

The Best of Intentions

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Part One

Chapter 1: The Screamer

It turned out she was a screamer.

And not in a good way, Gage thought as he lay on his left side, doing his best to tunnel his way into the back seat of a collection of metal and upholstery that once was a car. Though there was something to be said about a beautiful woman with ... fervor. Yeah, that was a good word for it. Except not in this case.

"OhmyGod, OhmyGod, OhmyGod, please get her out, she's my baby..."

The coupe had rolled, probably more than once based on where it'd ended upon the sidewalk upside down with its driver's door pressed up against a telephone pole. The roof had pancaked, leaving only a space so narrow and tight that even he felt claustrophobic as he shoved and pushed and dragged himself into the gap between the back of the front passenger seat and the doorjamb. He could've waited for the Jaws to enlarge the opening but he could hear it still in use, dragging groans from the dashboard of the other car as it tugged the chains upward inch-by-grinding inch and pulled the steering wheel out of the chest of the driver that Roy was still trying to save.

"OhGodplease, I can't, pleasepleaseplease, get her out.I can't..."

It was like a puzzle or a game of twister to contort his body into this slot, around that metal frame of a seat that used to be covered with upholstery before gravity, friction and concrete had ripped it and the foam from the metal. The female driver of this car had been extricated through the windshield, after they'd removed it of course. Barely even walking wounded, she was still screaming: incoherent moans and unearthly shrieks that made his nerves vibrate. He gritted his teeth as he dragged the skin of his left forearm across something sharp and unexpected on the roof of the car that now rested on the sidewalk. Which made it the floor or the ground or something.

"Lorena, baby, OhGodplease, Lorena, baby, you have to be all right, please, Oh God..."

There was more but much of it was incoherent sounds that were even worse than the pleading cries, intermixed with the sound of an adult woman whimpering in terror and trying to lean into the car when there wasn't enough space for him as it was.

He took the flashlight out of his mouth and hollered back over his right shoulder, "Cap!"

Someone had to get her out of here, had to get her away from the car or he was going to lose his mind because her terror was pervasive and contagious and despite the thousands of rescues he'd done, the hundreds of cars he'd crawled inside, she was starting to freak him out inside a wreck that was already more than a little worse than normal.

"Ma'am, c'mon, I need you to step back away from the car."

Cap's voice was pitched to reassuring and firm, which worked on about 80% of victims but slid right off hysterical mothers, screamers or otherwise.

"*OhmyGod*...it was just one... just one second. She took... I heard her take it off... I could hear the sound... and then I saw her moving. Oh God, just one second. I told her... I turned my head for one second to tell her to put the seatbelt back on....And then... and then...."

"Ma'am, listen to me. We are doing everything possible to help your daughter but we need your help and *she* needs your help."

He's pulling out the big guns, Gage thought as he dragged himself another inch into the back seat, pulling himself along by his left arm, flashlight in his mouth and the fingers of his right hand extended in front of him straining to reach the huddled form on the floor – okay, on the roof - behind the driver's seat.

"Please, just... just get her out. Please, God, she's just a little girl..."

"Listen, we don't know if your daughter is injured..."

Gage grimaced. Cap had to know that the injured was probably the best possible outcome here.

"... but whatever her condition, this would be a frightening situation for anyone. If she hears that you're scared, if she hears you panicking, it's going to make it even more frightening for her so we need you to calm down and let these men do their jobs..."

Hank Stanley's voice was growing fainter, as if moving away, which Gage hoped meant that he'd managed to lure the still whimpering woman to a safe distance, preferably to a police car or an ambulance, if one had finally arrived, where she'd be protected from the sight of firemen extracting her little girl from the back of a pile of scrap metal.

With The Screamer gone, he could hear the little girl's short, shallow breaths. Not great, but at least she was alive.

The tips of his fingers touched fabric, something soft and cotton, and then flesh, slightly cooler than his own. He moved his palm onto the skin, extending his fingers to determine what the flashlight didn't quite make clear. Okay, an arm. He slid his fingers to the right; the circumference of the arm narrowed as he did so, which meant he was going downward towards a hand, towards her wrist. He felt for a radial pulse with his right fingers and grabbed the flashlight with his left.

"Hi there, sweetheart, my name is Johnny. I'm a fireman and I'm going to take care of you and get you out of here, okay?"

There. Fluttery and weak, like a butterfly beating against his fingertips.

Outside, footsteps hammered against pavement.

"Gage, how's it going in there?"

Cap, back from handing off The Screamer to someone far enough away that he couldn't really hear her any more. As usual, Cap was bounding around the scene like a border collie checking on his flock, making sure Marco'd hosed down all the gas, searching for any new hazards and checking in on his paramedics and their patients.

"She's alive, but her pulse is about 110 and weak."

He heard Cap suck a breath through his teeth. "Okay. What do you need?"

"Cervical collar, backboard –the short one – and O2." And Roy, he mentally added, even knowing that his partner was tied up at the other car with the other victim. "We're gonna need some other way of getting her out of here, Cap. I can't pull her out the way I crawled in. We'll probably need a board and it just doesn't bend the way it'd need to."

"Roy's using the O2 from the squad on his victim. I'll get you the O2 from the Engine. Squad 36 is ten minutes out and I have a second ambulance on the way."

Cap had to be biting his tongue to not remind him that the reason the Squad was short an O2 canister was Gage's own damn fault for not grabbing another canister to replace the one they'd used on that earlier call, the one with that asthmatic smoker.

"Okay."

He heard Stanley back away from the car, shouting orders as he did so.

