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**Catching Fire (The Firehouse AU)**

by [kel_1970](http://archiveofourown.org/u/kel_1970)

**Summary**

21st Century fire department AU. Paramedic Leonard McCoy flees a disastrous break-up in Savannah and ends up working at a fire department in Iowa.
Catching Fire (The Firehouse AU)

Chapter 1: Fuel

“Stupid fuckin’ idiot,” Leonard McCoy muttered to himself, as he pulled into the small parking lot. “Goddammed moron.”

He shut of the engine of his Chevy van and sat there behind the wheel for another thirty seconds. “This was the stupidest idea on the planet. Iowa, for fuck’s sake. Stupid, dumb, idiotic—”

“Foolish, moronic, ridiculous, boneheaded, bird-brained … want me to go on, or not so much?” Leonard scowled out his open window at the ridiculously cheerful face that had popped up right outside the window of his van.

“Who asked you?”

“Just helping out, pal. So, you must be our new paramedic.”

“’Fraid so,” Leonard said. He opened his door and hopped out.

“Who are you afraid for? Yourself, or the rest of us?”

“Take your pick.”

“I’ll go for … yourself. Georgia plates, cussin’ yourself out in the parking lot; sounds like there’s maybe a sad story there. But I’ll let you tell me all about it later. I’m Jim Kirk, firefighter and rescue man extraordinaire on the ladder truck.”

Kirk stuck his hand out, and he and McCoy shook.

“Leonard McCoy, and yes, I’m your new ’medic. Out of Savannah, Georgia. And yeah, there’s a story, and no, you ain’t gonna hear it.”

“Now there’s a challenge if I ever heard one.”

“Lemme guess: you enjoy a challenge.”

“Now, after all that calling yourself stupid, you’re shaping up to be a fairly observant fellow, even for a sawbones! Come on in; I’ll show you around.”

McCoy allowed himself to be led in the back door of the fire station.

It was nothing like where he’d come from in Savannah. There, he’d run with a privately-owned ambulance company, which was entirely separate from the fire department. Here in Cedar Rapids, the fire department had its own ambulances, staffed by non-firefighter paramedics. He’d been looking for something different, to wash the taste of the last few months in Savannah out of his mouth, and different is what he got, when he was offered the job after a phone interview with the county’s EMS director.

McCoy stopped at the door of the apparatus bay, and stood and looked at the trucks. There were two
of them: a regular-looking fire engine, and one of those jobs with the big ladder on the top. Looked scary as hell. And nothing, but **nothing**, he thought, looks sexy painted the color of a tennis ball. Especially when it’s the size of a tractor-trailer.

“Yo! Dudes! Look what I found!”

It looked to McCoy like there were about twice as many people in the bay as he’d expect there to be on one shift for two apparatus, but what did he know? They moved around a lot, making it hard to count them.

Fourteen or so men—no, make that twelve men and two women—looked over at Kirk. A few were in civvies, the rest in uniform.

One man—the one in the white shirt—walked over.

“You must be Leonard McCoy. I’m Chris Pike, Captain of the B-shift. Welcome aboard.”

They shook hands. “Thank you, Captain. Or, uh, am I supposed to salute? I don’t rightly know, coming from an ambulance company.”

“Aw, now, Sawbones, don’t start putting ideas in his head!” complained Kirk.

“Can it, Jim,” Pike said. “Go get in uniform, and then, I don’t know, pick your nose until roll call.”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Kirk said, snapping Pike a smart salute.

“Infant,” Pike muttered, as Kirk trotted off to the door that McCoy assumed led to the men’s locker room.

“Sorry you got such a poor first impression of our shift,” Pike said. “Not even our probie, who just turned eighteen, is as juvenile as Jim Kirk.”

“This seems like … a lot of people,” McCoy said.

“Oh, that’s only because it’s shift-change. Half the guys in the bay are A-shift. I’ll introduce you to the B-shift at roll call. Until then, how about if we step into my office for a few minutes? I’ll be sure to leave you plenty of time to get changed. Oh, and your uniforms are in your locker, which has your name on it already.”

“Thanks, uh … okay, what do I call you?”

“You’re in the fire department, and I’m your commanding officer, so technically it’s ‘Captain Pike.’”

“Uh, yessir, Captain Pike.” McCoy mentally kicked himself for not knowing this, as he followed Pike into the tiny office.

“But unofficially, the medics are always a little sideways in the chain of command, since you take some of your orders from medical control. Plus, you’re closer to my age than anyone else here, and have … how many years experience?”

“Twelve.”

“Right. Your predecessor and I had a deal: in my office, or off shift, I’m Chris. In front of the guys, I should probably be ‘Cap,’ which is what all the others—well, everyone except Spock, that is—call me. Have a seat.”
McCoy sat in the chair across from the desk. “Who is this Spock fellow, and what does he call you?”

Pike chuckled. “‘This Spock fellow,’ and don’t let him hear you saying that, by the way, is Lieutenant Spock, who’s the officer for the ladder company. He insists on ‘proper address,’ so I’m always ‘Captain Pike.’ Gets to be a bit of a mouthful, if you ask me. But what do you go by?”

“Len, usually. Though I’m already a little afraid about what that Kirk kid is gonna come up with.”

“You should be,” Pike said. “Wait till you hear the nickname he saddled his partner with. But don’t worry—he’s really a nice guy. Bat-shit crazy—which you kind of have to be, if you’re a rescue man—but friendly.”

“You know, ‘friendly’ can also be scary. Like dog, for instance. People who have big dogs always say, ‘Oh, don’t worry, he’s very friendly,’ and that’s my sign to back away slowly, because there’s nothing worse than a friendly dog when you’re not a dog person,” McCoy said.

Pike laughed out loud. “Oh, great. Now I have this image of Jim Kirk as a Yellow Lab, tongue lolling out of his mouth, wagging his tail wildly and humping people’s legs.”

“But a dog, you could keep on a leash.”

Pike grinned at McCoy, and leaned back in his chair. “Len, welcome to Station 7. Glad to have you here.”

McCoy smiled back, ever so slightly. “Thanks. I’m just hoping this isn’t all a terrible mistake. I don’t know anything about fire departments. Some of the medics down in Savannah volunteered at their local fire departments. Especially the trauma junkies—they’re kind of the type for that. Uh, no offense,” McCoy said quickly, realizing he’d already put his foot in his mouth.

“None taken. This job does take a certain … type. But go on.”

“Me, I’m more of a medical man myself. Don’t get me wrong, I handle trauma patients just fine. I just don’t find them as fascinating as the medical patients. Plus, I’m afraid of heights—deathly afraid—so you’d never catch me up a ladder. So, what do I do? Run away from home and join the fire department, naturally. Terrific idea, huh?”

“Don’t worry, you won’t be going up any ladders. Some departments, their paramedics are also rescue men, which personally I think narrows the field way too much. It was a fine idea back in the early days of EMS, but these days, there’s so much demand for EMTs of any level that we’d never have enough of them if they all had to qualify as firefighters, too. Take your new partner, Chris Chapel, for instance. Firefighting simply wouldn’t be an option there.”

“Why, what’s his deal?”

“Her deal.”

“Ah. Right. I guess there aren’t many female firefighters. Probably not a lot of women are strong enough, right?”

“Well, that’s true. Some are, though. But firefighting still isn’t a very female-friendly field, despite the fact that it’s the 21st century. But we do have one. Gaila Morescu. She’s a black belt in something or other, and strong as a whip. And her husband—yes, husband; make a note of that, because if you make any suggestion to her that since she’s a woman in the fire service she must be a lesbian, she’ll kick your ass from here to tomorrow, by the way—is self employed, so he watches the kids. Yes, kids.”
“Okay—mental notes made. Anything else I should know before I jump into the fray?”

“Well, Christine will fill you in on the way your rig is organized, and all that paramedic stuff. She’s an EMT-Basic, by the way—that’s how we operate. One Basic and one Paramedic on each shift. If the call turns out to be Basic Life Support, she’s with the patient in the rig, and you drive. If Advanced Life Support is needed, vice versa. You decide how it’ll be played, of course. And whoever has the patient gets the pleasure of the paperwork. Which is all paperless, by the way.”

“Yeah, I heard that in my phone interview. That’s a relief; my handwriting is beyond awful.”

Pike laughed again. “Any thoughts of medical school?”

“Yes. It’s not happening right now, though.”

Pike waited for more, and realized he wasn’t going to get any, so he moved on, leaving yet another question mark about his new paramedic hanging in the air.

“We’ll all try to fill you in, during down time, about the organization of this station. But the main thing is, there’s the engine, and there’s the ladder. Four guys on each, and everyone’s got their special jobs. The engine company puts out the fire, and the ladder company does the stuff that makes putting the fire out easier. Or, if there are people trapped, gets them the hell out, ASAP.”

“Ah. That would be done by the rescue men, am I right?”

“You got it. Jim Kirk, and his partner Cup—uh, Carl Jablonski. And Lieutenant Spock is the officer for the ladder company, and Scotty is his apparatus operator.”

“And you said there’s a teenager working with us?”

“Oh, yes indeedy. Paul Chekov. He’s our probie—probationary firefighter, that is, fresh out of the academy. He’s a good kid. Too eager for his own good, but Gaila will shape him up in no time. Probably too smart for his own good too. Oh, and Hikaru Sulu is the apparatus operator for the engine. I think that’s everyone.” Pike’s eyes darted over to the clock on the wall. “I better let you get changed. Roll call is in the bay at 0730. I’ll let you put faces to all those names then. I’ll assign daily chores then, but you’re off the hook until you’re satisfied you’re up to speed on the rig and the local customs.”

“I was at the hospital for a couple hours yesterday,” McCoy said. “I’m all set on their expectations. Met a couple of the ER docs and nurses, too.”

“Good. Well, go find your locker—it’s probably in the middle row. Sorry about that.”

McCoy shrugged. “I’m not picky.”

“I hope that goes for food, too, because the cuisine around here is shit.”

“Terrific.” McCoy stood up. “See you at roll call. Thanks for the introductions.”

Pike nodded.

McCoy walked back through the apparatus bay, where the diesel engine of the ladder truck was thrumming away. He trotted through quickly, not wanting to breathe the exhaust, but noticed that a big yellow tube was attached the—well, he supposed he’d still call it a tailpipe, even though it was midway down the apparatus—carrying the exhaust up and presumably out of the station.
“Okay, so maybe they don’t actually enjoy inhaling toxic fumes,” McCoy said to himself. He found his locker, and changed into his uniform, wondering, for the hundredth time that week, what the hell he’d done.

TBC
Leonard found his locker easily, and got into uniform. It looked and felt all wrong—the shirt was the wrong color, the pants were stiff, and the insignia and patches were not what he was used to. It fit perfectly, though, and despite ‘feeling wrong,’ was quite comfortable. The rest—well, he’d get used to it. Or he wouldn’t. One or the other, he thought. But being here was a done deal, so he might as well get used to it.

Irritated with himself for wasting his time thinking about such things, McCoy slammed his locker shut. He was keenly aware that he was the only one in the locker room, which meant that everyone else was already lined up in the bay, probably waiting for him.

He strode up to the end of the line, and noted that the woman next to him had an EMT-B patch on her shoulder. His new partner, then.

“All right, people,” Pike said, clapping his hands. “0730. Listen up. First order of business: welcome to our new paramedic, Leonard McCoy. McCoy comes to us with twelve years’ experience, most recently at an ambulance company in Georgia. Take a moment to introduce yourselves during the day. Chris, you’ll go over the rig with him this morning; you’ll start taking calls at 0930. So, McCoy, welcome. It’s a pleasure having you on board.”

McCoy nodded. “Thank you, Captain.” As soon as he closed his mouth, he realized he was supposed to have said ‘It’s a pleasure to be here.’ But he didn’t know, yet, whether or not it was, so he waited out the short silence that Pike left him, trying not to squirm visibly.

Pike continued, mercifully, after just a few seconds. “All right, people,” Pike said, clapping his hands. “0730. Listen up. First order of business: welcome to our new paramedic, Leonard McCoy. McCoy comes to us with twelve years’ experience, most recently at an ambulance company in Georgia. Take a moment to introduce yourselves during the day. Chris, you’ll go over the rig with him this morning; you’ll start taking calls at 0930. So, McCoy, welcome. It’s a pleasure having you on board.”

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Pike continued, mercifully, after just a few seconds. “Okay: engine company, A-shift has nothing to pass along to you, and ladder company, ditto. Assignments on the apparatus for today’s shift are as per usual. Chores: Gaila, you’re in charge of the apparatus bay; Spock, you’ve got lunch, God help us all.” Everyone groaned, making McCoy wonder why, until Pike continued. “The Beano will be on the table, as usual, and hopefully we won’t be near any live fire today. Kirk, Jablonski; you’re on KP. Scotty, Sulu—weekly apparatus maintenance is assigned to our shift this week, so you’re on that. Probie, bathrooms. Chapel and McCoy, you’re relieved of chores this shift for orientation. And I’m on mounds of paperwork, lest you think I’m getting away with something here. Dismissed.”

The line broke up, and McCoy turned to his new partner. “Leonard McCoy,” he said, holding his hand out.

The tall blonde woman to his left took his hand and shook with a strong grip.

“Christine Chapel. Call me Chris. Nice to meet you. Georgia, huh? So what brings you to Iowa?”
“Well, it’s not Georgia, first of all.”

“Hmm. It’s certainly not. But twelve years of experience—wow, you probably could’ve gone anywhere.”

“But here I am,” McCoy said. “In Iowa.”

Chapel waited for more, but didn’t get it. “So, what do you think so far?” she asked.

“So far, I think there’s a lot of corn. And that everyone talks funny.”

Chapel laughed. “Fair enough. I’ve lived here all my life, and I think there’s a lot of corn, too. Come on, let me show you the rig.”

Chris pulled open the rear doors of the ambulance, and started showing Leonard the layout of the compartments. Things were organized in the same categories, of course, but just kept in different locations. He’d get used to it. She showed him through the supply closet, and went over their restocking procedures. In the two hours they spent going over things, the engine and ladder were called out once for an alarm activation, and the engine once on its own for a minor motor vehicle accident where there were no injuries or entrapment, but where some gasoline needed to be dealt with.

“Y’all have quite a bit fancier equipment here in corn-land than I’m used to,” Leonard said, after they’d been through the entire rig. “Battery-powered hydraulic stretchers, top-of-the-line defibrillator/monitor, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Well, I don’t know why that’d be,” Chris said.

A head popped into the back of the rig.

“Hey, Sawbones. Hey, Steeple. Don’t know why that’d be?” Kirk asked.

“Don’t you have something to do?” Chris asked.

“Nope—KP doesn’t start in earnest until Spock messes up the kitchen with whatever vegan wonder he’s inflicting on us today. So here I am, at loose ends, coming to bother anyone who looks busy. So, what is it that you don’t know why it would be that way?”

“Just that the equipment here is way better than what I’m accustomed to,” McCoy said, wondering if it was wise to encourage Kirk.

“Oh—that. Two things. Number one? You came from the private sector, right? In a small city? Well, let me tell you, taxpayer dollars are excellent,” Kirk said. “And number two, we got wiped out by flooding a few years ago, and FEMA dollars are excellent too.”

“Oh,” McCoy said. “That would explain it. Thanks for the insight.”

“No problem, Sawbones.”

Kirk leaned there in the doorway of the rig, as if he expected Leonard to say something else.

McCoy decided to oblige, partly in self defense. “It doesn’t make sense, really,” he said, “to use something for a nickname that’s just as many syllables as my last name, and longer than what people usually call me. I mean, what’s wrong with ‘Len?’”

“I could make you a shorter nickname,” Kirk said. “‘Saw.’ No—wait, that’s a horrible movie. And
you don’t strike me as the serial killer type. ‘Bones’ it is, then. Oh—and by the way, I’m showing you around town after Pike springs us tonight. District familiarization, you know? No arguing, because I know you don’t have plans. See ya, Bones.” And with that, Kirk was gone again, just as quickly as he’d appeared.

McCoy shook his head quickly, like a dog shaking water off its ears. “Jesus. And I came to Iowa to —” He stopped short, realizing he was about to say something he hadn’t meant to say.

Chapel desperately hoped he’d continue. “To what?”

McCoy sighed he hadn’t meant to say what he did, but there it was. “To be able to fucking breathe, is what. Pardon my French.”

“Oh, I do work at a fire station. But … what do you mean?”

“That kid—he seems to suck the oxygen right out of the air. No, that’s not right—I guess that it’s more like he uses twice as much as anyone else would. I don’t mean to sound uncharitable, but … it’s tiring just standing next to him.” McCoy hoped Chapel wouldn’t notice that he’d neatly sidestepped following up on his reasons for coming to Iowa.

Chapel laughed. “You should see him work. Now that’s tiring. But I can tell you one thing, nobody’s better at what he does than he is. Nobody. There’s nothing he won’t try to get his save.”

McCoy raised his eyebrows. “Seems like that could get you fired. Or dead. Or both.”

“Posthumously fired? That would be a fire department first, I think. But if anyone could do it, it would be Jim.”

“What could Jim do?”

Both Chapel’s and McCoy’s heads turned. Captain Pike was standing at the side door of the ambulance.

“Uh, get killed and fired at the same time,” McCoy said.

Pike nodded. “Oh yes, trust me, he could. But: are you two ready to roll? It’s almost 0930.”

McCoy nodded. “I won’t know where I’m going, at first, but if it’s real life or death, I won’t be driving anyhow. And if it’s not? Hello, nice modern GPS. So yeah, we’re good.”

“Excellent. Make yourselves available, then. And come see the ready room—I don’t know what you’re used to in Georgia, but hopefully we won’t disappoint.”

“I doubt I could possibly be disappointed,” McCoy said, as he climbed through into the cab and hit the status button on the mobile radio that automatically informed dispatch that they were available. “We had a TV and a DVD player in our bunk room, and whatever else people felt like bringing from home.”

“Well, go be undisappointed, then,” Chapel said. “You should meet some of the others, too. And you’ll have to excuse me; my contact lenses are killing me. I better take them out before we get toned out.”

McCoy pulled on the handle of the steel door that separated the apparatus bay from the rooms where the on-duty personnel spent their waking hours.
He wasn’t disappointed.

There was a U-shaped arrangement of three dark fake-leather couches around a huge flat-screen TV, which was on but not blaring. There was a pair of desks, each with a computer sitting on it. In one corner, there was a small weight-lifting setup—nothing fancy, but just what you’d need to get the job done. The far end of the room was dominated by a large table with ten chairs around it, behind which was a wall with a stove, two ovens, a dishwasher, an industrial fridge and freezer, and enough counter space for two people to work.

“So, welcome to Station 7,” a voice said from next to McCoy. “I’m Hikaru Sulu, and yes, my parents are Japanese, and yes, it’s unusual to see Asians in the fire service in Iowa, or anywhere else for that matter, so there’s those questions out of the way. Everyone calls me Sulu. What’s your handle?”

“Just Len will do. Nice to meet you, Sulu. If I have my facts straight, you drive the engine? Sorry if I get things wrong; my last workplace was just ambulances.”

Sulu smiled. “Well, that’s part of what I do. I also operate the pump, to get water from the source and send it to the various hoses and whatnot we’re using. And if there’s no need for water, I’m a jack of all trades.”

“And I’m completely aware I have no clue what any of those trades are,” McCoy said sheepishly.

“You don’t have to,” Sulu said. “But any of us would be happy to fill you in any time. In fact, you’ll be hard-pressed to stop some people.”

McCoy listened to Sulu speak, and tried not to stare. Sulu’s deep, melodic voice was such a mismatch with his physical appearance—short stature, compact but powerful-looking build—that it was fascinating to listen to and watch him talking.

“Come on, Len; there’s a commercial on TV, so let me introduce you to the other two members of the engine company.”

Len had already figured out, by process of elimination, which person in the room was Gaila. Even more than the fact that she was female, her fiery red hair made her stand out from the rest of the room’s occupants.

“Gaila?” Sulu said.

“Yep—oh, hi,” Gaila said, standing up from the couch. “Gaila Morescu.”


Gaila chuckled. “Jim’s found you already, I see. I would love to say he’s harmless.” She frowned, slightly. “Yeah, okay, I’ll say it—he’s harmless. Irritating as all hell, but harmless. Except maybe to himself.”

“I’ve been getting that impression,” McCoy replied. “ Anyone else I need warning about?”

“Don’t ever, repeat, ever, go drinking with Scotty,” Gaila said, pointing across the room to a brown-haired man who was in fierce conversation with Jim Kirk. “And don’t play chess with Spock. That’s about all I can think of. We’re all pretty much crazy, but like the book says, Mostly Harmless. Oh—and here’s our Probie,” Gaila continued, as what looked very much like a high-school freshman walked into the room.
“Probie!” she hollered, making McCoy wince.

“Ma’am?” the boy said.

“I swear, he’s eighteen,” Gaila said, as the kid walked over.

“I bet you have to say that a lot,” McCoy said.


“Do you have a name?” McCoy asked, shaking the boy’s hand.

“Not around here—at least, not for another few months,” the kid said.

“Well, your mama probably didn’t name you ‘Probie’ when you were born,” McCoy said. “I think Captain Pike said Paul-something-Russian.”

“Yessir. Paul Chekov.” The kid’s eyes shifted back and forth.

Gaila laughed again. “He came from a private ambulance company, Probie. You see, Len, that’s just what we do. Until he gets a black helmet, he’s Probie. We’ve all been there. Nobody takes it personally.”

“I don’t,” the kid said earnestly. “Honest. I’ve wanted to be a firefighter all my life, and I knew exactly what I was signing up for, and—”

Chekov’s justifications were interrupted by the department tones dropping over the station’s PA system.

“Ladder 1, Ambulance 2, respond to 18 Field Lane for a report of an injured child in a treehouse. That’s Ladder 1, Ambulance 2, to 18 Field Lane; injured child in treehouse. 0946.”

“Sounds like the old ball and chain got us a good one, Spock!” Kirk called, as the ladder crew started donning their gear.

“What did that mean?” McCoy asked, as Chapel started up the ambulance. In place of her contact lenses, she now wore thick glasses.

“Spock’s wife Nyota is a dispatcher for the county. And Kirk can’t resist commentary. Ever.”

“So I’m starting to see,” McCoy said. “So, do we run with lights and sirens routinely when we’re dispatched with a … a fire engine?” He was sure he had the terminology wrong, but he doubted Chapel would care.

“Yep. The rest of the time, we follow the dispatch codes, unless we decide to override for some reason and go hot.”

Along the way, Chapel pointed out some key roads and intersections. In five minutes, they were at their destination, just ahead of the ladder.

McCoy gulped as he looked at the treehouse. It was a good twenty feet up the trunk of a tall, straight ash tree. There was a zip-line connecting the treehouse to a platform on a neighboring tree; the setup was certainly the pride of the neighborhood children. McCoy was suddenly glad there was nothing like this in his childhood neighborhood; it would’ve been hard to come up with good excuses to keep his feet firmly planted on the ground.
The ladder pulled up to the curb, and Spock stepped down to speak to the woman who’d called in the emergency. Fifteen seconds later, Kirk was on his way up the ladder on the side of the tree.

Spock’s radio came to life.

“Spock, the kid’s got a broken arm, and may be concussed as well. I’ll need the Stokes, rope bag, and whatever McCoy and Chapel need.”

“Copy. McCoy and Chapel will be coming up,” Spock replied. He looked over at McCoy. “You may place your equipment near the base of the tree, and Jablonski and Sulu will send it up in the Stokes basket.”

“Got it,” McCoy said. He turned quickly, so Spock wouldn’t see the look on his face.

It figures, he thought. It just fucking figures. It would have to be my first run, my very first run, on my very first shift. He yanked open the compartment on the rig that held the splinting equipment. It’s like something out of a bad novel, or a bad TV show. And it isn’t what I signed on for. That’s not what Cooper said in the interview.

“No,” he muttered under his breath. “EMTs don’t do extrication work in our department. That’s what we have firefighters for. Just fucking awesome.”

He grabbed the bag of splinting equipment, and slammed the compartment closed. He whirled around and nearly ran right into Chapel, who was holding the bag of basic equipment and supplies they took in to all their calls.

“Uh, everything okay?”

“We’ll see,” McCoy snapped.

“Right …” Chapel said, putting the bag into the Stokes basket.

“Sorry,” McCoy said. “Sorry.”

“No problem. Let’s get up there.”

Chapel started up the ladder on the side of the tree. McCoy swallowed his gorge, and followed.

Don’t think about it, don’t look down; think about the kid. The hurt kid. The kid you can hear whimpering up there.

He made it to the top of the ladder, but panicked when he realized he’d have to let go of the ladder briefly to climb through the hole in the floor of the treehouse.

“Gimme your hand,” a voice said. “C’mon, let go with just one hand, and I’ll help you through.”

Okay. He’d believe that voice. But only because the kid was crying. He let go with his left hand, and a strong grip made him feel grounded once more. He took the last step up, sat down on the floor, and let himself freak out—on the inside—for just a second. He saw Kirk close a trap door over the hole he’d just helped Leonard through, and test it for soundness.

McCoy looked up to see the kid, huddled in the corner of the treehouse. There was a gaping emptiness on one side of the little room, where there should’ve been a wall, but wasn’t, because the zip line came in instead. The whole setup looked like an accident waiting to happen. Or not waiting. He looked away from the non-wall, and focused on the kid, who looked to be about eight. He was
huddled up against the wall, breathing fast and cradling his left arm as he cried. There was a puddle of vomit next to him. A large swelling was visible on the side of his head.

