There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All''

by Ross

Summary

When a severe manpower shortage causes the department to keep postponing his vacation, the pressures of the job finally get to John Gage. The burnt-out paramedic really needs to get away from it all for awhile. Where does one go to get away from it all?
Chapter Two

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Two

Captain Stanley watched helplessly from the bridge above, as Gage's body sank below the surface. "Take up John's rope!" he ordered back to the CHP officers.

They obediently began hauling up the slack, and Gage gradually reappeared up out of the river.

"John, you okay?" Marco anxiously inquired, seeing that his companion was coughing violently and still gasping and grimacing.

John nodded and continued gulping air into his oxygen-starved lungs. His security belt was pressing into his badly bruised ribs. He exhaled another gasp and tried to reposition it.

Needless to say, the journey topside was not a pleasant one.

Stoker and Kelly hauled Lopez back up, and then began retrieving the body in the basket.

"Take it easy, pal!" Captain Stanley advised as he assisted the pale-looking paramedic back up over the bridge railing. "You gonna be okay?"

Gage nodded and then stood there, hunched over a bit, resting his hands on his knees and fighting the urge to hold his ribs. "I just had," he gasped, "my wind knocked out."

Judging by the amount of pain he'd seen in the paramedic's eyes, Hank knew that to be a bunch a' BS. "Let's go on over and have Roy take a look at you."

Gage obediently unbuckled his security belt, dropped the danged uncomfortable object to the ground, and then sloshed on over to the Squad with his Captain, marveling at the man's ability to make direct orders seem like polite suggestions. His concerned Commander draped a blanket over his soggy, slumped shoulders, and he sat there, coughing very carefully…and feeling very miserable.

"Squad 51. Roger, Rampart," DeSoto spoke into the bio-phone. "Ambulance has just arrived. Transporting victim immediately. ETA fifteen minutes."

"Copy that, 51..." Rampart acknowledged.

Roy replaced the phone and began gathering up their gear.

The attendants began loading the badly injured accident victim into the ambulance.

"Roy! You got a minute?" his Captain called over.

"No, Cap! This woman's critical!" the paramedic called back. He glanced over at his shivering partner. "I can check him out on the way in!" he quickly determined and climbed up into the back of the ambulance with his patient—or, with his first patient.

Hank herded his second victim over to the ambulance. "Get in!"
Gage gasped. "Cap, I can take the Squa—"

"—Get in, Ga-age," Stanley repeated and gave him a gentle shove. "Kelly can drive the Squad."

The pained paramedic gasped again, but obeyed his Captain's order.

Stanley closed the doors on his frowning face.

The ambulance sped off, lights flashing and siren blaring.

In the back of the speeding ambulance, victim number two shivered and coughed. "Need a hand with anything?"

His concerned colleague came back with a quick question of his own. "What happened down there?"

"Let's just say I, eh, found the third vehicle," his shivering victim vaguely volunteered.

"Well, what happened?" Roy repeated, sounding extremely worried and not the least bit amused by his pained partner's half-hearted stab at humor. "Marco said you must've swallowed half the San Gabriel River." His head snapped up and he gave his uncooperative victim a concerned stare. "Did you hit your head?"

"No-o," John assured him. "I just had the wind knocked out of me. I'm fine…no-ow."

"Then you hit your chest or your ribs. Are you in any pain?"

"Look, I said I was fine!" his suddenly surly patient practically shouted. "Can't we just drop it?"

Seeing as how his inquisitive partner now seemed hurt, Gage grimaced and gasped for the third time in as many minutes. "Ah-uh, Roy...Look, man...I'm sorry...I don't know why I said that…"

"Yea-eah? Well, I do!" DeSoto declared, looking and sounding a might surly himself. "You haven't been yourself for the past few weeks now! You're tense…and irritable…and tired! You're just plain overworked! And, before this day is out, I'm gonna see to it that your vacation is un-cancelled! I don't care if I have to go see the Chief in person!"

John just sat there, slack-jawed, staring disbelievingly at his ranting friend. Roy tossed him his stethoscope and a blood pressure cuff—which he caught in self-defense.

"Now, get me a set of vitals!" the senior paramedic sternly ordered and pointed to his partner's left arm.

Gage gazed glumly down at the instruments for a few moments, and then attempted to comply. He shrugged the blanket off of his shoulders and tried to strap the BP cuff on with one hand. The fireman sighed in frustration as he repeatedly failed to accomplish the normally simple task. He looked up—saw his still-fuming friend sitting there, impatiently tapping his pen on a pad of paper—and shrugged again, this time in resignation.

"How 'bout a rough estimate?" DeSoto proposed, keeping a perfectly straight face.

Gage's glum expression was replaced with a grin.

Ten minutes later, in the Emergency Receiving Ward of LA County's Rampart General Hospital, Doctor Mike Morton walked into Exam Three.
The physician glanced from Gage to DeSoto. "Whichever one of you is the patient—get on the table!" he ordered sharply.

'Gawd! I just love this guy's bedside manner!' John silently, and insincerely, mused, but obediently got on the table. He sat there, frowning…and shivering.

Morton pulled his patient's blanket back a bit. "You're all wet!" he astutely observed.

The soggy fireman turned to his partner. "I knew tha-at…And I'm only a paramedic."

The two friends exchanged grins.

"Lie down!" Mike commanded and completely relieved the comedian of his protective covering.

Gage's grin vanished—right along with his blanket. He gritted his teeth and then reluctantly lay back, carefully pulling his legs up onto the table.

"No-ow, what happened to you?" his impatient doctor pondered, as he flashed a penlight into the paramedic's pain-filled eyes.

"I just got the wind knocked out of me," his squinting patient replied.

"That's a little fuzzy. You're going to have to be more specific," the doctor determined, and continued his neurological exam.

"Yea-eah. Well, yah see…there was this car and this big rock in the river…and then there was this car—and me—and this big rock in the riv—ou-ouch, Doc!" the prone paramedic exclaimed as the physician's probing fingers suddenly pressed into his badly bruised rib cage.

Morton opened Gage's soggy shirt up and examined his midsection—very thoroughly. "Roll onto to your side a moment. Careful," he cautioned, and carefully assisted his patient into the requested position. He lifted the fireman's shirt and saw that his back was scraped from his little encounter with the big rock. "I think you may have broken some ribs."

"They're just a little sore," the paramedic replied, contradicting the young doctor's preliminary diagnosis.

Mike looked extremely skeptical and carefully eased his patient onto his back again. "I'm sending you over to x-ray."

"They're just bruised," John re-assured him and tried to sit up.

Morton shoved him back down. "I have to make sure. Until then—lie still! You could puncture a lung or lacerate your liver."

Nurse Dixie McCall entered the exam room, carrying a cup of coffee. "Can he have this?" she inquired, not desiring to administer the steaming brew without a doctor's prescription.

"Nothing by mouth until after I see the x-rays," Morton ordered, and quickly placed a call in for some orderlies.

"But I'm freezing!" the prone paramedic pouted.

Mike turned back to Miss McCall. "Dix, get him out of those wet clothes."

"No-o!" their shivering patient practically shouted. "Just give me back my blanket! Plea-ease?"
Two orderlies came into the room just then, guiding a gurney.

"Alright," Morton told the newcomers, "give the guy his 'blankie' and get him over to x-ray."

They lifted Gage onto the gurney, covered him with his blankie and started wheeling him out of the room.

"Wait for me, Roy!" the paramedic pleaded of his vertical partner.

"Okay, Johnny!" Roy promised. "I've got to make a few phone calls! I'll be at the pay phone at the end of the hall!" he added, as his horizontal partner disappeared out the door.

"What's with him?" Dixie pondered and passed DeSoto the still steaming cup.

"Yeah…" a pretty exasperated Mike Morton muttered, joining the RN's inquiry. "I mean, he's acting a little strange—even for John Gage."

"He's overworked," John Gage's partner—and best friend—solemnly replied. "The pressures of the job are starting to get to him…no pun intended," DeSoto quickly tacked on, and took a cautious sip of the steaming cup's contents. The coffee was drinkable, so he downed several more long swallows.

"Well, that's easily remedied," the young doctor determined. "Why doesn't he just take some time off?"

"This drought has got half the department off fighting brush fires. And, that leaves the other half very shorthanded. A lot of guys are pulling two shifts. In fact, I don't know of anyone who hasn't been putting in extra hours. But this is the third time they've postponed his vacation," the fireman finished with a frown, and stood there, staring thoughtfully down into his half-drained cup.

"They can't do that!" Dixie angrily determined, but then quickly added, "Can they?"

"That's exactly what I said," Roy informed her. "They're just taking advantage of him! Which is normal. But Johnny's letting them take advantage of him. And that's not normal. I'm worried about him…" he confessed, and continued to stare thoughtfully down at the cup in his hands.

"I think Kel should hear about this!" Dixie further determined.

"Hear about what?" Dr. Kelly Brackett inquired, as he came into the room.

"Roy's worried about his partner," Mike informed him. "They keep postponing his vacation."

Brackett frowned and directed his next question at DeSoto. "Johnny showing signs of fatigue?"

"He's tense all the time, and doesn't have much of an appetite…" the fatigued fireman's frowning friend confessed.

"Is it effecting his work?" the doctor questioned further, his own frown deepening.

"Well, it's effecting him. So it's bound to effect his work—to some degree. For instance, this is the second time, in less than a week, that we've gone out on a call and ended up rescuing him. And, this time, he got hurt!"

"How is he?" Brackett anxiously inquired.

"Mike sent him over to x-ray," Dixie answered. "Something to do with his ribs?" she uncertainly
Johnny's doctor nodded.

"Excuse me," the head of Rampart's Emergency Receiving said and began taking his leave. "I have to make a phone call."

Speaking of phone calls…

DeSoto suddenly remembered that he was supposed to call the Station, and quickly drained the last of his coffee. Roy gave the thoughtful RN a warm smile and his empty cup. "Thanks, Dix!"

Miss McCall returned his smile, but kept the cup. "You're welcome!"

Kelly Brackett sat at his office desk, paging through a report and cradling his phone between his right shoulder and ear. Gawd! How he hated being put on hold!

"Yes, Dr. Brackett," someone finally said. "What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Lenhert, do you happen to have a copy of that Health Department report on stress handy?"

"Which one?"

"The one labeled FD 267-A."

"Hold on a minute…"

'Great!' Brackett glumly thought as a minute grew to two. 'Now I'm on hold again!'

"Found it," Mr. Lenhert finally came back.

"Goo-ood! I'd like you to open it to page 34 and read the first paragraph."

"Alright, I've read it," Mr. Lenhert announced, following another minute or two of dead air space. "Now what?"

"If my memory serves me right, weren't those recommendations approved—unanimously?"

"Yes. Yes, I believe they were."

"Then I'm a little confused. Would you care to explain why the Health Department bothered to make that report? Why I bothered to make those recommendations? And, why the committee bothered to accept them—if your department had no intentions of following them?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's come to my attention, that one of your department's policies is to juggle vacation schedules to meet work schedules. That is exactly the opposite of the policy the committee approved—and which I recommended!"

"Yes…Yes, I guess it is. But, under certain extenuating circumstances, this department is forced to change its policies. Take this emergency drought situa—"

"—Mr. Lenhert, maybe you should read that paragraph again—especially the part about 'critical to
the health and well-being. Vacations aren't just a fringe benefit to these men. They are a very necessary health requirement. Like eating and sleeping. You have to juggle their work schedules to accommodate vacations. And as for extenuating circumstances...There will always be extenuating circumstances. If it's not a drought, it's a flood...or a landslide...or an earthquake! These men won't function properly under any circumstances if they're not physically and mentally fit.

Speaking of stress, Kel was having an incredibly difficult time controlling his rising temper. So he paused for a few moments before continuing. "I want your department to act on the policy approved in this report—today! Have I made my position clear, Mr. Lenhert?"

"Perfectly, Doctor."

"Goo-ood! And this is one recommendation your department had better not ignore! We're dealing with men's lives here!"

"If I do this, it's going to cost me my job."

"On the contrary, Mr. Lenhert. If you don't do it, I will personally see to it that you lose your job!" the Los Angeles County Fire Department's Chief Medical Advisor advised. "Don't worry about rocking the boat. You just handle your department and let the other departments figure a way to deal accordingly. They'll come up with something. They'll have to! If anyone gives you any static, have them call me."

"I certainly will! Goodbye, Doctor..."

"Goodbye, Mr. Lenhert."

Back in Treatment Three, John Gage slowly sat up and swung his legs off of the edge of the exam table. "I told you they weren't busted," he reminded his young doctor.

Morton clicked the viewing screen light off. "Yeah. Well, we doctors aren't endowed with x-ray vision—like you paramedics," he quickly came back. "So we're forced to use a more conventional means of diagnosis—the x-ray machine."

The smug fireman was forced to smile.

The now smug doctor pressed his stethoscope into his patient's scraped back. "Take a deep breath for me," he requested, and the paramedic reluctantly complied. Mike repositioned his instrument. "Again...Take another one...Once more..." A deep frown appeared on the listener's face. "Cough!" he commanded. "Harder!" he urged, and noted that the pain produced by a deep cough literally took the fireman's breath away. Morton finished his respiratory exam, draped his stethoscope around his neck, and folded his arms in front of his chest. "You have some water in your lungs. I'm going to have you admit—"

"—No way!" John shouted, jumping down from the table.

"Johnny, listen to me! You're not breathing deeply. You're not coughing. If that fluid stays in your lungs, it could turn into pneumonia!"

"So I'll start breathing deeper and coughing. But I'm not staying here!"

"You're not going back to work, either!"

"I've worked with sore ribs before," the fireman reminded his physician.
"You're ribs are badly bruised. The pain is bound to interfere with your concentration."

"Just the opposite, Doc. I concentrate so hard on my work, that I don't notice the pain. Besides, there's nothing else you can do for sore ribs but grin and bear 'em. Please? Just let me finish this shift! Plea-ease?"

"You're hopeless!" Morton told the pleading paramedic with a sad shake of his head. "You not only think you have bionic eyes, but you think you have a bionic body, too!" Then, seeing his patient's pitiful expression, Mike exhaled an exasperated gasp and started heading for the door. "I think this situation calls for a second opinion," the young doctor determined and disappeared.

Dr. Morton returned a few moments later, with Dr. Brackett.

"Johnny...How are you feeling?" Brackett inquired. He picked up—and then closely examined—the patient's chart.

"Fine, Doc!"

Doc glanced up from the metal clipboard in his hands, looking extremely skeptical. "Mike tells me you want to finish the shift."

Johnny gave the doctor a definite nod.

"He also tells me that you should be hospitalized and given breathing treatments. Do you really think you're up to going back to work?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't ask you to let me finish the shift. I realize my work calls for the best physical and mental efforts I can put forth..." the paramedic paused and lowered his sad eyes to the floor. "That's why I quit this morning. I promised I'd finish the shift..."

His doctors just stood there, looking completely dumbfounded. Their patient's rather shocking revelation had managed to render them both speechless!

Kel was the first one to recover. "You're not serious?"

The fireman just kept right on staring, wordlessly, down at the floor beneath his feet.

Brackett looked even more shocked and rephrased his question. "Johnny, you haven't handed in your resignation, yet. Have you?"

"Why?" Gage glumly wondered and glanced up.

"Because, if you're not working for the County anymore, they can't very well send you on a two weeks paid vacation!"

John's right eyebrow arched. "Has Roy been talking to you?"

"Yes. He has. I only wish that someone," Brackett paused to shoot Gage an annoyed glare, "would have talked to me sooner! I'm sorry it's had to come this far..." he paused again. "Is your resignation official?"

Gage shrugged. "I quit over the phone. I haven't signed anything...ye-et."

"Great! Then why don't you take your vacation and, when you get back, your old well-rested self again, if you still feel like quitting, you can make it official then."
"You keep talking about my vacation like it's been un-cancelled," the fireman finally realized.

"It has!" Brackett assured him. "Or, at least, it will be by tomorrow morning."

The paramedic closed his eyes and exhaled a long—excruciatingly painful—but extremely welcome sigh of relief.

TBC
Disclaimer: The characters from Station 51 and Rampart General belong to Mark VII. They have been borrowed strictly for fun—and not for fortune.

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All' "

By Ross7

Chapter One

Los Angeles County firefighter/paramedic Roy DeSoto sat on the bench in front of his locker, buttoning the shirt of his uniform. At the sound of approaching footsteps, he turned his attention to the doorway and was shocked to see his partner, John Gage, enter the room. "What on earth are you doing here?" he demanded.

John pulled the door to his locker open and started shedding his street clothes. "Franklin's wife's sister is getting married. Potter's wife's father is getting buried. Brice burnt his arm last night. The paramedics on A over at 36's are assisting the National Guard with that brushfire in the San Dimas Canyon. So the paramedics on B over at 16's are subbing for them." He slid his uniform slacks on and then began sinking slowly down onto the bench beside his fuming friend. "I can't remember the rest of it, but, somehow, my vacation got lost in the shuffle…again."

"They can't do that!" Roy insisted and slammed his locker for emphasis. "They're taking advantage of you! This is the third time your vacation's gotten 'lost in the shuffle'! You've got to stand up to them, Johnny! Franklin doesn't hafta go to his wife's sister's wedding!"

"Franklin's already gone." Gage finished buttoning his uniform shirt and then stared sadly down at his badge for a few moments, before finally pinning it on.

"That's what you should've done, too!" Roy realized, as they both finished tying their bootlaces and then stood up to tuck in their shirts. "Just taken off!"

Chet Kelly, Marco Lopez, and Mike Stoker came strolling into the locker room just then. The three firemen appeared to be every bit as shocked as Roy had been, by his partner's unexpected presence.

"Humph!" Kelly turned to his crewmates. "I always thought the idea behind a paid vacation was that you got the money without having to do the work."

Stoker and Lopez exchanged grins.

Gage gave Kelly one of his 'Shut up, Chet!' glares.

Chet's next smart remark was drowned out, as the Station's alarm suddenly sounded.

"Humph!" Kelly turned to his crewmates. "I always thought the idea behind a paid vacation was that you got the money without having to do the work."

He and his companions quickly commenced stripping.

Squad 51’s crew of two tensed and then listened as the dispatcher's voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Station 51…CHP reports a three vehicle accident on the Arrow Highway /San Gabriel River Bridge…one half mile west of the Rivergrade Road Junction…Arrow Highway/ San Gabriel River Bridge…Ambulances responding…Time out…07:52"
Captain Hank Stanley poked his head into the room. "You ladies wanna shake a leg!" he ordered more than asked. "I told Ron we'd take this one."

Gage and DeSoto trotted past him, heading for their Rescue Squad.

A-shift's Engine crew threw a few last articles of clothing on and then followed their leader into the garage, stomping their boots on, tucking their shirrtails in and zipping their flies up along the way. The trio took a moment or two to tie their bootlaces, before tossing on their turnout coats and climbing up into their fire truck.

The guys from C-shift, coffee cups in hand, stepped out of the day room to see their replacements off.

"Thanks again, Hank!" Captain Graham restated as he passed a copy of the call slip up to Stanley's engineer.

"No problem, Ron!" A-shift's Captain reassured him.

Over in the Squad, John recorded the time of the call he'd just been handed and noted the address. "Hang a left," he advised his partner.

Ron Graham and the rest of the firemen from C-shift watched as Squad 51 exited the Station and then swung left, closely followed by Engine 51. The now off-duty firemen continued watching as both trucks disappeared down the street, lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Everybody hated it when a call came in just prior to, or during, a shift change. It meant that one crew was going to work a little early…or one crew was going to work a little late.

If the call had come in just five minutes sooner, C-shift would've been putting in some major overtime.

A mere eight minutes later, the crew of Station 51 reached the scene of the accident.

Mike and Roy brought their respective trucks to an abrupt halt on the bridge and cut their sirens.

The firemen piled out onto the debris-strewn pavement.

"Didn't the dispatcher say three vehicles?" Roy pondered upon counting the number of cars involved.

His partner nodded and began pulling medical equipment from the compartments on the side of their truck.

The paramedics grabbed what gear they figured they needed most, and went running up to the CHP motorcycle officer, who was standing in the middle of the bridge.

Engine 51's crew joined them there.

"What do we got, Jon?" Captain Stanley queried.

Officer Baker pointed to the first of two cars that had crashed into each other and then plowed into the bridge railing. "She seems to be hurt the worst..."

Roy hurried over to the person being pointed out.
Jon Baker's partner, Frank Poncherello, was kneeling on the seat next to the victim, applying pressure to the artery in her upper left arm. The front of his uniform was streaked with blood. "Her airway's clear and she's breathin'!" he informed the paramedic, upon his arrival.

DeSoto gave the capable cop an appreciative glance and then went to work.

"Those three appear to have only minor cuts and bruises," Jon continued and motioned to the occupants of the second vehicle.

Gage went trotting up to the still somewhat stunned—but able to stand—trio.

Officer Baker led Captain Stanley over to the bridge railing and pointed down. "I don't know about the driver of that car…"

The firemen leaned over the railing to get a good look.

Stanley whistled softly at what he saw.

Seventy-five feet straight down, a black sedan was bobbing in the swift current of the San Gabriel. The banks on both sides of the river were too steep and treacherous to traverse quickly. It would be a lot faster, and much safer, to follow the same route the car had taken.

The Captain turned and issued a slew of orders, which his engine crew readily obeyed.

As fast as Roy could press fresh 4x4's over the laceration in his victim's left forearm, they became saturated with blood. "Good going, Ponch!'" the paramedic said to his assistant, as he tore open another roll of gauze and used it to secure the fresh dressings over the ghastly wound. "If you hadn't applied arterial pressure when you did…" he paused to shoot the first-aid administrator another appreciative glance. "Well, you prob'ly saved this lady's life…"

Ponch' was pleased as punch by the paramedic's praise and he flashed the fireman a grateful grin. "Been watchin' you an' Johnny for so long, guess somethin' must a' finally rubbed off."

DeSoto smiled, both at the comment and at the fact that he had finally gotten the bleeding under control. He checked the pulse below the wound to make sure he hadn't cut the circulation off to his victim's hand, and then reached for their drug box. "Can you contact Rampart for me?"

Poncherello nodded and quickly opened up the case containing their bio-phone.

John finished his initial patient surveys.

Officer Baker was right. Thanks to their seatbelts, the driver—and both passengers—of the second car had no apparent injuries, save for a few superficial cuts and bruises.

He had convinced them to allow him to place a couple of band-aids on their facial lacerations, but they had waived off any further assistance from him, choosing, instead, to seek their own treatment. Gage had just gotten the last of the 'release from liability' forms signed and was about to head over and help his partner, when he heard his superior summoning him. He stowed the paperwork and then snatched his equipment cases back up.

"Yeah, Cap?" the dark-haired paramedic pondered as he promptly appeared before his Captain.
"We're all set here. Can you leave them and go down?"

John nodded. "They refused treatment." His curiosity piqued by his Captain's question, the paramedic set his cases down and peered over the bridge railing. So-o, the dispatcher had given them an accurate count after all. "They say, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line," he mumbled to himself and quickly donned the nylon harness and leather gloves he'd been handed.

The CHP officers had been recruited to help lower away.

Gage secured himself to the rope they were manning.

Mike and Chet had charge of a second rope.

Marco secured himself to it.

Those doing the lowering began playing out their respective ropes.

Those being lowered began their slow descent toward the river.

Being as how they were short-handed, Stanley took it upon himself to lower the equipment-filled Stokes. "More slack!" he ordered as the two dangling rescuers entered the water and began swimming against the current.

Gage and Lopez fought their way upstream, towing the Stokes between them.

Being as how they were both strong swimmers, they reached the bobbing car in no time and set their stretcher up on its hood.

The sedan was tilted sideways, with its passenger door partially submerged. The vehicle's undercarriage appeared to be hung up on a huge boulder, and the river's current caused it to rock precariously.

The paramedic hauled himself onto the hood as well, and then scrambled up onto the auto's roof. He reached down and tried to pull the driver's door open.

It didn't budge.

"Uh, Marco? Can you smash the back window in and unlock this door for me?"

Lopez carefully crawled over Gage's legs, across the car's slippery—slanting—roof, and over to the backseat window. The rescuer removed a spring-loaded device from a pants pocket, placed the pointed end of it against the glass and pressed its trigger mechanism.

The backseat driver's side door's window shattered into a zillion little pieces.

Marco re-pocketed the handy tool. He then reached in and around and pulled the driver's door open.

Gage gave him a grateful glance and jerked hard on the door latch. Again, nothing happened. So he braced himself and jerked harder. The portal finally 'screaked' open. The rescuer carefully lowered himself down into the car to examine its only occupant—an unmoving fellow slumped forward in his seat behind the steering wheel. John noted that a deep gash in the gentleman's forehead had scarcely bled, which told him the guy's heart was probably not beating. A careful check of the victim's carotid pulse confirmed his suspicions. A quick flick of his penlight revealed the victim's
pupils were both fixed and dilated. The paramedic turned to his companion and solemnly shook his head.

The firefighters exchanged frowns and their mission shifted gears from one of rescue to retrieval.

They pulled the victim's body from the vehicle and secured it into the Stokes.

Marco descended once more into the cool swift current.

John lowered the 'body in the basket' down to him and then began slipping back into the water, as well.

Suddenly some five hundred pounds lighter, the car was swept from its precarious perch. It rocked sharply, as the current caught it and then spun it sideways, pinning the paramedic's back up against the boulder and pressing the weight of the car into his ribcage.

"Uh-uhh!" Gage gasped with a grimace.

Seconds later, the completely out of control automobile spun back around and began drifting off downstream.

Marco narrowly missed getting nailed by the thing himself. He watched the now nearly submerged object float past him and then looked for his crushed companion. Lopez stiffened, as all that was visible of Gage...was his rope.

TBC
Chapter Three

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Three

Chet Kelly walked up to Roy DeSoto—who still happened to be on the phone. "How's Johnny?"

Roy placed his palm over the phone's mouthpiece. "He's back from x-ray."

"I've got the Squad outside. Are we supposed to wait for him, or what?"

DeSoto shrugged. "I called the Cap. He told me to call headquarters…and they've got me on hold."

The paramedic stiffened as the HT attached to his left wrist suddenly started 'bleeping'.

"Squad 51, what is your status?"

The fireman glanced from the radio in his left hand, to the phone in his right. He slammed the phone down and thumbed the HT's transmit button. "This is Squad 51. Standby, LA," he advised.

The paramedic raced down the corridor and poked his head into Exam Three. "What's the verdict?"

Gage gave his doctors another pitiful, pleading look. "Can I finish the shift?"

Morton and Brackett exchanged thoughtful glances.

"I tell you what," Mike told him, "since I can't force you to stay, I'll compromise. If you promise to come in for some breathing treatments—and, if you take it real easy and let Roy, here, handle all the tough stuff—you can finish the shift."

Gage grinned from ear to ear. "In that case, I promise! Thank you, Doctors!" he said and started heading for the door.

"I'll call you when I get your first treatment scheduled. It'll be sometime this afternoon or early evening."

The freed fireman glanced back over his shoulder, nodded his acceptance of Morton's terms, and then disappeared.

All three firemen headed off down the hallway, en route to their truck.

"LA," DeSoto spoke into their portable radio, "Squad 51 is available at Rampart General."

"10-4, Squad 51…Standby for a response…" Several seconds passed. "Squad 51…Man down…1253 East Lorraine Avenue…One-two-five-three East Lorraine…Cross-street Olympic…Ambulance responding…Time Out: 09:53"

The trio of rescuers had already piled into their vehicle's front seat.

John reached for the radio mic' on the dash and used it to acknowledge the response. "10-4, L.A. Squad 51 responding."
"1249…1251…” Chet counted aloud. "1253 should be the next place on the left…”

"Yea-eah," DeSoto agreed. "There it is!" He pulled the Squad into the driveway of 1253 East Lorraine and cut the siren.

The truck's occupants piled out. Kelly helped the paramedics carry some of their equipment up to the home's front door.

Roy rang the doorbell and called out rather loudly, "Fire Department!" He heard a man's feeble voice telling them to come in. So he turned the knob and pushed the portal open.

A very pale young man appeared. The guy was standing in the middle of his living room with a blood-soaked towel wrapped around his left hand.

"Here…You'd better lie down," DeSoto advised. He deposited his equipment and helped their swaying victim down onto the couch.

"I hate to bother you guys," their obviously in shock host confessed, "but my wife's off shopping…"

"It's no bother. Believe me," his rescuer reassured him. "I'm Roy. This is my partner, Johnny. And the guy with the mustache over there, is our friend, Chet." He was in the process of un-wrapping the crimson stained towel. DeSoto stared down at the victim's left hand and saw that two of the man's fingers had been completely severed. "What's your name?" he calmly inquired, exchanging a knowing glance with his partner—who was kneeling on the carpeted floor, flicking open various equipment cases. The senior paramedic used arterial pressure to prevent further blood loss.

Chet was already on the bio-phone, trying to establish contact with their base at Rampart.

"Mark," the man told his rescuers. "Mark Sorensen."

"Alright, Mark," the friendly, blond fireman compressing the artery in his upper arm acknowledged. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I was using my jigsaw…out in the garage…it slipped…"

While Roy continued to stem the bleeding, Johnny went to work securing a set of vital signs.

"Mark, are you on any medications?"

Their victim shook his head no.

"Are you allergic to any medications?"

"Not that I know of…” Mark verbally replied.

Chet passed John the phone, and he proceeded to pass his findings on to the doctor. "Rampart Base, this is Squad 51…”

"Go ahead, 51…” Dr. Early quickly came back.

"Rampart, we have a male victim…approximately 30 years of age. Victim has completely severed the index and middle fingers of his left hand, and partially severed the third. Respirations are 25…Pulse is 85 and weak…BP is 90/70…Victim has lost a considerable amount of blood…He is conscious and in extreme pain."
"51, have you applied a tourniquet?"

"51. Just pressure point, Rampart. The bleeding is under control."

"Alright, 51. Maintain arterial pressure. Start two IV's. One D5W. One lactated Ringers. TKO. Apply shock trousers. Administer 50 milligrams meparadine for the pain and transport immediately. Oh, and bring the severed fingers, if you can, 51."

"51. Roger that, Rampart," John acknowledged and read the doctor back the orders he'd just jotted down.

'The three of us are just like a well-oiled machine,' Kelly thought to himself, as he assisted Gage in carrying out the doctor's instructions.

In no time at all, the three of them had the victim completely stabilized and ready to transport.

The ambulance arrived.

The attendants wheeled a stretcher into the room and their patient was quickly transferred to it.

"My wife's gonna kill me…when she sees the carpeting," Mr. Sorensen glumly realized on his way out.

The blond paramedic followed alongside him, maintaining arterial pressure on his upper left arm.

Gage pulled a plastic bag and a bottle of saline solution from a green case on the coffee table and handed the items to Kelly. "Bring the Squad…and the fingers," he requested. Then he gathered up some of the more essential gear and went sloshing out the front door. His shoes, uniform, underwear and hair were all still extremely soggy.

Chet stared distastefully down at the plastic bag in his hand. "Gro-oss!" he exclaimed and reluctantly began heading for the garage. "Totally gro-oss!"

Mrs. Mark Sorensen pulled up and parked alongside of the Fire Department Rescue Squad in her driveway. She jumped out of her car and went racing up to the house, through the open front door and into her equipment case-littered living room. "Ma-ark?" she screamed, and then screamed again, seeing a fresh trail of blood across her carpeting.

Chet entered the living room just then, looking rather pale. He spotted the woman and quickly hid the plastic bag and bottle in his hands behind his back.

"What happened?" the now completely hysterical woman wondered. "Where's my husband?"

"Uh-uh…" Kelly swallowed hard. "He, uh, cut himself out in the garage…with his jigsaw. The ambulance just took him to the hospital."

The poor guy's wife's dazed gaze shifted from the fireman to the crimson stains on the carpeting.

Chet took advantage of the distraction and sidled over to the green case that was still resting open on the coffee table. He dropped the sealed bag and the remainder of the saline into it and quickly closed the lid. "If you want, you can follow me over to Rampart General…"

The woman glanced back up, through tear-filled eyes. "Thank you…" she told the kind stranger
standing in the middle of her living room. "That would be nice."

"Your welcome. Just let me throw this equipment in the Squad…"

It was beginning to look like John might finally get to enjoy a nice, freshly-dripped cup of Dixie's steaming black coffee.

That is, until Chet Kelly came racing up to the Nurses' Station and placed the plastic bag down on the counter Gage and DeSoto were leaning against. "Forget the coffee, fellahs!" the flustered fireman declared. Then he relieved both paramedics of their steaming mugs, and began herding them off down the hallway, in the direction of the exit. "Let's just get me back to the Station—before you guys get another run!"

DeSoto gave their mustached amigo an annoyed glare, and then sarcastically quipped to his equally perturbed looking partner, "I don't think Chet wants to be a paramedic anymore."

"Believe me," Gage grumbled, just beneath his breath, "I know the feeling…"

Captain Stanley, and his skeleton engine crew, heard the Squad pull in and strolled into the garage to greet their wayward associates.

As usual, the two paramedics were engaged in a rather lively conversation.

"I did not!" DeSoto insisted. "I just mentioned to Dr. Brackett that I was a little concerned about you missing your vacation—for the third time! Which would never have happened in the first place, if you had a wife to look af—"

"—Plea-ease, Ro-oy!" the confirmed bachelor interrupted. "I'm not gonna argue with you anymore, if you're gonna start using four-letter words!"

Their associates glanced at one another and grinned.

Their Captain cleared his throat. "What did the doctor have to say?"

"I'm okay, Cap!" Gage assured him. "Just bruised some ribs. I'm gonna go cha—"

"—Hold it, pal!" Hank interrupted, as the injured paramedic began taking his leave.

John halted.

Stanley turned to the frozen fireman's partner. "Roy?"

"They said he could finish the shift…but he's gotta take it real easy and go in for some breathing treatments," Roy obligingly informed him.

"I don't like it," their fearless leader determined with a frown. Fighting fires wasn't exactly a take it easy line of work.

"C'mon, Cap…" the paramedic pleaded. "I can handle it. Besides, my vacation starts the day after tomorrow."

"Says who?" Stanley asked.

"Roy, here, went and talked to Chief Jenner—personally!" John teased, with a grin.
"I did not!" DeSoto re-insisted. "I just mentioned to Dr. Brackett that I was a little concerned about you—"

"—All right!" their Captain unconditionally surrendered. "Ga-age, go change into a dry uniform!"

Ga-age grinned and began backing towards the locker room.

The rest of the guys grinned as well, seeing an exasperated Hank Stanley standing there, shaking his head.

Fifteen minutes later, in the combination kitchen/dining area of Station 51's day room…

Mike Stoker pulled a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator and set it down on the table, right in front of his Captain.

"What are those for?" Stanley wondered, and took a cautious sip of his coffee.

Stoker filled a pan with water and set it on the stove. "We're having egg salad sandwiches for lunch," he replied and placed several of the eggs into the pan. He turned the burner on and went to get some more eggs.

One slipped out of his hands.

His Captain managed to catch it, just before it hit the floor. "Easy on the eggs there, butter-fingers!" he teased.

"Ah-uh, Ca-ap!" Chet groaned and sat there at the table, looking rather dejected. "Why'd yah hafta go an' say that? I was just beginning to forget!"

Stanley ignored him and stared thoughtfully down at the egg in his hand. "That's it!" he suddenly said. "That's i-it!" he repeated and picked up another egg.

Gage and DeSoto strolled into the day room just then, en route to the coffeepot.

"What's with the eggs?" John inquired of his Captain.

Stanley stood and stepped up to the fireman with the fresh uniform. "These are for you, pal!" he calmly explained, and placed an egg in each of Gage's two front shirt pockets.

John's jaw dropped.

His fellow crewmembers glanced at each other and grinned.

"No-ow," his Captain continued, looking extremely pleased with himself, "I want you to take it real easy. Because, if you put so much as a hairline crack in either of those eggs, I'm sending you home."

The paramedic's mouth dropped open again, but before he could protest, the alarm went off.

"Squad 51..."

The Engine crew relaxed. Gage and DeSoto started heading for the garage.

"Man down...unknown cause...Camino Verde Motel...at the intersection of Hacienda Blvd. and Colima Road...Hacienda Blvd. and Colima road junction...Ambulance
The two paramedics climbed into their rescue truck and donned their helmets, while their Captain recorded the call.

"Squad 51. KMG—365," Hank acknowledged and handed Roy a copy of the call address.

DeSoto passed the slip of paper on to his partner.

The Squad's navigator clipped the call to their dash-mounted logbook. "Hang a right!" he advised and recorded the time.

The Squad's driver did, and they disappeared off down the street, lights flashing and siren blaring.

TBC
Chapter Four

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All''

Chapter Four

Fifteen minutes later, Roy pulled up in front of the Camino Verde Motel and cut the Squad's siren.
The paramedics piled out and began pulling equipment cases from its side compartments.
A young woman came out of the motel's office and waved them over. "He's in here!"
The two firemen followed her inside.

A middle-aged Hispanic gentleman was lying on a sofa in the motel's lobby, tossing his head. The guy appeared dazed and disoriented and seemed to be perspiring—profusely.

"What happened?" Roy asked and freed up his hands for an initial patient survey.
The woman shrugged. "My husband thinks he's drunk, but I think he's sick or something. I made him lie down."

"What's his name?" John wondered and began extracting diagnostic tools from various cases.

"He's registered as Estephan Morales."

"Mr. Morales, I'm Roy DeSoto. This is my partner, John Gage. Is it alright if we take a look at yah, here?"

Mr. Morales made no reply.

DeSoto took that as assumed consent and began taking vitals.

"Señor Morales," John called out rather loudly, "can you hear me?"

This seemed to catch their victim's attention and he mumbled something incoherent.

Well, at least, it sounded incoherent to Roy.

His Spanish-speaking partner stiffened. "¿Azúcar?" he repeated and a light bulb went on in his diagnostic mind. He bent down, gently opened their victim's jaws and got a whiff of the guy's fruity-sweet breath. 'Diabetic acidosis,' John silently thought, but then said aloud, "Insulin shock!"

DeSoto finished his IPS and snatched up the bio-phone. "Sure matches the rest of his symptoms," he agreed and inserted the call stick. "Rampart Base, this is County 51. How do you read?"

Over at Emergency Receiving, RN Dixie McCall saw the call light flashing. She entered the base station and flicked on the intercom. "Unit calling in, please repeat…" she requested.

"Rampart, this is Squad 51. We have a male victim, Estephan Morales. He's in his mid-forties. Victim is semi-conscious—"
While his partner brought the hospital up to speed, Gage made another attempt to reach their half-out-of-it patient. "¿Señor? ¿Señor Morales? ¿Habla inglés?"

No response.

The paramedic gasped in frustration and then tried again. "¿Señor? ¿Habla usted inglés?"

The Hispanic gentleman slowly shook his head. "No. No hablo inglés," he mumbled.

"¿Que tiene usted? Usted pide azúcar. ¿Usted un diabético?"

"¡Sí! ¡Sí! ¡Necesito azúcar!"

John turned to his partner. "Roy, he’s definitely diabetic. Request permission to give him some glucose."

DeSoto repeated the information to Rampart and then turned back to his partner. "They wanna know how long it’s been since his last insulin injection…"

Gage winced.

Noticing the high percentage of their victims who were Hispanic, the paramedic had persuaded Marco to teach him some Spanish words and phrases, including medical jargon for describing and treating common ailments.

John was sure they had covered diabetes, but he had to really tax his memory cells to come up with the proper terminology. "Uhhh…¿Cuándo usted inyectó la insulina? ¿Cuánto tiempo desde entonces que usted se dio la inyeccion de insulin?" he tried a second time.

The gentleman still didn't seem to understand.

So Gage took a syringe from the case at his feet and went through the motions of giving himself an injection. "¿Cuando es la vez última que usted se acaba de poner una inyeccion de insulin?"

"Ahhh," the man nodded. "Una hora."

"About an hour ago," John translated to his partner.

"Squad 51. It's been about an hour, Rampart," Roy repeated and then turned to the woman. "How long has he been like this?"

She glanced at her watch. "It can't be more than twenty…twenty-five minutes."

DeSoto gave Rampart the required information. "Alright, Johnny. We can go ahead and give him the glucose."

Johnny opened a tube of glucose and held it up to the gentleman's mouth. "¿ Señor, Morales? ¿Puede usted comer un poco de esto?"

The man nodded and began swallowing the clear, sweet gel being squeezed between his teeth.

Within seconds after swallowing the azúcar, Señor Morales’ condition miraculously improved.

Within two minutes, their patient was completely recovered.
Roy rechecked their now vertical victim's vital signs and passed them on to Rampart.

John felt the man's forehead. "¿Cómo está usted?"

The man managed a weak smile. "Mucho mejor. ¡Gracias! ¿Quiéntes son ustedes?"


The man finally caught on. "Ahhh, casi doctores …"

The fireman grinned. "Si-i, casi doctores. Ahora…¿Usted está bien? ¿O, usted quiere ir al hospital?"

The man stiffened. "No es necesario ir al hospital. ¡Estoy muy bien!"

"Bueno," John turned to his partner. "Roy, he says he's all right now. He doesn't want to go to the hospital. Ask Rampart if we can cancel the ambulance."

"Ahh, Rampart…victim has recovered completely. Request permission to cancel ambulance…Roger, Rampart," DeSoto hung up the phone and nodded to his partner.

"Esta seguro que estaria bien?" Gage again asked their patient.

"Soy positivo."

"Bueno. Ojala, usted no estoy enfermo una otra vez. Pero, si usted estoy enfermedo de nuevo, la palabra para azúcar es sugar. ¿Usted entienda?"

"Si. 'Sugar'."

"Tal vez, usted va a tu cuartos y usted se acueste. ¿Esta bien?" Gage suggested and helped the gentleman to his feet. "¡Cuidado!" he urged.

Señor Morales smiled and extended his hand. "¡Muchisimas gracias, paramédicos!"

John took and shook the grateful guy's hand. "Por nada, Señor," he assured him. Then he reached down to retrieve several of their equipment cases. "¡Que lo pase bien!" he called back over his shoulder and quickly began taking his leave.

"Yeah…adios," Roy said, following a quick handshake. He gathered up what was left of their gear and followed his multi-lingual friend out of the motel's office.

"¡Y, ustedes, tambien!" the man called after them.

"What was that he was saying about doctors?" Roy wondered, as they placed their equipment back into the various compartments of their Squad.

John closed the compartment doors and smiled. "He called us 'almost doctors'."

DeSoto returned the smile. "Is that what a paramédico is? An 'almost doctor'?"