"Stoker, we're going to need the Ajax tool, a short board, a c-collar and the O2 from the Engine over here. Lopez, bring the Jaws over to Gage's car and assist him in extrication. DeSoto, I'll be right there."

If Mike was leaving the Engine, Cap must've decided they weren't going to need the hoses again. Well, good; he could use some help since Chet was at Roy's car, helping with the guy who'd hit a steering wheel a lot harder than anyone's sternum could handle.

He pulled himself another few inches into the car and ran his right hand up her arm, until he reached her shoulders, then moved across her shoulders to her neck and found the carotid. He held his breath while he counted – no real difference from the radial pulse - and then slid the hand down her torso.

"Respirations are thirty-five," he called to anyone who was listening.

No dampness, nothing wet that he could feel and even though the smell of much diluted gasoline was still stronger than anything else, there was definitely something else there, probably urine.

"Damn it!"

A little girl's abdomen was supposed to be soft and warm and pliable; he shouldn't feel any resistance. They needed to get her out now.

"Gage! Hey Johnny!"

"Yeah, Marco."

"How's she doing?"

He was pretty sure she was unconscious from the way she was breathing and her lack of reaction to his voice or touch but damn, wouldn't it be the one time in a thousand where someone actually heard him say that they weren't doing so good, and from the little he'd felt so far, she needed every bit of encouragement she could get.

"Well, she'd be doing a lot better outside the car, if you get my meaning."

"Yeah, okay." There was a pause. "Listen, we've stabilized the car as much as possible but there's no way through the back window. The roof is just too compressed; might as well try to cut the whole back of the car off. We could try to pull the front passenger seat out of here but we think the best option is to cut you a back door, here on the passenger side so you can bring her straight out."

"Okay...."

"But we can't do that with you hanging half in, half out of the car. Not safely anyway. You think you can fit in there? All of you, I mean?"

Gage looked around, using the flashlight. He'd be bunched up and it would be tight, but it was do-able. The fact that they were lying on the roof made it a lot more workable than if the car was right side up though it would have been nice if he could get up on his elbows without banging his head.

"Yeah, Marco, I can fit. You think you can push me in a little?"

It took two firefighters pushing and one frantically shifting his body so he didn't bump into his injured patient before he was in, knees tucked awkwardly against the metal frame of the passenger seat.

"You got your coat on?"

Of course he didn't have his turnout coat on. How the hell did Marco think he wedged himself in here with that on?

"Wouldn't fit."

There were some words outside that he didn't catch and then a hand pushed a bundled up coat stenciled 'Lopez' through the passenger door.

"I'm going to go get a blanket but you can start with this to cover up in there. There might be some stray sparks."

Gage grabbed the coat and unfolded it into a small tent that could cover his head and the girl.

"Listen, sweetheart, I mean, Lorena, some of my friends are going to cut us a special exit from the car so we can get out quickly..." and without doing any further damage to you, "so it's going to get pretty noisy in here for a few minutes, okay? Don't be scared, it's just like an electric knife. Did your Daddy ever carve a turkey with an electric knife?"

A shout from Marco and then Cap's voice joined the others and another bundled up coat was pushed through the door. As he draped it over his torso, he wasn't surprised to see the name "Stanley" stenciled on the back since Mike was too smart and too careful to use the cutter without adequate protection. And Cap would have his ass if he did anything unsafe.

"Give me the collar now, Marco. She's gonna need it with the vibrations."

The continued unconsciousness was worrying him. He wanted to check her eyes but didn't have the right angle to do so and he could not move her so he let his fingers be his eyes: swollen left cheekbone and a bump in her hair,

just above and behind her right ear. Marco passed him the collar and a blanket and Gage held his breath as he wrapped it around her neck.

"Okay!"

The noise when it started wasn't really loud, nowhere near as bad as the K-12. The pneumatic chisel went through the steel side panel as easily as an X-acto knife cut through cardboard. Still, it was probably a little unnerving to hear for those who weren't used to it and little Lorena should have reacted. But she didn't.

He used the time underneath the Marco turnout tent to continue checking her out. She was lying on her left side in an almost fetal position; legs bent but not fully pulled into her stomach, head bowed. He gently traced her spine and neck and found no deformities which he counted as a small miracle considering that without a seat belt on, she'd been tossed around the inside of the rolling car like laundry inside a dryer. Probable tib/fib fractures on her left leg, swelling on her left wrist

He wondered how Roy's patient was doing. They probably had him out of the car now, might even be in transit to Rampart. He couldn't remember if he'd heard an ambulance arrive or depart.

With that type of trauma to the chest, Roy wouldn't be able to do CPR if the guy coded. He blew a breath out in commiseration for his partner and sent a thought to whatever universal Force or Higher Power guided the universe – assuming one did – that Roy would get the guy to Rampart without the guy arresting. Assuming they'd gotten him out of the car alive in the first place.

Pulse 110, still weak. Respirations thirty-five and shallow. *Come on*, guys.

And where the hell was Squad 36? Of course, they could've arrived and set up right outside, not that he'd heard anything with Mike using the pneumatic chisel to remove the side panel of the car. Cap had said they were ten minutes out, but he'd lost track of time.

He pushed Marco's coat up a half inch and then slightly more to see how much progress had been made. Daylight flitted through long, straight lines – Stoker had a hell of a steady hand – and Marco must've covered his bunched up legs with the blanket while he was examining Lorena. Huh. He'd never even noticed. Another ten seconds of cutting and Stoker was done.

