

Watch Me Burn

by Enfleurage

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Chapter 1

"What were you *thinking*?"

Gage, of course. Under the best of conditions he didn't possess a filter, or rarely bothered to use it, and these were about as far from the best of conditions as Hank Stanley could remember.

"Gage, Desoto," he barked. "You have less than two minutes to search that house and find whoever it is that's in there. Move it!"

They were masked already and with one lingering, doubting glance in his direction, they jogged toward the house, air bottles bouncing against their backs. Gage pulled his helmet on in the last few seconds before he ducked into the front doorway after his partner and was swallowed up by smoke thicker than coastal fog.

"Kelly, Lopez, cover them."

Technically it wasn't even a two-story house. The back half of the first floor of the one and a half story bungalow was already lost and it was just a matter of minutes until the house was fully involved.

We can't save the house now, just buy us enough time to get the victim out safely.

The man on the ground bucked up again and Stanley briefly wondered what on earth Gage had found so alluring about rodeo riding. He kept his balance and threw his weight, hard, onto the knee grinding into the man's lower back. With his right hand pressing down on the back of the man's neck and his right knee between the man's shoulder blades, he fumbled with his left, non-dominant hand for the HT in the right hand pocket of his turnout.

Where the hell were the police?

Almost immediately the man's nonstop vitriolic barrage against the 'whore' in the house was redirected to the Fire Department in general and the Fire Captain pinning him to this damp bit of patchy lawn adjacent to the Engine in particular.

"When I get up, I'm going to butcher you, you sonovabitch! I'm going to rip your fucking balls off and shove them down your throat. I'm going to take an axe and splatter your blood over this entire goddamned neighborhood...."

Stanley scowled downward, checking to make sure the man's arms were still pinned beneath him and then did his best to tune out the threats, each uglier than the last, as he tried to figure out whether Gage and DeSoto could have reached the upper level of the house yet. Assuming the stairs weren't already gone.

"Cap, you need some help?"

Stoker was dividing his attention between the Engine's panel, the fire, and his Captain and as much as Stanley wanted to ask for rope - Gage might be the fastest but Stoker's knots were as slip proof as the man himself—one of them need to stay focused on the job that they'd actually been called out to do.

"Get a blanket and their equipment out." With a glance at the smoke seeping upward from the opened windows of the half story, he added, "And a burn pack." There might not be flames up there yet but it was probably hotter than hell.

It was still light enough on this steamy summer night that he could see his wrist watch when he glanced down at it, and just smoky enough that he had to squint to make out the actual time on the watch face. He'd reported Station 51 as on scene at about 2015. Eight minutes. It seemed a lot longer than eight minutes.

He'd been hearing sirens for the last thirty seconds, unsure if he'd conjured them out of his own need or if they were really there, and he let himself smile, briefly, as the distant noise grew louder, identifiably the familiar whine of an Engine. Identification was confirmed by the reassuring sound of an air horn echoing around a curve of the meandering residential streets. While he needed local law enforcement to take this man, this monster, off his hands so he could do his job, it was just as much of a relief to be able to hand over command of the scene to the Captain of another Engine Company. He was watching the fire as best he could, but splitting his attention between it and the struggling man on the ground. He needed to be in motion, checking the fire's progress from a number of sightlines, checking in visually and audibly with his men. Instead he was squinting toward the gloom of the front rooms where Chet and Marco, just inside, were doing all the actual *fire* fighting so far, tracking their progress from how the hose slithered across the grass and trying not to panic about how completely blind he was to the fire's behavior, how far it'd advanced, whether the fire was already threatening the neighboring houses or was still a few minutes away from doing so.

It was an unpleasantly humid and still night, lacking even the semblance of a breeze, which left his shirts – both under and uniform – sticking to his torso but which had also so far kept embers from neighboring roof shingles.

Thank God.

Engine 36 slowed as it encountered the herd of neighbors that inevitably accompanied a residential fire. Usually they were on the sidewalks and underfoot but this herd was skittish and had been even before the man under his knees had gone nuts; they'd stayed a couple hundred yards away on the other side of the street.

Bill McDowell had one foot on the pavement before his Engine was anywhere close to stopping and Stanley assumed that 36 – en route to the call - had heard Stoker's request for local law enforcement at their scene and understood that it was for more than crowd control.

"Hank..." 36's Captain trailed off as his head swiveled from the Squad's open compartments and then to the house, sweeping back to 51's Captain's kneeling on a snarling stranger. "What do you have?"

Stanley gave him a wry grin at the unspoken but very clearly implied 'what the hell?'

"Bill, I've got two of my men inside searching for a victim on the upper floor, another two covering their exit. " He glanced downward. "I also have a police situation and need you to take over the scene."

McDowell stared at him for a few brief seconds, mouth partly open as if he wanted to say something, but instead gave a brisk nod and turned away to snap orders at his men.

Stanley sighed in relief as Engine 36's lineman deployed to protect the north and south exposures.

That brief second was all the distraction the very angry man underneath his knees needed.

The man threw all his weight up on one side, kicking upward with a foot and catching Stanley on his left side, just above his belt. Falling, mouth open trying to draw a breath that wasn't coming, Hank tasted dirt instead, dirt and grass and smoke, and felt another blow – fist, boot, he couldn't tell, wasn't sure it made a difference – connect against his lower back. He groaned into the dirt and another blow snapped his head to the side.

It took a few seconds for him to make sense of the voices he heard, shouting and furious, but the weight pressing him into the dirt was gone and he blinked his eyes open to see Mike Stoker's worried face a few inches away.

"You okay, Cap?"

"Yeah," he said, pretty much automatically. He rolled to his knees and after a quick internal inventory, was pleased to discover that it was actually true. "I'm fine. That jackass hit me in the helmet which probably hurt him a lot worse than it did me."

Stoker didn't look convinced.

"How about giving your Captain a hand up, Michael?"

He let Stoker pull him to his feet; more relieved than he wanted to admit that one of those angry voices he'd heard a minute earlier was Vince Howard's. He let his eyes follow Vince and Bill McDowell as they pulled the lunatic to the back of Vince's patrol car, Vince's voice rising and falling, words indiscernible but drowning out whatever the guy in handcuffs was spewing.

"Cap."

Stanley turned back to the fire and let out a sigh as DeSoto pushed through what was left of the front door, arms wrapped around the legs of the woman lying limply over his shoulder and wearing DeSoto's air mask. Gage was right behind DeSoto, turning to yell something at Kelly, his words swallowed up and lost in the noises of the fire and then he trotted in DeSoto's wake to the yellow blanket spread in front of the squad.

Stanley jogged over to them as Gage opened the burn pack. He helped him lay it out and then opened the squad's O2 case, fitting the mask over the unconscious woman's face as Gage set up the biophone.

"How is she?"

He knew what his eyes told him. Female, age approximately thirty but could have been younger under bruises that were clearly visible since her sundress left very little actually covered, and what looked like second degree burns scattered across her arms and legs. She'd been coughing before he'd given her the oxygen mask.

"She took in a lot of smoke," Gage said, never looking up from his examination of the victim. "It was a bad scene up there, Cap. A real bad scene."

He helped spread the sterile sheets and watched as Gage poured saline on her legs while DeSoto looked for an unburned spot on the woman's arm to get a BP.

"Hank."

Vince Howard stood a few feet away, his expression unsettled and hard to read.

"I'm going to need a statement."

"*Now?*"

Which came out with a little more disbelief than he'd intended, considering how happy he'd been to see Vince a few minutes earlier.

"I'd really like to get him out of here," Vince said, "get him someplace secure." And then almost conversationally, he said, "So, was it you personally that he wanted to kill or the entire County Fire Department?"