“Hey there, son, what’s your name?”

“Jared Metz.”

“Well, I’m Leonard, and I’m a paramedic with the fire department. My friend Christine is gonna hold your head still for me while I have a look at you. We’re all gonna help you out, and then we’ll get you down from here and to the hospital, okay?”

“Yes.”

McCoy moved to the side so Christine could stabilize the boy’s head and neck. The boy’s skin was sweaty and cool, and a little pale.

“Let’s get some O2 on him. Jim, could you get the—” McCoy said, just as Kirk approached with an oxygen cylinder and a pediatric mask. “Thanks. We’re gonna need a short spine board off the rig, and the pediatric cervical collars.”

“Got it,” Jim said. He radioed down for the immobilization devices to be added to the equipment on the Stokes.

“Jared, I’m putting this over your nose and mouth to help you breathe better,” McCoy said. “It’s just oxygen—it might help you feel a little better.”

“Yes,” Jared said in a small voice.

“What happened, here, Jared?” McCoy asked, as he gently palpated the boy’s head and neck.

“I came down the zip line, and … and then I don’t know. Then I was on the floor, and my arm was bent funny, and it really, really hurts!” Jared began sobbing in earnest.

“I know, buddy,” McCoy said, as he gently palpated a lump on the side of the boy’s skull. “Now I want you to try to keep really still, so don’t nod or shake your head when I ask you questions. Just say yes or no. Does your neck hurt at all?”

“A little. My arm hurts so bad!”

“I know, buddy,” McCoy said, as he felt Jared’s chest for any injuries. He felt the boy’s chest rise and fall as he breathed, and listened quickly on both sides with his stethoscope. In the background, he could hear that the equipment was being hoisted up into the treehouse. Once he was sure there were no immediate life-threatening injuries, he took a look at the arm. The boy’s forearm was badly misshapen, and was swollen and discolored, but he felt a good pulse in the wrist. “Can you wiggle your fingers?”

The boy managed to move his thumb slightly, but nothing else. “Okay, good,” Leonard said, even though it really wasn’t. “Can you feel what finger I’m touching right now?” McCoy asked, shielding the hand so the boy couldn’t see.

“Middle one,” Jared said. “And it’s kind of tingly. All my fingers are pins and needles.”

Shit. “Lemme tell you what’s gonna happen. The rules are, if someone hurts their head like you did, we have to make sure their head and neck are safe until a doctor can get some x-rays. So we’re
gonna put a collar on your neck, and then put you on a thing that kind of looks like a funny sled, so your head and neck and back will stay straight. And I’m gonna put a splint on your arm, to keep it from moving around while the firemen get you down. They’re gonna give you an elevator ride down, with ropes and pulleys.”

“Is it gonna hurt?” Jared asked.

“The collar’s pretty uncomfortable, and so is the backboard. And it’ll hurt when I put your arm in the splint, but that’ll keep it from moving around when we get you down.”

Jared cried harder at the prospect of more pain, and McCoy wished to hell he could give him something, but with loss of consciousness and a lump on the head like that, he wasn’t even going to ask medical control. He bit back a sigh as he reached for the bag of cervical collars. He sifted through the bag for the size he wanted, and set the collar on the floor. He took the boy’s shoes and socks off, and tossed them aside.

“Jared, wiggle your toes for me, all right?”

All the toes wiggled nicely.

“And what toe am I holding?”

“Uh, big toe, but my feet don’t hurt!”

“I know, buddy—I just have to check everything. What toe do I have now?”

“Baby toe.”

“Good job, pal. Now, here comes the collar on your neck. Just hold still, and let us do all the moving,” McCoy said, as he slipped the collar around the boy’s neck and chin and secured it. He turned to reach for the short spine board, and found Jim already holding the board. Leonard slipped the board behind Jared’s back, and did the straps up securely, ending with the blocks and straps that would hold Jared’s head securely to the board. Chapel moved from stabilizing Jared’s head to stabilizing his broken arm.

“Okay, pal. You’re doing great, Jared. You’re really helping out a lot by cooperating so well. I’m gonna splint up that arm now. That means wrapping it up in something that’ll keep the broken bones from moving around and hurting.”

“It’s gonna hurt!” Jared yelled. “Don’t touch it!”

“I’m sorry, buddy. I need to do it, to keep your arm safe,” McCoy said, while he pulled the appropriate splint from the bag. “I’ll be as quick and gentle as I can. Jim, why don’t you help out by his feet, there.” He looked at Kirk, to see if Jim understood what he was asking.

Jim nodded, and put his hands gently on Jared’s outstretched legs, near the feet, ready to hold them down in case the boy started to struggle.

McCoy steeled himself, and, as he promised, he was as quick and gentle as possible, but that didn’t stop Jared from shrieking bloody murder as his badly broken arm was moved, and moved again, padded, strapped into the splint, and finally, splint and all, secured to his chest. At the end, Jared threw up again, covering himself as well as McCoy’s hands and forearms. Christine’s hands were free at this point, and she cleaned them both up with a dampened towel, and replaced the oxygen mask with a fresh one.
McCoy and Christine moved Jared, whose screams had turned back to sobs, onto the long backboard that was already in the Stokes. After they secured him into the basket-like stretcher, Leonard took a second to brush Jared’s forehead gently before rechecking the pulse in his wrist and the sensation in his fingers and toes.

“You’re a super tough kid, Jared,” he said. “Now Jim, the fireman, is gonna send you down, just like in an elevator, and we’ll get you in the ambulance so you can go to the hospital.”

“Can you go with me?” Jared asked, his voice small and ragged.

Leonard squeezed his eyes shut for a second. “I sure can, Jared. I’ll see you at the bottom, okay? And don’t tell anyone, but I’m really scared of heights, so you might have to hold my hand after I get down from here.”

“Okay.”

Leonard and Christine had just finished packing up their equipment to be lowered down to the ground when the end of the rope came back up to the treehouse.

“You go on down first, Chris; see how he’s doing. I … might take a minute.”

“All right.” As she was meant to, Christine pretended, for the moment, that she hadn’t heard McCoy’s admission to Jared. She lifted the trap door, and stepped easily through the hole down to the ladder.

McCoy knelt on the floor, as far as he could get from the open edge of the treehouse, and watched as Jim sent the last of the equipment down and undid the rope and pulley setup he’d rigged up. Kirk packed the rope and pulley in the bag he’d brought them up in, and slung the bag on his shoulder.

“You know, you’re pretty much my hero right now,” Kirk said casually.

“What? Why?”

“I could see how much you hated coming up that ladder. And how you can’t look at the open wall there. But you were perfect with that scared little kid. Just … perfect.”

“Thanks,” McCoy said quietly. “But I still have to get the hell down from here.”

“I’ll help you get started. So you only have to let go with one hand at a time.”

“Thanks,” McCoy said gruffly. “That’s the part I don’t like. Letting go of one thing, before I can reach the next one.”

“I know.” Jim dropped down to the floor. “All right, let’s do this thing. You’ve got a patient down there.”

McCoy crawled over to the edge of the hole, his stomach coiling in on itself. He dropped one leg down, flailing it around until it hit something solid—a rung. He gripped the rough plywood corner of the trap-door opening. He was sure his fingertips were white under the cover of the blue nitrile gloves he still wore.

Jim knelt down in front of McCoy, and grasped both his forearms firmly. “I gotcha. I’m not gonna let go until you say. All right?”

“’kay.” McCoy took a second, and then moved his second leg down through the hole. As his weight
shifted, he lost his grip on the edge of the floor, and made a noise he hoped to God nobody heard. But Kirk’s hands held tight, squeezing his forearms and helping McCoy’s hands stay connected to the structure.

“I gotcha. See?”

McCoy tried to settle his breathing, knowing the effects of hyperventilation would do nothing to help him get down the ladder.

“You ready to try moving your feet down lower?” Jim said, after a few seconds.

“Oh, okay.” McCoy cautiously felt around with one foot, until he found another rung, and then the next. He repeated the action, until his arms were nearly fully extended. For the next move, he’d have to let go of the edge.

“I gotcha, and I’m not letting go until you say,” Jim said. He repositioned himself so he could reach down through the square hole to hold onto McCoy’s forearms when he was ready to lower them.

“Tell me which hand you’re gonna move first, and I’ll hold onto the other one.”

McCoy risked a glance downwards, if only to find where his first handhold was. He found it, and looked up again immediately.

“Oh, okay. I’m gonna move my right hand.”

“I gotcha.”

Leonard let go of the plywood corner, and fumbled until he found the handhold. Jim’s grip was still strong on his left forearm.

“Now move your other hand down, and I’ll hold on until you have a grip on that rung, okay?”

McCoy nodded shakily. He let go, shaking so hard he was sure Kirk could feel it, and reached down for the rung his right hand had already found.

“You got it,” Jim said. “When you’re ready, I’ll let go. Keep three limbs connected to the ladder all the time, and you’ll be fine. Three points of contact. And don’t forget to breathe, now. Breathe.”

McCoy took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “All right. Let go.”

Kirk’s grip on his forearm relaxed slowly, so Leonard didn’t feel like he was abruptly being dropped. “Three points of contact,” he said to himself. He moved one foot, then the other, then one hand, then the other. “And repeat,” he said to himself.

“You’re doing great,” Jim said. “About fourteen more steps, and you’ll be on solid ground.”

He repeated the process, for what seemed like forever, until he heard Jim’s voice again. “Two more steps. One more. And you’re down.”

McCoy finally took his eyes off the tree trunk, and looked down at his feet. They were, in fact, on solid ground. He turned around, and nearly fell over backwards when he saw Jim Kirk standing in front of him.

“Jesus Christ! Are there two of you? You were just in the treehouse. I saw you.”

“Oh, I couldn’t resist the zip line. I came down the other tree.”
“Oh.” McCoy cleared his throat. “Oh. Uh, thanks.”

“No problem. See you back at the barn, Bones.”

McCoy stripped off his mangled gloves, and shoved them into the red plastic bag on his way into the rig. He cleaned his hands with foam, and put on a new pair of gloves. Christine was sitting with Jared in the back of the rig, writing down numbers for a set of vitals on a cheat sheet. Jared looked better—much better—but it was time to get rolling.

“Thanks, Christine. Sorry that took so long.”

“What? Oh, it wasn’t that long, was it, Jared?”

“No,” Jared said wanly. He had stopped crying so hard, even though his broken arm had to still be incredibly painful.

“How about if I drive us in,” Christine said. “This isn’t necessarily ALS, but …”

“Thanks,” McCoy said. He’d been planning to ask her to drive anyhow, partly because he’d told Jared he would stay with him, and partly because he wasn’t in the best shape at the moment. Lucky for his patient, he didn’t really need to be.

“I want my mom,” Jared said, after a few more seconds. “I told the fireman her number, and my dad’s too.”

“I’m sure they called your parents, kiddo. Do you want me to try again?”

“Yes,” Jared said. “But—”

“What, champ?”

“I’m gonna be in really big trouble. It’s a school day.”

“Well, I think you and your folks can sort that out later. Right now, I bet your mom wants to see you as bad as you want to see her, so let’s give her a call. Is she Mrs. Metz?”

Jared shook his head. “Temple. My mom and dad are divorced. Ow!” he said, and cried anew as the ambulance hit a bumpy patch of road.

McCoy blocked caller ID, and tapped the digits into his cell phone as Jared told him the number. Jared’s mother answered on the second ring, sounding breathless.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Temple, this is Paramedic McCoy from the fire department.”

“Jared—is he okay? The firemen just called, and said he hurt himself in the treehouse!”

“Yes, ma’am, he did; he’s got a nasty bump on the head, and a badly broken arm, but he’s doing fine. We’re on our way to St. Luke’s, if you can meet us there.”

“Of course—I’m already halfway there, so I’ll be there soon. Uh, where do I go?”

“Go to the Emergency entrance; the receptionist there will help you.”
“Thank you so much. Can you—can you tell Jared I love him very much, and I’ll see him soon?”

McCoy was dying to hand his phone to the child, but that went against every rule in the book. “I certainly can.”

After he hung up, McCoy delivered the message.

“She’s not mad?”

“No, just like I said.”

McCoy checked Jared’s fingers again; he said they were still tingly but no worse than before. He radioed in to the hospital to give them a heads-up on the patient he was bringing in, and then settled in to his seat on the bench for the rest of the drive.

“We’re probably just about to the hospital,” McCoy said. “And your mom said it wouldn’t take long for her to get there, either.”

They drove on for another minute or so.

“Were you scared?” Jared said suddenly.

“Me? Oh yeah, you better believe it, buddy. I was scared out of my wits going down that ladder. But my fireman friend coached me down. It was a little less scary, having a coach.”

“You were my coach,” Jared said. “I was really scared, but you coached me.”

“And you were a super champion, too, kiddo,” McCoy said. He turned away briefly, so Jared wouldn’t see him wipe his eye quickly with the back of his wrist.

“And here we are,” Christine announced.

Leonard and Christine wheeled Jared into the ED, where his mother was indeed waiting. They left some notes with the charge nurse, exchanged the linens on the gurney for fresh ones, washed their hands, and slipped outside to the ambulance.

McCoy went to the driver’s seat, and sat down heavily. Christine sat next to him, silent for a moment.

“That was a tough one,” she said.

“It was,” Leonard said. There really wasn’t much he could add to that. Well, one thing. “He’ll be fine, though.”

“And you?”

“What about me?” McCoy said, scowling.

“Are you okay? I don’t think you were just trying to make the kid feel better by telling him you didn’t like heights.”

McCoy toyed briefly with the idea of trying to brush the whole thing off, but decided not to get off on the wrong foot with his new colleague. Kirk knew the truth, after all, so probably everyone else would soon as well.

“I practically crapped myself, but I’m fine.”
Chapel nodded. “We don’t often end up anywhere off the ground. I mean, I’ve been in a mangled back seat plenty of times, plenty of ditches and cornfields, and occasionally a pool, and once a gigantic pile of cow manure, but never a treehouse.”

“Where I came from,” Leonard said, “the firefighters were all EMT-Basics, and some paramedics too, so it was almost unheard of for us ambulance company people to get into anything other than a back seat.”

“Believe me, this wasn’t normal. Which is good, because if I remember right, you said you came out here so you could breathe.”

“Yeah. Breathe. Lotta luck I’ve had with that today.”

McCoy started the engine, and realized he had no idea where to go. “Which way back to the barn?”

Christine sighed, knowing she wasn’t going to get anything else out of him. “Left out of the parking lot, and then get on the highway.”

TBC
Chapter 3: Heat

The rest of the morning, to Leonard’s extreme relief, was much more like what he’d been expecting. They had one call for chest pain, in a fifty-year-old with no heart history, and one syncopal episode in an extremely thin-looking girl at the high school. That last call left both McCoy and Chapel ready for a good meal as they headed back to the station for lunch.

“This is a treat,” McCoy said. “At the ambulance company, meals were every man for himself.”

“You think it’s gonna be a treat, but it’s Spock’s day to cook,” Chapel said, wrinkling her nose.

“What’s the matter with Spock’s cooking?”

“He’s vegan,” Chapel said. “Nearly all the protein he serves is beans, to stay under budget. I don’t have anything against beans, in principle, and I’d bet he’s way healthier than anyone at the station. But he undercooks everything—and I do mean everything. And undercooked beans—well.”

“Digestive havoc,” McCoy agreed. “Terrific.” He decided this wouldn’t be a good time to mention that he was a vegetarian. It would keep.

“It’s not that I don’t approve of his recipes—it’s just how he makes them,” Chapel continued.

“I heard the Beano would be on the table, though,” McCoy said.

“That’s the mixed blessing of the day shift,” Chapel said. “Someone makes lunch, but you never know what you’re going to get. When we do our night shifts, we don’t do formal meals. Some people try to sleep when they can, but others don’t bother. There’s a pizza place that delivers until 3 a.m. They love us.”

“Well, I hope it’s at least edible, because I’m starving,” Leonard said, as he carefully backed the ambulance into its slot in the apparatus bay.

They quickly restocked the rig with supplies they’d used on their last run, and entered the ready room.

The room smelled, in McCoy’s opinion, terrific. The air was infused with the aroma of Indian spices. He was pretty sure he’d like the food, and he was looking forward to a hot meal after the way he’d been eating for the last few weeks.

“Hey, folks,” Scotty said. “It’s self-serve, eat-while-you-can,” he explained, for Leonard’s benefit. “I think the rest of us are done, so it’s all you.”

McCoy served himself up some brown rice, and topped it with the red lentil stew and a mixed vegetable dish. Chapel ate sullenly, pushing things around on the plate, and looking up occasionally at where Spock was busy packing up the leftovers. And in Leonard’s learned opinion, she wasn’t just looking—she was looking. He glanced at what looked like a diamond engagement ring on Chapel’s finger, and recalled that Spock was married, and wondered what the story was there. He figured, though, that he was about as likely to find anything out about that as anyone was to find out about exactly why he fled Georgia. No, it would be a cold day in Savannah before he’d tell anyone here the whole story about Jocelyn; that was for god-dammed sure.
Leonard looked at the slowly-fading dent on his own left ring finger, and tried to make his mind do a one-eighty—he didn’t even want to think about what had happened. But he was shit at not thinking about what he didn’t want to think about, so he ended up eating just as sullenly as Chapel, even though he was, in theory, enjoying the food immensely.

He tried to focus on the food, not the mood, and eventually began enjoying the meal in fact instead of in theory. The others could think what they wanted about Spock’s cooking, but in his opinion, he’d take it any day, and would go to Chez Spock, or Spock-tacular, or whatever he’d call the restaurant he damned well ought to open when he retired.

“The stew is called red lentils tarka, and the vegetable dish is seasoned with a spice mixture typical of the Goa region of India.”

McCoy nearly knocked his chair over backwards as he was jolted out of his reverie by the well-modulated baritone voice coming from the seat around the corner from him.

“I apologize, Mr. McCoy; I did not intend to startle you.”

“Oh, uh, I startle easily when I’m thinking about something else. This meal is amazing, Lieutenant Spock,” Leonard said, recalling Pike’s comment about how Spock preferred a certain degree of formality. Well, he was from the Deep South; he could handle that.

“Thank you. And although we know each other’s names, I do not believe we have introduced ourselves properly. I am, as you already know, Lieutenant Spock. I have been working in this department for nine years eight months, and currently am the officer in charge of the ladder company.”

“Nice to meet you. Leonard McCoy. Not much to say about myself that you haven’t already heard.”

“Indeed.” Spock paused for a moment, in what McCoy would have sworn was discomfort. “May I speak frankly?”

McCoy resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Here came a comment about his hesitation and obvious fear of heights during the morning’s first run. “Go right ahead.”

“I am attempting to improve my understanding of human behavior, which various colleagues have expressed is a considerable weakness of mine. It appeared to me that you were uncomfortable with certain aspects of this morning’s rescue. May I inquire if the difficulty pertained to the elevation?”

McCoy’s eyebrows twitched. What was with this guy? He’d’ve thought it was fairly obvious what the problem was. Maybe the guy did need to study ‘human behavior,’ as he so oddly put it.

“I don’t like heights,” he said. “Never will. I wasn’t led to believe that I’d be in that kind of situation in this job, but I guess I was wrong.”

“It is indeed highly unusual. However, through both first-hand observation and second-hand report, via Mr. Kirk, I am confident that you acquitted yourself admirably, despite your obvious discomfort.”

Was that a compliment? Leonard had no idea. “Uh, I’m glad you think so. But I’d be lyin’ if I said I enjoyed myself up there.”

Spock did not reply, and somehow that didn’t surprise Leonard. He didn’t seem like the type of fellow to waste words. Odd guy; very odd. Reminded him of a kid he’d known back in Georgia; the kid had Asperger’s Syndrome, and talked a little like Spock. But Spock couldn’t possibly be like that; you had to be completely functional to do the kind of work he did—especially to be in charge of
other people. Interesting.

“Has anyone explained the leftover food protocols to you?” Spock asked.


“Leftovers are packaged and labeled with contents and date, and stored in the refrigerator for a maximum of one week. Any staff member may freely help him- or herself to leftovers. This practice tends to be particularly popular during the overnight shifts. However, I do not believe that you will encounter substantial competition for this meal’s leftovers.”

“Well, thank you kindly for that advice. I’ll look for leftovers on tomorrow’s night shift, because this is about the best Indian food I’ve ever had.”

“Thank you.”

With that, Spock disappeared as abruptly as he’d shown up. Very odd fellow indeed, McCoy thought.

McCoy was just putting his dishes in the dishwasher when the tones sounded.

“Ambulance 2, respond to 2514 Fairway Drive for a 76-year-old male with altered mental status of sudden onset, history of CVA. 2514 Fairway Drive, 76-year-old male, altered mental status of sudden onset and history of CVA. 28-Charlie-5, 1341.”

*That’s more like it*, McCoy thought. *Hopefully he won’t be up a tree.*

The patient did appear to be having a stroke, but was transported to the hospital in stable condition. The rest of the afternoon was occupied by a non-emergency patient who was working the system to get a free ride to the hospital, an elderly patient on blood thinners who was having a serious nose-bleed—he didn’t look good at all by the time they got him to the ED doors—and a nursing-home patient with violent GI symptoms.

There were ten minutes left in the shift, and the ambulance, having experienced the side-effects of the GI symptoms, was still airing out on the concrete pad outside the apparatus bay when the tones sounded again, sending the engine and the ambulance to a one-car motor-vehicle accident. Chapel groaned in frustration, because she knew she wouldn’t be getting off shift on time, but Leonard was secretly relieved. He believed Kirk’s threat to take him out on the town at the end of the shift, so was glad the kid would be gone by the time he returned—the ladder truck didn’t go to MVAs.

“Chapel, you drive,” Pike ordered as they got ready to leave. “McCoy, switch to the Station Seven channel on the radio and I’ll brief you on the way over.”

“Yessir,” McCoy acknowledged. He was glad Pike wanted to brief him; MVAs with an unstable scene and an unstable patient could be tricky in terms of incident command, and McCoy didn’t want to tread on any toes. Chapel got the rig going, and McCoy switched his radio over an waited for Pike’s call.

“Ambulance 2 from Engine 1.”

“Go ahead.”

“Here’s our SOP for this situation. I know you’ve read it in the manual, but I want to tell you again, since it’s our first one. I’m in charge of the scene; you’re in charge of the patient. You don’t go near the vehicle until I say so. If extrication is required, you don’t get in the car until I say so. Period. If
you have a critical patient, inform me ASAP so I can get my people on the fastest means of extrication.”

“Copy,” McCoy said. “I don’t approach the car until you say; I don’t enter the car until you say; I tell you ASAP if I need rapid extrication.” It was completely standard, but McCoy didn’t blame Pike one bit for making sure he understood the procedures, especially since he was coming from a different setting.

“See you at the scene.”

Three minutes later, McCoy got the through-the-windshield view of a late-model sedan embracing a utility pole. He could see without getting out that the driver was thoroughly entrapped, and would likely be in bad shape, given the looks of the car. They pulled out their long spine board, their first-in bag, the monitor, the splint bag, and the trauma pack.

Pike and his crew approached the vehicle. Pike peered into the shattered windshield—it was an ominous sign to McCoy that he didn’t seem to attempt to get the driver’s attention. Gaila wrenched the hood open and cut the battery cables, as Chekov and Scotty made quick work of shoving an assortment of blocks under the vehicle to stabilize it. McCoy and Chapel waited a couple of yards away, ready to act on Pike’s signal.

“McCoy, Chapel!” Pike called, as he gestured for them to approach.

“One patient,” he said. “That I can see.”

The front door was jammed shut. The driver was slumped over the steering wheel, blood staining the deployed airbag, white airbag powder everywhere. McCoy pulled open the back door.

“Chris, can you get in there and hold c-spine?”

Chapel got in behind the driver, quickly checking the floor of the backseat for other occupants.

“Sir? Can you hear me?” McCoy said, positioning himself in front of the patient, to keep him from turning his head to look if he in fact did respond. Which he didn’t. He reached in and grabbed the man’s earlobe and pinched it, hard. No response.

McCoy could hear ragged, irregular breathing, so the airway was open to some extent, and the patient was breathing. He felt a rapid, weak carotid pulse, and with his bare wrist, felt that the man’s skin was cold, pale, and clammy—all bad signs. Except for the presence of pulse and respiration—McCoy could live with those.

He lifted the deployed airbag to inspect the steering wheel, and swore. The steering column was visibly damaged, and the man was firmly pinned between the steering wheel and the seat. There was a trickle of blood coming from his mouth, staining the airbag. He turned to Pike.

“Rapid extrication, let’s go.”

Chekov and Gaila were already prepared, with a variety of tools to open the car door. Their first and easiest option—prying it open with a halligan bar—was miraculously successful. Chekov pulled the door open, and he, Gaila, and Pike all put their weight into pushing the door open as far as possible.

“Chekov, take over on c-spine, from this side. Chris, you’re in the front seat on his lower body. Gaila and I are on the upper body,” McCoy barked. “Cap, Scotty, hold the backboard once I’ve got it under him.
The crew swung into action, and from their movements, a trained observer would never know this group hadn’t done this operation together many times. McCoy shoved the backboard under the man’s rear as far as he could without torquing the man’s body. The patient, the two EMTs, and four firefighters were all crammed together in a space the size of a diner booth, standing on each other’s steel-toed boots.