Gloved fingers grabbed at the side panel, tugging it downward and away, and then one of the gloves grabbed the blanket off Gage's legs and folded it over the remaining crumpled steel where the window had once met the roof. Before the roof had been compacted down almost all the way to the windowsill.

"I need to back out a little and then you hand me the board, okay?"

"Go ahead, Johnny."

He scooted back from the girl, leaning his right hip hard on the front passenger seat that was stuck on its track and wouldn't move any further toward the dashboard. Probably would've been smart to have had Marco and Mike rip it out but he had just enough room for them to pass him the backboard, even if it wasn't anything like comfortable in his current position.

"Okay, give me the board."

A gloved hand pushed it through the opening that they'd made and he chewed his lip as he considered options.

"Okay, I'm going to hold her head, neck and shoulders. Mike, you think you can reach her to get the rest of her on the board? Grab her hips; don't worry about straightening her out. Let's just get her on the board and out of the car as she is."

Neither Stoker nor Lopez was a paramedic but all of the guys on his shift had better than average first aid skills, better than a lot of the firefighters he'd worked with before 51.

Half sitting on the back of the front passenger seat and leaning his right shoulder and upper arm into the back of the driver's seat, he got his hands into the right position, holding her head and neck steady. Stoker, stretched out on his belly, did the rest. A quick, coordinated lift of the girl off the roof/floor onto the board and then they were pulling the board out of the car.

"Slowly, slowly, take it easy there..."

He was saying it mostly for his own benefit, just providing a soundtrack to Stoker pulling the board with him as Lopez grabbed Stoker by his belt and dragged him out of the car. With the tight quarters, it wasn't as if they could actually hurry, and of all the guys, Stoker or Lopez were the least likely to do anything hasty or half-assed.

Hands keeping her head and neck in the right positions, he crawled out of the car after them, blinking away the floaters in his eyes from the sudden glaring sunlight. They half crawled the board over to the yellow blanket someone had thoughtfully spread out right next to the wreckage.

"Roy's guy was in bad shape. He needed the biophone, drug box, defibrillator, and scope," Cap's voice said from behind him. As Gage turned, Cap handed him a BP cuff, stethoscope and an IV setup. "He left you a liter of saline and one D5W. I've got the trauma box too."

Gage looked around the scene: just a small suburban intersection in a quiet neighborhood, two completely totaled automobiles, Engine 51, Squad 51 and a Sheriff's car. No sign of Squad 36.

"Three minutes out," Cap said.

Gage nodded and got to back to work.

Chapter 2: Backhand

A lifetime ago, before either Wedsworth or Townsend had even thought about attaching their names to a bill that became an act that allowed him to do the job he loved, he used to wonder why the Squad they used for rescues didn't have a regular radio. He knew all of the logical reasons for why Fire Department apparatus didn't contain even an AM radio, but it was occasionally a bit dull and all too quiet riding in the Rescue Squad, dependent entirely on one's thoughts or your partner for entertainment.

Now, of course, he had Johnny.

"So, the Plan...it's like when she says it, it's all capitalized or something, but she kept going on about having a Plan, or in my case, clearly, not having a Plan. I mean, when you were my age, Roy, did you have a plan?"

When he was twenty-seven, he'd been married for six years and a father for five of them.

"Depends what you mean by a plan."

Gage turned in his seat to face Roy and threw his forearms out in a jerk. "Exactly!"

Uh-huh, Roy thought, eyes scanning the familiar streets in the route on the way back from Rampart: exiting out onto Meyler Street and then a left on W.223rd street and then a clear shot back to Station 51. Traffic wasn't too bad for late afternoon and by that he meant that it was moving.

"Well, I knew I wanted to be married to Joanne, so I guess that counts as a plan."

Gage snorted and scowled. "I don't think that's the type of plan she's talking about, Roy."

Probably not.

They crossed over Harbor Freeway and his peripheral vision said it was already backing up, like it did every day around this time.

"Who's cooking tonight?"

"Not me," Gage said immediately and shot a glance in his direction. "I dunno. Who did lunch? Heck, what *was* lunch?"

Roy shrugged. "It was that chicken noodle casserole." Egg noodles and chicken mixed with some kind of soup and some chopped up vegetables; uninspiring but filling and it'd tasted fine when they'd pulled the casserole dish out of the oven a few hours ago, after the lady bicyclist with a broken collarbone. "Probably Cap or Mike."

"Oh yeah. Well, it wasn't Chet 'cause it was edible and Marco makes his chow with a little more spice," Gage agreed.

He squinted into the afternoon sunlight slanting through the windshield. "You know who you should talk to about this planning thing?"

"I know, Roy, but you know, we haven't even seen the Engine since that MVA this morning. Who knows where they're at or when they'll be back."

"Nursing School fire. They're part of the second alarm called out about forty minutes ago."

It was only partially his good peripheral vision that alerted him to his partner's stare, incredulous and perplexed; most of it was just past experience.

He shrugged. "Heard the call over the radio."

Gage huffed and shook his head. "Man, I don't know where you find the time. We have just been running all day. You know this is the first..."

"Oh no, don't..."

The radio crackled to life. "Squad 51, stand by."

"You had to go ahead and say it, didn't you?" Roy growled.

Gage sagged and reached for his helmet with a big dramatic sigh.

"Squad 51, woman down. Veteran's Park Tennis Courts. Use Moneta Avenue entrance. Veteran's Park Tennis Courts, Moneta Avenue entrance. Time out 1622."

Gage acknowledged the call with a one-minute ETA, and then shot a glance in Roy's direction, along with a shrug. And since it wasn't as if Johnny opening his mouth had actually created the incident, even if it might seem that way, Roy let it go. For now.