Stanley wasn't quite ready to joke about it yet. "Probably anyone who got in his way."

"It's a damn good thing that he didn't have a weapon back there. If he had, he might have done you some damage."

"Oh, he had a *weapon* alright," Gage said, never looking up from shining his penlight into the woman's eyes, checking for pupillary response. "Cap took a loaded gun away from him."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

"What the *hell* were you thinking?" Vince thundered. "Why didn't you wait for me or another deputy to arrive on scene to handle it?"

Stanley pulled a breath in through his nose and slowly exhaled, then turned and jerked his head at the woman being treated by his paramedics. "She couldn't wait." And then he gave a pointed look towards where the upper story of the bungalow used to exist, the structure that had collapsed into the fire-gutted first floor about forty-five seconds after McDowell pulled everyone out of and away from the house, which was about ninety seconds after Gage and DeSoto had walked out with the victim. "You guys are usually here before we are. What happened?" he asked, deliberately lowering his voice into a friendly, non-confrontational tone.

He wasn't sure if it was the words or his tone but as Vince sighed, much of the bluster seemed to leak away and Vince sat down next to him on the tailboard at the back of Engine 51.

"There was a unit on the way, would've been here before you but on his way, he witnessed a bad MVA at Torrance and Normandie. Five cars, DUI, teenagers and fatalities involved." He shook his head and they both, as fathers of teenagers, had an uneasy, stomach-churning moment. "That one's ugly; there's three patrol cars, two Engine companies and two Squads, all probably still there. Dispatch sent me over as soon as I was cleared from a different scene."

Stanley nodded.

"Now why don't you tell me what happened."

"Okay." And then he wasn't sure where to start. He wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and dug fingers into the accumulated tension, trying to work it out as he decided on the right starting point.

"You sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm fine." He grinned. "A bunch of mother hens, all of you. Look, the safety was engaged, not that we knew that when he was pointing the gun at us, but everyone walked away okay and we got the victim out."

Vince opened his notebook and gave Hank a skeptical look.

"You'd better start from the top."

Stanley sucked in a breath and started with something familiar, something normal. "Station 51 arrived on scene about 20:15, flames were visible from the rear of the one-and-half story wood frame structure and there was already a lot of smoke, inside and out. There was a car parked on the street directly in front of the house." He pointed to the battered green coupe that still sat there. "It was blocking us from

direct access to the hydrant. We pulled up in front of the car so there would be room for the other responding companies.

"I split my guys into two teams – Lopez with DeSoto, Kelly with Gage – and told each to pull an inch and half and told Stoker to run a supply line from the hydrant. Then I saw the guy standing on the lawn in front of the house so I ran over, asked him if it was his house and if there was anyone inside."

He closed his eyes and the scene was perfectly clear in his head.

"He identified himself as the owner and said there was no one in the house." Opening his eyes, he shook his head, frowning as he searched for the right words. "I don't know, Vince. There was just something that seemed... I asked him if he was sure there was no one in the house and he said, yeah, he was sure. So I deployed my guys and we started putting water on the fire and making sure it didn't spread since the side yards are pretty narrow in this neighborhood, twenty, twenty-five feet between houses. And then the guy said it was a shame about the house, it was a nice house, but it looked like it was a goner and maybe we should protect the neighbors' houses."

In his head, he could hear the man's voice, could hear the funny little tone in his voice when he'd said that. At the time he was trying to figure out if the guy was trying not to cry or break down at the loss of his house or if they were dealing with a possible arson.

"So the house was pretty much a loss already?" Vince asked, quietly eliciting.

"That's the thing," Stanley shook his head. "At that point, the back was a loss. It would definitely have to be torn down and completely rebuilt, but the rest was still intact, some smoke damage, some water damage, but salvageable assuming we kept the fire contained to the back."

"Okay..."

Stanley nodded. "I told him just that, that the back – the kitchen - was gone but I thought we could still save the house which you'd think would be good news. He gave me kind of a funny look." He grimaced. "So I stepped a bit closer to him, to see if he smelled like gasoline or any of the usual accelerants. He didn't, but he smelled like smoke, a lot more than someone who'd been standing where he was standing should smell considering the smoke was just lying on top of that house. So I starting asking him general questions, the standard stuff – were you the one who called it in, do you know how the fire started, were you in the house when it started - and he kept shaking his head, telling me no. He said a neighbor must have called it in."

"Two or three neighbors called it in."

"Then I asked him about his heating system – gas or electric - and if he stored any accelerants in the house and he said, almost as if he wasn't really thinking about it, that his wife was an artist and she kept her paints and a lot of solvents on the upper floor."

"Huh..." Vince said quietly, under his breath, his pencil scratching on paper.

"I asked him where his wife was and he started to act annoyed, told me to just do my job and make sure the neighborhood didn't burn down. He said he didn't care about the house, to let it go but make sure it didn't spread."

He paused. Everything after that had happened so quickly, he wanted to get it straight in his head.

"I asked him again where his wife was and he told me it was none of my damn business and he sounded..." He exhaled a breath hard and thought about how he'd describe it to Chief Miller, because sure as hell that was the next person who'd be asking. "He sounded irate. I asked him how he could be so sure that she wasn't inside if he hadn't been in the house when the fire started and he just stared at me. That's usually when they realize that it's possible that someone *might be* in the house, but he just kept staring at me and he told me he was sure. And then he got nasty, asked me if there was something wrong with me, said he'd already told me that there was no one inside. "

He shrugged his shoulders. "I knew he was lying so I turned around and yelled for Gage and DeSoto, told them to mask up and head inside. I told them that there might be someone still inside."

"And what did he do?"

"Walked towards the car that blocked the hydrant. I thought maybe he was going to sit down in it and watch us. He wasn't going to go anywhere in it because we'd kind of blocked him in, the Engine in front of the car, the Squad behind."

"And then what happened?"

The clear picture in his head went fuzzy for a moment and Stanley licked lips that had suddenly gone dry.

"Roy and John had their masks and tanks on and were running towards the house, Marco was working the fire at the back of house and Chet was coming around to back up Gage and DeSoto..."

Funny that his gut was icing over *now*, in recollection; he hadn't felt a thing when it had gone down.

"...Stoker was working the Engine and he yelled..."

He licked his lips again.

"Mike yelled, 'Cap, he's got a gun,' and I turned around because I'd been looking at the house, making sure it was still structurally sound enough to send Roy and John inside. We all turned around and everyone just froze."

He breathed, in and out, unnerved at how much this was bothering him now.

"Jesus, Vince, give me a minute. I'm acting like a probie at his first big fire."

He leaned forward and rested his face in hands that were shaking like a 3 on the Richter scale and listened to Vince's pencil scratching in his notepad, hoping he wasn't writing this part down.

"You ever had a gun pointed at you before, Hank?"

Vince was using his victim voice, quiet, supportive, not condemning, but Stanley still felt like an idiot. He was a Professional Firefighter for God's sake. He led other firefighters into situations that gave most people nightmares. Or at least the *sane* people, his wife liked to remind him.

"Well, you know, in Basic, sure..." he said towards the ground, not yet willing to lift his head or show that his hands were shaking.

"Not the same," Vince said, in not quite his victim voice, maybe the tone he used with his kids after they'd woken from a nightmare. "You and I both know that in Basic, it's a controlled environment. Even in the live fire exercises, you knew the guidelines: you kept your head down and you wouldn't get hurt. It's not combat by a long shot."

It was nice of Vince not to mention that Basic Training was nearly twenty years ago and like most teenagers, he'd still had illusions of indestructibility back then.