"When in doubt," Gage replied, "improvise!"

"Is that what you speak?" His now grinning partner wondered, as they climbed back into their
Rescue Squad and hung their helmets up. "Improvisational Spanish?"

John's slightly eschew smile broadened into a lopsided grin. He shrugged and started reaching for their radio, but before he could even clear them, the dang thing started 'bleeping'.

"Squad 51…What is your status?"

Gage snatched up the mic' and pressed its transmit button. "LA, Squad 51 is available at the scene…"

"Squad 51 in place of Squad 16…Man down…car/pedestrian accident…at the intersection of Fourth Street and Garey Avenue…junction of Fourth and Garey…ambulance responding…Time Out: 11:47."

"Squad 51. 10-4," John acknowledged and jotted the call down in their log.

He and his partner re-donned their helmets and headed off in the direction of Fourth and Garey.

The rescue squad was within a few blocks of the accident site, when another message came over its radio.

"Squad 51…cancel."

The paramedics exchanged grim glances.

The cancellation most likely meant that their victim had died while they were en route to the scene. Slowly, they began slipping their helmets off.

Roy flicked the lights and siren off and returned to normal driving speed.

His partner exhaled a painful sigh of frustration and then answered, "10-4, LA…Squad 51 clear."

It was nearly half-past noon by the time DeSoto backed the Squad into its niche in Station 51's apparatus bay. He flicked the ignition off and started reaching for his door's latched handle.

The alarm sounded.

The firefighter's hand froze, right in mid-reach.

"Station 51…Engine 43…Engine 37…Ladder 12…Structure fire at Alvira Savings & Loan…2134 East Grand Avenue…cross streets Seventh and Grand…Two-one-three-four East Grand Avenue…Time Out: 12:27."

"Station 51. KMG—365," Stanley acknowledged.

Roy re-ignited the truck's engine, took the call slip copy from his Captain and passed it on to his partner.

"Hang a right!" John directed.

DeSoto did.

Both rescue vehicles swung right out of the Station, and went racing off down the street, warning
lights flashing and sirens wailing.

TBC

Author's note: Pardon the 'improvisational Spanish.' :D

Below is the same chapter…in English. ;)

Chapter Four

Fifteen minutes later, Roy pulled up in front of the Green Way Motel and cut the Squad's siren.

The paramedics piled out and began pulling equipment cases from its side compartments.

A young woman came out of the motel's office and waved them over. "He's in here!"

The two firemen followed her inside.

A middle-aged Hispanic gentleman was lying on a sofa in the motel's lobby, tossing his head. The guy appeared dazed and disoriented and seemed to be perspiring—profusely.

"What happened?" Roy asked and freed up his hands for an initial patient survey.

The woman shrugged. "My husband thinks he's drunk, but I think he's sick or something. I made him lie down."

"What's his name?" John wondered and began extracting diagnostic tools from various cases.

"He's registered as Steven Morales."

"Mr. Morales, I'm Roy DeSoto. This is my partner, John Gage. Is it alright if we take a look at yah, here?"

Mr. Morales made no reply.

DeSoto took that as assumed consent and began taking vitals.

"Mister Morales," John called out rather loudly, "can you hear me?"

This seemed to catch their victim's attention and he muttered something incoherent under his breath.

Well, at least, it sounded incoherent to Roy.

His Spanish-speaking partner stiffened. "Sugar?" he repeated and a light bulb went on in his diagnostic mind. He bent down, gently opened their victim's jaws and got a whiff of the guy's fruity-sweet breath. 'Diabetic acidosis,' John silently thought, but then said aloud, "Insulin shock!"

DeSoto finished his IPS and snatched up the bio-phone. "Sure matches the rest of his symptoms," he agreed and inserted the call stick. "Rampart Base, this is County 51. How do you read?"

Over at Emergency Receiving, RN Dixie McCall saw the call light flashing. She entered the base station and flicked on the intercom. "Unit calling in, please repeat…" she requested.
"Rampart, this is Squad 51. We have a male victim, Steven Morales. He's in his mid-forties. Victim is semi-conscious—"

While his partner brought the hospital up to speed, Gage made another attempt to reach their half-out-of-it patient. "Sir? Mister Morales? Do you speak English?"

No response.

The paramedic gasped in frustration and then tried again. "Sir, do you speak English?"

The Hispanic gentleman slowly shook his head. "No. I don't speak English," he mumbled.

"What's wrong with you? You asked for sugar. Are you a diabetic?"

"Yes! Yes! I need some sugar!"

John turned to his partner. "Roy, he's definitely diabetic. Request permission to give him some glucose."

DeSoto repeated the information to Rampart and then turned back to his partner. "They wanna know how long it's been since his last insulin injection…"

Gage winced.

Noticing the high percentage of their victims who were Hispanic, the paramedic had persuaded Marco to teach him some Spanish words and phrases, including medical jargon for describing and treating common ailments.

John was sure they had covered diabetes, but he had to really tax his memory cells to come up with the proper terminology. "Uhhh…When was your last insulin injection? How long has it been since you gave yourself an insulin injection?" he tried a second time.

The gentleman still didn't seem to understand.

So Gage took a syringe from the case at his feet and went through the motions of giving himself an injection. "When was the last time you gave yourself an insulin injection?"


"About an hour ago," John translated to his partner.

"It's been about an hour, Rampart," Roy repeated and then turned to the woman. "How long has he been like this?"

She glanced at her watch. "It can't be more than twenty…twenty-five minutes."

DeSoto gave Rampart the required information. "Alright, Johnny. We can go ahead and give him the glucose."

Johnny opened a tube of glucose and held it up to the gentleman's mouth. "Mr. Morales, can you eat a little of this?"

The man nodded and began swallowing the clear, sweet gel being squeezed between his teeth.

Within seconds after swallowing the sugar, Mr. Morales' condition miraculously improved.
Within two minutes, their patient was completely recovered.

Roy rechecked their now vertical victim's vital signs and passed them on to Rampart.

John felt the man's forehead. "How do you feel?"

The man managed a weak smile. "Much better! Thanks! Who are you men?"

"We're paramedics," Gage replied. "Uhhh, we give people first-aid," he added, upon seeing their patient's still puzzled expression.

The man finally caught on. "Ahhh, almost doctors …"

The fireman grinned, "Ye-es, almost doctors. Now, are you gonna be okay? Or, do you want to go to the hospital?"

The man stiffened. "I don't have to go to the hospital. I'm fine!"

"Good." John turned to his partner. "Roy, he says he's all right now. He doesn't want to go to the hospital. Ask Rampart if we can cancel the ambulance."

"Ahh, Rampart…Squad 51…victim has recovered completely. Request permission to cancel ambulance…Roger, Rampart…51 out." DeSoto hung up the phone and nodded to his partner.

"You sure you're gonna be okay?" Gage again asked their patient.

"I'm positive."

"Good. Hopefully, you won't get sick again. But, if you do get sick again, the word for sugar is sugar. Understand?"

"Yes. 'Sugar'."

"Perhaps you should go to your room and lie down. Okay?" Gage suggested and helped the gentleman to his feet. "Careful!" he urged.

Mr. Morales smiled and extended his hand. "Thank you very much, paramedics!"

John took and shook the grateful guy's hand. "You're welcome, Sir," he assured him. Then he reached down to retrieve several of their equipment cases. "Have a nice day!" he called back over his shoulder and quickly began taking his leave.

"Yeah…so long," Roy said, following a quick handshake. He gathered up what was left of their gear and followed his multi-lingual friend out of the motel's office.

"And, you, too!" the man called after them.

"What was that he was saying about doctors?" Roy wondered, as they placed their equipment back into the various compartments of their Squad.

John closed the compartment doors and smiled. "He called us 'almost doctors'."

DeSoto returned the smile. "Is that what a paramedic is? An 'almost doctor'?"

"When in doubt," Gage replied, "improvise!"
"Is that what you speak?" His now grinning partner wondered, as they climbed back into their Rescue Squad and hung their helmets up. "Improvisational Spanish?"

John's slightly eschew smile broadened into a lopsided grin. He shrugged and started reaching for their radio, but before he could even clear them, the dang thing started 'bleeping'.

"Squad 51…What is your status?"

Gage snatched up the mic' and pressed its transmit button. "LA, Squad 51 is available at the scene…"

"Squad 51 in place of Squad 16…Man down…car/pedestrian accident…at the intersection of Fourth Street and Garey Avenue…junction of Fourth and Garey…ambulance responding…Time Out: 11:47."

"Squad 51. 10-4," John acknowledged and jotted the call down in their log.

He and his partner re-donned their helmets and headed off in the direction of Fourth and Garey.

The rescue squad was within a few blocks of the accident site, when another message came over its dash-mounted radio.

"Squad 51…cancel."

The paramedics exchanged grim glances.

The cancellation most likely meant that their victim had died while they were en route to the scene. Slowly, they began slipping their helmets off.

Roy flicked the lights and siren off and returned to normal driving speed.

His partner exhaled a painful sigh of frustration and then answered, "10-4, L.A…Squad 51 clear."

It was nearly half-past noon by the time DeSoto backed the Squad into its niche in Station 51's apparatus bay. He flicked the ignition off and started reaching for his door's latched handle.

The alarm sounded.

The firefighter's hand froze, right in mid-reach.

"Station 51…Engine 43…Engine 37…Ladder 12…Structure fire at Alvira Savings & Loan…2134 East Grand Avenue…cross streets Seventh and Grand…Two-one-three-four East Grand Avenue…Time Out: 12:27."

"Station 51. KMG—365," Stanley acknowledged.

Roy re-ignited the truck's engine, took the call slip copy from his Captain and passed it on to his partner.

"Hang a right!" John directed.

DeSoto did.
Both rescue vehicles swung right out of the Station, and went racing off down the street, warning lights flashing and sirens wailing.

TBC
Chapter Five

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

They reached the incident scene seven minutes later, in the exact same fashion—with lights flashing and sirens wailing.

Engines 43 and 37 had already arrived.

Ladder 12's sirens could be heard, still a long ways off, and thick black clouds of smoke could be seen, rolling out of several of the ten story building's upper level windows.

Hank Stanley stepped down and went trotting up to one of the other crew's Captains. "Is everybody out of the building?"

"Everyone's accounted for but the janitor!" Station 43's Captain filled him in. "Apparently, he's still up on the seventh floor, battling the blaze with a fire extinguisher!"

"Good grief!" Station 51's Commander exclaimed. Then he turned to his men and called out a bunch of orders, which they immediately began to carry out.

A group of twelve firemen—with SCBA's donned—entered the Alvira Savings & Loan and began making their way up to the fire on the 7th floor.

An elderly gentleman in a business suit came running up to Squad 51's paramedics—who'd been told to stay put. "My secretary has been injured. Can you guys take a look at her?"

The paramedics replied by picking up several of their equipment cases and heading off in the direction the man pointed them in.

As the firemen approached a rather large gathering of the Savings & Loan's evacuated employees, the crowd parted for them and a strikingly beautiful brunette—with two very long, very lovely, very shapely legs appeared.

The hem of the woman's skirt was an inch or two above her knees and she was sitting—as modestly as circumstances would allow—on the sidewalk…surrounded by helpful male admirers—er, colleagues.

"All right! Step back please!" Roy pleaded. "C'mon! Give us some room to work here!"

"Ou-ouch!" their apparent patient pouted. "Oooooh...It hu-urts!" She directed her attention away from her right ankle and aimed her stunning gaze up at the tall, dark-haired fireman who had dropped to one knee beside her. "Can you plea-ease do something for my ankle?"

Gage glanced from the gorgeous girl, to his partner, and then back to the gorgeous girl again. "Yes, ma-am!" he assured the lovely little lady. Then he took her gently by the shoulders and eased her all the way down onto the pavement. "You just lie back and relax. Has anyone called an ambulance?" he inquired, following an initial examination of her swollen and discolored right
ankle.

Her boss nodded.

"Is it broken?" their pretty patient pondered.

"You're going to have to go in to the hospital and have this x-rayed," DeSoto informed her, as he went about securing a set of vitals. "How'd it happen?"

"I fell down the steps in the Lobby. My mother warned me about these heels," the girl admitted and dangled one of her very high stiletto-heeled shoes up for them to see.

"Did you hit your head when you fell?" the dark-haired fireman asked, flicking a penlight into her beautiful brown eyes.

"No."

"Are you hurting anywhere else?"

"My seat's kind a' sore," she reluctantly replied and rubbed her bruised bottom.

Gage and DeSoto glanced at each other again and tried hard not to smile.

Inside the burning building, the elevator doors slid open on the seventh floor.

Captain Stanley stepped out into an unbearably hot, smoke-filled hallway and tripped over the janitor's body. "Chet! Marco! Get him down and out!" he ordered through his facemask. "The rest of you—follow me!" However, before heading off in the direction of the flames, he pulled the portable radio from his coat pocket and hailed his paramedic team. "Engine 51 to Squad 51…"

"Squad 51. Go ahead, Cap…"

"Engine 51. Roy, we're bringing a victim down! Smoke inhalation!"

"Squad 51. Roger, that," Roy replied. He replaced the HT and began gathering up some of their gear. "When you finish here, can you give me a hand?" he rather reluctantly inquired.

Gage was busy immobilizing the bombshell's ankle. "Yeah. Sure. I'll be right with you," he promised, sounding tremendously disappointed.

For the second time, in as many minutes, the senior paramedic was forced to suppress a smile.

DeSoto adjusted the oxygen flow to their smoke inhalation victim and then snatched their bio-phone back up. "Rampart, Squad 51…"

"Go ahead, 51…" Dr. Early answered.

"Rampart, we have established the IV…500 cc's D5W TKO…and we've increased oxygen to 10 liters. Ambulance has just arrived."

"Vitals look good, 51…" Early assured him. "You can go ahead and transport."

"10-4, Rampart. Transporting victims one and two. ETA ten minutes."
"We'll be waiting, 51," the doctor came back.

Roy replaced the phone and then watched as his smitten associate assisted their first patient up into the ambulance.

"If all our victims looked like her," his bachelor buddy muttered, just beneath his breath, "we wouldn't need vacations…"

"Yea-eah…" DeSoto was forced to agree. "We got it, Johnny!" he exclaimed, seeing his injured associate reaching for one end of their unconscious victim's backboard.

Johnny exhaled an exasperated—all be it agonizing—gasp, but then obligingly stepped back out of the way. The pained paramedic sighed again and simply watched, as the attendants lifted the janitor onto a stretcher.

They slid the stretcher into the back of their ambulance and Roy quickly climbed up in with it.

Gage gave his amused, but un-amusing amigo an annoyed glare…along with several of their equipment cases. "I'll, uh, wait for the back-up squad and then meet up with you at the hospital."

His partner nodded his approval of the proposed plan and passed him their HT.

John pocketed the radio. Then he slammed the ambulance's back doors shut and gave them a couple of quick slaps.

Its driver heard the 'all clear' signal.

The left behind fireman watched the vehicle pull away, lights flashing and siren blaring. His gaze then shifted to the Savings & Loan's 7th floor.

The guys from 12 were busy attacking the blaze with their ladder mounted deck gun.

John stood there for quite a long while…watching all the action—and taking it real easy.

Gage glanced disbelievingly down his watch. "Twenty minutes!" Had he really been standing there that long? He crossed over to their Squad, climbed into the driver's seat, and snatched up their dash-mounted radio's mic. "LA, this is Squad 51…"

"Go ahead, 51…"

"LA, Squad 51. Request ETA on back-up squad to the structure fire at 2134 East Grand Avenue…"

"There are no squads available at this time, 51…"

Gage frowned. "LA, 51. We requested back-up over a half hour ago. This squad is tied up until I can get my partner back…"

"Repeat, 51…There are no available squads at this time…Will send the first clear squad your way…"

"Roger that, LA," John glumly acknowledged. He replaced the radio and then drew in a deep breath—which made him cough. He coughed hard—which made his ribs hurt. So he covered his mouth and tried not to cough so hard.
Another twenty minutes passed, and there was still no back-up squad in sight.

The bored-to-tears paramedic stared back up at the 7th floor of the Savings & Loan building.

Just a few puffs of white smoke and steam could be seen now.

"Watch the back-up get here when the fire's out," he grumbled aloud.

As if in response, the radio in the right front pocket of his turn-out coat 'bleeped'.

"Engine 51 to Squad 51…" 

The startled onlooker dug the instrument out and pressed its transmit button. "Squad 51. Go ahead, Engine 51..."

"Engine 51. John, Mike Stoker just went from the 7th to the 6th floor—without using the stairs or the elevator," his Captain announced. "I want you to come up and check him out! Bring a backboard—just in case!"

"Right away, Cap!" John assured him and replaced his HT.

Gage inserted his firefighter key and rode up to the 6th floor in a very soggy elevator. He stepped out into an even soggier hallway and spotted his Captain.

Stanley was standing in an office doorway, halfway down the hallway, motioning for him to hurry over.

John trotted up to the requester of his presence.

His Commander promptly relieved him of some of his burden and then escorted him into the office.

"He says that he's all right," Stanley informed the new arrival. "Claims he just had his wind knocked out of him, but we all know how that goes. I want you to check him out—one hundred percent!"

Gage acknowledged his Captain's order with a slight nod and then focused a hundred percent of his attention upon his patient.

Mike was lying on his left side, on account a' how his SCBA tank was still strapped to his back.

John set his cases and helmet down and then knelt beside his fallen comrade.

More than anything, Stoker seemed irritated about all the fuss being made over him.

"Hi, Mike. Did you hit your head?" The paramedic flicked his penlight in the engineer's eyes.

"Hi, Johnny. No. I did not hit my head. This is silly."

"Are you in any pain?" the paramedic inquired and continued his initial patient survey.

"No-o. I'm perfectly all right…no-ow."
Gage checked everything out, including the man's pulse, respirations and BP. "How did you hit the floor?"

"Very hard," Stoker sarcastically declared.

His fellow firefighters grinned.

The paramedic couldn't help but smile. "I meant, what part of you hit first?"

"My feet…and then my seat."

John decided to play a little paramedic's version of 'The Hokey Pokey' with his patient. "Move your legs…"

Mike moved his legs.

"Okay. Now, wiggle your feet for me."

Stoker hesitated.

"C'mon!" the playful paramedic encouraged.

Mike wiggled his feet.

"Move your arms and wiggle your hands…"

His patient reluctantly moved his arms and wiggled his hands.

"Raise your head…"

Mike raised his head.

Gage grabbed his patient's right wrist and started pulling him into a sitting position. "Any pain in your back?"

Stoker shook his head.

So the paramedic pulled the engineer to his feet. Gage grinned and turned to face their fearless leader. "I can't find anything wrong with him, Cap," he happily reported, but then teasingly tacked on, "least ways, nothing physical…"

His shift-mates snickered.

Mike raised an eyebrow and rested his hands on his hips. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Gage turned back to face his questioner. A drop of water landed on his nose. He glanced up at the steel I-beams, which crossed the gaping hole above their heads.

An enormous metal filing cabinet had toppled over when the 7th floor's floor went. It now teetered, rather precariously, on one of the building's exposed support beams.

Another drop struck the fireman, in the center of his forehead.

Less than an instant later, the teetering cabinet fell.

John grabbed Mike around the waist and tackled him to the office's soggy carpeting.
Just in time! The filing cabinet crash-landed onto the 6th floor—right in the spot he and Stoker had been standing.

Stanley rushed over to them. "You two okay?"

"Yeah," Mike assured him and slowly began getting to his feet. "But that was uncomfortably close! Thanks, Johnny!"

Hank heaved a silent sigh of relief. The Captain extended a hand to the other floored member of his crew, but the downed man chose to remain flat on his back.

Gage grimaced and just continued to lay there, with his eyes and mouth clamped tightly shut.

Hank saw the paramedic's *pained* expression and quickly dropped to his knees beside him. "What's wrong, pal?"

John reluctantly reached inside his bulky coat—and pulled out a handful of raw egg and eggshells.

Everybody burst out laughing.

Well, except for Hank—who was struggling desperately to keep a straight face. The Captain stood and began pulling the still grimacing paramedic to his feet. "C'mon!" he gently urged. "We'll give you a lift back to the Station…"

TBC
Chapter Six

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Six

It was around two by the time 51's engine crew finally got to enjoy their lunch.

Hank was just about to take another sip of his delicious soup, when Gage entered the day room, showered and in his street clothes. The Captain paused to offer the paramedic a suggestion. "You should have a sandwich before you go. You must be as starved as we are."

"Thanks, but no thanks, Cap." John strolled past the table, heading for the sofa. "I've had enough eggs for one day."

The guys grinned.

"Move over, Henry!" the paramedic pleaded.

The Basset Hound barely lifted his head up from the couch cushion.

"C'mon! Move over!" the weary fireman repeated and gave the unmoving mutt a gentle nudge.

Henry let out a low, menacing growl and John snatched his hand back.

Chet Kelly and Roy DeSoto stepped into the room.

"He's bluffing!" Kelly told Gage. "Just give 'im a good shove! I hope you guys left a little something for me! I'm starving!"

John gave Henry a not so gentle nudge.

Sure enough! The dog growled disgustedly, but obligingly crawled down the couch a ways.

The paramedic collapsed onto the vacated cushion and closed his eyes.

DeSoto strolled over and parked himself in the chair directly across from him.

"Roy, aren't you eating, either?" his concerned Captain called over to him.

"I had lunch with Dr. Brackett in the hospital cafeteria," Roy replied. "Hey! Johnny! Why don't you go home and do that?"

Johnny opened one eye a crack. "I'm waiting for Morton to call. You didn't happen to see him, did you?"

"No. But when he calls, I can pass the message on to you."

"I'm not gonna be home. I've gotta go to the Laundromat. Besides, I'm also waiting for the mail..." his words trailed off. His eye closed, and he was instantly asleep.

The visitor's buzzer sounded.

Hank looked up from his lunch. "Hey, Roy? Since you're not eating, would you mind seeing who's
"No problem, Cap." DeSoto got stiffly to his feet and left the room.

Roy pulled the portal open and a young lady with long blonde hair and emerald-green eyes appeared.

"Hi!" the girl said and extended a hand. "I'm Stacey Ferrel. I'm with the Personnel Department of the Los Angeles County Fire Department."

DeSoto shook her hand. "Hi! I'm Roy DeSoto. Firefighter/Paramedic Department. Won't you come in…"

She entered the Station and then followed the firefighter/paramedic off across the garage.

Roy escorted their visitor into the day room.

The guys shoved their chairs back and stood.

"Gentlemen," the paramedic aptly introduced, "this is Miss Ferrel…from Headquarters."

"I'm sorry," the lovely young lady told them. "I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner. Please! Sit down and finish eating."

Chet, Marco and Mike sat back down.

Captain Stanley remained standing. "What can we do for you, Miss Ferrel?"

"Well, Captain, I was hoping I might get a chance to talk to one of your men, but I won't bother him during his lunch-break," their visitor vowed and turned to go.

"Wait!" Hank encouraged. "I'm sure it wouldn't be any bother. Who is it?"


The guys stopped chewing and stared off across the room at their dozing colleague.

Stanley smiled. "I told you it wouldn't be any bother. He's not even taking a lunch-break." With that, the Station's Commander turned and shouted, "Ga-age!"

Ga-age opened both eyes. Then he sat forward in his seat and sleepily inquired, "Yeah, Cap? What is it? Morton? Or the mail?"

"Neither. You have a…visitor," his Captain informed him and motioned to the girl.

John's blurred vision cleared and then focused on his visitor. His sleepy eyes widened and his brows shot up. He cradled his ribs and then struggled carefully to his feet. "You-ou want to see me-e?" he incredulously inquired as he stepped stiffly up to the lovely apparition.

"Are you all right?" the girl asked the hunched over—and obviously hurting—fireman.

"Just stiffened up a little," the fireman assured her with a faint smile. "Shouldn't a' stopped moving."
Stacey stared uncertainly down at the crippled young man with the slightly crooked smile. "Ye-es. May I speak with you? Privately?"

The guys glanced at one another and grinned again.

Gage's eyebrows rose once more. "Sure! Why not?"

"You can use my office, John," his Captain volunteered.

"Thanks, Cap!" John acknowledged and led the lovely lady out of the room.

The paramedic strolled into Stanley's office.

The girl followed him in and then shut the door. "Stacey Ferrel," she said and extended her hand. "Personnel Department."

The fireman took and shook her hand. "John Gage," he introduced and that slightly eschew smile of his reappeared. "You can call me Johnny."

"Very well…Johnny. You may call me Miss Ferrel," Stacey icily informed him—and his smile turned instantly upside down. She stared at his street clothes, looking confused. "I was told you were planning to finish the shift…"

He followed her gaze. "Yeah. I was. And I would have, too—if those darned eggs hadn't a' cracked."

Miss Ferrel's confusion quadrupled. "Ri-ight. Look, Mister Gage—"

"—Johnny," he quickly corrected.

"Johnny," she cooly complied, "I was sent here to try and talk you out of quitting."

"That's not necessary," the fireman assured her.

"I see." It was now Miss Ferrel's turn to frown. "And nothing I might have to say will change your mind. Right?"

Gage's smile returned. "'Miss Ferrel', you could probably say a lot a' things that would get me to change my mind…but it's not necessary. I've already changed my mind—myself."

"Then…you're not quitting?"

John shook his head and stood there, staring—unabashedly—at his breath-taking visitor. "You have the most beautiful green eyes I've ever seen..." he quietly confessed.

Miss Ferrel blushed and avoided the rather forward fireman's gaze. "May I ask what made you change your mind?"

The paramedic sat back on the edge of his Captain's desk. "Do you know why I was quitting in the first place?"

She nodded. "Because your vacation was cancelled."

Gage managed a bitter smile. "If that was the case, Miss Ferrel, I would've quit over a month ago…when my vacation was cancelled the first time."
The girl shot him a questioning glance. "Then why-y?"

"I was quitting because I was getting to the point where I could no longer do my job as well as it should be done. And, when my life—and other people's lives—are at stake..." He exhaled a shallow sigh of profound frustration. "Well, let's just say I'm not going to sacrifice my health," he paused. "But I don't have to quit, either. Because it now appears that I have two weeks of R&R coming!"

There followed a long silence.

Stacey stood there, staring at the overly-fatigued firefighter like she was seeing him for the first time.

She had despised being given this little assignment. She'd been told, by her superiors, to use her womanly wiles to sweet-talk the crybaby paramedic into staying on the job.

Turned out, they'd been all wrong about John Gage.

She'd been all wrong about him. "I'm glad you're not quitting, Johnny," she said sincerely and flashed the handsome young fellow a genuinely warm smile.

John melted. "Thank you, Miss Ferrel. So am I."

The girl opened the door and began taking her leave. "You can call me Stacey," she called back over her shoulder.

"Thank you...Stacey," Gage acknowledged, and followed her out of the room.

The two of them returned to the dining area.

"Goodbye, Captain...Mr. DeSoto...Gentlemen," their visitor said. The girl then turned to Gage and re-extended her hand. "Johnny, I hope you enjoy your vacation."

Johnny took the pretty lady's proffered palm and re-shook it. "Thanks, Stacey. I fully intend to!"

"Bye!"

"Bye, Stacey!" Gage bid their departing guest.

The young woman smiled and waved...and was gone.

The guys stared wonderingly up at their colleague.

The paramedic pretended not to notice. "Did Morton call?"

"Not yet..." Roy numbly replied.

"The mail come?"

"Not yet..." his partner numbly repeated.

"I'm really impressed, John!" Captain Stanley confessed. "In the eighteen long years I've been with the department, I have never had a beautiful young lady come all the way over from headquarters just to wish me an enjoyable vacation. Why-y, I've never even had a whole new vacation schedule made out—just for me. How the blazes do you do it?"
"Well, Cap…" Gage grinned and placed a hand on his partner's shoulder, "it pays to have friends with the right connections."

The guys all grinned.

The visitor's buzzer sounded again.

"The mail!" John exclaimed, and exited the room.

Gage returned a few moments later with a bunch of envelopes—which he deposited on the table beside his Captain's plate.

"Now, John?" Hank inquired, sounding somewhat annoyed.

John just stood there, looking hopeful.

Stanley shoved his unfinished lunch out of the way and began sorting through the mail. "Here's a couple for C-shift. One for you, Chester," he announced and passed Kelly an envelope. "Three for you, Marco," he continued.

Lopez snatched the letters from his Captain's upraised hand.

"This week's bulletin board poster." Stanley set a large manila envelope aside. "The Department Newsletter and a reminder for the benefit dance Friday night." He heard John's impatient sigh and looked up from the newsletter. "Sorry, pal. Nothing in here about the new vacation schedule."

"That's okay. They probably ran that off before it came in," Gage glumly reasoned.

"Probably," his Captain conceded. "Here's the new inspection schedule. It hasn't been six weeks already. Has it?"

Chet glanced up from the letter he was reading. "Hard to believe, isn't it!"

"It seems like we just finished the last schedule," Marco remarked, sounding equally amazed.

"That's because we did just finish it," Stoker reminded him. "It took the whole six weeks to hit all those places."

Firefighter/Paramedic, Dave Wright, from Station 12's B-shift, strolled into the day room. "Hi, guys!" he cheerily proclaimed.

The alarm sounded.

"Squad 51…"

The new arrival's shoulders slumped. "Bye, guys…" he gloomily grumbled and reluctantly followed Roy from the room.

"See yah, Johnny!" DeSoto called over his shoulder.

"Yeah. See yah, Roy!" Gage called back.

The loudspeaker drowned out any further conversation between the two parting friends.

"Man down…possible heart attack…Gilbert Jr. High School…3655 Chelsea…cross-street
"Squad 51. KMG—365," Stanley answered and handed Roy a copy of the call slip.

Gage leaned against the doorway to the garage. He stood there, smiling—and looking very relaxed. He watched the Squad pull out, siren blaring and lights flashing. He thought about the two whole weeks he wouldn't be hearing the alarms or racing to the calls...no stress...no responsibilities...no life and death situations. He grinned and straightened. "Bye, guys..." he quietly called after them.

Just then, the phone rang.

"I got it!" John announced and snatched the annoying instrument up. "Station 51. Fireman Gage...5:30?...Yeah...Sure...No. No problem...Thanks, Doc!" He replaced the phone and turned to his friends. "Bye, guys!" he repeated.

Stanley slapped him lightly on the back. "Take care of yourself, John. We're gonna miss you around here." Hank flashed his young friend a warm smile and extended an open palm.

The paramedic placed his right hand in his Captain's. "Thanks, Cap. Same here," John assured him. He exchanged smiles and waves with the rest of the guys. Then he grinned and turned to go.

"Send us a postcard!" Kelly called after the vanishing vacationer. "From...wherever!

"I will!" the paramedic promised—and was gone.

**TBC**
Chapter Seven

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Seven

LA County Firefighter/Paramedic John Gage was not feeling his best.

Being caught between a rock and a hard place, was not a good way to start a shift.

Come to think of it, having the front of your uniform completely soaked with raw egg, was not a particularly great way to end one, either.

Though, as lousy as the relieved-of-duty fireman now felt, he was actually glad his Captain had sent him home.

The shift had ended—for him—at around 2:30, but it wasn't until almost 4:30 that he finally made it to his apartment. He'd had some errands to run—and uniforms to clean.

That river water he'd inhaled, and the bruised ribs he'd received from being hit by a car—again—had led to an extremely painful coughing episode at the Laundromat.

No sir! The still hacking—and hurting—young man was not feeling very well—at all!

Gage put his cleaned clothes away and took another hot shower. The heat helped ease the discomfort in his ribcage, but the steam caused his coughing to intensify.

'Wow!' he thought to himself, as his latest coughing jag painfully continued. 'It's a good thing Dr. Morton made that appointment for me!'

He coughed himself into his bedroom and threw on a fresh change of clothes. Then he sat on the edge of his bed and began towel drying his hair. He glanced at his alarm clock. It was a quarter to five. He lay back, and allowed his heavy eyelids to drop.

'Can't afford to fall asleep…' he reminded himself, and snapped his tired eyes back open. 'I've gotta be at the hospital in forty-five minutes…' However, the shower had been very relaxing… too relaxing. His drooping lids shut the world out again. 'I'll just rest my eyes awhile…'

With that final thought, the overly-fatigued fireman fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

John jerked awake.

It was dark in his room.

The luminous dial of his alarm clock said it was now 10:30.

"Oh-Oh no-o!" he groaned aloud. "Morton's gonna kill me!"

He tried to rise, but was unsuccessful. He suddenly realized he was dripping wet—but not from the shower. No, this time, he was soaked with sweat! His whole body seemed to be on fire! He also realized that his chest hurt a whole lot more now—too much for just some bruised ribs.
'Better get to the hospital…' he groggily determined.

He rolled very carefully onto his side and then tried to sit up again…but still couldn't do it. He couldn't believe how light-headed and incredibly weak he felt.

'Gotta get to the phone…' he decided and rolled out of bed. "Ah-uh!" he cried out, as his bruised body made contact with the carpeted floor. He paused there, on all fours. Waves of dizziness rolled over him. His breathing was very labored. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

'Uh-oh…' he thought, as the shaking proved unsuccessful, 'I'm gonna pass ou—'

The feverish fireman collapsed in a crumpled heap—and was still.

At around 08:00 the next morning, Roy DeSoto and Dave Wright were standing at the Nurses' Station in Rampart's Emergency Receiving, restocking their diminished medical supplies. They'd just been out on a run where a little girl was injured falling down a flight of stairs.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" Dr. Brackett said, as he came stepping up to them.

"Mornin', Doc! How's the little girl?" DeSoto asked.

Brackett smiled. "You were right, Roy. No broken bones. Just a few dandy bruises. She'll be fine."

Roy returned his smile. "Great!"

Dr. Mike Morton stepped up to the counter and then stood there, scowling down at the chart in his hands.

"Bad day, Doc?" Roy inquired.

The physician glanced up, redirected his frown at the smiling fireman and angrily announced, "I just had a talk with the respiratory therapist who was supposed to give your partner his breathing treatments. He didn't show up! Not last night! Not this morning!"

DeSoto seemed surprised—no-o, stunned by the doctor's little announcement. "That's odd. He told me he was planning on coming here."

Morton slammed the chart down on the counter. "Yeah? Well, he must've changed his plans!"

Roy suddenly felt extremely nervous, and more than a little worried. "I think I'd better give him a call. He promised he'd be here! It's not like him to break a promise…"

Wright signed the voucher, picked up their box of supplies and began heading off down the hall. "I'll wait in the Squad!"

DeSoto nodded and started heading for the pay phone.

"We-ell?" Mike wondered, when the paramedic returned a few minutes later.

"No answer. He's probably on his way here," DeSoto determined. "He, uh, probably just overslept."

Johnny's doctor remained extremely skeptical.
The two LA County firemen rode along in complete silence for about ten minutes.

"Where we goin'?'" Wright wondered, as DeSoto suddenly steered the Squad off course.

"Back to the Station," Roy nonchalantly replied. "We're just taking the scenic route…"

"I thought you said he wasn't home," Dave reminded the driver.

"No-o. I said there was no answer. There's a difference," Roy reminded Dave right back. 'A big difference!' Johnny's extremely anxious friend solemnly reminded himself.

"Ahh, he probably just took off somewhere," his passenger proposed. "After all, it is his vacation. I don't blame him for not wanting to spend any of it in a hospital."

But the Squad's driver remained extremely anxious.

Several minutes later, Roy pulled up to 2190 West Ridge Street. The panicky feeling he'd been fighting back, since they'd left Rampart, suddenly overwhelmed him.

Johnny's Land Rover was still parked in its space, right in front of his place.

That could mean only one thing!

Roy flicked the ignition off and reached for the radio. "LA, Squad 51. We are responding to a man down…at 2190 West Ridge Street…Apartment 3. Send an ambulance!" he requested. Then he piled out of the cab and began pulling equipment cases out of the side compartments. "Bring the O2!" he shouted to his slightly stunned partner—er, temporary partner.

"10-4, 51…2190 West Ridge…Apartment 3…Ambulance responding…Time Out: 08:27"

'Man!' Wright thought as they went running up and into Apartment 3. 'If Gage has just overslept, DeSoto is gonna look like a real dufuss!'

"Johnny?" Roy called out for a fourth time, before finally finding his friend collapsed face down on the carpeted floor of his bedroom. "Johnny!" he exclaimed a fifth time and reached for the unmoving man's carotid artery. 'Thank God! He has a pulse!' the paramedic silently pronounced and gently rolled his unconscious friend over onto his back.

"How is he?" Wright anxiously inquired.

"He has a carotid! Hurry up with that O2! He's asphyxiating!" DeSoto added, having noticed their patient's blue-tinged complexion. "Start him on 10 liters!" he advised. Then he opened the base kit, inserted the call stick and picked up the phone. "Rampart Base, this is County 51. How do you read?"

As Wright placed the oxygen mask over their victim's nose and mouth, he couldn't help but notice Gage's elevated temperature. "Man! He's really burning up!"

His partner nodded. "Get his BP!" he ordered, and re-depressed the transmit button. "This is Squad 51. Come in, Rampart!"

Dr. Brackett was standing in the corridor, just outside the Base Station, looking over a chart. He caught the call light flashing out of the corner of his eye, set his chart down and entered the little
glassed-in cubicle that contained the hospital's Paramedic Command Center. He stepped up to the radio and flicked the transmit switch. "Unit calling in, please repeat…"

"Rampart, this is Squad 51…"

"Go ahead, 51…"

'Just pretend you don't know him. Just pretend you don't know him. Just pretend you don't know him,' Roy kept telling himself. "Rampart, we have a male vi—" the paramedic paused and silently informed his friend, 'Sorry, but I can't just call you 'victim'. ' —Dr. Brackett, it's John Gage. He's unconscious due to asphyxiation."

Brackett stiffened and his face took on a rather pained expression as he listened to Roy telling him about Johnny.

"Respirations are 26 and shallow…pulse is 110…BP is 100/80…He's running a high fever, Rampart…He's also cyanotic…We've got him on 10 liters O2."

Brackett jotted down the victim's—er, Johnny's vital signs and then passed his prescribed treatment along to the two paramedics in the field.

"Squad 51. Roger, Rampart," Roy replied and repeated the Doctor's orders. He placed the phone down and took immediate steps to get their patient's prescribed IV established.

Dave Wright stared wonderingly across at his conscious colleague. "How did you know?"

Roy glanced up. "I know Johnny," he simply said. "I knew something had to be seriously wrong… if he didn't keep his promise…" his words trailed off.

Dr. Brackett was standing in the corridor outside of Exam Three, issuing orders to some nurses and medical technicians.

Mike Morton heard the commotion and strolled over to investigate it. "What's up, Kel?"

"John Gage is coming in for his breathing treatments," Kel informed him.

The fireman's physician appeared pleased.

"In an ambulance!" Kel finished.

The younger doctor looked completely stunned.

"It seems he's asphyxiating…"

Morton just continued to stand there, with his mouth open.

The ambulance backed up to Rampart's Emergency entrance.

Wright backed Squad 51 in beside it and bailed out.

The attendants exited their vehicle, opened its rear doors and started reaching for its patient's
DeSoto jumped out and followed Gage's gurney, carrying their precious cargo's IV in his raised right hand.

"Put him in Three!" Dixie told them.

They did.

Roy had remained in Exam Room 3 until being asked to leave by two technicians towing a portable x-ray machine. He was still leaning against the wall, just outside the door, when Dr. Brackett exited ten minutes later. "How is he, Doc?"

The physician held the door as two orderlies guided a gurney into the treatment room. "Get him up to ICU and put him to bed," he ordered. They nodded and disappeared inside. The doctor turned to his questioner. "You got him here just in time. His latest pulse/ox level is up from the sample I had you draw at the scene. If it remains steady, we shouldn't have to put him on a ventilator. Now all we gotta do is wait for the antibiotics to kick in."

A somewhat relieved Roy DeSoto watched as his best—but no longer blue-tinged—friend was wheeled out of the room and off down the corridor. "I don't get it..." he muttered, quietly. "How could he get so sick—so fast?"

Brackett folded his arms across his chest and sighed. "Well, I haven't seen the lab reports yet...but my guess is he was coming down with some form of viral infection before that incident in the river yesterday morning. His weakened condition—coupled with a few swallows of river water..."

"Damn!" Mike Morton exclaimed as he stepped out into the hall. "I never should have let him leave here yesterday!"

Brackett placed a hand on the discouraged young doctor's slumped shoulder. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Mike. I saw his chest x-rays. His lungs showed no signs of pneumonia yesterday morning. Besides, you told him that you wanted to admit him. You can't help it if he's stubborn."

"I should have been even more stubborn!" Mike insisted.

"You probably would have been—if he had been his old self. But, under the circumstances...Well, I would have handled the situation exactly the same way you did. Treating him as an outpatient was better than not treating him at all. You couldn't hold him here against his will."

Morton mulled all that over for a few moments. "I guess you're right. But I still feel miserable about this whole thing! It just shouldn't have happened!"

"Yeah," Roy sadly remarked. "That's what really gets me, too."

Wright rushed up to his exceedingly glum partner and waved the HT in his hand. "Roy? We got a run! 1411 South Polomar!"

DeSoto nodded in Dave's direction, but then turned back to Brackett. "You'll let me know if there's any change?"

"Yes. Of course," the doctor assured him.

Roy gave both physicians a grateful glance and then, reluctantly, took off.
Sheesh! He and his temporary partner were putting in some major overtime.

TBC
Chapter Eight

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Eight

1411 South Polomar turned out to be an industrial complex.

As the two paramedics piled out of their rescue squad, a foreman came jogging up to them.

"Hurry! He's inside!"

The firemen grabbed a bunch of equipment and followed the frantic fellow into some type of factory.

They filed past row after row of automated machinery and assembly lines filled with electrical components.

Finally, they reached what appeared to be the scene of the accident.

"What happened?" Roy asked a group of workers huddled around a young man standing next to a conveyor belt.

The young man grimaced. "I sneezed…and stapled my hand to this…thing!" he explained in a rather nasally tone. It was obvious that he had a bad head cold.

The firemen looked at each other and then down at the guy's left hand.

Sure enough! A rather large steel staple was indeed holding the hand securely to some kind of very heavy looking electrical component.

DeSoto turned to Wright. "Get his vitals. I'll call Rampart."

His colleague nodded.

Roy opened the base kit, inserted the call stick, and picked up the phone. But, before speaking into it, he addressed their victim. "Hi! I'm Roy. This is Dave. What's your name?"

"Stan…Stan Markum. Look, kin you guys speed it up? My hand hurts like blazes!"

"Hang in there, Stan," Roy urged. "We're workin' at it. Rampart Base, this is Squad 51…"

"Go ahead, 51…" Joe Early answered.