“We move him on your count, Chekov.”

Chekov counted to three, and they turned the man’s body as a unit and laid him flat on the backboard.

“Everyone, on Chekov’s count, we slide him up to the top of the board.”

Chekov counted again, and the man was in place on the backboard, with Chekov still holding his neck straight.

“Set him down right here; it’s flat.”

McCoy swiftly cut the man’s clothing off and whipped through the rest of his initial assessment, first putting an oxygen mask over the man’s mouth and nose.

“Chris—flail chest, left side.”

“Got it,” Chris said, and began preparing the necessary supplies to stabilize the injury.

“Absent breath sounds on the left. Respirations 26 and shallow. Pulse 130 and thready. BP 90 systolic. I’m doing two IVs NS, wide open, and then we’re gonna wrap and run.”

The man had shitty veins, made shittier by his low blood pressure. He was likely hemorrhaging internally, and the patient’s only chance was to get some fluids in him and get him to the hospital instantly.

“I’m not fucking around with this,” McCoy said after his first failed attempt at an IV. He grabbed the intraosseous drill from the pack and moved to the man’s legs. The left one was badly broken.

“Fuck.”

He drilled a catheter into the marrow cavity of the man’s right tibia, and connected the catheter to a bag of fluid. He taped the mess down.

“Wrap him up,” he ordered.

Chapel had already put a rigid cervical collar on the man, and everyone’s hands flew to secure the patient to the backboard. They carried him carefully over to the waiting stretcher, secured him down, and loaded the stretcher into the rig.

“I’m gonna go once more for a second line, and then we’re out of here,” McCoy said. He tried a different vein, and was successful in getting an IV established.

“Got it! Make your best time, Chris,” McCoy said unnecessarily.

As they hit the road, McCoy surveyed the man’s body for any additional injuries, and noted the already-stabilized flail chest, left upper quadrant bruising and rigidity, fractured left tibia, fibula, and femur, and facial injuries on his cheat sheet. He radioed the hospital to alert them to the imminent arrival of a multi-system trauma patient, and gave them a run-down on the man’s condition. The only thing the guy had going for him, really, was a rapid response time, and the fact that the accident
occurred ten minutes from a Level-I trauma center.

McCoy took one more set of vitals—the good news was that nothing had gotten worse, which was about all he could expect. The ambulance was met in the bay by a trauma team. McCoy gave his run-down once more, and the patient was whisked away. They retrieved their stretcher, cleaned it up, restocked, and, bone tired, returned to the station, arriving over half an hour after their shift was supposed to have ended.

Pike was on one of the computers finishing his paperwork from the last run. McCoy sat at the next one, and filled out his report.

“Nice work today,” Pike said. “Especially at that MVA. Which, I mean, was the only one of your runs that I saw, but it was very smooth.”

“Thanks,” McCoy said. “Hopefully it was smooth enough for our patient. He was in rough shape when we turned him over at the hospital.”

“They won’t mind if you ask for disposition tomorrow night,” Pike said.

“Not sure if I want to know,” McCoy replied, “but thanks. I’ll probably ask.” He closed his file, cracked his knuckles, and groaned.

“Think I’ll hit the shower and head out. Have a good night.”

“You too. See you tomorrow evening.”

McCoy plodded into the locker room, and shrugged himself out of his uniform. With a towel around his waist, he went to investigate the shower situation.

“Hey, Bones! We still on for drinks?” a voice chirped from what seemed like right next to his head.

“Jesus Christ!” Leonard shouted, reeling backwards into a bank of lockers, and very nearly losing control of his towel. “Fuck, Kirk! You scared the shit outta me!”

“Oops. Sorry,” Jim said.

He didn’t look the least bit sorry as McCoy glared at him.

“Go ahead, have a shower—I heard about your last run. You get him there alive?”

McCoy nodded. “Barely,” he replied, as his heart rate settled down to something approaching the normal range for a man of his age and general physical condition.

“Awesome. Well, I’ll be in the day room. Come grab me when you’re ready to be awed by the Cedar Rapids night life. On a Tuesday.”

McCoy’s mind boggled at the kid’s assumption that they were actually going to bars, or clubs, or whatever the hell he had in mind. Leonard stepped into the shower, and decided that he’d at least go to the ready room and tell the kid he was too tired for any such thing, and then get straight into his van and leave.

Though it might also be amusing just to leave.

No, Leonard thought, rinsing shampoo out of his hair. No good reason to start burning bridges on the very first shift. Plus, Jim had really been pretty professional and helpful with the whole ladder thing. He’d talk to Kirk before he left. But no way in hell was the kid getting him into a bar. Or a club. Or
whatever the fuck they had in Iowa.

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“Can I get you two another beer?” the waitress said.

“Just a Coke for me, thanks,” Jim said. “Gotta drive and all.”

“Make mine a Diet Coke, please, miss,” McCoy said.

“Oooh, I love your accent!” the young woman said. “Where are you from?”

“Georgia,” McCoy replied, trying to sound as much as possible like he was from Iowa.

“I thought so,” the waitress said. “My cousin lives in Atlanta, and you sound just like him.”

McCoy didn’t miss the young woman’s glance at his left hand. She turned slowly, as if offering him a 360-degree view, and returned to the bar, got their sodas, and came right back to the table.

“Here you are,” she said, setting the drinks on the table. “Can I get y’all anything else?” She giggled at her own cleverness.

“Just the pizza, whenever it’s ready,” McCoy said, doing his best not to roll his eyes.

The waitress returned to the kitchen.

“Bones, she was totally checking you out. And she’s hot, too. You gotta teach me that accent,” Jim said.

“I don’t really think you can just—”

“And holy shit! Look at that!” Jim pointed to the napkin under Leonard’s soda.

She’d written her name and number on it.

“Jesus,” McCoy muttered. “Here. I’ll trade you.” He shoved the napkin at Kirk, lifted Jim’s glass, and took the damp napkin from underneath it.

“Seriously?”

McCoy silently nursed his soda.

“What, she’s not your type?”

“No,” McCoy said. “Fatuous, simpering women half my age aren’t my type.”

“Oh, c’mon, Bones—half your age?”

“I’m thirty-two.”

“She’s gotta be at least eighteen, to be serving booze.”

“Still fatuous and simpering, though. And eighteen is too young for thirty-two.”

“All right, all right.” Jim chugged a third of his Coke. “So, tell me about your ex.”

McCoy glowered across the booth at him. “We are not, repeat, not, having this conversation.
Besides, how do you even know I have an ex?"

"The dent on the finger, and the fact that you fled Georgia for some reason you’re not saying."

"Fine, I have an ex. End of discussion."

"What’s she like? And what the hell did she do to piss you off so bad? I mean, not that it doesn’t seem like it’d be easy to piss you off, because—"

"I don’t wanna discuss it!"

Jim put his hands up defensively. "Sorry, sorry! I’m just trying to be friendly. Because to be honest, you look like you could use a friend."

McCoy stared into his drink. The kid was absolutely right, and he really was just trying to be nice. He’d been nice, in a puppy-doggish kind of way, from the instant they’d met. Hell, he’d gotten him out of a bind earlier that day, the first day they met, waited for him after the shift, even though he was late, and took a grumpy, sour old guy he didn’t know from Adam out to a completely reasonable pizza place, and got nothing in return but snarkiness and hostility.

"Sorry," Leonard said, still staring into his drink.

"It’s all right," Jim said mildly.

"No, it’s not," Leonard said, finally looking up and really looking at the kid’s face. He must not have really looked at him before, or else the lights in the pizza joint were doing funny things, because Kirk’s eyes were a completely unreasonable shade of sapphire. "You’ve been nothing but nice—well, okay, a little annoying, too. And I’ve been nothing but nasty. I apologize."

"Apology accepted." Jim looked across the table at his companion. On the one hand, he didn’t look thirty-two—there was no trace of gray in his hair, no wrinkles on his face, except a double furrow between his eyes, which Jim suspected was just part of his expression these days. On the other hand—the eyes. Yeah, they looked older than the hills. Jim knew about that, from looking at his mother.

The waitress brought their pizza to the table.

"Thanks, I think we’re set for now," Jim said. He used the spatula that came with the pie to serve a slice to McCoy, and then to himself. They started eating, neither one speaking.

McCoy finally put his slice down.

"Look," he said. "I left Savannah because I had a nasty break-up. Really nasty. The kind that leaves you with nothing—no friends, no nothing—and the kind that wasn’t my fault. I mean, our relationship was going to hell, I admit that, but it wasn’t my fault that I came home sick one day and found Jocelyn in our bed with one of my co-workers. Who I thought was also one of my friends."

"Ouch," Jim said.

"Yeah, ‘ouch.’ To make a long story short, there were enough people who took the other side, and who thought Joss and I shouldn’t have been together in the first place, that … well, in a town the size of Savannah, and in the line of work I was in, I had to go. Wanted to get away anyhow. So I looked at jobs at least a thousand miles away, and this seemed like the best fit."

"That sucks."
“Yep. It completely, utterly sucks. So now you know why I’m here. And why I’m such an asshole.”

Jim squinted at Leonard. “I don’t think you’re an asshole. Cupcake—now, he’s an asshole. He’s a shit to his wife, tries to get away with crap at work every shift, et cetera, et cetera.”

McCoy frowned. “Who’s Cupcake?”

“Oh—he was probably introduced to you as Carl Jablonski. My partner. Don’t get me wrong—he’s a good firefighter. I trust my life to him every time we do something dangerous. Which is fairly often. But he’s a lousy excuse for a human being otherwise.”

“Ah. Actually, he’s the only one on the shift I haven’t spoken to yet.”

“Like I said—asshole. Who doesn’t go talk to the new guy on his first day? Him, that’s who.”

“To be fair, I wasn’t exactly forthcoming myself.”

“Yeah, but you and the Steeple were running all day. Us ladder guys had a pretty easy shift. So as far as I’m concerned, he shoulda caught you, not vice versa.”

“That’s mighty generous of you,” McCoy said. “Because maybe I didn’t really make an effort with anyone except Chapel. Now that I’m thinking about it.”

Jim talked around a huge bite of pizza. “Well, you just said you found your ex in bed with one of your former co-workers. That could’ve had something to do with it, maybe.”

“Maybe.” McCoy returned his attention to his pizza, and suddenly realized he was starving. He plowed through the rest of the slice, and another, and looked up to see Kirk watching him, a bemused expression on his face.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just thought you actually liked Spock’s lunch, and ate plenty of it. And now you’re going at that pizza like you haven’t had a square meal in a week.”

*Triple that, and you’d be about right*, McCoy thought. “Just hungry. That last run took a lot outta me.” He finished his half of the pie right at the same time Kirk finished his.

“So where do you live, anyhow?” Kirk asked.

“Uh, I’ve got a place not far from the station.” Well, it was technically true, McCoy thought.

“Huh. I wouldn’t have thought there was much around there,” Kirk said. “I live down in Riverside—where I grew up, actually.”

“I’m not so up on the geography around here,” McCoy said, glad Kirk volunteered his own information, to take the conversation away from McCoy’s arrangements.

“South of Iowa City. About forty minutes from here. I really oughta get a place up here, I suppose, but—well, my mom lives down there, and my brother and his kids, and I help out on the farm sometimes.”

“You don’t …”

“No, I don’t live with my mother. That’d cramp my style, real bad. Hoo boy, I can’t even think about that. What a nightmare.” Kirk shuddered, and McCoy didn’t think it looked feigned.
“Sorry I assumed,” McCoy said dryly.

The perky waitress appeared once more. “Do y’all need anything else?” she asked, apparently having decided she liked the word.

“Just the check, please,” Jim said.

“Shore thang, hon.”

McCoy rolled his eyes at the extremely poor southern accent.

“Okay, so maybe you’re right,” Jim said. “She does seem like kind of a moron. But she is hot, though.”

“I’ve never been very good at seeing past idiocy,” McCoy said.

“That’s not exactly a character flaw, Bones,” Jim said.

McCoy snorted. “No, I guess not.”

The waitress returned with their check, which Jim immediately snatched out of her hand.

“This one’s on me, Bones,” Jim said.

“Now, c’mon, kid; I wanted to get it. B’ sides, I never properly thanked you for bailing my ass out of that tree this morning.”

“You did, actually. You said ‘thanks,’ right after you accused me of having an evil twin.”

“But—”

“No ‘butts,’ Bones. I’ll tell you what—you get the next one, all right?”

“Sure. Thanks, Jim. For dinner, and for saving my ass.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jim tossed cash on the table, and they both stood up.

“Not gonna take that phone number with you?” McCoy asked.

“Nah. In the first place, it was for you. In the second place, she really was a moron. Even if she was hot. Say—you know how to get where you’re going from here?”

“Yeah—no problem. I’ll see you tomorrow evenin’, then.”

“Great. I actually love the two night shifts,” Kirk said. The department followed a fairly standard schedule of two day shifts, followed by two night shifts, followed by four days off.

“Yeah, I worked a lotta nights in Savannah as well. Anyhow—thanks again, and see you tomorrow,” McCoy said, as they went to their vehicles.

“Wait a sec—you probably don’t know anything around here. So lemme give you my cell number, in case you’re trying to find … I don’t know, a place to buy a lamp, or underwear, or liquor, or whatever. If you even drink. Don’t tell me you’re one of those totally straight-laced people like Spock, now are you?”
“Ah … that would be a resounding ‘no,’” McCoy said. “I drink plenty, believe me. I just don’t mix it with gettin’ behind the wheel.” Not to mention the ‘not being able to stop’ part.

“Good,” Kirk said quietly, with a look on his face McCoy couldn’t quite place. “Good. Anyhow—here’s my number, just in case.” He rattled out seven digits.

“Oh, what’s the area code around here?”

“Uh—sorry. 319. And what’s your number?” Jim asked.

McCoy gave his 912 area code along with his number.

“See you tomorrow, then,” McCoy said. “Thanks again for dinner, and the help this morning. And for taking pity on a cranky old man.”

“You’re not old, and you have a good excuse for being cranky. The ‘man’ part I’ll agree with, though.” Kirk swung his keys. “See ya.”

“Later,” McCoy said. He stepped into his van, and headed to the state park that was his temporary home. The next two paydays couldn’t come soon enough.

TBC
McCoy forced himself to stay up as late as he could that night. It wasn’t easy: he didn’t have much to do. He had his laptop, but no wi-fi. No TV, obviously, since he was living in a freaking van. He’d tried to get a library card a couple days ago, but he wasn’t able to provide a shred of proof that he actually lived in Linn County, so they turned him down. Now that he had his department ID, they might believe him; he’d try again tomorrow.

He eyed the bottle of bottom-shelf bourbon he’d bought with his nearly-maxed-out credit card the previous day. No, he decided; starting might mean not stopping, and that wouldn’t be good for his sleep, which wouldn’t be good for his first night shift at his new job. Instead, he started yet another game of Minesweeper. When he tired of that, he’d go back to Scrabble for a little while, and then maybe some more Freecell.

In the middle of what Leonard thought might be his twelfth game of Scrabble, his phone rang. It was a Savannah area code, but he didn’t recognize the number, so he picked up, partly out of curiosity—it was nearly two a.m.—and partly in case it was actually important.

“Hello?”

“Leo, don’t hang up—please.”

Leonard paused. He’d blocked Jocelyn’s number, and all the numbers he knew from Savannah. He should’ve just blocked the entire fucking area code. He should hang up—he really should. But what the fuck.

“Okay, Joss,” he sighed. “What do you want?”

“I understand why you don’t want to talk to me.”

McCoy laughed a hollow chuckle. “You do, huh? Well, maybe you shoulda thought of that before you started sleeping with Marie. What was it, a year ago? Is that about right? And you definitely shoulda thought of it before I came home that day. That woulda been good, don’t you think?”

There was a few seconds of silence on the line. “Look. I deserve everything you need or want to dish out right now. And more. But here’s the thing. I just want to see if you’re okay. I still care—”

Leonard exploded. “Don’t you dare say you still care about me. Don’t you dare!”

Another silence. “All right. I won’t say it. Even though it’s true.”

“Fuck you, Joss. Just—fuck you. I wasn’t enough for you, and you didn’t even have the decency to say so. I knew you were bisexual—you were up front about that. I’ll give you that. But that doesn’t excuse screwing around behind my back. God, I’ve never wished more that we could just get a divorce. That would make things so much simpler.”

“But we can’t, and you know it. It doesn’t work that way.”

“We sure asfuck can’t. If it’ll make you happier, I’ll do like they do in Saudi Arabia, and say ‘I divorce thee’ three times. And then it’s official. Or as official as it can be, without actually being real. Would you like that?” Leonard spat.
“I … you know, I guess I would, actually,” Jocelyn said, finally. “But Leo—you didn’t take any of your things with you. Can I at least send you some things? Some of your books, or … anything? I mean, I don’t even know where you are.”

“I thought I made it pretty clear that I didn’t want you to know where I was. I’m over a thousand miles away, just like I said I’d be. More than that, I’m not ready to say at this point.”

“All right. But …”

“Look. In a few weeks, when I’m …” not homeless anymore, “more settled, I’ll give you a post office address where you can send some things.”

“Good. Because I know how much you like having your books around you, and there are a lot of things from your family in the house, and … well. I just wish you hadn’t left with nothing.”

“At the time, I felt like no matter what I took, I’d still be leaving with nothing.”

“I know.”

McCoy sighed. “If you feel like doing me a favor, you can put anything you want to in storage somewhere, then send me the key, and I’ll come down and get it sometime when I get some time off.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Thank you.” That was civil, Leonard thought.

“Could you do me a favor, too?”

“What?”

“Say it. Like they do in Saudi Arabia. Please.”

Leonard’s heart felt heavy, like it was trying to push its way through his diaphragm into his abdominal cavity. The lump in his throat got harder and tighter. But he swallowed it down, because he had something to say.

“I divorce thee. I divorce thee.” Tears sprang up in Leonard’s eyes. “I divorce thee.”

He pressed “End” on his cell phone to sever the connection. He pressed it again. And again. And again.

He found the plastic bottle of shitty bourbon and opened it anyhow.

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The phone rang again, jolting Leonard out of sleep. He didn’t remember filling his mouth with cotton, the night before, and didn’t remember ordering an in-head delivery of an entire drum corps, but he’d gotten them anyhow. He checked the caller ID—Jim Kirk. Fuck.

“’lo,” he grunted.

“Bones! You sound like shit.”

“Feel like shit. Time is it?”
“Uh, almost two o’clock. Fuck. I woke you up, didn’t I.”


“Just wanted to see if you wanted to grab a bite before our shift. Sounds like maybe it was good I called, huh? Wouldn’t be good not to show up for your second shift.”

Well, that was a fact. “True.” He sipped some more water, cautiously. “Yeah. A diner or something would be great. Tell me where and when, and I’ll show up. And I’ll even try not to be a grumpy ol’ bastard.”

“Aw, now, Bones—that’s no fun. So I’m thinking, the Queen Diner is about a mile west of the station, on the same road. You can find that, right?”

“God, I hope so. Because if I can’t find the station, I’m really fucked.”

“You sound pretty fucked. Everything okay?”

No, you idiot child, everything is not fucking okay! Leonard wanted to shout. “Fine. Just stayed up too late, I guess.” And had about five drinks too many.

“Well, I don’t actually believe you, but we’ll talk about that later. See you at the Queen at four-ish?”

“Great. See you then. And we won’t talk about it, just in case you’re wondering.”

Leonard put his phone down, and surveyed his environment. He rooted around on the floor, and found the bottle of bourbon. He was relieved to see that it was still over half full. So he hadn’t done as much drinking as he’d feared. He had some more water, and downed a banana to cushion the four ibuprofen he swallowed next, and started to feel like maybe he wasn’t all that hung over after all. Mostly just messed up from turning his sleep schedule halfway upside down. Well, okay. A little hung over, too. But not so bad that he was still drunk. That was something.

He gathered his towel, toiletries bag, and a change of clothing, and walked to the park’s bathroom for a shower. There wasn’t any competition at all at two on a Wednesday afternoon, so he took his time. He wondered, while he was in the shower, why Jim seemed to be making him his own personal project. He couldn’t for the life of him come up with a plausible reason. The kid just seemed so … everything McCoy wasn’t. Young, bright, happy, confident, easy-going. But, he decided he didn’t really care. The kid was growing on him, in a funny sort of way.

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Leonard found the Queen Diner without difficulty. Even at four pm, the parking lot showed that the place was popular. Leonard parked the van, and was immediately hailed when he climbed out.

“Bones! Hey, over here!”

Jim was leaning against a car—some kind of classic, he was sure, but Leonard couldn’t give less than a shit about vehicles, so he didn’t know what it was.

“It’s a scorcher today, isn’t it?” Jim said.

Leonard laughed out loud. “It’s what—eighty five?”

“Right. Georgia. Well, anything over sixty is hot when you’re in turnout gear.”
“Oh. I guess it would be. That stuff looks pretty heavy.”

It was Kirk’s turn to laugh. “It’s basically an ironing board cover with a raincoat on top of that, and a Kevlar coat on top of that. Sometime after a day shift I’ll dress you up in all my gear, and throw an air pack on you.”

“That’s a good idea, actually.”

“Huh? I was kidding,” Kirk said, as he waved to a waitress and plunked himself down in a booth.

“I’m not. I know nothing about what you guys do, so it’s only fair.”

“Okay. You’re on.” Kirk handed McCoy a menu from a pocket on the wall. “Don’t get the corned beef hash—it’s straight from a can. Everything else is good.”

“I don’t eat meat anyhow,” McCoy said, as he looked over the menu. Shit. He hadn’t meant to say that.

“Wow—that has to be a department record—two vegetarians on one shift,” Kirk replied, not batting an eye. “Do you eat eggs and shit?”

“I try to not go crazy with the cholesterol, but yeah, I eat eggs. But not shit.”

“Good—because to be honest? You look hung over. So get eggs.”

McCoy scowled. “Fine, mother. I’ll get eggs.”

The waitress came and took their order, blessedly managing to do so without commenting on Leonard’s accent.

“So what’d you do last night, after pizza, to make you sleep till two, and get you looking like that?”

McCoy scowled harder. “I already told you. I drink plenty. Just not when I’m gonna drive.”

“So … why?”

“Because, and I’d think you’d know this by now, alcohol impairs your coordination and—”

“No, why’d you drink so much?”

McCoy sighed. What the hell. “If you must know—”

“I must! I must!” Jim was practically bouncing up and down.

“If you must know,” McCoy repeated, wondering why the hell he was talking about this, “my ex called. It wasn’t a pleasant conversation.”

“Oh.” Jim fiddled with his silverware. “Sorry.”

“Yeah. Thanks. I wasn’t actually planning on saying anything to anyone around here about any of this, and I don’t know why I said anything to you, actually, so …”

“My lips are sealed,” Kirk said, miming locking his lips with a key and tossing the key over his shoulder. “Whatever you do,” he said to the people in the booth behind him, “don’t give that back to me.”
McCoy finally looked up from his detailed inspection of the formica tabletop. The diner was decorated with various pictures of female royalty. Each booth had its own framed picture or poster hanging on the wall next to it. Their wall was graced with Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Behind the counter, however, all the pictures were of the band “Queen.” Freddie Mercury was everywhere. McCoy’s eyebrows climbed his forehead heroically, trying to reach his scalp.

“Ah—I see you found the homage to Freddie,” Jim said, following Leonard’s gaze.

“Yeah—now, *that’s* not something I’d’ve expected in Iowa, quite frankly.”

“The owner’s a friend of mine from way back. Major Queen fan. Between you and me, he didn’t think he could get away with having a Freddie Mercury themed diner, so he, uh, broadened his horizons a bit.”

“By adding some broads,” McCoy finished for him, “who also happen to be queens. I get it.”

“Doesn’t bother you, does it?” Jim asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The homage to Freddie? And yes, my friend I’m talking about is gay as a maypole, if that’s what you’re assuming. So, does it, or doesn’t it?”

“Bother me? Uh, no. Should it?”

“No. Just wondering. Since Georgia is one of the reddest of the red states.”

McCoy rolled his eyes. “Just ‘cause a guy’s from a red state, doesn’t mean he’s a redneck. And Iowa’s not exactly San Francisco, either, if you catch my drift, so you shouldn’t talk.”

“All right, all right! I was just …”

McCoy squinted. “You were just what?” Jim was playing some kind of game with him, and he was damned if he could figure out what it was. But when he was honest with himself, Leonard realized he was intrigued. He decided to play along—see what would happen.

“Nothing.” Jim played with his water glass, and took a sip.

Leonard didn’t know what the game was, but he knew what his next move should be. “You’re just trying to tell me that just because you’re a fireman, doesn’t mean you’re a narrow-minded, homophobic, gun-totin’, woman-bashin’ caveman?”

“Maybe.”

“So, then, maybe I’ll tell you that just because I come from from a state so red it needs a tourniquet, I’m none of those things either. Is that fair?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m glad we got *that* out of the way,” Leonard said. “Whatever it was.”

The waitress arrived with mugs of coffee.

“Thanks, DeeDee,” Jim said.

“What *was* that, anyhow?” McCoy said.
“It was …” Jim sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Oh, I’m no stranger to complicated,” Leonard said dryly. “Try me.”

Jim toyed with the napkin dispenser. “This wasn’t how this was supposed to go.”

“Uh huh,” Leonard said. “I bet. You like to be in charge of your own games. I don’t know what the game is, but I bet I made a move that was supposed to come later. If at all.”