There were two tennis courts, side-by-side. Assuming it was some kind of injury, they hauled the biophone, trauma box and oxygen and headed toward the crowd gathered in a loose circle on the nearside of the far court. Most of the group was ladies in tennis whites about five to ten years older than John Gage's usual target market, intermixed with two or three teenagers and a guy with a George Hamilton tan who was twirling a racquet impatiently.

"What took you so long?" the guy with the tennis racquet demanded. "I called from the payphone," he waved his racquet towards what was presumably a payphone somewhere on the other side of where they'd entered the park, "almost ten minutes ago."

"We got here as soon as possible," Roy said as he knelt next to a woman sitting near the baseline of the court. He scanned her for obvious injuries and sent her a reassuring smile. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Can't..." she puffed. "Can't....catch."

Her face was flushed and she looked a little older than most of the other women, most of whom were probably not that much older than he was actually, probably early to mid-thirties. It was a sunny October day, low humidity and not unusually warm. No signs of extensive perspiration, or at least nothing more than the other tennis players. Johnny was sending surreptitious glances towards the shapely legs of some of the female tennis players and for the briefest moment, Roy pictured Joanne in one of those short tennis skirts. Then he refocused his attention on the patient in front of him.

"You can't catch your breath," he repeated back at her and she nodded.

"Do you have any allergies? How about asthma?"

Two quick shakes of her head as he took her pulse.

"Any history of pulmonary disease? How about heart problems?"

Another head shake as he rested his hand on her torso and counted respirations.

"Do you have any pain in your chest or anywhere else?"

Another head shake.

"How have you been feeling recently? Any nausea? Vomiting?"

A rapid, frightened shake of the head as Gage pulled the elastic cord of the non-rebreather mask around the back of her head. Without words or even eye contact they'd split into the roles they needed to play. The woman was scared; she needed reassurance, needed to be calmed as quickly as possible so they could determine whether her dyspnea was brought on by exertion or was emotional or physical in origin. Calm, steady reassurance was Roy's forte, so Johnny had automatically assumed the mechanics while Roy handled the patient.

Her pulse was strong and a little fast, respiration rapid, blood pressure was higher than normal. Gage opened the biophone and contacted Rampart Base.

"How about coughing or tightness in your chest?"

Another abrupt head shake. He listened anyway through the stethoscope; no wheezing, no rales.

"Roy, I'm gonna get the scope." Johnny scrambled to his feet and trotted towards the squad.

"Have you been feeling dizzy or tired?"

"She said she's been feeling tired, washed out, kind of weak lately."

The new voice sounded oddly familiar but out of place and Roy glanced up and then blinked in surprised recognition.

"Karen. I didn't recognize you in the crowd." Or in that tennis... Is that really considered a dress? He purposefully kept his gaze on her face when he was talking to her.

"Hello, Roy." She glanced back towards the Squad. "I don't suppose they sent the Engine too."

He smiled up at her and shook his head. "Sorry, just the Squad." He'd learned a long time ago that you never told a fireman's wife that her husband was at a fire instead of a nice safe rescue, even when her husband was usually the one outside sending the other guys in. "Can you tell me what happened?"

She nodded and then crouched down by the other woman, placing her hand on the other woman's back; a gesture of reassurance or support or just letting her know that someone familiar was there.

"Jackie seemed a little pale when she arrived. She said she was okay but she didn't play like she was okay. Her serve was off. Usually it blisters the paint," she said with a tight smile. "We didn't even play an entire set when I noticed that she was breathing harder than usual. She stopped for a water break and then she just sat down. Jerry, he's our instructor," she nodded toward the man who'd greeted them. "He came over to check on us and when we realized that she wasn't getting better, I asked him to call you guys."

"Good thing you did," he said, noting that Johnny was bringing the defibrillator back with him along with the scope. "Hey, Jerry," he called and waited a second for the tennis pro to meander over. "You think you can round up all these people and move them off the court, give Jackie a little privacy?"

Johnny spread out a blanket and begin gently coaxing Jackie to lie down on it as the crowd was ushered off the tennis court.

"You want me to leave?" Karen said quietly.

That was probably a good idea since he really didn't want her watching if or when things went sour.

"That's up to Jackie," Roy said, fingers pressed against Jackie's carotid. "How about it, Jackie? My partner is talking to the doctors at Rampart and they want us to bring you in so they can make sure everything's all right. But if you want Karen or someone to stay with you while we wait for the ambulance, that's okay too."

"Honey, you're in good hands," Karen said. "Hank says that Roy and Johnny are the best paramedics in the County. Maybe even the best in the state. Do you want me to call Edmund? Have him meet you at the hospital?"

Gage looked up suddenly, looked straight at Karen with a deer-in-the-headlights look that came and went quickly as he connected the dots. And then he blushed and focused his attention entirely on attaching cardiac leads and fussing with the monitor. Roy was pretty sure Johnny had just realized exactly whose legs he'd been checking out.

The whine of the approaching ambulance's siren drowned out whatever Rampart was instructing over the bio phone but Gage grabbed for the IV setup.

"Ringer's, TKO," he said, as he swabbed Jackie's left arm below the BP cuff.

Roy didn't recognize the Sheriff's Deputy who was talking to Jerry and a few other women at the other end of the tennis courts. The Deputy tucked a bag, presumably Jackie's, under his arm and started writing on his note pad.