"Ahhh, Rampart, we have a male in his mid-twenties…the victim of an industrial accident…" He paused a moment or two, trying to think of the best way to explain the situation. "The victim has stapled his left hand to some kind of electrical component. Standby for vitals…"

Wright pulled the stethoscope from his ears. "Respirations are 20. BP is 160/90. Pulse is 90. He's in extreme pain and there is some superficial bleeding from the puncture wounds."

DeSoto passed the information on to the doctor and then asked their victim, "Are you allergic to anything?"
The young man looked very pale. He gritted his teeth and exasperatedly exclaimed, "Yeah! Staples! Can't you guys just get this…darn thing out of me?"

"Hang on!" Dave re-urged. "The doctor's gonna want us to give you something for the pain first. Now, are you allergic to any medication?"

"Not that I know of," Stan impatiently replied. He sniffled and then stiffened, as Roy started to insert a long, slender needle into his right wrist. "Whoa-oah! Hold on! Can't you guys get this steel out before you put any more in?"

"The pain medication will work a whole lot faster if we administer it directly into a vein," the paramedic with the 'pokie' patiently explained. "And, in order to do that, we have to establish an IV."

Their patient still didn't like the idea, but he apparently liked pain even less, because he allowed himself to be jabbed.

Roy taped the needle in place and Dave connected the IV bag's tubing to it. "You can go ahead and give him 50 milligrams meparadine," DeSoto informed his fellow fireman.

Wright did.

"Pain meds are on board, Rampart…"

"Can you feel the shot working?" Wright asked their antsy victim.

Stan sniffled again and nodded.

Dave turned to his fellow rescuer.

Roy turned to the foreman. "Okay, we're gonna need a hammer and a pair of wire cutters."

Stan's co-workers managed a group grimace.

The foreman nodded and went trotting off.

The boss man returned in under a minute with the requested tools.

"Thanks," DeSoto told him. The paramedic carefully raised the component.

The two points of the staple were sticking through the underside of the metal base.

Roy even more carefully tapped the staple points until they were flush with the component's undersurface. The staple raised just enough on the top surface to allow him to slide the wire cutters under Stan's trapped appendage. DeSoto quickly—and surely—snipped through both sides of the staple, freeing the young fellow's hand.

"All right!" the grateful guy exclaimed. "Now get this…darn thing out of me!"

Roy reached for their phone instead. "Squad 51. Rampart, the victim is free. Transporting immediately. ETA twenty minutes."

"Hey! Wait a minute!" their victim demanded. "Aren't you guys gonna take this out?"

Wright stepped aside, as the ambulance attendants pull a stretcher up. "Fraid not. You see,
paramedics are strictly hand from component rescuers. *Doctors* do the staple from hand part."

Their unhappy patient stifled another sneeze and then reluctantly allowed his initial rescuers to ease him onto the stretcher and strap him down.

Dave turned to his fellow firefighter. "You kin ride in with him," he offered. "It'll give you a chance to check up on that partner of yours…"

"Thanks…" Roy responded with a grateful smile. He gathered up some of their more essential gear and followed the attendants out of the factory.

"Okay! Shows over!" the foreman shouted. "Everybody—without colds—back to work!"

Forty-five minutes later, DeSoto backed the Squad into the apparatus bay of Station 51.

The engine crew stepped out of the day room and into the garage to greet them—still in uniform. Stanley and his men had apparently been putting in some major overtime of their own.

"Please, tell me we didn't *really* hear the dispatcher say 'ambulance responding 2190 West Ridge Street, Apartment 3'," his Captain pleaded.

"He was asphyxiating…" Roy reluctantly replied, through the open window of the Squad. "But Brackett thinks we got to him in time. He's in Intensive Care…but he's breathin' on his own. They've started him on antibiotics…"

Stanley, as well as the rest of the engine crew, looked deeply saddened by the news.

"What, in heaven's name—?" Hank stopped speaking as the tones suddenly sounded…and sounded…and sounded.

Wright and DeSoto vacated the Squad.

B-Shift's paramedics quickly took their places.

"Engine 36…Engine 43…Engine 47…Engine 8…Station 51…Battalion 12…Battalion 14…Structure fire…3114 Austin Boulevard…Three-one-one-four Austin…Cross-street Meredith Avenue…Time Out: 10:28"

"Station 51, KMG-365," B-Shift's Captain, Pat Donnelly acknowledged. He passed his paramedics a copy of the call slip. Then he took his copy and started trotting towards the Engine.

Stanley's crew watched Donnelly's crew depart.

A-Shift's off-duty, completely bewildered, Commander waited for the wailing sirens to subside a bit before turning back to DeSoto. The Captain quickly rephrased—and then completed—his interrupted question. "How could he possibly get so sick—so *fast*?" he wondered, unwittingly repeating Roy's question to Brackett almost word for word. "What, in heaven's name, has he got anyways?"

"Pneumonia."

His Captain looked even more confused. "And he came down with it *overnight*?"

"Not exactly," DeSoto angrily answered. "You might say he's been working at it for over a month."
"I should've intervened a lot sooner," Stanley sadly admitted, beneath his breath.

But the paramedic caught his Captain's quiet comment and shot him a questioning look.

"I've been asking 'the powers that be' to send over a replacement for him for the past three weeks!" Hank explained. "Headquarters kept giving me the same answer: 'Request denied. No paramedics available'. Well, that turned out to be a big line of BS, didn't it!" the Captain exclaimed, as his sadness gave way to anger, as well. "Because it sure didn't take very long for Dave, here, to show up—once I'd relieved John of duty!" Following that little outburst of anger, 51's Commander cursed under his breath and began heading for the locker room.

"Thanks, Cap!" Roy quietly called after him.

Hank halted and glanced back over his shoulder. "For what?" he wondered, sounding as disgusted with himself as he was with the Fire Department. Man! He'd really dropped the ball on this one!

"For giving a damn," DeSoto quietly continued, "...a damn sight more than we deserve," he added, and shot his Captain a look of admiration.

Seeing the look only served to incite Stanley to even greater anger. "I'm thinking you deserve better...a whole lot better!" he irately added. Then he returned Roy's look—and quickly took his leave. Hank wasn't sure whom he was angriest with, himself—or the asinine people in the personnel department!

When Roy reached his home—about an hour or so later—he exhaled a long sigh of relief.

The shift from hell was finally over!

The off-duty paramedic entered the front door and smiled, as his four-year-old son, Christopher latched onto his right hand.

His little two and a half-year-old daughter, Suzie latched onto his left pant leg.

Their big Black Labrador, Joshua, jumped up on his chest and licked him on the chin.

Roy's smile broadened.

 Heck, with a greeting like that, a guy couldn't help but grin.

To top it all off, his beautiful bride, Joanne threw her arms around his neck and planted a passionate 'Welcome Home' kiss right smack dab on top of his grin.

"Oh, Honey! I was beginning to worry about you!" the pretty woman pouted as she pulled back from her embrace.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I should've called. We got two runs—after the shift ended. Then, on the way home, I decided to stop and visit...a sick friend," he further explained. He stooped down to the kids' levels, to give them each a hug and a kiss. Then he swooped both children up into his arms, carried them into the living room and collapsed into an easy chair—completely spent.

Joanne smiled at the sight and shook her head. "Are you hungry?"

The giggling children squirmed out of their father's tickling grasp and back onto the carpeted floor. Roy hauled himself up out of the chair and headed for the breakfast counter. "Yah know, that's probably why I feel so rotten." He collapsed again—this time, onto a stool. "Dr. Brackett bought
me lunch, yesterday...and I haven't eaten anything since then."

His wife shot him a concerned glance and then crossed over to the 'fridge. "Who's sick?"

Roy took an interminably long time to reply. "Johnny."

Joanne's jaw dropped. "You're kidding!" she exclaimed and glanced up from the glass of milk she was pouring. "Did you tell him he's not supposed to get sick during his vacation?"

Suzie was tugging on her Dad's left pant leg again.

He picked the baby up and placed her back in his lap. "They wouldn't let me in to see him."

His wife's look turned from one of mild amusement, to one of complete confusion. "Johnny's in the hospital?" Upon seeing her husband's nod, Joanne's jaw fell open once more. "He must be awfully sick…if they wouldn't let you in to see him."

Roy avoided her eyes.

"Honey, how sick is he?"

"They've got him in the Intensive Care Unit. He's got pneumonia. He's not responding to treatment. He's asphyxiating. He's unconscious because his blood isn't being properly oxygenated as it passes through his lungs," the paramedic went on to explain, seeing that his spouse remained puzzled. "Anyways, he's still breathin' on his own…and they're pumpin' him full of antibiotics…"

The woman set the glass in her hand down and gave her glum husband another huge hug. Joanne understood the real reason Roy felt so 'rotten'.

TBC
Chapter Nine

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Nine

DeSoto had visited his hospitalized partner quite frequently during his four days off.

Gage remained in ICU...still comatose—due to asphyxiation. It seemed that the pneumonia was not responding to the patient's current antibiotic regimen.

The doctors were going to try changing his medication.

There was an arsonist on the loose in Los Angeles County—within Station 51's jurisdiction, as a matter of fact.

The sick-o psycho had already torched twelve buildings—all on Austin Boulevard—and it seemed like there was no end in sight!

These arson fires, along with the raging brushfires, were spreading the Department's already depleted ranks dangerously thin. There was even talk that some station's crews might be called upon to pull double shifts.

Those dire thoughts, among others, were running through A-Shift's Captain's sooty, sweat-soaked head, as he climbed wearily down from Engine 51's cab.

He and his exhausted engine crew dragged themselves into the dayroom and collapsed onto some chairs.

They'd had a real ball-buster of a start to their shift and were just returning from battling a big warehouse blaze...over on Austin Boulevard. The warehouse was the arsonist's latest target.

The men were completely wiped out and their empty stomachs were complaining—rather loudly.

"Someone really should see about putting some grub on," Marco mumbled, as his tummy rumbled.

The busy firemen had managed to miss both lunch and dinner.

"Whose turn is it to cook?" Chet wondered.

"I can't remember," Marco confessed.

"It's Gage's turn," their Captain, who had collapsed onto a chair at the kitchen table, suddenly spoke up. "So that means it's Dave's turn," he added. Stanley, who was just sitting there, resting his forehead on his folded arms, didn't even bother to look up. Since his paramedics were on a follow-up to Rampart, he then politely suggested that an order be placed for pizza. When nobody moved toward the phone, he rephrased his suggestion. "Kelly, call out for pizza!"

"Aye, aye, Cap'!" Chet acknowledged and forced himself back up onto his feet. "Three medium?...One—the works, one—sausage and cheese, one—pepperoni?" he proposed.

No one disputed his selections.
So he staggered over to the phone and then dialed a number from memory.

"Hey, Cap'," Mike Stoker suddenly piped up. "Did the Fire Marshal confirm it was arson?"

"Yeah, Cap'," Marco joined in, "Do they think that warehouse was torched, too?"

Stanley opened his smoke-irritated eyes, but never lifted his head. "They found some empty gas cans near the hot spot. I think that's pretty obvious." His eyes closed again.

"What was in all those crates, anyway?" Kelly queried upon completing his call.

Marco straightened in his seat. "That poor guy is now the proud possessor of five thousand very soggy, crisp-fried color TV sets."

Chet whistled.

"Kelly, since you're already standing…How about fetching the mail? Oh, and bring whatever's in the inbox on my desk, too, would yah, pal?" Stanley further suggested.

The vertical firefighter did an about face and disappeared.

Kelly reappeared a few moments later, his mission accomplished. "There yah go, Cap'," he quietly said and deposited a small pile of envelopes before his motionless—and quite possibly now sleeping—boss.

Stanley would have preferred a few more minutes to rest his sore eyes, but he snapped them open, and straightened stiffly up in his seat. "Thanks." His shuffling hands froze as they found what they'd been searching for. Station 51's Commander in Chief stared sadly down at the latest Department Newsletter for a few moments and then quietly commented, "John's 'latest' vacation started March 15th and it ends March 29th…"

"Can I see that for a minute, Cap'?" Marco requested, seeing as how Stanley was now just sitting there, staring blankly off into space. "Thanks!" he acknowledged as his Captain obligingly forwarded the updated Department Newsletter to him. "Hey, Chet…I didn't know you had a vacation coming up in two weeks."

"I don't," Chet assured him.

"According to this, you do," Marco corrected.

The Irishman stepped up behind Lopez and began reading over his shoulder. "That's gotta be a mistake!" he insisted. "I switched with Newcomb!"

"You'd better read the first page there, pal…" his Captain suggested.

Kelly snatched the newsletter from Lopez and flipped it back to the front page. "All personnel must take their assigned vacation on schedule?" he began reading aloud, his voice an equal mix of vexation and disbelief. "Will no longer tolerate vacation swapping?…Any requests for special consideration must be received six weeks prior to—" he stopped reading and started ranting. "This is un-American! They can't do this to me! I don't want my vacation! I want Newcomb's vacation! I've already made reservations for Newcomb's vacation! Newcomb's already made reservations for my vacation! They can't do this!" he angrily re-insisted.

His fellow firefighters gave him sympathetic glances.
Marco suddenly had an idea. "Hey, Chet, if you can't swap vacations, why not just swap reservations?"

"That's not a bad idea, Marco!" their Captain concluded. Hank turned to Kelly, looking curious. "Where's Newcomb going?"

Chet shrugged. "Prob'ly someplace I'd hate!" He and the others turned their undivided attention to the doorway to the garage, as they heard the Squad backing in.

A few moments later, its passengers appeared in said doorway, looking equally exhausted.

"Holbrook's gonna be just fine," Roy informed them. "Just some second degree burns and mild smoke inhalation. Johnny's still not getting any better. The doctors are gonna try another combination of antibiot—" he stopped speaking as the Station's alarm suddenly went off…and off…and off.

"Engine 36…Engine 43…Engine 47…Station 51…Battalion 14…Structure fire…3101 Austin Boulevard…Three-one-zero-one Austin…Cross-street Champlain…Time Out: 18:45."

Stanley answered the call. "Station 51. KMG-365." He passed the paramedics a copy of the call slip. Then he crossed the bay, climbed up into Big Red, and began tossing his turnout coat and helmet on. "Looks like our arsonist has been at it again," he grumbled to his engineer.

Mike frowned and nodded.

Twelve minutes later, Station 51 arrived at the fire scene—a two story building totally engulfed in flames.

Firemen were pulling hoses from other engines, and enormous plumes of thick, black smoke were billowing up into the cloudless, early-evening sky.

Captain Stanley stepped down and went running up to Battalion 14’s Chief. "What do we got, Mac’?" he wondered, looking up at the blazing inferno.

"An empty apartment building," Mac' answered.

"It's already been swept?" 51’s Captain queried rather incredulously.

"No need," 14’s Chief replied and pointed to a sign laying on the sidewalk, which said that the building inspector had condemned the premises.

"Condemned buildings make great hang-outs for hypes, winos—and kids!" Stanley solemnly reminded him.

"Well, Hank, let's just hope there's none hanging-out in this one!" Even as the Chief was speaking, the second floor collapsed into the first floor. "We'll just have to concentrate our efforts on protecting the exposures!"

Three exhausting hours later, the trucks returned to Station 51's apparatus bay.

The overly-fatigued firemen climbed slowly and stiffly down and began staggering towards the soap and sinks in the washroom.
"I feel like I've been rode hard and put up wet..." Mike Stoker realized aloud.

His co-workers couldn't help but smile at the engineer's accurate description of back-to-back multiple-alarm fires' effects on a body.

"Yeah, well, just as soon as we get cleaned up, everybody's gonna tie on the old feedbag!" Hank Stanley sternly ordered. "I know cold pizza may not exactly be your flavor of the month, and that it's after ten and you're probably feelin' too beat to eat...but I expect everyone to partake of some sustenance—A.S.A.P.!' he tacked on, in a no-nonsense tone. "An army marches on its stomach. And, with that pyromaniac running around out there, we may be asked to march again at any moment!"

51's crew nodded their compliance to their Captain's wishes and began disappearing behind the washroom door.

"Hold it, Roy!" Hank advised.

The paramedic halted and obediently turned to face his now bewildered-looking boss.

"Did you say, they're changing John's medication?"

DeSoto nodded. "Hopefully, he'll be able to hang around long enough to give it a chance to kick in..."

If it was even gonna kick in...

TBC

Author's note: I wrote this story over 33 years ago, waaaaaaaaaaay back in the Fall of 1975.

Thirty-three years ago, I only had CANON to go by, because there was no fanon.

In the show's canon, the sex and name of Roy's second child was never mentioned. So, I had to make up SOMETHING. I couldn't just call the child an 'it' or 'the kid'. :D

I know that the actor, Kevin Tighe, who plays Roy DeSoto, has a real daughter and that HER name is Jennifer.

But, in CANON, the 'other' kid's sex and name is never mentioned.

In my UNreal writer's world, I created a second child (I'm not positive, but I believe he does say Joanne and the kids-plural...Doesn't he?) for the 'character' Roy DeSoto...and I chose to make the second child a little baby girl...and I chose to name her...Susie.

:) Ross
"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

**Chapter Ten**

Following a feast of cold, petrified pizza, the *literally* washed up Captain and crew of Station 51 had collapsed onto their bunks…and remained there until the wake-up tones sounded the following morning.

"Humph…” Hank groggily grunted, upon hearing the tones and seeing the light of day. "I guess even arsonists have to sleep sometime."

A little while later, the members of B-Shift began arriving. The men donned their uniforms and then joined their cohorts in the day room for coffee.

"We heard you guys got two multiple alarms yesterday," one of the incoming crew casually remarked to the rather bushed-looking members of the outgoing crew. "Must've kept you pretty busy, huh?"

"I don't think you guys are gonna be too idle yourselves," Chet Kelly shot back. "That pyromaniac is still playing with matches, over on Austin Boulevard."

"Is that on the level, Hank?" B-Shift's Captain queried of his counter-part.

Stanley frowned and nodded. "They're finding empty gas cans near the hot spots. So far, he's only torched uninhabited buildings."

Captain Donnelly frowned as well. "So far…"

One of B-Shift's paramedics stepped up to DeSoto. "So-o…we've got an arsonist on the loose, and Gage is on leave. I've got to hand it to him. Johnny really knows when to take a vacation!"

"Yeah," Roy sarcastically agreed. "His timing is perfect!" the absent paramedic's partner insincerely added. Then he vacated his seat and vanished out into the garage.

The paramedic from the opposing shift shot DeSoto's colleague's a 'Did I say something wrong?' look.

"Gage is in ICU," Stanley informed him. "He's got pneumonia. He's not responding very well to treatment. They're going to try changing his medica—" he stopped talking as the tones suddenly sounded.

They continued for some time.

B-Shift's crew set their coffee mugs down and began taking their leave.

"Station 51…Truck 124…Engine 37…Engine 43…Battalion 14…Structure fire…3273 Austin Boulevard…Three-two-seven-three Austin…Cross Street Paquette…Time Out: 07:57"
Joanne was there to greet her guy as he came through the door. She gave him a warm embrace and then planted a kiss on him that left no question in his mind that she was glad to have him safely home. "How's Johnny doing?"

"About the same." Roy scooped his children up off the floor and kissed their dimpled rosy cheeks until they giggled.

"Sorry to hear that..." She gave her hubby's shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Thanks for calling. Kept me from worrying and kept your breakfast from getting all dried out."

"That's great to hear! 'Cuz I am famished! I didn't get to eat anything, yesterday. Well, except for a couple a' slices of petrified pepperoni pizza..."

"Oo-oooh, Ro-oy!" his wife irritately exclaimed, and went stomping off into her kitchen. "I'd like to get my hands on the slave driver who keeps you so busy that you can't even eat!"

DeSoto set the kids down and followed after her. "You'll have to stand in line," he informed his frowning spouse, and collapsed onto a stool at their breakfast counter. "The police would like to get their hands on him, too," he explained, upon seeing her questioning look. "The slave driver is an arsonist."

Joanne's jaw dropped. She set his plate down and threw her arms around him again. "Oh, Roy! It's not bad enough that you have to risk your life for accidental fires and emergencies! No-o! Some... sick...twisted...maniac has to go around purposely causing you to lay your life on the line!"

"I'm sorry, Jo..." Roy wrapped his arms around his teary-eyed wife and held her tightly. "I didn't mean to upset you..."

She pulled back a bit. "The arsonist is the one who upsets me," she quickly clarified. "And, I'm the one who should apologize. I know you must've had a rough shift. You don't need anymore hassles."

DeSoto was forced to smile. He pulled her closer to him and then held on tighter than ever. "Yah know, you may be a lot a' things, but you are never a hassle..."

Their lips met again.

Another, even longer—even more passionate—kiss ensued, causing the firefighter's racing heart to throw more than a few PVCs.

Joanne was the first to come up for air. "You'd better eat," she whispered softly in his ear. "Before your food gets cold—or before you pass out...and I have to summon the paramedics," she tacked on, with a rather wry, sly smile.

Her husband smiled. Then he kissed her tenderly on the forehead and reluctantly released her.

Roy was standing in the corridor of Rampart General Hospital's Intensive Care Unit at around ten thirty that evening, talking with the respiratory specialist assigned to John's case.

Suddenly, a nurse stepped out of 604—his partner's room. "Dr. Stafford!" she called down the hall. "I think the patient may be coming around!"

Roy grabbed the physician's arm. "Can I see him?"
The doctor hesitated for a few moments. "Okay," he finally allowed. "But only for a minute!"

DeSoto nodded his acceptance of Stafford's stipulation.

The two men entered room 604 and stepped up to Gage's bedside.

The paramedic's impassive face looked deathly pale. There were oxygen tubes in his nostrils and IV tubes in his wrists. His eyes were closed, but he was tossing his sweat-drenched head slowly from side-to-side and moaning softly.

"His fever broke about five minutes ago," the ICU nurse informed them.

At the sound of her voice, Gage stiffened and struggled to sit up.

DeSoto held him down with very little effort. "Take it easy, Johnny..." he soothingly said, and his partner immediately stopped struggling.

Johnny slowly opened his eyes and blinked them into focus. "Ro-oy?" he called out, in a voice barely above a whisper.

Roy took his friend's hand in his. "I'm right here, Johnny..."

Gage turned his head in the voice's direction, saw his partner smiling down at him, and untensed. "Hi..." he said softly and flashed his friend a very weak, slightly crooked smile. His drooping eyes closed.

Roy returned the greeting and gave his partner's limp hand a squeeze.

Gage managed a feeble squeeze back. "How—?"

"—Dave and I rescued you."

"Oh-oh...That's...embarrassing."

"It could have been worse."

John forced his eyes back open and shot his partner a confused, questioning look.

Roy gave his hand another squeeze and grinned. "It could have been me and Craig Brice."

Gage snickered softly. Then his eyes closed and he was perfectly still once more—deathly still!

DeSoto felt his friend's hand suddenly go limp and glanced anxiously up at the doctor.

Stafford had finished his examination and was now scribbling instructions across the bottom of his patient's chart. "It's all right," he assured the ICU's concerned visitor. "He's just gone back to sleep. Minute's up, anyway," he reminded the asleep on his feet looking fireman. "I suggest you go get yourself some shut-eye. You look like you're about to fall over..."

Roy gave John's hand a final, reassuring squeeze and then headed home, to follow the physician's sound advice.

John's partner paid the ICU another visit the following evening...
"Hi. I kin only stay a minute," Roy informed his finally conscious, no longer feverish, but still unbelievably weak friend. "So, before I forget...The guys wanted me to say 'Hi' for them, and they want me to tell you that they hope you're feelin' better. Are you? Feelin' better?"

Gage shook his head.

DeSoto looked somewhat alarmed. "Feelin' worse?"

Again, Gage shook his head. "They've got me...so doped up...I don't feel...anything...at all...'Cept glad...ta see you," he added with a smile. Then his smile faded, his eyes closed and he became very quiet. "Ro-oy?"

"Yeah, Johnny?"

"Thanks...for rescuing me."

"Hey...There's no need for thanks. Heck, no. That's what you pay your taxes for. Just doin' my job," the fireman finished, with a grin.

His grateful victim returned his grin. "Speakin' of your job...Did you...put the IV...in my right wrist?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You know...I'm right-handed."

Roy raised an eyebrow. He stared disbelievingly down at his complaining partner. "Yeah. Well...I gave it a lot of thought," he teased. "And I finally figured that you must have wanted the IV in your right wrist—or you would have been dying on the other side of the bed!"

His victim couldn't help but snicker. Then his smile slowly suddenly faded and he was perfectly still—yet again.

"Take it easy, Johnny..." Roy quietly urged and quickly took his leave.

His partner had gone back to sleep—and his sixty seconds were up.

**TBC**
Chapter Eleven

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Eleven

Because the arsonist was still at large—and still starting multiple alarm fires—and because the men battling these blazes were already finding 24 hour stretches too fatiguing—the Department didn't switch the shift rotations for any of the stations within the response area of Austin Boulevard. Which meant Captain Stanley's A-Shift crew did not have to report back to work two days early.

When Hank and his men arrived at the Station for their next regularly-scheduled tour of duty, they found the garage empty.

Stanley strolled over to the call desk and picked up the log book. "Humph..." he announced. "It was quiet all night...and then they got a four-alarm call twenty minutes ago."

"Wait! Don't tell me," Chet sarcastically said. "Let me guess...Austin Boulevard!"

"Close," his Captain confessed. "He's moved over to Meredith. The police were probably making it a little too hot for him on Austin."

The men winced at his pun.

Mike started heading for the locker room. "Well, if they can't catch him, I hope they can at least chase him out of our District. A couple more blocks, and he'll be Station 20's headache."

"Good morning, gentlemen!" the Captain declared as Wright and DeSoto stepped into the Station. "Roy, what's the latest on John's condition?"

"He's doing much better. That new drug combination seems to be doing the trick—" the paramedic paused. "Where is everybody?"

"Three guesses," Marco told him. "The first two don't count."

"The arsonist? Already?" Roy frowned as his Captain nodded.

Kelly came back into the garage, buttoning the shirt of his uniform. "Yeah. And, if he would have slept in a half hour longer, our shift would have been off to a really great start! As it is, we'll just have to take it easy for a few hours."

"I'm all for that!" Dave declared and started heading for the locker room.

Four hours later, C-Shift finally returned to the Station. The trucks backed in and the crews climbed down—exhausted, and covered with soot and sweat.

"Arson?" Stanley wondered as his counter-part came walking up.

C-Shift's Captain nodded. "The Fire Marshal is getting quite a collection of charred gas cans."

"Anyone hurt?"
"Not so far. I sure hope they catch this guy soon! Like yesterday! I hope you guys have a dull and uneventful shift!" Captain Graham wished. "What's left of it!" he added, after glancing at his watch.

"Thanks, Ron!" Hank told him. "By the way, you guys are welcome to stay for lunch…"

"Thanks, Captain Stanley," one of C-Shift's paramedics gratefully acknowledged, "but we never eat lunch before breakfast."

The paramedic's partner stepped up to DeSoto. "Hey, Roy…Sorry to hear about Johnny being sick and all. Lousy way to spend a vacation."

"Yeah," Roy agreed. "Real lousy…"

"By the way," the paramedic continued, "you guys are gonna hafta make a supply run to Rampart. The Squad's runnin' low on just about everything. We've just been too busy to restock."

"You two can head over there right after lunch," Stanley determined and disappeared back into the dayroom.

C-Shift's paramedics went to change while A-Shift's paramedics went to eat.

An hour later, Wright and DeSoto were leaning against the counter at the Nurses' Station in Rampart's Emergency Receiving—restocking their Rescue Squad.

"Will that be it, gentlemen?" Dixie asked and handed them a larger than usual box of medical supplies.

"Yeah. Thanks, Dixie!" Dave told her.

His partner signed the supply voucher.

Wright took the box and they turned to go.

The phone rang.

Dixie answered it. "Hey, Roy? Wait up!" she called down the corridor.

The paramedic turned around and stepped back up to the supply desk.

The RN continued her phone conversation. "I see…Uh-huh…All right…Thanks, Jeanie." She hung up and stood there, smiling. "That was a friend of mine up in ICU. She says Johnny's doctor just upgraded his condition."

"That's the best news I've heard in a long time!" Johnny's partner realized with a grin.

"Well, I'm glad I got to be the bearer of it then!" Dixie declared with an even broader smile. "I'll keep you posted, okay?"

"Thank you, Dix!"

The RN's eyes sparkled. "You're welcome, Roy."

DeSoto backed the Squad into the bay at the Station, jumped out and went dashing into the dayroom. "Johnny's off the critical list!"
Johnny's shift-mates all looked tremendously relieved to hear that.

Especially Captain Stanley, who exhaled a long sigh of relief and said, "Roy, I don't even think a four-alarm fire could dampen that news!" He no sooner finished his sentence, when the alarm went off…and off…and off…

"How about a six-alarm?" Kelly inquired, as he and the others started heading for the garage and their trucks.


Wright and DeSoto found themselves leaning against the counter at the Nurses' Station again, five fatiguing hours later. They'd had to bring in an injured firefighter from the Percy Auditorium blaze.

"You two look like you could use a cup of coffee," Dixie decided, as she came stepping up. "Well, actually, you look like you could use something a whole lot stronger than coffee, but you're still on duty."

The paramedics flashed her appreciative grins and began pouring themselves some of the pretty nurse's proffered potion.

"How's Porter?" Roy pondered.

"He suffered some second and third degree burns," Dixie informed them. "but Kel's confident he'll make a complete recovery."

The firefighters were both pleased and tremendously relieved to hear that prognosis.

"What about that maintenance man 12's paramedics brought in earlier?" Wright wondered.

"Just some minor smoke inhalation," Dix' announced. "He didn't even have to be admitted. I, uh, take it the arsonist struck again?"

Dave nodded. "He started four separate fires, this time! I think he thought he could divide and conquer us."

"Well…Then he succeeded with me!" DeSoto wearily determined. "Cuz I sure feel divided and conquered."

"There where 12 engines and two squads on scene!" Wright continued. "It took us almost as long to overhaul and pack up, is it did to put out the fires! But we were able to save the building…mostly smoke and water damage."

"I sure hope they catch this guy—before somebody becomes a fatality!" the RN angrily added. The two solemn firemen sipped their coffee and nodded their concurrence.

Mike Stoker and Captain Stanley were standing in front of the wall map in the garage when DeSoto backed the Squad into the Station twenty minutes later.

"Hey, guys!" Hank greeted them. "How's Porter?"
"Hey, Cap! Dr. Brackett expects a complete recovery," Roy replied, gladly passing the greeting and good news along. "What's up?"

Stanley looked relieved and turned back to the wall map. "We're trying to figure out where he might strike next," he explained and traced the arsonist's trail with his finger. "From Austin…to Meredith…to Hargrove…to—"

"—Brampton," Mike volunteered and pointed to a street bordering their District. "If he follows his pattern, that is. One block! One lousy block more, and Station 20 will have themselves a pyromaniac."

Dave looked thoughtful. "If this guy's got a pattern, then why can't the police catch him?"

Stoker and Stanley glanced at each other and shrugged.

The tones sounded.

"Station 51…Possible structure fire…Danfield Pharmaceutical Warehouse…118 South Brampton…Cross Street Presley…One-one-eight South Brampton…Time Out: 19:02"

Stanley answered the call. "Station 51. KMG-365." He handed Roy a copy of the call slip and then climbed up into the front seat of the Engine. "Possible structure fire? South Brampton? Could this possibly be our pyromaniac?" he sarcastically inquired.

The trucks pulled out onto the dark street, lights flashing and sirens blaring.

TBC
Chapter Twelve

There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Station 51's crew reached the scene of the possible structure fire fifteen minutes later.

Mike pulled Big Red right up to the Danfield Pharmaceutical Warehouse.

Roy parked the Squad behind three police cars and a waiting ambulance.

Both men cut their trucks' sirens.

Captain Stanley jumped down and went jogging up to a police sergeant, standing under a street light. "What is goin' on?" he demanded, sounding somewhat annoyed.

"We've got the arsonist trapped in a corner of the warehouse," the Sergeant explained. "It's a standoff. He's poured gasoline all over the place and he's threatened to light it if we try anything."

"Good grief!" Hank exclaimed.

"There's more. The watchman says he thinks he might have wounded the guy. The watchman also says that the warehouse is packed full of chemicals...some may be toxic—or explosive."

"If he does light that gasoline, I'm gonna need more manpower!"

"That's already been taken care of, Captain..." the Sergeant calmly said and pointed off down the dark street. "We have two battalions, four additional engines and a back-up paramedic squad waiting in the wings. Oh, also two foam trucks."

Stanley stared disbelievingly out through the darkness at the row of engines and equipment parked just a block away. "How—?"

"—We called them on the phone and told them not to use their sirens," the Sergeant interrupted. Then, seeing the Captain's still completely puzzled expression, he further explained, "You see, the arsonist has a portable scanner rigged up on the Fire Department's frequencies. He can hear all your calls. We don't want him to think that this is anything more than a one alarm call. He would probably like to go out in an eight alarm blaze of glory. But he might not think a single alarm possible structure fire is worth it."

Captain Stanley stared incredulously at the Sergeant. "So what are we supposed to do?"

"We can't use a marksman—not with all that gasoline around. So we'll just have to wait."

"For what?"

A patrolman left the warehouse and came running up to them. "He's insulted, Sarge," he breathlessly reported. "He wants more firemen here. He wants to know why only one alarm was sounded."

"Will your men volunteer to go inside?" the Sergeant suddenly wondered, and pointed to 51's paramedics.
Stanley considered a flat out no answer, but he had faith in his men's sanity. "Why don't you ask them?" he offered.

The Sergeant turned to DeSoto and Wright. "How 'bout it, gentlemen?"

Roy looked uneasy. "Just what did you have in mind?"

"The arsonist may be wounded. You could offer to treat him. When you got close enough—you could jump him."

"What happens if he lights the match?" Dave interjected.

The Sergeant didn't reply. He didn't have to. The look on his face said it all.

"Sorry," DeSoto said, "but my wife made me promise her I wouldn't do anything foolish. And it would be very foolish to volunteer for anything that would put my life in that maniac's hands." He turned to Stanley and offered a more sound suggestion. "Cap? Couldn't we put some hoses inside to dilute the gas?"

"Sounds good to me, Roy. But I'm not sure who's in charge of this circus—" Stanley stopped speaking as two more cars suddenly pulled up.

Two men exited the vehicles and came hurrying up to the Captain and the Sergeant.

"What's going on, Hank?" Chief McConike inquired.

"What do we got, Sergeant?" the other man demanded.

The Sergeant went first. "Lieutenant, we have the arsonist trapped inside. It's a stand-off. He's poured gasoline all over the place and has threatened to set it on fire if we try anything. The warehouse is full of chemicals."

"Chief," Stanley spoke up, "We'd like to get some water in there to dilute the gasoline."

"What's stopping you?" McConike wondered.

"The Sergeant wants us to wait."

The Chief and the Lieutenant turned to the Sergeant. "For what?" they both asked at once.

"He might be wounded. The watchman thinks he may have wounded him."

"Are we waiting for him to bleed to death?" McConike incredulously inquired. "He may not even be injured!"

"I'm open for suggestions," the Sergeant admitted. "Anybody got a better idea?"

There was a long silence.

"I think we could water down that gas without even letting him know we were pulling anything," Captain Stanley finally determined.

The Chief apparently liked the plan because he turned to the Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant looked thoughtful. "If your department is willing to assume full responsibility—go right ahead!"
McConike turned to Station 51’s Commander and nodded.

Stanley turned and issued several orders to his engine crew.

The firemen ran over to their truck and began pulling hoses.

DeSoto had been discussing something with Wright. He turned back to his boss. "Cap? Dave and I are willing to try to distract the arsonist. If we can keep him talking, he might not hear the water running. We'll be careful…” he promised.

Stanley hesitated, but then slapped the paramedic lightly on the back. "Okay, Roy! But don't get anywhere near that gasoline! That's an order!"

The two distracters nodded and went trotting over to their rescue truck. They grabbed a few pieces of gear and ran into the warehouse.

The two firemen followed their noses over to where some uniformed police officers were crouched down behind some crates. They knew they had to be fairly close to the arsonist, because there was an overpowering odor of gasoline in the air.

"Where is he?" Roy asked one of the officers.

The officer pointed to the far left corner of the brightly lit warehouse. "Over there. Right behind those barrels."

"Has anybody seen him?"

"No. Why?"

"I was just wondering if he's been wounded," DeSoto explained. "Have you been wounded?" he shouted, deciding to ask the arsonist, himself.

"Who wants to know?" the arsonist called back, from the corner of the warehouse.

"Roy DeSoto! Los Angeles County Fire Department!"

"Squad 51, right?"

The paramedic was surprised. But then he remembered what the Sergeant had said about the scanner. "Right!"

"I recognize your voice! Where are the rest of the firemen?"

"Outside! Have you been hurt?"

"What are they doing out there?"

"They're waiting to see if we need their help! Have you been hurt?"

"You're lying!"

"Look, if you've been hurt, we can help you!"

"Why would you wanna do that?"

"That's our job! That's what we get paid to do! We help people!"
"I meant, why would you want to help me—an arsonist?"

"Arsonists are people, too!"

There was some strained laughter…followed by silence.

Well, not complete silence.

Roy could hear the faint sound of running water. He watched as the warehouse floor gradually became covered with water. "Please! Let us help you!" he shouted loudly, trying to drown out the tell-tale sound.

"Just go away, and let me die!"

"You don't have to die! Give yourself up! The police won't hurt you! Please! Let us help you!" DeSoto's voice was getting hoarse. He cleared his throat and turned to Wright. "You try."

"What do I say?"

"Say anything!" Roy prompted. "Just so he doesn't hear the water running."

Ten minutes later, the distracters had just about run out of small talk.

But that was okay, because the whole floor of the warehouse was now covered with water.

"Tell Captain Stanley to bring the foam trucks up," DeSoto told one of the policemen. The officer nodded and left the warehouse.

"Go tell your Captain to get some more firemen here! I'm going to light this match!"

"Why do you want to burn this building down?" Roy asked, just for something to say.

"I don't want to burn it down! The firemen will put the fire out before it burns down! They always do!"

"Yeah! But there are only six of us here! And, we only have one engine!"

"Get some more trucks! Get some more firemen! I've poured gas all over in here! Where are the firemen?"

The policeman re-entered the warehouse and came running up. "Everything's all set!" he breathlessly announced.

Roy exhaled a long sigh of relief and got stiffly to his feet. "Now we can wait," he croaked rather hoarsely, on account of his strained vocal cords.

He and Wright left the warehouse.

"How does it look in there?" Stanley asked, as his men stepped up to him. He noticed their bodies reeked of gasoline.

"It'll still burn," the senior paramedic croaked, "but it shouldn't explode. It's pretty diluted."

Stanley turned to McConike. "Chief, I think we've just lessened his threat—substantially! The
foam crews are all set…"

"Good work, Hank!" McConike declared. Then he turned to the police lieutenant. "It's your move…"

The Lieutenant pursed his lips. "We'll wait!" he determined, following a long, thoughtful silence.

A half hour later, an officer exited the warehouse and came running up. "Lieutenant? We can't get the arsonist to answer us. He may be unconscious…or dead…or bluffing—to lure us over to the gasoline."

The Lieutenant turned to McConike. "Your move, Chief!"

The Chief turned to Stanley. "Hank?"

"We could move in with the foam crews," Station 51's Captain suggested. "That way, if he is bluffing—and does light the gasoline—we'll be on top of it in seconds!"

McConike nodded his approval of the plan.

Stanley passed the order along.

The firemen got into position.

"Now!" the Captain shouted.

The doors on the end of the warehouse were slid open.

Two crews entered, spraying foam—and two more entered, spraying water. They sprayed a path over to where the arsonist was hiding.

The paramedic team followed the foam sprayers.

Roy and Dave reached the arsonist's position.

The guy was lying in a puddle of bloody, watered-down gasoline.

DeSoto shoved some empty gas cans out of his way. Then he stooped down and pressed his fingers into the carotid artery in the motionless man's neck.

Nothing! No pulse…no respirations! His pupils were fixed and dilated.

The paramedic stared down at the bullet wound in the victim's upper left thigh. He recalled Dixie's comment earlier, about hoping the police caught the guy before somebody became a fatality. He turned away from the sickening sight and quietly croaked, "He's dead."

Dave turned to the police officers who had accompanied them. "Must've bled to death."

The Sergeant didn't seem a bit surprised.

Wright watched as the Lieutenant took an opened book of soggy matches from the arsonist's clenched fist. "It's a good thing he didn't carry a cigarette lighter," he solemnly realized.
TBC
Chapter Thirteen

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Thirteen

DeSoto entered ICU's Room 604 the following morning, and was pleased to find his usually sleeping partner wide awake. "Hi there!" he croaked with a broad smile, and stepped right up beside the bed containing his conscious comrade.

"Roy…?" Gage said, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah, Johnny?" his partner responded, his voice barely audible as well.

"What happened…to your voice?"

"It's a long story. And, they said I can only stay a minute. So, I'll have to tell you about it some other time. All the guys over at the Station wanted me to say 'Hi!' for them and they wanted you to know that they're glad to hear that you're finally doin' a little better."

"Tell 'em…I said 'Hi!'…an' 'Thanks!'…Will you?"

"Sure thing! No problem! I'll gladly pass that message along. Anything else I kin do for you?"

"Could you…raise this bed…a little?" his wishing-to-be-perpendicular partner pleaded and fought desperately to keep his drooping eyes open.

"I'll have to check with your doctor and get back to you on that. Feelin' a little bed-sore?"

John nodded, sleepily. "Sorry…not much company…the…antibiotics…make me…real…drowsy…" his words trailed off as he lost his battle to stay awake.

Roy patted the back of his snoozing associate's hand and slipped silently from the room.

A few hours later, Gage awoke and glanced around his ICU room. Roy was gone. He also noticed his backside was killing him from having to lie in the same position for so long. So he tried rolling onto his side.

He forgot that he was being watched by a closed-circuit TV camera, and—before he could even turn over—two nurses had rushed into his room and up to his bedside. They forced him onto his aching back again and then held him there. It didn't require much effort on their part. He was still extremely weak.

"Let me u-up!" their antsy patient pleaded and began squirming around.

"You can't change your position, Mister Gage!" one of the nurses told him, "You'll start coughing!"

"Please, let me up! I have to get up!" John informed them, and kept right on struggling with them. He couldn't stand being confined—and he hated being called 'Mister' Gage!

One of the nurses held him quiet, while the other injected something into his IV's med's port.
"Cheaters!" their now peeved patient pouted— just prior to going completely limp.