Head still lowered, he glanced to his left. "So what you're telling me is that I'm acting like a *Police* department probie?"

Vince snorted, which sounded as if he was relieved that Hank was regaining his mental footing.

"If it makes you feel better, the shit you guys do on a daily basis would make me wet my pants inside of five minutes."

That was clearly his cue to suck it up and get back to making his statement, though he had to admit that it did make him feel a little less like a terrified wet-behind-the-ears boot.

He sat up a little, still resting his elbows on his knees for stability.

"So after Mike yelled, we all turned around and sure enough, the guy had a gun in his hand, a pistol, and he told us to stop."

"Where was he pointing the gun?"

"Um, at me first but then he kind of waved his arm and the gun around, making the point that he was talking to all of us, or aiming at all of us."

"Do you remember what he said?"

Vince didn't stress the question or insert the word 'exactly' but Stanley knew it was important to get this right, which wasn't difficult; he was pretty sure he was going to be hearing that voice in his head for a long time.

"He said, 'Stop what you're doing. Don't go in that house. Just let it burn, I want to watch it burn.'"

"Anything else?"

"Oh yeah." Stanley exhaled. "Right about that time we started hearing screams from inside, which made Roy and John anxious. They just wanted to get in there and get her out. I mean we all wanted to get her out but trying to pull either one of them away from a rescue is like trying to pull a hunting dog off a scent. Both of them started moving around, kind of shifting from side to side, wanting to run in."

"Okay..."

"He said, the guy said 'Don't move, don't any of you move' and then he told Chet and Marco to turn off their hoses because, you know, even though they'd frozen in place, the nozzles were still open and the water was keeping the fire contained."

"So what did Chet and Marco do?"

"They were watching me, waiting for direction."

He could see it clearly in his head, Chet Kelly's face scrunching into confusion, saw the question on his face coalesce into a single word, '*Cap?*'

"Roy had his hand on John's arm, holding him back from doing anything stupid, and the guy started getting agitated because Chet and Marco didn't shut down the hoses when he told them to."

"So what happened next?"

"He said," Stanley sucked in a breath. "He said, 'If you don't turn those hoses off now, I'll kill him. And then I'll kill the rest of you.'"

"Who did he mean when he said 'him?'"

"He was pointing the gun at me when he said it. And then he turned and pointed it at Mike and then swung back again and aimed it at Roy and John." He listened to his own harsh breaths for a few seconds. "Chet and Marco shut the hoses down." He swallowed. "We could hear the woman's screams more clearly with the water turned off. He kept saying 'let it burn, I want to watch it burn.'"

"Okay, Hank, what happened next?"

"You realize it's taking longer to tell you this than when it actually happened, right?" He wiped his face. "It was less than a minute from start to end."

"Yeah, I know."

"Okay, so with the hoses shut down, the fire started advancing and I think we all knew we were going to listen to her die if we didn't do something. Stoker was trying to catch my attention, he had his hand on

the compartment where we keep the pike pole and I'm guessing he was thinking that if I could distract the guy, he could whack him with it. Chet and Marco didn't turn a hose on him, probably because they were afraid he'd start shooting at the rest of us. The guy was waving the pistol around enough that I finally got a good look at entire weapon, not just at the barrel. It was a .45, looked like a standard Army Officer sidearm, and I could see that the manual safety was engaged..."

Vince groaned. "Tell me you didn't do what I think you did"

"I was less than ten feet from the guy. I gave Stoker a heads up, he made a noise and as soon as the guy turned, I was on him. Five seconds later, the rest of my crew were helping me hold him down."

"Where's the gun? Did you touch it?"

"In the cab of the Engine, on my seat. And yeah, I touched it when I knocked it out of his hand but I was wearing gloves." He held up his hands, fingers outstretched.

"Can I have them?"

"My *gloves*?" Stanley sat up straight. "Are you serious?"

"I assume you have a backup pair, otherwise I'm sure the Fire Department will issue you some new ones. We're going to need every bit of physical evidence from the scene."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

"How's she doing?"

He'd reached them just in time; Gage was handing DeSoto the biophone and the drug box, as they loaded the victim into the back of the ambulance.

Roy's face contorted into his hedging look, the one between cautiously optimistic and 'I wouldn't hold my breath.'

"Well, she's doing pretty well, considering. She has second-degree burns over about twenty percent of her arms and legs, a little smoke inhalation but her BP's still pretty rocky."

"Internal injuries," Gage said and then muttered something under his breath.

Since they were eager to get moving and he needed to get back to his Engine crew, Stanley clapped his hands together and rubbed them, a habit he couldn't remember starting but which everyone seemed to understand.

"I talked to Vince and he's asked us not to discuss what happened here until they have a chance to interview each of us separately, and that means not talking about it with each other or anyone else."

He saw Gage and DeSoto exchange frowning glances and thought it was probably a waste of breath to ask them not to talk to each other, particularly since they'd been side-by-side through the entire series of events. On his own, DeSoto wouldn't say a word but Gage was going to need to vent a little in the Squad on the way home and there was a good chance he'd draw his partner out.

"By the time you get back to the station, we'll know whether the Chief is going to take the station out of service for a while so we can make our statements tonight or whether we'll do them in the morning. Either way, keep all your discussions at Rampart focused on the victim."

"Got it, Cap. Did Vince arrest that guy?"

Stanley nodded and Roy seemed satisfied but Gage was still scowling as he closed the back doors of the ambulance, with the customary two thwack signal. As he turned to pack up the rest of the squad's equipment, he called over his shoulder.

"You know, if I'd've done what you did, my ears would've been bleeding by the time you got through with me."

"You bet your ass they would've," Stanley snapped, instantly back in Command voice. It wasn't the right place for this discussion and he damn sure wasn't in the right frame of mind but the faster he restored a bit of normality in his crew, the better. "You have a lot of experience with a .45 automatic that I don't know about, Gage?"

"Uhhhhh...." Gage turned around and looked at him, expression twisted as if trying to comprehend the question.

Stanley straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin, unfurling into his full 6 feet 3 inches.

"Uhhh, no sir, "Gage stammered as he unconsciously mirrored his Captain's posture. "No experience with a .45 automatic." He frowned and confessed, "I don't much like guns, Cap."

"Neither do I, John," Stanley said, back in normal voice. He patted Gage on the shoulder. "Neither do I. I'll see you back at the Station."

The crew from both Engines were doing overhaul and clean up as he met Bill McDowell near what once had been a nice garden border by the front door, now trampled into California dust and mud by hoses, boots and water.

"You want to stand your guys down, we'll finish up here," McDowell offered.

Stanley gave him a grateful smile. "That's a pretty generous offer, but it'll go faster with both companies. Besides, a little hard work won't hurt my guys."

And a little routine wouldn't either.

They were quiet on the way home, quieter than was normal for the size and duration of the fire. It hadn't been complicated or especially dangerous, except for one unnerving sixty to ninety second period of time. The last time they'd been this quiet on the way back to the Station was after being on scene almost four hours at an industrial fire, and that was mostly because Kelly had gone hoarse after taking his mask off for a minute or two for some idiotic reason that Stanley couldn't remember.

He caught Stoker stealing glances over at him and normally he would have batted those questioning looks away verbally. The quiet suited him tonight but after a few minutes, he realized that it might not be what his men needed.

"Hey, Marco, will you do me a favor, pal, and make sure Kelly didn't fall out somewhere? We might have lost him back there when Stoker did that hard 90 degree turn at an excessive rate of speed."

The corner of Stoker's mouth was twitching and he heard a quiet chuckle from Lopez.

"Ah c'mon, Cap you *told* us not to talk about it," Chet grumbled.

