

The Phantom Returns

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With Chet back after an injury, the men of station 51 are together again as they continue to heal. This is the second story in the "Coping Trilogy".

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Chapter One

Friday, First Shift Back

"Kelly. My office. Now." Captain Stanley's clipped tone left no room for argument. Chet shook free of Mike Stoker's hand on his upper arm to stalk out of the locker room.

"And you," Hank rounded on John, who was leaning, head bowed, his back against his locker, flanked on each side by the balance of A-shift. "*you* don't go far, because you'll be up next. Roy, take a look at his hand," he growled as he moved to join his lineman.

Striding into his office, he paused just long enough to swing the door closed and to draw a steadying breath. He turned to face the still standing Chet. "What in blue blazes was that? You're back for what, less than four hours, and you and Gage are already tearing into each other? Sit down and start talking, pal, because I am this close to writing you both up."

Chet plunked down in a wooden chair while his captain circled the desk to gain his own seat. "Cap. I don't know why I pushed him as far as I did. I guess I just wanted to get him to talk about what is bugging him. I didn't expect him to haul off and swing a fist into his locker door. You aren't thinking he was trying to take a poke at me are you? Because he wasn't; he wouldn't, you know that."

"Yes, Chet - I know, of course I know. What I don't know is what possessed you into thinking John was going to open up and have a heart-to-heart with you while you were shouting at him. Good Lord, Chet, you should know better. You must be able to guess at what he is going through. What were you thinking?"

"Well, I wasn't... it may not be my job to..."

"You weren't and it's not. But just for the sake of curiosity, and in the interest of peace on earth, starting with our little corner of the sand box - let's hear it."

Hank watched his lineman as he leaned forward, started to get to his feet, changed his mind and eventually sank down to perch on the edge of the chair, one knee bouncing like a sewing machine needle.

"Okay, look. I come back from being off a few shifts and it's like a morgue around here. Hell, there's better conversation going on between the spider plants back in my apartment, and they're half dead. A quiet John Gage is downright creepy. He's going to implode if he keeps this up. You know I'm right. He can't keep shit like this bottled up inside, it'll kill him."

"You think none of the rest of us has noticed he's hurting? You think I *like* watching him tear himself up? You didn't consider that his captain might be keeping an eye on the situation?" Hank halted this line of questioning and made himself count to ten. He made it to three before he had to pause to rub at the twitch that had possessed his left eyelid. "You *could* have come to me instead of choosing to lay into him first thing." He finished his count before he drew a deep breath to continue.

"Look, John is working through some hard stuff here, sure. But he is making progress; he *is* doing better. I'm not going to rush him just because we all want him to get better, real fast. As his friends, we owe him some space. As his captain, I insist that we give it to him. So you are going to lay off and let the man heal at his own pace, got that?"

Chet's knee had ceased its frenetic motion, and his captain could see signs that he was at least trying to absorb some of what his commanding officer had to say on the subject of John Gage.

"Chet, I know that you meant well, but you have to let him be. That's an order. Now we're done here once you can tell me that you understand all this order entails."

"Yeah, Cap, you want me to lay off Gage. I got it. And Cap? I *am* sorry; I never meant to make things worse."

"I know that, Chet. He does too. He'll get this sorted out. We just need to be patient. Now get on out of here. Leave the door open, and I wouldn't let Marco's mama know you let her spider plant's babies die if I were you."

Chet's reply began with a snort. "Marco pawned those 'babies' off on me specifically so they wouldn't die on his watch. He'd already killed off the first batch. Neither one of us ever claimed to have a green thumb. They are just quietly living out their inevitably short little lives where Marco doesn't have to stand witness."

"Bring them on in. My wife has a way with growing things; maybe Rosie can resurrect them."

Hank shook his head as his chastised lineman slunk off to finish his assigned chores. He leaned back in his chair and considered that particular member of his team.

Adding Chet to any equation was like adding a catalyst to a chemical reaction. You could always count on him to stir things up. Sometimes, that was a good thing. He brought a dynamic of relief to a stressful and often grim occupation. Sometimes things got a bit heated; sometimes you got an explosion. *Sometimes*, Hank might want to tear his own hair out in frustration, but Chet brought a unique quality to the shift that kind of grew on you.

He levered himself up from his chair, wondering if he'd given Roy enough time to coax Gage back inside. He headed to the kitchen where Marco was stirring something on the stove. A peek out back gave him his answer, so he turned to pour a cup of coffee.

"You'll get traumatic arthritis in that hand if you slug something every time Chet deserves it." Roy finally broke the silence he had been working through as he cleaned the knuckles of the man sitting on the hood of the Rover. "Well, looks like nothing's broken. It'll hurt some for a few days, but I don't think it needs a bandage. Can you bend it enough to start an I.V.?" Roy stowed his doctoring supplies in his coat pockets, not really surprised that Johnny wasn't in the mood to chat. His eyes scanned the overcast sky and he wondered if they would actually get the weatherman's promised break from the rain they had seen for days on end. "You know, when Cap said not to go far, he wasn't suggesting you just stay in this area code. He's going to come looking for you. I wouldn't make him work too hard at it, if I were you."

With a heavy sigh, John finally answered, "It's fine. See?" He demonstrated by wiggling all phalanges and flexing the hand in question. "And you're right, we should get back." Sliding down off the hood, he answered the implied question that Roy hadn't outright asked. "I'll be fine, too. Chet was just being Chet. I know that, the jackass. He's like a bulldog: once he starts in, he just can't let something go. This time it really ticked me off, is all." John shot a thoughtful glance toward the back of the station as they headed back in. "How far ahead do you suppose Cap is working on the latrine schedule? I've lost track."

John held the door as Roy passed through, then paused before turning to face his captain's undisguised exasperation. He winced as his commander crooked his index finger once in a less than optional gesture to follow him. As he hunched his shoulders and stepped to obey, he had to pull a hand out of a pocket to receive the steaming mug of coffee that was held in his path. "Thanks, Marco. Here goes - again. Man, I am getting tired of that office. And you, Roy - a real friend would've told him we need to make a run to Rampart."

"Nope, a *real* friend would tell you to get your butt in there before Cap *really* gets mad. So, get in there. You know you might as well face the music. As soon as you're through we do need to restock."

Captain Stanley was waiting behind his desk, and John drug the door closed behind himself, to lean back against it, his hand still resting on the doorknob.

"Buck up, John. This won't take long. I have two questions, and one request and then you and Roy can make tracks to Rampart. First, are you okay? And second, do you think we can make it through the rest of the shift without any more self-inflicted injuries?"

"Yeah, Cap I'm good. I'm sorry about earlier, it won't happen again."

"Good to know. Now for the request: could you try not to look like you're headed to the gallows every time I ask to talk to you? It's enough to give a captain a complex."

"Ah, sure Cap, you want the door open or closed?"

"Open. See if Marco needs you to pick up anything for dinner, would you?" Hank blew his cheeks out and turned his shaking head towards the vacation roster he was trying to cobble together, hoping the ears attached to the retreating man he had spoken to had caught that last request.

The paramedics responded to a pair of back-to-back cardiac runs just as they were pulling out of Rampart's parking lot. Those runs necessitated another drug resupply and then they had to make the requested stop at a grocery store, so it was a while before they made it back to the station.

Roy waved at Chet's sister who was just pulling her car out into the street.

"What do you suppose Chet is hatching now?" John's eyes narrowed as he considered the possibilities.

Roy figured his partner wasn't being especially paranoid, seeing as how Chet pretty much *always* had a scheme in the works. "Who knows, Johnny? Here, let's take these sacks in to Marco, and we'll both keep an eye out."