They sat there, waiting each other out. McCoy knew he’d win that part of the game; he was a master at saying his piece and waiting. But the kid was really troubled about something; that he could see. As for what this was all about, though, he’d just have to wait for it.

The waitress brought their food, took one look at the tableau in front of her, and quietly walked away.

“It wasn’t a game,” Jim said, finally looking up at McCoy.

“Then what was it?” Leonard said, his voice calm and gentle, rather than challenging or angry.

“It was a test,” Jim said, practically whispering.

“A test?”

“I had to make sure … I can trust you.”

McCoy blinked.

“Trust me with what? You barely know me.”

Jim looked down again.

“Trust you with my life. On the job. Because,” Kirk said, looking up again, “if something really bad happens, it’s up to you.”

McCoy found he wanted to squint and raise his eyebrows at the same time, but it just wasn’t possible.

“Of course I’d take care of you. I’d take care of a total stranger, so of course someone I work with. Why would you think I wouldn’t?”

Jim didn’t say anything, not for many seconds. He looked at his food, and shoved it towards the wall.

“Maybe I should just let you die,” he whispered.

McCoy froze. He could tell, from Jim’s tone, though, that this was a quotation, and not a threat directed at him. But it chilled his blood nonetheless.

“One less queer in the world. And the worst kind, too—the kind who might accidentally pass his genes on someday, if some sick woman let you fuck her, even though your dick has probably been up more asses than cunts.”

Jim looked up. “That’s what he said to me. In the back of the ambulance.” He looked down at his hands, which were busy shredding a napkin into tiny pieces of fluff.
“Who, Jim? Who said that to you?” McCoy knew, rationally, that you couldn’t feel your own blood pressure rising, but at that moment, he forgot that fact.

“Oh lovely predecessor. In the back of the rig. I had a concussion, heat exhaustion, and more than a minor case of smoke inhalation—wasn’t doing so hot. He shut off the oxygen, making sure I could see him do it. He took the IV line, and held it right in front of my face as he kinked it so nothing was getting through. He put his face right next to mine, and that’s what he said.”

“Jesus.”

“I don’t know how he found out about me. But I sure knew he hated me. Was sickened by me. I also knew I wasn’t really going to die, no matter what he did right then. But I also knew perfectly well, with my job being what it is, and his job being what it was, that the next time, it might be different.”

In that moment, it all came together for McCoy. Jim’s intense interest in him, right from the get-go. His odd desire to get to know the new paramedic, from the second he pulled into the parking lot. Bringing him here, to see his reaction to the Freddie Mercury display.

“Jim,” McCoy said in low tones, “I’m not like that. Okay?”

Jim started demolishing a second napkin, and the pile of confetti in front of him grew.

“I don’t care who you sleep with,” McCoy said quietly. “Man, woman, outer-space aliens, all of the above at the same time—it doesn’t matter. All right?”

Jim’s fingers worked nimbly at the napkin. He finished number two, and reached for the dispenser to swipe a third. McCoy caught his hand.

“Stop, Jim. Look at me,” he ordered, still using tones so low as to be inaudible to the people behind Jim. “Look at me.”

Jim’s hands stilled, and he looked up.

“I’m not like him.”

“Oh okay,” Jim said finally. He still looked, to Leonard, like he wanted to fold himself up and disappear. He held onto the eye contact, and Leonard let his hand go.

“I don’t think you wanted me to know as much about you as I do,” Leonard said.

“It wasn’t supposed to go that far,” Jim whispered. “I just wanted to see how you reacted when I told you about my friend who owns this place. See if I could trust you. That was all. You weren’t supposed to get the whole story.”

“Well, I got it.”

“And you’re not going to tell anyone? About me? ‘Cause that’s the part that wasn’t supposed to happen. You figuring out … that part.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone. That’s your business. And I’m not gonna let you die. I don’t care if a guy is wearing makeup and a dress, or if he’s got a shaved head with a swastika tattooed on it—I take care of them. I don’t care if he’s black, or brown, or green. I don’t care if he’s the mayor, or a drug addict we found in a gutter. I don’t care if he’s having a psychotic break and is doing his level best to pluck my eyeballs out and eat them. I don’t care if my patient is my ex, or my supposed friend who I found in bed with my ex. Everyone gets my best. Everyone.”
“Okay.” Jim compressed his confetti into a ball, and wrapped it up in another paper napkin. “Sorry.”

Leonard reached across the table, and shoved Jim’s plate back in front of him, and unrolled his own silverware from the neat napkin-wrapped bundle.

“Apology accepted. Now, I think we better chow down, because you look like crap, and I feel like you look, and we both have a busy night ahead of us.”

**TBC**

A/N: The “fire tetrahedron” is a model of the required conditions for a fire to ignite and be maintained. Fuel, heat, and oxidizing agent (usually oxygen) and a chain reaction must all be present for a fire to start and continue.
Chapter Summary

Now that the fire tetrahedron is complete, we can have a fire.

Chapter Notes

I was totally horrified to discover that this story has the same name as a "Hunger Games" book! Aaaack! I guess that's what I get for not being in touch with popular culture.

Chapter 5: Fire

Two weeks’ worth of shifts came and went. McCoy got to know all his shift-mates, at least a little bit. Pike was a natural leader—the kind that made his people want to please him, and want to not let him down. Scotty and Sulu, the two apparatus operators, were fast friends, despite their vast differences in personality and habits. McCoy did in fact make the mistake of going drinking alone with Scotty—once. Next time, he vowed there’d be at least two others along, so he could drink at a sane pace and not look like a wuss. Chekov was definitely over-eager, but also very smart. Spock remained a puzzle—he was precise, perhaps over-articulate, and very intelligent, but ‘aloof’ was too mild of a word to apply.

Kirk was right—Jablonski was a total ass. He was loud, surly, messy, a terrible cook, and a sexist pig. McCoy heard the story of how he and Gaila had been partnered briefly and messily. He hadn’t exactly broken any rules; hadn’t done anything he could be disciplined for, but he’d managed to make it very clear that he didn’t think a woman could do the job, despite Gaila’s five years of service to the department. As far as McCoy could tell, people tolerated him because he was extremely good at his job. He was also the strongest person on the team, hands down. But he ended up in Pike’s office every third or fourth shift, for one reason or another.

Chris Chapel was also very good at her job. She was so good that Leonard sometimes wondered—but never asked—why she remained a Basic EMT. It was her own damned business, and Leonard knew better than anyone that people had their own reasons for what they did.

He certainly did.

And Jim Kirk. McCoy was half expecting that once Jim realized Leonard wasn’t a Nazi who would leave him to die because he didn’t care for his sexual preferences, Jim would just leave him alone. But he didn’t. And despite himself, despite promising himself that he’d stay professional and detached at work, and seek friendships and social connections elsewhere, Leonard found himself spending quite a bit of time with Jim, both at the station and off shift.

One of the first things McCoy noticed about working for the fire department was the near absence of any fires.
“It’s a different kind of job, now, than it was even twenty years ago,” Jim explained to him, over a cup of coffee, in the small yard outside the station, on a cool morning. “Smoke detectors, heat detectors, sprinkler systems, non-flammable construction materials, building codes—we’ve made so much progress. Now, we get a lot of alarm panel activations, smoke detectors and CO detectors going off, and plenty of accidents of various kinds—but not a lot of fires.”

“But most of the training I see you guys doing—it’s for fires,” Leonard said.

Jim nodded. “Ah. Well, most of that other stuff doesn’t kill you as fast when you have to deal with it. So yeah, we put a lot of work into being ready for things that don’t happen very often, because when they do happen, they’re way more dangerous to us than most of those other things.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but it makes sense. I mean, we have to put a lot of learning time into procedures we don’t do very often, but are critical when we do use them. Chest decompression. Needle cricothyroidotomy. Invasive procedures that can save someone’s life, or injure them worse if you do them wrong,” Leonard said.

“Same idea, you’re right. We can save a burning structure, if we’re there soon enough and we play our cards right, but if we screw up, or any number of unforeseen things happen, we can kick the bucket. Or worse.”

“What’s worse?” McCoy asked, wondering if Jim’s worst case scenarios were anything like his own.

“Get burned up, but live. Or, worse than that, run out of air, but live, as a vegetable. That’s worse, in my book.”

“Mine too,” McCoy said quietly. “That’s for sure. Sometimes, with some of my patients—mostly the ones who’ve been without oxygen for one reason or another—I think it would be kinder to—well. It’s a moot point. There are strict rules about when we can stop treatment in the field. Real strict.”

“Unless you’re, say, out to get someone,” Jim said.

McCoy sighed. “I don’t suppose you reported my predecessor’s behavior, did you?”

“No. There’s kind of a … I don’t know.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “An unwritten rule that you don’t rat on one of the brothers. Right. But he threatened you, Jim; shouldn’t that be an exception?”

“Well, as it turns out, I didn’t have to rat on him.”

McCoy’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? He got caught in an act of some kind?”

Jim shook his head. “Violated some kind of protocol. Did something without permission, that he was supposed to contact the hospital about. Wasn’t the first time it’d happened, either, apparently. They pulled his card. He moved away. I don’t know what he’s doing, now. Don’t particularly care, either, as long as it has nothing to do with human beings.”

“One can hope.” McCoy plucked a blade of grass, and another, and another, forming a small pile in front of him.

“Anyhow—don’t worry. You’ll get to see a whopping big fire eventually. There’s always an ambulance standing by at the scene of a working fire, so you’ll be there.”

“Terrific,” McCoy said dryly. “Just what I always wanted—to see my friends go charging into the
“And up ladders,” Kirk added, grinning ferociously. “Really, really, really tall ladders.”

McCoy showered him with the pile of grass he’d plucked.

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It was early afternoon of the second day-shift of McCoy’s fifth rotation when it finally happened.

“Engine 1, Ladder 1, Engine 5, Ambulance 2: Report of smoke and flames from first floor windows, no entrapment suspected, at 2569 72nd Avenue Southwest; 2-5-6-9 72nd Avenue Southwest. 1241.”

“It’s early afternoon of the second day-shift of McCoy’s fifth rotation when it finally happened.

“Let’s go, boys and girls!” Pike shouted, as everyone dropped what they were doing and got into their apparatus. The three vehicles from Station 7 screamed down the street, and arrived at the scene within minutes.

Chapel drove, and McCoy chewed on the inside of his cheek the whole way. Once before, only once, he’d had to treat someone he knew well, and he was hoping he wouldn’t add to that number during this incident.

“I hope to God all we’re gonna do is rehab,” Chapel said.

“Me too.”

Christine parked the rig well away from where any fire apparatus would need to be, and they tried, and failed, not to look at the flames and smoke pouring from the house.

Things were happening fast. Ladders went up to windows. Hoses were stretched to the front door, which Spock quickly popped open with some tool McCoy couldn’t quite see. Gaila and Chekov went straight in with a hose, and were followed quickly by a team from the second engine, which arrived shortly after Station 7’s crews.

Sulu extended the ladder truck’s huge aerial ladder to send Jim and Jablonski up to the roof. McCoy was surprised to see Jablonski—who he tried very hard not to call or even think of as Cupcake—take a shorter ladder off the long aerial ladder, and hang it over the peak of the roof with hooks. Another roof ladder went about six feet away from the first. McCoy bit his fingernails as Jim stepped out onto the roof ladder, climbed up to near the peak of the roof started a chainsaw, and started cutting a hole in the roof. When the hole was cut, Jablonski took a long pole with a hook at the end and got ready to do … something … with it.

“Jesus,” he said. “On the roof, with a running chainsaw. I can’t look.”

“But you also can’t not look, apparently,” Christine said.

McCoy watched as Jablonski took the long pole and used it to pull shingles away from the roof, and then shove what must have been the plywood sheathing down through the hole Jim had cut. Dark gray smoke poured out, instantly obscuring both men from view.


Before the smaller of the two men reappeared from the smoke, flames also started shooting through the new hole in the roof. Jablonski was firmly on the aerial ladder by then, and Leonard literally held his breath until Jim appeared at the tip of the aerial ladder and started making his way down. Jim had only been on the roof for six or seven minutes, at the outside, but Leonard felt like he’d been holding
his breath for hours.

Leonard had just caught his breath when Kirk and Jablonski reported to Spock, who had them pick up new air bottles, and then sent them into the structure with a third attack line, via a ladder to a second-floor window. Spock, meanwhile, was setting up a huge fan a couple yards from the front door, blowing air into the house. Gaila and Chekov came out shortly afterwards, for just long enough to swap in full air bottles, and went straight back in again. Kirk and Jablonski were only inside for just over twelve minutes—they were both big men, and breathed down their bottles quickly. At the end of their second bottles, Pike pointed them both over to the aid station that McCoy and Chapel had set up next to the ambulance.

The two men stripped off their air packs and coats on the way over. Both men were flushed and soot streaked, and drenched in sweat. Chapel handed them each a quart bottle of water and got a temperature reading from each of them as McCoy took vitals.

“Jim, finish your water, and you’re fine to go back. Crazy, but fine. Carl, your temp and BP are both up, your pulse is 130, and you’re still breathing hard. Five minutes, and we’ll check again,” McCoy said. “Might as well gear all the way down; you’ll cool off faster.”

Jablonski glared at McCoy, but knew better than to argue. Jim chugged down the last of his water and wiped his forearm across his sooty face.

“Chill out, Cupcake. See ya, Bones,” Jim said, as he donned his coat and returned to the staging area for a new assignment. McCoy watched as Jim geared back up. Pike said something to Jim and Spock, and gestured to the building, and Jim and Spock entered the building through the second-floor window.

McCoy watched as the color of the smoke changed from dark black to gray. He checked Jablonski over once more, and released him from rehab. Jablonski reported to Pike, and started unloading various tools from the ladder truck. The smoke continued to lighten, then disappeared entirely. All three pairs inside the building came out, briefly. Some went in with different tools; Jablonski went in with a large fan, which then appeared in an upstairs window, apparently blowing leftover smoke out of the house.

“What’s going on now?” McCoy asked Chapel. “Any idea?”

She nodded. “Fire’s out. They have to make sure there are no hot spots that might flare up, which means opening up ceilings and walls and such. We’ll remain on standby until they finish all of the dangerous stuff.”

McCoy’s insides twisted as he watched Spock and Kirk come back down the ladder from the second floor. Spock carried the nozzle of the drained hoseline, and Kirk was carrying some sort of bundle.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered. “Hopping down that ladder like he’s a bird. Sure hope he knows he can’t fly.”

To McCoy’s surprise, Jim headed back towards the ambulance, peeling off his helmet and facepiece as he went. He was still carrying the bundle, which seemed to be moving feebly.

“Bones! I know you’re a paramedic, not a veterinarian, but can you do anything for this little guy?” Jim asked, holding the bundle out to McCoy.

McCoy took the bundle and set it down on the stretcher. “Well, let’s see what we have, here,” he said, partly to the animal, and partly to himself.
It was a small dog—probably a terrier of some sort, and it was panting and occasionally making a barking sound that could have been a cough.

“He was hiding under a bed upstairs,” Jim said. “The smoke wasn’t too bad in that room, but he was probably in there the whole time. Poor thing is terrified, too.”

“So I see. Well, buddy, looks like maybe you have some canine smoke inhalation.” The dog tried feebly to burrow under the sheet on the stretcher. “Looks like you want to hide, too. I think we can work with that,” Leonard said. “Chris, can you grab me another sheet, and, hm, what might we have that might be not so permeable … a sheet of plastic, or something?”

Kirk snapped his fingers. “I could get you a piece of plastic salvage cover—just thick plastic sheeting. How much do you need?”

“Oh, four by four or so would probably do it. Feets, that is.”

“You got it. BRB.”

McCoy rolled his eyes. He’d learned to tolerate text messaging abbreviations when they were actually part of a text message. But in actual speech? Not there yet.

Leonard patted the quivering dog under the sheet and spoke to it soothingly until Christine returned with another sheet. He made a sort of tent for the dog, who disappeared snout-first into the hideaway. McCoy attached a piece of plain tubing onto the oxygen cylinder, and snaked the tubing into the burrow. He set the oxygen for a low rate of flow, figuring the animal didn’t breathe nearly as much volume as a human.

Kirk returned with a piece of plastic sheeting. “How’s this, Bones?”

“Perfect. Lucky the little guy likes to burrow.” McCoy tucked the plastic around the bundle. “There. Home-made oxygen tent. That oughta keep the O₂ in nicely. He does need to get to a vet, though.”

Jim nodded. “I’ll let Cap know. Kinda surprised the homeowners haven’t shown up yet.”

“I’ll make sure he gets some water in the meantime,” Leonard said.

Jim beamed at him, his shockingly blue eyes standing out starkly from his flushed, sooty face. “You’re totally my hero.”

Jim’s radio crackled to life.

“Kirk, get your rear back on overhaul,” Pike’s voice said.

“Copy,” Jim said into his lapel mike. “Can’t say ‘ass’ on the radio,” he said to Leonard, and winked.

Leonard rolled his eyes, watched Jim trudge back to the building, and sighed.

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One of the homeowners, a woman in her mid-thirties, appeared as the firefighters were in the middle of their overhaul and salvage operation. McCoy watched, but couldn’t hear, as she spoke frantically with Pike, who seemed to be doing a good job of soothing her. Her hands flew to her face, and she seemed to be sobbing, suddenly, but Pike turned her around gently and pointed her towards the ambulance.

The woman ran towards the rig, stumbling slightly. “Ike?” she called.
“We have your dog, ma’am,” McCoy said. “He’s just having a little oxygen. He should go to the vet, though, because it seemed like he was having a little trouble breathing.”

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, I’ll take him straight there! Thank you so much for saving him! He’s my daughter’s dog, and this fire is going to be hard enough for her without—well, thank you so much for getting him out.”

“Ma’am, another fellow brought him out. Jim Kirk is his name—he’s the one by the front door right now. I just gave him some oxygen and a little water.”

“Well, thank you both. I’ll take him straight to the vet.”

McCoy and Chapel watched as she put her dog, who looked considerably healthier, into the car, and drove away.

“Looks like that dog was pretty important,” Chapel said. “She seemed more worried about him than about the house.”

“Well, taking care of him is something she can do,” Leonard said. “She can’t do anything about the house right now.”

“That makes sense,” Chapel said. Together, they stripped and wiped down the stretcher and put a clean sheet on it.

“So, you’re Jim’s hero,” Christine said. “That could be both interesting and dangerous. But at the very least, you’ll probably get a beer out of giving old Ike some nice oxygen.”

McCoy scowled. “It’s ridiculous, is what it is.” But dangerous, too, he thought. Yep, could be very dangerous indeed.

Especially because, God help him, he liked it.

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As Christine had predicted, Leonard found himself on the receiving end of a offer for a beer at the end of the shift. The beer, predictably, turned into beer and pizza, and more beer.

“That, my friend, is what it is all about!” Jim said, midway through his third slice of pizza.

“What is what all what’s all about?” Leonard replied.

Jim snorted. “Aw, man! Pizza up my nose! You just said ‘what’ three times in a row!”

McCoy waited, arms crossed. “Well?”

“All right. Today’s fire, right? That’s what it’s all about, Bones! We saved a whole lot of that place today. They’ll have to have a lot of work done, but they didn’t lose their whole house. Don’t get me wrong, it’ll probably be just as much work to fix it up as it would be to knock it down and start fresh, which might be the smart thing to do, but lemme tell you—it means something to people not to hafta do that. Plus, you saved their little dog, Bones! And the mom who came to pick him up—yeah, I saw her all right—she was hot! And don’t tell me you didn’t notice.”

He hadn’t noticed. “I told her you got the dog out, so hopefully credit will go where it’s due.”

“You didn’t notice? C’m on, Bones! Women eat that stuff up! I mean, you were giving oxygen to her dog!”
McCoy scowled. “Well, I guess maybe I didn’t really look at her, all right?”

Jim frowned back at him suspiciously. “I know,” he said, after a few moments. “I bet she looked just like Jocelyn.”

Leonard couldn’t help himself. He burst out laughing. “Jesus Christ, are you ever wrong! And that is absolutely all I’m saying.”

“All right, all right!” Jim held his hands up defensively. “I’ll change the subject. What are you gonna do to stay awake tonight?”

“No idea. Read, maybe. I also got some DVDs from the library. That’s about it. Nothing exciting. I’m sure you’ve got interesting plans, though. Quite frankly, you look like you wouldn’t have any trouble staying up all night if you wanted to, though.”

“I kinda get hyped up after a good structure fire.”

“A ‘good’ structure fire?”

“Aw, c’mon—you know what I mean. You might say you had a really good call if it was something interesting for you but horrible for the patient, right?”

“Yeah, okay. I guess that’s actually even worse than saying ‘a good fire.’ Sorry.”

“No worries. Anyhow—yeah. I’m hyped up. Winding down to get to sleep before the sun comes up will be more of a challenge than keeping myself awake all night. So hey—you wanna watch a movie at my place or something? You could go back to your place and get your movie, or whatever, or I also have a bunch of stuff. I don’t even know what you like, actually.”

“I was gonna watch this series called Firefly. Well, re-watch, actually.”

“Hey, that’s by the ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ guy, right?”

“Yeah, though I refuse to watch anything with the word ‘Buffy’ in the title.”

“Uh, it’s supposed to be funny, Bones. Tongue-in-cheek.”

“But still.”

“I’d watch anything by the Buffy guy. You wanna get it, and watch at my place? Or your place? Not that I’m inviting myself over. It’s just that my place is a good half hour away.”

No way in hell was Leonard going to admit that he lived in his van, and watched his movies on his laptop.

“I don’t mind driving.”

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Jim’s place turned out to be a tiny house, just north of Riverside. He was making some microwave popcorn, after the two of them watched the first three episodes of Firefly.

“Well, I figured if it was by the Buffy guy, it’d be awesome, but Bones, this is awesome awesome, not just regular awesome.”

“Thought you’d like it. And maybe, just maybe, you can convince me to watch the vampire show,
but I’ll have to stick my fingers in my ears every time I hear the name ‘Buffy.’ And the guy’s name is Whedon. Joss Whedon. So quit callin’ him ‘the Buffy guy.’"

“Sure, Bones—whatever. You know how good I am at calling people by their actual names. And hey, that’s your ex’s nickname too, I just realized. You want another beer?”

“Why the hell not? We gotta stay up real late anyhow, right?”

“See, now that’s the spirit. Not three hours ago you were saying how you’re an old stick in the mud. I don’t know who put that idea in your head.” Jim frowned at Leonard as he popped open a bottle of beer and handed it to him. “It was that ex of yours, wasn’t it? Did Jocelyn somehow convince you that you were boring? ’Cause you’re totally not.”

Leonard sighed. “I think I pretty much convinced myself, actually. Or maybe Joss helped. I don’t know. We hadn’t been getting along great, but hadn’t quite gotten to that phase of total scorn towards each other—or so I thought. But gettin’ home that day and finding them … well. I guess that felt pretty scornful.” He took a long pull of his beer. “And why the hell I’m tellin’ you all this is beyond me.”

“Because we’re friends, Bones, and that’s what friends do. Plus, I have a gift. My brother said I oughta be a CIA interrogator when I’m too old to be a fireman, because people always tell me shit they don’t wanna say.”

Leonard snorted. “He’s absolutely right. Either that, or you should be a shrink.”

They went back to the living room, put their feet up on the coffee table, and ate their popcorn while they watched another episode of Firefly.

“Another forty-five minutes well spent,” Jim said. “And I’m starved for real food. How ‘bout if I make some eggs and toast?”

“Sure, that’d be great. Instead of the breakfast I’ll sleep through later.”

Jim started some scrambled eggs, and threw four pieces of bread in the toaster. When the eggs were done, he put a lid on the skillet and cleared some piles off his dining table. Leonard noticed a book of crossword puzzles go by.

“Crosswords, huh?”

“Yep. I like words,” Jim said.

“I’ll have to beat you at Scrabble sometime, then.”

“You wish.”

“I don’t have a real set, but I’ll bring my laptop to the station next shift and we’ll see who schools who,” Leonard said.

Jim put two loaded plates on the table, along with the butter, and two glasses of orange juice. “I figure if we’re having fake breakfast we might as well do it right. Dig in.”

“Thanks,” McCoy said.

Jim ate slowly, in contrast to the way he ate at the station. McCoy had also gotten into the habit, at work, of shoveling food in as fast as he could, since he could be torn away from it at any second.
McCoy noticed that Jim was squinting at him slightly.

“What?” Leonard said, trying not to bark. Or scowl.

“Hmm. I was just thinking about something.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What were you thinking about?”

“A word. Like I said—I like words.”

“Here I am, biting again. What word were you thinking about?”

“Epicene,” Jim said, the word rolling off his tongue like a marble.

McCoy understood why people in trouble inherently trusted Jim; everything he said, when he was being serious, was just so smooth and easy, that it seemed impossible that he shouldn’t be trusted. He had no idea what the kid was talking about this time, though.

“Epicene?”

“It’s an under-appreciated word,” Jim said.

“Well, I for one can’t appreciate a word if I have no idea what the hell it means,” McCoy said. He sipped his orange juice, and wondered what he was getting himself into this time.

“It can mean two really different things, actually. It can be used to mean ‘having characteristics of both sexes,’ or it can also mean ‘not having characteristics of either sex.’ Personally I like the first one better.”

“You would,” McCoy said dryly. “And this is going where, exactly?”