"I told you not to talk about what happened until after we get the official interviews done," Stanley said. "Now, I know I'm going to look back on this moment of peace and quiet and wonder what the hell I was thinking...." He paused, wrestled his expression into submission. "Mike, was I just encouraging Kelly to talk?"

That was definitely a snicker from the driver's seat, a slightly louder chuckle from Marco and an annoyed huff from Chet.

It wasn't that easy, of course. He'd only just defused a little of the tension but was pleased to hear snatches of conversation between Chet and Marco that seemed to have something to do with their plans for tomorrow. They went quiet again when they saw they had company back at the station.

He'd requested the Battalion Chief meet him at the Station though he'd been hoping for a chance to shower and change into a clean uniform first. The turnout had absorbed most of the grass stains but his trousers were wrinkled and dirty. Firefighters spent half of their working time soaked in smoke, sweat, grime, water and occasionally blood and the other half cleaning themselves, their gear, their apparatus and their station. The Chief knew that; he just preferred to see his men turned out in a way that reflected well on the department.

He left his turnout in the cab, straightened up his uniform as best he could and met his Chief by the office.

"Chief, thanks for coming down."

"Hank." Chief Miller looked past him; sharp eyes evaluated the Engine crew loitering near the Engine and blatantly eavesdropping. "Sounds like you boys had a rough time of it."

"A few bad minutes, Chief, but no one got hurt. Gage and DeSoto are at Rampart with the victim. They should be back shortly."

Miller nodded towards the office. "Why don't you fill us in on what happened."

The 'us' became clear as he entered the office and saw that Lt. Crockett had made himself at home at his desk and was just hanging up the phone.

"Lieutenant."

Crockett inclined his head graciously, as if welcoming Hank into his own office. "Captain."

Stanley turned around and looking at his crew, jerked his head towards the day room, hoping one of them would make a fresh pot of coffee as it was probably going to be a late night. Then he shut his office door.

It was different telling the story this time. With Vince, it had all come out in a rush and he'd felt a lot better afterwards as if he'd expelled something unsettling from his system. Now, conscious of how he'd already told it, the words were slower to come, more deliberate and the questions after he'd finished were different.

"Did you see him come from the house?"

He thought about it and then shook his head. "I didn't see him when we first pulled up, but after we were all out of the Engine and the guys were dragging hoses towards the house, I saw him on the front lawn. He was standing midway between the house and his car, turned away from us, looking at the house."

Crockett nodded and scribbled something in his notebook.

He noticed a few sheets of mimeographed paper, blue ink smeared, peeking out from Crockett's notebook. *A copy of Vince's notes, maybe?*

"How do you know it was his car?"

Stanley frowned and then shrugged. "I guess I don't. After I told Gage and DeSoto to search the house, he walked in that direction. I guess I assumed that's where he'd gone, where he got the gun."

"But you didn't see him open the car or in the car?"

He sighed. "No."

"Well, the car is registered in his name, but just give me the facts, what you know, don't speculate or try to guess."

He tensed and shifted his jaw. Crockett was doing his job, was reportedly very good at his job, but something about the man had always made him wary. He just seemed a little too glib, a little too quick to think the worst of people.

"All right."

"Tell me about the gun."

Stanley raised an eyebrow and waited.

Crockett looked up from his notebook and waved a hand at him to hurry it up.

"It was an automatic pistol, a .45," Stanley said slowly, trying to determine what more one could say about the gun.

"Yes..." Crockett said encouragingly. After a minute, he flipped back to the mimeographed paper. "You told Vince Howard that it looked like a standard Army Officer sidearm."

"Yes, it did."

"You were in the Army, Captain?"

Stanley nodded. "'Two years. '57 through '59."

"You an Officer in the Army?"

"No. My Company Commander recommended me for OCS. I decided I preferred to fight fires instead of wars, but I have handled a .45. In the Army and as a civilian."

Crockett was frowning at his notes and Hank wasn't quite sure how to read him. The detective was still sitting in the chair Stanley normally used while Chief Miller was quietly observing from the other desk chair, which was fine. He was still a little too wound up to sit quietly so he stood, and occasionally shifted about on his feet.

"You said that you didn't smell gasoline or any other accelerant on the man. What about alcohol?"

"ETOH?" He shook his head. "No, I didn't smell that either."

Crockett stared at his notebook for what was probably only a minute or two, but what seemed an much longer time, and then turned with a bright smile that Stanley still didn't trust.

"The D.A.'s going to love you, Captain. You're precise, detailed and consistent. You make one hell of a witness."

Hank blanched. It was a logical sequence from the minute the man pulled the gun, to an arrest, to a trial, but his brain hadn't made the leap yet, possibly hadn't wanted to think about it. He looked at Chief Miller who was frowning, obviously not thrilled at the idea of dragging Fire Department personnel into a criminal case, much less the media circus an Attempted Murder case would entail.

"I may have some more questions for you later, Captain but I'll have these notes typed up into a statement and I'll need you to stop by in the morning, review it to make sure I got the details right and sign it for me. I need to speak to the rest of your crew now, get their stories down and have them sign statements tomorrow morning too."

"Lieutenant," Stanley said quietly. "What are the chances of keeping our names out of the morning papers? Give us an opportunity to talk to our families first? We're on shift through tomorrow morning and I'd rather not have our family members read our names in the newspaper before we get home."

The look on Crockett's face wasn't encouraging.

"I'll do what I can to keep your names out of it, but we've already had a few calls from reporters and they know it was Station 51 that was involved."

Stanley glanced at the clock on the wall. 21:45 already, with five men still to interview.

"Then I'd appreciate it if you could interview Roy DeSoto next so he can call his wife afterwards, before it gets too late. "

He'd heard the Squad pull in at least five minutes earlier; otherwise he would have asked Crockett to start with Chet Kelly, who was probably tying himself into knots trying not to talk about the incident.

"Happy to accommodate you, Captain," Crockett said, still wearing that glib grin. "If you don't mind me asking, just between us, what on earth possessed you to jump a man with a gun, even if you were sure the safety was on, instead of waiting for the police to arrive?"

Hand on the doorknob, on his way to get DeSoto, Stanley stopped and turned. "I had a responsibility to the woman in the burning house to get it resolved quickly, and a responsibility to my men to get it resolved safely."

Chief Miller shifted in his seat, tilted his head and didn't bother to try to hide his interest.

"How's that?" Crockett asked.

"Let me ask you a question, Lieutenant. If I'd waited another couple of minutes for Vince to arrive, or for Engine 36 to arrive and she died, would that have made me or my men accessories to that woman's murder?"

Crockett shook his head, and his lips were pursed, not smiling. "I just enforce the laws, I don't interpret them but I'm pretty sure being held at gunpoint would mitigate any failure on your part to rescue the woman or to fight the fire."

Stanley decided he might possibly grow to like this serious, thoughtful version of Crockett.

"Let me ask you another question. That man set his house on fire with his *wife* in it....

"Allegedly set the fire," Crockett said with obvious reluctance.

"Whether he set the fire or not, he pointed a gun at me and my crew and threatened to kill all of us to prevent us from entering the house to rescue his wife or extinguish the fire. You think a man like that would think twice about eliminating witnesses to what he did?"

"Hank," Miller said finally, breaking his self-imposed silence, "At what point did it occur to you that the man might consider you witnesses to a crime? At the scene or after it was all over?"

Stanley exhaled. "It was a lot less coherent a concept at the scene, Chief. I just knew that a guy who let his wife burn to death wouldn't have any trouble shooting the firemen who could identify him. I was worried that one of my guys would do something that would set him off."

He paused for a moment and waited for Crockett or Miller to tell him he was wrong.