It took them less than five minutes to come across the clown punching bag waiting in front of John's locker. "Cheer up. I can think of at least a dozen worse things that could have been waiting. At least this one is out in the open."

"You're right Roy! I'll bet this is just a decoy." John spent the next half hour scouring the station for the "real" trap, which Roy thought was not only paranoid, but also fed Chet an extra measure of glee.

John was still wandering around looking suspiciously behind doors when the tones sounded.

Station 51; respond to a boy trapped in a marsh near Carson Harbor Village Mobile Home Park, 17701 Avalon Boulevard - one seven seven zero one, Avalon Boulevard, Cross street: East Vista Drive. Time out: 1345.

John met Mike at the map. "That's less than half a mile from Station 116."

"They got a call to a mudslide at Leapwood Elementary while you guys were gone. Must still be dealing with that," Mike said as he pulled himself up into the cab of the engine.

Seven minutes later the rigs pulled up along the eastern boundary of the marsh. An animated boy of perhaps six years of age bounded up to the firemen as they stepped down from the rig. "Come quick, come quick, ya gotta help him," he sobbed, latching both hands to Mike's turnout sleeve and trying to tug him toward the marsh's edge.

"Hold on there, young man." Captain Stanley got hold of the determined boy's shoulders and turned him away from his engineer as he knelt on one knee. "How about you telling me what is going on so we can figure out how best to do just that? Are you the one who called the fire department?"

Hank's answer came in the form of another shuddering sob before the boy threw himself into the captain's arms and completely dissolved into tears. Arms that had automatically enfolded the child lifted him to a hip as Hank straightened to survey the scene.

His brow furrowed as he studied the boggy area dotted with groups of trees. Hank guessed this whole marsh pretty much dried up each summer but at the moment it was mix of mud and standing water. He counted over two dozen lengths of lumber and plywood that had been strategically placed to provide access to a spot of higher ground a little under fifty yards away. The last link of the "bridge" was an entire sheet of plywood floating right on the mud.

Cap searched for an alternative to the kid-laid path, but regardless of how unstable it appeared, he could see no better, safer way to quickly access the drama taking place thirty feet left of the bridge against the far bank.

It did not take much imagination to mentally reconstruct the rescue the boys had envisioned when they set out to save the deer that had apparently gotten caught in the mud.

Another, older boy crouched on the end of what looked to be an interior door. His end balanced on a boulder jutting out of the mud. One of the opposite corners was set against the edge of the bank right at water level. The deer was close enough to catch the free corner with an occasional flailing hoof. Every time the frightened kid tried to crawl to the safety of solid ground, the deer struggled and set the door in motion. It looked for all the world like the panicking animal was going to succeed in catapulting the boy into the mire.

"Hang on son, and try not to move too much," Hank called.

"Okay, I'm going to need your help here, young man. What do you say?" the captain asked as he motioned Marco over to take the child who had calmed enough to give a nod yes.

"Good. Is that your fort over there?" he asked as he dug the HT from his pocket, receiving another nod in the affirmative. "So, is that an island, or can you get to it from another side without using boards and planks like you've got on this side?"

"It's an island now. It didn't used to be so cool before it started to rain. Now this is the only side that has enough rocks an' little islands to build bridges. Danny says it's a way more defensible space now. We have our own moat and we're gonna build a drawbridge an' everything," the boy finished with enthusiasm.

"I take it Danny's your brother?"

"Uh huh... and my name is Josh. Hurry, you gotta save him!"

"Working on it son, I'm working on it. Marco, see if you can get an address or phone number to get hold of their parents."

"Stoker, Gage, pull the ladder, and prepare to get dirty; Kelly, Roy you too. Grab some ropes."

Cap keyed the HT. "LA, this is Station 51. Respond a truck company, law enforcement and Animal Control to this location. Let Animal Control know we're dealing with a mule deer stuck in mud."

"Keep it spread out men. Take ropes but leave the ladder for now. Let's just try to get the kid away from the deer and up on solid ground for starters. Try not to spook it any more than it already is."

Roy led the way, stepping onto a set of two-by-fours that linked a reed-tufted mound to the solid land he was leaving behind. They reminded him of the balance beam Joanne had talked him into trying to walk across in high school. Once. He had fallen and cracked his head hard enough to see stars. He paused for a moment to refocus and looked ahead only to count four more similarly constructed sections. He began to feel nostalgic for the four-inch mat he had landed on years ago. At least then there had been no danger of drowning. Not to mention the added bonus of Joanne being right there to kiss the hurt away. With that memory, Roy stepped clear of the first boards. He was just getting ready to tackle the fallen log that formed the next section when Mike called to him to wait up.

Roy turned to watch the engineer trip-trapping across the first section with ease, holding a pair of doubled-up pike poles out like a trapeze artist. Mike joined Roy on his bit of terra firma and offered him one of the poles with a flourish and a grin, before hopping up on the log and practically *sprinting* across it. "Smart ass," Roy called out just loud enough for Mike to hear before he stepped up and mimicked the technique, finding he could move with a bit more confidence and speed than before.

Mike plunged the pike pole into the mud on his right side in an effort to stabilize the bucking plywood beneath his feet. Any advantage he gained with that maneuver was lost when he had to wrench the pike back out of the tenacious bog. He changed tactics and dropped to his hands and knees to lower his center of gravity. Leaning on the pike pole with it held flat across the board stabilized it enough to allow him to work his way forward until he was close enough to the bank to crouch and execute a quick leap before being tipped into the waiting sludge. Standing, he looked up to see Roy successfully hopping from one boulder to another followed by Gage. Chet was queuing up to join them, waiting to give them a moment to get spaced back out a bit.

Danny knelt on his end of the door as he and the exhausted deer faced off in a few minutes of seeming truce.

"Atta boy," Roy encouraged the boy as Chet made the final leap to solid land. The firemen started to circle to the other side of the pair hoping to keep from alarming the deer. "Keep real still, you're doing great, son."

They edged into position as they considered their options. The deer was definitely paying attention, shifting its head constantly to keep all four firemen in sight. Without warning, the animal decided one boy was less of a threat than four grown firemen. He reared out of the mud and began to try to pull himself up and over the boy in a desperate effort to put some distance between himself and the men on the bank.

John dove from where he stood to cover the child before sharp hooves could descend. Chet took the more direct route and lunged to pull the deer away from the paramedic's back, grabbing head and neck to turn him toward the bank. He held the struggling animal against his chest, his own back braced against the ledge that Roy was leaning out from. Mike grabbed the paramedic's belt and with the security of that belay, Roy reached even further.

"Up behind you Johnny."

John responded to his partner's voice, without turning to look, by twisting and boosting the boy up into Roy's waiting arms. That motion caused the door to spin on the boulder beneath it and to tip in another direction. This forced John to push off of the gyrating surface to avoid falling head first into the treacherous mud. He landed hard against the top of the bank, but managed to scramble the rest of the way to gain firm footing. The others ended in a heap to his right.

Meanwhile, Chet had a lap full of frantic mule deer. Predictably, it had reached its tolerance of human contact and literally climbed Chet's frame to gain higher ground. The terrified animal scrambled away from the commotion at the marsh's edge.

Chet barely had the presence of mind to grab a last lungful of air before the weight of the deer pushed first his chest and then his head underwater. He tried to flip over to gain a solid purchase to push up from, but he could not overcome the sucking action of the mud that held him firmly on his back. His struggle only served to work him further into the marsh's cold grip - until his eyes, then mouth and finally his nose were completely covered. He couldn't help it; he began to thrash in earnest. He concentrated on holding his breath but something primal was rising from his

chest, catching in his throat and threatening to choke him from the inside, without any help from the mud and the water that would rush in once he lost control and succumbed to the urge to scream and gasp and... He became aware of pulling and prying. He reached for the reserves to hold on a bit longer.