"How's this?" RN Dixie McCall inquired, as she came stepping up to Gage's bedside the following morning. She'd been in to see the paramedic earlier, and had promised a return visit on her coffee break.

John stared up at the aerial photograph of Rampart General Hospital she was holding in front of his face, and smiled. "Dixie, it's perfect!"

Miss McCall smiled, too and her devious eyes sparkled. "Now what?"

The patient stared down at the IV in his right wrist and his smile vanished. "Roy's screwed up my writing hand…" he muttered, sounding dejected.

Dixie took the hint, reached into the right pocket of her uniform and pulled out a pen. "Mine works okay…" she told him and twirled the writing utensil around with her fingers. "Just tell me what I'm supposed to write—and what I'm supposed to write it on."

The fireman flashed her a grateful grin. "The back of the picture," he announced. Then, upon seeing her look of complete confusion, he calmly went on to explain. "We're making a postcard."


The 'postcard producer' promptly proceeded to dictate a brief message to her.

She glanced up and asked in amazement, "That's it?"

The paramedic nodded. "I promised them a postcard—not a novel."

Dixie just stood there, looking highly amused.

Later that same day, John watched as one of his nurses—a Mrs. Gotterd—hung another 500 cc's of D5W and adjusted his IV. "How about some real food? I'm starving!"

"Nothing through the mouth until you're off the IV," she replied and quickly exited the room.

"When—?" Gage groaned as she disappeared.

Twenty minutes later, another nurse entered the room with his meds—a Mrs. Dreyfuss.

"Nurse? When can I get rid of this?" her patient asked and raised his right wrist, with the IV needle and tubing taped to it.

"We'll be feeding you intravenously until you can handle solid food again."

John just stared up at her in disbelief. "But...the other nurse just said—" he began, and tried propping himself up on his elbows.

"Mister Gage, you must lie still!" the woman sternly stated, and shoved him back down onto his pillow—for added emphasis. "Still...as in no movement of any kind!" she tacked on, seeing the patient's mouth reopening.

"But I'm hungry!" the body in the bed disobediently blurted.
"Shhhhh!" the lady urged. She finished administering his medications and immediately took her leave.

John just lay there, fuming…quietly.

Mrs. Gotterd returned after about an hour, to secure a fresh set of vital signs. She stiffened, as her patient suddenly grimaced and let out a pitiful moan. "Where are you hurting?" she anxiously inquired.

"My stomach," the famished fireman informed her. "I have these terrible hunger pains…"

His nurse was not amused. "I told you—nothing through the mouth until you're off the IV!" she impatiently repeated. Then she shot him a mean look and started searching for a thermometer.

The moment the woman turned her head, John reached over and yanked the IV from his wrist. "Ou-ouch!"

Mrs. Gotterd heard him cry out and glanced back up. Her mouth dropped open in amazement. "Mister Ga-age!"

Mister Ga-age glared defiantly up at her and calmly stated, "I'll have a chocolate malt…make it thick."

Roy stepped up to John's hospital bed, later that night.

His partner was awake, but seemed to be drugged.

"Hi!" the visitor cheerily declared.

Gage slowly turned his head in his friend's direction and, when he went to talk, his mouth moved in slow-motion as well—first, forming a slight smile…and then a barely audible, "Hi-i…"

"I heard you got a little rowdy this afternoon…" the vertical paramedic began, noting that the IV was now in his patient's left wrist, "…and they had to give you another dose of sedatives…"

"Yeah…" John shamelessly admitted, and even proudly tacked on, "…but…this time…it took...two... to hold me down."

The naughty patient's partner's expression turned deadly serious. "Yah know, Johnny…if you use up all your strength fighting the nurses, you're not going to have any left to fight this pneumonia. Dr. Stafford tells me you've been making a pretty good recovery—so far. But he's worried about a relapse. He thinks you'd be too weak to fight back. He said a relapse would probably…kill you."

The tranquilized patient's ja dropped open. "He told you that?"

Roy nodded.

"Why didn't he tell me-e?"

"He said he heard you have a reputation for not listening to your doctors. He thought maybe you'd listen to a fellow paramedic."

There followed a long silence, as DeSoto's stunned partner pondered over all that he'd said. "All right," Gage finally agreed. "No more fighting. But there are terms…to this surrender.
All of the nurses…on this floor…are either married or engaged. I demand to be moved…to a
different floor!

Also, I've been lying here in one spot for so long…they're gonna have to surgically remove…my
backside…from this bed! Don't they realize how incredibly difficult…and danged
uncomfortable…it is…for an active guy…like me…to have to lie here…day after day…staring up
at the ceiling?

I want a room with a view…a-and some company!"

Speaking of surrendering…

Roy held both of his hands up. "Okay! All right! Just take it easy, Johnny! I promised I wouldn't let
you tire yourself out by talking too much. I'll give Dr. Stafford your list of demands," he further
promised and began backing towards the door. "I'll pop back up again sometime tomorrow."

"Hey! Wait! Don't leave ye-et," the prisoner-locked-in-solitary-confinement pleaded. "You just got
here!"

"You're not supposed to have any visitors, at all. If I stay too long, they're not gonna let me in to
see you anymore. Now, get some rest! Okay?"

The now frowning fireman exhaled a resigned sigh and nodded...glumly.

DeSoto flashed him a sympathetic smile. Then he waved and disappeared.

**TBC**
Chapter Fourteen

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Fourteen

The following afternoon, Station 51's current residents were sitting around their rec' room, trying to squeeze in a little rest and relaxation between calls.

"Man! With that pyromaniac gone, it sure is quiet around here," Chet Kelly commented on his way over to the sink to get himself a drink of H 2 O. "Did any of you guys catch the news last night?" he inquired, and began sipping the water like it was fine wine.

Paramedic Dave Wright was seated at the dinner table, resting his head on his folded arms. "What news?" he asked, not bothering to open his eyes.

Chet set his glass on the table and sat down beside him. "They said this drought could go on for another nine months," he glumly responded.

"What drought?" Wright sleepily wondered.

Wright's partner—er, temporary partner glanced up from the cup of coffee he was nursing. "Who are THEY?" he asked, not really expecting an answer. "I mean, THEY say this…and THEY say that. Haven't you ever wondered who THEY are?"

"What drought?" Wright repeated.

Chet stared down at the sleepy form sprawled across their table and sadly shook his head. "Sheesh! Do you lead a sheltered life! What do you mean, 'What drought'? Where have you been for the last 18 months? We haven't had a decent rain since last July! Why do you think the department has been averaging three and a half brush fires a day? It's so dry right now, if we don't get some rain pretty quick, the whole state is gonna go up in smoke!"

Stoker was seated on the sofa.

The Station's mascot was lying next to him, resting his head on the engineer's lap.

Mike scratched the mutt behind the ears for a moment or two and then turned to his crew-mate, seated a cushion and a half away. "Hey, Marco? How do you put out half a brush fire?" he insincerely inquired.

Lopez looked up from the magazine he was reading and shrugged. "A quarter at a time?" he proposed, and his fellow firefighters chuckled.

Well, all except for Chet, that is. "I should a' known better than to try and discuss something serious around he-ere…" he muttered dejectedly.

DeSoto stepped over to the kitchen counter and began pouring himself some more coffee. "Sounds pretty serious alright," he sarcastically conceded. "The entire state of California is going to catch on fire, and then THEY say a big earthquake is going to come along and put it out—by dropping it into the Pacific Ocean."

Mike and Marco enjoyed another good chuckle—at Chet's expense.
Even old 'half-asleep Wright' was forced to grin and snicker.

"Yeah, yeah…we'll see who gets the last laugh," Kelly quickly came back and took a big swallow of his cold—and precious—commodity.

"What are you guys complaining about now?" their Captain inquired as he came walking in with the day's mail.

Kelly replied with a quick question of his own. "What do you think of this dry spell, Cap?"

Stanley poured himself a cup of coffee and then sat down at the table to sort through his stack of envelopes. "As long as we can hook a hose up to a hydrant—and there's water when we turn on the valve—I'm not gonna worry about it…" he paused to glance around the room. "Besides, before you know it, we'll be getting more rain than we can handle. And then, I suppose you'll be complaining about mud sli—" he stopped talking suddenly and smiled. "Hey, you guys! John sent us a postcard!" he announced and held up the aerial photograph of Rampart General Hospital.

His men gave their Commander their undivided attention.

Hank's smile broadened into a grin. "Listen to this…'Dear Cap, Roy, Mike, Marco, Chet and Henry…Having a miserable time…Be glad you're not here…John'."

"That's it?" Chet asked, amazed.

"No-o…" Their Captain continued. "There's a P.S. 'P.S….He said he promised you a postcard—not a novel…Love, Dixie'."

The missing fireman's friends glanced at each other…and grinned.

"I see you got some company," DeSoto declared, as he came strolling into his lonesome partner's hospital room later that afternoon, carrying a long, slender tube.

Gage glanced glumly over at the intensive care patient that had been placed in the bed beside his. "Huh! Some company! I waited all day for him to wake up. Come to find out—he's in a coma! Some company!" he sadly repeated.

"We got your postcard…" Roy announced, determined to keep the conversation upbeat.

"Already? We just sent it yesterday…" the body-in-the-bed said, and his gloomy mood did brighten—but only for a moment. "They won't let me leave this floor…and they won't let me move," John announced, looking—and sounding—sadder than sad.

"Yeah…well, I brought you a view…" the frowning fireman's friend quickly continued, making yet another attempt to cheer his depressed partner up. The tube in his hands turned out to be a couple of rather large posters—glued back-to-back. Roy unfurled and uncurled them.

The view on one side was an awesome picture of the sun rising—or setting—upon a peaceful, pastoral landscape. The view on the other side was an even awesomer picture of a beautiful, long blonde-haired, bikini-clad girl running on a sunny, sandy beach somewhere.

DeSoto stared thoughtfully at the skimpily-dressed, deeply-tanned, richly-endowed maiden for a few moments. "She looks kind a' like that 'Miss Ferrel' from headquarters, don't yah think?" He glanced up and was relieved to find his friend grinning back at him…well, at the beach scene, actually.
Speaking of thoughtful…

John flashed his one-in-a-million—exceedingly thoughtful—partner an appreciative smile. "Thanks, Roy…for the beautiful views!" he said aloud. Then silently he added, '…and, for bein' such a goo—great friend!'

"Hey…no problem," the beautiful view provider proclaimed and shrugged the whole thing off. "I've got it on a string, see...So, when you get tired of one view, you just have someone flip it over." Roy pulled a roll of industrial-strength tape from the front pocket of his uniform and then took great pains to position the poster for the patient's optimum viewing pleasure. "This okay?"

John nodded. "Yeah…that's fine right there…thanks!"

DeSoto secured the sights to the wall and then wondered, "Where would you like to go first? To the country?…or to the beach?"

"The beach! Definitely the beach!"

"You're not so sick, after all!" Roy realized with a grin.

Speaking of 'that Miss Ferrel from headquarters'…

Stacey stepped up to Doctor Brackett's office and timidly tapped upon the obviously busy physician's open door.

Brackett was embroiled in a losing battle with bureaucracy. He glanced up at the girl, briefly, and asked, "What can I do for you?"

"I, uh, have the paperwork you requested for John Gage…" his visitor announced, and promptly proffered some official-looking LA County Fire Department documents.

"You didn't have to hand deliver it," Kelly informed the gal with the folder, "but thanks! Just set it on my desk. I'll try to get it filled out and sent back to you…" he paused to shoot the stack of folders already piled high before him, a distasteful glance, "as soon as possible."

The girl set her delivery down and then stood there for a few moments, trying to muster up the courage to interrupt the busy gentleman again. "How is he?" she finally just blurted out.

Kelly put his pencil down and took a longer look at the lovely—and apparently concerned—young lady. Great minds must indeed think alike, because he suddenly came up with DeSoto's absolutely brilliant idea for brightening Johnny's day. "Why don't you go on up and see for yourself," he proposed, suppressing a smile all the while.

"They told me he's not allowed visitors," the girl glumly replied.

Brackett flashed the blonde-haired beauty standing before him the smile he'd been suppressing. "I think we could make an exception in your case. I think a visit from you might even have a 'therapeutic' effect on him…" he figured and began reaching for his phone.

Stacey stepped quietly into ICU's Room 604 and cautiously approached the seriously ill paramedic's hospital bed.

The fireman's dreamy, dark-brown eyes were open and focused upon a poster that someone—
obviously another male—had given him.

Once again, the girl found herself standing around, trying to muster up the courage to speak. "Hi, Johnny!" she finally blurted out, and just about gave the poor guy a heart attack.

The startled young man swung his gaze in the girl's direction and his heart rate and respirations slowly returned to normal...well, nearer to normal. "I must be delirious..." he quietly confessed and blinked his wide eyes a few times in disbelief. But his new beautiful view remained right there beside him. "Are you for real?...or am I just imagining you?"

Stacey smiled and then reached out to place her right hand over his.

John returned her smile, but kept her hand. "I didn't think my imagination was that good. How did you get in here? They won't let anybody but Roy in here to see me...and then, about all he can do is say 'Hi' and 'Bye'..."

"Doctor Brackett fixed it so I could see you."

"Oh, yeah? He fixed it, did he? We-ell, bless his heart!" the fireman found himself staring into his lovely visitor's emerald-green eyes—again. 'A fella could drown in those eyes...' he suddenly—and silently—determined. 'Ah, yes...but what a way to go!' It also abruptly occurred to the eye-gazer that he just might be getting ahead of himself. 'Is this an official visit?' he anxiously inquired.

"Well, I did come to the hospital on some official business," the girl began, and the fireman immediately released his hold on her hand. "But I came up here because I wanted to...see—for myself—how you were feeling..." she finished, softly.

"For a second there, I thought you were going to say you came up here to tell me that my vacation was cancelled again—for the fourth time!"

"Actually, it was canceled again. You're on sick leave."

"With pay?!" the paramedic pondered.

The pretty personnel employee nodded.

Gage looked ecstatic—and then glum again. "What about my vacation?"

"It's been postponed—indefinitely," Stacey stopped talking and stood there, staring at all the medical paraphernalia that was attached into, onto, and around the handsome young man in the hospital bed. "I thought you told me you weren't going to sacrifice your health..."

"I didn't sacrifice it!" the paramedic innocently proclaimed. "It committed suicide!"

"Time's up!" Mrs. Dreyfuss told her patient's pretty visitor, as she came charging into the room to administer Mister Gage's latest dose of meds.

"Don't worry," Miss Ferrel said, seeing the look of tremendous disappointment on the young firefighter's face. "Doctor Brackett also fixed it so that I can come back!"

"I really must remember to thank that man..." John realized with a wry smile.

The girl with the emerald-green eyes smiled...and waved...and was gone.

TBC
Chapter Fifteen

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Fifteen

Bright and early the next morning, Dr. Stafford announced that he felt his pneumonia patient was finally strong enough to try his first breathing treatment.

So John did.

The paramedic then spent the next three and a half hours alternately coughing and spitting—and groaning—in agony. His badly bruised ribs were still unbelievably sore, and all that coughing was killing him!

John's partner popped in again that afternoon. The pneumonia patient had just completed another breathing treatment.

In fact, Roy had passed his Respiratory Therapist out in the hall.

DeSoto noticed that his coughing colleague looked a little pale. "Hi!" He also realized that the head of his friend's hospital bed had finally been raised. "I see they're letting you sit up a little, huh."

Since Johnny was coughing too hard to speak, he simply nodded.

"They're trying to get all that junk out of your lungs, huh."

John nodded again and lay there, coughing and gasping. He coughed so hard, and the pain was so intense, that one of the groans he'd been suppressing—since his visitor's arrival—suddenly escaped. A frown appeared on the patient's pale, pain-filled face. The paramedic did not want his friend to see him hurting…and he most certainly did not want to be seen spitting!

"I'll, uh, come back when you can talk…" his partner promised, and began backing towards the exit.

Gage gave his intuitive guest a grateful glance and another nod.

DeSoto waved and disappeared.

John just kept right on coughing and spitting—and groaning.

Roy reappeared in ICU's Room 604 later that evening.

The paramedic approached the now re-leveled hospital bed, and found his partner lying very still and looking even paler. He placed a hand on his friend's forearm and quietly inquired, "Johnny? You awake?"

Gage gradually opened his eyes and slowly blinked them into focus. He wanted to say 'Hi, Roy!' but he couldn't get his mouth to work. A particularly potent painkiller had been prescribed for him, and he was completely zonked!
"I'll, uh, come back when you can talk…" Roy re-promised, and began backing towards the exit.

John's head nodded, ever so slightly. The fireman flashed his considerate company the faintest of smiles. Then, his drooping eyelids dropped…and his visitor vanished.

John Gage had had a really rough time with his breathing treatments.

However, after over forty-eight hours of nearly non-stop hacking and spitting—and groaning, the Intensive Care Unit's pneumonia patient now seemed to be making a rather remarkable recovery.

Dr. Brackett dropped by to tell him so. "You had us pretty worried there for awhile," his admitting physician informed Gage, following a careful examination of both him and his chart. The doctor finished recording his findings and deposited the metal clipboard onto his patient's med's stand.

The paramedic immediately picked it up and began flipping through its many pages. "I had me pretty worried there for awhile, too…" the doctor's young friend confessed, and winced at some of the vital signs that had been taken over the course of the past nine days. Nine da-ays?! Had he really been cooped up in Rampart's ICU that lo-ong?

"I imagine by now you've developed a healthy respect for pneumonia," Kel continued.

"Oh, I don't know..." the patient thoughtfully said and set his chart back down on the stand. "Just having pneumonia isn't so bad. It's the getting rid of it part that can kill yah!"

His physician was forced to smile. "Well, then you'll be relieved to know that your latest chest x-rays show that you are rid of it."

Gage grinned. "No more breathing treatments?"

"No more breathing treatments."

"I can leave this floor and have visitors?"

Brackett nodded and his smile broadened.

His former pneumonia patient looked positively ecstatic! "When can I leave here entirely?"

"That depends entirely on you. You keep improving the way you have been for the last day and a half, and you should be able to go home within a week."

"Another wee-eek?" the paramedic pouted, but then looked hopeful. "And then I can take my vacation?"

"Don't worry about your vacation," Brackett urged. "I'll take care of that. You won't be fit to go back to work in two weeks, anyways. It's going to take that long just to get your physical condition back to where it was before all this happened—and that was total exhaustion! No. I'm afraid a simple vacation isn't going to do you much good. I'm recommending that you take a temporary leave of absence."

"How temporary?" his impatient patient pondered.

"A month—at the very least."

"A whole mo-onth?!" Gage griped.
"Johnny, you've been with the Paramedic Program from its very beginning, right?"

The paramedic nodded, "Six years."

"Do you want to stay with it?"

"Of course!"

"Well, then listen up. We don't really know how your work affects your health. There are no records or statistics. Six years ago, there were no paramedics around to make any. So you—and Roy and the others—are creating the statistics as you go along. Statistics like 'how long can a fireman work as a paramedic before occupational burn-out starts getting to him'."

The body in the bed looked bewildered. "Occupational burn-out?"

"Your work is pretty darn strenuous. Wouldn't you agree?"

"A little…I gue-ess."

"A little?" the ER's main medicine man repeated in absolute amazement. "You gue-ess? Whenever you over-exert yourself—which, in your case, is most of the time—it places a tremendous strain on your body. When your body responds to this strain, there's tension.

Now, tension is normal—once in awhile. Tension in muscles, for example, is a preparation for action. And, everybody is under a little stress.

It's when your work becomes so strenuous that it places you under constant tension and constant stress that the trouble starts.

I'm not saying tension and stress are responsible for every bump and bruise you might get. There are enough occupational hazards in your line of work to account for some degree of bodily injury—or bacterial infection. But this thing with the viral pneumonia is definitely a non-specific disease related to stress. Stress is a killer, Johnny. A very subtle killer. It doesn't jump up and hit you in the head. It creeps up on you, gradually."

"Gradually…like over a month?"

"Like over six years! When was your last vacation?"

"About seven months ago."

"How did you spend it?"

"Uh-uh…back-packing…climbing…mountain biking…"

Brackett grimaced. "How about the vacation before that?"

Gage shrugged. "The same, I guess."

"Your vacations are as strenuous as your work! You don't give yourself any real rest! You don't give your body a chance to store up energy! Where did you go? Did you leave the state?"

"No-o."

"The county?"
"No-o."

"That's another mistake! You should get away from old scenes! Find a complete change of climate!"

"Are you suggesting I go to Alaska and twiddle my thumbs?"

His physician was forced to smile. "I'm suggesting you go anywhere but Los Angeles County—and do anything that isn't too strenuous. If you want to twiddle your thumbs in Alaska—fine! Now, where was I? Oh, yes…tension! The opposite of tension is relaxation. Relaxation is a natural tranquilizer. It's also your best defense against stress. Your trouble is, it's been so long since you've really relaxed, you've forgotten how to!"

"I relax. On my days off…between calls…"

Brackett looked deeply skeptical. "Are you really relaxing? Let's say you're sitting in the Station. The alarm goes off—a stimulus you have learned from years of habit to obey. So you leap—without thinking—from your chair, to answer the alarm. Instead, I want you to force yourself to relax—even though your body wants to respond to the conditioned response. I don't think you could do it!"

"I know I couldn't do it! Besides, if I didn't answer the alarm, I'd lose my job!"

"This is hypothetical," the doctor reminded his now grinning patient. "Pretend the call isn't for you! Remember…the opposite of tension is relaxation. As long as you remain tense, you can't possibly be practicing relaxation. But, even if you couldn't ignore the response altogether, you could at least try to delay your reaction to it.

Delay breaks up the automatic workings of conditioning. The secret of relaxation is learning to ignore the conditioned response…” the physician halted his lecture to exhale a gasp of frustration and fold his arms across his chest. "The point I'm getting at is this: tension is your conditioned response! It's like your body's alarm. It's a conditioned reflex with you! You don't even have to think about it—it's just there! Relaxation is something you're going to have to work at! It requires mental effort!

I want you to concentrate on relaxing! You've got to, Johnny! Because, you can't fight stress when you're under tension—and you can't fight tension unless you concentrate on relaxing!

You can't concentrate on relaxing if you're concentrating on your work. You need to get away…just as far away as you can possibly get—from tension, responsibilities and stress! You need to rest your body—and your mind!"

"You're concerned about my mental fitness. Why-y? Because of the personality change?"

"Well, you have to admit, you haven't been yourself lately. Whatever happened to the radical rebel of Station 51? The crusader against bureaucracy? The John Gage I know wouldn't have let his vacation be canceled three times in a row. And he sure wouldn't have quit—without putting up one heck of a fight!"

The radical rebel of Station 51 stared sadly down at the foot of his hospital bed. "Sometimes people just get tired of fighting…" he quietly replied, sounding as sad as he looked. "When my vacation was canceled the first time, I went over to headquarters and screamed my bloody head off. All it got me was a hoarse voice and an appointment to see some Mr. Lenhert.

I was working the day of the appointment, and missed it because we were out on a call. They
wouldn't reschedule it for three days!

So, I tried calling. Do you know what it's like to be put on hold?"

The ER Administrator gave him a 'Boy! Do I!' look and an understanding nod.

The paramedic continued. "I finally got through to him, but then I had to leave on another run!

I tried to reach him later, at his home. His number is unlisted.

Three days later, I made it to the second appointment. Mr. Lenhert's secretary informed me that he
was called unexpectedly out of town and so all his appointments for the day had to be canceled.
That's when I started writing letters! One a day—and very nasty!"

Brackett's brow formed an arch of extreme skepticism as to the effectiveness of a letter writing
campaign.

"Well, it was better than nothin'..." the paramedic proclaimed in his defense. The fireman's frown
deepened and his narrative continued. "Mr. Lenhert stayed out of town on my days off. Before I
knew it, the first week had passed, and I had kind a' lost my momentum.

I gradually adjusted to having my vacation canceled. And, since it was rescheduled for the
following week, I just gave up and worked those two weeks. The only thing that got me through
that last week, was the fact that my vacation was coming up." John drew in a breath as deep as his
frown. "When my vacation was canceled the second time, I went to see Mr. Lenhert—without an
appointment!

I, uh, think pretty much everyone in that part of the building probably heard what I had to say to
the guy.

He was very understanding, and I left with him promising he'd do his best to get me my vacation
back..." The storyteller heaved a heavy sigh. "I called every day—for a week! You wouldn't
believe the hard time I gave that guy's secretary. Finally, she just put me on hold—and kept me
there!" The paramedic paused again, looking thoughtful. "I guess I must've been too tired to fight
after that, cuz I just worked another week—without giving anybody any hassles.

It was kind a' scary. It was like I was adjusting myself to just keep working and working—
indefinitely! I thought, 'Why can't they let me take some time off? Is my work so important that I
can't stop? Am I so important?' I realized that I liked feeling important. John Gage...VIP!

Yes sir, I was so important that they couldn't possibly get along without me—for two whole
weeks!

Yah know, when my vacation was canceled again, I was actually expecting it!" Gage's gaze turned
from the foot of his bed to his physician. "That's when I got mad! Mad enough to start fighting
again! I called Mr. Lenhert's secretary and told her I was quitting! She asked me to keep working
until they could find a replacement for me. I gave her until the end of the shift.

The rest is—as they say—history!" The paramedic paused again, and lay there, looking even
sadder. "I almost waited too long to start fighting again, didn't I, Doc...I almost lost."

His physician flashed him a sympathetic smile. "You wouldn't have been the only one who lost,
Johnny! The people of this county would have been out, too. Because your work is important! Very
important! And, so are you! You're one of the best paramedics we've got! Your training and
experience are invaluable!
That's why we've got to get you back into shape—physically. I'm not worried about your mental fitness anymore. I'm sure once the radical rebel of Station 51 gets his strength back, he'll start crusading again. But you've got to cooperate!" Kelly noticed his young friend looked tired. "Now, I'm going to leave—and let you get some rest! And relaxation!"

"Do-oc?" John called after the departing doctor.

Brackett halted and glanced back over his shoulder. "Yeah, Johnny?"

"Thanks for the compliment. I have a great deal of respect for you—and your opinions. I promise, I'll try to cooperate. Oh, and before I forget…Thanks for fixing it so Miss Ferrel could come up and visit me…"

"You're very welcome!" his physician wholeheartedly assured him. "Wanted to send you a little something to let you know that I was thinking of you…" Kel teased, keeping a perfectly straight face. "And...well, flowers aren't allowed in ICU." The good doctor's pursed lips formed a wry grin. Then he winked…and waved…and was gone.

John Gage grinned…snickered softly and then turned his relaxed gaze back towards his beautiful view of the beach.

TBC
Chapter Sixteen

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Sixteen

That evening, Roy DeSoto decided to pay his recuperating partner a quick visit.

He ran into Miss Ferrel in front of the elevator in the ER, and the two of them rode up to the second floor together.

Since John had been moved out of ICU, visitors' restrictions no longer applied.

Roy and Stacey stopped outside the open door to Room 202, and then just stood there, looking absolutely amazed…and listening.

A pretty, young nurse was replacing her patient's empty IV bag.

The guy the IV was attached to, was sitting up in his hospital bed…singing!

"Me and my IV…Me and my IV…" the room's sole occupant crooned—to the tune of the RC Cola jingle. "Cuz' what's good enough for other folks…Just ain't good enough for me…Me and my IV… Me and—" the paramedic caught sight of his company and stopped, right in mid stanza. "Well, don't just stand there! Come in! Come i-in!" he urged.

"Sorry!" DeSoto suddenly declared. "We must have the wrong room. We were looking for a sick friend…" he teased and turned to go.

"Ro-oy!" John anxiously exclaimed, as his partner took Stacey by the arm and started to leave.

His departing guests turned around, and then came strolling into the room and up to his bed.

"You look great, Johnny!" DeSoto determined, with a grin. He was amazed at the drastic change in his friend's condition—and countenance. "What? Did they give you some new kind of 'wonder drug'?

"I'm not on any medication," the patient proudly replied. "I just get healthy the same way I get sick—overnight! You're just in time to join me for a little nightcap. My last 500 cc's!" He turned to his nurse. "Miss? Could you bring us two more of these?" he requested, and tugged on his IV bag. He then redirected his gaze to his grinning guests. "What'll yah have?"

"What do yah got?" Miss Ferrel inquired, and flashed their hospitable host a beautiful, broad smile.

"D5W."

"I just remembered…" Stacey suddenly stated, "I'm on a diet." She pointed to his IV. "Can I get that sugar-free?"

"What would D5W be without the five parts dextrose?" John teased.

"Sterile water!" Roy obligingly replied.

Gage rolled his eyes and then promptly finished placing their order. "Make that one D5W and
one…Lactated Ringers."

His pretty nurse nodded and then left the room, suppressing a smile all the while.

Miss Ferrel could no longer contain her amusement.

The sound of the girl's light laughter made Gage feel even greater than he looked. "I'm on a liquid diet! Tomorrow, I get solid food!" The patient threw both arms up and his head back. "I kin go home in a week! Maybe less!" he joyously proclaimed, and lay there, looking like he was about ready to fly right up off of his hospital bed.

Stacey was astonished by the amazing transformation in both the handsome young firefighter—and his energy level.

Roy turned to her. "If you think this is bad…you should see him when he's healthy!" he teased. Then, to his partner, he consolingly said, "Cheer up, Johnny! Maybe they'll have some good news for you tomorrow!"

Gage grinned and turned his attention to his gorgeous guest. Their gazes locked, and he instantly forgot all about stress and hospital stays. 'Talk about breaking up the automatic workings of conditioning!' the fireman mused.

The girl's eyes were like two deep, inviting, emerald-green pools…

"I gotta go..." Miss Ferrel suddenly announced and began backing towards the door. "My friend is waiting for me out in the parking lot. I didn't know—until I got here—that you'd been moved out of ICU. So I promised her I'd only be a minute. But I'll be back again, tomorrow!" she vowed.

"Goodnight, Johnny!"

"Goodnight, Stacey!" the completely crushed patient called back. "And thanks for stoppin' by!"

The fireman's pretty visitor lingered in the doorway for a few more moments. Then, she flashed the handsome young fellow the loveliest of smiles…and promptly vacated the premises.

"What I'd like to know is…whatever happened to your 'I don't date cops or firemen' rule?" Stacey's friend wondered, as Miss Ferrel climbed into her sporty, little white convertible.

"I'm not dating the guy!" Stacey adamantly stated in her defense, and buckled her seat-belt. "I'm just visiting him!" She flipped the key over in the ignition and the car's engine came to life.

The brunette in the bucket seat beside hers managed a scornful laugh. "You wouldn't be visiting him—if you weren't interested…" she paused, noting the 'happy glow' emanating from her friend's face. "You're falling for the guy!"

"I am not! We're just friends!" she assured her companion and pulled out onto the street. The vehicle's speed picked up and the wind began whipping their hair.

"Then why do you look like you just stepped on a scale and discovered you're suddenly 10 pounds lighter?"

"We're just friends!" the car's driver adamantly restated.

"I hope he knows that. It wouldn't be fair to the guy to keep visiting him—and getting his hopes up—if you have no intentions of ever establishing a more meaningful 'relationship' with him. You
should make it perfectly clear—from the very start—that your interest is only that of friendship. So have you told him yet, that you're only interested in him as a friend?"

"His name's Johnny. And no-o…” the car's driver confessed, "I haven't told him...yet. But I will!"

"Before or after you break Johnny's heart?"

'Hopefully, before…' Miss Ferrel silently replied.

The next afternoon, Roy dropped by Room 202 for a brief visit between runs. He found his partner sitting up in bed, staring miserably down at a tray of solid hospital food.

"Hi!" the on-duty paramedic cheerily proclaimed. "What's seems to be the problem?"

Gage smiled—halfheartedly. "Hi, Roy. Nothin'…really. I just realized somethin', is all. All this time, I've been thinking of the doctors and nurses as my enemies. Now, I know that I am my own worst enemy…"

"You're just findin' that out no-ow?" DeSoto teased.

John shot him a 'ha-ha very funny' look and continued. "For days, I beg them to let me sit up. They tell me no. I keep insisting. They let me sit up—and I almost cough to death!

For days, I beg them to give me some real food. They tell me no. But I keep insisting. Today, they let me have real food—and I just about die barfing!

Next, I'll be begging them to let me out of bed.

If they tell me no, I'm not gonna press the issue! The way things have been goin', I'd probably get out of bed…keel over…hit my head on something—and die from a concussion!"

Roy didn't say anything. He just stood there, marveling at his recuperating partner's warped—and, in this case, seemingly sound—line of logic.

TBC
Chapter Seventeen

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Seventeen

The following afternoon found the patient once again sitting up in his bed, staring glumly down at yet another tray of unreal real food. The paramedic sat there, poking at the hospital provisions with his fork, and looking very bored.

"Hey, Johnny!" Chet Kelly called through the opened door to his room. "Can I come in?"

"Hey, Chet!" Gage greeted him with a grin, and motioned him in.

He and Kelly shook hands.

Kelly spotted the ten days growth of facial hair on the paramedic's upper lip. "Hey, Gage, is that the makings of a mustache I see there? You thinking of joining the ranks of the 'Manly Men', are you?" he teased and stroked his own mustache a few times.

John just rolled his eyes. "The nasal canula made my upper lip a little sore. I figured I'd hold off with the razor until my sensitive skin is a little less tender..." he paused, suddenly looking a bit devious. "Yah know, Chet...I hate to admit it, but I miss your cooking. I mean, even a bad taste is better than no taste at all!"

"Hospital food is pretty bland, isn't it," Kelly quickly came back, taking the teasing in stride.

"Bla-and?! I think there was more flavor in the stuff they were putting in my wrist!"

"What you need, is a little incentive!" his visitor determined. "Somethin' to get your appetite working. So you'll start eating again and get your strength back!"

"What I nee-eed, is a big bowl of your left-over chili!"

"Well, what d'yah know! That's exactly what we had in mind, too!" Kelly confesed. Then he crossed back over to the door and called out into the hall, "Okay, you guys!"

Gage stared in disbelief, as his friends from the Station came strolling into his hospital room—carrying boxes and carting folding tables and chairs. There followed much back-slapping...handshaking...and wisecracking.

"We wanted to invite you to lunch over at the Station," Stoker went on to explain, when things finally settled down, "but your doctors wouldn't hear of it!"

"So-o," Lopez promptly picked up, "we brought the lunch from the Station over to you!"

"We would've been over sooner," his Captain confessed, "but Chester here, wanted the chili to age properly."

The guys exchanged grins.

Roy looked up from the slice of bread he was buttering. "At least over here—we won't get an alarm halfway through the meal!"
"And over here," Hank handed the recuperating patient a steaming bowlful of Chet's special chili and flashed him a warm smile, "you won't get stuck with the dishes!"

Gage grinned and then glanced around the room at his fellow firefighters—his friends. He felt pretty damn good…maybe even great!

Chet returned to Rampart that very evening, to feed John Mike Stoker's fried chicken for supper—among other things…

"Mmm! Mmm! Mmm!" the patient proclaimed, between mouth-watering bites. "Stoker must be related to the Colonel! A distant cousin twice removed or something…"

"Hey...John...remember when I told you that Marco suggested that I trade reservations with Newcomb?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I decided to take him up on it. So I talked it over with Phil."

"Where did he say he was going?"

"To the Upper Midwest. They have five feet of snow up there!"

"Really? Well, different strokes for different folks. Too bad he wasn't going some place you would've liked."

"But I do like it!" Kelly corrected and pulled a folded slip of paper from his front shirt pocket. "Newcomb gave me this," he announced. "It's his vacation itinerary…” he explained, and passed the document on to the pigeon—er, patient.

"Itinerary?” the paramedic proclaimed in a hoity-toity fashion. He wiped some of the grease from his fingers before unfolding the note. "Wednesday the 30th : arrive at airport, rent car, check in at hotel, call Ann and Gary—" he looked up at Kelly, "Yeah, Chet…I can sure see why this appeals to you,” he said, not sounding too sincere.

"Keep reading! Keep reading!” Kelly urged.

Gage exhaled a weary sigh and returned to his reading. "Thursday the 31st : visit Ann and Gary…” he glanced up again. "Who are Ann and Gary?"

Kelly shrugged.

John reluctantly continued. "Skiing at Huron Mountain Lodge…Friday the 1st : Skiing at Silver Creek Lodge…Saturday the 2nd : Skiing at Pine Mountain Lodge…" The impatient patient raised an eyebrow. "I had no idea you were so in to skiing, Chet! You ski pretty good, do you?"

"Fair," Kelly modestly confessed and pointed to the paper. "Keep reading!"

"Gee-ee…” Gage exclaimed, his voice oozing sarcasm. "This is so suspenseful and thrilling…I don't know if I can take any more!"

"C'mon, John!" Kelly urged. "You haven't gotten to the best part, yet!"

"I'm guessin' that would have to be the 'end'," the reader teased, but then obligingly returned to his boring task. "Sunday the 3rd : Snowmobiling at Ski Brule…” He shot his mustached amigo a look
of amazement. "Snowmobiling? You enjoy snowmobiling, do you?"

"Well…actually…I've never done it before," Chet honestly admitted. "But I sure would like to give it a try!"

"Cross-country skiing?" John continued, sounding both incredulous and amused. "What? Is that cheaper than flying?"

"I've always wanted to try cross-country skiing," Kelly confessed. "It's supposed to be a lot safer than downhill."

John gave Chet an 'I always suspected you were nuts! But thanks for confirming my suspicions!' glance, before folding the paper back up and returning to the remains of his chicken dinner.

"You didn't finish it!" Kelly pouted.

Gage flashed him a sympathetic smile. "Chet, if you must ski, can't you find any snow closer to home? What about Vale, Colorado? Or Aspen? What about Lake Tahoe? Donner's Pass…or Sun Valley?"

"Those places didn't get any snow this year…on account a' the drought."

"They must've gotten some!"

"Some, maybe…" Kelly reluctantly conceded, "But not five feet!"

"Do you realize that it would take you almost two full days of travel—just to get there and back? If you get back! You could break every bone in your entire body and end up spending six months in traction!" Gage wiped the grease from his fingers again and handed the itinerary back to his certifiably insane friend. "You're not really—seriously—considering swapping reservations with Newcomb…are you?"

"Yes, I am!" Chet informed the purveyor of doom and gloom. He returned the itinerary to his pocket and then undauntedly added, "And I will, too!...If I can find someone to go with me…"

A strange look came over the paramedic's face, as it suddenly dawned on him who that someone was! He threw his hands up and vehemently shook his head. "Oh-oh no, no, no! No way! I may be sick—but I'm not THAT sick!"

"Ahh, c'mon, Gage!"

"Unh-uh! NO WAY! Just cuz' my body's messed up—don't mean there's anything wrong with my brain! And no one in their right mind would want to spend their vacation—thousands of miles from nowhere—sitting in five feet of snow! Besides, even if I wasn't just getting over pneumonia, I don't ski! While you're out there on the slopes, what am I supposed to be doing? Sitting around, twiddling my thumbs?" he stopped speaking, as Brackett's words suddenly played back in his brain. Complete change of climate…change of scenery…and unstrenuous activity. 'Nahhh! Then again…'

Kelly saw the pigeon—er, patient lost in thought and suddenly looked hopeful. "Have you ever sat around a ski lodge…in front of a big, cozy fireplace…watching all the pretty girls—waxing their skis?"

Gage looked even more thoughtful. Sitting around a cozy fireplace—and watching pretty girls—sounded appealing. Plus it did seem to be just what the doctor had prescribed. "If I were insane
enough to go on Newcomb's vacation with you...how much would it set me back—financially?"

Kelly looked positively radiant! "That's the best part! Newcomb got a family rate on everything! We can split it 50/50! Roundtrip airfare, hotels, motels, car, snowmobile, and ski rentals—all discounted!"

John looked even more thoughtful. "The biggest drawback is the full day of travel—both ways! I'm not sure I'd be feelin' up to that, just yet!"

"Today's only the 26th. You have three days before we'd have to leave..."

"Three da-ays? I don't even know if I'm gonna be out of here in three days!"

"If you are...and you do feel up to it...will you go?"

"How soon do you have to have an answer?"

"Newcomb's travel agent has to know by tonight...something to do with her losing her commission and a late cancellation penalty fee on the airline reservations, or somethin'..."

The recuperating pneumonia patient took an extremely long time to answer. At long last, he drew in a deep breath, sighed in surrender and said, "All right, Chet. If I'm out of here in three days, and if I'm feeling up to it...I'll go on Newcomb's vacation with you."

Kelly looked ecstatic. He slapped Gage lightly on the back and then gleefully exclaimed, "Terrific! Now, go to sleep and get all the rest you can. We've got to build your strength up!" He latched onto the remains of Mike's yummy meal and began lowering the head of the patient's hospital bed. "What's the matter?" he inquired, seeing John's unhappy expression. "Having second thoughts?" he continued, pulling the paramedic's covers up and tucking him in. "Don't worry! You won't regret this! We're gonna have a great time!"

John just lay there, looking extremely annoyed. 'I wish I had your confidence,' he silently—and sincerely—admitted.

TBC
"It sounds great!" Stacey exclaimed, later that night, as Johnny finished telling her about Newcomb's vacation. "It sounds like it fills Dr. Brackett's prescription for a temporary leave of absence perfectly! Complete change of climate and scenery…It's perfect!"

Gage stared up at his guest in absolute amazement. "How do you know about all that?"

"I work in the Personnel Department. Remember? Dr. Brackett is the consulting physician—and Chief Medical Advisor—for the department. I was put in charge of your file."

"My file?" John repeated, looking and sounding a little nervous. "You've looked through my file? What's in it?"

"Sorry…" she teased, "But that's classified information."

"What's it classified as? Racy?…Or boring?"

"Confidential!" the girl quickly came back, with a beautiful, wry smile.

"That's not fair!" the firefighter figured. "Do I get to look through your file?"

"Just what is it that you want to know about me?"

"Whatever classified, confidential things you're willing to tell me."

"Okay. My name is Stacey Ferrel—"

"—What's your middle name?"

"I don't have one. My parents didn't believe in middle names. I was born at Beaumont General Hospital in San Francisco, California, September 17, 1950. My parents are…deceased. I have two older sisters: Jackie and Bobbie—"

"—Sisters?"

"Jacqueline and Roberta," she explained. "Let's see…I'm 26 years old, five feet six and a half inches tall. I weigh 130 lbs. I have blonde hair and green eyes—"

"—Beautiful green eyes," the paramedic quietly corrected and—once again—locked his brazen gaze upon them.