They didn't, so he opened the door of the office and walked toward the day room where he could smell a pot of coffee on the stove and hear voices rising and falling, and then suddenly go silent as they heard his footsteps.

He leaned in the door and raised an eyebrow. "Roy? You're up next. That way you can call Joanne afterwards, before it gets too late."

At the table, Kelly groaned and Gage snickered.

"Pay up, Chet," he crowed. "Told you Cap would pick Roy for that very reason, didn't I?"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure it was Mike who said that," Marco said with a long-suffering sigh and a glance that shifted from Gage to Kelly and back again.

"Well, I *agreed* with Mike when he said it," Gage argued.

DeSoto, standing at the cooktop, lifted the pot of coffee and Stanley nodded and then headed back to his office to offer coffee to Crockett and Chief Miller.

Miller followed him back out of the office, turning to Crockett as he crossed the threshold. "Don't start without me, Lieutenant. Either Captain Stanley or I will need to sit in on the remainder of the interviews."

"It'll have to be you, Chief," Crockett said with a shrug. "Captain Stanley's a witness. Intentional or not, his presence might influence the statements from the other witnesses."

Miller nodded and then tapped Stanley lightly on the shoulder before they'd reached the day room.

"Hank? A word please."

He nodded and they walked to the area between the Squad and the Engine.

"The Department places a great deal of responsibility on the shoulders of our Company Officers, not least of which is your responsibility to ensure the safety of the Fire Department personnel under your command and to ensure that your decisions do not expose them to unnecessary risks."

Stanley squared his shoulders, steeling himself for what he knew was coming next.

"Hank, you're one of the best Captains in the department, one of the better Incident Commanders I've seen in my career and I have a great deal of confidence that you deploy resources safely and very effectively at a fire or a rescue."

He swallowed.

"But attempting to subdue an armed and dangerous individual on your own was a brave and extremely risky move that could have resulted in your own death and the injury or death of your men. If you ever try something like that again, I will personally put a letter of reprimand in your file. Next time you wait for local law enforcement."

It took every ounce of discipline to spit out, "Understood, Chief."

"All right," Miller sighed. "At ease, Captain. You're not in the Army now."

Stanley relaxed his shoulders and nodded. There was no argument he could offer in his own defense that Miller hadn't already heard.

Miller looked in the direction of the day room. "What are your thoughts about bringing in someone to talk to your crew? This was not a situation any of you were equipped to handle, technically or otherwise."

"Well," Stanley stuck his hands in his trouser pockets and rocked gently on the balls of his feet as he gave it some thought. "We usually do some informal debriefing after a bad call. Let me see how that goes, get a reading on how they're handling what happened. I'm not opposed to bringing in crisis counselors if necessary."

"All right, Hank. Let me get a cup of coffee and then I'll sit in on the rest of the interviews. "

"Appreciate that, Chief."

And he did. Knowing that the Department was looking out for his men in this unnerving situation took a burden of worry off his own shoulders.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

A/N:For those of you wondering where Chief McConnikee is, though a fanfiction staple, he actually doesn't show up on the show until about mid Season 6, replacing Chief Miller. This story is set earlier than that.

It was nearing 23:00 and it was a quiet group of firefighters that were draped across the couch, the easy chair and the kitchen chairs, waiting for Crockett to finish getting Stoker's statement.

Stanley had sent Gage in after DeSoto had finished making his statement so that he could put the Squad back in service and had said a quiet prayer to whomever might be listening that the calls would be light tonight.

So far, through DeSoto's, and then Gage's, and then Kelly's, and Lopez's time in the office with Lt. Crockett and Chief Miller, a benevolent Deity had allowed Station 51's men the downtime to recover. The television was on, though the sound was almost imperceptible and while they were looking at it, Hank didn't think any of them were actually paying attention to what was on the screen.

He heard the office door open, heard footsteps, more than one set of footsteps, and some voices in the bay. He swung up out of his chair, pivoting on his right shoe to reach the bay quickly. Miller was shaking hands with Crockett near the front of the Squad and Stoker was walking toward him, toward the day room, with a tired smile.

"How'd it go, Michael?"

Stoker shrugged. "I just told them what happened. The Lieutenant asked a couple of questions and I answered him. No sweat, Cap."

Stanley gave him a weak smile, a pat on the shoulder and walked toward Crockett and Chief Miller.

"Chief, if Lieutenant Crockett is done here, I'll put the Engine back in service."

Miller nodded. "Go ahead, Hank. Let me know what you decide about the crisis counselors." He turned towards Crockett. "Lieutenant, any follow-up or further participation by these men needs to be routed through Headquarters so we can make the proper arrangements for shift coverage."

Stanley shook hands with his Chief and with the Lieutenant and then gratefully shut the bay doors after they left, silently hoping the doors would stay down until the morning wake-up tones.

He lifted the mike from the base station. "LA, Station 51. Engine 51 is available."

He waited for the confirming, "Station 51" from Dispatch, then glanced at his watch and came to a decision. His long strides ate up the distance between the bay and the television set quickly.

He switched the television channel to a local station, one he watched at home, and turned up the sound. The station was showing a commercial right now but the 11:00 PM news should be starting any minute.

"Seriously, Cap, you really want to watch the *news*?"

They'd all watched him with varying degrees of curiosity but he wasn't all that surprised that it was Chet who'd sussed out his intentions. Over the last hour, he'd been considering and discarding opening gambits for the conversation they needed to have.

Stanley dropped back into the chair he'd occupied on and off for the last hour and shrugged. "Aren't you curious to see if we get mentioned?"

Chet started to answer. "Well..." He looked around at others.

"I'd like to see what they have to say," Roy interjected with a glance towards Stanley that probably meant he'd figured out his Captain's intent and planned to support him.

"So would I," Mike added from across the table.

Chet shrugged and threw himself onto the couch with elaborate indifference,

"Take it easy on that couch, Kelly, or it'll be coming out of your allowance."

Allowance? Did he really just say allowance instead of paycheck?

Gage started snickering and the look of total outrage that Chet turned upon his Captain solidified his resemblance to a particular thirteen-year old boy.

"So, how old is your son, now, Cap?"

He wasn't sure if Roy was actually curious or just playing straight man.

"*He's* old enough to know better," Stanley growled with an arched eyebrow challenging Chet to complain. That Kelly actually resisted the urge to respond was just further evidence that his guys had not yet rebounded from this evening's events.

"Shhhh," Marco said, holding a hand up as the news program started. "It's starting."

Roy and Mike dragged their chairs from the kitchen table closer to the television and Chet sat up a little from where he'd sprawled next to Marco and Henry on the couch.

After five minutes of national news, the tension in the room had sagged a bit and Gage had left the easy chair to start rummaging through the refrigerator looking for something to eat.

"In local news...."

"Hey, Gage, isn't that the reporter chick you've got the hots for?"

"...a Torrance man is being held tonight on weapons possession and menacing charges..."

"*Menacing?*" Gage yelped.

"...after holding a group of Los Angeles County Firefighters at gunpoint this evening in an attempt to prevent them from extinguishing a fire at his residence. According to sources, the firemen were able to overpower the man, rescue an unnamed individual from inside the house and contain the fire before it spread, though they were not able to save the house..."

Chet sat up and pointed a finger at the television, "We could've saved that house if that lunatic..."

"*Shssssshh!*"

"Put a cork in it, Kelly!"

"...Angeles County Sherriff's Department spokesman stated that they are continuing to investigate the incident and that additional charges may be filed."