Mike threw himself into the marsh feet first even as he saw Chet's head go under. John slid down from his hard-won perch. He landed close enough to join Mike in his determined efforts to pull Chet's head and shoulders up enough to clear the four-inch layer of water that lay atop the mud. It was taking a frustrating combination of sliding their hands to break the suction and then a quick shift of effort to work his shoulders incrementally up. It was taking too damn long. Each of Chet's movements countered any progress they were making.

Mike plunged one hand into the murk while he continued to pry at a shoulder with the other. He groped to capture Chet's flailing hand and squeezed until his own ached. He squeezed until Chet's form stilled a moment later. "No! Chet!" an anguished cry ripped from his throat. Mike and John's eyes met over their friend's submerged body, frozen for a second in despair and horror. Then Mike turned to dig with renewed purpose, spurred on by the lineman's answering squeeze. Roy was suddenly there and he concentrated on hollowing out a space beneath Chet's shoulder blades until with a reluctant slurp, the quagmire released its hold.

Just when Chet could not resist the building pressure in his chest a moment longer, he felt hands scrape at his face so that when he finally did take a shuddering gasp, it was primarily air that he inhaled instead of the grime he expected to feel slide into his lungs.

They took several minutes to clear much of the mud from the sputtering man's face and continued to work at digging him out. It was time they felt they could spare considering all three stood stuck fast in the knee-deep mud.

"Marco, go!" Hank ordered the moment he saw the deer panic and initiate the ensuing wrestling match. He'd just begun briefing Captain Jim Alan of 116's who had arrived at the scene after finishing at the grade school.

The most alarming part was over in less than three minutes, with Chet's head above water and the boy, Danny, safe in Marco's care.

It took them the better part of ninety minutes to free the rest of his crew. The rain had started up again. The boys had long since been transported to Rampart in the care of Peterson and Brooks, 116's paramedics.

Hank sighed, mostly in relief, to hear the banter coming from the rear of the squad.

"Hold still Chet, you're getting blood on my muck."

"Ouch! Gage, that smarts. Do you have to wrap it that tight?"

Hank paused to exchange grins with Roy who was stowing boxes in the side compartments of the squad. He rounded the corner just as John was securing an edge of the gauze encasing Chet's forearm. A corner of the yellow blanket draped across Chet's shoulders was carefully arranged to shield the arm from the drizzling rain.

"There you go, you big baby," John teased as he stepped away from the lineman perched on the squad's bumper. "That'll teach you to try to go a round with a 165 pound animal. You're lucky he was a youngster, otherwise he would have been sporting more than single spikes on his head."

They all turned to see a pair of wary eyes watching from the bushes of the fiercely contested slip of high ground.

"Cap, you don't think they'll have to shoot him, do you?"

"Not my call Chet. We'll leave that decision up to the animal control guys." At the look of devastation on his lineman's face, Hank added, "Now Chet, would you rather the poor thing get stuck again and die of exhaustion or worse be at the mercy of coyotes or feral dogs?"

Roy and John moved to steer Chet away. "Come on pal, you look like the creature from the black lagoon."

"Better than looking and smelling like a garden variety goon like you do on a good day, Gage."

"Let's get going, you two. We're all a mess. Johnny what did you do to your shoulder?"

"Landed kinda hard on it I guess," John replied as he eased into the squad after Chet slid to the center over the yellow blanket Roy had spread.

"We'll have one of the docs look at it while Chet gets stitched up."

"Not if Morton's on, we won't. Man, I am not going to sit still and listen to him yammer at me about how I'm out of shape like he did the last time I pulled a shoulder muscle."

"Listen to your partner, John. Roy, make sure they both get cleared before you haul them back to the barn." Hank turned to head toward the group standing near the engine as the squad pulled away.

Mike joined him, trying gamely to match his captain's stride, in spite of his hampered gait. "Gee, Cap. Can we keep him?"

"Michael, don't start. You know it's not up to me." Hank eyed Stoker's left foot which had abandoned its boot somewhere back in the mud. "I hope you have a spare pair back at the station."

"Hey, Hank, we were just discussing what to do with 51's new mascot," Captain Alan announced with a grin. "This is Jerry Tormey and Todd Michaels from Animal Control. Jerry, Todd, meet

Captain Hank Stanley, ring leader of the motley, mud encrusted crew you just witnessed us rescue from the mire."

"Thanks for that, Jim, *I think*," Hank muttered good-naturedly as he stepped forward to shake the hands of the newly introduced men.

"Captain, good to meet you. As I was telling Captain Alan, I think we *should* remove the deer. He'll just get stuck again and next time it might be half of the area's second grade class that comes to his rescue. He's way out of a muley's normal range so it will take a bit of effort to relocate him..." Tom paused, raising both hands at the dismayed expressions he saw on most of the firemen's faces. "Hold on... that being said, I think it's worth a try. I suggest we lightly sedate him and pull him out on a game sled. It will be less traumatic for the deer and safer all around. We could use a few extra sets of hands if you men can spare the time."

"You should head on out, Hank. My crew can handle it, along with dismantling the bridge afterwards. It *is* our swamp after all. Do you think those kids left anything standing to go home to?" Captain Alan paused a moment before adding, "They'll take it hard you know."

Hank looked up to follow Jim's gaze, realizing he was not referring to the young bridge-building boys, but to the pair of engineers standing with their heads together, gesturing occasionally to the path of lumber the kids had laid out. He could see the same wheels turning that Jim obviously recognized. "I'll be sure to break it to them gently," he assured his fellow captain as he headed to squelch what he was sure were budding plans for a working drawbridge.

John watched Dr. Early's hands as he methodically set the last of the seven stitches in Chet's forearm.

"... and then the damn thing's front hoof slipped inside of my turncoat's sleeve. Who knew they file their hoofs to such edges?"

"Who knew?" the doctor responded with a chuckle. "Well, that should do it, Chet. You'll be fine to finish the shift, but keep the arm dry and come back in if it shows signs of infection. Let Roy and John keep an eye on it. And have Roy wrap the arm when you take a shower, and Chet - take a shower." Dr. Early flipped his exam gloves off onto the suture tray. "Your turn, Johnny. Let's take a look at your shoulder in exam room four." He and the paramedic stepped out as Chet started to pull his borrowed shirt on.

Dr. Early manipulated John's shoulder, keeping an eye on the his face for signs of pain. He caught a few grimaces, but was satisfied that it was only a slight strain of the pectoral muscle. "It'll be sore for a bit. Ice it when you can. Anything else we should take a look at while you're here?"

"Nah, I'm good..." John paused, and Dr. Early again turned to face him at the hesitation he heard. His raised eyebrow urged his friend to continue.

"Doc, how do you do it? Keep doing it, I mean. How do you keep it from getting to you, all the times you just can't do enough to save them?"

Dr. Early was silent for several seconds, as he considered the question. "John, it does get to me sometimes. Losing a patient tears us all up. It just goes with the territory. The day I am able to walk away without regretting a lost life, is the day I hang up my stethoscope and play piano for a living."

"I know you care. How do you keep from caring too much?"

The doctor hooked a wheeled stool with a foot and pulled it closer to take seat. "It's not *about* trying not to care too much. For me, it comes down to realizing that I need to be there for the patient and the family, to really be *present* and empathetic - to bring all my skills, all my everything, every time. And then I need to be able to let go." He shifted to readjust the contents of a lab coat pocket. "I've come to realize I am a part of my patients' lives for a short time. I can't own the tragedy, or the triumphs. They aren't mine to claim. I'm not doing my job if I can't step back when it's done, whatever the outcome, and accept that my part *is* done. People move on if they live, or families grieve if they die."