“Names. Epicene names—those are the ones that can be for a male or a female. Pat. Chris—like we’ve got two of at the station, one boy and one girl. There’s a lot of new names like that these days too. Jordan, Taylor, Morgan, and the oh-so-hateable MacKenzie. Then there’s the classics. A lot of those are used for men anymore only in the South. Ashleigh. Evelyn. Meredith. Hilary.” Jim paused, and looked Leonard in the eye. “Jocelyn.”

McCoy stared into his glass. He’d expected people would start figuring it out eventually. But not so soon, and not by talking about television shows, for Christ’s sake. And he sure as hell didn’t think Jim Kirk would be the first to know.

“I guess maybe you might beat me at Scrabble after all,” Leonard said quietly. “With all those words you know.”

TBC
Chapter 6: Incipient

McCoy just sat there at the table, looking at a clump of egg on his plate. “I should probably just go,” he said.

“What? Bones, no. Jesus—you know I’m not gonna judge you. Me, of all people.”

McCoy kept his eyes away from the blue ones that he knew were blazing at him from across the table. He just couldn’t risk looking.

“On a rational level, I know that,” he said finally.

“But … how about on an irrational level?”

Leonard didn’t say anything. Elbows on the table, just like his mother had taught him never to do, he ground the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, so hard he saw sparkles.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Now why the fuck would you think that?”

“You’re so … confident. So in control. Hell, everyone at the station probably knows you’re bi and doesn’t give a fuck.”

“Except Cupcake. But I don’t give a shit what he thinks.”

Leonard took his hands away from his face, finally. “See? Now that’s exactly what I’m talking about.”

Jim had the good grace to at least look confused. “Huh?”

McCoy looked away. “There’s nothing you’re ashamed of.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. I mean, I’ve screwed up plenty of times in my life. Done some things I’m not proud of.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Jim paused, not understanding. “All right, then. What do you mean? I don’t understand, Bones. And I want to.”

“Why?” Leonard looked at Jim, now, hazel eyes taking the full onslaught of the bright blue beams.

Jim leaned back in his chair, shocked at the sudden intensity of McCoy’s gaze. “What?”

“I said, why? Why do you want to understand?”
“Because,” Jim said slowly, “I’m trying. I don’t know how to do this. So I’m just trying my best.”

“Jesus,” McCoy said. “Words, words, words. We’re both saying all these words, and we’re not getting anywhere. Now I don’t understand. So I’m gonna try this. I’m gonna try to help you understand what I meant just now, and then you can use your best Scrabble words to explain what it is you don’t think you know how to do. So here goes. Shame, Jim. I grew up with it. It was my best friend—sometimes my only friend—and my worst enemy. I was ashamed of being a white man in a part of the world where you couldn’t do well if you were anything else. I was ashamed of being descended from people who believed they could own other human beings. And once I was old enough to understand, I was ashamed by the fact that I was gay. Hell, I didn’t even know there was any such thing until I was fourteen—that’s how repressed I grew up. So I was ashamed when I fell in love with another man, and ashamed when my parents pretended we were housemates, and ashamed when I found my partner in bed with a woman. My only friends at my last place of work were women. And a third of the guys wouldn’t work with me as their partner. I’d get nasty notes in my locker. Things like, why should I bother to wear gloves, since it’s not like I could get HIV twice. Which I don’t have, by the way. Women’s panties wrapped up for me under the company Christmas tree. A pink triangle sewn to my uniform sleeve one day. So I’m not talking about things I did that I don’t feel proud of, Jim. I’m talking about being taught, one way or another, for all thirty-two years of my life, that who I am is wrong.” McCoy finished his orange juice in one gulp, and slammed the glass down on the table like it was an empty shot glass. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared across the table at Jim. “Your turn.”

“Shit, Bones. Just—fuck.” Jim rubbed his hand over his face, his eyes. “Ante up, Jim, or the game’s over. Not that I even know what the hell it is we’re playin’ at. But still.”

“All right—okay, I’m trying. Okay. It’s like this,” Jim took a deep breath, and blew it out. “I don’t have friends. I don’t think. I’ve got … acquaintances. Co-workers. Fuck-buddies. Pals. I’ve been accused of being a whore, even though I’ve never taken—or given, just in case you’re wondering—money for sex. I’ve been accused of being a manipulator, more than once—and that’s probably true. I know how to get what I want. And sometimes it’s sex. Women like to get fucked by me. Men like to fuck me, and sometimes get fucked by me. But I’m twenty-seven years old, and I don’t have a single person—and never have—who I can call a friend. And that’s what I suck at. That’s what I don’t know how to do. And that’s why I’m trying to understand. Trying to understand you.”

Leonard’s glare softened. “Good ante. See? Now you’re in the game. My turn. Why me? I didn’t get why you latched right onto me, like a remora onto a shark, but then when you told me about my delightful predecessor, I got it, and I thought, okay, that’s it, the kid will go away now that he knows I’m not gonna kill him, actively or passively. But you didn’t go away. Why not? Your turn.”

“Because of the way …” Jim cleared his throat. He picked up his orange juice glass, and put it down again quickly, as if shocked that it were empty.

Leonard silently stood up, and took Jim’s glass into the kitchen, bringing it back filled with orange juice. He set it gently in front of Jim, and sat back down again.

Jim picked up his juice, and drained half the glass. He licked his lips, and looked away. “Because of the way you answered me, when I told you more than I meant to. It was almost like …”

McCoy let the pause go on as long as he thought he could. “Like what, Jim?” he prodded gently.

“It was almost like you cared,” Jim half whispered.

Almost. Leonard died a little bit when he heard how Jim said that word.

Jim’s eyes blazed back across at him. “Why?”

The question almost seemed like a challenge. Probably was a challenge. But Leonard knew, somehow, that honesty was the best policy.

“At first? Because you were another human being. And that’s what I do. I take care of other human beings, on the worst day of their life. But later? Because, Jim, and I don’t know if you understand this, but we’re friends. We are. I don’t know enough to know whether it’s totally true that you’ve never had a friend before, but we’re friends. And God help me, but for some reason I don’t entirely understand, I trust you. If it’d been anyone else who figured out just now that Jocelyn is a man, I would’ve run screaming. And they probably woulda let me. But I didn’t run.”

“And I wouldn’t have let you, anyhow.”

“I know,” McCoy said. “Because we’re friends.”

Jim chewed on a fingernail, and it was all Leonard could do to manage not to reach across the table and stop him.

“I’m gonna fuck it up,” Jim said. “I always do.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Leonard said dryly. “I’ll be on the lookout, and I’ll tell you to stop whatever the hell it is you’re doing to sabotage yourself. How ‘bout that?”

“Okay. And … I’ll try to let you.”

McCoy nodded. “Fair enough.”

Jim looked at the clock on his microwave. “It’s one a.m. You up for one more episode?”

Leonard grinned. “Sure, Jim. Then I should get home.”

To my parking space at Walmart.

Jim frowned. “Where do you live, anyhow?”

“Uh, not too far from the station.”

“That’s what you said last time I asked.”

“So maybe it’s true.”

“Shit, Bones,” Jim said. “You’re worse than me. Aren’t we supposed to be friends? Weren’t you just telling me how you’d be on the lookout for self-sabotage? I’ve done it enough times that I know it when I see it. So spill it, Bones.”

McCoy nodded, with a tiny movement of his head. “All right. I’m living in my van. Just for now,” he said, raising his hands defensively, as Jim started to protest. “I had nothing when I left Savannah—nothing. So I’m just sleeping in the van until I’ve saved up enough for first and last month’s rent and a security deposit, which is what everyone seems to want. And don’t feel sorry for me. I don’t really mind. Besides, by the next payday I’ll be there.” Leonard tried to convince himself that any of what he’d said was actually true. Well, living in the van was definitely true. And he sure hoped he’d have enough saved by the first of the next month.

Jim frowned. “I know some people,” he said.
“I’m sure you do,” McCoy said.

“No, I mean, I know some people who are renting places, and who would take my word for it that you’re a responsible guy, and might not ask for that much up front. In fact, I know someone who’s got a house that I think she’s trying to sell, if you’re looking to buy. She might do a rent-to-own, if that would interest you.”

“It might,” McCoy said slowly. “Though I can’t say I’m necessarily ready to settle down in Iowa yet. To be honest, I wasn’t running to anywhere. I was running away from Georgia. And I’m so fucked up right now that I don’t know what I’m doing. But yeah—if you have contacts who have places to rent—that’d be great. Thanks, Jim.”

“You’re welcome. What are friends for, right?”

“Right. Now—let’s get back to the world of the Browncoats.”

~!~!~!~

“That was fairly disturbing,” Jim said, at the end of the episode.

“Well—it’s definitely a dystopia.”

“Ooooh, good word! Eight letters, too, so with the right open letter you could play it in Scrabble.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind when I’m busting your ass tomorrow. But for now, I gotta go.”

Jim frowned at him. “Go where? Just … park your van somewhere else?”

“Uh …” Leonard didn’t have a good answer.

“Leave it right where it is. Use my bathroom. Eat my food. Mi casa es tu casa. Except I don’t have a spare bed. The couch isn’t bad, though.”

McCoy sat there, not sure what to make of the offer.

“Please say yes, Bones. I hate thinking of you in a parking lot. Please?”

“Thanks, Jim. I will. But I’ll sleep in the van, if that’s okay, because I’ve actually got a pretty comfortable mattress in there, and—”

“Just bring it inside,” Jim said. “The spare room is just an office—well, without any officey things in it. Okay, it’s pretty much just … an empty room. You can stay as long as you want.” Jim looked at him almost imploringly, and there was no way Leonard was going to say no.

“Thanks. But you have to let me, I don’t know, buy groceries or something. And it’s only for a little while—just until I get my own place.”

“Great! This is great, Bones! I never had a roommate before. Well, except for Sam, when we were kids, but that doesn’t count.”

“I should warn you, I’m cranky in the morning.”

“Well, duh, Bones. I don’t care. You’re cranky in the afternoon and evening, too. And at night.”

McCoy cracked a small, crooked half-smile. “Looks like you’ve got my number. But seriously—thanks. I’ll try not to be too much of an ass.”
“Need any help moving anything?”

“Nah. I’ll just fold up the mattress and throw it on the floor. Grab a change of clothes. That sort of thing.”

“Okay.”

Jim puttered around in the kitchen as McCoy took three trips to and from the van to bring various things into the spare room. When everything he needed for the night and the morning was in Kirk’s spare room, Leonard went into the kitchen and picked up a dishtowel, and started drying the dishes Jim was washing.

“I think I’m gonna turn in after this,” Jim said, yawning mightily.

“Looks like you’ve come down from the fire, all right.” McCoy shook his head. “I just couldn’t believe what I was seeing this afternoon.”

“Huh? What did you see?”

“You, up on the roof, with a running chainsaw, and … then flames shooting out practically right where you were standing.”

“Oh. Well, that’s rooftop operations for ya. If my eyebrows had been showing, they’d’ve gotten a little singed, but that’s why you cover up but good. Does get pretty toasty, though.”

McCoy shuddered. “Doesn’t anything scare you?”

Jim let the water out of the sink. “Yeah,” he said quietly.

Leonard looked at Jim, who suddenly looked like he was going to fall over with exhaustion. He decided to drop the discussion. It would keep.

“All right. Listen, you wash up first. You look completely wiped out,” Leonard said.

“Yeah. Okay. I guess I am pretty beat.”

Beaten, even, McCoy thought. Maybe even defeated. The kid seemed to go from sky-high to grave-low, and up again, then down, so quickly it was impossible to follow. He watched Jim walk down the hall to the bathroom, and then retreated to the spare room which was indeed, as Jim had warned, quite spare. There was nothing in it except a rickety wooden chair and a laptop stand. But it was clean, and quiet, and legal, and McCoy would sleep knowing no cops would come knocking on his windows.

Leonard made up his mattress, which had gotten discombobulated in its move from the van, and, suddenly feeling just as tired as Jim looked, put on pajama pants and a t-shirt and waited for his turn in the bathroom. After a short time, he heard flushing, and water running, and then Jim appeared in the hallway.

“You settled?” Jim asked, leaning against the open doorway of the spare room.

“Yeah. Thanks a lot, Jim.” Leonard stood up from where he’d been sitting on the mattress on the floor.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you decided to stay.”

Leonard stood there in the middle of the room, waiting for Jim to move out of the doorway so he
could go have his turn to wash up in the bathroom.

Jim didn’t move. He stood there, looking at Leonard, but not saying anything.

“Bones,” Jim said, “If you felt like it, I would totally …”

McCoy waited for Jim to continue, but he didn’t. “Totally what, Jim?”

Jim stood there for another few seconds, and then shook his head. “Sabotage,” he muttered. “Forget it. Sleep well.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: An incipient stage fire has just started burning. The fuel load of the structure isn’t burning yet, and the fire is easily controlled by a fire extinguisher. Think a stove fire, or a fire in a wastebasket.
Two weeks later

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Petty,” McCoy said, pocketing the keys and shaking the hand of his new landlady. “I really appreciate your flexibility. It’s been tough getting settled in around here, since everyone wants three months’ rent up front, and since I couldn’t provide landlord references.”

“Oh, any friend of the Kirks’ is a friend of mine,” replied Mrs. Petty. “And having a real live paramedic living next door will be wonderful. Plus, the fact that you’re willing and able to help out with fixing things around here is a huge plus. I’m not getting any younger. And you absolutely must let me take off from your rent when you work on this place or my place.”

“All right,” Leonard said. “I will. And I’ll let you know as soon as I can whether I’m interested in buying the place.”

“I certainly hope you’ll want to, but I understand you’re a bit at loose ends right now. So there’s no hurry at all.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

“And do feel free to put any of the furniture you hate right into the basement.”

“I’ll do that. But to be honest, I’ve got nothing, and I’m not picky, so I think it’ll all pretty much stay right where it is.” Leonard checked his watch. “I’m sorry, but I really need to get going. My shift starts in half an hour.”

“Well, do say hello to young Jim for me. I was so proud of him when he graduated from the fire academy. He had a rough start, from the first day of his life, but it looks like he’s finally made good for himself.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Leonard agreed, not having the faintest idea what she was talking about.

~!~!~!~

“You do it?” Jim asked, the moment Leonard set foot in the station.

McCoy held up the key as he reached for a towel in his locker. Rain had begun to fall just as he drove from his new house to the station, and he got drenched between the parking lot and the door of the station. “Yup. Nice lady, perfectly fine place. Moving in tomorrow, right after our shift is over. Thanks a lot for the recommendation to Mrs. Petty.”

“No problem, Bones.”

“And thanks for putting me up the last couple weeks. I’ll be out of your hair tomorrow afternoon.” Leonard finished toweling off, and hung his towel in his locker.

“Yeah.” Jim closed his locker door quietly. “I guess so.”
Leonard pulled his wet shirt over his head, and turned to say something else to Jim, but he was gone. No matter; they could continue their conversation after the morning line-up.

Pike had nothing of interest to report during the start-of-shift lineup. Sulu and Scotty started a movie up on the DVD player, Pike and Spock retreated to the office to go over some things that Leonard had no clue about, Cupcake—Leonard mentally smacked himself for even *thinking* that nickname, but it just kept happening, so maybe he just wouldn’t fight it anymore—coached Chekov in some weightlifting, and Christine and Gaila looked at some catalog together. Jim was—

Leonard frowned as he realized Jim was nowhere in sight. Leonard thought he must be in the corner of one of the couches, blocked from view by the high counter that was behind the sofa that formed the bottom of the U-shaped arrangement of furniture, but when he peered around the counter to look, only Scotty and Sulu were watching the movie.

“Huh,” Leonard said to himself. Usually Jim seemed to be everywhere at once, almost taking up the whole room with his energy, but this evening he seemed to be … nowhere. He stopped at the table where Christine and Gaila were looking at their catalog.

“You ladies seen Jim around?”

Gaila rolled her eyes. “I guess you haven’t been here for any of his weird days yet.”

“ Weird days?” Leonard asked.

“Yeah, there are days when he just … retreats, I guess. A couple times a year. It’s kind of a relief, actually. Like a mini-vacation for the rest of us, even though we’re still working.”

“Come on, I just stayed at his house for two weeks. He’s not *that* bad.”

Christine shook her head. “I don’t know how you could stand it, personally. That guy just never seems to be still—not for half a second—and you’re just so … calm. And I don’t know how anyone could put up with his … uh …”

McCoy stood there, hands on hips, waiting for Chapel to finish.

“His what, Chris?”

“Well, didn’t he, like … bring people home all the time? I mean, that’d totally drive me up the wall. I had a housemate once who was a … prolific dater, and”—

“Never mind,” Leonard interrupted, and stalked out of the room, scowling. It wasn’t their business in the slightest, but Jim hadn’t brought home a single date the entire time Leonard had been his guest. But it was clear from Christine’s remarks that people at the station assumed, for whatever reason, that Jim was highly promiscuous. Sure, it had only been a couple weeks, and maybe Jim had been on his best behavior since he had a guest. But they’d been out a couple times, on days off or after a day shift, and Leonard had never felt in the slightest like he was a third wheel, or worse, a wingman.

The apparatus bay was quiet, which meant it was unlikely that Jim was there, so Leonard proceeded to the bunk room, where people could try to get some sleep if they wanted to during a night shift. Hardly anybody bothered, and Leonard had never seen Jim go near any of the beds.

He decided to just poke his head into the locker room, though it wasn’t really proper to chase someone down in there.

“Jim?”
He wouldn’t be outside on a day like this—Leonard could see through the transparent portions of the bay’s overhead doors that it was still pouring. So where the hell was the kid? It was like he was hiding, or something. Leonard peered cautiously into the cabs of the two huge tennis-ball-yellow fire trucks, but nobody was in there. He stuck his head back into the ready room, but still no Jim. Back to the apparatus bay, then.

“Jim?” Leonard inquired cautiously, not wanting to sound strange in the probably empty bay.

“Yeah, Bones.”

Leonard jumped, and cast his eyes around the bay again.

“Up here.”

Leonard looked up, where he heard the voice coming from, and saw Jim sitting on the tip of the aerial ladder that was part of the ladder truck. He shuddered, even though in its resting position, the ladder was only about ten feet off the ground. Jim was sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest, hands around his lower legs, and making no move to come down.

“You okay?”

McCoy could see Jim’s blank expression. “I don’t know,” he said finally, in a voice that was as flat as the fields of corn that surrounded Leonard’s new home in the Midwestern plains.

“All right. How do I get up there?”

“You don’t want to come up here.”

Spoken differently, Leonard realized, those same words could sound threatening. But in Jim’s flat voice, they just sounded … dead.

Leonard walked around to the back of the truck, where he recalled seeing stairs. He climbed the stairs to the platform at the back end of the ladder, and unhesitatingly walked out onto the completely horizontal ladder. He held onto the sides, and looked at his feet the whole time—no problem, since all he saw underneath his feet was the top of the truck. No problem, at least, until he got to the part of the ladder that extended out in front of the cab, over a ten-foot drop. Leonard took a deep breath, stayed low, held on, and crossed the single yard between himself and Jim. He sat on a diamond-plated rectangle, still holding on tightly to the sides of the ladder.

“What’s going on, Jim?” he asked softly.

“I didn’t think you’d come up here,” Jim replied, his voice still oddly expressionless.

“Well, what’s a few feet of elevation between friends?”

Jim finally looked at Leonard. “We’re friends. We really are, aren’t we?”

McCoy nodded. “Yeah, Jim; we really are.”

Jim looked away again.

“So I can tell you something—something that might kind of be weird—and it’s okay?”
“You sure can.”

Jim nodded, as if he’d made a decision. “All right. Tomorrow’s my birthday.”

Of all the things Jim could’ve said just then, that was not what Leonard had been expecting. He had his head on straight enough, though, that he realized that “Happy Birthday” was the wrong response. So he waited.

“And I really, really hate my birthday,” Jim said. “Especially this one.”

Leonard thought about what he really knew about Jim, which was precious little. It would be Jim’s twenty-eighth birthday, so not one where he’d be likely to be feeling particularly ancient. So he risked a question.

“Why’s that?”

Jim stared down to the floor of the apparatus bay as he answered. “My father died the day I was born. And this year, on my birthday, I’ve officially lived longer than he did.”

*Yep*, Leonard thought, *that’d do it all right.*

Just as Leonard was about to open his mouth to continue, Jim spoke again.

“He was driving my mother to the hospital, because I was apparently going to be born any minute. A drunk driver plowed into the car. From what I hear, my dad was killed instantly. I guess, having seen what I’ve seen over the last few years, that’s what I want to believe, too. My mom had some injuries, but the real problem was that she was pinned in the car. In such a way that … well, if I hadn’t had such a big head, she and I would both be dead. But I guess my big head slowed things down enough that they got her out just in time for me to be born. On a backboard, by the side of the road. Next to the crumpled up car that contained what was left of my father. Who was twenty-seven.”

*Jesus.* Well, that sure counts as a rough start.

“I’m sorry, Jim.”

“And here I am, older than he was when he died, and boy, have I ever not lived up to his memory. And nobody ever, ever lets me forget that, either.”

*Especially you, I bet,* Leonard thought. But this was clearly not the time to try to talk Jim out of the idea that he was somehow a failure, despite—or perhaps because of—the ‘Fragile! Handle With Care!’ label visible smack dab in the middle of Jim’s forehead.

“How can I help?” Leonard said instead.

Jim looked up again. “You know, nobody’s *ever* asked me that. Everyone always just tries to make it not seem so bad. But it’s *my* fucking life. Not theirs.”

“That’s true.”

“So … how can you help? I don’t know. Just … don’t try to talk me out of my funk. Don’t try to make me feel better, because I don’t want to. Not right now. And don’t bake me a fucking cake, or send me a card. And maybe …” Jim looked back down at the polished cement floor again.

“Maybe what, Jim?”

“Maybe, if you could wait one day—just one; I know you want your own place and everything—but if you could wait one more day before you take off …”
“Of course I can,” Leonard said. “What’s one more day between friends?”

Jim’s sapphire eyes met Leonard’s hazel ones. “More than you can imagine,” Jim said.

“All right, then,” Leonard said. “One more day, no fucking cake, no goddamned card, no freakin’ party, and no—”

The station’s tones sounded, and were followed by the much more mellifluous tones of the voice of Spock’s wife, Nyota.

“Engine 1, Ladder 1, respond to 2274 East Hollow Road, for a car fire in a garage. 2-2-7-4 East Hollow Road, for a car fire in a garage. 1816.”

“Figures,” Leonard said.

McCoy hurried across the ladder as fast as he could, and Jim plodded patiently along behind him. Leonard nearly had a heart attack when the diesel engine of the ladder truck started up while they were just coming down the stairs from the operator’s platform atop the rear of the truck. He moved to get away from the truck, but was stopped by a hand gripping his upper arm.

Jim didn’t say anything—he would’ve had to shout over the engine noise—but he didn’t need to. Leonard quickly clasped the wrist of the hand that was gripping his arm, and then they both let go. Jim silently stepped into his boots and bunker pants, grabbed his coat and helmet, and boarded the truck.

McCoy returned to the ready room, to find Chapel still sitting at the table.

“Um,” she said. “Len?”

“Yeah?” Leonard said mildly.

“Uh, I wanted to apologize for maybe … badmouthing Kirk. I know you guys are friends. I just … don’t get it. So I kind of forgot.”

“I guess so,” Leonard said. “But look: he’s having a really bad day, for a really good reason. So, I don’t know. It couldn’t hurt to be nice to him, or if you wouldn’t normally interact with him much, which I guess you wouldn’t, actually, just …”

“I know. Don’t be mean. I’ll try. I guess I could be a little nicer to him in general.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that—”

“No, I know you didn’t. I’m … I guess I’ve just been really hard to get along with since my fiancé got deployed.”

Ah. The mystery of the engagement ring, Leonard thought.

“I didn’t know about that,” he said. “I noticed the ring, but … I didn’t know the rest.”

“That’s because I didn’t tell you,” Christine said dryly. “Just like you didn’t tell me you ran away from Georgia after a bad divorce or something.”

Or something, Leonard agreed silently.

“But anyhow—yeah. Roger’s a surgeon; he was in the National Guard, and guess what? One weekend a month and two weeks in the summer turned into deployment. He can email every so
often, but we only get to talk like once every ten days. So that’s why I’m such a bitch most of the time.”

“To me, you just seem like you’re stressed out sometimes.” Or ninety percent of every single shift, is more like it. “Besides, I’m such a cranky old bastard it seems only fair.”

“I think, actually,” Christine said slowly, “that I really like working with you.”

“We’re a good team,” Leonard said.

“The guy I worked with before you—Neil Selig—he, uh, wasn’t so easy to get along with. I didn’t really understand it. He never seemed to be in a bad mood, or grumpy—”

“Like yours truly,” McCoy said.

“You said it, not me,” Christine said. “But Selig was … I don’t know. I sometimes got the feeling that he didn’t really give a shit about most of his patients. Not in the normal way—but like he really couldn’t have cared less if some of them lived or died. I mean, I never saw him … I don’t know … do anything to people, or anything, but—I can’t quite put my finger on it. He was just kind of … menacing. And we’re supposed to be caring.”

“We are,” Leonard agreed. “I heard he’s history anyhow, though, right? Jim told me his card got pulled.”

“Yeah. But there’s still a court case pending, so I’m not allowed to talk about it.”

“I would imagine not,” McCoy said.

The station’s tones sounded again, and Spock’s wife again announced a call.