"That's it?" Gage demanded. "Weapons possession and *menacing?*"

"Lt. Crockett left here less than ten minutes ago, John," Stanley said in a mild tone. "He'll need our official statements and a statement from the victim before any additional charges are filed."

"They didn't mention the Station," Mike said with a glance in his Captain's direction.

"Not yet anyway," Marco said.

Stanley stretched his legs out in front of him and turned to look at Gage, still standing in front of the refrigerator but staring at the television set where the reporter was now talking about funding for infrastructure improvements to the freeway system.

"Gage, stop trying to air condition the entire station," he said with a look designed to jar Gage out of his funk. "Either get something to eat or close the refrigerator door."

Gage made a face as if just coming back to himself, shut the refrigerator door and then meandered over to the counter and leaned back against it. Stanley craned his neck to make sure the cooktop wasn't turned on – it wasn't – and then decided that he should get things rolling.

"How did it go at the hospital?"

Gage's expression was suddenly thunderous but it was Roy who answered.

"She's in serious condition, Cap, but she should be okay, according to Dr. Morton." He hunched his shoulders. "She had some non-fire related injuries, some internal bleeding and they were taking her up

to surgery right as we left. Maybe a week, ten days in the hospital recovering from the surgery, the second degree burns on her arms and legs and the smoke inhalation."

"Internal bleeding?" Marco said. "Did she fall or something?"

Gage snorted.

"He beat the snot out of her and then tied her to the bed," he said, voice roughening and growing louder as he spat out the words. "He tied her to that bed and then he set the house on fire and walked outside to watch it burn."

Bright jangling noise from the commercial playing on television was jarring in the midst of their silence and Stoker rose and quickly turned the television off.

"He tied her..." Stanley hit a blank spot as he ran out of words, trying to wrap his head around what his paramedics were telling him. Considering what had already happened, none of this should surprise him but it seemed he'd reached his capacity for absorbing violence tonight.

"Vince arrived at Rampart just as we were getting ready to leave," Roy said into the silence. "He told us that the Sheriff's Department has been out to that house at least three times in the last month for domestic disturbances. They apparently have a..." he paused, and then continued somewhat hesitantly, "a volatile relationship. She's refused to press charges in the past."

"Did *she* tell you that's what happened?"

Gage started to pace, as if he could dispel anxious energy in a circuit around the kitchen.

"She was tied to the bed, Cap. Arms and legs, tied to the bed frame legs. He used packing string; you know the stuff you use to tie up parcels, that scratchy twine? We had to cut it off her to get her out."

Marco said something under his breath in Spanish, hard and low, definitely not a prayer and Stanley glanced over towards the rest of his crew. Chet's eyes were wide and rounded, his lips were parted as if to speak but he seemed to be stunned into silence. Mike Stoker was leaning away, expression closed off, eyes narrowed and focused on Gage and DeSoto.

"So what did Lt. Crockett have to say about it?"

Both John and Roy shrugged.

"He asked a lot of questions about the scene upstairs," Roy finally said. "It was just one big open room, with a bed and a wardrobe at one end and a couple of easels and a lot of painting supplies near the windows. He was particularly interested in the flammables upstairs, like he was trying to figure out why the fire had started down in the kitchen instead of the bedroom if the guy was trying to kill his wife."

"She said that *he* told her that he wanted her to hear the fire, smell the smoke, know it was coming," Gage spat.

Hank took a deep breath. He'd definitely be calling HQ in the morning to request the Crisis Counselors, at the very minimum for his paramedics if not for his entire shift.

"And you told all this to Lt. Crockett?"

Twin nods, Roy's slow and reluctant and John's sharp and edgy.

"Yeah, he said something about hearsay," John said with a huff of breath expressing his disgust. "That we could put in our statement that she told us that, but that she was going to have to say it in her statement and in court for them to use it against him."

"Which she probably won't do," Roy said unhappily, "since he's beaten her up about half a dozen times already and she won't testify against him."

"It's going to be hard to say she fell and set the house on fire if she was tied to bed," Marco said and something prickly and dark in his tone of voice caught Stanley's attention. "Besides," Marco continued, "this time, she's not the only witness. You guys had to go into a burning house to cut her loose and he used a gun to try to stop that from happening."

Chet was nodding, slowly emerging from his withdrawal.

"You know, when you guys came out with her, John, you told me that it was a bad scene, but I had no idea," Stanley said. "I'm sorry."

Gage blinked at him. "What do you have to be sorry about?"

"Well, I...." He stopped and considered and then sighed. "I prefer you guys keep me informed when you run into something like...." He huffed air, not quite a laugh. "To be honest, I have no idea what I would have done differently if I'd known what you'd seen inside. "

"Are you kidding?" Chet Kelly snapped out of his dormancy, volume rising with each spoken word. "We're just happy that guy didn't shoot you, Cap."

Stanley shifted uncomfortably in his chair; the dressing down he'd received from Chief Miller still ringing in his ears.

"I'm pretty relieved that he didn't shoot *any* of us, Chet. He was waving that gun around pretty indiscriminately and frankly, I was afraid that he might just start shooting no matter what we did."

"Jeez, Cap," Kelly said, shaking his head. "If Gage hadn't told us to shut the lines down..." He shuddered. "I don't even like to *think* about what would've happened."

Stanley sat up a little straighter in his chair. "Wait a minute, what..."

"Oh, I was thinking about it all right." Roy had a hangdog expression that rivaled Henry's on his most expressive day. "Trying to figure out how we were going to treat you without any equipment, whether he'd let us get the drug box..."

"What the hell were you thinking?" Gage hollered at Kelly. "I shouldn't have had to yell at you, you idiot, but if I didn't, that guy would've shot him and then started shooting at the rest of us!"

Chet stood up and got right into Gage's face. "I couldn't *hear* what that lunatic was saying! If you remember back to the days when you were a *fireman*, Gage, you might remember that a fire is loud and noisy as hell. I could see the guy waving the gun around but I had no idea what was going on."

"Well, that's pretty much status quo for you, Chet. You should be used to it."

He could have intervened but they needed to get through this stuff, the yelling, the emotions, the terror of a situation out of their control, something that no training had prepared them to handle. Plus he was learning a lot he hadn't known.

"Hey, Roy," he said and waited for the man to pull himself out of his own memories of the scene. "Did you know what was going on? Could you hear everything that was said?"

Roy shrugged. "Most of it." He paused and then looked uncertain. "I think I heard everything. He pulled a gun when we were about to go inside, told us not to move, not to go inside or he'd start shooting."

Stanley nodded.

"And then he told Chet and Marco to shut down the lines," Gage said in a voice flattened, as if he'd stomped all of the emotion out of it. "And after they didn't do it the *first* time he told them to, he said if they didn't shut 'em down, he was going to kill Cap."

Chet and Marco were shaking their heads.

"Swear to God, Gage, I never heard any of that," Chet said. "Marco, did you hear any of that?"

"My hand on my heart," Marco said, doing exactly that, "I didn't hear it. I would never..."

"I did," Mike said. "He said something like, 'If you don't turn those hoses off right now, I'll kill him. And then I'll kill the rest of you.'"

Hank Stanley closed his eyes for a second and drew a breath through his nose. "Yep, that's what he said all right."

"Huh, I only heard the first part," Roy said, with a puzzled glance at his partner, since they'd been standing side-by-side.

Gage nodded in Stoker's direction. "I heard what Mike just said. That's why I started yelling at Chet and Marco when they didn't shut down the hoses right away."

"So we shut them down," Marco said emphatically. "And then like ten seconds after Gage yelled at us to turn the water off or that guy would kill you, you went charging at him. I thought my heart was going to come out of my chest when you did that, Cap."