John's face was skeptical. "So *you* just move on, just like that?" He raked a hand through his hair, leaving his fingers tangled for a moment before releasing a frustrated sigh.

"I need to work through what happened, sure, and I do grieve when I've lost a patient. But it's not the grief of a parent or loved one. It can't be." Joe paused to form his next thought. "Just as they can't be the ones who go into the burning building, or perform the surgery, we can't be the ones who hold the grief, John - we just can't."

"But how do you accept it when you can't save them?" John shifted a bit and tested his shoulder's ability to support him as he leaned back. One leg began to swing.

"I never get used to losing a patient, but we all need to accept that people die. Everybody dies, sometime. We just try very hard to give people more time, or less pain, or more dignity than they would have if we didn't try at all. Sometimes people die in spite of our best efforts. Sometimes children die, or parents die too young." Dr. Early noted his patient's growing restlessness and stood to stand at his side. "I don't have to understand it. But I do believe in showing up, in being there to do my best. When that falls short, at least their loved ones know that everything was done that *could* be done - at the very least *I* know it."

Joe's hand had moved to pat John's non-injured shoulder, but stalled mid-air as he considered what such a maneuver would cost in terms of hand washing. "Johnny, borrow some scrubs and take a turn in the showers here, compliments of Rampart." They both turned to face the door when it opened and Roy's newly scrubbed head poked in.

"Hey, Doc, are you about finished patching him up? He's not giving you too much trouble is he?"

"Nope, we're just finishing," Early turned to the man who still sat fidgeting. "Ready to get out of here, Johnny?"

"You'll never have to ask me that question twice. Thanks, Doc."

"No problem. Anything for the department's finest. You guys be safe. 51s has already exceeded its limit of injuries per shift," Dr. Early said with a fond smile before turning to leave as the quota-meeting paramedic hopped off the exam table.

After John left his share of the swamp swirling down the shower drain, he and Roy went in search of Chet.

Later that shift, Chet fought sleep as he waited. It was mostly quiet, which meant Mike was sleeping on his side or stomach, otherwise it wouldn't have been so peaceful. He waited until...there it was: the prolonged lack of rustling that signaled all five of his shift mates had found their way to sleep.

Chet quietly slipped out of the dorm room and moved to the couch, certain his wayward subconscious was going to follow the pattern it had fallen into over the past weeks. He was unwilling to subject his fellow firemen to the sharing of his regularly scheduled nightmare.

Chapter 2

Sunday, Second Shift Back

Chet was the last man of A-shift to arrive at the station Sunday morning, but it wasn't because he was running late. Captain Stanley had watched the other members of his crew arrive almost an hour earlier. At the moment, there were even a few extra men from C-shift loitering around to savor the anticipated reaction when Chet first wandered into the bunkroom. Shushing everyone, Marco held up one finger, then two, then...

Chet came charging onto the apparatus floor under a full head of steam and as indignant as Hank had ever seen him. Of course, that might have had something to do with the hog-tied, inflatable deer lounging in the blow-up kiddies' pool that currently rested in the center of the lineman's bunk. Bambi was waiting for round two, in four inches of mud.

His men jostled each other and jockeyed their way to line up for morning roll call. Most wore ear-to-ear grins, and even Chet, who was the brunt of the ribbing, was proving that he could take his own medicine with a modicum of grace.

"Why, Chet. You are absolutely glowing this morning! I've heard mud is great for the complexion," Roy commented as they gathered along the side of the engine.

Mike nudged Chet to claim his spot on the end. "You know, Chet - you could bottle it and then do your own commercials with before and after pictures."

"Say, I bet my sister would love a bottle," Johnny leaned out of line, trading another grin with his teammates. "What about you, Roy? Do you think Joanne would like some of 'Chet's Magic Mud Mask' for Christmas? Of course, no one could afford to apply it as liberally as he does, but then again, no one *needs* it as much either."

"Alright men, settle down," Hank broke in, just as the lineman opened his mouth to retort.

"Tim Forest is staying over a few hours to cover for Marco so he can go to his niece's Thanksgiving play." Cap paused to make a few adjustments on his clipboard. "It looks like he'll be latrine officer, since he hasn't seen fit to grace us with his presence here for roll call.

"Roy, you're the cook today. Mike, John, there are a few hoses to hang from last shift, and you'll have the day room also. Marco will help there and with kitchen clean up when he gets back, and Chet, you get the bunkroom. Make sure you don't spread that goo from your spa all over the station. If there is time, I want to check the hydrants over on Grace Avenue.

"Moving on, I detect an inflatable theme forming here, and am just going to say once that I don't want it to cross over to the realm of impropriety. Let's try to keep it clean, and I am not referring to the mud in this instance, although a little less enthusiastic application of that would be appreciated also. We are not the only folks that might stroll through the station at any given moment.

"Along those lines, a safety officer from the City of Phoenix Fire Department is touring some of the stations this week with Chief Jackson out of Battalion 3. They're due here first thing this morning.

"And one final item: 'looks like the boys from the deer incident last shift will both be fine. Jerry from Animal Control called with an update on the status of the deer. Bambi was last seen high tailing it into the bushes up on the backside of Saddle Peak.

"Alright men, let's get to it."

Chet caught up with Captain Stanley as he was about to enter his office. "Hey, Cap, you got a minute?"

"Sure, Chet what's on your mind?" Hank asked, holding the door in invitation, but refraining from inquiring about the stack of hard-covered books Chet placed on one chair before pulling its mate around to face the desk.

With some trepidation, he leaned back in his own seat and waited for his lineman to pitch what he was sure was going to be another one of his schemes.

"Well, you see Cap," Chet began as he handed a book over the desk, "I've been reading a book by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross called *On Death and Dying*. She's got a lot of great theories on how people go through grief."

Hank offered no comment as the man warmed to his subject.

"John is in classic denial, and Marco has got the anger phase down pat like he invented it."

Again, Chet's commanding officer refrained from interrupting. Hank had actually read the book when it had been given to him after his father died, and he was curious to see where Chet was headed with this.

"I've also read about the therapeutic technique of journaling, and I thought if Gage won't talk about what he's got bottled up inside, maybe he could write it down. I got us each one, so no one feels singled out or anything."

The captain waited to be sure Chet was indeed finished with his spiel. "Well, Chet, You have obviously put a lot of time and thought into this. And I appreciate your running it by me before springing it on the guys. You can go ahead and suggest it, but no one is under any obligation to participate...*especially not me*," Hank added under his breath as his lineman carried the inch-thick tomes out of his office.

The tones sounded for a squad response and Captain Stanley moved to jot the address down before handing the call slip to Roy. Roy had his hand on the handle of the squad's door and John had just swung around the rear of the engine when Mike slid into the bay at a near run, almost shouting to get the paramedics' attention.

"It's Tim, I found him out back under the hose tower; it looks like he fell." Mike reversed direction and ran back out.

"What in Sam Hill was he doing out there?" Cap questioned the air as he called dispatch to cancel the squad's response and report a still alarm with a code I.

Roy and John each grabbed equipment from the squad while Chet came out of the bunkroom to lend a hand.

"Keep holding his head, Mike," Roy instructed as he set the trauma box near the fallen man's feet.

"Don't move, Tim. Where do you hurt? Tim? Can you open your eyes for me?" Tim was on his right side, curled in a fetal position on top of a snarl of hose. More hose and rope tangled in and on top of his legs.

Tim was not answering, nor opening his eyes. Roy and John exchanged concerned glances as they leaned in to continue the assessment. Worry etched his face as Chet opened the bio phone while John pried open Tim's eyes, and then flicked his penlight and palpated the back of the young lineman's head. "Eyes are equal and reactive. I've got some blood here, but not that much..." He got up from his crouch and stepped lightly over Tim to examine the back of his head. "...it's coming from a superficial gash about three centimeters long over his right occipital."