Karen stepped back as they loaded Jackie onto the ambulance but Roy felt her seeking eyes on him, looking for reassurance. Feeling awkward and unusually uncomfortable, he pretended he didn't notice as he climbed into the ambulance, keeping his focus on his patient's breathing instead.

She kept breathing the entire five-minute ride to the hospital, breaths a little deeper and more regular, the panic fading from her tight features, while Roy gave Morton updated vitals every two minutes, trying not to hold his own breath or to show his increasing concern.

He'd delivered her safely, alive and breathing, so she was officially Mike Morton's patient when she suffered the MI five minutes after Roy, Morton, Carol and the Mayfair attendant lifted her onto the bed in Exam Room 3.

Johnny had offered to drive, but he'd declined, mostly out of habit.

"Wasn't anything more you could've done, Roy."

He knew that. He'd run it over and over in his head and he knew with clinical detachment that he had performed his job perfectly. Just as he had that morning, on a man who he'd known had had little to no chance of surviving the MVA injuries. Just as Johnny had that morning on that little girl who'd been rushed to surgery almost as soon as Brackett had finished examining her.

It would've been nice to turn on a radio, listen to a little music right now. He couldn't count on Johnny for distraction or entertainment when they were both in need of it.

"Oh yeah," Gage said, snapping his fingers. "Before I forget, Mrs. Stanley told me to tell you to have Joanne call her about that substitute thing." He was still staring out the open passenger window. "Whatever that means."

He nodded and made a mental note to call his wife when they got back to the station, which might actually be in time for dinner. Whether or not there was actual food prepared would depend on when or if the Engine had been released from the scene at the Nursing School fire.

"You ever wonder..." Gage trailed off and then heaved a great sigh. "Never mind."

Pretty much anything that would take him away from the scared look in Jackie's eyes would be welcome right now, no matter how inane.

"What?"

"Never mind," Gage gave himself a shake, both physical and mental and turned back to his partner. "So what substitute thing? And man, why didn't you *warn* me that was Cap's wife?"

It was only about thirty or forty minutes ago that they'd passed over Harbor Freeway and now it was a solid block of massed cars inching forward at about twenty mph at best. It seemed like a lot more time had passed.

"If you'd been looking at her face, you might have remembered meeting her, oh, I don't know, about twenty or thirty times, maybe more."

"Yeah, ha ha, get a good laugh in," Gage said. "I was kneeling, remember."

"Uh-huh," Roy said. "Well, you can tell that to Cap when he asks why you were checking out his wife's legs. *Again*."

"Roy," Gage sputtered. "Man, that's uncalled for. That was....It was just that once and it was like four years ago, right after Cap came to 51s and you know I didn't know who she was then."

They passed Veteran's Park without comment though he noticed Gage craning his head as if he could see the tennis courts from W.223rd Street, which he couldn't.

"I was thinking that maybe I should take tennis lessons."

Roy started coughing, trying to hide his laughter, and wondered for a moment why he'd ever missed having a radio at all.

Chapter 3: Chemistry

It was a science, no different than chemistry. It was just a matter of understanding the interaction of chemicals and knowing the appropriate catalyst. In this case he was using ingredients instead of chemicals and the catalyst was heat. He was sure that this combination of ingredients at a temperature of 350 degrees Fahrenheit would work. His mother swore by it and as he understood basic chemistry at an intuitive level, it was simply a matter of application.

"Meatloaf?"

The question was entirely innocuous, but they both knew better.

"I'm pretty sure this'll be the recipe that works, Cap."

Stanley nodded and returned his attention to the equipment manifest that he'd spread across his corner of the kitchen table.

"Pay attention here, Mike. You'll be dealing with this stuff one day soon."

Stoker hid his grimace as he mashed the potatoes by hand. The more he saw the actualities of a Captain's job, the less appealing it seemed.

Marco leaned in through the kitchen door. "Sorry, Cap. We definitely left it on scene. I looked for it during overhaul and clean up but it must have been buried under the debris."

Stanley sighed heavily and rested his jaw in his right palm, staring glumly at the manifest.

"Headquarters on your case?"

Stanley nodded.

"That pencil pusher at HQ actually had the audacity to tell me that if we left one more porta power on scene, however valid the reason, the County was going to start taking it out of my paycheck."

"No way," Marco breathed. "We could head back there right now..."

"Appreciate that, Marco, but it won't be necessary." Stanley spared Marco a quick smile. "I told the supply guy that I'd be happy to have him ride along, have him help us dig it out from under the foundation that gave way. I'll let him know that my offer still stands."

Marco snickered and went back to cleaning and checking the equipment that they'd used at the Nursing School fire. Chet was supposed to be checking their air bottles and refilling those below full from the station air compressor.

And speaking of Chet...was that singing?

He turned and exchanged glances with Stanley who'd raised his head in disbelief.

Chet singing was only slightly better than Chet yammering, as he'd been doing since the Squad backed into the bay about twenty minutes earlier. From the hum of voices, it sounded as if Gage & DeSoto had lingered there, which was just asking for trouble since Chet was undoubtedly looking for something to distract him from his assigned tasks.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot..."

"Kelly, check the calendar," Stanley said in a voice loud enough to be clearly heard in the bay. "It's brushfire season, not the holiday season."

"Sorry, Cap," Chet said, as he popped through the kitchen door. "I was just reminding Gage of those immortal words of wisdom from that great Irish poet, 'The best laid plans of mice and men, often go awry' and I got a little carried away."

Or perhaps carried awry, Stoker thought and smiled down at the potatoes.

Stanley leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Scottish poet. And it was schemes, not plans."