"He's not exaggerating," Chet said. "Marco was hyperventilating for about five minutes after you jumped the guy."

"Well, it wasn't *ten* seconds," Gage said.

Stanley eyed him, wondering if he was just arguing out of habit, a conditioned response to Chet Kelly, or if there was an actual point to be made.

"More like twenty or thirty seconds," Gage said and seemed happy about getting the details right.

Marco spat out something that made Stoker laugh and made Hank Stanley wish he knew more than basic 'on scene dealing with the victim' Spanish.

"Like I told you guys when we were at the scene, I saw that the manual safety was engaged and we needed to do something before *he* realized that he had the safety on," Stanley said, trying for an apologetic tone but no matter what he'd indicated to his Battalion Chief, he still wasn't sorry he'd done it. "It wasn't like I could *tell* you that the safety was on before I jumped him. Would have defeated the purpose. And it was that or let Mike try to get a pike or something to use as a weapon and I think he would have started shooting if he'd heard you open a compartment."

"Well, he couldn't if the safety was on," Gage said.

"Jeez, Gage, did you use up all your critical thinking skills on scene? Once he tried to shoot Stoker and the gun didn't work, he would've realized the safety was on."

"Enough," Hank said, firmly before Kelly and Gage could escalate.

"And besides, Cap," Chet continued, "I don't remember you telling us at the scene about seeing that the safety was on."

"That's because *you* were still hyperventilating when he said it, Chet," Roy said, trying to suppress a smile.

"I think you should get your hearing checked," Gage said, sounding happier than he had since they'd arrived at the structure fire more than three hours earlier.

"Well, for what's it's worth, guys, I never heard John tell you to shut the water down so maybe I should get my hearing checked too." He thought about the scene, the specific situation again and blew out a slow exhale. "Now that I think about it, I saw you looking at me, Chet, and I thought you were waiting for me to give you the okay to shut down your lines"

"They why didn't you give us the kill signal?" Marco waved a hand in agitation. "*Madre de Dios*, if we hadn't shut them down when we did..."

"Mostly, it never occurred to me that you couldn't hear what was going on," Stanley admitted. "And it should have. I know how loud it is at a fire, that's why I shout, run over to you or use the HT and get some sort of confirmation that you hear me. When I saw what I thought was the two of you waiting for me to give you the okay to shut down, I..." He stopped and tried to find the right words. "We were there to fight a fire. I didn't want you to shut 'em down."

"So then he would've shot you," Gage said, as bleak as Stanley had ever heard him. "No doubt in my mind after seeing what I saw in that room. He would have shot you and I really don't think he would've let us treat you, Cap. He'd have probably started shooting at us too."

It felt for a moment as if he'd stopped breathing, as if the very mechanism of breathing had somehow stuttered and then stalled in his throat.

"You're probably right," Stanley admitted slowly, reluctantly. "I could have gotten some or all of you killed." He couldn't meet their eyes. "*Jesus*," he whispered to himself.

"Hey, is this a private self-flagellation thing or can anyone join?" Mike said suddenly.

Heads around the room swiveled and Stoker waved at them, a grim expression on his face.

"See this hand?" He held up his right hand. "This hand was on the pump panel. I heard *every* word that SOB said and I could have shut off the water at any time. What's my excuse?"

Stanley sighed. "It was my call to make, Mike and I didn't make it." He sat in heavy silence for a few minutes, grateful for the men who gave him the quiet to think, and then rubbed a hand over his face. "John, I think you may have saved our lives tonight, pal."

Gage looked instantly uncomfortable.

"Yeah, well you're the one who jumped the guy with the gun, Cap, so how about we call it even?"

Chapter 5

Epilogue

Chapter 5: Epilogue

He'd been worried about sleeplessness and nightmares but they'd slept the dense, deep sleep of the emotionally drained. Or they had until the Squad was toned out at 04:17 for a possible choking.

In a sleepy voice, Roy had said, "We got it, Cap" as Stanley was pulling on his bunker pants, so he crawled back into his bed and listened to the other three men settle back into their beds. Lying on his back, he listened to the Squad's engine start, the bay doors creak their way open, the Squad pull out and the bay doors creak their way back down. He listened for the soft noises that were part of sharing sleeping quarters with other firemen, with other *sleeping* firemen. He was still waiting to hear those noises when he drifted back to sleep.

An hour later, he woke suddenly and thought that he should probably insist that they get the bay door fixed so it wouldn't make so much noise, especially in the middle of the night, and then he remembered why he'd let it go the previous times. He felt himself relax as he heard the Squad pull in, its engine shut down and then the soft snick of doors opening and being pushed closed with a click rather than a metallic clang. Muted voices, still somewhat gravelly, were too quiet for him to make out most of the words but he heard footsteps and an occasional word as they came through the locker room.

"Just tired...." Gage said. ".... the *stupidity*..."

He heard Roy's voice, too soft to make out any of the words but the tone was conciliatory and supportive.

"On his own *vomit*, Roy," Gage insisted. "In front of his *kids*."

Well that explains the smell, Hank thought. And then he wondered which would be worse: the noise of the shower or the smell that the two paramedics had carried back to the Station. Mentally groaning, he rolled out of bed and into his bunker pants and boots, half stumbling into the locker room as he pulled the suspenders over his shoulders. He blinked and held up a hand as protection from the sudden onslaught of light, muted through it was.

"Sorry, Cap, did we wake you?" Roy said in a quiet voice.

Stanley rubbed his nose. "Not exactly."

"Oh," Gage said, and looked down at his bunker pants. "Sorry, Cap, I kind of knelt in it and it just doesn't seem to want to come out."

Sleepily rubbing the heel of his hand against his right eye, Stanley squinted at Gage and nodded at the stain that covered the knee and shin area of Gage's left leg.

"You have an extra pair?" he asked without any real expectation that would be the solution. Uniforms, sure, all of them kept at least one extra uniform as backup in their lockers. Bunker pants were supposed to be semi-indestructible.

Gage shook his head.

"Okay, do me a favor, take those into the shower and use a scrub brush and soap. I'll find you an extra pair you can use if we go out again tonight." They kept a few with the spare turnouts, for those rare occasions when they were needed. "A drunk?"

Roy nodded sadly. "Alcoholic. Pretty bad. By the time we got there, he'd aspirated some of it..."

Hank sighed.

"In front of his kids," Gage said in a tight whisper, keeping his voice down. "He choked to death on his own vomit, in front of his *kids*, Cap. Who the hell does that?"

"People who need more help than you or I can give them, John," he said. "Maybe more than any other human being can give them. Go hit the shower, okay, pal?"

He stood with Roy and watched Gage slink off to the shower.

"I can find the extra bunkers, Cap."

"I know, Roy." He gave him a crooked smile. "Just like I know I should get the...."

"...bay door fixed," they said together.

Stanley lifted his arms above his head and stretched. "Go grab a set of the extra bunkers and have John put the smelly ones in the utility closet. I'll give you five minutes, ten max, to hit the rack."

Roy nodded.

"Don't make me come looking for you," he warned and then headed back to bed.

He was in a half-drowsy, half-awake state when they came in, just aware enough to register their presence and their movement, which was enough to let him slide back into sleep.

It seemed only five minutes later that the wake-up tones went off.

~E~

"Jeez, Gage, the utility closet stinks like a college frat house during pledge week," Kelly yelled and his voice echoed around the bay.

In the midst of dipping bread into the egg mixture that would make it French Toast, Roy turned around and looked at his shift mates in varying slumped positions around the kitchen table. "Do I really want to know how he knows what that smells like?"

"I can't believe he hasn't told you that story," Marco said in a low voice, hunched, bleary-eyed over his coffee cup. "Whatever you do, do *not* ask him how he knows..."