"Abdomen's soft," Roy added. "No signs of fractures."

John bent to raise the back of the lineman's jacket and shirt. "Looks like he landed on a couple of hose couplings - he's starting to bruise along the right side of his spine."

Roy got right in the non-responsive man's face. "Tim!" He paused a moment before trying a firm command of "Forest! Open your eyes!"

Tim tried to move his head, but Mike's restraining hands prevented him.

"Tim can you hear me? I need you to open your eyes and look at me." Roy continued to harangue the lineman. "Atta boy, do you know what happened?"

Tim was still not forming words, but he worked his jaw in the attempt. He closed his eyes and moaned again. Roy took the blood pressure cuff Chet handed him as John accepted the c collar. Cap was taking notes to relay to Rampart. Chet slipped away and returned with the backboard and a blanket.

"Ambulance is on the way."

"Okay, let's get him on the board, on three."

Chet again left to meet the ambulance crew as Cap continued to relay vitals. Mike handed John the supplies to start the ordered I.V. just as Tim opened his eyes again and formed his first words, "I am dead meat."

"Hey, welcome back there, Tim. Can you tell us what happened?"

Tim swiveled his eyes to take in his surroundings and his gaze settled on the hose tower. "Ah, man. I fell. Cap is gonna kill me." He made panicked eye contact with the man holding the I.V. bag aloft. "Not you, Captain Stanley. Captain Hookrader is going to absolutely shit bricks... ah, sorry sir," the agitated lineman snapped his mouth shut in mortification.

Hank laid a calming hand on the young lineman's man's head. "Let's get you to the hospital and worry about that later." And suspecting that he already knew the answer, he asked, "What were you doing, son?"

Tim closed his eyes in resignation. "I was trying to hoist myself up to the platform. I am going to get fired aren't I?"

Hank closed his own eyes and dug deep for just the right tone of voice. "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Sorry Cap," Tim's eyes popped open at the jostling of being lifted to the gurney between the two ambulance attendants. They had rolled a gurney up while the chagrined linemen and his temporary captain discussed repercussions. With a crooked, rather endearing grin, the lineman's eyes drifted closed again. "I would've made it, too - but my foot slipped off the hook and then I guess I must have grabbed the wrong end of the haul rope and down I went. He's gonna *kill* me."

Captain Stanley looked up to see Battalion Chief Jackson standing next to a fire officer in an unfamiliar style of uniform. They stood aside, taking it all in, as Roy, John, and the ambulance attendants hustled Tim off through the station.

"*I'm* gonna kill him." Cap muttered as an aside to Mike, who ducked his head and moved to help Chet finish cleaning up the medical debris scattered in the shadow of the hose tower. Chet scrambled up the ladder with the haul rope in hand and threaded it through the pulley block while Mike sorted the snarled hose below.

Captain Stanley went to greet their guests, one of whom met him with an icy glare. "Captain Stanley, meet Chief Haynes, the *Safety* Officer from Phoenix Fire." Chief Jackson ground the words out as he watched them shake hands. Stalking over to the tower he growled, "I want a sign posted, and I want it posted NOW." He then turned smartly on a heel and stalked off.

Chief Haynes turned to Hank with a sympathetic smile. "Mind if I call later to see how he's doing? You know, I tried that once - 'made it a bit higher than young Tim before my captain caught me, and he *did* shit bricks." The visiting officer turned to follow his escort. "Safe shift, Captain."

Once Marco showed up, the guys filled him in on all the excitement he'd missed and Chet pulled out the journals. "No look, guys, I'm serious. You just need give it a chance. The idea is to let your stream of consciousness flow and put it all down in writing. Here, look, I copied some prompts if you need help getting started."

Cap watched the skeptical looks form on his men's faces and decided a rescue was in order. Clapping his hands and rubbing them briskly together he announced, "Okay then. There are a dozen hydrants calling our names over on Grace."

When he heard the engine pull into the bay, Roy set out soup and sandwiches for a late lunch. The paramedics had caught a run to Carnegie Middle School to patch up a couple of boys after they got in a fistfight. One came away with a broken nose, and he was the *winner*. The engine crew had stayed to finish the hydrant checks.

"Great soup, Roy," Marco offered between bites.

"Thanks, it's a recipe Jo got out of *Women's Day* years ago. The kids eat it without complaints so I thought I'd give it a shot."

"Did you get a chance to check on Tim?" Hank asked as he reached for the saltshaker.

"The first look at the x-rays was clear, but when Bracket and Early checked again, they saw three fractured transverse processes. Those are boney paddle-shaped wings coming off each side of a vertebra. The muscles actually tore them off in a row along his thoracic spine." Roy reached around his lower rib cage to illustrate the area he was talking about.

Hank suppressed a shudder and noted the same reaction from the rest of his engine crew.

"What does that mean in terms of recovery?"

"Lots better than you'd think," John piped in. "Bracket told him he'll be off maybe three months with a ton of physical therapy and then probably be good as new. Captain Hookrader showed up as we were leaving and we'll have to wait and see if the guy's still alive when we check on him, next chance we get. Do you think they'll fire him over this, Cap?"

"I can't say for sure. He's got a good record, and certainly the Brass have refrained from firing men who have pulled crazier stunts than this in the past. Of course, it doesn't help that Chief

Jackson and his guest were eyewitnesses, but Hookrader will stand up for him and I will too. My guess is he'll get off with a reprimand."

The tones sounded, calling them to a three-alarm fire at an abandoned apartment building on the other side of Highway 405.

They were relieving station 105 at this fire scene, as that crew had been at it since early morning. By the time they pulled up, the operation was in the last stages of overhaul. An arson investigator met Captain Stanley as he hopped off the engine.

"What's up, Walt?" Captain Stanley asked as he gave his helmet strap a cinching tug.

"Hank," the man greeted 51s captain with a nod. "Walk with me. Have your men report to the incident commander for assignments if you would."

"Got it, Cap." Mike offered as he hoisted his SCBA up to his back, leaving the mask to dangle off his left shoulder, and moving to round up the rest of the crew.

"What we have is a growing case for arson, so we are treating this whole site as a crime scene. Incident Command will brief your men, but I'd like you to stress the importance of preserving any evidence they find. We've identified classic scorch patterns of a trail of accelerant and have also located an empty gasoline can in the dumpster two blocks north-east of here. Just have them keep an eye out, will you? I don't expect the station crews will be on scene too much longer. I'm guessing it will be a long night for my partner and I."

"But you and Ernie are so *good* at what you do," Hank gave his friend a conciliatory pat on the back before he moved to check in with Command and then set off to have a chat with each of his men. On the way, he made a wide berth around four upended cardboard boxes, each marked with chalk as evidence and covering what he suspected were footprints.

He caught up with Chet and Marco as they were removing molding to check one of the last apartments for hot spots. He repeated Marvin Olsen's requests and left the pair to finish with their inspection, satisfied they were using their SCBAs in the lingering smoke.

He found Roy and Mike taking a break and noted they both were trying not to be too obvious about keeping an eye on John. He was, as usual taking way too much delight in tearing open a wall. "Everything okay, gentlemen?" he asked casually, searching their faces for unspoken clues about how John was handling the very same situation that just last week had sent him into a momentary tailspin and caused a flashback to the fatality house fire the week before.

"Just fine, Cap. It's kind of twisted the way he takes to demolition and destruction don't you think?" Mike said with a grin as he re-joined the paramedic with equal enthusiasm.

Roy sketched a salute with his own ax. "Joy is where you find it, I guess."

Their captain had to agree.