Chet scratched the back of his head and crinkled his nose. "You sure about that, Cap? Blood calls to blood, you know, and I recognize the ancestral genius of a fellow Irishman..."

"Robert Burns is the national poet of Scotland. And you were born in Chicago, not Ireland, which makes you an American with Irish ancestry, not an Irishman. Now knock off your poetry recitation and get busy. I want every air bottle on the Engine checked."

Kelly mumbled something that sounded like "Sasanach" as he shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and ambled back towards the Engine, in no apparent hurry. "That explains it, of course. Burns being a fellow Celt..."

"And don't forget to check the hydro test dates," Stanley shouted after him.

Gage pushed past Chet impatiently in the doorway, calling a distracted greeting to Captain Stanley before opening the oven for a sniff. He turned, frowning, toward the refrigerator and stuck his head almost completely inside. DeSoto wandered in and stood, looking somewhat hesitant, near the table.

"You got a minute, Cap?"

Stanley looked happy to have any reason to close the books on his paperwork. "Sure, Roy. Have a seat."

Roy nodded and after taking a seat, leaned forward and spoke softly enough that Stoker couldn't make out a single syllable. He could see Stanley looking thoughtful and then nodding pensively.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks for letting me know." He glanced at his wristwatch. "She should be home now. I'll give her a call."

He gathered all his paperwork and tucked it under his arm.

"Ten minutes," Stoker called after him as he left the kitchen. Then he turned expectantly towards DeSoto with raised eyebrows.

"We ran into Cap's wife on our last call," Gage said as he poured himself a glass of milk. "Bystander, not the person who needed help."

"Friend of the patient," DeSoto corrected, sagging back into the chair.

"Everything go okay?" Stoker asked as he stirred the vegetables. Frozen succotash mix, cooked with a little water over heat was supposed to be hard to mess up but somehow they'd managed it a few times.

"MI at Rampart," Gage said.

"Cardiac Care Unit," Roy added.

His tone said 'doesn't look good.'

Stoker sighed. "Crap."

That news was bad enough on its own but the cases where they knew the victim or knew someone who knew the victim were worse by a factor of ten, maybe more. And since Cap's wife was a friend of the victim's, she'd be upset and who knew what that would do for Cap's mood the rest of the shift. A shift they weren't even halfway through.

Nice job, Mike, he thought. Very compassionate. He hit the potatoes a little harder than necessary when he mixed in the butter.

And okay, so it turned out that this wasn't the recipe that worked. It wasn't the one that tasted like the meatloaf he recalled liking so much, but no one complained, not aloud anyway. The mashed potatoes were popular, the succotash was not mushy or overcooked and since there were no leftovers, he considered the meal a qualified success. He was beginning to wonder about Platonic ideals and whether they applied to meal planning.

Cap was heads down focused on his dinner, his usual quiet self during any meal, but smiled and leaned back in his chair when he'd finished. And if his "Great dinner, Mike," sounded a little less enthusiastic than usual, well, he couldn't really be sure whether it was the mediocre meatloaf or an upset wife that was to blame.

Gage had dishes and Roy helped, which was fairly normal for the two of them.

Slopping soapy water as he scrubbed at the pot in which Mike had boiled the potatoes, Gage seemed to have a sudden thought and twisted his head to the right. "Hey, Roy, did you remember to call Joanne?"

Roy hesitated as he dried the vegetables pot and surprisingly glanced at Cap, who'd hauled out his paperwork again and sat at the kitchen table, head bowed, as he read some report. On the other side of the table, Mike doodled in the margin of the newspaper and pretended to be studying the crossword puzzle that someone had started and then abandoned half-done. At least whoever had done so had used a pencil so he could correct the errors he saw. He erased 'later' and penciled in 'adieu' for 9 down: parting word.

"Yeah," Roy said and rubbed a bit harder at the pot, frowning as he picked with a thumbnail at a small bit of lima bean that hadn't come away in the washing. "Yeah, I called her before dinner."

"And?"

A loud splash as Gage dunked the big pot back into the soapy water.

Roy's mouth twitched and he shot another glance at Cap before shrugging. "I passed on the message and said maybe tonight wasn't the best time to call."

"Uh-huh." And then Gage looked up and made a face as if he'd just heard Roy's reply. "Yeah, okay." He began rinsing the pan. "You're probably right about that." And then Gage frowned and glanced at Cap too. "Bad timing, I guess. I should probably wait too."

Mike jiggled the pencil between his fingers and scowled at the puzzle. 12 Across: Not Gregarious. Seven characters.

"You know you could talk to Mike," Roy suggested in a quiet tone that probably would not have been overheard had he not spoken during a rare moment of silence as the television station switched from a commercial back to the program. Even Chet and Marco looked up and a flicker of eyes across the table indicated that maybe Cap wasn't as engrossed in his report as Mike had thought.

He was aware of Gage and DeSoto looking in his direction and he couldn't really pretend that he hadn't heard. After all, it wasn't eavesdropping if everyone had heard Roy.

"Talk to me about what?"

Gage shifted his weight onto his right leg and twisted the dishrag until he'd wrung it dry. Then he turned around and leaned back against the sink and his face contorted into a parade of expressions.

Stoker sat back in his seat, content to watch the always amusing visual display of John Gage working through his thoughts and was almost disappointed when Roy snapped the towel and hit Gage in the left arm.

"Oww!" Gage turned and glared at his partner. "I'm gettin' to it! Jeez, give me a chance."

Roy sighed heavily and then picked up the big potato pot to begin drying it.