“Ambulance 2, respond to 2157 180th Street for a 26-year-old male with an allergic reaction, epi-pen self administered but condition worsening, 2-Delta-1 response. That’s 2157 180th Street, 26-year-old male with an allergic reaction, epi-pen self administered but condition worsening, 2-Delta-1. 1822.”

Chris and Leonard took off for their destination, and arrived to find their patient seated inside the open front door, hands on knees and neck craned out in the classic position of respiratory distress. He was pale and sweaty, and his eyes were flashing back and forth in apparent agitation. His ankles were covered with angry welts, and the raised flush of hives was visible creeping through the v-neck of his t-shirt, up his neck.

Christine immediately set up the oxygen and placed a mask over the man’s nose and mouth, and then helped the man to the stretcher, which was right in front of him. She began taking an initial set of vitals while Leonard got more details. Their patient had already written them a note, which Leonard read aloud.

“Several bee stings, both lower legs, at about 6:05 pm, immediate hives and airway swelling, one epi-pen administered shortly afterwards?”

The man nodded.

“Has this happened before?” Leonard already knew the answer, because (a), the man had an epi-pen, and had used it, and (b) he wrote down all the pertinent information before he started having worse difficulty breathing.
The man nodded again.

“Okay. I’m going to hit you with some more epinephrine and some benadryl, and we’ll get you into the hospital pronto, all right?”

Another nod.

“Did you take any benadryl already?”

The man shook his head.

*Why the hell not?* Leonard wanted to shout at him. But he didn’t.

Christine announced the vitals. “Pulse 136 and thready, respirations 28, with stridor and bilateral wheezes, BP 104/78.”

Leonard would’ve liked to have heard a higher BP reading, given that the man had already had a dose of epinephrine. He quickly prepped the man’s arm for an IV, and pushed epinephrine and then benadryl.

“Let’s roll, Chris.”

They pushed the gurney to the ambulance and loaded their patient up. Leonard reported in to medical control. The doctor on the other end of the radio gave advance approval for McCoy to sedate the patient and insert an endotracheal tube should his airway condition worsen. While he didn’t worsen, which was a surprise to McCoy, because frankly he’d been expecting for this guy to crash, he didn’t get any better, either. Luckily for their patient, the drive to the hospital, with lights and sirens, took only twelve minutes.

Leonard handed the patient off to the ER nurses, along with a copy of the cheat-sheet he used to record basic data before completing his real report later on the computer. Back at the station, he had just started his report on the bee-sting patient when they were summoned again, this time for a mental health transport.

“Oh, goody,” Leonard said.

“At least it’s a voluntary transport. And you be quiet—you get to sit up in the front and drive, while I’m in the back with a patient who could go postal on me any second.”

The transport turned out to be routine—a fifty-year-old woman who was feeling suicidal. She denied feeling like she was going to harm anyone else, but still, it was never entirely comfortable transporting a patient who had declared themselves to be mentally unstable.

The pouring rain had stopped, and by the time they returned to the station just after nine, the evening was clear and cooler than it had been. Both fire apparatus were also parked in the bay. Leonard peered quickly up at the tip of the aerial ladder, but Jim hadn’t perched himself there again. Leonard completed his paperwork on one computer, while Christine did hers on the other. Everyone else had gotten back to the activities they’d started earlier in the shift, with the exception of Spock and Pike, who were now engaged in a chess game at the large table.

Leonard closed down the electronic records system, and cast a glance around the room for Jim. He wasn’t expecting to find him, and didn’t get any surprises on that front. He decided he didn’t really care whether or not Jim wanted to be found, and started looking. He looked everywhere he could think of in the apparatus bay, including scanning all of the metal beams that held up the high roof. He looked under the doors of all the stalls in the men’s room. He decided he’d leave the ladies’ room for
last—no need to incur the wrath of Gaila or Christine if he got caught. Besides, hiding in the women’s locker room would be something Jim might do if he was in a good mood, not a bad one.

McCoy stuck his head in the dorm room lined with single beds. It was completely dark, and it wasn’t possible to see past the brick dividers that separated the sleeping areas into cubicles without walking down the aisle. Leonard took his pen light out of its pocket on his pants, and walked down the aisle of the room.

He heard the voice before he even got to the last cubicle.

“Go away, Bones.”

_Uh huh. Like that was gonna happen._

Leonard put his pen light away, and let his eyes adjust to the near total darkness for a moment. When he could see the brick cubicle dividers, he proceeded to the end of the row, and found a dark shape sitting on an unmade bed, leaning into the corner formed by the divider and the wall.

It was shocking to Leonard how the brilliant golden star he’d found himself somehow orbiting—or perhaps they were orbiting each other; he wasn’t really sure—had burned up, burned down, burned out, turned itself into a brown dwarf. Or even a black hole—but McCoy would reserve judgment on that last until he saw if anything he did had an effect, or if everything just got sucked down, never to be heard from again.

He knew that by approaching, he risked being pulled in past the event horizon, if his star had indeed become a black hole, but he didn’t give a shit. He sat down on the bed, next to Jim, and just … sat there. Close enough to feel the heat radiating off Jim’s body, but far enough that they weren’t actually touching. He didn’t know what he was doing, and didn’t have a plan. Minutes passed. And even though Leonard had never seen Jim be silent for such a long period of time, the silence didn’t seem wrong on this occasion.

It didn’t seem wrong when Jim broke the silence either.

“I don’t know what to do, Bones. I just … I feel like I’m supposed to have some Big Plan, but I don’t.”

“Big Plans,” Leonard said, capitalizing the words with his voice just as Jim had, “are overrated, in my opinion. They go wrong, and then you feel worse off than if you didn’t have a plan to start with. And I’m not tryin’ to make you feel better, ‘cause I said I wouldn’t. But that’s my experience with plans.”

“And I hate this day.”

“It’s a pretty hateable day.”

Another few minutes of silence went by.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“How ‘bout if we just sit here awhile, then. Till Spock’s wife tells us what to do.”

“Okay.”

They sat there, silently, for fifteen more minutes.
And when Jim leaned his head down onto Leonard’s shoulder, and Leonard slipped his arm behind Jim’s neck and stroked his hair, slowly and gently, it wasn’t weird at all.

Ten minutes after that, the engine and ladder were toned out to an alarm panel activation at a store.

Jim sat up slowly, and looked at Leonard in the darkness. Leonard found himself taking Jim’s face between his palms, and looking at him carefully.

Jim took one of Leonard’s hands, kissed the palm, and folded the hand closed. He disappeared silently from the dark room.

Leonard sat on the bed, cross legged, and thanked his lucky stars that at the moment, he was utterly without a Big Plan. Because whatever the hell had just happened couldn’t possibly fit in.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In the growth phase of fire development, the radiation of heat causes other contents of the room start to ignite as well. Imagine that the flames from the burning wastebasket have spread to the nightstand next to it, and the curtains, and the bed. Or, the burning stove has ignited the cabinets above it. The fire is still confined to one room, but is getting larger quickly. If fuel, heat, and oxygen are present in adequate supply, the fire will continue to grow, unless there is an intervention to remove one of those elements, or to interrupt the chemical chain reaction.
Chapter 8: Flashover

The ambulance was up and running for most of the rest of the shift. When they weren’t on a call, Leonard was busy catching up with reports from previous runs. He was glad to note that the engine and ladder had their share of runs as well. Although he’d promised not to try to stop Jim’s brooding, he thought it was for the best if it was interrupted every so often by a neutral authority.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the shift, the ambulance was toned out for what ended up being a complex medical call in one of the far corners of their district. By the time the ambulance returned, the shift had been over for an hour. Leonard was relieved to see that Jim’s car was gone from the parking lot. They hadn’t crossed paths again since their close encounter in the dorms, and Leonard would greatly prefer that their next path-crossing take place in private. He really wasn’t sure what the hell was happening, but he was sure that Jim was even more lost than he was.

McCoy decided to do the paperwork from the complicated call first, while the details were fresh—or as fresh as they could be at the end of the second night shift of the rotation—and hit the shower second. In the shower, he thought about the half hour that he and Jim had spent sitting next to each other in the dark on the bed in the sleeping area. For half that time, they hadn’t just been sitting next to each other, either. Jim’s head had been on Len’s shoulder, and Len had found himself stroking Jim’s hair.

If it were anyone other than Jim, McCoy would know exactly what that kind of touching meant. People didn’t usually lean on each other, and hold each other, and stroke each other like that, unless they were something more than friends. But Len knew that Jim was an intensely physical person—he had no concept of a personal space bubble, never stopped moving, and any conversation with him, no matter how casual, always resulted in some kind of touch being applied. Plus, Jim had never had a close friendship. So perhaps he thought friends touched each other that way.

So Leonard decided not to read anything into Jim’s actions.

Because Jim probably just didn’t know what he was doing, resting his head on Len’s shoulder that way. Or kissing his hand that way, and folding Len’s fingers over the kissed spot as if encouraging him to hold onto the kiss. He probably just didn’t know.

But Leonard had no such excuse. He knew perfectly well that you didn’t stroke your friend’s blond-tipped bronze hair that way. He knew perfectly well that you didn’t think about looking into your friend’s icy-bright blue eyes to see what you’d find in their depths as you moved to kiss him. He knew perfectly well you didn’t stand in the shower, wishing you weren’t stroking your rock-hard cock, water coursing over your naked body, wishing your friend were there too, touching you everywhere and begging for your hands to do as they pleased.
He didn’t have the excuse of not knowing the boundaries.

He knew exactly what they were, and where they were.

And he wanted to violate every single one of them.

With someone who didn’t understand them.

Which would be wrong.

Fuck.

Leonard turned the shower to cold, partly as a necessary remedy, and partly as punishment for his thoughts. When he couldn’t take it any more, he turned off the water and toweled off. He dressed in his civvies, and got in his van to drive to Jim’s house, one last time.

~!~!~!~

Leonard let himself in quietly, hoping Jim was sleeping after the all-night shift. Len immediately noticed that Jim was sleeping—just not where he should have been. He was sitting at the dining room table, with his head cradled on his folded arms. The aroma of coffee filled the house, but it seemed that Jim had fallen asleep before the brew cycle completed, as the pot was full.

Len sighed, realizing what the full coffee pot and Jim’s presence at the table meant. Jim had made coffee to keep them awake for a while, while they talked about … whatever the hell had happened. And Jim probably fell asleep thinking that Leonard wasn’t returning. The last run had taken far more time than was reasonable, as had Leonard’s paperwork and punitive shower afterwards.

But he’d promised Jim that he’d be here today. And, well, talking about what had happened in the darkness of the dorm area—it wasn’t a terrible idea. Leonard had his speech all prepared, about the boundaries of friendship, personal space, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. An expository but gentle speech that would be equally perfect for a pre-teen with Asperger’s, or a newly-minted twenty-eight year old who’d never had a real friendship.

Leonard looked at Jim for a moment, and then went into the kitchen and filled two mugs with coffee. He sat at the spot at the table that had become his, in the chair with the armrests that didn’t quite fit under the table, around the corner from the place that was Jim’s. He looked at Jim some more. Maybe if he looked hard enough, he’d find a way to fix what had happened. Or find a way to have his cake and eat it too. But probably not. Life didn’t work that way—especially not for Leonard McCoy. Jim needed a friend, so a friend is what he’d get. Even though the palm he’d kissed still tingled, for no explicable reason.

“Jim,” Len said quietly.

Jim’s head snapped up off the table. “Huh?” He blinked a few times, but then appeared completely awake. “Oh. Hi. I, uh, wasn’t sure if you’d come.”

“I said I’d stay another day. I meant it. When I tell a friend I’ll do something, I do it.”

Jim stared at him, his eyes not leaving Len’s face even as he sipped his coffee and set the mug back down on the table.

“Even if your friend just did something really weird?”

Len nodded. “Even if. And even if I did something that crossed a line I shouldn’t have known better than to
cross. A line,” he said, steeling himself for the lecture he was about to give, “that you probably didn’t know I’d crossed.” His knuckles whitened as he clenched his hands around the wooden armrests of his chair.

Jim continued to stare back at him. “I knew. But I crossed it first.”

Leonard shook his head. “But maybe you didn’t know that friends don’t—”

“Yes, I did. Jesus, Bones. I might be a little bit … socially retarded, but I’m not stupid. Just because I haven’t had a real friend before doesn’t mean I don’t know you’re not supposed to snuggle up to them. And kiss their hand. Which wasn’t what I really wanted to do.” Jim shifted in his chair, pushing away from the table.

Len’s plan for a lecture on friendship had already been shot all to hell, and he knew it. He unclenched his hands from the armrests, and resisted the urge to rub his still-tingling palm. “But Jim, friends can’t—”

In the single second that it took Leonard to start his well-intentioned phrase, Jim was out of his chair, and leaning on the armrests of Len’s chair, kissing him, unleashing some of the energy that had been crackling in the air between them.

Len raised his hands from his lap, intending to gently push Jim away, to continue his explanation that friends don’t do these sorts of things, damn it, but it didn’t work out that way. Instead, his hands, the one palm still tingling, found the back of Jim’s neck, the side of his face, the hair that couldn’t decide what color it was, and he returned the kiss. Len opened his lips at the first gentle but insistent request of Jim’s tongue, felt and heard the rumble of Jim’s voice as he groaned into the kiss.

Jim was the first to pull away, but they were equally breathless and flushed. Jim still leaned his weight on the armrests of Len’s chair, effectively trapping him where he was sitting.

“Maybe,” Jim said, his voice pitched a little lower than his usual tenor, “we’re not cut out to just be friends.”

“Jim,” Leonard said, fighting to control the trembling in his voice, “I don’t know if you’re thinking straight. I don’t know if I’m thinking straight. And I don’t know if this is the right day for you to—”

“My birthday was at two twelve a.m. You know what I was doing then? I was sleeping. You were out on those back-to-back runs, and the engine was out on some bullshit call. And I actually slept through the moment of my birthday. That’s the first time I’ve ever done that, since I was old enough to understand what that moment meant. And the reason why I was sleeping, was that for the first time ever, I knew that on my birthday, someone would be there with me who wouldn’t look at me with sad, sad eyes. Eyes that said ‘you killed my husband, and you look so much like him that I can hardly stand to lay eyes on you today’ or ‘our dad might still be alive if you’d picked a better time to be born,’ or ‘you poor fucked up little kid, you sure had a rough start.’ Eyes that couldn’t look at me without seeing the shadow of a dead man.”

Jim traced his thumb over one of Len’s eyebrows. “You look at me and see me. You look at me and I can tell you care.”

“Jim …” Len had to close his eyes briefly to shut out the intensity of Jim’s azure gaze.

“Yeah, Bones?” Jim half-whispered.

“Jim, I’m just … too broken. Too raw, too bitter.”
“Rare steak is pretty raw. Dark chocolate is bitter. So is coffee. I like all those things. And I’m pretty broken too, but I think our jagged edges might fit together just right.”

“Or my jagged edges might cut you till you bleed.”

“You’d patch me right up again.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Leonard said, feeling his willpower fading by the second.

“Then don’t hurt me.”

“And I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Nobody’s allowed to hurt you,” Jim whispered. “Nobody. Especially not me.”

Leonard grasped at one last straw, while at the same time tossing his carefully-prepared lecture out the window. “We work together. It wouldn’t be right.”

Jim leaned in, and kissed Len again, his lips slower and sweeter than before, but just as insistent. After not nearly long enough, he pulled away again.

“Did that feel not right to you?” Jim asked.

“No … I …” Leonard cleared his throat. “No.”

Jim removed his hands from the armrests of the chair, and extended one hand to Len. Leonard took it, and allowed Jim to pull him to his feet.

They didn’t crash together immediately, like they seemed they were going to for a moment. Instead, Len took Jim’s face between his palms again, just like he had before Jim kissed his hand in the dorm the previous night. This time, Leonard initiated the kiss, moving one hand into Jim’s hair, and the other to the small of his back, pulling him closer. He felt Jim’s breath hitch as the lengths of their bodies connected, from knees to lips, and felt Jim’s strength pull him closer still. Leonard couldn’t prevent the escape of a small, breathy sound as Jim’s blatantly present erection nudged against his own, the contact stunningly delightful even through the double layer of thick denim.

Leonard suddenly realized that if he didn’t feel skin soon he’d absolutely die, and reached his hands up under the back of Jim’s shirt at the exact moment that Jim did the same. They separated their bodies and lips just long enough to take turns hauling each other’s shirts off. Len couldn’t stop himself from immediately exploring the new landscape open to him, hands roaming Jim’s chest and back, lips making their way down the cords of Jim’s strangely elegant neck, and back up again. Leonard pulled back just enough to look into Jim’s eyes, to take in the sight of his slightly parted full lips.

He felt Jim’s broad hands sliding up his ribcage, taking advantage of the open space between them. Leonard shivered as Jim’s calloused thumbs traveled over his nipples, which suddenly felt like the very center of sensation in his body. He closed his eyes and let the electricity surge through his body, taking a short circuit from his chest to his groin, where the heat was beginning to pool and beg for release. When Jim slid his hands downwards, to find Len’s back pockets and slide into them, Len snapped his eyes open again, and once more took Jim’s mouth with his own, tongue diving in slickly, exploring voraciously. Leonard allowed his hands to find every finely chiseled muscle, every ridge and valley in the expanse of skin he could feel but not see, as his fingers traveled over Jim’s back, shoulders, everywhere.

This time Jim pulled back, flushed and breathless.
“This isn’t wrong, Bones. We’re not wrong. Tell me this is all right with you,” he pleaded softly.

Leonard nodded. “It’s all right, Jim. It’s all right,” he said, tracing Jim’s cheekbone with his fingers.

And damned if Jim didn’t whimper, just a little bit, as he squeezed his eyes shut again and kissed Leonard for all he was worth.

Len couldn’t help himself this time, and strayed his kisses down Jim’s neck, pausing at the hollow of his suprasternal notch, traveling down and sideways to swirl his tongue around a hardened, peaked nipple. He could feel the low rumble of Jim’s groans even through his thick pectoral muscles as he nipped and sucked and laved one side of his chest, then the other.

Leonard hummed to himself in satisfaction as he suddenly realized exactly how this needed to go. He pulled himself together, and prepared to take hold of the situation he’d lost control of once already. He slowed his breathing, and planted a column of kisses back up to Jim’s lips, and looked him in the eye, and was about to speak when Jim beat him to it.

“Jesus, Bones. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I need you naked and in my bed right the fuck now.” Jim’s hands slid around from Leonard’s ass to the front of his jeans, fumbling with the button at the top of the fly.

Len smiled and placed a gentle restraining hand on Jim’s chest.

“Now hold your horses, there, darlin’.”

“Sorry; don’t mean to rush you,” Jim panted, stilling the movement of his hands.

Len chuckled. “You’re rushing you, babe. I’m gonna slow you down, for once in your life, if it kills both of us.”

“Oh, god, Bones; it will kill us both; it will.”

“Mm, good thing my CPR skills are up to date,” Leonard said, as he slid his hand between them and palmed Jim’s cock through this jeans.

“That’s not how to slow me down, Bones. I’m gonna come in my pants like a horny teenager if you —”

“Not gonna let that happen, Jim,” Len said, as he deliberately and slowly unfastened the top button of Jim’s jeans.

“Huhhhn … not fair,” Jim groaned. “How come you get to … and I … fuck, Bones!” Jim whined as Leonard unzipped Jim’s fly and eased the jeans open, but not yet down. Len couldn’t suppress an eye-roll at Jim’s boxers, which were covered with a print of monkeys, all covering their eyes with their tiny paws.

“Because, Jim, in case you haven’t figured this out yet,” Len said, as he started backing Jim down the hall towards the bedroom, “I’m gonna be in charge here for a little while.”

They entered the bedroom, and Leonard closed the door, not because there could possibly be anyone else in the house they’d need privacy from, but because he wanted the relative smallness of the space to enclose them, to help contain Jim’s energy.

“How come you get to be in charge?” Jim complained weakly. “It’s not like I haven’t done this before, you know.” He reached for the waistband of Len’s jeans, and pulled him closer by hooking his fingers through a belt-loop on each side.
Leonard shook his head, smiling slightly as he allowed Jim to pull him closer. “No, you haven’t done this before.”

“Now come on, Bones; you know that’s not true. You don’t want me to tell you how many people I’ve been with, do you? ‘Cause that’d either be bragging, or just plain sad,” Jim said, his lips nipping a trail down Leonard’s neck, to his shoulder.

“That ain’t what I meant,” Leonard said breathily, his dialect slipping deeper into the South as he became more aroused. He pulled back from Jim’s touch—not that he wasn’t enjoying the attention, but because this wasn’t how it was going to go.

“What?” Jim had the good grace to look confused.

“It don’t matter how many men or women you’ve fucked or been fucked by,” Leonard said, ghosting his palms up Jim’s torso. “I don’t reckon a single one of ‘em took time to properly make love to you, darlin’. And that’s how it’s gonna go this mornin’. Whether you like it or not. Which I suspect you will.”

“But I can’t—” Jim’s eyes flicked nervously across Leonard’s face, back and forth, up and down.

“Shh.” Len put a finger gently over Jim’s lips, and kept it there. He locked his eyes onto Jim’s, and Jim’s eyes settled, and his breathing settled, as he slowly, slowly let go of whatever it was he was holding on to. “Yes, you can.” He kissed Jim on the lips again, slowly, contentedly, lingeringly, before he reluctantly pulled away again to look Jim in the eye once more. “You can. All right?”

Jim nodded, ever so slightly.

“Okay. Good.” Leonard stepped back, so they were no longer in contact with each other, and looked Jim over, from head to toe, aware that Jim was surveying him in the same way. The calm that had come over both of them had tempered the sense of urgency, but not their arousal.

“Can I take off your jeans?” Leonard asked, watching as Jim licked his lips.

“Yeah.”

Len approached slowly, as he would a skittish colt, and carefully eased Jim’s already-open jeans down past his hips, careful to leave the tented monkey-covered boxers in place. He pulled the denim down past Jim’s knees, and helped Jim’s feet out of the legs of the jeans. He peeled Jim’s socks off his feet, tossing them aside, and did the same with his own while he was at it.

“You wanna take mine off?”

“Uh huh.” Jim’s teeth closed over his lower lip, as he carefully repeated Leonard’s actions, leaving another pair of jeans empty on the bedroom floor.

“Now, can I please get rid of those damned fool infantile shorts you got there?”

Jim looked down, blushing as he noticed his own absurd attire for the first time since it was uncovered.

“Uh, shit. Yeah. Um, sorry.”

Len grinned. “It’s all right, darlin’; I can take the goods underneath seriously even if the wrapping’s a bit much.” He carefully eased the wrapping down, being careful not to bend the goods underneath. He let gravity take care of the rest of the monkeys’ descent, and kicked the shorts aside once Jim had
stepped out of them.

He stood back and looked at Jim, who, for the first time since they’d first laid eyes on each other, didn’t look comfortable in his own body. Len would never have expected the word ‘shy’ to be part of Jim’s physical vocabulary, but he was pretty sure that’s what he was seeing.

“Is it okay if I look at you like this?”

Jim relaxed a little, as if being asked was all he needed, and nodded.

“You’re gorgeous, Jim,” Leonard said softly, just looking. “You wanna look at me, too?”

“Yeah,” Jim said, but didn’t make a move to divest Len of his underwear.

“You’re allowed to touch, Jim. In fact, if these are gonna come off,” Len said, gesturing to his own plain white briefs, “you’re gonna have to.”

Jim took half a hesitant step forwards, and gently peeled Leonard’s underwear all the way down to the floor. He remained kneeling on the floor, looking up. “Jesus, Bones; you’re so perfect like that.”

“Now, c’mon; nobody’s perfect. Least of all me.” Len knelt down on the floor to be at Jim’s level, and kissed him. “Come back up with me?”

Leonard’s knee cracked as they both stood up again, close enough to each other that it looked like their erections were trying to reach out to each other.

“Can I touch you?” Len asked quietly.

Jim laughed softly. “You can do whatever the hell you want to me, Bones.”

Leonard shook his head. “That’s not what I need you to say, Jim. Not this time.”

Len could see Jim’s Adam's apple rise and fall as he swallowed hard. “Okay. Um, yeah. Yeah, you can touch me. Please.”

And with that, Leonard closed the gap between them, and took Jim’s hard, hot length in his hand, feeling it twitch as he heard Jim suck in a breath. He grasped more firmly, and swiped his thumb through the wetness that had appeared at the slit. He moved the circle of his hand up and down slowly, watching the look on Jim’s face evolve.

“Holy fuck, Bones.”

“See? It’s okay to take it slow,” Leonard said. He could see and feel every muscle in Jim’s body quivering and trembling. “But I think we’ll be both better off not standing up.”

Jim looked at the bed next to him as if he’d just noticed it was there, and, in one smooth motion, threw the quilt and blanket down to the foot of the bed. Leonard didn’t mind, since it was Jim’s house, Jim’s room, Jim’s bed, that Jim was the one to pull them both down onto the mattress, but he quickly rolled them so he straddled Jim, and captured his mouth once more, as he slowly rubbed their bodies together. When he broke away from the kiss, trailing his open lips down the center of Jim’s chest, Jim groaned.

“God, Bones; you gotta fuck me already, please!”

Len chuckled quietly. “Now, Jim, we’re not nearly there yet. Got some other things to take care of first,” he said, as his lips continued their downwards journey. Plus, he thought, he was pretty sure
they’d both need a little nap after what he was about to do.