Later that evening, after dinner, Mike set aside the crossword and stood to stretch out his frame. He strolled over to the kitchen area and smiled at the sight of John writing once again in his journal. One could only guess at the mischief the man was plotting. Roy was setting out the cards, and their eyes met over John's head. Roy nudged his partner as Mike drifted back to the day room. Chet and Marco looked up from the TV.

"Something wrong, Mike?" Roy asked, studying the obviously distracted engineer's face.

"Nothing, I guess... I just..." Mike paused, unable to put a name to his unease. "I guess we should go and dig Cap out from under his mound of paperwork to play a token hand of poker before John does the dishes."

Standing, John began his retort to that jibe with a palm spread over his chest, "Who says *I* am going to lose this time? What if I'm feeling lucky tonight?"

"Gage, you wouldn't recognize what "feeling lucky tonight" felt like if it bit you in the face."

"Why don't you go play in the freeway, Chet?"

Captain Hank Stanley looked up from the letter in his hands and into the concerned faces of five firemen. He did not attempt to hide the emotion brimming his eyes as he stood. With the barest smile, he handed the letter to Roy, who was closest to his desk. He slipped out of the office and headed towards the kitchen. The other four crew members moved to surround Roy in a huddle over the handwritten pages.

Los Angeles County Fire Department

To the captains of the stations that responded to the house fire on West Lincoln Avenue, on November 2nd.

Dear Sirs,

Perhaps you can forgive my asking you to read this before deciding whether to share it with your men. I will trust your judgment. I do not mean to cause more pain to whatever any of you are feeling now.

To heroes who do not always win,

You could not have saved her. I am sure you have been told, as we have been, that she died of smoke inhalation, and that she was probably gone before you were even called to the scene. Some of us, friends of the family, are only now turning to face this obscene truth ourselves. It will be awhile before her parents are able to.

I shudder at what you risked to save her. I thank God that this world did not lose any firemen, any heroes that night.

If bravery could have saved the day, then the outcome would have been so, so different.

I wish you could have known this child, this little girl, who, even at her young, (oh, my God, she was so young) age, rarely had to resort to temper tantrums. She relied on an impish grin or simply the most soulful eyes a child ever wielded. She sang off-key, too loudly. She still sucked her thumb, but as she would have indignantly informed you, only at night. She wanted a pony, a puppy and three kittens, please. She spoke with a lisp because her cousin knocked out one of her baby teeth before its time, during a wrestling match. She was afraid of going to Kindergarten next year because she knew the doctor would have to give her shots before they would let her attend. She loved Brussels sprouts, hated tapioca pudding and preferred that the foods on her plate never touch. She wanted to be a ballerina when she grew up.

It isn't right. It isn't fair. And it wasn't your fault.

I am sorry that your part in her life was limited to the end. She would have loved to meet you, I am sure, although she would have probably demanded to know what you had done with your "spotted damnation puppy dog."

Her mom gave me a picture to enclose, in the hopes that you can someday think of her as she was on her fourth birthday.

We will miss her forever. But even knowing that, I wanted you each to know how grateful we are that you were there that night, fighting a battle against impossible odds. I am sorry for what it must have cost you.

I pray that you are healing from your injuries - bruises and burns, to bodies and spirits.

Be well. Be careful. Take care of each other.

Anne Camden, a friend of Missy's mom.

Roy laid the pages down, his fingers lingered to brush the edges even. One, by one the men turned away to join their captain. John was the last to step into the kitchen. He paused to tuck a photo of a dark haired angel with a pink-frosted grin into the corner of the bulletin board.

Chapter 3

Tuesday, Third Shift Back

Hank shut his car door and strolled over to join the small crowd of firemen, wondering what had captured both shifts' attention until he looked over their shoulders and read a sign posted on the hose tower.

Rope Rides

5 for \$1.00

He covered a smile with one hand but camouflaged that action by rubbing his open palm across his mouth. "Very cute. That comes down this shift, got it? But first, someone take a snap shot of it."

Mike shadowed him into his office. "You want I should put up an official sign like the chief ordered?" his engineer asked in a voice straight off of *Leave it to Beaver*.

"I'll have to ponder some on that. Just what do you suggest, 'Eddie'?"

"I'll give it some thought too, Cap. I'll ask the guys for better ideas."

"I can only hold my breath in anticipation. Roll call in ten."

"Welcome back men, I hope you all had a fine day off." Captain Stanley's eyes scanned down the line-up and rested on the figure bobbing between a stone-faced Mike and a not-so-under-control-faced Roy. "Chet, your friend needs a haircut," he dead-panned, indicating the punching bag that was now sporting a bushy mustache and an orange wig with a dress uniform hat perched on top.

"Back to the business at hand. The good news is, they've caught the arsonists. The bad news is it was a trio of 13-year-old boys down from East LA. One of them was spotted in the crowd and on follow-up, has a five-year history of what is termed here as "a fascination with fire". They seem a tad young to be launching careers of wanton disregard for life and property. They rode the bus to and from the fire scene, for heaven's sake."

After chore assignments, the engine company set out to shop for the shift's meals. The paramedics took the squad to the department equipment yard to have Charlie do a routine maintenance check, since Repair 14 was in the shop too.

Roy sipped a coke as they waited across the street from where the squad was being worked on and listened to John push the straw from his shake in and out, in and out. "Will you knock that off? My kids make less noise drinking one of those than you do."

"You mean this?" John helpfully demonstrated the noise in question.

"Yes, that. It sounds like you are trying to play 'Oh my darlin', oh my darlin', oh my daaar-lin' Clemintine' on the darn thing."

John paused long enough to take a really long, really obnoxious slurp of his shake.

"Much better, thanks." Roy allowed with a roll of his eyes.

They sat, each leaning with their backs against the top of the picnic table in front of the diner where they had bought their drinks, waiting for Charlie to finish with the rig.

"Doc Early's right, you know. I heard part of what he said last shift, and he's one hundred percent spot-on." Roy met his partner's silent gaze over the dwindling shake. "You're going to have to stop beating yourself up about it eventually, John."

His answer was a record-breaking length of slurp, which was accomplished without breaking eye contact.

"Look, he's lasted in the business for years longer than anyone we know. And he's still top-notch. And he still cares. He hasn't lost a bit of himself in admitting that he has to let go to keep on doing what he does so well - something he loves to do. Johnny, you're going to have to find a way to let this one go too. I can't lose the best partner I am ever going to have because he's too stubborn to admit that sometimes things just don't make sense - that they don't *have* to make sense for us to keep trying our best." Roy paused to take a breath and to measure how his speech was being received.

John took another long, noisy pull on the straw.

Roy turned with a sigh to once again face the same direction as his partner.

"Roy, look, I know you're right. I know the Doc is too. But I am never, *ever* going to try to 'come to terms' with losing a patient 'now and then'. I am not going to buy into any of that 'cosmic balance of life and death' bullshit. It is just going to have to be enough that I can live with life not being fair, without me thinking that it is. Fair, I mean."

Roy took a moment to allow his mind to follow that disjointed train of thought, and decided that he believed his friend probably could. Live with life. Like that. And not be so far off from his own philosophy on life. And death. He mentally shook his head to stop the stream of sentence fragments his own consciousness was subjecting him to.

Roy looked across the street and caught Charlie's wave. "Time to mount up, Junior."

John set up to take a shot at the garbage can several feet away, making a rim shot with his empty cup. "You really think I'm the best partner you'll ever have?"

Roy declined to answer as he pushed the button on the HT to declare, "Squad 51 available."

Mike was heating a can of chili when they got back to the station. "Anyone got a scrap of paper to use to start the briquettes for the burgers?"

Marco opened a journal lying on the kitchen table, ripped out a page and held it over his shoulder to Mike without even looking up from the newspaper he was reading.