"There's a girl," he said, with a jerk of his head towards Gage, "and she's got him twisted about having a..."

"It's not about the girl, Roy," Gage insisted. "But you know, she kind of had a point about the... you know... plan." Warming to his subject, Gage leaned back against the sink again and faced Stoker. "So I was thinking about guys I knew who had a plan, who'd figured out what they wanted, you know, had an objective and got it, or were working their way toward it."

Mike stretched his legs out but continued to play with the pencil, because it gave him something to do while he tried to figure out exactly where Gage was going with this, and because it was kind of fun. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stanley turn a little in his seat, so he could divide his attention between the report he was supposedly reading and his paramedic team to his left.

"So, you know I've wanted to be a firefighter since about forever and then when Roy talked me into the Paramedic thing..."

"I didn't talk you into," Roy objected. "You came to the information session of your own volition..."

"Yeah, me and about zero other guys," Gage said with an exaggerated eye roll. "As I was saying..."

He paused and shot his partner a look. Roy bowed and his sweeping hand gesture clearly indicated that Gage should continue.

"So after Roy talked me into the Paramedic thing, I knew that's what I wanted to do but it wasn't as if I knew that ahead of time. It just came along at the right time, you know?"

He paused again and since he was so clearly expecting some kind of acknowledgement, Stoker nodded.

"So, what I was wondering, was how you knew?"

Stoker blinked. He thought over the question again but still didn't really understand what Gage was asking him. He slid his gaze over to Stanley whose expression clearly said 'I don't know what the hell he's talking about either.'

"How did I know what?" he said.

"How you knew you wanted to be an Engineer?" Gage said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You know, before you became one, or before you took the Engineer's exam. You must have had a plan or something, right?"

Stoker blinked. Gage wanted career counseling? From him?

"You know, Cap's probably the guy you want to talk to if you're looking for career advice."

"Well..." Gage hesitated, shifted his weight a little. "I was going to, but..."

Shit, Stoker realized. That's what Gage meant earlier about 'bad timing.'

"I'm not really looking for career counseling, you know. Just wondering how it was that you knew that being an Engineer was what you wanted to do."

And now Cap's eyes were glittering with amusement. He probably thought this was good practice, since of course in his mind, it was only a matter of time before Mike Stoker was a Captain one day and would need to provide some kind of guidance to his own men. Great. Thanks a lot, Cap.

The truth - 'I just did' - was just going to frustrate Gage so Stoker thought about it, thought hard about what it had been like to be a lineman at Station 29, with an Engine, Truck and Squad, hauling hose where and when his Captain told him, eating smoke, ventilating roofs, and getting up close and personal with the heat of a fire and going home with steam burns and blisters.

What he remembered most clearly was that he wanted to fight fires smarter. He'd decided that any firefighter could be the guy on the hose and sure, some had an instinct for it, almost a communion with fire itself and it was as if those guys could predict its behavior and move to counteract it in some kind of weird ballet, but he didn't have that instinct. What he did have was the brains to outthink it. Plus being a lineman just didn't give you the perspective to watch the total fire response, watch how the Incident Commander deployed the responding companies and be a conscious part of that response. And of course, there was the equipment; both the

responsibility for making sure everything was working and the responsibility for making sure the crew had what it needed when it needed it.

"You know," he said finally, "it was probably not a lot different from why you decided to be a paramedic. I liked firefighting, but I wanted to do something more, so I watched what our Engineers at 29s did. It looked interesting and I wanted to learn more about it so they showed me."

There was silence then, as if Gage was waiting for him to say something more, give him a roadmap to coming up with a plan for his own life.

"And of course, he gets to drive the Engine," Chet said.

There was that, Mike acknowledged, with a shrug.

"Yeah, that too."

A/N: Sasanach is the Irish variant of Scottish word 'Sassenach,' a not always friendly word for 'Englishman ' and since Henry Stanley is *very* English name, that was a bit of a diss from Chet to his Captain.

Chapter 4: Heading In

It was an unwritten law, a universal law acknowledged by fireman everywhere that if a television show was an hour long, somewhere around forty-five minutes into the show was when the tones would sound. Same thing for a movie. The movie could be ninety minutes, could be two hours, either way, fifteen to twenty minutes before it ended and almost always during the incredibly tense scenes leading up to the climatic resolution of the plot, they'd get called out.

He was working on a corollary to this law, though he hadn't yet proposed it to the guys. Inevitably, when the television show was truly exciting and they had no idea how the heroes would escape whatever dire situation they faced, the call would be an alarm panel activation or a false alarm or something else equally lame and pointless. He was going to call it the Kelly Inverse Proportions Corollary, which should set Gage off for no other reason than it would bug him that there was a universal law named after Chester B. Kelly.

This one was definitely not a false alarm, but since he hadn't quite figured out the relationship between movies that he hadn't particularly wanted to watch in the first place but got outvoted on and their resulting dispatch, he'd have to categorize this as requiring more research.

He rested his gloved hand on the metal banister and felt the vibrations of the slatted metal stair tread jolt up through his boots.

It was like being inside a concrete fort. He'd noticed the old-fashioned yellow and black 'Fallout Shelter' metal placard affixed to the front of the building, just to the left of the entrance. One of the Pac Tel guys hanging around by the Chief had said, 'The only thing left after a nuclear explosion will be cockroaches and central offices,' and the other Pac Tel guys had laughed, but not as if it was funny, more like it was an old, inside joke.

Cap had gone up the metal staircase first, testing the weight of each step, the beam from his handheld flashlight a jerky thing bouncing almost erratically through the smoke-filled darkness. If it held for Cap, and there was no reason it shouldn't hold, then it would be fine for Marco and for him, each a little lighter than the prior man.