Leonard took his sweet time exploring every square inch of Jim with hands, lips, and tongue. Once he’d covered everything, and had Jim wrecked and writhing under his touch, he started at Jim’s lips to work his way down the center of his body one more time. He took a detour to the left to suck a hickey onto a spot he decided he liked, right on one of Jim’s toned six-pack muscles. Jim’s hands clenched in his hair, not so hard that it was uncomfortable, but hard enough that Leonard knew that Jim knew what he was about to do.

“Ohfuckohfuckohyesyesyes,” Jim babbled, as Leonard’s tongue swirled wetly over the crown of his cock. Len nudged Jim’s knees apart with one of his own, to give him more room where he wanted to be. With one hand, he held Jim down at a hip, while his other hand found Jim’s balls and caressed them, lightly at first, and then with more insistence as his mouth went farther down on Jim’s cock. He found he didn’t need either of his hands to provide any stimulation to himself; the sights and sounds and feel of Jim underneath him were enough that he was ready to come at any second. By the time he was able to take Jim’s substantial length in, he had to use both hands to hold Jim down.

“Bones, bonesbonesbones, can’t … gonna—”

Leonard circled the base of Jim’s cock tightly with one hand, and Jim groaned as Leonard’s mouth popped wetly off the head of his cock. Moving quickly, Len straddled Jim again, and took both their cocks together in his hand.

“Open your eyes, Jim, and look at us,” Leonard said, his voice so husky he almost didn’t believe it was his own.

Jim’s hands clenched in the sheets as he seemed to use every bit of willpower he had left to force his eyelids open. His pupils were blown so wide that there was only a tiny cerulean ring surrounding them, and Len almost believed he could see right into Jim’s soul. Then, Jim threw his head back, and his entire body arched up as he came with a shout, and Leonard followed him instantly, and they tumbled together into a haze of white static.

When he was able, Len rolled his weight off of Jim, who clutched him and rolled with him so they remained face to face, on their sides, sticky chests and bellies glued together.

“I told you,” Jim panted.

“Huh?”

“Told you it’d kill us both. ‘Cause I’m dead.”

“Mmm, me too.” Len slung a leg over Jim’s body, and they pulled each other close once more. Jim carded his hand through Len’s hair, and Len found himself being kissed to within an inch of his life—or past, he realized, since he’d already declared his own demise.

When they surfaced to breathe, Leonard remembered his promise that he’d stay with Jim today, for his hated birthday.

“If I’m not here when you wake up,” he told Jim, with the last of his energy, “it’s because I’m in the bathroom or the kitchen.”

“If I’m not here when you wake up, it’s because I’ve spontaneously combusted and gone to heaven.”

Len managed one last rumbling chuckle before he fell asleep. “Well, I hope if you wake up and feel like that’s gonna happen, you’ll let me in on the action.”
“Will do, Bones.” And with that, Jim rolled onto his back, pulling Len’s head down onto his chest, and they fell asleep, just over eight hours after the twenty-eighth anniversary of Jim’s birth.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As a fire’s heat increases, combustible objects in a room release flammable gases. When the temperature is high enough, the gases ignite all at once, causing a sudden and tremendous surge in heat and flames. This surge can in turn cause solids in the room to reach their autoignition temperatures and catch fire nearly simultaneously. The entire room and its contents are completely engulfed in flames. This condition is not survivable for more than two seconds, even for a firefighter in full personal protective equipment.
Chapter 9: Fully Developed

Coffee.

It was such a wonderful smell, that even though Leonard McCoy could tell without being fully awake yet that he really could have used at least three or four more hours of sleep, he couldn’t resist letting the aroma pull him out of a deep, dreamless sleep. With a combination of reluctance and pleasure, he opened his eyes a crack, and sat up abruptly as he recalled where he was.

In Jim Kirk’s bed. Naked as a jaybird. Reeking of sex. And, truth be told, feeling pretty god-damned pleased with himself.

The owner of the bed, and his partner in the morning’s activities, sat on the edge of the bed, holding two mugs of steaming coffee.

“Hi,” Leonard said, cracking a small smile despite himself.

“I thought I’d bring you some coffee, so you could get a head start on the self-re Grimination, guilt, and pointless regret.”

Even though Jim had his assessment wrong, it was only really a matter of timing that made him incorrect. The truth was, Leonard had already gone through all of Jim’s suggested emotional phases in the thirty seconds before he’d fallen asleep earlier that morning.

“Thanks.” McCoy sat up with his back against the headboard, and accepted the steaming mug.

“Plus, I figured you’re probably really, really cranky before you have your coffee.”

Now that part he had right. In fact, in order to be a civilized guest over the last few weeks, Leonard had made sure that he was always awake and partially caffeinated before his host was out of bed.

“Yes,” he replied, sipping his coffee.

“And a man of few words, too, I see. Well, that’s okay. I know you’re not a morning person. So I can just sit here quietly with you, and we can drink our coffee. And then when—”

“Jim.”

“Shutting up.”

Leonard patted the bed next to him to invite Jim to sit next to him, to take any sting out of what could have seemed like a rebuke. Jim set his coffee on the nightstand, and then scootched over next to
Leonard, leaning into him and snuggling him in with his non-coffee-holding arm. They sat there silently while they drank their coffee.

When his coffee mug was empty, Leonard leaned around Jim and set his empty mug on the nightstand.

“Better?” Jim asked.

“Yeah. Thanks. I guess you figured out that I’m nonfunctional before I’m caffeinated.”

“Yep.” Jim fiddled with his empty mug, turning it around and around. He picked at a chip on the rim, and turned the mug again, all the while avoiding looking at McCoy.

“Hey,” Leonard said, gently taking the mug from Jim’s hands and setting it next to his own on the nightstand. He picked up one of Jim’s hands and kissed it. “You okay?”

Jim finally looked at Len. “Me? Yeah. I’m actually pretty good. Considering what day it is and all.”

“But?”

Jim sighed. “Okay. But, I, uh, guess I blew it, didn’t I. Big time.”

Leonard raised one eyebrow. “Blew what, exactly?”

“I pushed you into this. You weren’t ready—I know you weren’t. But I huffed and I puffed, and I blew the house down, just like I always do, and—”

“Now hang on a second, there, Mr. Big Bad Wolf. Do you have some crazy idea that I’m in your bed right now because I thought you wanted a pity fuck? Or do you somehow think I’m so weak-minded and desperate that you’d be able to talk me into something that I didn’t want to do? Is that what’s going on here?”

“I …” Jim looked down at his empty hands, and started picking at a nail. “No. I don’t think that at all.”

Len took Jim’s hand, and kissed the spot he’d been picking at. “Then what do you think? Help me out here, darlin’.”


“Why what, Jim?”

“Why do you even … want me? I mean, if you do, that is.”

Len gaped at Jim. “Are you serious?”

Jim nodded.

“Holy Moses on a motorbike,” he muttered. “Okay. Remember when you said this morning that when I look at you, I see you?”

Jim nodded again. “Yeah.”

“What I see is a guy who’s smart and energetic, who cares more about everything and everyone than he really wants to, and, God help me, who is the sexiest goddamned creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. I see a sensitive guy in a world where that’s seen as weak in a man, which in my book is total bullshit,
by the way. I see someone who could do anything, who no doors are closed to. I see someone I want
to love, for a whole lotta reasons, and who I’m hoping will let me. Hell, you didn’t push me into
anything, Jim. I pulled a little, and then you pulled, and I pulled back. We’ve been pulling on each
other a little bit here an’ there since the first day we met, in one way or another. That’s what I think
happened. Did you feel like it was somethin’ different?"

Jim stared at Len. “You want to love *me*? Me?”

“Yeah, sugar, I sure do. You gonna let me do that?”

“I want to let you,” Jim whispered. “God, Bones, I want to let you. And I want to love you back. I
just … don’t know how. And I don’t wanna fuck it up.”

“Me neither. But I think the best way to fuck it up is to keep thinkin’ we’re gonna.”

“So let’s not.”

“You got yourself a deal, darlin’.”

They sat there, just looking at each other, when Jim’s stomach broke the silence by growling audibly.

“Sounds like we oughta get you fed real soon,” Len said, patting Jim’s rumbling belly.

“Wait right there,” Jim said, and leapt out of the bed.

Less than one minute later, he returned with two bowls of cereal with milk, and two spoons.

“I don’t normally eat in bed, but I think we have extenuating circumstances,” Jim said.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“Bones, you’re naked in my bed, so I think it’s fair to tell you that my circumstance has been pretty
extenuated all morning. Now eat up.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n!” Leonard said, digging in to his cereal. “Jesus Christ, Jim, what *is* this shit?”

Jim laughed through his mouthful of cereal. “You were on the right track. Cap’n Crunch. Part of a
nutritious breakfast.”

“Nutritious my ass. No—forget I even said that. Just … let’s just make it through these bowls of
sugar, and then we’ll work on something more interesting. If we don’t go into diabetic comas first.”

Jim plowed his way through the cereal, while Leonard picked at it and made various faces. He
finally put his half-empty bowl down on the nightstand.

“I surrender. I just can’t do it.”

“That’s okay. Here—gimme your bowl.” Jim nested Leonard’s half-eaten bowl inside his own
empty one, and took them both to the kitchen.

Leonard took the opportunity to use the bathroom, and decided to brush his teeth as long as he was
in there. The cereal—plus the lack of proper toothbrushing earlier that morning—had made his teeth
feel furry. He inspected himself in the mirror, and decided that a shave could damned well wait.

“Bones? Don’t you *dare* shave!” Jim hollered from outside the door. “The teeth I’ll allow, but
shaving would just be stalling.”
Len flung the bathroom door open. “Now, I wouldn’t do a thing like that. What with extenuating circumstances and—YIP!” he yelped, as he suddenly found himself being grabbed around the midsection and lifted off his feet and carried bodily across the hallway, where he was dropped unceremoniously onto the bed. “You’re insane!”

“And you’re a lot heavier than you look,” Jim said, looking down at Len from his position above him. His hands were on either side of Leonard’s shoulders, and his knees straddled his hips.

Leonard reached up and touched Jim’s cheek. He saw a shy look that he hadn’t expected to see from Jim Kirk, and had a pretty good idea what it meant.

“Bones,” Jim whispered.

“Yeah, darlin’. Come lay yourself down with me, now.” Len rolled, and pulled Jim down so they were face to face, side by side.

Jim slung a leg over Len’s hips, and pulled their bodies close together. He kissed Len, softly at first, but the glowing embers of their kiss quickly flared as their breathing sped up and fanned the flames.

Leonard tasted Cap’n Crunch and coffee on Jim’s tongue, and smiled at the incongruous combination. He stroked his fingers up and down in the valley between the solid ropes of muscle surrounding Jim’s spine, and felt the muscles tighten as Jim arched into him. He felt Jim’s broad hand exploring tentatively at first, and then with more confidence. Good. Len shifted his weight slightly, inviting Jim to roll him over and take the top position again. His silent request was fulfilled as Jim broke the kiss to flip them over, and once again he looked up into Jim’s startling eyes. This time, though, there wasn’t a hint of shyness in Jim’s gaze. Leonard smiled his approval.

“Fuck, Bones. I wanna kiss you everywhere, do everything with you, all at the same time.”

“We got all day, don’t we?”

“All afternoon,” Jim said into Len’s neck, “and all night,” he said, trailing a line of kisses down a collarbone, “and three whole days after that.”

“Mmm,” Leonard replied, hands roaming lazily wherever they could reach. They found the waistband of Jim’s boxers—plain navy blue this time. “Can we lose these? I wanna feel you.”

“Do it,” Jim said, as he and Leonard worked together to divest him of the shorts.

They traded indistinct but pleased sounds as their naked bodies met each other. Leonard gasped and clutched at Jim’s ass when Jim treated one of his nipples to something puzzling but amazing, involving his tongue, and maybe teeth as well, but he didn’t care what the mechanics of the feeling were. Leonard closed his eyes and let the sensations wash over him. He delighted at once again being allowed to run his hands over Jim’s body, but his hands’ explorations quickly devolved to just plain clutching as Jim found every sensitive spot on his body, as if he’d downloaded the Google map of Leonard McCoy’s hot spots.

Len couldn’t hold back a sound that was half shout, half moan, as Jim’s hand encircled his cock and began stroking it, his thumb sliding through the pre-come at the tip.

“God, Bones,” Jim murmured, “you’re so perfect like this.”

As Jim’s lips closed around the head of Leonard’s cock, Leonard lost the ability to do anything at all other than clutch the sheets in a desperate attempt not to grab Jim’s head and pull it closer, and his voice lost the ability to do anything other than let out whatever sounds wished to come out. His brain
lost the ability to do much of anything at all, except, when Jim took Len’s entire length down his
throat, to think “it figures.” That was his last coherent thought. He tried to warn Jim when he was
about to come—he really tried—but he couldn’t make his brain work well enough to form language.

Leonard discovered, once he started to come back to himself, that the lack of warning didn’t seem to
have mattered. The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Jim looking smugly down at him
and licking his lips, like a cat that had just eaten a prized pet bird, but didn’t feel a bit sorry about it.


Jim’s response was to flatten his body over Len’s and kiss him. Leonard couldn’t detect the taste of
the sugary cereal any more, as it had been replaced by more mature flavors.

Jim pulled away and looked down at Len. Jim’s smug smile from a moment ago was gone, replaced
by an expression Len could only think of as contentment.

“How long ago did you and your ex split up?”

Len shook his head. “Wrong question. Things … hadn’t been going well for a while.”

“Oh.”

“He just … wasn’t interested. And then one day, I found out why.”

“That’s when you walked in on him with another guy.”

Len shook his head again. “A woman. A co-worker and friend of mine. Or so I thought.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Jim said. “It’s none of my business. And I guess this isn’t a great time or place to talk
about this anyhow.”

“What, just ‘cause we’re in your bed, right after you liquefied my brain and sucked it out my cock?”

Jim laughed, but quickly became serious again. “I didn’t mean to bring up your ex. Kind of a mood-
breaker. Sorry.”

“’s alright. I think I started it, actually. Anyhow. You might as well ask what you wanted to ask, Jim.
I think it’s fair for you to know how I got broke, since I’m kinda hopin’ you’ll be stickin’ around my
sharp edges for a while.”

“Me too, Bones,” Jim said. But he didn’t ask the rest of his question.

Len wrestled with his sense of judgment and timing for a moment, and decided he had to answer the
question anyhow. He rolled them to their sides, because somehow, it didn’t feel right to be discussing his ex with Jim lying on top of him.

“You were gonna ask somethin’, and I think the question was gonna be along the lines of was it worse that it was a woman, or that she was supposedly my friend. And the answer is, it didn’t matter. I knew Joss’s gate swung both ways, and there were times in our relationship where we each had permission from the other to … seek out fulfillment for something we couldn’t get at home. That was part of … what we’d promised to each other. When we said we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together. But that time? We hadn’t discussed it.”

“Oh.”

Len noticed that the muscles in Jim’s jaw and temple were clenched tightly.

“Sorry,” Len said. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

Jim shook his head. “No, Bones, no. I’m … mad at him. ‘Cause nobody’s allowed to hurt you. But he did, and now you’re here, and I can’t imagine you not being here, but you’re only here because he …”

“Hey, now, c’mere.” Len smoothed Jim’s bed-headed hair and kissed him. “I’m not gonna lie and say I’m completely over everything. ‘Cause I’m not. But even though I don’t know how we got here so fast, I’m glad we’re here.”

“Me too, Bones.” Jim cleared his throat. “I, uh … the first night you stayed here? I almost asked if you would sleep with me.”

“I know.”

“But I didn’t.”

Len cracked a small smile. “I noticed.”

“So, Bones. You wanna sleep with me?”

Leonard snorted. “That’s closin’ the barn door after the horse ran off, darlin’. But yeah, I do. In fact,” he said, as he maneuvered Jim onto his back again, “I think you have some payback comin’ to you. And even if you didn’t, I pretty much can’t keep my hands off you any more, so I hope that’s all right with you.”

“I think I can stand it.”

“Good.”

~!~!~!~

1730, Jim’s bedroom.

“Jim?”

“Mmm.”

“I’m gonna die if I don’t eat some real food.”

“’kay.” Jim rolled over and kissed Len one more time. “Wanna get a shower, then go out somewhere?”
“Well, that depends,” Leonard said, sitting up and stretching.

“On what?”

“On whether there’s anywhere we can go out where it’d be okay for us to be all over each other. Because I’m not ready to be discreet yet. And where there’s no chance we’d see anyone from the department. Because that—well, it’s right out.”

“Oh. Yeah. I guess there’s not anywhere like that. Chicago’s a little far for dinner.”

“I’ll tell ya what. I’ll grab a fast shower—by myself, or else it’ll be another hour—and then I’ll go get takeout.”

“Just this once, I’ll let you get in the shower by yourself. But I’ve got some awesome shower sex stuff to do with you later.”

“I’m sure you do. So what kind of food do you want?”

Jim shook his head. “I don’t care. I’ll be eating it with you, so I’m not even gonna notice.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “Chinese it is, then. We both need some protein, and pizza just won’t cut it.”

He located his pants, and dug his cell phone out of the pocket.

“Shit,” he said, frowning.

“What?”

“Message from Joss.”

“Don’t let me stop you. I can get in the shower now if you wanna listen right away.”

“Actually, I don’t want to listen right away. I want to do what I was gonna do anyhow, and listen to his message when I feel like it. Which might not be today. So off I go, to the shower, like I said I would.”

“I’ll … clean up in here a little bit,” Jim said. “We made a pretty good mess of the sheets.”

“Yes, indeedy. See you in five.”

Leonard placed a ridiculously large order with the closest Chinese place, and showered quickly, trying not to think about what Joss might have wanted. He dried off, and returned to the spare room to pull on a clean pair of jeans and t-shirt.

“You clean up nicely,” Jim said from the doorway. “And you look hot in jeans.”

Leonard leaned against the door frame and pulled Jim to him. “You reek.”

“Your fault.”

“I take full responsibility.” He grabbed his keys and his wallet from his old pants. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Bones?”

“Yeah?”
“Drive safe, all right?”

Shit. Leonard hadn’t thought about that aspect of Jim’s birthday.

“I can cancel the order,” he said quietly, “if you want. Sorry I didn’t think about the whole driving thing.”

“It’s stupid,” Jim said. “You go on. I’ll be fine.”


“Yeah,” Jim said softly. “I guess I do.”

“Okay. It pains me to say this, but you’d better put some clothes on.”

“And I better wait in the car when you pick up the food.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Leonard said, following Jim back to the bedroom. “Everyone would smell you, that’s for sure. But they’d also know I was the one who got you that way. And I kinda like that idea.”

“That sorta thing wouldn’t go over any better around here than it would in Savannah,” Jim said, as he tugged on a pair of sweatpants, and slid a t-shirt over his head.

“I guess not.”

As they were getting into the van, Leonard’s phone chimed again, to remind him he had a message. He looked at the screen, and shoved the phone back into his pocket.

“Bones, just listen to it. You’re gonna be thinking about it until you do.”

Leonard sighed. “Yeah, you’re right.” He called his voicemail, and listened.

“Leo, it’s Joss. I just wanted to let you know that I put everything of yours into a storage unit, at that self-storage place near Eric’s house. Just … I don’t know. Just let me know what you want me to do with the key. And the other thing is … I just balanced the checkbook, and I don’t understand what the hell you’ve been living off of. Except for the four hundred bucks you took out that first day, you haven’t touched the joint account. It’s half yours. I want you to take half of it, all right? I know I … lost my right to be worried about you, but I can’t help it.”

There was a pause in the message, and for a moment Len thought his call had been dropped, but Joss’s voice came back.

“I’m not going to try to track you down, because I know you don’t want that. But … be well, all right? Get your stuff. Take the money. And don’t do it for me. Do it for yourself. Please.”

There was another pause, with a muffled sound that Leonard thought might be a sob or a sniff.

“Goodbye, Leo.”

“End of message,” the neutral Verizon voice said.

Len shoved his phone back in his pocket, and put the key in the ignition of the van. He was about to start the engine, but changed his mind, and rested his forehead on the steering wheel.

“Bones,” Jim said. “Please. I’m not asking for details. But please, don’t just pretend like nothing
Leonard rubbed his temples, and left his head down. “It was Joss. He put my stuff in storage, like he said he would. And he wants me to take half the money from our joint account.”

“That sounds reasonable. But you don’t seem like you’re gonna do it, are you. Are you being stubborn to make him suffer? Because it’s not worth it, Bones.”

“Okay. You’re right. It’s not. I just … don’t want to deal with it any more.”

“So then don’t. Not today. But I’ll tell you what. In a month, we’ve got two rotations off instead of just one—so that’s eight days. I’ll call U-Haul and arrange to rent a truck in Savannah. We’ll drive down there together, and I’ll help you get your stuff out of the storage place. And you’ll have some time to do anything else you need to do down there. And then we’ll caravan back up here. Okay?”

Len picked his head up.

“You’d do that with me? For me?”

“We could leave right now, if you wanted. We could make it back in time for our next shift, if we drove fast and didn’t stop too much.”

“You’re insane.”

“No shit.”

“In a month, though—that might work. That’s not crazy.”

“Nope. Are we on?” Jim asked.

“Yeah. I think we’re on.”

“Good. Now let’s go into town and pick up Mama Fong’s finest.”

“Jim?”

“Uh huh?”

“Thanks.”

Jim didn’t say anything. He just leaned across the console between the two front seats of the van, and kissed Leonard.

“Happy Birthday to me, Bones.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A fire is considered fully developed when all combustibles in a compartment are burning. In a fully developed fire, the “neutral plane” (the intersection between hot and relatively cool layers of air/gas) is at or close to the floor, allowing for no survivability. Average temperatures in the compartment can range from 1300-2200
degrees Fahrenheit (700-1200 C). How long the fire continues to burn depends on the presence and balance of oxygen and fuel. Once a fire in one compartment is fully developed, it will certainly spread to other compartments (rooms) unless contained in some way, or unless fuel or oxygen are cut off and the fire decays.
Chapter 10: Delta Response

“This just feels wrong, Bones,” Jim said, as he helped carry the foam mattress from the van to Len’s new rental house. “I mean, things are really getting going with us, and you’re moving out. That just seems weird.”

“C’mon, Jim. We can see each other whenever we want. You know that. But we gotta have our own places. I could start givin’ you a list of reasons, but that’d just be stodgy.”

“Yeah, all right; I know, I know.”

They set the mattress down on the floor of one of the bedrooms. Jim looked around.

“I guess I would call this ‘partially furnished,’ rather than ‘furnished.’ But most of what’s here is crap anyhow, so I suppose it’s just as well that there’s not more of it,” Jim said.

“Well, Mrs. Petty did say I could put anything I wasn’t going to use into the basement. But, at the moment, I don’t have anything at all other than what we just threw on the floor in there, so I’m not complaining. Very much. And the price is right.”

“I’ll say. You really got a deal, Bones. I mean, this place is bigger than my place, and you’re paying less, even though you’re pretty much in Iowa City.”

“The right side of it, too, for work. It should only take twenty minutes or so to get there.”

Jim cast his eye about the room, and then clapped his hands and rubbed them together gleefully. “Bones, Bones, Bones! You know what we’re gonna do now?”

“Vacuum?” Leonard guessed.

Jim shook his head.

“Dust? Mop? I don’t know,” Len said, growing more irritated each time Jim shook his head.

“We’re going shopping! C’mon. Let’s go.”

“I hate shopping, Jim. Besides, what exactly do you think I need?”

“A bed, for one thing. We won’t both fit on that thing,” Jim said, pointing at the mattress. “Even if it’s comfy for one, it’s not exactly built for two guys of our size. And that bed in the other room?” Jim shuddered. “Nuh uh.”

“I guess it does seem pretty musty,” Leonard admitted. “But Jim, I hate shopping. I really hate it. Plus, I’m broke, so it’s a moot point.”

“Well, I love shopping,” Jim said.

Len stared at him. “Seriously?”
“C’mon, Bones. Gimme a break. Look at me. I’m the closest thing to metrosexual in all of Iowa.”

McCoy snorted. “Of course you are.”

“So I’ll just rub some more gel into my hair, touch up my eyeliner, grab my man-purse, and off we go.”

“You don’t wear eyeliner, and you can shove your wallet in your pocket like you always do. Plus, you may be a shopaholic, but I’m still broke.”

“I’m not. And you’re not gonna be broke for long, so I’ll lend you the money. Unless you’re not good for it. But your ex did say he wants you to have half the bank account. So, what’s he do, anyhow? Another medic? Or something more mundane? I know—sales! Cars, or maybe even shoes. Or real estate—that’d be good.”

Len sighed. “He’s a cardiologist.”

Jim opened his mouth as if to say something, but then shut it again for several seconds. “So you’re probably good for it.”

“Yeah. Soon as I can figure out how he can get me some money without me telling him where I am, I’ll be fine. And Jim?”

“Yeah?”

“Please, please, please, don’t Google him. Okay?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Jim said.

“Bullshit. You were just thinking about doing it, right after I said what kind of job he had.”

“Okay, all right, I was. But I won’t do it.”

“Thanks.” Leonard looked around the room, and sighed. “All right. Let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“Wherever you’d go to buy a bed around here. And no, you don’t get to pick it. And we’re not testing it out together in the store.”

“Can we break it in later, though?”

“Course we can. I’m counting on it.”