Chet wandered in just in time to catch this exchange. "So this is what a guy gets for having a good idea! Roy uses his journal, don'tcha pal? I've seen you."

Roy leaned to push the singled-out volume across the table. "Knock yourself out, Chet."

Chet eagerly flipped through a few pages to choose a good example of soul-searching prose. "Hey, this is a shopping list, and ideas for where you might want to vacation... and Roy, your kid's birthday wish list? You've got to be kidding me."

Roy shrugged both shoulders in answer as he munched a raw carrot he'd just retrieved from the fridge.

"Are you really gonna get him a motorcycle?"

"Sure Chet, right after I buy him a hang glider and teach him to juggle knives." Roy joined John at the kitchen table to help him sort and enter the morning's runs into the logbook.

An hour later, John poked his head into the office. "Hey, Cap can I use your journal if you're not going to?"

"Help yourself, Gage," Cap said absently, as he returned to the stack of requisition sheets he was working his way through.

Another hour later, the engine crew was pulling both the extension and roof ladders off the rig as the paramedics strapped on their life belts.

"Well, you don't see that every day," their captain commented as he tipped his head sideways to contemplate their victim's predicament.

The man hung by a rope tied to the chimney of a steeply sloped two-story home. He was lying on his back and every few minutes he made an effort to reach the rope tangled around his ankle by

defying gravity and bending at the waist. This maneuver was made all the more impressive by the multiple strings of blinking Christmas tree lights wrapped around the man's upper body and arms.

Captain Stanley cupped his hands to his mouth, "Fire department, sir. You need to hold still and wait for us to come to you."

"Alright, but please hurry, I think it might be broken."

"Hang in there." Hank mentally cringed at his own unintended pun. "I mean hold on. We'll be up as quickly as possible."

A small group of neighbors quickly filled them in as Marco and Chet set the extension ladder down next to the house. "...he was trying to surprise his wife...first year away from the town she grew up in...her family always does Christmas in a big way, carols starting right after Thanksgiving, lights, yard ornaments, the whole shebang...I was watching, he was being extra careful. He tied himself to the chimney and everything. It's so romantic, don't you think?" a middle-aged woman wrapped up the crowd's report with a wistful sigh.

"It sure is something," Hank muttered to his engineer as they turned to help raise the extension ladder and set it against the eaves of the house. "Wonderful, just what we need." He ducked his head against the raindrops that had just begun to ping against their helmets, the roof and their victim above.

Roy started up the ladder while Marco heeled it firmly from below. Once he was standing on the seventh rung, Roy shouldered the roof ladder and continued the climb to gutter-level. He paused to lock into a rung of the ladder he was standing on before raising the roof ladder hand over hand until it rested on the shingles. Sliding it up until the hooks grabbed the ridge line, Roy unsnapped his harness to step onto the roof. Johnny climbed to join him, a coil of rope slung over one shoulder.

With a nod they each started toward their inverted victim using the roof ladder for added purchase. Roy was leading the way and paused to turn his head over his shoulder. "Careful, Johnny, these tiles are awfully worn. With this rain, they're bound to be extra..." Both of Roy's feet shot out from under him and he landed with a solid "thud" full on his right side. "...slick," he finished through clenched teeth as he grabbed a rung to arrest his slide.

John, playing the town crier announced, "Cap! Roy's down!"

Roy rolled to his knees and took a moment to decide he could honestly tell his partner he was all right, if you didn't count how embarrassing that little pratfall felt.

The small crowd of neighbors below exhaled the unified gasp of dismay they'd drawn. Johnny bent over him in genuine concern, but as Roy got his feet under himself, he was sure that his friend was fighting hard not to laugh.

Roy turned away, determined not to let it bother him. By the time both paramedics reached their victim, he found himself having to concentrate on not cracking a grin, because his idiot partner was chanting softly, "Careful, careful now. It could be slick. That is rain. Rain is wet. And slick. Don't slip. Not in front of an audience. That would be embarrassing." Their eyes met, and Roy could not maintain his straight face, not while looking into the devilment and understanding sparkling in John's eyes.

"Hold on, let's get you tied in," Roy said to the man as he reached to get him situated and strapped into a safety belt. He used a wide loop of webbing to clip him to the roof ladder. "Got it, Johnny."

"Kay, we'll have you set...in just a moment, sir," John said in between reaching into a pocket for his folding knife and stretching to cut the rope holding the man's ankle. The paramedics gradually rotated and guided him to an upright position, where Roy held him in place, while Johnny cut the few remaining lights away.

After clipping into the roof ladder, John braced himself on it with a knee and an extended leg. "They're heading down," he hollered as he played out the line attached to the man's safety belt. Roy reached to support him from below as they descended one rung at a time to the roof-line, where Chet waited on the extension ladder.

With the man supported on Chet's knee the entire trip down, the two descended smoothly. Cap and Mike reached to support and then lay the victim on the ambulance gurney that the attendants had conveniently waiting a few feet away.

"Hi again. I'm Roy DeSoto and that's John Gage working on your leg. Can you tell me your name?" Roy asked as he scribbled a set of vitals to hand to Marco, before turning back to the patient.

"John, John Sorenson. Man, I can't believe I got so tangled up. So much for surprising my wife Vicky, huh?"

"I'm sure she'll be glad just to know you're going to be okay. Besides, it's the thought that counts," Roy said with a reassuring pat to his patient's shoulder, before taking the handset Marco was holding out.

"Rampart, this is 51, go ahead."

"51, is the patient in much pain?" Roy easily recognized Dr. Bracket's voice.

"Negative, Rampart. Patient is resting comfortably."

"Ten-four 51, transport via ambulance non-code."

"Copy that, Rampart, transporting non-code, ETA ten minutes. Squad 51 out."

Johnny turned from slapping the back of the ambulance to send it on its way. Since Dr. Bracket hadn't ordered an I.V., he hopped into the passenger side of the squad. His stomach made an impressive noise that turned Roy's head. "Come on, Johnny. We'd better head back and feed that thing before you need a bone graft to plug the hole in your backbone."

During a late afternoon lull, John was scribbling away in his journal, sitting at the kitchen table as Marco made yet another sculpture out of one of his own journal's pages to add to his growing collection. So far he had a paper airplane, an origami crane, a miniature kite and an as-yet unlabeled fortune-teller.

"So, ah Marco, I owe you an apology," John paused to build enough momentum to continue. "Okay look, I should have known that little girl was dead, I *am* a paramedic. Damn it, how could I not have known? I risked your life and my own for nothing."

"No, mi amigo, we each risked our own lives because that is what was required. You could not have known, so what were you to do? What would you have done differently? What *could* you have done differently?" Marco puffed open the paper box he had just fashioned with flair. "My friend, you have nothing to apologize for."

Cap strolled back to his office after a trip to the storeroom to find a stack of cardboard signs had appeared on his desk. He thumbed through them with an occasional chuckle.

"Adult supervision required"

"X failures/X attempts" (this one came equipped with its own cunningly crafted twin sets of tear-away numbers.) He shuddered at the mental image of that many predicted "attempts".

Hank flipped through a few more and paused to consider "Hoist your rear in your own backyard"

"X number of days without injury" Hank hesitated once again before lifting the ghoulishly thin stack of numbers this one sported, to reveal the number of days the sign's creator anticipated they could last.

"Use the damn ladder"

"Only YOU can prevent a Forest Fall"

He made his choice of his men's offerings and tucked it under his arm on his way out back. He stopped for coffee and gathered a trailing entourage before he wedged the sign into the cross bars of the hose tower at eye level.

The men stepped back to admire the winning yellow sign. A black null symbol was superimposed over the dark silhouette of a falling man with his foot caught in a dangling hook.