The nicer stairs, the ones made from poured concrete embedded with nonslip treads, the ones that would survive nuclear fallout if the Pac Tel guy was right, were at the front of the building. Of course that was also where the fire was most heavily concentrated which was why they were at the back of the building, in the northwest corner, climbing up metal stairs that shook under his relatively light body weight. The fire hadn't reached the third floor back here, not yet anyway, but the guys from 36s had said the cable vault in the basement was something out of Dante's circles of hell and the offices on the first floor were pretty well involved too.

He kept his right hand on the banister, groping ahead with his boot toe for the next step, shifting his weight carefully onto his right foot before taking his left foot off the previous step. And then there were no more steps, and he used his hand on the banister as guide, navigating around the far edge of the intermediate landing, shuffling his boots against the bumpy metal flooring until the toes of his left boot collided against the lip of the landing and pushed into the small gap between it and the first step to the next set of stairs.

He waited there, staring up into the dense blackness, only some of which was smoke, actively listening to pick out what he could hear above the hiss of his own breaths inside the mask. A heavy clang that he both heard and felt echoing under his feet meant that Marco was still climbing the stairs from the landing to the fourth floor. Cap had said one man at a time, on each set of stairs, just in case.

"You know, Cap. Just for future reference, let's see if we can do these Search and Rescue things during daylight hours in the future, okay?"

Cap was probably only about fifteen feet above him but his voice sounded a lot farther away.

"I'll see what I can arrange."

There was another vibration under his feet from Marco a few feet ahead of him, and then he heard something new. It sounded a little like the whale sounds he'd heard piped through a talk at the Aquarium, a kind of deep, groaning wail, which, when accompanied with the slight sway of the metal landing under his feet....

"Let's get off these stairs, guys," Cap called from above.

He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, as the landing seemed to gently shift. It was a very slight movement, no worse than the rocking of a boat in quiet waters but considering the amount of steel and concrete that was supposed to be holding it up... Actually, he didn't really want to think about the steel and the concrete, or the fact that this staircase probably ran all the way up to the roof because it started in the basement, the same place the fire had started.

"Stairs are getting hotter, Cap," he said. So was the landing, and the railing.

"All right, Lopez is just about up..."

Chet heard a clang and then a grunt from his Captain.

"He's up. Let's make it quick, Kelly. Floor up here is nice and solid."

It would have been handy to use the round metal banister as a grip to pull himself up instead of just as a guide but it was too hot to hold more than just loosely, even with his glove. He tapped the stairs ahead of him with the short pike pole like a blind man's cane - since he was carrying it, might as well get some use of it - and scrambled up the stairs as quickly as possible. Near the top, he couldn't see them but he could make out the sounds of Cap and Marco breathing through their masks and then their hands wrapped around his upper arms and pulled him on to the fourth floor.

Cap stood and walked towards the windows to check in with the IC. Thank God, this was one of the floors that had windows, or at least this side did. The street lights and the light truck outside were putting out enough lumens that though it would never be mistaken for daylight, the guys outside could see what they were doing. Some of that light poured through the dirty narrow windows here, just enough to pick out Cap's outline in hazy gray light, but it was better than the constant darkness they'd been operating in since they'd entered the building.

The third floor had been an equipment floor, walls solid concrete unbroken by a single window, and filled floor to two-story high ceiling with tall and endlessly long steel racks. Each rack was overflowing with sheathed copper wire coming up in massive cable bundles from the basement, and then stripped out individually so that each wire connected to one tiny piece of equipment on one of the rack shelves and then connected to another piece of copper wire that was going somewhere else in the building. Cross-connections, Marco had called it.

It had been a bitch to search in the dark, up and down the aisles, using flashlight beams to pick out the hazards as the thick, heavy smoke continued to pour up the internal building cable risers from the fire in the basement and lower levels. He'd crawled right into one of the stepladders on wheels, presumably used to access shelves higher

on the rack but the hand lights had kept him from getting wrapped up in any of the wrapped bundles of copper wire running along the base of the tall racks.

"Battalion 14, this is HT 51." Cap paused and waited for the Chief's acknowledgment. "The third floor is clear. We are beginning search of the fourth floor. Be advised that the northwest staircase is now unstable and unsafe for egress." He took his thumb off the HT. "Lopez, Kelly, check the standpipe."

It had been a little weird not dragging a charged line or carrying a hose pack into the fire, but so far the wet standpipe system seemed to be fully operational. They made their way into the hallway, using their flashlights to pick their way to the glass fronted hose cabinet. Chet kept his light on task as Marco opened the hose cabinet, tugged out the one-inch hose and nozzle, and opened the valve to check water flow.

It was designed for building tenants, not firefighters, so it wasn't the strongest flow rate, but it was pressurized and better than anything that they'd have gotten from a hose wrapped around four unusually tall flights of stairs. And his shoulders appreciated not having to haul the hose.

Cap joined them in the hall, backlit by the light truck outside just enough that Chet could make out the 100-ft. of rope Cap wore draped over his turnout coat.

"Okay, first thing's first: there's another staircase in the southwest corner, same construction as the one we just came up and possibly the same problems, so we'll check it out when we search that area. We've got a telephone company switch taking up the entire south-side of this building," he used the axe in his right hand, blade turned down, to point in the direction away from where they'd entered. "More equipment rooms across the east and west sides and office space on the north. We'll start there. Lopez, give Kelly the halligan; you've got the line."