The look in the handsome young firefighter's dreamy, dark eyes caused the green-eyed girl's pulse to quicken. 'Now would probably be a good time to bring up the 'just friends' subject,' she realized.

"Sorry…Didn't mean to interrupt," he apologized. "Don't know what came over me," he wryly admitted and that slightly crooked smile of his made a fleeting appearance.

So much for broaching the 'just friends' subject! 'You are entirely too cute when you smile like that!' Stacey silently said—instead. Miss Ferrel cleared her throat and quickly continued. "I, uh… graduated from Berkley, majoring in Business Administration. My current address is: 118 La Brea Canyon Road. My friend's father is a realtor, and he found us the prettiest little place—" she
paused, noting his questioning look. "Yes, I live with a friend, Gerry Mills."

"Jerry Mills?" the crest-fallen paramedic repeated.

"Gervaise Mills," the little lady elaborated, and laughed lightly at the young man's look of extreme relief. "I've been with the Los Angeles County Fire Department for two months. Before that, I worked for the San Francisco City Fire Department."

"Why'd you leave San Francisco?"

"My Uncle told me about this job opening up...and I liked the idea of a better position and higher pay."

"Your Uncle works for the Department?"

"Yes! He sure does!"

"What's his name? Maybe I know him..."

"William Jenner."

The fireman's jaw fell.

The sound of Stacey's light laughter filled the room. "I see you know my Uncle Bill," she teased with a grin, when she finally regained her composure.

Gage swallowed hard, and was a little slower in regaining his. "Uncle Bi-ill?" the paramedic repeated, looking and sounding incredulous. "Chief Jenner is your Uncle Bill?"

The girl nodded and her grin broadened. "When firemen start coming on a little strong, I just mention my Uncle Bill. They don't act so fresh after that. In fact, they turn into perfect gentlemen!"

"That's understandable..." the gentleman grumbled, just beneath his breath.

Roy brought his partner some more Firehouse cuisine the following day—a bowl of Lopez's delicious Irish stew.

John was enjoying his catered meal—immensely! "It sure is great a' you guys to keep bringin' me all these little 'care packages'. I really appreciate it!" he added, and shoveled another spoonful of the stew into his mouth.

"I sure hope you know what you're doing," Roy warned.

"Why-y?" Gage nervously inquired—right in mid-chew. "What did Marco put in this?"

DeSoto suppressed a smile. "I meant, this thing with Newcomb's vacation. I hope you're not going to regret putting your vacation in Chet's hands."

"I'm not," his now relieved partner continued, speaking—as he often did—with his mouth full. "That's the beauty of it. I'm on a temporary leave of absence. My vacation has been put on hold...again. Besides, Dr. Brackett thinks it's a great idea...as long as I don't overdo it. Of course, Dr. Stafford thinks it's a little too soon to be doing so much traveling. But I promised 'em both that I'd take it real easy. Can you swing by my apartment and pick up my shoes and my keys?"

"Sure! When can you leave?"
"Dr. Stafford's gonna give me a physical exam tomorrow morning…and—as soon as he checks me out—I'm checking out!"

"Need a ride?"

"It's, uh, Stacey's day off. She's offered to take me home…"

Roy's right eyebrow arched. "You've been here eleven days...she's been here to visit you—every day—for the last six days. And now...she's going to drive you home." He grinned down at his friend. "Know what I think?"

Gage looked extremely uncomfortable. "Wha-at?"

"I think Miss Ferrel would make some lucky guy...a great little four-letter word!" DeSoto teased.

His partner looked positively petrified.

The following afternoon, John Gage's pretty chauffeur pulled up and parked her sporty little—but cramped for leg room—car in front of 2190 West Ridge Street.

"It's gonna take the Jaws Of Life to get me out of this...thing," the six foot one firefighter, crammed into the itsy-bitsy bucket seat beside her, figured—right out loud.

The thing's owner/operator pretended to shoot the grumbler an annoyed glare, but her giggles gave her away. The auto's highly amused driver got out and stepped around to render its complaining passenger her assistance.

It took some doing, but—finally—her vehicle's victim was extricated.

"Thanks!" Gage gasped—in relief, and extended his stiff, but no-longer-trapped legs. His freed feet hit the sidewalk and he slowly and carefully stood. Well, half of the way anyhow.

Stacey stiffened and made a frantic grab for the hunched over—and quite obviously hurting—gentleman. "You okay?" she anxiously inquired and quickly latched onto his arms to help steady him.

The grimacing guy nodded and slowly began straightening up.

The girl suddenly found herself face-to-face—and practically nose-to-nose—with the very tall...dark haired...and extremely handsome young fireman.

The two of them just stood there, with their faces pressed closely together...holding onto each other's arms, and gazing—rather dreamily—into each others eyes.

Miss Ferrel sighed, silently—and went a little weak in the knees herself. 'Right now would be a really, really, really good time to bring up the 'just friends' topic!' she told herself, but then told him, "I could drive you back to the hospital..." instead.

"I'll be alright," the pained paramedic assured his pretty assistant. "Just some...bruised ribs...is all."

"From when that car crushed you against that rock in the river?" she wondered. "I got to type up—and file—your accident report," she explained, seeing Johnny's look of absolute astonishment. "Let's get you inside," his helper then suggested, and draped his right arm around her neck.

Gage allowed the girl to assist him up the steps. But, when they reached the entrance to Apartment
3, he pulled his arm free so he could fumble for his key. "They fed me through my wrist for so long, now my hand thinks it's a mouth. Have you ever tried to turn a doorknob with your mouth?"

The fireman finally got his apartment's front portal unlocked.

"Wo-ow!" Stacey exclaimed as the gentleman opened the door and waved her in—first. "Where did you get all the plants?"

"I got them from my friends—instead of purple hearts." The paramedic pointed to the plants occupying one corner. "I got those for breaking my wrist—four years ago." He pointed to another corner. "Those were from a burnt leg—last summer…and all the plants on those shelves came from when I got hit by a different car—two years ago. The plants in the kitchen are from a mild concussion—last fall…" The tour guide gave up and flashed the girl his crooked smile. "The guys at the Station call me Tarzan, cuz they claim I live in a bloomin' jungle! They say, one more accident—an' I kin open my own greenhouse!" Gage exchanged grins with his gorgeous guest. "Can I get you something to drink? The milk's probably gone bad, but sodas don't go sour…"

"No thanks. Didn't you get any plants this time?" Miss Ferrel wondered, as she roamed around the apartment, admiring the firefighter's lush, green foliage.

"No! Thank heavens! I don't have any more room!" The paramedic shoved a palm branch out of his way and plopped into an easy chair.

"Who looks after them all…when you're not here?"

"My landlady—Mrs. Gereau—feeds and waters them for me."

Stacey stooped beside a huge, cinnamon bear cactus. "How many do you have?"

"I don't know. I've never counted them. But there's gotta be close to a hundred."

The girl's emerald-green eyes widened in amazement. She stood and crossed over to where 'Tarzan' had collapsed.

As she came within his reach, he latched onto her hand and pulled her down onto his lap.

Miss Ferrel sat there for a few moments, in stunned silence.

"Yah know," her captor began, keeping a perfectly straight face, "if I wasn't so exhausted, I'd be tempted to make a pass at you…"

His pretty captive went from looking absolutely astonished—to highly amused. "Even knowing my Uncle Bill is Chief Jenner?"

"Even knowing your Uncle Bill is Chief Jenner," John assured her. "Well…maybe not a pass exactly…" the fireman continued, following a few moments of thoughtful silence. "Perhaps just a little innocent flirting…" he re-figured and exchanged wry grins with the gorgeous girl in his lap.

Stacey found herself staring into the fireman's dreamy, dark eyes—again. Once more, this action had a profound affect on her pulse—and respirations. 'Better stand while you still can!' she thought, recalling how close contact with the guy made her feel weak in the knees, as well. "I gotta go!" she suddenly announced, and jumped up from Johnny's lap, like a jack-in-the-box.

"Why-y?" the paramedic pouted, looking and sounding tremendously disappointed.

"Because you're supposed to spend the rest of the day in bed!" she lied. "And because you look like
you're going to pass out, if you don't lie down pretty quick!"

Gage got stiffly to his feet and followed Miss Ferrel over to his front door. "Can I see you
tomorrow?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought maybe I could take you on an un-strenuous picnic, or some other
relaxing thing..." he teased.

"I'll have to see what Gerry has planned for tomorrow."

"Do I call you? Or do you call me? I know!" the paramedic suddenly proposed, with a snap of his
fingers. "I'll give you my number...and you give me yours. That way, it doesn't matter who calls
who!"

Stacey watched as the 'smooth operator' ripped the top sheet from a note pad on his phone stand
and tore it in half. Miss Ferrel reluctantly took the slip of paper he proffered, and even more
reluctantly wrote her unlisted number down on it.

Gage recorded his unlisted number, as well...and the two of them exchanged slips.

"Goodbye, Johnny!"

"Goodbye, Stacey! And thanks again for the...lift home!"

The girl with the emerald-green eyes winced slightly—at his pun. Then she grinned...and waved...
and was gone.

John stared—triumphantly—down at the little slip of paper in his hand. 'Roy's right! She's gonna
make some lucky guy a great little four letter word!' Only, this time, he didn't find the thought
quite so horrifying.

TBC
Chapter Nineteen

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Nineteen

Gerry Mills hated housework. The only thing that sucked worse than having to clean house, was having to do it on her day off. Thus, Miss Mills was not in the best of moods when the phone interrupted her dreary, backbreaking task. She flicked the vacuum off and reluctantly responded to the annoying ringing. "Hello?" she snapped.

"Uh-uh...Hi," came back a rather timid reply, from some guy. "This is John Gage. Is Stacey there?"

The girl gasped in exasperation. Then, without covering the mouthpiece, she turned and shouted, "Stace? You-our..friend is on the phone!"

Stacey, who'd been battling some stubborn stains in their toilet bowl, exited the bathroom and came hurrying down the hall. She pulled the bright-yellow Playtex gloves from her hands and exchanged them for the telephone. "Hello?"

"Hi, Stacey! It's John. I was just calling to see if you were gonna be free this afternoon. The weather's s'posed to be beautiful, and I happen to know the perfect place for a picnic!"

"Well, actually, we're pretty busy he—" Stacey managed to say, before Gerry snatched the phone away.

"Stacey has just been released from cleaning detail," Miss Mills proclaimed. When her astonished roomy tried to yank the phone back from her, Gerry covered the mouthpiece and announced—in an agitated whisper, "This house isn't going anywhere! It'll still be here tomorrow! You-our..friend is leaving for two weeks! And—before he goes—you have something very important to tell him! Remember?"

Stacey's look of extreme annoyance turned to one of tremendous discomfort. She reluctantly accepted the receiver her smug—pushy—pal passed back to her. "There's been a sudden change of plans. Looks like I'm gonna be free, after all."

"Grea-eat!" Gage exclaimed with such exuberance, that the girl had to hold the phone away from her ear. "What time shall I pick you up?"

"Uh-uh...How 'bout I meet you at your apartment around noon? Okay?"

"Sure! But you don't have to drive all the way over here. I'd be glad to—"

"—It's no problem!" Stacey assured him. "I have a few errands I can run along the way."

"Well, if you insist. Oh...Do you like peanut butter and jelly?"

The question struck Stacey as most amusing, and she had everything she could do to keep from laughing. "I love peanut butter and jelly!" she somehow managed to get out—with only a grin.

"Good!" the guy on the other end of the line replied, sounding slightly relieved. "Then I guess I'll see yah around noon."
"Yeah. See yah, Johnny..." Miss Ferrel signed off, sounding somewhat melancholy.

"Bye, Stacey..."

'Click'.

"Repeat after me," Gerry coached her glum companion. "We're *just friends*. It's not all that difficult to say," she continued, following a roll of her friend's green eyes. "I can't believe you were going to let the guy go off *for two weeks*, without telling him!"

"I was gonna *call* him!" Stacey stated adamantly in her defense, but then timidly tacked on, "Later."

"Yeah? Well, now you get to say it to his fa—" Gerry stopped speaking, as something suddenly occurred to her. "You can't tell him to his face! Oh-oh, girl...if you don't already got it, you're definitely coming down with it!"

"With what?"

"The love bug! You're falling for the guy—and don't give me none of that 'we're just friends' nonsense!" Gerry warned. "Because, if you really were 'just friends', you could tell him that, in person! But you can't do that, can you. Because close contact causes you to breathe funny...you get all weak in the knees...and your heart goes 'pitter-patter'! Because being with him is so-o...wonderful! So exciting!"

Stacey stared silently back at her roomy, looking absolutely amazed...and guilty—on all counts.

"I've fallen a few times myself," Gerry explained. "I know all the symptoms. What about food?" she wondered. "Can you *eat* in his presence?"

"G-Guess I'm gonna find out..." Stacey stammered and stood there, looking like she wasn't sure if she should laugh or cry.

Gerry gave her smitten associate a huge hug, and her concern immediately shifted from the fireman's heart being broken, to her friend's heart being broken. 'I don't think you realize what you've gotten yourself into, girl!' she sadly—and silently—surmised. "I wish you had let him pick you up! I can't wait to meet the guy that got you to break your 'I don't date cops or firemen' rule!"

"I can't wait to meet him, either!" Stacey suddenly realized—right out loud.

The two friends broke into broad grins.

It turned out that Stacey would have to wait.

When the girl arrived at John's apartment, she was greeted at the door by his landlady, a Mrs. Gereau. The kindly old woman—who insisted on being called Annie—told Miss Ferrel that her date would be a few minutes late. Because he was presently out back, fixing a badly-leaking garden hose, so that she could water her wilting flower beds.

While John busied himself in the backyard, Mrs. Gereau—er, Annie took the opportunity to re-pot a few of the paramedic's root-bound houseplants.

Stacey, who'd been recruited as Annie's assistant in the messy project, tightened her grip on the uprooted palm tree in her hands, and casually commented, "It sure is nice of you to take care of
John's plants like this.

The dirt-besmudged woman was kneeling at her feet, scooping soil into a large, clay pot. She paused in her work and an amused glint filled her hazel eyes. "Thank you, dear. And it sure is nice of him to have these plants for me to take care of. It's my hobby, you know. I suspect he never owned a houseplant 'til he moved in here," she added and glanced up. "Did he ever mention how he came to be my tenant?"

The girl shook her head.

So Annie smiled and continued. "Well, it was shortly after my husband passed away. I had taken up indoor gardening as a hobby...to sort a' fill in the hours and fight off the loneliness. I just love growing things! I discovered I was quite good at it. So good, in fact, that my apartment was soon wall-to-wall plants!"

The horticulture hobbyist suddenly turned solemn. "Then, one evening, I woke up—barely able to breathe! Somehow, I managed to phone for help. John, and his partner, that nice young man, Mr. DeSoto, arrived within minutes."

Her smile returned. "They were so wonderful! They took such good care of me! Why, even after they brought me to the hospital, they would drop in on me to see how I was feeling. I explained to them how the doctors had found I was allergic to a certain mold which grows in damp soil...and so I was going to have to remove all of my beautiful plants from my apartment." Another frown appeared, fleetingly.

Then she grinned again and continued her narrative. "That's when John suggested that I build a greenhouse. I told him the backyard wasn't big enough for one. Then he said that it was too bad that there weren't any empty apartments in my building. Because I could probably turn one of them into a greenhouse easily enough. I told him that was a terrific idea, and that there was going to be an empty apartment—the first of the month. One of my tenant's lease was going to be up then, and he had decided to move into an apartment closer to L.A. John was so excited to hear that! But then he changed his mood suddenly and left—wishing me green-thumb success with my hobby.

I didn't know it then, but—at the time—John was desperately searching for an empty apartment himself. He was having trouble with the other tenants in his building. They would barge in on him at all hours of the night—or keep him awake with their constant partying. He couldn't get any rest on his days off, and it was really beginning to wear him down. That's how I found out he was apartment hunting. After John left, I mentioned to Mr. DeSoto that his partner appeared to be 'all pooped out'. He assured me that there was nothing wrong with his friend that a nice, quiet apartment, in a nice, quiet neighborhood, couldn't fix..."

The dirt reached the desired level and she motioned for her audience/assistant to place her burden down into the pot. Annie adjusted the palm's roots just so, and began scooping—and de-clumping—the damp soil again. "Well, let me tell you, I had those plants sold before I even left the hospital! Then I had Mr. DeSoto bring John by for a 'visit'..."

The devious old lady got a far away look in her eyes. "I'll never forget the expression on his face when I handed him the lease—and the keys to his new apartment. I thought he was going to cry. Then he asked about my plants. I told him there were other hobbies...and he darned near did cry!"

She blinked a few times, as her own eyes got a bit misty.

"He had eight with him when he moved in. And, every time he ended up in the hospital, he ended up with more plants!" She stopped speaking suddenly and turned rather sad. "As you can see," she motioned to all the greenery, "his work has caused him to end up there much too often," she
finished bitterly, but then forced herself to brighten again. "So-o now I have my greenhouse...and he has his peace and quiet. And we're both very happy with the arrangement. Especially me! You see, my husband and I couldn't have any children of our own...and...well, I like to think of John as the son Rob and I might have had."

Annie finished patting the last of the fresh soil in place and glanced up at the girl again. "He's such a wonderful young man! Don't you think? So gentle...and caring...and considerate of others. In fact, he has all the qualities necessary for a good husband..." she added, rather slyly.

Stacey was amused to find that plants weren't the only things being planted in John's apartment that afternoon.

Speaking of John...

The paramedic came groaning into the room just then, grimacing and shaking his right hand. "Ahhh...Shee-eesh!" he bemoaned. "I just smashed my finger with the wrench!" he explained. "To top it off...I put the new washer in, right? And it still leaks!" he added, looking and sounding extremely flustered.

Stacey grinned. Then she turned to Mrs. Gereau—the matchmaker—and stated, "Yeah. I can see where it'd be real handy to have him around the house, all right!"

Annie was forced to chuckle.

John just stared at them both, looking confused—and like he didn't appreciate the fact that they were finding his plumbing problems so amusing.

Three plants, twenty minutes, and another new washer later, the pair of picnickers were finally able to depart.

"We're going in that?" Stacey exclaimed in horror, as John escorted her up to a once-white, but now completely mud-covered vehicle...of some unrecognizable sort.

"Yeah. Why?" the dirty Land Rover's driver wondered, as he unlocked its doors.

"It's filthy!"

"Nah-ah...well...I was sort a' hoping it would rain," the vehicle's owner/operator nervously confessed. He pulled the back hatch, upon which some passerby had scrawled WASH ME, open and packed their picnic paraphernalia safely inside.

"Annie could pot two plants in the dirt on this...thi-ing!" a frowning Miss Ferrel informed the fireman with the filthy form of transportation.

John had spent most of his morning packing, and the remainder preparing for their picnic. Between the two projects, he'd become so preoccupied, he'd forgotten all about breakfast. "So I'll wash it," he promised, with a persuasive smile. "Right after we eat," he tacked on and gave his protesting tummy a quick tap. He pulled the passenger door open, and his date reluctantly climbed aboard.

TBC
Chapter Twenty

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Twenty

'Flows and flows of angels' hair...and ice cream castles in the air...' John sang to himself, as he watched a lone puffy-white cloud sail across the patch of sunny blue sky directly over his head. He was lying on a blanket, in a secluded little clearing, along the wooded west bank of the San Gabriel River.

The peaceful sound of water, trickling over stones, filled his ears, and there was a gentle breeze caressing his face and tugging at his hair.

No doubt about it. The arduous fifteen minutes of hiking had been well worth it. For, the fireman realized with a slight smile, he was completely relaxed.

He heard Stacey calling him, and propped himself up on his elbows to see what she wanted.

The girl waded out of the river and began unrolling her pant legs. "How in the world did you ever find this unbelievably beautiful place?"

"We got called out here a couple a' months ago...to rescue a little boy...and his duck."

"Oh," Stacey simply acknowledged and dropped onto her butt beside him on the blanket.

"Oh-Oh?" Gage stared at the beautiful girl in confusion. "Aren't you curious?"

"Kind a'. But you're not supposed to be thinking about your work. So I'm not gonna let you talk about it. You thirsty?"

"Kind a'," the disappointed paramedic further parroted. It had been a real interesting shift and he was just dying to relate the rescue to someone. "Thanks," he added, as she pulled a soda from their picnic basket and passed it to him. He rolled onto his side and appreciatively eyed his pretty date. "Speaking of beautiful views...' he mused, and his slight smile reappeared. "I'm gonna hafta call Chet and tell him I can't go tonight."

The girl's pretty face filled with horror. "W-Wha-at?" she shouted and quickly followed up her stammered exclamation with a commanding—and rather demanding, "Why-y?"

"I don't think I can make it through two weeks without being able to look into your eyes."

Stacey groaned and dropped back onto the blanket. "Don't scare me like that! I thought you were serious."

"I am," Gage assured her. "Your eyes have...medicinal qualities."

"So do vacations!" she quickly came back, and then firmly added, "You have to get away for awhile! Doctor's orders!" Stacey studied the handsome young man lying at her side. "Are you serious about my eyes...or are you just being mushy?"

John gently brushed a few stray strands of long, blonde hair back from the girl's pretty face and softly replied, "The very first thing I noticed about you, were your beautiful, green eyes. And,
believe me, eyes aren't usually the first thing I notice on a girl. Not that you don't have any other outstanding qualities..." he quickly added, and his slight smile broadened.

The girl laughed and continued to just gaze across at her dreamy date. Speaking of outstanding qualities, Stacey suddenly realized how much she loved that lopsided grin of his. 'Speaking of missing things...' she further realized. "Oops! Sorry. I forgot you were starving. Guess I should have waited until after we ate to go wading, huh..." she teased and sat bolt upright again, to begin rummaging through their box of provisions.

She pulled two plastic-wrapped PB&J's from the basket and passed one on to the famished fireman on the blanket beside her. Well, close contact did cause her to 'breathe funny'...she did get all 'weak in the knees'...her heart did go 'pitter-patter'! And being with him really was 'wonderful and exciting'! Stacey opened her sandwich up and stared nervously down at it. 'The moment of truth...' she mentally noted, and hesitated to take that 'telling' first bite.

Seeing the way the girl was eyeing her lunch, the picnic preparer exhaled an exasperated gasp. "I should have fixed us something fancier. But I didn't wanna buy a bunch of groceries when I knew I was gonna be gone for two wee—"

"—The food's fine!" the dallying diner quickly reassured her troubled host. "Honest!" she added, and took a big bite. Stacey had everything she could do to swallow. It seemed her tummy was all a 'twitter'. 'At the moment, I just don't seem to have any appetite...' she realized, solely to herself, and blinked a tear of joy from her eyes. She flashed the guy she'd become 'emotionally involved' with—over the past two weeks—a sweet smile and licked the peanut butter from her lips. "In fact," she continued, when she could, "this is the best peanut butter and jelly sandwich I've ever tasted!"

The fireman exhaled a huge sigh of relief, and his frown turned quickly—and crookedly—upside down.

Upon Stacey's insistence, the pair of returning picnickers had pulled into the first car-wash they'd come across.

The fireman was balancing on his front bumper, busily soaping down the vehicle's hood.

Stacey had been recruited to rinse the suds off.

The soaper suddenly noticed that his assistant was daydreaming and spraying water onto the pavement instead of his car. "Hey! We can't afford to waste any a' that stuff. We are in a severe drought situation here."

The rinser snapped back to reality. "Sorry."

"Besides," Gage tacked on with a grin, "the dollar bill changer machine is out of order and I only have one quarter left."

Stacey did her level best to look sympathetic, but a slight smile betrayed her. "When was the last time you washed this thing?...Can't remember back that far, huh," she added, when the thing's owner had to stop and think.

The water stopped running.

John dug his last quarter out and flipped it to her. "It was on a Saturday afternoon, the first weekend in March," he smugly replied.
The girl was unimpressed. She set the limp hose down, hurried over to a coin slot and dropped the quarter into it. Then she reluctantly retrieved the nozzle and returned to her rinsing. "I could've washed my car three times, by now!" she stated, sounding more than a bit bored.

Gage glanced up and grinned again. "You call that dinky little thing you drive a car?" He snickered. "It looks more like something you'd find at the bottom of a Cracker Jacks' box."

Stacey's green eyes narrowed. "I'll have you know that I get over 50 miles to the gallon with that thing!"

It was the paramedic's turn to be unimpressed. "Oh, yeah? Well, I get over 23 with this!" he countered and gave his vehicle's sudsy hood a few affectionate pats. "Plus, I have plenty of room to sleep and four-wheel drive for going over rough terrain and getting through the mud. If you drove into a mud puddle with that teeny weenie little thing of yours," he snickered again, "you'd probably disappear!"

The girl grinned deviously and turned the hose on him.

"Ah-ahhh!" John gasped as the icy spray took his breath away. Then he jumped down and went chasing after the now fleeing female.

Stacey sprayed him again. When the hose reached the end of its length, she tossed it and took off running.

The pair raced around the Rover a few times, until the girl began laughing so hard she couldn't run anymore.

Gage caught her by the waist, dragged her back over to the hose, and picked up the nozzle. But, before he could point it at her, the water stopped running.

The still-giggling girl doubled-up with laughter.

John laughed right along with her.

Gradually, the giggles subsided and Stacey straightened back up.

The two of them just stood there for a few moments, breathing hard...and staring into each others' mirth-moistened eyes.

Then the paramedic pulled the pretty, panting girl up into his arms and tenderly kissed her.

"If I would've known it was going to involve all of this," the pretty, posing miss pouted, "I would never have agreed to let you take my picture!"

It was sunset and the pair of picnickers were now standing—barefoot—on a deserted stretch of ocean beach.

"Quit complaining and just enjoy the view," the photographer advised and kept right on playing with his camera's aperture.

"If you don't hurry it up, you're going to miss your plane!"

"I told you, I'm already packed. Besides, we're on the Redeye. Our plane's not leaving for another four hours, yet."
Stacey sighed in surrender and reluctantly changed the subject. "Did you really take all of those incredible silhouette photos in your apartment?"

John nodded. "It's a hobby a' mine."

"Well, you're very good at it."

"Thanks. Now, I'm gonna need you to stand sideways. You see, I'm going for your profile."

The girl sighed again and moved into the requested position.

"Just a little to the left. I want you standing right in the center of the sun."

Stacey grinned. She'd never been asked to stand in the center of the sun before.

"A little more...Perfect!" the picky picture-taker proclaimed. "Okay. Thanks. I got it," he added, following a few 'click's and 'whi-irr's."

The girl gasped in relief and allowed herself to look around. She gasped again. The view was breathtaking! "Oh!...Wo-ow!" she exclaimed.

The fireman finished stowing his photographic equipment in his car, and returned to the water's edge.

"Beautiful, isn't it!" Stacey quietly commented and stood there, transfixed by both the beauty of the scenery and the soothing sound of the surf.

Gage was studying the girl's glowing face. He could see the setting sun's reflection in her eyes. "Yes...it certainly is!" he softly agreed.

Stacey shot her companion a sideways glance, saw that he wasn't even looking out at the sunset, and gave him a playful shove.

John lost his balance and went down on all fours. He latched onto to laughing girl's wrist and pulled her to her knees, as well.

A huge wave came rolling in and swamped them both.

John scrambled to his feet and dragged his date further up the beach.

They stood there, laughing at themselves for getting caught off-guard.

The paramedic pulled the pretty girl back into his arms, held her close and kissed her—again. Just like the first time, his head began to spin. He could feel his heart start throwing PVCs.

'Wo-ow!' Stacey mentally repeated and melted into his embrace. "Let's build a sandcastle!" she suddenly suggested, when the couple, at last, came up for air.

The fireman was tremendously disappointed. Building a sandcastle could never hold a candle to kissing her! "I'd rather hold you..."

"Plea-ease?" the pretty miss pleaded and gave him a persuasive smile.

"A sandcastle, huh?" Gage grumbled. Then he reluctantly released his hold on her and began heading towards the water's edge again. He walked into the surf, right up to his knees, and let another cool wave wash over him.
Stacey struggled desperately not to laugh. "Now where are you going?" she wondered, as he dripped past her.

"To my car," he called back. "To get some matches and some wood...to start a fire! It'll be dark soon and we'll be needing some light...So we can see to build our...sandcastle," he finished explaining, failing miserably to hide the extreme disappointment he was still experiencing.

"You carry your own wood around with you?"

"Yup!" the paramedic proudly confessed. "I believe in being prepared."

Stacey shook her pretty, blonde head a few times and then flashed her Boy Scout an appreciative smile.

A little while later, Gage and the girl were kneeling in front of an enormous mountain of sculpted sand, putting the finishing touches on their sandcastle...by flickering firelight.

John kept stopping to stare at Stacey. He loved the way the flames' reflections lit up the girl's lovely face, and caused her long strands of blonde hair to shine, like fine-spun gold.

The girl saw him piling sand into a giant mound with no apparent purpose. "What are you making?"

Gage glanced down. "Uhhh...The dragon."

"The dragon?"

"Yeah. Every castle has to have a dragon. Preferably fire-breathing. That way, when the dragon attacks the castle, the princess will be sure to call the fire department." He grinned and crawled even closer. "And, that way, I'll get to rescue her!" He took her hand in his and kissed it...and her wrist...and her arm...and her shoulder...and her neck. "What?" he wondered when the girl began backing off a bit. "Don't you want me to rescue you?"

"That depends...on what you'd do with me once you'd...rescued me." Stacey stopped to stare off across the water. "You see, my mother told me that guys like popular girls. She said what they liked about them was that they liked to take them to bed..." she turned back to witness John's reaction to her soft-spoken words.

The guy looked thoughtful.

Stacey continued. "The unpopular girls, the ones with morals and values, she said that guys liked to take them home to meet mom and dad. So-o I decided—long ago—that there was more to life than just being popular. This princess wants her story to end: And they lived happily ever after. Can you understand?"

"I didn't think there were any old-fashioned princesses left in this world," John answered, sounding genuinely amazed.

"You think that I'm a fool..."

"He-ey, no way! In fact, I respect and admire you. It takes a great deal of courage to be old-fashioned, these days."

Stacey blinked her watering eyes. The tears streamed silently down her cheeks.
Gage saw the girl's tears glistening in the fire's light. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a reassuring hug.

"I have your respect and admiration. But can an old-fashioned princess ever find true love in a modern world?"

John just knelt there for a while, holding her and gazing into the fire. "A guy could very easily fall in love with you, princess," he whispered finally. "Very easily..." he quietly repeated. Then he closed his eyes and held her even tighter.

The old-fashioned girl smiled and snuggled cozily up in his arms.

The two held on to each other for a long time.

Eventually, the paramedic pulled back from their embrace and kissed her softly on the forehead...then on her nose...then their lips met.

Stacey started to melt down again.

Realizing that the girl was surrendering to his...advances, John suddenly pulled free. "I shall protect your...honor with my life, my Lady," he vowed and then stood.

"What are you doing?" his lady demanded, as she was suddenly swooped up in his arms. "Put me down!" she pleaded and rapped him on the shoulders. "Put me down!" she screamed again, seeing that he was heading for the water. "What are you doing?" the panicked girl repeated.

Gage ignored her and walked right into the cold surf. "I am protecting your honor...from a very dragon-like fireman."

Stacey laughed and then gasped as they both got completely drenched by a cool incoming wave. She pulled a long strand of soggy seaweed from her protector's sopping wet head. "We'd better get you back to your place and dry you off. You have a plane to catch! Remember?"

John just stood there for a few more moments, holding her in his arms. He grinned as he realized he was feeling pretty relaxed...all things considered.

TBC
"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Twenty-One

Stacey had borrowed her rich roomy's roomy black BMW to take the two travelers to their plane. That way, neither of them would have to pay the Airport Parking fee.

John was standing in front of LAX's main terminal, holding their lovely volunteers' hands in his. "I'm gonna miss you, Stacey Ferrel."

"So, call."

"I can't see your eyes over the phone."

"Call anyways. I'll pick you guys up when you get back."

Kelly pulled the last of their luggage from the car's spacious trunk. "Thanks for the lift," he said and gave the girl a wave. He gave his dallying companion an impatient gasp and pointed to his watch. "C'mon, John! If we miss this flight, we miss them all!"

Gage kissed the girl softly on the forehead. "See yah in two weeks..." He gave her hands a final squeeze and forced himself to pull away. "I must be out of my mind," he mumbled to himself and reluctantly picked up his suitcases.

"Goodbye!" the girl called after him. "I hope you have a really great vacation!"

John glanced back over his shoulder, saw the sad look on Stacey's face and started to set his suitcases back down.

Chet shoved him in the door's direction.

Gage groaned and begrudgingly followed Kelly into the terminal. 'I gotta be certifiably insane!'

The two tardy travelers hurried over to the airline desk and checked their luggage in. Then they turned and went trotting off across the terminal in search of a people mover. Owing to the late hour, they were able to continue running down the handy device's already-in-forward-motion conveyor belt.

The now panting pair made it to their departure gate—just as their flight's final boarding call was being announced.

The firemen quickly found their seats and collapsed into them with audible sighs of relief.

"Hey!...Cool!" Kelly breathlessly exclaimed. "I've never flown...on a 747 before...Have you?"

Gage, who was still breathing too hard to speak, just shook his head.

"Say," his chatty chum continued, "isn't this...the airlines Julie works for?"
John nodded. "But this is...a domestic flight...She's strictly...international."

"Oh...Right." Chet studied his fatigued friend's face for a few moments. "Yah know, in a couple more weeks, you're gonna have yourself a fairly decent cookie duster."

"No I'm not. Because I'm shaving it off the moment we arrive."

"Why-y?"

"Because my upper lip is no longer so sore. And because having all that hair above your mouth is high maintenance. Talk about your milk mustaches. And the crumbs! Man! I don't know how you can stand it. I was supposed to get rid of it before we left. But I kind a' ran out of time..."

"You're makin' a bi-ig mistake," his mustached amigo informed him. "I'm tellin' yah, Gage, the chicks love 'em!"

"Yeah...Ri-ight."

"No-o. Really! If you let it grow out, I'll bet yah five bucks that Stacey will absolutely love it!"

Gage thought the wager over for a few moments before, begrudgingly, accepting his companion's proffered palm.

Chet grinned. The bet was now a done deal. After all, they'd just shook on it. "Speakin' a' Stacey..." the Irishman's eyes narrowed deviously. "She and this Jerry fellah must be pretty good friends for him to let her borrow his car like that..."

John's eyes suddenly sparkled with a bit of mischief, as well. "Oh...They're more than just good friends. They're roommates."

Kelly's look of amusement quickly turned to one of amazement. "Na-ah!"

"It's true. In fact, they've been living together—off and on—for years!"

"And, you're okay with that?"

"Hey, if it doesn't bother Gerry, it doesn't bother me."

Chet's face scrunch up in disgust. "Man! You are totally twisted!"

His totally twisted traveling companion chuckled inwardly. Then he turned and beamed a broad smile of satisfaction out the plane's darkened window. 'Well, well, well. This just might be fun, after all...'

Seven hours and twenty-two minutes later, the Redeye's red-eyed passengers touched down in Detroit, Michigan. The clock on the terminal wall told them it was 11:02 AM.

Gage glanced at his watch. It was only 8:02, back in LA. "Man! We just flew through three time zones!" He reset his timepiece and turned to the possessor of their travel plans. "When does our next flight leave?"

"8:15..." Chet announced, then he cleared his throat and regrettably added, "this evening."

John's already fallen jaw fell even further. "You have got to be joking!"
Kelly cringed and reluctantly passed his understandably upset companion a slightly crumpled piece of paper.

The still completely dumbstruck paramedic opened it. It was, apparently, the first page of Newcomb's 'itinerary'...a page he'd never seen before. 'Breakfast with Bob and Beth...Lunch with Jim and Phylis...Spend afternoon visiting the Green Field Village and Henry Ford Museum'? Gage glanced up from his reading. "You have got to be joking!" he numbly restated.

"Jerry claims they have a really cool collection of antique rigs and a lot of other neat fire fighting artifacts. C'mon, John!" Chet urged. "It'll be fun! Besides, we could both use a little culture."

Gage's annoyed glare softened. His already slumped shoulders sagged even more—in surrender. "How do we get there?"

"The museum's in Dearborn, which is only a few miles west a' here. We kin grab our coats, stash our luggage in some rental lockers and catch a cab."

"If we miss this flight, we miss them all?" John grumbled, as they headed off down one of the terminal's many corridors, to claim and stow their luggage.

"Well, I couldn't tell you that we had a 12 hour layover when we landed. You would a' never left LA."

"You got that right!"

Instead of an afternoon, the pair spent the entire day touring the Green Field Village and Henry Ford Museum.

They got back to Detroit Metro just in time to board a North Central DC-10 to Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Their flight was full when they left Detroit and the two LA County firefighters were somewhat relieved. Apparently, Michigan's Upper Peninsula was a pretty popular destination.

Unfortunately, their flight was not nonstop.

"I think we've flown more vertically than horizontally," John joked, after having touched down in Flint, Saginaw, Grand Rapids, Menominee and Escanaba.

At each airport, more and more passengers had disembarked and fewer and fewer had boarded. So that, by the time the two reached the last leg of their journey, they were the only paying customers left on the plane.

Finally, the pilot announced that they had reached their destination: Marquette County Airport.

As the plane taxied up to the little terminal, Gage glanced at his watch. It was 11:45 PM Marquette, Michigan time. It had taken them nearly an entire day of travel just to get there...wherever there was.

The Californians stepped down from their plane and onto—bare pavement? They glanced around the well-lit area.
Except for a small patch up against one of the terminal buildings, there didn't appear to be a single flake of snow—anywhere!

John shivered and slipped his jacket back on. "Five feet of snow, huh? My refrigerator, back in LA, has more frost in it than this!"

Chet just stood there, looking bewildered. "I don't get it. It was here last week." He turned to one of the baggage handlers. "Excuse me. What happened to all your snow?"

"We got a week a' warm rains and it melted."

"We came all the way from California!" Kelly exclaimed. "We even missed the rain!" he pouted.

The baggage handler saw their disappointed expressions and grinned. "Yeah. Well...we have a saying around here: If you don't like the weather in the U.P., wait five minutes...and it'll change!"

"C'mon!" Gage grumbled and began heading for the terminal. "Let's see about getting out of here."

"Give the place a chance, will yah!" Kelly requested, as he caught up with him. "We just got here!"

"Okay. Okay. I'll give it five minutes. And then I'm catching the next flight out of here!"

They entered the tiny terminal.

Gage turned away from the North Central Airlines' desk.

Kelly came staggering up to him, carrying all four pieces of their luggage.

John flashed him his frown. "The next flight out of here isn't until tomorrow morning."

"Ahhh...too bad," Kelly insincerely said. He gave Gage a grateful grin, as he took two of the heavy cases from him. "Let's pick up our rental and head for our hotel. I'm starved!"

"We don't need to rent a car for one night. There's a cab right out front," the paramedic added and pointed to a vehicle visible through the glass doors.

They stepped out of the terminal and into...an icy drizzle?

Gage glanced at his watch again. It was 11:50. 'Na-ah...It's just a coincidence.'

"How 'bout that!" Kelly exclaimed with a grin. "It's raining...sort of." He shivered his way over to their cab. "It's been so long since I've seen rain, I almost forgot what it's like."

The manager of the Ramada Inn reached across the check-in counter and handed his guests their room keys. "Mr. Gage, Mr. Kelly, I hope you enjoy your stay with us. If you need anything, just ring for room service."

"Thank you," Mr. Gage told him. "Oh. We have to be out to the airport by 8:00 AM. Could you have someone ring our rooms around six, or so?"

"I'm sorry to hear you're leaving us so soon. Yes, of course. We'll give you a wake up call at six. Good evening, gentlemen."
Kelly pocketed his key and picked up his suitcases. "Goodnight," he mumbled, sounding dejected.

They strolled past an indoor pool and started up the stairs to the second floor balcony.

"Do we have to leave in the morning?" Chet pouted. "I kind a' like this place!"

"You don't have to leave. You can stay. Maybe you could water ski?"

"I don't want to have to stay here by myself. I don't know anybody."

"You could always look up Ann and Gary."

"Hey, I was right about the museum, wasn't I?"

"Yeah. I must admit that was pretty cool."

"So give this place a chance. C'mon, Gage! Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Back in LA...with the rest of my senses."

They reached their rooms.

Chet set his suitcases down and began fumbling for his key.

John already had his key in his hand. So, before Kelly could even get his door opened, he had entered his room, dropped his luggage and collapsed onto his bed.

A few moments later, the Irishman reappeared. "How 'bout that!" he exclaimed as he stepped through a portal in the wall and up to his collapsed companion. "And I thought this was the bathroom."

"Goodnight, Chet!"

"You're not turning in already? If we're only gonna be here for one night, let's make the most of it. Didn't you see that poster in the lobby? 'MaryAnn Entertaining Nightly in the Discoverer's Lounge.' " Kelly picked his fellow firefighter's feet up and swung his long legs over and off the bed. "Let's go get 'entertained'," he invited. "Let's go discover 'MaryAnn'..."

But Gage didn't budge. "Goodnight, Chet!"

"At least come and have something to eat..."

John lifted his legs back onto the bed and rolled over. "I'm too beat to eat."

Kelly gazed glumly down at his motionless mate. "Yeah. And too pooped to party." He exhaled a resigned sigh and then disappeared back through the door between their adjoining rooms.

TBC
Chapter Twenty-Two

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Twenty-Two

John Gage gradually became aware of a strange humming sound...and the distinct odor of stale cigarette smoke. He snapped bolt upright in his bed and gazed rather dazedly around.

It took him a few moments to realize where he was.

The strange hum seemed to be coming from a radiator running along the wall and the stale cigarette smoke smell was emanating from the curtains, carpeting and upholstery of his hotel room.

'It has to be past six,' he realized, noticing how light it was out. 'I wonder why they didn't call?' He flicked the little light beside his bed on and squinted down at his watch. "Ten to ten!" he shouted and swung out of bed. "We missed our plane!"

The hotel's upset guest grabbed the phone on his nightstand and dialed the desk. "Yes. This is room 222. Why wasn't I called this morning?...What do you mean closed? Doesn't your airport open on Mondays?...A blizzard?" He glanced towards the window. "But it was just raining last night..." his words trailed off, as he recalled what the baggage handler had told them: 'If you don't like the weather in the U.P., wait five minutes...and it'll change.' "All right...I see...Yes. And thanks for letting me sleep in, then. I appreciate it...Yeah...Bye." He hung up and hurried over to the window.

He stood there, staring out at a fantasy world—a Winter Wonderland!