"How the hell would *you* know what a college frat house smells like?" Gage yelled back from the bay, and then turned and walked into the day room, grinning his good mornings.

Marco sagged and muttered something underneath his breath and Stanley echoed the sentiment even if he hadn't made out the actual words. The steam and the smell of the coffee was enough to block the worst of the smell from the utility closet and he lingered over his own cup, delaying the inevitable walk to his office where he needed to start writing up a report on last night's run while it was still fresh in his head. As if he hadn't revisited it enough already.

And then Chet Kelly came through the door. "You really want to know?"

"Kelly, give it a rest," he grumbled at the same time Mike, Marco and Roy all said 'No,' with particular emphasis from Marco.

"Well, I'll tell you..."

"Kelly, how about you cut Gage some slack since he saved all of our lives last night, huh, pal?"

"Pretty sure he saved your life, Cap. I would have rabbited out of there before that guy finished pulling the trigger. Besides, you cut Gage enough slack for both of us."

It was too early for this, for dealing coherently with an annoyingly well-rested and energized Chet Kelly

"Kelly, when I told you to give it a rest, that wasn't a suggestion."

"Just trying to get things back to normal around here, Cap."

"Well, try it with a little less volume," he heard murmurs of approval from everyone who wasn't Kelly, "or I'll task *you* with getting the stink out of those bunker pants." Palms flat on the kitchen table, he pushed his way to his feet and snagged the coffee cup for a refill before he tackled the paperwork he'd delayed long enough.

"Aw, *Cap!*"

He gave Kelly the best glare he could summon under the circumstances and refilled his coffee. "Roy, give me a shout when you have breakfast on the table, will you?"

The smell of sizzling bacon and the French Toast crisping in the skillet on the cooktop was a distraction he didn't really need as he stared at the form on his desk. He'd filled in the easy stuff, the bare bone facts of the run almost automatically and was trying to determine exactly how much detail to include. Maybe he could just get a copy of his statement from Crockett and attach it. Heck, he should get a copy of all of their statements and attach them so Headquarters would get a truly complete picture.

He hadn't made up his mind about whether to bring in the crisis counselors yet. Things seemed as if they were already getting back to normal and he'd planned to keep an eye on the guys over the next couple of shifts and see what demons got unearthed. It wasn't as if they all hadn't previously dealt with unfathomable cruelty between people who were supposed to love each other. It happened more often than any of them would ever tell their wives or family members and at least this run didn't involve children.

The shrill jangling of the phone jarred him out of his thoughts and he glanced at the clock and the partially completed report with dismay. The longer he took to get this done, the longer he'd be at the station today and what he really needed was some real sleep in his own bed and if he was particularly lucky, maybe his wife would join him.

"LA County Fire Department, Captain Stanley."

And then he wondered if Lt. Crockett had gotten any sleep whatsoever last night.

"Huh.... Yes, well that's unexpected.... Okay, we'll still come down and review and sign our statements.... Thanks for calling, Lieutenant."

As he replaced the receiver, Roy yelled from the day room that breakfast was up and his stomach growled, which he took as another sign that things were getting back to normal.

Like a lot of firefighters, he viewed meals as a time to eat, not talk, since there was no guarantee they'd actually get to finish what they were eating when they were eating it and plenty of time to talk on the way to the next call. Of course that particular philosophy didn't hold true for everyone and he half-listened to the conversation that floated back and forth across the table as he finished his meal.

So close to end of shift, none of them were going to jinx getting called out by actually talking about it so he chose his words carefully.

"Great breakfast, Roy, thanks." He leaned back in his chair to stretch out the kinks and his body complained about the bruises he'd picked up last night. "Listen up, guys." He waited until Kelly stopped sniping at Gage long enough to turn an innocent expression in his direction. "I wanted to remind all of you to stop by on your way home and read over your statements. If it isn't right, do *not* sign it. Make the clerk or whoever retype it to fix the statement before you sign it because it becomes a legal record so take the extra time to get it right. Also, I want you to get a copy of it for my report."

Heads nodded and a couple of eyes were raised to the clock on the wall as the next shift started wandering in, headed to the locker room.

Hell, he was going to have to repeat the whole damn story for Ben Collins, B-Shift's Captain.

"So, you think all of us are gonna have to go to court?" Gage asked as he reached for the last piece of French Toast on the table. "To testify against that guy?"

"Nope." He shifted in his seat, still trying to get comfortable. "As it turns out, none of us are going to have to testify against Mr. Mathers. That call I got a few minutes back was from Lt. Crockett."

"Seriously?" Gage sounded more surprised than pleased.

"Did he sign a confession?" Stoker asked.

"Yeah, let's make sure he confessed to more than weapons possession and menacing," Gage said, eyes narrowing and expression going dark. "It better be Attempted Murder times seven."

"Attempted *Murder*?" Kelly rolled his eyes. "Get real, Gage. Him waving a gun at us does not constitute Attempted Murder."

"Listen up!" Stanley waited until he had their attention. "There's not going to be any trial because they aren't going to be any changes," he kept talking right over the sudden uproar, "because apparently sometime last night after the District Attorney's office informed Mr. Mathers that *this* time, his wife was going to press charges, and that they had signed statements from the six of us, he decided to take his own life."

That shut them up.

"Seriously?" Gage sounded a lot more tentative this time.

"Gage, is there anything about what I just said that sounded like I was joking?"

"Well, no, Cap, it's just..."

Yeah, he did know so he let out a slow exhale, a subtle form of communication for the rest of them to take a minute and was relieved when each did so, in his own way.

"It's an ugly ending to an ugly incident, I know. You know what they say: an ordinary day for us is usually the worst day of their lives for the people we help."

He watched them absorb the news for a bit, noticed Roy seeking out Gage's eyes and the two paramedics communicating silently with each other, while Marco was elbowing Chet to get him to look back at him.

"This one was a little worse than normal, Cap," Stoker said, and Stanley was pretty sure that was less Stoker's typical understatement and more a deliberate opening for the rest of the shift to join in.

"For all of us, Mike." He waited for someone else to follow-up on Stoker's statement but they were quiet. "The Chief and I talked about bringing in a crisis counselor..." and heads starting jerking back in

his direction when he said those words, "and I told him that I'd get back to him. This one *wasn't* a normal day for us, guys, and it's a damn sight better to talk to an objective person who has some idea of what we see rather than expecting your wife," with a glance at Roy, "or your family, friends or girlfriends to understand. You can make an appointment on your own but if I think it's necessary, I'll bring someone in to talk to us as a group or send anyone that I think needs it." Five glum faces looked back at him. "Got it?"

Based on the noise from the locker room, it sounded as if most of B-shift had arrived and Ben Collins walked into the kitchen, eyes landing on the dirty breakfast dishes still on the table. "You guys look like something Stoker dragged behind the engine."

Surprisingly it was Roy who replied, "You have *no* idea."

Collins' attention swung back to Stanley, who gave him a nod, confirming Roy's statement, and a tilt of his head towards the office, a promise to fill him in, privately.

As he poured himself a cup of coffee, Collins called back over his shoulder. "You know, Hank, my guys are all here." He was casual about it, though he had to be aware of the instant charge he'd introduced to the room. "How about you guys clean up your breakfast dishes and head out. We'll take any calls that come in, starting," he glanced at his wristwatch, "right about now."

Stanley glanced around at his men, all of whom were visibly leaking tension and exchanging glances of pure relief.

"We'd appreciate that, Ben. How about you and I catch up on a few things while the rest of you," he looked around and met each man's gaze, "clean up and go home."

And just like that, they were off duty.