"Sometimes a picture's worth a thousand words. Here's to many, *many* days without an injury." Hank's eyes settled on the asphalted area below the hose tower. A newly chalked outline of a sprawled body, arms and legs at exaggerated angles graced the pavement and he stretched a toe to scuff at an edge. "That'll fade in this weather..." he took a sip of his coffee and gazed at the overcast sky, "...might not last long enough for Tim Forest to enjoy. Best take another snap shot."

"Chet, toss me a biscuit, would you?" John asked as he reached for the butter. "Mike, what did you do different with the tuna casserole? It's still as good as usual, but *something's* different."

"I used frozen broccoli instead of peas because we were out."

"Oh, sorry I asked," John said as he poked with suspicion at the mound on his plate."

"Grow up, Gage. You just said it was good."

"Chet, shut up. I never said it wasn't good. I just don't care for stealthy vegetables."

"Hey, guys," Marco said as he set his fork down. "I had an idea earlier. Tell me what you think." All eyes turned at the serious tone of their shift mate's voice.

"Cap, you know how you were saying those kids seem too young to become arsonists? What if there was a program to reach out to kids when they first get caught messing with fire, *before* they work up to something big like abandoned apartments? What if we could make them stop and really see the consequences of their actions; let them meet a few firemen, maybe visit a few fire scenes?"

"Kind of put a face to those lives they're willing to risk and force them to face the devastation of a few fires before they start one of their own? Marco, I think you might have something there. I'll run it by HQ if you're willing to write it up."

"Thanks, Cap. I'll do that."

Just as the last dinner dish was dried and put away, Joanne showed up to drop off two-dozen of the cupcakes she and a certain six-year-old had made.

Each of the firemen took one, expressing their thanks around crumbs and sips of milk or coffee.

"Interesting design, ladies - I especially like the um, creative choice of plumage colors you've got going here." Johnny said directly to the beaming child leaning against his leg.

"Well, a few of them were prototypes. We were making them for the first grade Thanksgiving party. We went through a few sloppy copies before we finally got the design of the tail feathers just right," Joanne said with shrug and a grin. "You guys get to benefit from the steep learning curve."

"Mmmm, your seconds taste just fine Joanne," Chet said as he lifted another cupcake.

"Mr. Chet, that's not your second, that's your *third* cupcake," a pint-sized observer pointed out.

"Well, you know what, Sweet Pea? You're absolutely right. So what would this one be?" he quizzed, pretending to reach for another.

"Mr. Chet, I can count to 100 and we didn't bring near that many," she giggled.

Her eyes fell on the photo of Missy across the room where it was still prominently displayed on the bulletin board. "Mr. Chet, is that a picture of one of the firemen's little girls? She kind of looks like you but without a 'stravagant mustache."

Chet knelt in front of Roy's daughter, shaking his head in reassurance when Joanne looked at him and the other firemen in dismay.

"Well, sweetie, I guess in a way she was one of our girls. Come on, you want to go check out the engine? You can sit in Fireman Mike's seat and we can pretend to drive."

"Sure. We can take turns. Maybe someday when you're bigger, Uncle Mikey will let you drive for real. Mr. Chet, can I call you *Uncle* Chet?"

Their voices faded as they headed hand in hand to the apparatus floor.

Several hours later, Captain Stanley's head snapped up as a startled yelp, followed by a howl of rage filled the station.

"I'll get you..." Chet's sputtered threat could be heard coming from the bunkroom.

The captain got up from his desk to lean out of his office, supported by a hand on each side of the doorframe. He held his breath, trying to gauge if an intervention would be necessary.

Hank pulled his head back just in time to keep it attached, as his junior paramedic skittered around the squad after sprinting across the front of the apparatus floor. A taunt of "...my pretty, and your little dog too," floated back over John's shoulder along with a surprisingly accurate rendition of the witch's cackle. "Scuse me, Cap," John called, just before he made a sliding halt

in time to turn and disappear into the kitchen. Hank allowed the beginnings of a smile to form as he left the office to investigate, but not before he yielded right-of-way to Chet. The Irishman was hot on Gage's trail, flapping his right hand like it had been burned.

The smile bloomed as he passed his engineer who was leaning against the side of the rig. Mike was supplying the whistled soundtrack to John's antics. Cap grimaced as he realized he would have the wicked witch's "music to bicycle by" theme song stuck in his head for the rest of the evening. The smile returned and seemed destined to remain in place indefinitely after he opened the journal, *his journal*, which he plucked from the bunkroom floor where his affronted lineman had abandoned it in favor of pursuing his tormentor.

Someone had painstakingly cut out a space from the center of most of the pages to leave a now empty niche. Hank searched the floor until his eyes rested on what he was looking for. The mousetrap had landed against the wall near Roy's bunk.

It took less than 20 minutes for the rest of the crew to fall asleep so Chet could make his nightly sojourn to the couch. He was asleep two minutes later.

On some level, he was aware that he was dreaming. That realization did not dull any of the terror he felt as he fought to reach her. Something was holding him down. Where were the guys? Why weren't they helping him get free? He struggled until in his dream, he felt a hand anchor his, and the panic receded.

Chet woke with a start to a firm grip on his forearm. With the help of the ambient light that filtered through the window, he could easily make out Gage's face.

"Hey," was John's eloquent statement as Chet got control of his breathing.

"Hey yourself, what are you doing up?"

John lifted a glass to his lips then raised it in salute. "Milk has Something for Everybody."

He swiveled to a sitting position, because gazing up at a white mustachioed John Gage in the moon light was just too surreal an image to contemplate for long.

The tones sounded and he tumbled off the couch. "Hold that thought, Gage," Chet called as they each joined the scramble to reach the rigs.

It turned out to be a nothing run - a report of the smell of smoke from an apartment, which turned out to be *that* kind of smoke, which turned out to be a matter for the officer who was also summoned to the same address for a complaint of noise. It seemed resident college students had begun celebrating Thanksgiving break a few days early.

The weary crew filtered back to their beds, except for Chet, and the captain he ran smack-dab into on his way to the couch.

"Chet, do you suppose there's a reason it's called a *day* room? Come on; time to try something different, like sleeping in an actual bed. Besides, Henry wants his couch back."

Chet was simply too tired to offer up any argument, so he trudged to his bunk like the sleepwalker he very nearly was.

He woke in the morning without dreaming for the first time in over three weeks.

Cap could make out bits of the muffled conversation coming from the kitchen as the men discussed plans before being relieved by B-shift. His own family had a full dance card this Thanksgiving, in part because A-shift would be working both Christmas and New Year's Day later this year. He could detect a definite whine as Chet put in an argument that his apartment be the place to watch the football game since he was allergic to Marco's cats.

Cap regarded the journal he held. It had been left on his desk. At first glance he had thought one of the men had abandoned it in boycott and ire at Chet's ongoing attempts to therap-ize them all.

But after scanning the first few pages, it dawned on him what it was. He turned the book and fanned the pages to experiment. Trust Mike to execute a project like this with such precision. After a few practice attempts, he got the hang of managing the journal-turned-flip-book and sat back to enjoy a rather intricately rendered saga of a fireman leaping through flames to enter a burning building, then racing back across the lower edges of the pages, victim slung over a shoulder to pass her off to waiting arms extending from off-page. He smiled as the fireman repeated his derring-do performance twice more - the final time carrying a rather frazzled looking cat. He took several minutes to admire the detailed renditions and snorted with satisfaction to note the cartoon-fireman wore regulation protective gear, complete with SCBA and a helmet numbered 51. He reached for his favorite pen, and added a title: *Because We Are a).**

*(from a conversation between Mike and Cap in *Coping Mechanisms*)