"Good grief!" he said aloud. "There must be a foot already...and it's still coming down!" The paramedic smiled and continued to just stand there, transfixed by the big, fluffy, white flakes that were swirling past his window. 'Wait til Chet sees this!' he mused.

He pulled himself away from the wondrous sight and poked his head through the portal between their abodes.

Kelly's room was dark. His window's shades were drawn and his phone was off the hook.

John stared at the still-snoozing figure and debated whether or not to wake him. Determining that it might be best to let his night-owl friend sleep, he pulled his head back into his room and quietly closed the door.

Forty-five minutes later, John stepped lightly down the stairs of the Ramada Inn and into the Settler's Dining Room. He was showered and shaved—and starving!

The tourist took a seat by the windows, so he could watch the snow fall.

A pretty, young waitress stepped up his table and handed him a menu. "Good morning!"

Gage tore his gaze away from the windows. "Good morning! Isn't that beautiful!" he exclaimed and motioned to the snowstorm—that was still raging.
The girl gave him a strange look. "You can't be from around here, or you'd be sick a' that Michigan dandruff by now."

"Michigan dandruff, huh? Well, it sure beats Southern California drought!"

The little lady was dumbstruck. "Why would anyone ever leave sunny California...and come to the U.P.?"

"Would you believe...just to see that?" the Californian inquired and pointed to the fluffy flying flakes.

The girl grinned and shook her head. "Would you like some coffee or breakfast while you watch?"

"Yes, please. Both." The paramedic was about to peruse the restaurant's menu, when he heard a woman scream.

The paramedic turned in the scream's direction in time to see an elderly gentleman slump down in his seat at a table in the room's far corner.

The woman seated beside him jumped to her feet and screamed again. "Please? Somebody call an ambulance!"

Before she could even finish her sentence, the gentleman by the windows was at their table.

"What happened, mam?" John asked and carefully lowered the obviously unconscious man to the floor. He knelt beside the victim, opened the guy's airway and checked for a corotid pulse.

"I...I don't know. After shoveling the car out this morning, he was complaining about indigestion. He said that his chest felt...tight. Are you a doctor?"

"No, mam." He couldn't find a pulse. "Look, I don't have time to explain. But I've got to hit this man's chest." With that, he struck the victim's breastbone with his clenched right fist. (*)

The victim was no longer breathing.

So Gage gave him four quick, building breaths of air and then rechecked his corotid.

Still nothing!

"What are you doing?" the guy's distraught wife wondered.

"Mam, I believe your husband has suffered a heart attack. I'm performing CPR...Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation," the paramedic patiently explained. He located the tip of the victim's breastbone...measured up two finger widths and placed the heel of his left hand down. He placed his right hand over his left and interlocked his fingers. "One..." he counted aloud and pressed firmly down, compressing the gentleman's heart between his breastbone and spine—forcing blood out of the heart and through his body, "...and," he released, "...two," he compressed, "...and," he released.

Speaking of bones...

John's bruised ribs were rebelling under the strain. He winced in pain but kept right on pressing and releasing—and counting.

The waitress came running up. "An ambulance is on the way!"
Gage gave her a grateful glance.

The hotel's manager also came rushing into the room. "Is he...dead?"

'Clinically? Yes. Biologically? No,' the rescuer thought to himself. Even if he weren't too busy at the moment to respond verbally, the paramedic would never have acknowledged such a 'tactless' question. "...fifteen. You have a pool. Do you have a resuscitator?" he asked, before giving the victim two more lungfuls of air, mouth-to-mouth.

"Yes. But Jeffrey couldn't make it in to work today—on account of the storm. And nobody else around here knows how to use it."

"I do," his guest informed him, and kept right on performing CPR. "Get it! And send someone up to room 224 and tell Mr. Kelly to get down here!"

The manager turned to the waitress. "Call room 224—!"

"—You can't! His phone's off the hook! Please! Just somebody go get him!" the rapidly tiring rescuer with the really sore ribs repeated.

The girl nodded and left.

Five series of compressions and breaths later, Mr. Kelly came flying into the room. "Ga-age! What are you doing?"

The manager followed, towing the hotel's resuscitator.

"Chet! Am I glad to see you! Take over compressions for me! So I can set up the O2!"

Kelly dropped to the floor and knelt there, frowning. 'Ma-an, Doctor Brackett is never gonna believe this!'

"No-ow!" John shouted and jerked his hands out of the way.

Kelly took over compressions for him.

Before setting up the oxygen, Gage paused a moment—to regroup. The paramedic glanced up and saw tears streaming down the victim's wife's face. He took a few more precious moments to reassure her. "The ambulance should be here any minute now," he softly said and gave her wrung hands a few comforting pats.

She gazed down at the kind stranger, her eyes brimming with both tears and gratitude.

"Mrs...?"

"Valinski. Mrs. Stephen Valinski."

"Mrs. Valinski, is your husband allergic to any medication?...Is he on any medication?" he continued, when she shook her head.

Another 'No'.

"Does he have a history of heart problems?"

"No. I told him we should just stay home this morning. But it's our 40th wedding anniversary and
he wanted to take me out to breakfast. The snow was too wet...too heavy. I wanted him to hire one of the neighbor boys to shovel out the car. But he wouldn't hear of it."

Gage finished setting up the oxygen and shot the guy's poor wife another sympathetic glance. He exhaled an impatient gasp and glanced at his watch. "How far is it to the hospital?"

"This blizzard has a lot of the streets blocked off," the manager said. "The plows haven't opened them all up, yet. The hospital is only a few blocks away. But they may have had to take a longer route..."

Suddenly, sirens could be heard in the distance.

The sound grew louder and louder and then stopped.

Gage turned to his waitress. "I'm gonna need a metal serving tray."

The girl nodded and headed for the kitchen.

Gage breathed an enormous sigh of relief, as two ambulance attendants entered the restaurant, wheeling another resuscitator and a stretcher. He stood and deftly switched their victim's oxygen supply from the hotel's to the hospital's.

John placed the tray down on the stretcher.

Kelly had to pause compressions while they lifted the man onto the gurney.

"Okay, Chet. I'll take over from here," John announced and gently nudged his assistant out of the way. "I'm riding in with him."

"No way, Johnny! You're not supposed to be do—"

"—I'll walk back. It's only a few blocks."

"Bu-ut...you don't even have your jacket!" Kelly gave up, as Gage disappeared—along with the attendants and their victim. 'We just got here and...Ahh...Hell...I can't even believe this!'

Several slippery, snow-covered streets later...

The ambulance pulled up to Marquette General North's Emergency Receiving.

The vehicle's back doors popped open and John Gage hopped out.

The attendants wheeled Mr. Valinski inside and into one of the emergency treatment rooms.

"The victim's name is Stephen Valinski," the paramedic informed the ER doc. "He's been in cardiac arrest for the past 22 minutes. He's not on any medication. No known allergies and no previous history of heart problems. I witnessed the arrest, administered a precardial thump and began CPR, immediately. As soon as a resuscitator became available, I placed him on 10 liters of O2."

"I don't suppose you could stick around for awhile?" Stephen's physician requested. "This stupid storm prevented over half of our staff from showing up. Which has left us extremely shorthanded."
The paramedic shoved a little step stool over to the table, stepped up onto it and promptly made both of his hands available—again.

A nurse swapped the metal tray for a short backboard, and John continued to perform chest compressions.

Electrocardiogram sensors were positioned.

One of the only two nurses available switched the patient's oxygen over to constant flow and an ambu bag.

The other nurse started to hook up an IV.

Five minutes—a few doses of some potent drugs, and three defibrillations—later, John watched a familiar spiked pattern begin to dance across their victim's cardiac monitor. "All right! We got a conversion! He's in sinus rhythm!"

"Respirations are spontaneous!" the nurse who'd been squeezing the ambu bag further proclaimed.

The four ER team members exchanged triumphant grins.

"He would have been DOA, if it hadn't been for you, doctor!" the young ER physician told his CPR administering assistant. Then he turned to the nurses and started issuing a whole slew of orders. "—and then get him up to CCU, stat!" he finished, at long last.

The nurses nodded.

The order issuer and his handy assistant left the room.

"I'm not a doctor, doctor...?"

"Hunter. Tim Hunter," the physician replied and stood there, looking somewhat perplexed.

"John Gage. Fireman Paramedic. Los Angeles County," his assistant said and extended a hand, once more.

Hunter took and shook the paramedic's proffered palm. "Well, John...you sure had me fooled! You seem to be more familiar with emergency medical procedures than some doctors around here!"

"Thanks! I get an awful lot of practice."

"You know, you're the first paramedic I've ever met. And, I must say, I'm very impressed!"

"Thank you for the compliment. Don't you have any paramedics in Michigan?"

"We might. But I don't know of any. What brings you to the Upper Peninsula?"

"Snow."

"That's usually why people leave here to go to Southern California. Do you ski?"

"No-o...no. I see enough broken bones on other people. Enough to know that I don't want to have any of my own!"
Hunter grinned. "Smart!"

They reached the waiting room by the ER's main entrance.

"Mrs. Valinski, this is Doctor Hunter. Dr. Hunter is in charge of your husband's care," John introduced, as their patient's spouse approached them.

"Your husband is stable, for now...I've ordered some tests," Hunter informed her. "We're moving him to the Coronary Care Unit, where we'll be keeping a very close eye on him, for the next few days."

"Oh! Thank you, doctor!"

"Don't thank me. Thank Mr. Gage, here. Your husband is very fortunate that John wasn't staying at the Holiday Inn."

"Thank you, young man!" Mrs. Valinski sincerely said. She gave Mr. Gage a huge hug.

"You're very welcome...?"

"Margaret. But you can call me Peggy."

"Well, Peggy, I hope you and your husband get to celebrate many, many more anniversaries—together. And you can just call me John."

"That is so sweet of you, John. If you aren't a doctor, how did you know what to do for my husband?"

"You don't have to be a doctor to administer Basic Life Support. Anybody can learn Basic Life Support. Even you could've done what we did. It just takes a few hours of proper instruction."

Dr. Hunter glanced at his watch. "Oh...my...I have to be in surgery in fifteen minutes. John, do you need a lift back to your hotel?"

"I'm gonna walk. They said it's only a few blocks from here."

The doctor stared at him in disbelief. "You start walking around Marquette, Michigan in a blinding snowstorm—without a jacket—and they'll be bringing you in here on a stretcher, next!"

Gage glanced down at his flimsy, cotton shirt and winced.

Hunter grinned again. "C'mon. I'll loan you mine. You can leave it at the desk."

TBC

*Author's note: Back in the days of "EMERGENCY!", the precardial thump was SOP for a witnessed arrest. It has since been deemed dangerous and pretty much useless.*
Chapter Twenty-Three

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Where have you been?" Kelly annoyedly inquired an hour later, as his soggy associate finally came stomping through the main entrance to the Ramada Inn. "How long does it take to walk a few blocks?"

Gage's socks were soaked and his feet were frozen. His pant legs were damp up to the knees and his hair was also wringing wet. He'd been tossing snowballs at street signs and trees. So his hands were now hurting from the cold. The Californian didn't care. He'd had a blast! He stomped some more Michigan dandruff from his shoes and then blew on his stiff, red fingers, in a futile attempt to warm them. He shivered and then smiled, as he suddenly realized he wasn't just cold and hungry, he was also completely relaxed. The wayward walker grinned and pointed to the watermark on his jeans. "Look how deep it is! Man! It's really coming down out there!"

"Don't change the subject. What happened, Johnny boy?" Chet taunted. "Did you get lost?"

Gage's grin broadened. "Hey! What can I say? The street signs were all covered with snow."

"Ah-hah!" Kelly gloated. "I knew it! I knew it! You better get out of those wet clothes. Whose jacket did you rip off?"

"Dr. Hunter loaned me his. He's coming by to pick it up, later on this afternoon." John slid the soggy garment off and sloshed over to the front desk. "Can I leave this here? Someone'll be comin' by ta claim it...hopefully, after it's had a chance to dry out a little."

"Sure. No problem. I'll drape it over a chair by the register," the pretty desk clerk proposed.

"Thanks!"

John sloshed through the lobby and past the pool. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Yeah. The food's not bad," Kelly critiqued and followed his frozen friend up the steps to their floor.

John Gage entered the Settler's Dining Room—again—feeling much dryer but still chilled to the bone. He stepped up to a huge, stone, gas fireplace and then stood there, warming his stiff, cold hands...and thinking. He was thinking about Stacey...about the drastic change in climate...about Stacey...about his empty stomach...about Stacey...about everything but his work.

The same pretty waitress approached him. "Sorry, I didn't hear you come in," she apologized. "How's that guy with the heart attack?"

The fireplace hugger turned around and began warming his backside. "Last I heard, he was doin' okay."

"That's great! Do you want to try ordering again?"

"Yeah!" The disrupted diner's blood sugar was now so low, he was about to pass out himself. "You
still serving breakfast?...Or is it brunch now?"

"Hu-uh?" the bewildered waitress wondered and handed Mr. Valinski's handsome rescuer another menu.

"You know, when you combine breakfast and lunch together..."

The little lady smiled and pulled out her order pad. "You can order breakfast anytime of the day around here. Shall I give you some time to study the menu? Or do you already know what you want to brunch on?"

At that point, John didn't particularly care what he consumed—as long as it was something edible. Firefighters couldn't afford to be picky eaters. Besides, his defrosting fingers were still too stiff to be turning pages. He smiled and passed the menu back to her—unopened. "Just bring me whatever you fed my friend," he suggested, and placed the backs of his hurting hands on his toasty-warm tush.

The girl grinned. "You want coffee with it?"

"Yeah. And a large milk, please."

The woman returned in about as much time as it takes to toast some bread and slice a tomato. "Where are you going to sit?"

The dining room was completely deserted. Which meant her customer had his choice of any seat in the house.

The paramedic pulled out the chair closest to the fireplace and plopped himself down onto it. "Thanks," he said, as the girl finished setting her tray's contents on the table in front of him. Gage glanced around the big empty room. "Would you care to join me?"

"I'd love to! But I don't think my boss would approve."

"Go ahead, Sharon..." the hotel's manager invited, as he came stepping up to them. "I think this snowstorm is going to keep the usual crowd away. So you can take off early. I'd like to buy the both of you lunch," he announced and offered their guest his hand. "George LaRosse."

The famished fireman got to his feet. "Thank you, Mr. LaRosse," he replied and gave the generous man's hand a hearty shake.

"Yeah. Thanks, boss!" Sharon exclaimed and hurried off, in the direction of the kitchen.

"Thank you, Mr. Gage," the manager countered.

"John," the Californian corrected.

"John...We could have had a real tragedy here this morning. I was really impressed with the way you handled the situation. Sharon tells me you're not a doctor. Are you a medical student?"

The paramedic glanced down at his plate. The big, juicy bacon-lettuce-and tomato sandwich it contained made his mouth water. "I'm a fireman paramedic."

"A fireman what?"

"A paramedic is like an EMT—an emergency medical technician. Someone who is trained to
administer ALS—advanced life support," Gage patiently explained, over the loud growling of his empty stomach. "You're welcome to join us..."

"Thank you. But I have to get back to the desk. I would like to talk to you later on—about that CPR thing—if I could. After what just happened here, it might be prudent to have myself and some of my employees trained in that."

Gage grinned. "I think that's a great idea!"

"I'll see you later, then. Enjoy your lunch, John!"

"Thanks! I'm sure I will." 'Eventually,' he silently finished.

Sharon returned—with a big, juicy BLT of her very own.

The hungry gentleman stayed standing and pulled a seat out for her.

The girl gave the gallant guy a grateful grin. "Thanks," she said, as he helpfully shoved her chair back in.

"You're welcome. And thanks for joining me for brunch, Sharon...?"

"Linquist. And thank you for inviting me, John...?"

"Gage. My pleasure, Miss Linquist."

"Sharon," his pretty companion corrected.

"John," the paramedic countered.

The brunchers exchanged smiles and handshakes.

"Let's eat!" the faint-feeling fellow with the dangerously low blood sugar level suggested and quickly re-asserted his seat. "Mmm! Chet was right," he determined, between chews. "This is really good!"

Speaking of Chet...

Kelly entered the dining room, stepped up to his traveling companion's table and nonchalantly announced, "There are some guys out in the lobby who want to talk to us." He took a seat beside the pretty gal and flashed her a grin. "Hi, Sharon."

The girl grinned back. "Hi, Chet."

"Sharon and I have a date tonight," Kelly proudly proclaimed and then hinted, "She's got a friend..."

John took a long swallow of milk and another big bite of his sandwich. "Who are they?"

Chet stared at his chum in disbelief. "Don't you know Sharon? Criminally, Gage! You're having lunch with her! I don't know her lady friend's name." He turned his perplexed gaze to his date for the evening. "Who's the friend?"

Gage managed an amused gasp. "I meant, the guys in the lobby."

"Oh...I don't know. But I think they may be reporters. Cuz a couple of 'em have cameras."
"Why would reporters wanna talk to us?"

Kelly shrugged. "The manager didn't say."

Sharon stared at them in amazement. "Are you kidding? It's not everyday that someone saves someone's life around here. What happened here this morning is big news...for Marquette."

The two California firefighters exchanged confused glances. They didn't find anything particularly newsworthy about what had happened there that morning. It really was no big deal. Well, except to poor Mr. Valinski...

"Why all the publicity?" John wondered, aloud.

Chet managed another shrug. "Maybe that guy was the mayor?"

"Our mayor is a woman," the even more amazed girl informed him.

Kelly tried again. "The Chief of Police?"

"They're not here because that man was somebody important. They're here because you two saved his life, and that makes you heroes. They're here because you're heroes."

"But...all we did is administer Basic Life Support," the paramedic protested.

"Yeah," his chum chimed in. "Anybody—with the proper training—could have done the same thing."

"How can you be so modest? Honestly, anyone listening to the two of you talk would think you guys go around saving peoples' lives all the time!"

"Actually, we do," Kelly confessed. "We're firefighters. It's what we do for a living. Especially him," he added, and motioned to his still-munching amigo. "Go ahead, Gage. Show her that little card you carry around with you."

The paramedic took another big gulp of his milk. "What little card?"

"You know, the one that says: 'This certifies, etc., etc..."

Gage slid his wallet out of his back pocket.

Chet snatched it from him and began flipping through it. He found the card in question and held it up in front of the pretty little lady's face.

Sharon held his hand still and read, "This certifies that firefighter John Roderick Gage has met all the necessary requirements...mumble, mumble...qualified Emergency Paramedic...mumble, mumble...administer definitive therapy...mumble, mumble...State of California...County of Los Angeles...California State Board of Medical Examiners." She pulled Chet's hand down. "You're a fireman doctor?"

"No. No. I'm a fireman paramedic."

"What's the difference?"

Seeing as how his friend had gone back to filling his face, Kelly succinctly summed it up. "Well, a doctor can treat patients without a paramedic. But a paramedic can't treat patients without a doctor."
John suppressed a smile and then latched onto his billfold, which his nosy friend had returned the card to, and now closely examining. "The difference between a doctor and a paramedic is the degree of training we receive. Doctors spend about seven years in Medical School. In comparison, the Paramedic Program is like an advanced first-aid course."

"So then...what—exactly—does a paramedic do?"

"A paramedic acts as the eyes, ears and hands of a doctor. When we have a victim of an injury or illness, we see what the problem is...we listen to the complaints...and then we relay that information on to a physician, over the phone. The doctor then tells us how to treat the victim. If it's something we've been trained to do, we do it. If not, we simply stabilize the patient and then transport them to the hospital."

Sharon shook her head in disbelief. "And I thought all firemen did was put out fires."

"We do that, too." Kelly snuck a few swigs of the paramedic's coffee. "But most of our rescues don't even involve fire."

"What happens if something starts burning while you're off rescuing someone? Someone with a bad heart, for instance..."

"Then Johnny and Roy take the Squad to the heart attack victim and we take the Engine to the fire."

"Who's Roy?"

"My partner," the paramedic replied.

"No wonder you think this was no big deal," the girl suddenly realized. "Your work must be so exciting—and dangerous! What happened here this morning must seem pretty tame, by comparison. I bet you guys have had a lot of close calls..."

"As a matter of fact," Kelly began, "just two short weeks ago, Gage, here, had a real close ca—"

"—Che-et!" John suddenly interrupted.

"In fact," his friend calmly continued, "he just got out of the hospital three days ago—"

"—Che-et!" the paramedic repeated and aimed a menacing glare in his mouthy companion's direction.

The girl was now on the edge of her seat. "What happened?"

Kelly threw caution to the wind. "He was involved in a rescue where the victim was dying of pneumonia."

"A-and...?"

The storyteller shrugged. "That's it."

His female audience looked tremendously disappointed. "So...what was the close call?"

Chet drained the cup dry and then aimed his right index finger at his frowning friend. "He was the victim."

Sharon's jaw dropped.
"His doctor gave him strict orders: No more rescuing! For at least a month! 'Not even a cat out of a tree!' his doctor said. And we aren't even in town for half a day—"

"—Well, I couldn't just finish ordering my breakfast and let him die!' John interjected, in his defense.

"Maybe not. But you didn't have to ride in with him. And you should've called me sooner!"

"I'll try to remember that...next time. And, next time, you try to remember to keep your phone on the hook." He reached for his coffee. The cup was empty.

"It was getting cold," the caffeine thief explained, when his annoyed friend's gaze fell upon him. Speaking of getting cold...

The still slightly chilled Californian suddenly excused himself and stepped back over to the fireplace. Gage stood there, basking in its warm glow...and smiling.

"What do we do about those guys in the lobby?" Kelly wondered.

The paramedic's smile disappeared. "Is there another way out of here?"

"Yeah," Sharon assured him. "But, if you leave through the kitchen, you'll be on the back side of the building. You'll have to trudge through nearly two feet of snow to get to the side entrances, because none of the sidewalks have been snow-blown, yet. And, if you use any of the emergency exits, alarms'll start going off."

They were trapped.

"Then I guess we should just go and get it over with," John gloomily surmised.

"You didn't mention that one was a television camera," Gage grouched beneath his breath, as the two of them stepped up to the small group of guys in the lobby.

"You didn't ask," Kelly grumbled back.

"Mr. Gage...Mr. Kelly," the hotel's manager greeted them. "These gentlemen would like to speak with you...if you're willing, that is," he added, seeing the paramedic's unhappy expression.

"On one condition," Mr. Gage agreed. "No one is to mention the fact that we're firefighters, or that I'm a paramedic. We don't want people to get the impression that you've got to be a paramedic or a firefighter before you can administer Basic Life Support."

"Yeah," Kelly concurred. "Anyone can learn Basic Life Support. The manager, the waitress, even Mrs. Valinski could've done the same thing we did. It just takes a few hours of proper instruction."

The reporters reluctantly agreed to the firefighters' terms.

There were three separate interviews, each lasting between ten to fifteen minutes.

The first was given to some guy from an FM radio station.

The second series of answers—accompanied by photos—were supplied to the city's only newspaper.
Lastly, there was the documented conversation with the roving reporter and camera crew from the local TV station.

Curiously enough, the final question posed to them always turned out to be: 'Why would anyone, in their right mind, ever want to leave warm and sunny Southern California and spend their vacation in the U.P.?'

Their pat answer was, "Snow!"

Judging by the odd looks that reply always received, the visitors knew their questioners had to be thinking: 'These guys can't possibly be in their right minds!'

Later that snowy afternoon...

Chet was seated on a chair in his chum's room, reading an article in an outdoor magazine—all about snowmobiling.

John was lying on his bed, gazing out the window at the still flying flakes, and concentrating hard on relaxing.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

Gage got up and answered it.

It was Dr. Hunter. "Hi, John! I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, no-o. C'mon in..." the paramedic spotted the doc's coat, draped over his arm. "Did it dry out?"

"Yes. It did."

"Oh, Dr. Hunter, this is Chet Kelly," he introduced, as his friend came stepping up to them. "Chet, this is the guy whose jacket I ripped off."

Kelly and Hunter shook hands.

"Would you care to sit down?" Kelly inquired and motioned to his vacated seat.

"No. Thanks. I can't stay. I just stopped by to ask John, here, a quick question. I hate to ask you this. Because I know you're on your vacation. But, weather permitting, we're having a meeting Wednesday night to organize a community Emergency Services Pro—"

"—Excuse me, Dr. Hunter," Chet interrupted, when he saw where the conversation was headed. "Please, don't ask him. Cuz' he'll accept. And his doctor gave him strict orders—"

"—Che-et!" the paramedic stepped in front of his friend. "What are you doing?"

"I'm helping you keep your promise to Doctor Brackett," Kelly calmly replied and then peered around him. "He's still recovering from a bad case of pneumonia. Plus, he's suffering from complete physical exhaustion and he's on a medical leave of ab—"

Gage placed a hand over Chet's mouth, in desperation.

Kelly quickly pulled it away and completed his sentence, "—sense."

The physician stood there, looking highly amused. "I understand. Thanks for telling me," he told
Chet and turned to take his leave.

"Wait, Doc!" John urged and held the door shut.

"It would be unethical to ask you to do something that would go contrary to one of my colleague's orders. In other words, forget it, John! And listen to your doctor. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about when I say he knows what he's talking about," he teased. "It was nice meeting you, gentlemen. I hope you enjoy your stay in the U.P.," he added with a grin.

"Thanks!" Kelly called after the disappearing doctor.

John quietly closed the door and slowly turned in his infuriating friend's direction.

"Don't blame me-e! Blame Dr. Brackett," Chet chided. "Before we left, he made me promise to look after you. Your R&R is s'posed to consist, strictly, of relaxation and recuperation. Brackett's orders!"

The paramedic's countenance softened and he gave his guardian a grateful grin. "Ah-ah, gee-ee. Thanks for lookin' out for me—Mo-om."

His Old Mother Hen of a friend suddenly turned stern. At least, he pretended to. "You'd better watch it, sonny! Or I'll send you to your room."

Sonny's grin broadened. "This i-is my room!"

"Oh...ri-ight," Kelly was forced to concede. "You'd still better watch it! Or I'll send you to the other room."

The paramedic collapsed back onto his bed and then lay there, looking extremely relaxed...and most amused.

Chet picked his magazine up and then plunked himself back down in his chair—er, John's chair. The pictures made snowmobiling look so appealing. He glanced up at the window and wondered how long the snow would last.

Hopefully, it would stick around long enough for them to give the snow machines a try.

TBC
Chapter Twenty-Four

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Upper Peninsula snowstorm continued to hold the two Southern California firemen hostage in their hotel.

Kelly whiled away the hours in The Discoverer's Lounge—with the ladies—and continued to absorb everything he could—about snowmobiling.

Gage borrowed a pair of scissors from the front desk, turned his rattiest jeans into a pair of cutoffs, and then spent his afternoons bobbing leisurely about their hotel's heated, indoor pool.

Since John was already completely relaxed, his concentration centered on a certain long-blonde-haired, green-eyed young lady back in LA.

The two of them had even chatted—long distance—until he, and everyone within close proximity of the pay phone, had run out of change.

The vacationing paramedic treaded water and watched as one of the hotel workers picked up a hose and began spraying the tropical plants surrounding the pool. All the heat and humidity must have agreed with the greenery, because the foliage sure was lush. Why, some of the exotic flora was even flowering! The beauty of several of the more spectacular blooms was quite breathtaking.

If only Stacey were there to share the view with him...

A thought suddenly occurred to the swimmer. He smiled and started heading for the ladder.

John climbed out of the pool, snatched up his wallet—and the credit card it contained—and disappeared in the direction of the nearest pay phone, toweling himself dry—and swapping paper currency for coins—along the way.

Several thousands of miles away, and a few hours later...

All eyes in the LA County Fire Department's clerical pool looked up, as an FTD representative suddenly appeared.

"I have a delivery here for a...Miss Stacey Ferrel."

A couple of helpful people pointed him in the right direction.

The ladies followed the fellow over to Miss Ferrel's cubicle and then watched, as he presented the astonished young woman with a big, bright-orange bouquet.

"Stacey Ferrel?" the delivery man demanded, prior to releasing the contents of his hands. "Sign here, please..." he added, following an uncertain nod. The guy pulled a pen from his pocket and a clipboard from his armpit.

Stacey set the exotic arrangement down on her desk and obligingly wrote her name in the space the
gentleman's finger was pointing to.

The deliveryman snatched his pen back and vanished, leaving a large crowd of curious coworkers in his wake.

Miss Ferrel ignored the half dozen inquiries as to her admirer's identity and reached for the card. 'Just wanted to share the beautiful view with you. John' The woman clutched the note to her heart and wondered where—and how—the fireman had managed to find tropical flowers blooming in a raging blizzard. She couldn't wait to ask him.

The girl beside her sighed. "That is so-o-o-o romantic!"

"Jo-ohn?" another of the women who'd been peering over her shoulder pondered. "John who?"

The green-eyed girl glanced around.

The women were all waiting expectantly for an answer. Apparently, they were not going back to work without one.

It was Stacey's turn to sigh—in surrender. "John Gage."

"John Ga-age?" Melanie, from payroll, parroted. "That sexy paramedic who works out of 51's?"

Stacey nodded.

"Oo-ooh! That guy is gorgeous!" one of the girls droolingly determined.

"I'll say!" another coworker quickly concurred.

"You go, girl!" a fourth female chimed in.

Stacey was correct.

With their curiosity satisfied, for the most part, the ladies gradually began filing back to their workstations.

Fifteen minutes later, in the Break Room...

"You shouldn't have told them," Bonnie Simms, from Personnel, chastised. The brunette pulled her freshly dispensed purchase from a bottom slot in one of the vending machines and crossed over to the closest snack counter. "Some of the 'snootier' girls are already insanely jealous of you," the woman, who was Miss Ferrel's most trusted amigo at work, continued. The hungry girl gasped in exasperation, as her first few attempts, to tear the tough plastic her pretzels were packaged in, failed.

Stacey stepped up behind the counter and stood there, looking stunned. "Jealous?...Of what?"

Bonnie stopped struggling and turned to stare incredulously back at the beautiful blonde beside her. "Oh-oh, I don't know. Possibly your looks...and the fact that one of the sexiest single guys—in the entire department—just sent you flowers."

The girls exchanged grins.

Miss Simms tugged on the stubborn plastic with renewed vigor. Her eyes widened, as the package in her hands suddenly exploded—launching its contents into space.
The two chums had a good chuckle. Then they dropped to their knees and began picking the scattered pretzel stix back up.

The sound of shuffling shoe heels grew louder and louder. An undetermined number of women entered the Break Room and stepped up to the coffee dispenser in the corner.

"The flowers are lovely," one was saying. "I just can't picture the two of them together. I mean, she's not exactly his type, is she."

"What do you mean?" another asked. "I hear any woman who puts out is his type."

A fit of giggles followed.

"I thought he only dated nurses," yet another commented.

"And airline stewardesses."

"Hey...That's right. Last I heard, he was pretty 'hot and heavy' with some stewardess."

"Maybe they broke up?"

"O-Or, maybe she's just out of town..."

"You know what they say...When the cat's away, the rat will play."

The group finished filling their coffee mugs and went giggling back out into the hall.

Bonnie turned to her ashen-faced friend. "Ignore 'em, Stace'. They're just a bunch of jealous gossips! You do know that...don't you?"

The old-fashioned girl, kneeling beside her, blinked the tears from her sad, green eyes and nodded...albeit a bit uncertainly.

TBC
Chapter Twenty-Five

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Twenty-Five

The following morning found the two California firefighters standing out on the freshly scooped and salted sidewalk in front of their hotel, waiting for a cab.

Kelly, who wasn't used to seeing his breath, exhaled another little white, wispy cloud and glanced up at the still overcast sky. "I haven't seen the sun shine since we left California," he realized.

"Quit complaining," Gage lightly admonished. "At least the wind's not howling and the snow's finally stopped falling."

Chet sighed. Another little fleeting exhaust fume appeared. 'I wonder if I could blow smoke rings?' he mused. The Irishman drew a deep breath in. The introduction of all that cold, crisp air into his lungs caused him to cough. Little plumes of transient steam appeared. "There's somethin' funny about the air around here..."

His friend was forced to smile. "It not funny air. It's fresh air."

"I know what it is," Kelly continued, following several cautious sniffs. "It doesn't have any...smell."

Gage grinned outright. "Of course it does. You just don't recognize it. Yah know, you really should get out of the smog more...for a refreshing change."

Chet flashed his grinning chum a fake smile.

Their cab finally pulled up and the pair climbed aboard.

"Where to?" their driver inquired.

"Hertz Worldwide Reservations," Kelly informed the fellow. "US41 West."

"West? That's it? That's the address?" his traveling companion incredulously inquired.

His fellow passenger slipped a yellow piece of paper from his jacket pocket and then held the unfolded item up for inspection.

Gage stared at the Yellow Page—and its jagged edge—for a stunned moment and then shot Chet an 'I can't believe you ripped this out of the phone book' look.

The Irishman's defrosting mustache twitched and his averted eyes sparkled, mischievously.

John exhaled an amused gasp and proceeded to read the ad—aloud. "Hertz Worldwide Reservations...US41...West."

"That's all I need," their driver assured them with a slight smile. "There's only one car rental place in this whole entire area. And that's out at the airport."

Kelly gave Gage an 'I told you we should have picked our rental up when we first arrived' glare.
Which the paramedic pretended not to notice.

Gage braced himself against the dash, as Kelly—once again—slammed the brakes on their rental car. "Easy on the ribs!" the paramedic, who'd been flung forward—very hard—against his seatbelt and shoulder harness, urged.

"I can't help it! It's like trying to drive on Jello—with whipped cream topping!" his completely frazzled companion complained. "Maybe we should just get out and walk," he seriously suggested.

"Nonsense. All you need is a little practice," John reassured him. "Only, I don't wanna be in the car while you're practicing," he un-reassuringly added.

"Yeah? Well, I don' wanna be in the car while I'm practicing, either!" Chet quickly came back.

His friend was forced to smile. "Do you think you could drop me back at the hotel?...In one piece?"

Kelly cautiously edged their car out onto the snow-covered highway. Further acceleration caused the vehicle to fishtail—wildly. Chet jerked the steering wheel from side to side, frantically trying to straighten its trajectory. Failing that, and fearing a collision with oncoming traffic, he hit the brakes—hard. The car skidded sideways...off the road...and into a snowbank. Its ashen driver turned to its even paler passenger and pondered, "How many chances do I get?"

His shaken chum couldn't help but chuckle. The paramedic released his two-fisted grip on the dash and reached for the back of his hyper-flexed neck. "Do that again," he started, calmly, "and I'm gonna sue you for whiplash!" he finished, a bit more frenetically.

"Sorry," Kelly sheepishly said. "You sure you don't wanna drive?"

"Nah. You won the toss—fair an' square," Gage conceded.

The toss had been neither fair nor square. Chet had wanted to drive so badly, he'd actually cheated. Now, there he was—driving so badly. 'They say: Be careful what you wish for,' he glumly mused. He released the brake pedal and reluctantly returned to the roadway. 'This is just downright scary! I have absolutely no control over this car!' he silently realized and then wondered, right out loud, "How do people ever get around up here?"


While Kelly practiced the day away, his companion visited the various stores that were within walking distance of their hotel. John managed to pick up a few more rolls of 35MM film, some souvenirs of the Upper Peninsula, and a cute and cuddly little stuffed moose—which he planned to present to Stacey, when she picked them up at the airport.

After another delicious meal in the Settler's Dining Room, the two 'stuffed to the gills' guys decided to walk off their dessert.

They ended up in the Marquette City Park, just before dark. The park was situated on a hillside and a rather large number of neighborhood kids were snow-coaster'ing and sledding down its slippery slopes.

Seeing all the fun they were having, Chester B. was inspired to build a snowman. The snow was of the correct consistency and John was recruited to help him roll the unbelievably heavy, wet balls
into 'snowman body parts'.

The kids contributed a pair of 'broken branch arms'.

One child, who must have lived particularly close by, even provided them with a 'nose carrot', a 'ribbon mouth', and a couple of 'Oreo cookie eyes' for the head ball—which they had to give one of the older boys a 'hoist up' to install.

It was slow-going, on account of all the intermittent snowball fights, but Kelly's creation was, at last, completed—all ten feet of it—er, him.

Almost as if on cue, the park's dusk-to-dawn lights began to flicker on.

Gage stared thoughtfully up at the enormous—now illuminated—object and commented that it looked more like a snowmonster than a snowman.

Kelly didn't care. In spite of being sweat-soaked and sore, a smile of deep satisfaction crept across the Irishman's frosted face. The experience had been both exhilarating and exhausting. He would certainly sleep soundly that night.

The now rapidly-chilling Californians bid their fellow snowball combatants farewell and began trudging off towards their hotel.

The two men resolved to return to the park the following afternoon, for some photos. Hopefully, they would find their big, snowy buddy still standing.

TBC
Chapter Twenty-Six

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All’

Chapter Twenty-Six

The next morning dawned cool...crisp...and overcast.

Following a hearty breakfast, the two firemen bundled up and then headed out—to brave the elements.

It was already the fifth day of their vacation, and the fourth day of their stay in Upper Michigan. Yet, their hotel was the only place—in their entire destination-packed itinerary—that they'd managed to make it to. It was time for them to venture out—and about.

Those long, white-knuckled hours behind the wheel—and that half a tank of gas—turned out to be time—and fuel—well-spent.

Kelly had discovered the key to controlling a car on slippery roads and he was eager to enlighten his still in the dark associate. "Everything must be done in slow motion," he patronizingly announced, as they departed the hotel's parking lot. "You accelerate y. You brake y. You drive y. And you arrive alive. Speed things up—and you're snowbank bound."

"Excellent!" his chum chimed in. "Oh, and one other thing...Always steer in the direction of a skid."

The Irishman braked for a red light and then just sat there, looking stunned. "You know all this stuff?!

"I like hiking in the mountains. It snows up in the mountains. Trust me, I've taken a few white-knuckled trips down some pret-ty treacherous roads."

The car's driver shifted from stunned and into steamed. "So why'd I hafta waist all that time practicing? Why didn't you just tell me what I needed to know?"

"Because there are things in life that can't be taught. There are things that can only be learned from personal experience. Driving under adverse conditions just happens to be one of those things."

'What a bunch a' hooey!' Chet thought to himself. A horn sounded and prompted him to press on the accelerator.

Less than an hour later, John was seated comfortably in the Silver Creek Ski Lodge—in front of another gas fireplace—sipping on some complimentary coffee.

The entire front half of the rustic, log structure was covered—floor to ceiling—with thermal-pane windows.

Gage gazed serenely out through their tinted glass and watched as Kelly used the pointed tips of his rented poles to lock his booted feet into the binders of his rented skis. He continued watching, as Chet took the chair-lift up to the top of the hill.
For a few seconds, the fireman was lost to sight. But then his bright-blue ski parka reappeared—at the start of one of the hill's steeper runs.

'Man, you'd better be more than just a fair skier,' the paramedic mused, as his ambitious amigo began his descent. He cringed, as Kelly nearly lost his balance—twice.

At about the half-way point, Chet sat down on the back of his skis and just sort of tobogganed to the bottom of the slippery slope.

John sat there, on the edge of his chair, for a few moments, feeling tremendously relieved—and more than a little amused. 'Fair, huh?'

Apparently, Gage wasn't the only one who'd witnessed Kelly's ungraceful glide down the hillside.

A young lady skied over to the still-crouching Californian and helped him to his feet. They shook hands and then started heading for the chair-lift—together. The girl seemed to be giving Chet some 'pointers' along the way.

The pair rode up to the top—together, and then skied down—together.

Chet managed to stay standing the entire way—a truly remarkable improvement.

The lovely young lady patted her pupil on the back—congratulating him.

Kelly wrapped his arms around the girl—thanking her.

John's right eyebrow raised, as did the steaming cup in his right hand. "Chet, you're not just a fair skier, you are also a pretty smooth operator!" he conceded and drank a toast to his foxy friend.

At their request, Miss Vicki Ann Taylor, Kelly's lovely young skiing instructor, joined the two tourists for dinner.

Following another delectable meal in the Settler's Dining Room, the firemen determined they would, once again, attempt to walk off some calories.

John went in search of some subdued lighting, so he could load a fresh roll of film into his camera.

While he was gone, Chet explained their photographic expedition to Miss Vicki and invited her to tag along.

"Sounds like fun," the young woman admitted. "But you don't have to go all the way down to the park." She took Kelly's hand in hers and hauled him over to the hotel's front desk. "Do you happen to have a copy of today's paper?" she inquired of the clerk.

The uniformed girl nodded and obligingly shoved a folded newspaper across the counter.

Vicki unfolded the object and held it up in front of the confused fireman's mustached face.

Kelly's jaw dropped.

Plastered across the paper's front page—right below the headline: Last Snowman Of The Season?—was a great big, black and white photo of—their snowy friend. Even more amazing, was the accompanying article on page 8A, which attributed the flaky sculpture's formation to 'Those two guys from California. The ones who saved that man with the heart attack.'
"Hey! Dig this!" Chet prompted, as his photographer friend caught up with them. He pressed the paper's front page up to paramedic's puzzled face.

John's jaw dropped even lower than his had. Upon being shown the accompanying article, the paramedic appeared even more perplexed and pondered, "How could those kids know who we were?"

His question caused the girl's jaw to drop. "Are you kidding? After all the media coverage you guys got, everybody in the entire Upper Peninsula knows who you are!"

The guys glanced at one another—with slightly arched eyebrows. "Coo-ool!" they simultaneously commented. They'd never been 'celebrities' before.

Vicki grinned. "C'mon! Let's go get your pictures—before it gets any darker. And, on the walk back, I can show you guys my ceramic studio."

The guys glanced at one another again, and again chorused, "Coo-ool!"

Their gorgeous young—grinning—guide gasped in even greater amusement and led the two 'coo-ool' California dudes from the lobby.

TBC
Chapter Twenty-Seven

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The vacationers spent the fifth day of their stay at the Huron Mountain Ski Lodge.

Vicki, Chet's ceramic artist skiing instructor from the previous day, joined them on their journey.

The mountain's slopes were steeper and faster than those on Silver Creek's hill, and Kelly 'racked up' quite regularly, getting sympathy from Miss Taylor...and giggles from Mister Gage.

John spent another relaxing day seated in front of yet another gas fireplace—sipping leisurely away on even more cups of complimentary coffee—and girl watching.

He sang to himself an old Beach Boys' tune. 'I wish they all could be California Girls...' "Well, one California Girl, anyways..." he sadly realized, right out loud.

Later that evening, as the two weary travelers were turning in...

"Now I know the real reason you wanted me to come on Newcomb's vacation with you," Gage amusedly mumbled, as he fumbled for his hotel key.

Kelly stepped stiffly over to the door to his room. "Oh yeah?" he cautiously inquired. "And what would that be?"

"If I skied like you, I think I'd want a paramedic around, too."

"Har har," Chet chided his chuckling chum.

"And, just to be on the safe side, I don't think we oughtta go out to Suicide Hill tomorrow." John laughed himself into his room and collapsed back onto his bed.

A pillow came sailing through the air and smacked him right in the face—which prompted another round of muffled giggles. The paramedic pulled the pillow away.

Chet appeared. He was standing in the open doorway between their rooms, looking rather victorious.

"You're gonna want this back," his victim smugly predicted. "You're gonna need this...to sit on." And, with that, Gage whipped the pillow back.

Kelly caught it in one hand and felt for his bruised tailbone with the other. "Ouch! You may be right. I'd better sit tomorrow out," he held up the pillow, "on this."

The two chums exchanged smiles.

But Chet did not sit the next day out.

He spent it on his feet, touring Marquette, Michigan...with Miss Vicki.
John had graciously declined the invitation to join them. "Three's a crowd," he had quietly reminded Kelly. "Besides, yah never know. She may want to *show you her etchings*..."

So, while the Irishman and the artist explored ice sculptures, created by the waves off Lake Superior, Gage drove their rental around in search of a 1-Hour Photo shop, so he could get a few rolls of film developed.

Though he never did find one, he did manage to get some more souvenir shopping done.

Upon his insistence, John dined alone that evening.

Upon their insistence, Gage agreed to meet up with the pair later on, for drinks.

The trio found themselves in the Discoverer's Lounge at around eleven that night...listening to MaryAnn.

"I'll be right back," Vicki vowed, when the woman's latest song ended. "Order another drink for me, will yah, Chet?" the girl requested, as Kelly gallantly pulled her chair out for her.

"Sure thing!" the gentleman promised.

"What's next on our itinerary?" John wondered.

Kelly stood there, staring dreamily after the lovely young lady who'd just left to powder her nose. "Did you say something?"

Gage exhaled an amused gasp. "Yeah. I said, where do we go from here?"

"Why do we have to go from here?"

"Why-y," John teased, "we have a whole *itinerary* full of places to go and people to see!"

"I've got all the people I wanna see right here. In fact, I'd better order that people's drink before she gets back." Kelly called a waitress over to their table and ordered another round of drinks.

"Ah, c'mon, Chet!" his chum continued to tease. "We haven't even gotten to the *best* part, yet! So...what's next...on *our* itinerary?"

"You sure you wanna go through with this?" Kelly inquired, sounding miserably miserable.

Gage grinned and nodded.

Chet looked even glummer, and then more than a little confused. "I thought you said you left your sense of adventure back in LA?"

"Yeah...well...it caught a later flight and has now rejoined me. So where do we go from here?"

Kelly grinned and carefully sat down, to pull a crumpled sheet of paper from his shirt pocket. "We lost some time...on account a' the blizzard...and driving practice," he annoyedly added. "And one day because of a bruised tailbone," he continued, squirming slightly in his seat. "So we're *behind* schedule."

Gage grinned and groaned.
Kelly continued. "Even if we never go out to 'Suicide Hill', we're not gonna have enough time to cover all these places."

"Well, what's next on the list?"

"Cross-country skiing and snowmobiling."

"Where?"

"Do you wanna go to Pine Mountain?...Or Ski Brule Mountain?"

"What's the difference?"

"One's in Iron Mountain...and one's in Iron River."

"What's the difference?" John repeated. "Flip a coin," he suggested, upon seeing his companion's shrug.

"Okay. Heads: Iron Mountain. Tails: Iron River." Kelly pulled out a coin, tossed it into the air, caught it, flipped it onto the back of his other hand and peered down at it. "Tails!" he declared. "We're going to Iron River!" The excitement suddenly drained from his face. "Wherever the heck that is. We should probably pick up some maps."

John took a long swallow of his beer and nodded their newly-made plans approvingly.

TBC
Chapter Twenty-Eight

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Sheesh!" Kelly exclaimed the following morning, as the vacationers motored along mile after mile of fir-tree-lined, snow-covered and banked highway—devoid of any signs of human habitation. "I've never seen so many trees! This area of the country sure is…desolate!"

"Ahhh, man. I don't believe this!" Gage grumbled, as a 'Lanse 40 Miles' sign suddenly whipped past his window.

"Wha-at?" Chet shot his passenger an anxious glance. Those were not words you wanted to hear your navigator mutter.

The paramedic glanced up from the map in his lap. "We must a' missed our turn-off."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I'm serious. Turn around."

Kelly carefully brought the car to a stop and then even more carefully began making a U-turn.

"I've been reading maps for over six years," John went on, "but I've never seen anything this screwy. I mean, why even bother to print a map, if you're not gonna mark any of the roads?"

The car's driver refrained from commenting.

"We're just gonna hafta go by mileage," its passenger further determined.

"And Mertin's Café signs," his hungry companion added. "I thought it was weird, when we hadn't seen any in a while. The famished fireman finally managed to get them safely headed back in the right direction.

Gage chanced a glance at the gas gauge. The needle still registered three-quarters of a tank.

Which was a huge relief, since neither of them had seen a gas station in the past sixty, or so, desolate miles.

Kelly kept one eye peeled on the road and the other on the odometer. "Alright, we've come 24 miles r-r-right…n-n-no-ow!"

The car's occupants gazed out its windows for a few moments and then at one another—in complete confusion.

"I don't get it," Gage griped. "According to this," he rattled their sorry excuse for a road map, "we just drove through the town of Channing. There were only two houses."

"Three," Kelly corrected. "And a garage."

The vehicle's navigator shook his confused noggin a few times. "We hafta hang a right pretty quick. The next couple a' houses could be Sagola. So you'd better slow down."
Less than an hour later, the Californians' rental car pulled up in front of Mertin's Café.

The exhausted pair of explorers exited their parked vehicle and then stood there—on Main Street, Iron River, Michigan—clutching their coats against the cold.

"I feel like we should plant a flag, or something," Kelly quipped.

His shivering chum was forced to chuckle.

Chet grinned and followed his still snickering associate into the restaurant—or, café.

The two men looked around the tiny eatery.

Crammed into the confined space were a few wooden booths, a couple of tables and a little lunch counter.

"Boy," Kelly began, "for bein' so small, this place sure does a lot of advertising. They must have thirty signs between here and Marquette."

Gage shrugged his jacket off and draped it over the back of a chair. "Don't knock it. If it wasn't for those signs, we never would a' made it. They worked slicker than the map...just like a homing signal. And, to show our appreciation, I'm gonna buy us a big victory dinner—and leave the waitress a big tip."

Speaking of waitresses...

A pretty, petite brunette came stepping up. She placed a pitcher of ice water and a pair of drinking glasses down on their window table and then passed them each a menu. "Hi." The girl's polite smile graduated into a bonified grin. "Say, I saw you two on TV the other day. You're the guys from California, right?"

John read the girl's nameplate. "Hi, Diane. Yeah...we're the guys from California."

"And we're famished!" Chet interjected and eagerly opened his menu. "So...what would you recommend?"

"Everything on there is good. But pasties are our specialty. This place makes the best pasties! Well, except for my grandmother's," the woman added with a wink—in a whisper.

The two guys from California exchanged mystified glances.

Kelly turned back to their hostess. "What, exactly, a-are pasties?"

The girl gazed at the pair as though they'd just sprouted purple antennae. "You've never had a pasty?" The gal quickly overcame her amazement and switched back into waitress mode. "Like I said, this place—well, really, the whole U.P.—is famous for its pasties...which consist of diced carrots, potatoes and onions baked in a light pastry crust. They come in chicken, ground beef or vegetarian, and you can get them with, or without, rutabagas. And, visitors—brave enough to try them—are not disappointed," Diane further assured them.

Actually, it came across as more of a dare than an assurance.

The courageous Californians promptly placed their orders: two coffees, two milks and two U.P. specialties...ground beef...with rutabagas...whatever the heck those were.
There were about fifteen other patrons in the place and it didn't take the two newcomers long to realize that they were the center of everyone's attention. Oh, their fellow diners tried to be discreet. But, every time the firemen glanced around, they found the café's other customers' gazes locked upon them.

"You get the feelin' that Diane ain't the only one who saw us on TV the other day?" the paramedic pondered in a hushed tone and rolled his eyes in the direction of their audience.

His companion nodded and then quietly confessed, "Yah know, I've always wondered what it would be like to be famous." Kelly pulled a pair of dark, mirror shades from the front pocket of his ski jacket and quickly slipped them on. The celebrity then sat there, hiding behind his dark glasses.

Gage managed an amused gasp, and then buried his famous face behind his menu.

"Diane was right!" Gage exclaimed, through a mouthful of partially masticated pasty. "This is incredible! The guys back at the Station would love these things! I have got to get this recipe!"

Kelly quickly averted his eyes. "What's to get? I mean, she already gave you the ingredients: diced carrots, potatoes, onions and hamburger baked in a light pastry crust." His empty tummy grumbled at the mere mention of food. He stopped talking to take a big bite of his own pasty. "Gawd, these are good, aren't they!" he proclaimed, just prior to swallowing the mouth-watering morsel. He'd prefer pasties to just plain burgers—any day!

His dinner companion nodded—vigorously.

The firemen had finished their milk and pasties and were sipping the last of their coffee, when Diane returned to their table, brandishing a fresh hot pot of the steaming brew…and their check.

The diners waved off a refill.

John took a look at the bill. Then he handed it back to the girl—along with a twenty—and told her to keep the change.

Diane looked at him like he'd just sprouted purple antennae again. "You do realize that this is a twenty…and not a ten." She really needed to be sure. Cuz, both meals had only come to six bucks, and nobody had ever given her a fourteen-dollar tip before.

Gage gave the pretty miss a grin and a nod.

Kelly was glad that he was still seated, or he may have keeled over. "Sheesh, Gage! If you'd spend that much on your dates, maybe you wouldn't get dumped so often."

John shot his friend a look that was an equal mixture of amusement and annoyance. The reason he didn't spend a lot on his dates wasn't because he was tight with his money. It just so happened that the things he loved to do and the foods he liked to eat weren't all that expensive. He'd just never had to fork out a lot of green to have a good time. He turned back to the now grinning girl. "Is there any way I could get the recipe for those pasty things?"

The girl's grin turned upside-down. "Sorry. The Mertin's won't divulge their secret pasty formula to anybody. They're afraid folks'll stop comin', if they can make 'em themselves, at home." Diane saw how crushed their California visitors appeared to be by this bit of news and quickly came up with a plan. "Hey, cheer up. They ain't the only ones who make pasties. My grandmother would be more than happy to share her recipe with you."
Her guests' countenances brightened.

John, especially, looked hopeful. "You sure it's not too much bother?"

"It's no bother at all," the girl assured them. "I'll go give her a call…"

"Ask her about the lodge," Chet urged.

"Uhhh, Diane?"

The waitress halted and then spun back around.

"You wouldn't happen to know how to get to the Ski Brule Mountain Lodge, would you?"

A strange look suddenly came over the girl. A smile followed closely in its wake. "My grandmother lives on the same road. Look, I'm off in five. Why don't you guys have a refill. Then you can follow me over to my gram's house…pick up the pasty recipe…and be on your way from there."

John was positively jubilant. "Sounds great!"

"Yeah! That'd be great! Thanks!" Chet added, sounding equally enthusiastic. With a guide—and a little luck—they just might make it to their new lodgings before dark.

The big tippers slid their coffee cups across the table and their extremely helpful hostess quickly topped them off.

TBC
Chapter Twenty-Nine

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Fifteen minutes later, the two firemen found themselves at Grandma's House.

Diane's grandmother turned out to be a sweet little Bulgarian lady, who spoke with an extremely heavy accent. The woman said that she recognized her guests from her TV. She also insisted on showing them—step by step—how pasties are made.

It was a hands on experience from start to finish and the pair departed with not one, but three recipes. They also had in their possession a half-dozen pasties, fresh from the oven, which, when cooled, needed to be individually wrapped—in tinfoil.

Gage glanced back over his shoulder at the shallow cardboard box that was resting on their great-smelling car's back seat. "Where are we gonna find tinfoil?"

"Turn the blower fan up another notch or two, will yah," Kelly requested. "I can't see. The pasties are steaming up the windows."

"The defroster's goin' full-blast, already. Stop the car. I'll stick 'em in the trunk."

"No way! They'll get all smooshed. Just wind your window down."

"It's twenty-eight degrees out there."

"So-o?"

"So-o, you wind your window down."

"All right. We'll both roll our windows down. C'mon, John. It'll be cool. Just think of it as a 'one-horse-open-sleigh' ride."

"Oh…It's gonna be waaaay more than cool. It's gonna be damn cold! We're traveling at over 40 MPH! The wind-chill factor is gonna be below zero!"

"Okay. Okay. Then just open yours a crack," the car's driver compromised. "If you get too cold, you can always crank up the heater."

His passenger sighed in surrender and cracked his window open.

Chet rolled his down—all the way.

There was a sudden—drastic—drop in air temperature. The steam dissipated and visibility began to improve, immediately.

"What a sweet little old lady!" Kelly suddenly exclaimed, in an attempt to get his chum's mind on something other than the wind-chill factor.

"Yeah," Gage agreed.
"And feisty!"

"And generous. I can't believe she gave us three of her best recipes! Course, that scrambled eggs and tomatoes thing was kind a' weird…"

"Fortunately, it tasted a whole lot better than it looked. I thought that fried bread stuff was amazing!"

"Some of the best fry bread I've ever had," his distracted companion confessed. Then he glanced back over his shoulder and inquired, once again, "Where are we ever gonna find tinfoil?"

"Relax, will yah. I mean, it's not like the pasty police are gonna come along and bust us if we wrap 'em in paper or plastic."

"You sure about that?" John attempted to keep a somber expression, but a grin betrayed him.

Kelly flashed his grinning companion a broad smile and shivered. "I think the pasties are cool enough," he quickly determined and began cranking his window back up.

His passenger wound his window up as well. Gage wasn't so sure about the temperature of their pasties. But it had gotten cold enough in their car for them to actually see their breath.

---

Nicole Norland stood in front of one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, in the spacious—and crowded—lobby of the Ski Brule Mountain Lodge, surveying her domain.

As Captain of the Brule Mountain Ski Patrol, the beautiful, blue-eyed blonde ruled the mountain's slopes. Seeing as how her father owned the place, the pretty miss also reigned over the mountain's multi-million dollar resort. The girl was used to getting what she wanted and, right then, Nicole wanted the gorgeous guy that had just entered the lobby.

She recognized the tall, good-looking gentleman in an instant. The woman had fallen in love with the fellow the first moment she'd seen his handsome face flash across her television screen.

The young man stepped up to the lobby's enormous stone fireplace. He brushed his unzipped parka back, placed both of his hands on his hips and then stood there, frowning.

Nicole noted that neither hand bore a wedding band. 'I bet I can put a smile back on your face,' the young lady silently mused and, immediately, stepped up beside him. "You don't approve of our fireplace?"

"Humph. It's more like an open gas furnace than a fireplace. I mean, a real fireplace should burn wood—real wood," Gage groused and glanced, glumly, in the questioner's direction. John's jaw dropped. He just stood there in stunned silence, and rightfully so. After all, the person who had posed the question was stunningly beautiful.

"Nicole Norland," the little lady, with the 'Brule Mountain Ski Patrol' patch on the sleeve of her bright red jacket volunteered, and flashed him the loveliest of smiles. "You don't approve of our fireplace?"

"Nicole Norland," the little lady, with the 'Brule Mountain Ski Patrol' patch on the sleeve of her bright red jacket volunteered, and flashed him the loveliest of smiles. "Friends call me Nikki."

"John Gage," the fireman quickly countered, when he'd recovered from his close encounter of the Captain? Nicole Norland kind, and politely proffered an open palm.

Nicole took it and shook it...and kept it. "Will you be a guest here, at the lodge?"

"If I can ever get Chet away from his snowmobile long enough to get checked in," the paramedic
replied, with a suppressed, and slightly crooked, smile.

"In that case…How would you like to stay…in your very own private chalet…with a real wood-burning fireplace?" the pretty miss proposed.

The gentleman's jaw dropped for the second time in as many minutes. "Are you serious?"

Nikki nodded. "Of course, there'd be no phone, and it would mean trading your indoor 'facilities' for an outhouse…"

John's smile returned and broadened. "That's even better!"

It was the girl's turn to grin. Nicole now found the already unbelievably attractive young man even more irresistible! Her heart had always been drawn to the rugged, outdoorsy types. "C'mon!" she urged and began towing her outdoorsman off across the lobby. "I'll show you to your…quarters."

Twenty minutes later, the two Californians found themselves atop Brule Mountain. They raised the visors on their rented snowmobile helmets and stood there, staring out at some truly spectacular vistas! From their current vantage point, the visitors could see—quite clearly—for miles…and miles…and miles—in all directions.

"We're standing at the highest elevation within a 100 square mile radius," Nikki shouted out, above the noisy sputtering of their snow machines' idling two-cycle engines. "That's the lodge, down there." Their guide aimed a gloved hand down one the mountain's many steep ski slopes. "And that's the Brule River." She pointed to a meandering stream far below, at the mountain's opposite base. "Right across that river, is Wisconsin."

The trio took in the breathtaking scenery for a few more minutes and then climbed back aboard their snowmobiles.

TBC
Chapter Thirty

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chapter Thirty

A few more short twists and turns in the trail and they were at the chalet…their very own private chalet.

The rather large log structure nestled cozily into a little clearing that had been cut—just for it—right smack dab on the top of the mountain. That the picturesque place had been built to take full advantage of the million-dollar view was evident in all the windows, and the open-air deck, which completely encompassed it.

Speaking of the million-dollar view…

It was probably a little late to ask, but, once they'd killed their noisy engines, Chet Kelly lifted the visor on his helmet and nervously inquired, "Exactly how much is this place gonna cost us?"

Nikki caught the Irishman's inquiry and promptly replied—er, promised, "Not a penny more than you've already prepaid."

The two firemen apparently couldn't believe their good fortune because they exchanged more than a couple of mystified glances.

"Far out!" Kelly proclaimed. He scrambled off his snow machine and began unbuckling his suitcase from the little sled he'd been towing. Actually, it was more of a Stokes on skis, than a sled. Which, they'd been informed, the ski patrol normally used to transport injured skiers.

The two Californians carried their luggage, and the cardboard box of cooled pasties, into the cabin.

Gage made it as far as the little alcove, just to the left of the entryway.

The small space was filled, from floor to ceiling, with the latest 'state of the art' rescue gear.

John passed the box of pasties to their pretty hostess. Then he set his suitcase down and began running his hands over the assorted equipment. "Gibbs ascenders…Petzl AM'D karabiners…Collinex ring bolts…Meillan rapid descenders…SAR air splints…S.K.E.D. stretchers…Larkin rescue frames…CMI belaying devices…Petzl ropes…Stohlquist wilderness packs…Raine spine boards…Pelican 1600 EMS packs…EVAC O2 packs…CMI micro CSR pulleys…GEMTOR harnesses..." Gage was in his glory! The paramedic felt like the proverbial 'kid in a candy store'!

Nicole Norland was completely stunned. She took the box she'd been passed and followed Chet Kelly into the kitchen. "Why is he so familiar with that equipment?"

"'Cuz he uses that stuff all the time. I use it, too, on occasion, but I'm not on a first name basis with it, like he is." Chet set his suitcase on the floor. Then he took the box of cooled pasties from her and placed it on the counter. "Do you have any tinfoil?"

Nikki completely ignored his question. "What—exactly—do you two do?"

"Don't tell anybody, but we're Los Angeles County firefighters. He's a firefighter/paramedic."
The Captain of Brule Mountain's Ski Patrol felt faint. That clinched it! The woman would have accepted the handsome young man—no matter WHAT he did for a living. However, upon hearing that he was a firefighter/paramedic? Well, Nikki was now truly in love! She was also slightly confused. "Why don't you want anyone to know that?"

"Because we don't want people to think that you hafta be a fireman or a paramedic in order to give someone Basic Life Support. Do you have any tinfoil?"

"How did you guys ever end up in the U.P.??"

"Johnny got hurt on the job and his doctor wanted him to 'get away from it all' for awhile, and the department wouldn't let us swap vacations anymore. So I had to swap reservations with Phil Newcomb. Do you—"

"—I know Phil and Deanna—and both of their boys! The Newcombs have been coming here for years!"

Kelly flashed the pretty lady a 'that's nice' smile and then posed his question for a third time. "Do you have any tinfoil?"

Nikki was even more confused. "Why do you keep asking me that?"

"Because we need it to wrap our pasties," Kelly explained. "He-ey...Don't worry," he added, upon seeing that the woman was now staring back at him in utter disbelief. "We promise we'll replace what we use...Help yourself!" he offered, as their hostess' amazed gaze shifted to the shallow box she'd carried into the kitchen. "We just finished makin' 'em. So they really are 'fresh from the oven'."

Nikki remained speechless.

The Los Angeles County firefighter/paramedic finally exited the little alcove. "You guys have got an amazing bunch of rescue gear!" He stopped suddenly and glanced around. "It's warm in here...but...there was no smoke coming from the chimney..."

Nikki was forced to smile. "There's no electricity. So we do use gas to run the furnace, lights, stove, refrigerator and water-heater. But I assure you, the fireplace is fueled by wood—real wood." She took John's hand and towed him over to an enormous wood-burning stone fireplace.

"During the season, the Ski Patrol uses this place to warm up. That's why most of our medical and rescue gear is stored here. We had the furnace installed to keep us—and the water pipes—from freezing." She motioned to the huge stone structure. "We had this built strictly for the warm cozy atmosphere. You'll find the real wood piled on the left side of the path to the outhouse." She pointed out the wall of windows, to some long-handled tools. "There's a shovel, if you care to scoop out a place on the deck, and a broom, if you care to sweep off some chairs. I like to sit out there and sip my morning coffee."

She focused all of her attention back on the California fireman—whose hand she was still clutching. "This is my favorite place in the whole world." She tilted her head to the right. "Out that window, you can watch the sun rise." She turned her face to the left. "Out that window, you can watch it set..."

The sun happened to be setting just then.

The trio watched as the brilliant yellow orb slowly sank behind an ominous black bank of
approaching storm clouds.

"It's supposed to snow heavily tonight," Nikki announced and turned to Chet. "So, if you decide to go riding and don't want to get lost, follow your tracks back to the cabin before they drift in."

Chet nodded, appreciatively.

"C'mon," the woman invited and began pulling the paramedic over to an open set of stairs. "I wanna show you the view from the loft…before it gets too dark."

Kelly's eyebrows shot up into the middle of his forehead. The invitation, itself, was innocent enough, but the sultry way it had been delivered? And the way the girl had been gazing at Gage—with those big, beautiful bedroom eyes? He now knew how much this place was going to cost them. Well…one of them, anyways. He waggled his bushy arched brows a couple of times and then returned to the kitchen. 'This place is pretty well stocked,' he realized, as he began peaking behind cupboard doors. 'There's gotta be some tinfoil around here—somewhere!'

Nicole Norland led her captive into the loft and up to the only piece of furniture in the tiny space, a rustic bed.

She latched onto the fireman's free hand, as well, and pulled him toward her, quickly closing the gap between them. The woman moistened her lips and then gazed up into the gentleman's warm, expressive eyes, begging to be kissed.

John Gage had to agree. The view certainly was breathtaking! And he hadn't even looked out the windows, yet. The woman pressed her beautiful body up hard against him and he felt something else start to harden. He caught himself. "Uhhh…Look…Nikki…I hope I'm not mis-reading anything here—"

"—Oh-oh...I certainly hope you're not," the woman interrupted, in a breathy whisper. "I stopped being subtle…at the foot of the stairs." She brushed her moistened lips across his mouth. "Besides, it's not like I'm throwing myself at you. I've been in love with you for days...ever since I first saw your face flash across my television screen." She unzipped the paramedic's parka and slid her warm hands seductively over his chest, stopping at his shirt buttons.

John's pulse quickened. "But…you barely know me!" he stated, sounding a bit breathless himself. The woman's advances were rapidly wearing down his resolve.

"I know that I find you unbelievably attractive," Nikki spoke, as she began undoing his buttons. "I know that you're a fireman—a paramedic. I know that you go out of your way to help people—complete strangers. I know you love roughing it in the Great Outdoors." Her fingers finished with the buttons and began fumbling with the buckle to his belt. "I know you love real wood-burning fireplaces. I know you can cook pasties. I know—"

"—Look, Nikki," Gage latched onto the girl's probing appendages, before they could undo, or unzip, anything else. "I find you incredibly attractive, too! Believe me, I truly do-o! A-and, if I wasn't already in a relationship, I would have packed some condoms, and we would probably be rollin' around in that bed, right now."

Nikki was only slightly deterred. "So-o...is it the relationship—or the lack of protection—that's stopping you?"

The fireman was forced to smile. "The relationship. Something tells me, a smart girl like you
would be on the pill."

Miss Norland was now completely deterred...and deeply saddened. "Now, I know you're not a two-timing jerk." She reluctantly re-buckled the fireman's belt, but left his shirt buttons undone. She cradled the fireman's handsome face in her hands and forced a sad smile. "That just makes you even more attractive..."

John flashed her a bashful, slightly askew, smile. "You want your keys back?"

Nicole couldn't help but chuckle. "I also know...that you make me laugh," she announced and returned his grin. "You can keep the keys. Chet tells me you left California to 'get away from it all'. We-ell..." she finally pointed to the view out the loft's windows, "it doesn't get any more 'away from it all' than this place!" She turned back to face him and smiled. "You guys are welcome to stay here...for just as long as you like."

"Thanks, Nikki!"

"You're welcome, John." The lovely lady's smile suddenly saddened. "I hope whoever it is, that you're currently seeing, appreciates you. I also hope that, if this 'relationship' you are currently involved in ever ends, you will look me up...So that the two of us can pick up...right about where we left off..." she finished, in that breathy whisper, and kissed him lightly—on the cheek.

The pair descended the stairs.

Chet saw his pal's unzipped parka and unbuttoned shirt and his eyebrows shot up into the middle of his forehead again. 'Geeze, Gage! That sure was fast!' he amusedly mused. 'No wonder the chicks keep dumpin' yah!'

Man! Kelly couldn't believe his bachelor friend had actually passed on the pretty girl's blatant invitation! Gage had to be certifiably insane! One of Chet's eyebrows lowered, in thought. 'Or in love...' Damn! No wonder his buddy had been so reluctant to leave LA! His other brow suddenly lowered and he stood there contemplating what his own reluctance to leave Marquette meant...

Nicole entered the kitchen. She pulled an oblong box from a drawer and handed it to Kelly. "I'll see you in the morning, Chet...probably sometime around eight."

"Right!" the Irishman acknowledged.

The two had made a date...of sorts. Their gorgeous guide had promised to show him some of the best snowmobile trails—and sights—in the entire area. They'd even talked of crossing the Brule River into Wisconsin.

Chet could hardly wait to hit the trails! He flashed the little lady an appreciative grin. "Thanks!"

Miss Norland smiled and nodded. "Goodnight," she told him and turned to leave.

John escorted her over to the door. "Goodnight, Nikki..."

The girl gazed longingly into the gentleman's dreamy dark eyes for a few moments. "Goodnight, John..." she wished, in that breathy whisper of hers. Then she smiled and waved—and was gone.

Chet finally glanced down at the oblong box in his hands. "Hey! Look! Tinfoil..."

Gage couldn't help but grin. He stared disbelievingly at their surroundings—the polished
hardwood floors, the rich throw rugs and the costly décor. 'A person could hardly call this posh place roughing it.' In fact, the only thing lacking was a warm cozy atmosphere. He grinned again and then headed off—in the direction of the woodpile.

TBC
Chapter Thirty-One

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'

Chet placed his last tinfoil wrapped pasty into the refrigerator and then quickly re-donned his ski parka.

His friend's failure to return from his trip to the woodpile—in a timely fashion—was giving him cause for concern. So, with flashlight in hand, he ventured out to investigate.

Kelly followed a freshly cleared snow trail around the base of the cabin's deck and found his missing chum—with a shovel in his hands and a smile upon his face.

Gage had already reached—and uncovered—the woodpile, and was in the process of clearing a path to the outhouse.

"I'll take over from here," Chet announced.

The paramedic didn't protest. He simply passed his pal the snow shovel, and then backtracked over to the woodpile.

John tossed the canvas tarp off and started loading his left arm with two-foot lengths of logs—real, wooden logs.

Gage stomped his feet up the steps of the deck and carried his burden into the cabin.

Kelly must have discovered a box of matches while conducting his tinfoil search, because every gaslight, in the entire place, appeared to be lit.

John dumped his armload of logs into the woodbox and set the fireplace screen aside. He then rested one foot on the hearth and reached up into the chimney. His hand latched onto a soot-covered metal lever and he yanked the fireplace's flue open.

There was a pile of old newspapers beside the woodbox. He pulled the top one from the stack, wadded its pages up into tight little balls, and placed them in the center of the log holder. Next, he took slender sticks of cedar kindling and built a little teepee over the wadded up paper. He built another teepee over that one, using cut up branches, and then built a final one—of logs.

Dozens of long wooden matches were nestled in a box on the mantle. The fire starter struck one of them up and then used it to light the paper…which sparked the kindling…which ignited the branches…which would—eventually—get the logs burning.

The paramedic promptly replaced the fireplaces' protective mesh screen.

Within just a matter of minutes, Gage had a snapping, crackling, cozy little fire going.

It took about the same amount of time for Kelly to finish clearing the path to the privy.
Since he was right there, he decided he might as well use the facilities. So he pulled the flashlight from his coat pocket and went in.

The outhouse door had an amazingly powerful spring attached to it, probably to prevent wind damage or critter entry.

At any rate, the heavy wooden portal closed so abruptly—and so hard—it ended up smacking Chet rather painfully on his posterior.

The fireman rubbed his sore backside and flashed his light about the tiny abode. He grunted at what its beam revealed.

The outhouse was a 'two-holer'. Both holes had covers, but only one had a seat. Right over the hole with no seat was a sign that said 'MEN'. Above the other hole, which bore a black, furry-cloth-covered toilet seat, the sign read 'WOMEN'.

Kelly utilized the MEN's hole and then shouldered his way back out the door.

Without his tush in the way, the portal slammed shut with a terrific amount of force. The resulting loud 'BANG!' startled Chet and caused a kind of an avalanche.

The Californian was even more startled as an eave of overhanging snow came cascading down upon his uncovered head. He let out a 'yelp' and then cringed and shivered, as the incredibly cold substance melted its way down the back of his neck.

Chet stomped and shivered, and shook and shimmied, his snow covered boots—and body—back into the warm, cozy cabin.

John had assumed a seat on the plush leather sofa, situated directly in front of the now roaring fireplace.

Kelly tossed his gloves onto a radiator, his parka onto a coat hook and immediately took up a position in front of the fire, too. He stood with his back to the fireplace and waited for its warmth to penetrate his still somewhat pained—and now partially frozen—posterior.

Gage gazed dreamily into the fire and watched as the flames darted and danced in and out of the white birch logs.

Fire had two profound affects on the paramedic. Out of control, it sent his adrenaline charged body into overdrive. Under control, its flitting, flaming dance filled him with such peace and serenity, he found it rather difficult to keep his heavy eyelids elevated.

Kelly saw his companion sitting there, staring trance-like into the fire, and was forced to smile. "Too bad we couldn't just stay here. I think one week up here would do you more good than a whole month, back in LA."

"We can," John said, as his no-longer-chilled chum finally assumed a seat on the opposite side of the leather sofa. "Nikki told me that we can stay here for just as long as we like."

Chet was both pleased…and somewhat saddened to hear that. He was torn between wanting to see his 'stressed out' buddy finally get to really relax…and wanting to spend more time with Vickie. He flashed his friend a smile and quickly cast his vote. "Then, I say we stay!" Johnny's health was waaaay more important than his personal 'love life'. 
Gage grinned his agreement. The paramedic was perfectly contented. Well, maybe not 'perfectly' contented. It would take the presence of a certain blonde-haired, green-eyed girl, snuggled up on the sofa beside him, to create 'perfect' contentment. He gazed longingly down at the empty cushion between them for a few moments and then glanced up.

Kelly was staring down at the same empty space, with a kind a' melancholy look on his mustached face.

John made a mental note to ask Nikki something, when he saw her in the morning. Speaking of Nikki…"You can have the loft," he offered. After what had transpired up there earlier, he had serious doubts about ever being able to fall peacefully asleep on that bed.

Chet nodded his acceptance of their sleeping arrangements. "I found some cocoa mix in one of the cupboards. You want a cup?"

"Sure. Thanks!"

Kelly rose to his feet and quickly made his way into the kitchen.

Gage heaved a sigh of almost pure contentment. He gave the empty cushion beside him another wistful glance…and then went back to gazing, serenely, into their cozy little fire.

TBC
Chapter Thirty-Two

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Thirty-Two

The two California visitors awoke bright and—thanks to the wind-up alarm clock Kelly had found and set—very early the following morning.

The cabin's cupboards were well stocked with non-perishables, but fresh foods, such as milk, bread, butter and eggs, were sorely lacking.

So the pair had heated up a couple a' pasties for breakfast. The reason why Diane's grandmother had told them to wrap the cooled items in tin foil quickly became apparent, when all they had to do was pull the dang things from the fridge and pop them directly in the oven.

A foot-and-a-half of fresh snow had fallen overnight, and it was still snowing. While the famished firemen were waiting for their 'no muss—no fuss' food to warm, they had taken turns clearing the paths they had created the previous evening.

During breakfast, it was determined that, while Chet and Nikki were off snowmobiling, John would take a run into Iron River, to stock up on supplies.

The paramedic stood at a kitchen counter, with paper and pencil in hand. "Can you think of anything else we need—besides: eggs, pancake mix, syrup, milk, coffee, cocoa mix, bread, butter, paper towels, T.P., matches and sunflower seeds?"

"Tin foil," Chet told him. "Don't forget the tin foil!"

John smiled and jotted 'tin foil' down at the top of his shopping list.

"Where yah goin'?" Chet inquired, as his chum re-donned his parka.

"To the 'little brown shack out back'."

Kelly contemplated passing along an 'avalanche alert'. But then he recalled what his pal had said about 'driving practice', and immediately dismissed the whole 'advance warning' idea.

He waited until he heard a loud bang and a shriek, before re-donning his own parka and ducking outdoors.

Chet reached the outhouse just as his bent over buddy was brushing the last bits of avalanched snow from the back of his bare neck. "Pretty powerful spring, huh…"

John slowly straightened up. He gave his amused amigo an annoyed glare. "You knew about the damn door?"

Chet nodded and his smug smile broadened into an even smugger grin.

"Well, why didn't you tell me about it?"
"Because there are things in life that can't be told. There are things that can only be learned from personal experi—" Kelly caught the vengeful gleam in Gage's narrowing eyes and cut his 'misquoted' comment short.

John stooped and scooped up two gloves worth of fresh snow.

Chet didn't wait for his p.o.'ed pal to pack the sticky substance into a ball. He just turned and fled. "Ain't payback a bitch?" he gleefully called back over his shoulder.

Gage grinned and took off after him. "You're about to find out!"

Chet was hoping to make a clean get-a-way, but, before he could get his snow machine brushed off and climb aboard, the back of his bulky jacket was completely covered with Michigan dandruff.

"Behold!" Gage declared, between giggles. "The Abominable Snow—mobiler!"

"Eat my flakes!" Kelly continued to taunt, his voice still filled with defiance. He latched onto the handle of the starting cord, and was just about to give it a pull, when a sound—other than snickering—suddenly caught his attention.

The two friends locked gazes and listened to a low mechanical drone, coming from somewhere off in the distance.

Chet glanced at his wristwatch. "If that's Nikki, she's an hour early."

The droning sound was growing louder by the second.

"It's not Nikki," John assured him.

The noise had grown much too loud for a tiny two-cycle engine. In fact, the low drone was rapidly transforming into a deafening roar!

The firemen squinted up into the blizzard of sifting white flakes, and watched—wide-eyed—as a twin-engine plane went soaring over their heads—right about at tree-top level.

"They're too low!" Gage realized, his voice reflecting his growing alarm.

He no sooner finished his statement, when the aircraft's droning engines suddenly cut out. The ominous sound of snapping timbers promptly took their place.

The two alarmed listeners' exchanged looks, of shock and disbelief, were immediately followed by a blur of activity.

Kelly got his buddy's snowmobile brushed off and quickly reconnected the 'Stokes on skis' to the backs of their machines. He helped his paramedic pal fill the two sleds with an assortment of 'borrowed' state-of-the-art medical and rescue gear.

The two men then donned their shielded helmets, manned their snow machines, and followed a trail of sheered-off tree tops and torn fuselage over to the crash site.

The rescuers raised the shields on their helmets and gazed out through the fluffy falling flakes at the debris field.
The aircraft's wings had been ripped away upon impact, and its tail section had been torn in two.

Miraculously, the plane's cockpit and passenger compartment were still 'somewhat' intact.

The wreck had come to rest right-side up, with its nose crumpled into the snow-covered mountaintop.

The pair pulled right up to the plane's cockpit and killed their engines.

Gage got off and grabbed a satchel full of first-aid supplies from the sled he'd been towing. "Stay out here and pass equipment in as I call for it. Okay?"

Kelly glared at his determined buddy's back. That was so-o-o not okay! But—short of knocking the paramedic out cold—there was absolutely nothing that he could do about it. So he exhaled a resigned sigh and reluctantly replied, "Yeah…sure."

TBC
"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Thirty-Three

John brushed the snow from the cockpit's splintered windshield and peered inside the plane.

The aircraft's pilot and both of its passengers were slumped in their seats, either unconscious...or dead.

The paramedic stepped over to, and then pulled, on the main door to the plane. It didn't budge. So he waded through the wet, knee-deep snow, toward the back of what was left of the aircraft, and then climbed up—and crawled his way in—between a couple of jagged pieces of its torn-in-two tail section.

The air in the plane's punctured cabin was quickly cooling.

Speaking of air...

'Airways, Breathing and Circulation,' the fireman silently reminded himself, as he carefully descended the aircraft's dangerously slanting and sloping aisle.

The paramedic reached the first passenger's position.

Victim one's chest was still moving, but just barely.

Victim two had sustained injuries incompatible with life, having been impaled by a broken tree branch. The limb had come through the wall of the cabin, piercing both the poor passenger and his plane seat—clear through!

Victim three, the plane's pilot, also appeared to be breathing. His chest was heaving in fact, a sure sign of respiratory distress.

With A and B out of the way, the rescuer tugged the gloves from his hands and began reaching for carotids.

Not surprisingly, the injured passenger's pulse was rapid and thready.

Upon his touch, the pilot picked his hanging head up and gasped, "Who...Who's there?"

"John Gage," his rescuer replied, sinking into the co-pilot's seat so he could begin his initial patient assessment. "I'm a paramedic with the Los Angeles County Fire Department."

"Jack Bates," the pilot breathlessly responded. "Angel Airlines...Life-Flight 2290...outta Rhinelander."

'That would explain the Caduceus on the vertical stabilizer,' John realized, recalling the bright blue medical emblem he'd noticed upon their arrival. 'Not to mention the IV port in the dead man's arm.'

Jack emitted an involuntary groan. "Los Angeles County...you say?...Damn!...I knew...we were
lost…but I never dreamt…we were…that…lost.” His bloodied, and clamped-in-pain eyes opened and he and the Californian traded grins. Suddenly, the victim’s grin vanished. "The guys…in back?"

John's own grin immediately transformed into a sympathetic smile. He'd taken an instant liking to this patient. Anybody who could come through a plane crash—and still be cracking jokes—was his kind a' person! The paramedic gazed into the pilot's pain-filled eyes. The guy was clearly suffering enough already—physically. He certainly didn't need any 'emotional' pain, on top of that. "Let's just deal with you right now. Okay? Where are you hurt?"

"—Please?…I need…to know."

Gage heaved a silent sigh, of surrender. "The guy in the seat directly behind you still has a pulse. I'm afraid the other passenger didn't make it."

Jack also sighed, both loudly—and painfully—in relief. "The guy…behind me…is my best friend…Billy Renwall…Billy's an RN…He volunteers…to accompany…our patients…We fly…medical emergencies…to distant hospitals…Mr. Niemic…is…was…terminal…We were…trying to get him…to Green Bay…for a…heart…transplant."

The paramedic concluded his initial patient survey. 'Who flies the Life-Flight guys?' he morbidly mused. "I'm gonna take a quick look at your friend, and then go grab some gear. But I'm gonna be right back. Okay?"

All that exertion had left the severely injured pilot too breathless to speak. So he simply nodded. Gage gave the surviving passenger a quick, but thorough, exam as well. Then he returned to the rear of the aircraft and hung half of his ski-parka'ed self out of the crack in the hull, so he could place—and accept—his requested equipment order from Kelly.

"We were…flying…above the storm," Jack explained, while the paramedic from California treated and immobilized his numerous injuries. "Lost all…electrical…No flight instruments…no…wing de-icers…Had to descend…to melt the ice…off the wings…Flew in circles…waiting for daylight…Ran out of…fuel…Tried to find…a place…to put us down…It appears…the place…found us…first." The pilot managed a morbid smile. "How did…you guys…get so…lost?"

The foreign fireman was forced to smile. "We're on vacation," he confessed. "This is the Brule Mountain Ski Resort."

"I've…heard…of it."

"Me and my buddy, Chet, are staying in a cabin, less than a mile from here. Yah know, if you were going to fly into something, this would be the place. According to a reputable source, Brule Mountain happens to be the highest point in over a hundred square miles."

Jack was going to reply with just a nod, again. But the paramedic's applied cervical collar prevented him from doing so. "I recall…seeing it…on…a couple a'…my…flight ma—"

John's head jerked up, as his patient suddenly stopped speaking.

A quick check revealed that the severely injured pilot had slipped into unconsciousness.

Kelly climbed aboard the creaking, and still settling, aircraft, carrying the remainder of the
requested medical gear.

Within minutes, the two highly-trained professionals had both crash victims completely immobilized and ready to transport.

The paramedic jumped down from the plane and then reached up, to pull the pilot's backboarded body out through the ragged slit in its torn-in-two fuselage. The rescuer felt a sudden 'twinge' in his right side and inhaled sharply. Over three weeks had passed since his 'close encounter' with the rock and the car. Still, a few vestiges of pain remained—a constant little reminder of just how badly his ribcage had been bruised.

The two firemen re-entered the wrecked plane and picked up the passenger's backboard.

Before leaving the crumpled aircraft for the last time, Gage bent down to retrieve a medical insignia'd satchel, that had been stowed beneath the RN's seat. The paramedic placed the heavy canvas sack between their immobilized victim's booted feet.

Both crash victims were soon extricated. Their bodies were heavily blanketed and then buckled in to the Stokes-like sleds being towed behind the snowmobiles.

A little 'choking', a few firm tugs on the pull cords, and the firemen had their machines' noisy two-cycle engines going again.

John set the RN's backpack on his lap.

The two rescuers then turned around and began to backtrack down the same snow trail that they had broken earlier.

TBC
Chapter Thirty-Four

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Thirty-Four

The rescuers quickly reached their cabin and John insisted on making a pit stop.

The pair pulled their snowmobiles right up to their front porch.

The paramedic climbed off his seat and up the steps, leaving his machine's engine idling.

John had noticed some kind of radio resting on a desk in that little equipment-filled alcove, while he was exploring the previous afternoon. If he could get the thing working, they might be able to save some precious time.

The fireman found the odd-looking communication device right where he'd remembered seeing it. He flicked its power source on and thumbed its mic'. "Brule Mountain Ski Patrol, come in…"

Nothing. Not even static.

Gage exhaled an exasperated gasp and tried again.

Nicole was on her way to meet up with Chet. As she stepped past the check in counter, she heard a strangely familiar voice coming from the room that served as sort a' their Ski Patrol's headquarters.

"Brule Mountain Ski Patrol, do you copy?"

She dashed through the room's open doorway and snatched up their Base radio's mic'. "Sorry. But the Ski Patrol doesn't come on duty until nine. Will I do?"

"Nikki? Is that you?"

The girl's grin broadened. "Good morning, John. Why are you playing with our radio?"

"Nikki, listen to me. A twin-engine plane just crashed into the top of your mountain. There were three souls on board. One fatality. Chet and I are bringing down the two survivors—right now. They're in critical condition. Nikki, I need you to notify the authorities and get some medical help rolling, just as soon as possible. Ask them to send a doctor with the ambulance. Did you copy all that?"

Nicole quickly overcame her amazement. When the woman pressed her mic's send button this time, she was all business. "This is Brule Mountain Ski Patrol Base One. Copy that, Base Two. I'll start making phone calls. We'll be ready for you when you get here. Base One out."

"Thanks, Nikki. We'll be down in just a bit. Base Two out."

As promised, Nicole, and several of the ski resort's brawnier employees, were waiting outside when the two snowmobiles pulled into the parking lot ten minutes later.

The plane crash survivors were quickly carried into the Main Lodge's toasty-warm lobby. Their
blanketed backboards were gently lowered onto two of its leather-covered sofas.

Nikki saw John struggling to unzip his jacket. The woman stepped up to help him, placing her warm, delicate appendages over his cold, rough ones. "Your poor hands!" she exclaimed. "They're freezing!"

"My fault," the fireman confessed. "Left my gloves in the plane."

"I asked the guests to move into the Dining Room," the girl continued, once she'd got the zipper unstuck. "The entire lobby is yours until the ambulance gets here."

John unzipped, but did not remove, his jacket. "Speaking of the ambulance…Were you able to get an ETA?"

"They said they'd try to be here within the hour."

"Within the hour? Exactly how far away is this hospital?"

"It's just seven miles or so. But the plows are still working on getting the main highways opened up. They haven't started clearing any of the side roads, yet."

"This resort must have its own plow truck," Kelly realized.

"We do. But it doesn't have the ability to push this much snow. It takes us practically all morning, just to clear out the parking lot. It would take us hours to reach the main road. We could probably spend an entire day, trying to make it out to the highway."

John resigned himself to the snowstorm's crippling effects on transportation. "Did they send a doctor out with the ambulance?"

The girl gave her pretty blonde head a shake. "They can't send a doctor, because they haven't got one to send. Seems they've only got two, and one of them is currently 'out of town' for the weekend."

The flustered fireman resigned himself to the hospital's doctor shortage. "What about the other one?"

"He claims that hospital regulations won't allow him to leave. At least one accredited physician has to be on duty—from five o'clock in the morning, til five o'clock at night, or the hospital could risk losing its license."

John resigned himself to the cowardly doctor's unwillingness to assume risks. "Then how about sending out a registered nurse?"

"This snow kept a lot of people from coming in to work. They said they couldn't possibly spare a single soul."

The paramedic could not—and would not—resign himself to that. "Damn it! These men have dedicated their lives to helping people with medical emergencies. Well, this is a medical emergency! And they need help! They need IV fluids—now! Their vital organs aren't being properly infused. They're slipping deeper and deeper into shock! Eventually, they're going to reach the point where it becomes irreversible…"

"What about the snowmobiles?" Kelly suggested.
"These guys are critical. They're in no condition to go 'dashing through the snow'. Hell, I'm amazed they managed to survive our little trip down the mountainside." Gage stooped down and picked up the RN's backpack.

Chet gave his glummer than ever chum a worried once over. "What do you intend to do with that?"

John unbuckled the heavy bag's canvas flap and peered inside. Just as he'd suspected, the nurse's satchel was filled with pieces of medical equipment, various types of IV kits and solutions, hypodermic syringes and drug bottles, everything a paramedic would need, to give two badly injured 'guardian angels' a fighting chance at life.

"What do you intend to do with that?" Kelly cautiously re-inquired, upon spotting the backpack's contents.

Again, Gage didn't reply. He couldn't reply, because he didn't have an answer...yet. He needed time to think. What he wouldn't give for a pair of anti-shock trousers! There was a roll of Ace bandage in the bag. He stared down at it for a few moments and then turned to his female assistant. "Nikki, I need you to bring me all of the Ace bandages you can possibly find! Right Away!" There was more than one way to increase a person's dangerously diminished blood volume.

The young woman nodded her compliance and immediately departed.

Kelly studied his pal's improvised G-suits.

By beginning at their ankles, and meticulously working his way upward, toward their hearts, Gage had managed to encase all four of their crash victims' legs in tightly-wrapped elastic bandage cocoons.

Using the cuff and stethoscope he'd found in the satchel, the paramedic quickly took a new set of vital signs. Both of his shocky patient's BPs were up—significantly. He'd just managed to buy them—all three of them—a little time. The deeply troubled paramedic pulled the stethoscope's tips from his ears and abandoned his 'guardian angel' vigil.

John stepped up to one of the lobby's floor to ceiling windows and then just stood there... staring thoughtfully out at the still falling snow, through two thick panes of tinted glass.

TBC
Chapter Thirty-Five

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

A full fifteen minutes passed, and the paramedic was still just standing there...staring silently out the window.

Chet was also just standing there, staring at his stressed out buddy's back. "Ah, man! This is **not** good. I can not believe that this is happening. Before we left L.A., Dr. Brackett gave me strict orders to keep him out of stressful situations. And, just when I thought we'd finally gotten him far enough away—*plonk!* 'Stress' falls right out of the sky!"

"I dunno. He seems to be more sad, than stressed," Nikki determined.

"Believe me, he's stressed all right," Kelly assured her. "In fact, I don't think I have ever seen him **this** bummmed out before."

The pretty miss was a bit confused by the comment. "I thought you said that he's been doing this sort a' thing for over six years. Surely, there must have been plenty of other men that he and his partner couldn't save." She stared down at the two unconscious crash victims. "Why should their deaths affect him any differently?"

Kelly's sad gaze gradually shifted, from the back of his 'majorly upset' buddy's ski parka, to the person who had posed the question. "Johnny's not bummmed out because he can't save them." The fireman's focus returned to the silhouetted figure standing in front of the windows. "He's bummmed out because he **can**."

"If he could keep them alive, he would keep them alive!" Nikki confidently predicted.

Kelly managed a rueful smile. "Yeah. I imagine he's standing over there right now, contemplating doing that very thing. I just hope he's also been considering the **cost**…"

"Co-ost? What 'cost'?"

"Johnny's a paramedic—one a' the best in the business. But he's not certified outside of Los Angeles County. He's not licensed to administer drugs and definitive care here, in Michigan. And, if he treats these two men, he won't be licensed when he gets back to California, either."

Nikki studied the sorrowful figure in front of the windows for a few moments. She had to admit, the 'cost' would prove to be extremely high for him—indeed!

"If only this were Santa Rosa County," Kelly wistfully stated.

The girl found the fireman's latest comment the most confusing of all.

So Chet proceeded to explain. "Johnny, and his paramedic partner, Roy, were on a fishin' trip up in Santa Rosa County last fall. Somehow, the two of them ended up helping the local Sheriff rescue a couple a' rock climbers off a' this cliff. As a token of his gratitude, the Sheriff offered to show them the best fishin' spot in the County. So they pull up to this lake, right? And 'boom!', suddenly this boat blows up. The guy that was in the boat got burned—pretty bad. The poor man was in a great
deal of pain, and going into shock. Since John and Roy were the only trained medical personnel available, and since he'd already seen the two of them in action, the Sheriff decided to talk his brother-in-law, the County Medical Commissioner, into certifying them, so they could keep the burn victim guy going. Well, at least long enough for him to make it to the nearest hospital, anyway."

Upon the completion of his narrative, Nikki's gloom-filled face suddenly lit up.

Kelly caught the sudden change in the girl's demeanor. "Don't tell me," he insincerely said. "Your uncle is the County Medical Commissioner. Right?"

Nicole shook her pretty blonde head. "Nope! But my Mother's Bridge-playing partner's husband is. Come on! We have some phone calls to make."

"I'm right behind you!" the fireman eagerly exclaimed, and readily followed the rapidly departing gal from the room.

The pair reappeared in the Lobby, less than ten minutes later.

A desk phone was in Nicole's left hand. Its receiver was in her right.

Once again, Kelly found himself following in the young woman's wake, uncoiling the extension's ridiculously long cord as they walked along.

Gage was crouched beside the dying pilot. The tips of Billy's stethoscope were stuck in his ears. The RN's backpack was lying—open—at his feet.

The duo reached the paramedic's position, with plenty of telephone line to spare.

"It's for you," Nikki announced, and thrust the receiver into the crouching fireman's sorrow-filled face.

John didn't say a word. He just stared, first at the phone, and then at the girl—in complete and utter confusion.

"It's long distance..." the pretty miss impatiently informed him.

The paramedic pulled the stethoscope from his ears and reluctantly accepted the proffered phone. "Hello?" he tentatively spoke into the receiver. John's jaw dropped and his sad eyes about doubled in size. "Dr. Hunter? What—...Yes...They're both critical...Lactated Ringers and Normal Saline. But I can't—...I ca-an?...But I'm not cert—...I a-am?...But how—?...You di-id?" The fireman's face suddenly radiated with relief. "In that case, standby for vital signs." Gage stuck the phone in the crux of his neck and turned toward a coffee table. He picked the piece of paper, upon which he'd been recording his patients' rapidly changing medical conditions, up and blinked his blurred vision back into focus. "Victim one is the plane's pilot. His name is Jack Bates. The patient is approximately 45 years of age..."

In a little under five minutes, Doctor Hunter's orders for treatment had been followed, IV's had been established and all available medications had been administered.

The plane crash victims' latest vital signs had already revealed a marked improvement in their previously life-threatening conditions. Though still extremely shocky, his patients were, at least,
starting to stabilize. They just might make it into surgery, after all!

The paramedic's frozen fingers had finally defrosted. He rested the receiver on the coffee table and ran one of his no longer ice-cold hands down the front of his relief-filled face. Gage then got stiffly to his feet, turned toward the girl and grabbed her by both shoulders. "I don't know how you managed to pull it off. But," he tugged the phone holder a bit closer and then planted a big kiss in the middle of her forehead, "thank you!"

Though the kiss was delivered more out of gratitude than affection, the woman still felt its effects—from the top of her pretty blonde head…clear down to the tips of her slightly curled toes. "You really should be thanking Chet," she confessed, once she'd gotten both her breath and her voice back. "He's the one who gave me the idea."

The appreciative paramedic turned toward his 'inspirational' associate and made like he was going to kiss him on the forehead, as well.

Kelly flung the rest of the coiled phone cord at his deviantly behaving buddy and immediately vacated the area.

John settled for flashing his fleeing friend a grateful 'grin', instead.

Thirty-five more minutes passed before a bright yellow Iron County Road Commission plow truck finally appeared in the ski resort's cleared parking lot.

Following in its wake, were three Michigan State Police cars, a four-wheel drive vehicle from the Iron County Sheriff's Department and…an ambulance.

Moments later, a group of State Troopers stepped into the Main Lodge's lobby.

The crash victims' caregiver promptly approached them. "My name is John Gage. I'm a certified paramedic. I'm going to be accompanying the survivors to the hospital and I need to stay in contact with their doctor. Do you guys have two hand-held radios I could borrow?"

The police officers thought the paramedic's radio request over for a few moments and then reluctantly handed him two of their HTs.

"Great!" John joyously proclaimed. "Don't worry. I'll take real good care of them and see that they get right back to you," he promised.

Gage returned to his accomplices, proudly displaying his prized possessions. "I'll use this radio to keep in contact with you," he announced. The paramedic passed the other radio on to Nikki. "You use that one, to relay messages between me and the doctor."

The girl nodded her compliance.

A couple of Sheriff's Deputies, and the remaining two State Policemen, came into the lodge's main lobby, guiding a pair of gurneys.

Apparently, the ambulance's driver didn't have an 'assistant'.

John turned to his extremely useful associate. "Chet, you'd better come with. I may need an extra
set a' hands."

"Right!"

John supervised the transfer of his patients, from the lobby's sofas, to the stretchers. "All right. Let's roll!" he urged, once the blanketed backboards had been buckled down.

"I'll pick you guys up at the hospital!" Nikki called after the rapidly departing pair.

Gage gave the accommodating young woman an appreciative smile and a nod.

Kelly gave the girl an eternally grateful glance and a gloved 'thumbs up'.

The pretty miss responded with a wink and a grin. "Mission accomplished," Nikki triumphantly muttered, soley to herself. She'd just managed to put a smile back on that gorgeous guy's face.

The handsome young firefighter was happy. Well, at least, for the moment.

The woman exhaled a wistful sigh. Nicole enjoyed making the young man happy and wished that she could list 'keeping him that way' as her full-time occupation…

TBC
Chapter Thirty-Six

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Thirty-Six

The County Medical Commissioner was waiting at the local hospital, to greet their new paramedic.

"Mr. Gage?" he inquired, as two mustached young men exited the back of the newly-arrived ambulance and began unlocking and unloading a couple of occupied gurneys. "Richard Jandron," the elderly gentleman continued, and extended a hand to the guy who had glanced in his direction. "Iron County Medical Commissioner."

John took a moment to shake the hand of the man who had just made it possible for him to save two lives—not to mention his paramedic career. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Jandron. And, it's just John."

"Dick," the commissioner quickly countered and followed along, as the two California firefighters helped a couple of hospital attendants guide both gurneys into the six-storied brick building's emergency entrance.

"Dr. Hunter speaks very highly of you, John," the commissioner continued, as they turned and headed off down a hallway. "Said that he would gladly vouch for your accreditation as an advanced medical care provider. He assured me that you were fully qualified. When you get a moment, I have some paperwork for you to sign."

"Sure thing!" the paramedic promised, just prior to disappearing into one of the hospital's two emergency treatment rooms.

Mr. Jandron stepped up to a glass portal in the E.R.'s door and watched, approvingly, while Iron County's one and only paramedic helped the doctor get the two plane crash victims further stabilized. The commissioner quickly—and relievedly—realized that Dr. Hunter's assessment of Mr. Gage's qualifications for the job seemed to be quite accurate.

In fact, the fireman appeared to be more than fully qualified.

Now, if he could just talk the young man into moving to Michigan...

John's question, as to who flies the Life-Flight guys, was answered when a nurse entered the exam room a short time later, and announced that a helicopter had just set down, out in the parking lot.

Since the local hospital was not equipped to deal with the severity of the survivor's injuries, a chopper from KI Sawyer Air Force Base, with a team of highly skilled medical personnel onboard, had been dispatched—upon Dr. Hunter's request—to fly the two crash victims on to Marquette.

John stood, just inside the doors to the hospital's emergency department, and watched the Air Force medical team load Jack and Billy's blanketed backboards aboard their idling aircraft.

The chopper's side door was slid shut. Its whirling rotor blades rapidly became a complete blur.
The paramedic's concerned gaze remained fixed upon the hovering helicopter, until it finally pulled up and completely out of his field of vision. The weary rescuer stared down at the black rubber mat beneath his booted feet for a few moments and breathed an audible sigh of relief. Then he spun quickly on his heels and headed off…to find a pay phone.

John called Stacey.

She was at work, and he didn't have a whole lot a' change in his pockets. So the two of them could only talk for a couple of minutes.

Gage met up with Mr. Jandron again, just outside the hospital administrator's office.

In practically no time, the two of them had all of the necessary paperwork taken care of.

The legally licensed and fully certified Iron County paramedic finally managed to swap some of his paper currency for coins. He purchased a couple of cups of coffee from one of the hospital's vending machines, and then headed off again, in search of his associate.

John found his friend waiting for him in the hospital's lobby. He passed his pal one of the steaming Styrofoam cups in his hands and then plopped into the seat beside him.

"Thanks," his 'in need of a quick pick-me-up' amigo gratefully acknowledged. "Yah know, I could a' swore I heard a helicopter, earlier."

"You did. They couldn't perform the surgery here. So Dr. Hunter arranged for them both to be flown to Marquette."

Kelly's mustached face immediately filled with a look of profound confusion. His head slowly turned in Gage's direction, and the two rescue guys exchanged a couple a' 'Why didn't THEY just send a helicopter out in the first place?' glances. Chet gave his mystified mind a quick shake and his attention returned to the still steaming stimulant. "Think they'll make it?"

"The pilot actually stands a pretty good chance. But I ain't so sure about the passenger."

Chet glanced over at the 'official' looking documents, which were protruding from his glum chum's right jacket pocket. "Well, I'm just glad that commissioner guy came through with the license in time to save you from getting' yourself into a whole lot a' legal trouble. Man, talk about 'stress!' I'd a' prob'ly had to bail you out a' jail!" The fireman watched as his friend's deep frown slowly transformed into just the slightest of smiles.

Gage aimed his glum gaze in Kelly's direction. "What makes you think I was going to treat them without a license?"

"I don't think you were going to treat them without a license. I know you were going to treat them without a license. I also know that you would never administer any advanced medical treatment without a doctor's orders. So you may as well come clean. C'mon…fess up! You were just about to call Dr. Hunter, yourself. Wer-ent you. That's why you were so surprised to find him already on the other end of the line. Isn't it."

The paramedic completely ignored his companion's Cheshire cat grin and refused to either admit—or deny—anything.
Chet promptly declared his associate's silence as an admission of guilt. "See! I knew it! So I decided I'd save you some time… and phone him for you. I mean, somebody had to keep your sorry ass out a' prison." The Irishman smiled inwardly, as his latest comment caused his no longer glum chum to chuckle outright.

"Gee... thanks. Your... 'concern'... completely overwhelms me," Gage insincerely said, but then beamed his 'caring' buddy a broad, genuinely grateful grin.

Kelly continued to keep a perfectly straight face. "Concern? What concern? I just didn't want to have to—"

"—break in a new pigeon. I know. I know. You're all heart."

"Hey, Johnny boy, I didn't just do it out of the kindness of my heart. You owe me, babe. Big time!"

"We-ell... you do still got that kiss on the forehead coming to you..."

Chet leapt to his feet and immediately moved both his forehead—and his tush—a few chairs further away from his slyly smiling associate. "You're demented!"

'Johnny boy' just sat there, snickering.

The two Californians remained right there in the lobby, patiently waiting for their coffee to cool... and for Miss Norland to come and pick them up.

TBC
John was just about to drain the last of his now cold coffee from his Styrofoam cup, when their pretty chauffeur's form appeared outside the entrance's glass doors.

"Sorry to keep you guys waiting," Miss Norland apologized as she pushed her way into the lobby. "But the 'authorities' insisted that I take them up to the crash site. I told them to just follow your trail. But, no-o-o. For some stupid reason, they wanted me to 'guide' them up there. I gave those State Troopers back their radio," she added, as an afterthought. "How are those two men doing?"

"An Air Force helicopter flew them to Marquette. I imagine they must be in surgery, right about now. Major Devon promised the Resort's borrowed rescue gear would either be returned—or replaced—just as soon as possible," the paramedic relayed. John then took Nikki aside. The two of them talked for a bit.

Then Gage gave the girl another kiss on the forehead and headed off down the hall to use the pay phone again.

The trio left the hospital, crossed the parking lot and climbed into Nikki's nice, warm car.

John pulled their shopping list from the right pocket of his parka. "Think we could hit a grocery store on the way back?"

The pretty miss took the two California firemen shopping.

The grateful guys then took the girl to lunch at Mertin's Café—their treat.

Miss Norland pulled her car into the Ski Resort's packed parking lot. "When I left, there was a group reporters, and a TV 6 news crew, waiting for you guys in the lobby," she warned her passengers. "Just thought I'd mention it. In case you two wanted to make a quick get-a-way."

"Thanks," the paramedic replied. "We do."

Nikki parked beside their rented snowmachines and then got out to open up her trunk.

The firemen's freshly purchased provisions were quickly transferred from her car…to their Stokes-on-skis sleds.

Nikki announced that her and Chet's snowmobile tour was rescheduled for the following morning.

The weary rescuers thanked the young woman for the lift back, and quickly climbed onto their snowmobiles. They got both machines going and headed back up the mountainside.

The vacationing firemen were really looking forward to getting back to their nice, quiet, private
quarters, where they would be able to just kick back and relax.

The pair reached the place where the snowmobile trail intersected with one of the ski resort's maintenance roads, and were amazed to discover that the County plow truck had cleared a path all the way to the top of the mountain—all the way to the wreck site, no doubt.

The pair followed the plowed road clear over to their cabin.

The two men killed their noisy, two-cycle engines and stared out their helmets' clear plastic visors at the three 'official' looking vehicles that were parked in their yard.

The 'authorities' were waiting there, in their idling autos, to interview the two of them.

'The two of them' traded a couple of 'We may as well get this over with' glances, and reluctantly climbed off their machines.

The groceries, and their visitors, were taken inside.

Kelly stowed their provisions away and then put a fresh pot of coffee on the gas stove, to brew.

The two firemen wanted to talk to the all of the 'authorities' all at once.

But, for some stupid reason, each branch of government insisted that they had to interview the two eyewitnesses—turned rescuers—separately.

The State Troopers went first.

John removed their other hand-held radio from his jacket pocket and returned it to them—none the worse for wear.

The Iron County Sheriff, and several of his deputies, interviewed them next.

They asked the same exact questions, and were given the same exact answers.

Finally, it was time for the pair to face the Federal Aviation Commission people, who had driven down from Marquette. Their questions were a little different, since they were investigating the cause of the crash.

The rescuers assured the FAC folks that there was no need for them to investigate the cause of the crash, because they already knew what had caused the crash.

They had both heard the plane's engines cut out a few moments before it went down.

Plus, the paramedic repeated what the plane's pilot had told him, just prior to losing consciousness. Jack had said that, after flying around in circles all night, they'd finally run out of fuel. The pilot had also told him that, shortly after take-off, the plane had lost all of its electrical instruments. John then suggested that, if the FAC wanted to investigate something, they should probably try to find out why the plane's entire electrical system just suddenly went capoot!
As the FAC guys were heading out the door to return to the crash site, and do just that, Gage, whose frozen fingers had finally defrosted—again, mentioned that he'd left his gloves on the plane, and asked if they wouldn't mind retrieving them for him.

The government guys gladly agreed to do so.

At last, after three-and-a-half hours of grueling interrogation, the cabin's weary occupants were left alone.

Speaking of crash sites…

Gage got a birch log blaze going in their fireplace and then headed for the sofa, where he proceeded to 'crash and burn'. The pooped paramedic's still-mending ribcage was still bothering him, and he was all talked out. He didn't wanna hafta to move—or speak to another living soul—for the entire rest of the day. "If any reporters or TV news crews show up, please tell them that I am unavailable for comment, will yah?" he wearily requested.

Kelly couldn't help but grin. "Yeah. Sure. No problem."

Later that same afternoon…

Following a restful and relaxing half-hour nap, John was once again up and about. In fact, he was currently in the process of replenishing the burnt out logs in their fireplace.

Chet was seated on their comfy, leather sofa, staring wistfully down at the couch's vacant middle seat cushion—once again.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of a motorized vehicle approaching the cabin.

A few seconds later, a car door slammed.

"Wonder who that could be?" Chet grumbled, getting stiffly—and rather reluctantly—to his wool stockinged feet.

The government guys had already dropped off Gage's gloves and then gone for the day.

Gage glanced up from the fire he was tending. The paramedic pursed his lips, to keep from smiling, and replied with a one-shouldered shrug.

Kelly could now hear someone coming up the porch steps. So he—even more reluctantly—began making his way over to the door.

Kelly pulled the heavy wooden portal open, just as their visitor was about to knock. Chet's heart instantly leapt in his chest. "Vickie!" he joyously exclaimed, to the beautiful brunette he found standing there with a suitcase at her feet—and her knuckles still raised in the air.

The young lady appeared to be equally overjoyed to see him. "Hi, Chet!" she exclaimed right back, and beamed the fireman a joyously radiant smile. "Did you miss me?"

Chet's vision blurred and he pulled their pretty visitor up into a warm embrace. "More than you'll ever know," he shakily whispered into the woman's ear. He'd missed her all right. More than he could have ever thought possible!

The car that had deposited their guest began to take its leave.
Vickie broke the embrace, so she could turn and wave goodbye.

Chet saw the Ski Patrol patch on the waving sleeve of its driver's bright red parka, and made a mental note to be sure to thank Miss Norland for allowing her guests to have a guest of their own. Kelly picked Miss Taylor's suitcase up and then escorted her into the cabin. He was just about to ask how their guest had managed to get there, when he suddenly recalled his associate's mysterious conversation with Nikki at the hospital earlier, and then the paramedic's brief disappearance. He turned in his devious buddy's direction and found his foxy friend grinning, broadly, back at him.

"Like my surprise?" Gage calmly inquired.

"Beats a kiss on the forehead, any day!"

"Yeah. That's sort a' what I figured, too."

"Thanks, man."

"Hey, no problem," his helpful pal assured him. "Besides, somebody had to save your sorry ass from pining away," he teased.

Vickie's beautiful brown eyes widened with surprise and immediately re-riveted upon her suddenly bashful fireman's handsome, and now blushing, face.

Chet promptly picked the pretty woman's suitcase back up. "Uhhh…Where do you want this?"

Ever the gentleman, Gage offered to give up his room and sleep on the couch.

But their beautiful guest, whose dreamy gaze hadn't left Kelly for a moment, assured him that that wouldn't be necessary.

John caught the look on his friend's face and tried his damnedest not to grin.

Vickie would obviously be bunking with Chet.

Kelly took the lovely young lady's hint, along with her left elbow, and began escorting their—er, his gorgeous guest toward the stairs. "Allow me to show you the view from the loft…before it gets too dark."

The reunited couple quickly disappeared up the steps.

The remaining fireman finally released the grin he'd been struggling so hard to suppress. The paramedic quickly shut 'the loft' completely out of his mind and returned his full attention to the 'blaze' that was raging in their fireplace.

_TBC_
"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Kelly's borrowed alarm clock went off at six a.m.—sharp—and continued to go off until the spring mechanism unwound to the point where its loud, annoying 'clang'ing became a mildly irritating 'tap'ping sound…and then quit, entirely.

Gage crawled out of his nice, warm bed, tossed on some clothes and then headed into the cabin's kitchen.

The paramedic waited until the last possible moment, before disturbing the loft's still-dozing denizens. "There's coffee and pancakes!" he called up the stairs. "If anybody's hungry…for food," he wryly added, just beneath his breath.

"What time is it?" Chet sleepily pondered.

"Seven-thirty."

Kelly's "Ah sh—eeeesh!" cry was closely followed by a flurry of activity.

The cook snickered and returned to the kitchen.

A few minutes later, the loft's former occupants appeared in the cabin's cozy little breakfast nook.

Judging by the bags under their eyes, and by the way they had to practically drag themselves to the breakfast table, the pair had put that bed in the loft to good use.

Gage placed a platter—piled high with pancakes—and a pot of steaming coffee down on the set table and then assumed a seat, directly across from the groggy couple.

The paramedic was able to put up with the pair's mushy terms of endearment. He even tolerated all the lustful, furtive glances they managed to exchange.

But, when the two lovebirds started feeding each other pancakes, and licking the maple syrup from one another's lips, the cook quickly excused himself and finished eating his breakfast in front of the fireplace.

Nikki put in an appearance around eight, as promised.

John loaned Vickie his helmet and snowmachine and Miss Norland led Chet and his 'guest' off on a deluxe tour of the best—and most scenically beautiful—snowmobile trails, in the entire surrounding area…including a brief sojourn into Wisconsin.

Shortly after the trio left on their scenic tour, several large trucks pulled up to, and went rumbling past, the cabin. During the course of the morning, and under the strict supervision of the FAC, what could be found of the plane's wreckage was carted off.
Gage ignored the heavy machinery's whining engines and grinding gears, and concentrated, instead, on relaxing.

John filled the bird feeders out on their cabin's deck, swept off a comfortable wooden chair and then spent a somewhat disturbed, but still relaxing morning out there, sipping coffee and communing with a small flock of Black-capped Chickadees.

Gage even managed to get several of his remarkably tame feathered friends to land right in his motionless lap, and take sunflower seeds right out of the palm of his steady hand.

The fireman felt a profound calmness flow over him and suddenly recalled Dorothy's words in the final scene to 'The Wizard of Oz': "If a person can't find happiness in their own backyard, they're not going to find it anywhere." Or something to that effect.

He figured it was the same way when it came to trying to find someplace to relax. If a person couldn't relax in their own backyard, they most likely weren't gonna be able to relax anywhere else, either.

John also now knew why Nikki liked being out there on the deck so much.

You couldn't hear the wind, or the quiet chorus of singing birds when you were in the cabin.

As he sat there under a canopy of crystal blue sky, with a cool but gentle breeze caressing his cheeks, and the sun's warm rays lulling him to sleep, the paramedic could actually feel the serenity and beauty of his surroundings sucking all the stress out of him.

The paramedic exhaled a contented sigh. He felt incredibly—and completely—relaxed. And he wasn't even concentrating anymore!

By that afternoon, the recovered pieces of plane wreckage, and the FAC people, were finally gone—for good.

Peace and quiet returned, once more, to the mountaintop.

That is, until just before dark, when the sound of three, noisy, two-cycle engines suddenly broke the silence.

When the trio of bold explorers got back to the cabin, they discovered that John had supper waiting for them in the oven.

Nicole's guests invited her to be their guest for dinner that evening.

The young lady accepted their gracious invitation, and the four of them finished off the last of their tinfoil wrapped pasties.

Four snowy/rainy RELAXING days later, it was, regrettably, time for the two Californians to take their leave of both Brule Mountain and Michigan.

John and Chet bid their unforgettable—and beautiful—hostess goodbye, and thanked the pretty miss—profusely—for her hospitality…and her friendship.
Nikki pulled Chet aside and slipped him a note, along with some 'stern' instructions.

Chet and Vicki headed back to Marquette in her car.

John followed them in their rental.

Prior to checking back in to their original hotel, John stopped at The Camera Corner to pick up several rolls of film he'd sent off to be developed.

The paramedic purchased a picture frame, to go with one of the photos he'd had blown up, and then finally returned to the Ramada Inn.

John carried his packets of pictures and his heavy suitcase up to his old room.

The photographer looked over his developed pictures for a while, and then headed over to the hospital, to thank Dr. Hunter—in person—for vouching for him with the Iron County Medical Commissioner.

Dr. Hunter filled the paramedic in on how Jack and Billy were fairing, following their surgeries.

Gage was relieved to hear that the two 'guardian angels' were recovering well from the crash. Their rescuer was also delighted to learn that the pair intended to purchase a new Life-Flight plane, so that they could continue to fly people with medical emergencies to distant hospitals.

John returned to the Ramada Inn and asked the desk clerk to give them a couple of wake up calls around six, or so. Then he exchanged some paper currency for coins and headed for the nearest pay phone.

He called Stacey, just to hear the sound of her voice. He bid the girl sweet dreams and a goodnight, and then turned in.

Chet and Vickie dined and danced one last time in The Discoverer's Lounge.

The couple then retired for the evening.

Speaking of discovering things…

Gage was awakened, at precisely 6 a.m., by the loud, annoying ringing of a telephone.

Kelly completely ignored his wake-up call.

The muffled, but still annoying, ringing continued.

So John stumbled across the carpeting and rapped, rather loudly, on the door to Chet's adjoining room. "C'mon!" he insincerely urged. "If we miss this flight, we miss them all."

"Is it always this difficult for you to get out of bed?" he heard Vickie ask.

"I can get out of bed—easy," he heard his sleepy chum reply, "unless you're lying beside me…" he
romantically tacked on.

Gage wasn't the least bit surprised to discover that the beautiful young woman had spent the night. In fact, he would have been shocked, if she hadn't. John blinked his own sleepy eyes and then headed for his shower.

Chet and Vickie saved water, by showering together.

The couple also shared breakfast—together.

John was packed and ready, and waiting for Chet in the lobby.

The pair walked in, hand-in-hand, and the three of them headed out to the parking lot.

The artist retrieved a tall, gift-wrapped cardboard box from the trunk of her car and presented it to the U.P.'s departing visitors, as they were packing their rental.

Kelly thanked her and then bid the beautiful young woman a lingering—and surprisingly emotional—goodbye.

Having been there…and done that…himself, Gage didn't rush their departure, even if it meant that they might miss all of their flights.

The two men reached the Marquette County Airport at about a quarter to eight.

"Before I forget," John announced, as the pair were pulling their suitcases from the trunk of their rental car. "You were absolutely right!"

"Of course I was right! I'm always right…About what?"

"This trip. You said it was going to be great, and it was."

"Damn straight it was great," Chet smugly agreed. "It was even greater once we ditched the itinerary."

"Anyways, thanks…for inviting me along."

"Thanks…for coming along," Kelly countered. Then he gazed up at the bleak, overcast sky they were about to take off into, and quickly changed the subject. "I don't know about you, but, after all the snow…and the rain…and the blizzards, I am really looking forward to seeing some good old California sunshine again. Man, I can't wait to get back to the blue skies and sunshine!"

Weather wasn't the paramedic's chief concern, at the moment. All John was 'really looking forward to seeing again' was a certain California girl.

The 'blue skies and sunshine' would just be a welcome bonus.

The travelers turned their rental car in, checked their luggage and boarded a North Central DC-10, nonstop, to Detroit.
After a brief layover at Detroit Metro, the Californians climbed aboard a TWA Boeing 747—direct to LA International.

TBC
Chapter Thirty-Nine

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Jumbo Jet touched down in Los Angeles, and John Gage promptly set his watch back to Pacific Standard Time.

As they were taxiing over to the terminal, Chet Kelly gazed out their plane's portal at a row of thunderclouds looming ominously on the horizon. "We haven't had clouds like those around here for over eighteen months," he glumly realized and turned to share his gloom with his traveling companion. "We must a' brought 'em back with us from Michigan."

John just nodded, and kept right on staring—trance-like—at the 8x10 framed photo in his lap.

The rolling aircraft finally reached the terminal building and rumbled to a stop.

The two weary travelers disembarked.

"I don't see her," Chet announced, when the returning firemen finally reached their gate.

Gage glanced anxiously at his watch. "I hope I didn't give her the wrong flight num—"

"—Excuse me," a beautiful brunette suddenly said. "Are you two looking for Stacey Ferrel?…Hi, I'm Gerry Mills," the girl went on, seeing the duo's uncertain nods.

'Ah, yes...Stacey's roommate.' Kelly gave Gage an aggravated glare, which his aggravating pal pretended not to notice.

"Stacey sent me to pick you up. She's so-o sorry she couldn't make it, herself. Oh, it's nothing serious," the woman went on, noting their worried looks. "She thinks she just has a touch of the flu, or something."

The man with a stuffed moose in one hand and a picture frame in his other exhaled an audible sigh of relief and his worried expression turned to one of extreme disappointment.

Gerry managed a slight smile. "You know, this is embarrassing. But Stacey told me that 'John' would be the one without a mustache…"

"I'm John," the taller of the two mustachioed men introduced. He stuck the stuffed animal under an armpit and extended a moose-free hand. "John Gage."

So...this was the guy that got her roomy to break her 'I don't date cops or firemen' rule. Well, now the woman knew who—and she could definitely see why. Gerry took and shook the good-looking paramedic's proffered palm. "It's nice to finally get to meet you...John."

"And, I'm Chet," his chum quickly chimed in. The Irishman juggled the tall cardboard box he was carrying into one arm and then nudged 'John' out of the way, so he could take and shake the lovely young lady's hand, as well. "Do you work for the department, too?"
"No. No, I'm a para-legal for an LA law firm, McGuinnis-Crocker-Patterson & Doyle," Ms. Mills politely replied and promptly pulled her hand back. "C'mon. The two of you must be tired. What do you say we go claim your luggage and then see about getting you home?"

"Thanks for meeting our plane," Gage gratefully acknowledged. "You didn't have to bother, though. We could've grabbed a cab."

"It's no bother," their pretty chauffeur assured them both. "I just happened to have the afternoon off."

The pair picked their suitcases up from a conveyor belt in the Baggage Claim area and then followed Stacey's roommate out of the main terminal and into the…rain?

"Ple-a-ease?" John Gage pleaded into the mouthpiece of his apartment's phone, about an hour or so later. "I have to see you!"

"No!" Stacey firmly re-stated in his ear. "I was throwing up all last night!"

"Puking doesn't bother me. I'm a paramedic. Remember? I could come and…hold your hand…and fluff your pillows…and take care of you…and 'comfort' you."

"It wouldn't matter if you were a doctor. You're not immune to disease. You were just in an Intensive Care ward a few short weeks ago. What I have could be highly contagious and I don't want to risk you getting sick—again!"

The frustrated fireman flashed the feisty female an unseen frown. "All right then…When can I see you?"

"I'll call you. Hopefully, this is just one of those 24-hour bugs."

"Okay. But, if I don't hear from you within the next 24 hours, I'm coming over."

As per Doctor Kelly Brackett's standing orders, immediately upon his return—and, even before unpacking—the recuperating paramedic put an appearance in at Rampart General Hospital's Emergency Receiving.

Brackett ushered Gage into an empty exam room and gave him a complete physical.

The fireman flinched as the physician's probing fingers found a sore spot.

Kel glanced up. "Your ribs still bothering you?"

"I still feel a twinge, every now and then," the apparently still-recovering paramedic confessed. "It's not anything that would prevent me from goin' back to work, though."

"I thought we agreed on a temporary leave of absence," the physician reminded his stubborn patient. "I thought we agreed on a month."

"Yea-eah…" Gage regretfully admitted. "But I can relax without concentrating. So I don't have to concentrate on relaxing. An' there's nothin' else for me to do…but go back to work."

Kel finished his exam and watched wordlessly as the fireman slowly began to re-don his civies. Finally, the physician felt compelled to comment. "Physically speaking, you are a different person.
You've managed to regain most of your strength, and even some of your weight," he paused to smile and shake his head. "I can't get over that mustache! I even feel like I'm talking to a different person."

"You are! I am a different person! I'm totally relaxed, now. I feel…at ease. It's hard to explain. I just feel…great! And, I am very anxious to get back to work."

The doctor looked thoughtful.

John looked hopeful.

Brackett spun on his heels and began heading for the exit. "When you've finished dressing," he called back over his shoulder, "I'd like to see you in my office."

His former patient looked even more hopeful and speeded up the rate at which he was tugging on his blue jeans.

TBC
Chapter Forty

"There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All'"

Chapter Forty

The completely redressed paramedic stepped up to Brackett's office, just a couple of minutes later.

The door was open and his physician was on the phone.

So John slipped, silently, inside and assumed a seat, directly in front of his doctor's piled-high-with-folders desk.

"Oh, I'm sure there's some paperwork involved," Kel told whomever it was that he was speaking to. "There's always paperwork involved…I see…Yes. Just a moment—" The doctor placed a hand over his phone's mouthpiece and addressed his visitor. "You really feel you're ready to go back to work?"

Gage replied with a hairy grin and a nod.

"Well, you should know better than anyone. Is tomorrow morning too soon?" Brackett further inquired. "They could really use you. I've just been informed that—due to an extreme, and continuing, shortage of manpower—the Fire Department has been forced to take several of its Rescue Squads temporarily out of service."

The paramedic found the thought—of entire areas of the county being left without some form of Definitive Care—positively horrifying. However, tomorrow morning was too soon. Gage was real eager to get back to work, all right. It's just that the gentleman had wanted to spend some time in the company of a certain beautiful, blonde-haired, green-eyed girl—prior to doing so. "Tomorrow's fine," the fireman found himself saying, as his sense of duty won out.

Kel looked somewhat relieved and quickly uncovered the mouthpiece. "—He'll be there…You're welcome. Oh, and, thank you…Right…Goodbye." Brackett hung up his phone. "Congratulations! You are now—officially—a working stiff, once more."

John reached across the desk to shake his doctor's extended hand. "Thanks…for everything."

"You have yourself to thank, mostly. For cooperating—" Kel pulled his hand back so that he could pick up two of the three newspapers that were setting there, amidst the rest of the mess on his desk. "—almost 100 percent."

One headline read: 'California Visitors Save Heart Attack Victim'. Another read: 'One Man Killed in Iron County Plane Crash—Two Others Rescued'.

John couldn't see the third paper's headline. But he figured it probably said something along the lines of: 'Last Snowman of the Season?' "How—How did you get those?"

"Chet sent them…instead of post cards." Kel stared at the young man seated directly across from him for a few moments. "If I hadn't read it with my own two eyes, I never would have believed it!"

"Yeah? Well…I still don't believe it! And I was there! I'm tellin' yah, Doc…It doesn't matter where you go…or what you do. There's just no 'getting away from it all!'"
"So it would seem…” Brackett sadly surmised and skimmed over one of the articles again. "Mr. Gage was unavailable for comment?"

"Hey, what can I say," the paramedic calmly stated in his defense and flashed his doctor a sly—slightly askew—smile. "I was trying to relax."

His physician-friend was forced to grin.

THE END

Author' note: This is just the conclusion of EMERGENCY! Book One: "There's Just No 'Getting Away From It All". The story-line continues in the sequel, EMERGENCY! Book Two: "If Wishes Were Horses".

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!