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Three hours later, Jim and Len dragged a queen-sized mattress from the van to the front bedroom, and carried in a box that contained the pieces for a platform bed with drawers. An hour after that, they decided to assemble the bed, so the broken-in mattress could be picked up off the floor.

“Jesus, Jim, put some clothes on before you use the tools, would you please?”

“What, you getting fond of the equipment or something?”

“Yes, damn it; and do you have any idea how much blood there is if you injure your—”
“Stop!! Okay! Pants being put on … now!”

“Thank you. And yes, later I’ll be harping at you to take them off. What can I say?”

“You can say ‘oh please oh pretty please hot sexy fireman boyfriend, let me fuck you into my new bed until we both come all over my new sheets?’ That’d be a good start.”

Leonard facepalmed.

Jim ignored him. “Can you pass me a Phillips-head screwdriver? A long one?”

They worked together for the next twenty minutes until the project was done.

“There,” Len said with satisfaction. “You know what? You were right. It was a good idea to buy this. Not just because we can both sleep in it, and what have you, but … I guess having my own place, with my own bed, kind of makes it feel like I really live here. In Iowa.”

“Whether you like it or not, huh?” Jim said, perched on the edge of the bed.

Len sat next to Jim, and didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “I like it here. I didn’t care, when I left Georgia, where I ended up—as long as it was away. But … I like it. I like my job, I like the people I work with, I like the town—well, towns, really, since here we are in Iowa City, with our workplace in Cedar Rapids a whopping twenty minutes away. And I like you. I’m not sure how it all happened so fast, but I guess I’ve got a new life. And I like it.”

“Good,” Jim said simply.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is good.” Len leaned over and kissed Jim on the cheek quickly, almost shyly.

“Wanna go grab a bite?”

“Early dinner? Sure. We could just drive around town and see what strikes our fancy.”

“Sure. South to Iowa City, or North, to Cedar Rapids?”

“Take your pick, Bones.”

“How ‘bout Cedar Rapids, then? I haven’t actually spent much time there when I wasn’t scraping people off the floor for some reason or another.”

“Okay, good. We can take my car,” Jim said.

They drove up to Cedar Rapids, and cruised the streets aimlessly. Jim pointed out various bars, stores, and restaurants; Leonard realized that although they were a thousand miles from Savannah, the only big difference seemed to be that there was no coastal or Southern ‘feel.’ Other than that—things seemed pretty similar, which he hadn’t noticed before.

Jim suddenly went silent as he stopped at a red light. There were uninteresting looking places on three of the corners, but the fourth corner—where Jim seemed to be purposely not looking—was occupied by a place that Leonard thought might be a large bar, or a nightclub, or something like that. The red awnings advertised “Roma.”

“What’s that place?” Len asked, pointing to the awnings.

“We’re not going there,” Jim said flatly, still not looking.

“Okay … but what is it?”
“It’s a shitty nightclub, run by an even shittier guy. I’m surprised you haven’t been there a hundred times already on night shifts.”

“That kind of place, huh?”

“Yep,” Jim said. The light changed, and he peeled out from the intersection, the force of the acceleration throwing Leonard back into his seat.

Leonard was about to probe further, but saw Jim’s hands clenched on the steering wheel, knuckles white with tension. He decided it could wait. They drove a few more blocks in silence.

“Wait—is that a Thai place?” Len said.

“Yeah—it’s pretty good, too. Wanna go there?”

“I think my fancy has just been struck. I love Thai.”

“Me too,” Jim said. “It’s sometimes pretty crowded, but this early, in the middle of the week—should be fine.” He found a parking spot half a block away, and Len fished some change out of his pocket and put it in the meter.

They walked to the entrance, shoulder to shoulder. Len desperately wanted to put his arm around Jim’s shoulders, and ask him what was wrong, but from the hunch in his shoulders and the tension in his neck, Leonard could tell it wasn’t a good idea.

Jim calmed down as soon as they entered the air-conditioned establishment, and they were greeted by a pretty thirtyish Asian woman.

“Well, hello, Jim Kirk!” the woman said in lightly accented English. “We haven’t seen you here for a while. How are things?”

“Things are good, Sunee. Just dandy. Still down at Station 7, or you’d see me a lot more often, you know. Oh—this is my friend Leonard McCoy. He’s our new paramedic. Just moved up here from Georgia.”

“Georgia? The weather there would be a lot more like Thailand, I think,” Sunee said. “Welcome, Leonard.”

“Thank you, miss,” he said. “And if Thailand is hot and humid and sticky, Savannah would feel pretty familiar, I think.”

Sunee showed them to a booth, and they studied the menu. Jim surprised Leonard by ordering food that was not only just as spicy as Len’s own order, but vegetarian as well.

“Thought you were a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy.”

“Fake meat won’t kill me, and plus, I like to share.”

“You do?” Len said, raising his right eyebrow, which he thought of as the more skeptical of the two.

“Well, with you.”

The soup arrived, and it was delicious.

“Seems like you’re a regular here,” Len commented. “Or maybe it’s just that you actually do know everyone in the city of Cedar Rapids, plus most of Iowa City as well.”
“When I was at Station 1 around the corner, when I first started working—my probie year, you know, just like Chekov now—I used to come here after day shift a lot. I had a little crush on Sunee, but I totally knew better, even at that age.”

“Which was?”

“Twenty.”

“Huh. What’d you do between high school and fire academy?” Leonard asked.

“Nothing. I, uh, kind of didn’t graduate on time. I guess it would be fair to say I made some pretty poor choices when I was a teenager. I’ll tell you about it sometime. Not now, though.”

“Sure, Jim. That’s fine. Can I ask one thing, though?”

“Fire away,” Jim said.

“I’m curious—how’d you end up working in Cedar Rapids? I mean, why not Iowa City? It’s so much closer to your mom’s place, and they’ve got a career fire department, too.”

Jim put his spoon down, and sighed. “I guess I never told you what my dad did for a living.”

Len shook his head. “Nope. And—I mean, it seems like this was a tougher question than I meant it to be, so if you don’t want to—”

“No, Bones. It’s fine. It’s not like it’s some big secret or anything. My dad was a cop in Iowa City. And, you know about the sort of … incestuous relationship between the cops and the fire department in some towns. Or maybe sibling rivalry. I don’t know. Anyhow—he was a big hero. About a year before I was born—or before he died, take your pick—he busted up a drug ring—kind of by accident, actually—and took one in the shoulder when he was covering his partner on that bust. And every cop and fireman in Iowa City who was around then would know I was George Kirk’s kid. The Iowa City fire chief, at the time I was graduating from the academy, was a friend of my dad’s. He offered me a job. I said no, and he understood. He put in a good word for me up in Cedar Rapids, and also in Marion, and the rest is history.”

Bones produced a low whistle. “Wow. Okay. That makes sense. I bet before that, you got some pressure to follow in your dad’s footsteps, too, right?”

Jim shook his head. “Wrong. Remember those bad choices? Sealed juvie records can be as sealed as they want, but no police academy would ever have let me in. Wouldn’t wanna do that, anyhow. I don’t like guns.”

“Me neither. I suppose there’s a certain amount of truth in the idea that guns don’t kill people, people kill people, but in my experience, people with guns can kill a hell of a lot more people a hell of a lot faster than people without guns.”

“Amen to that, Bones. Anyhow—enough of my deep dark secrets,” Jim said, as the waiter cleared the soup bowls. “How ‘bout some of yours?”

Leonard laughed. “There are so many, but most of them I can’t really say here in this nice restaurant. But try me—since after all, fair’s fair.”

“Okay. Just say no if this is a bad question. But how’d you hook up with a cardiologist? Did you, like, meet him at the hospital or something?”
Len snorted. “You really have a talent, you know that?”

“I have many, but which one did you have in mind? Putting my foot in my mouth?”

“No, getting straight to the biggest secret.”

“Oops,” Jim said. “So okay, you didn’t meet at the hospital. Is it at least scandalous? And even though it pains me to say this, you don’t have to answer.”

“No scandal,” Leonard said. “But what I’m about to tell you can’t bounce off any eardrums other than yours, all right? And I’m serious about that, Jim.”

“All right,” Jim said. “I can keep a secret if it’s important. And if it’s yours, then it’s important. No matter how hot it is.”

“It’s not hot,” Len said, scowling. “Look, do you want to know, or not? Because this isn’t a joke.”

“Sorry,” Jim said. “I know it’s not. I do want to know, and I promise I won’t say a thing to anyone. I’d offer to pinkie swear, but I’m pretty sure you’d deck me.”

“Yes. But here goes. We met in medical school. And yes, I finished. I could put M.D. after my name if I wanted, and I could work at a doc-in-the-box or some other place that only requires that you’ve finished the bare minimum. But I didn’t do a residency, so I can’t really do anything else. So here I am.”

Jim gaped at Leonard, and didn’t even seem to notice when the food arrived.

“The deal was,” Len continued, “we couldn’t match together for residency locations. No marriage certificate, see? So we decided he’d go first, and then when he was done or nearly done, I’d get my turn. And my turn was supposed to be this past year, but then he got offered a position he couldn’t refuse in Savannah, and I … caved.”

Jim was still sitting there with his mouth open, so Leonard stabbed a bite of tofu and popped it right in.

The spiciness of the food must have popped Jim out of his state of shock, because he chewed and swallowed quickly.

“Holy crap, Bones! You’re an M.D.?”

“Yes. I’ll show you my diploma when we pick up my stuff,” Leonard said as he spooned rice onto his plate.

“But … so … will you ever be able to practice as a doctor?”

“I’d have to complete a residency to really be employable.”

“You totally need to do it,” Jim said. “What specialty would you do?”

“Probably emergency medicine—no big surprise there. But it’s a pipe dream at this point, Jim. I think I’m just gonna keep doing what I’m doing.”

“Why, Bones? Why is it a pipe dream?”

Leonard sighed. “Jim, there’s so much competition for so many residencies that nobody’s gonna want a guy who’s been out of medical school for nearly five years.”
“But … but can you try? At least try? You’d be such an awesome doctor, Bones. I mean, you’d probably have a crappy bedside manner sometimes, like with frequent fliers or people who did something really stupid, but that’s not necessarily a terrible thing.”

“I don’t know, Jim. It’s just such a longshot.”

“What, that some hospital would want a terrific paramedic, with twelve years of experience, who’s finished medical school, but had life get in the way of his career?”

“Exactly. In medicine, you’re supposed to drop everything. It’s supposed to be your dream from day one, and if you’re not dedicated enough, well, there’s someone else who is.”

Jim didn’t have a snappy comeback for that, so they both ate in silence for a few minutes.

“Bones?” Jim said, after polishing off a spring roll.

“Yes.”

“Don’t give up on yourself. Please? Just … see what you can do.”

Leonard didn’t answer right away. He moved some bean sprouts from one side of his plate to the other, and squeezed a lime onto his pad thai.

“All right. I’ll try.”

“Good.”

~!~!~!~

First night shift of the next rotation

“‘Flong?’ That’s not a word, Jim. And you can’t convince me it is. So take it off the board, or I’ll challenge you. And I’ll win. Because there’s no way that’s a word.”

“Come on, Bones! It’s a kind of sea bird.”

“Bullshit. Three seconds till I challenge. Two. One—”

“Ambulance 2, respond to 1880 40th St., Roma Bar, for a 20-year-old female, unresponsive, believed to be highly ETOH. 1880 40th St., for a female, age approximately 20, unresponsive and believed to be highly ETOH. 23-Delta-1. Law enforcement responding. 0028.”

“Saved by the bell, Jim. Saved by the bell,” Leonard hollered, as he and Christine hustled out the door to the bay. He didn’t notice the look on Jim’s face as he left.

Leonard recognized the place as soon as he pulled the rig up in front of it. It was the place Jim didn’t want to talk about. He and Chris were met at the door by a police officer.

“A friend found the girl in the bathroom. She looks pretty bad—not breathing too well. Her ID says she’s twenty-three, but it’s obviously fake.”

Leonard and Christine crammed themselves into the narrow, smelly bathroom. It was immediately obvious that their patient was in big trouble. There was vomit on her face and shirt, and she was breathing shallowly, slowly, and noisily. Her skin was pale and clammy, and her lips and fingertips had a bluish cast.
“Shit,” Len said. "Her airway’s crap. Suction and ventilate her, Chris; I’m gonna drop a tube.”

A minute later, Christine was ventilating the patient while Leonard was checking further into what was going on.

“Odor of alcohol for sure, but pinpoint pupils too. Terrific.”

He started an IV, and hit her with a dose of Narcan to counteract the narcotics.

“Let’s load and go, Chris.”

Three minutes later, Len and his patient were in the back of the ambulance, and he was applying EKG leads. Five minutes after that, as they were pulling into the ambulance bay at the hospital, the girl’s heart started quivering erratically instead of beating normally. Thirty minutes after that, the morgue had a new patient waiting for autopsy, and Leonard and Christine drove the rig silently back to the station. Christine went to the supply closet to begin restocking. Leonard pushed the button on the mobile radio that told dispatch that they were available, but didn’t move from the driver’s seat. Christine left him alone while she replaced the supplies and medications they’d used on their unsuccessful run.

A few minutes later, Leonard was still sitting in the ambulance, with his forehead resting on the steering wheel, when the passenger-side door opened, and clicked closed quietly.

“Bones?” Jim followed his query up by putting his hand on Len’s back, in a gesture that would just look friendly and supportive.

“Fucking hell, Jim. We were at that bar you wouldn’t talk about. A girl—maybe eighteen, probably not—had a stomach full of oxycontin and booze. She didn’t make it. Somebody there has an awful lot to answer for.”

“Yeah,” Jim said softly. “Yeah. Johnny Nero, the owner. One more death on his hands now.”

Leonard looked up, frowning. “You know the guy?”

“Never met him. And for his sake, I better not. But twenty eight years ago, he was the drunk who killed my dad.”

They sat silently in the cab of the ambulance for a long, long time.

“I just wanna go home, Jim, and crawl into bed with you, and sleep until noon. But I can’t, because there are gonna be more drunks tonight, and car wrecks, and forty-year-old diabetics with heart disease who keel over in front of the TV with a stack of Big Macs, and—”

“Bones,” Jim said, “there’ll be people who are hurt, or sick, or in pain, and you’ll help them. You’ll take the worst day of their life, and make it a little less bad. Or make it not be the last day of their life.”

“Yeah. Not for that girl, though.” He picked his head up, and rubbed his eyes. “I better write my fucking report. Because there’s no way it’s not getting subpoenaed.”

“You want me to see if Cap will stand you guys down for a little while?”

Leonard sighed. “Yeah. No—actually, I’ll talk to him. Maybe see if he can take us off Alpha responses, at least, until I finish this report.”
“Okay.” Jim’s hand moved upwards on Len’s back, and quickly caressed his neck and carded through his hair. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.” Leonard leaned into Jim’s hand, like a cat pushing against the hand of a person who’s petting it. There was the sound of a door opening in the bay, so they quickly parted.

Jim opened his door, and started to get out.

“Jim?”

Kirk stopped, with the door halfway open.

“Yeah, Bones?”

“Thanks.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In many areas, dispatchers use a coding system that tells the responders what type of incident they’ve got (the first number), a letter that indicates whether the incident is likely to need basic life support (alpha and bravo) or advanced life support (charlie and delta), and whether they should respond with lights and sirens (bravo and delta) or not (alpha and charlie), and another number (a further breakdown of the first number. So, “23-Delta-1” is an overdose, where the patient is unconscious, and will need advanced life support, responding with lights and sirens.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11: Backdraft

The next shift: 0358.

Leonard was abruptly jolted from a night-shift catnap by the station’s tones.

“Engine 1, Ladder 1, Ambulance 2, Engine 4; Multiple callers reporting heavy smoke from an abandoned building, 1304 26th St. Heavy smoke from an abandoned building, 1304 26th St. 0358.”

The entire crew of the station’s B-shift poured into the apparatus bay, and all three apparatus from the station were en route within two minutes. When he and Chapel arrived at the fire, Leonard staged the ambulance away from the scene, and waited.

“Dispatch, from Engine 1. We have a one-story wood frame structure, windows boarded up, fully involved. Continue Engine 4,” Pike said into his radio.

“Defensive mode, people. This place has had it. Scotty, Spock—ladder’s master stream on the Bravo side. Kirk, Jablonski—check out the Charlie side and report in. Morescu, Chekov—master stream on the Alpha side. No, I repeat no, ventilating until we get a better look.” Pike picked his radio up again. “Engine 4, approach from Chestnut Street, and run a forward lay from the hydrant there. Protect the exposure on the Delta side.”

Leonard heaved a sigh of relief when he heard the phrase ‘defensive mode,’ which meant in this case that nobody would be sent inside. The smoke was an ugly yellowish-gray color, which he’d never seen before. There were practically no flames visible—he thought that was a good sign, but he didn’t really know. He watched as everyone worked smoothly to execute their tasks. Jim’s voice popped on the radio moments later.

“Command from Charlie side, no exposures or hazards of note. Two large windows, boarded up. This place is sealed up tight, Cap, and it looks like the fire is breathing.”

“Copy,” Pike said. “I see it too. Return via Delta side, on the double. Spock, retract a bit; you’re awfully close.”

“Breathing?” Leonard asked Christine.

She shrugged. “Beats me.”

Leonard watched the structure. He started to see what Jim meant by ‘breathing.’ The smoke billowed out, but then at times seemed to get sucked back in for a moment. Around the plywood covering the window openings, he could see smoke getting pulled in through the cracks, then puffed out again. He once again mentally thanked Pike for keeping everyone safely outside.

The building groaned as it seemed to inhale a deeper breath than before, and the first visible licks of flame appeared from the roof in the front of the house. Two indistinguishable figures in yellow turnout gear were just visible between the right side of the house and the chain-link fence when Pike’s voice suddenly came on loudspeakers and the radio at the same time.
“Back off! Everybody ba—”

All at once, with a deafening blast, huge gouts of smoke blew the plywood off the boarded up windows on the right side of the building. Leonard’s heart stopped, then raced, as both figures on the right of the house were flung like ragdolls against the chain-link fence. One of them staggered to its feet. The other didn’t. The scene was then completely obscured by thick, black smoke, and flames poured through the uncovered windows, grabbing the roof and ripping through it like it was nothing. It looked like even the smoke was burning, but Leonard hadn’t heard of such a thing.

Leonard could hear Pike shouting something over the radio, but it was drowned out by the static in his head. He didn’t realize he himself was screaming out loud, until he became aware that Christine was shaking him, and he caught himself in the middle of a yell.

“Len! Leonard!” Christine shouted, right in his face, looking at him oddly. “Hey!”

He crammed his knuckles in his mouth, and watched helplessly as one of the figures dragged the other away from the building. His heart was pounding, and he couldn’t do a thing about it. A man was down, and there wasn’t a thing he could do about it.

It could be Jim. He could be dead. Leonard had no idea, and there wasn’t a thing he could do except watch and wait.

Pike joined the pair, and quickly helped pull the motionless man to relative safety. As soon as the group was outside the collapse zone, McCoy and Chapel approached rapidly with their equipment, just as the standing man collapsed to his knees. Len still couldn’t tell who was who, and it was killing him. He could tell, at least, that the downed man was breathing, from the steady Darth Vader sounds coming from the regulator on his facepiece.

“Chris, you get him,” McCoy said, pointing to the man who was now on his hands and knees. The back of the man’s turnout coat was covered with soot, and the name was illegible. Len couldn’t even tell if the name had four letters, or nine. He was praying it was four.

Len was joined by Engine 4’s Captain, who turned off the air pack, and assisted Len in stripping the gear off the felled man. As soon as Leonard had his hands on the man’s shirt, under his coat, he nearly sobbed with relief. It wasn’t Jim—he could tell, just from the feel of him. Too large, too soft—it wasn’t Jim. He stole a glance over to where Christine was kneeling next to Jim, who had removed his own helmet, mask, and air pack, and was now sitting on the grass, looking … the only word Len could think of was ‘impatient.’

Jablonski was starting to come around, noisily and with a surfeit of F-bombs, just like he did everything else.

“Fuck—holy fuck! What the fuck happened?” Jablonski said, as he struggled to sit up.

“Easy, Carl, easy. You got knocked down by some kind of blast from the house. It looked like the plywood blew off the windows.”

“Fucking backdraft,” Jablonksi replied. “Shit. I remember—fucking fire was breathing like a motherfucking dragon.”

“It was a backdraft, all right,” Engine 4’s Captain replied. “You okay there, McCoy, or do you need another set of hands still?”

“Thanks, Cap, but I’m good. You hurt anywhere, Carl?” Leonard said, as he finished getting a set of vitals.
“Just a headache. Son of a bitch. I should’ve seen that coming. Fuck.”

“Well, you just take it easy. Even if it weren’t an SOP for guys that get knocked out, I’d recommend you go in to the hospital and get checked out, since you might have a mild concussion.” As he was talking to Jablonski, Len looked back over at Jim, who shot him a quick “okay” sign, which McCoy returned.

“I didn’t get knocked out!” Carl protested. “Just … stunned! I wasn’t really out!”

Leonard shook his head and rolled his eyes at the same time. “Sorry, pal; you were out cold.”

“Well, Jim looked a little wobbly, but didn’t get knocked out. He pulled you away from the house. It’s a good thing, too, because as soon as he got you away from that window, the flames started shooting out of it.”


And what, McCoy thought, would you say if you had more than one thing to say for him?

Jablonski let out a tremendous, hacking cough, and spat a wad of phlegm into the grass.

“Delightful, Jablonski. Thanks for that work of art. Are you having some airway irritation, or was that just a normal loogie you hocked?”

“Jesus, you medics are mother hens! I’m fine.”

“All right, all right! Listen, you gear down, hop into the rig, and I’ll go check in with Christine about Jim, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m not lying on any fucking stretcher, though.”

“Fine. Sit on the bench. I don’t care.”

Leonard restrained himself from running the few paces to where Jim was now standing.

“Kirk, there’s no point in being a child about it. You sit out for fifteen, period. Captain Pike’s orders,” Christine said firmly. “No ifs, ands, or buts.”

“But—” Jim protested.

“Jim,” Leonard said.

Jim met his eyes.

Leonard didn’t have to say anything else.

“Fifteen minutes,” Jim said.

“Good,” Leonard replied. He held out a hand to help Jim up, and it was accepted. Leonard held onto the hand slightly longer than would be normal, but not long enough that anyone but Jim would notice.

“Cupcake going in for a checkup?” Jim asked.
“Kicking and screaming. Speaking of which: I’m driving you home after shift. No ifs, ands, or buts about that, either.”

Jim reflexively opened his mouth to begin a protest, but then looked at Len, and shut it. “Okay,” he said.

Christine gaped openly at Jim’s compliance.

“C’mon, Chris; let’s get Cupcake to the hospital. And you get to drive. Catch you later, Jim. Take it easy.”

Len waited next to Pike until the Captain could spare a moment of attention from the fire, which was quickly being subdued by the huge volumes of water being dumped on it from all sides. He kept an eye on Jablonski, who was sitting on the side bench in the ambulance.

“How are they?” Pike asked.

“Well, Jablonski denied he was out cold, but I quashed that idea right away. We’ll take him in, and with any luck, it’ll be busy enough that he’ll be there till shift change anyhow.”

Pike nodded. “And Kirk? Chris said he was just shaken up, but otherwise okay. I told him to take fifteen. You wanna look at him before he gets back to business?”

McCoy shook his head. “He’s all right. And he’s gonna take fifteen.”

“Good. If I don’t see you at the station, I’ll catch you for a debriefing next shift.”

“Yessir. Anything else?”

“Nope. Come on back to the scene when you’ve dropped Cupcake off. Rig 4 is coming to cover until then.”

“Got it,” Leonard said. He looked back over at the rig—Cupcake had changed his mind, and was lying stretched out on the gurney, hand folded behind his head. Len took a quick detour on his way to the rig, and stopped at the front bumper of the engine, where Jim was sitting.

“You really okay?” Leonard asked just loudly enough to be heard over the din of the fire scene.

“I’m really okay, Bones.”

“You scared the living shit out of me.”

“Me, too.”

They looked at each other for another second or two, each wanting more than eye contact, each knowing that wasn’t possible.

“See you later.”

“Yeah.”

Leonard spun on his heel, frustrated with the situation, and returned to the rig. Christine was in the driver’s seat, ready to go.

“I see you changed your mind about the stretcher,” he said to Carl.
“Yep. I figured, why not chill out?”

“Good call. The deal is, everyone needs to be belted in,” McCoy said, as he did up the straps on the stretcher, and then fastened his own seat belt.

“Whatever. I don’t care. If I get to chill on the clock while everyone else is killing their ass, I’m not gonna complain. Hey, maybe they’ll even make me take a shift off! It’s free sick time, you know, if you’re injured on the job. Can you put in a bad word for me?” Cupcake laughed at his own wit.

“We’ll leave that up to the docs,” Leonard said. This was the longest conversation he’d ever had with Jablonski, and he was starting to see what Jim meant about him being a shit.

“How’s your headache, Carl, on a scale of zero to ten, where zero is nothing and ten is the worst you can imagine?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t even notice it unless I’m thinking about it. Three? But if you wanted to shoot me up with some of the fun stuff, I wouldn’t complain.”

Leonard wrote that number down on his cheat sheet, and ignored the rest of Carl’s statement.

“You said before you weren’t hurt anywhere else. That still how you feel?”

“Yup. Take your time up there, Chapel,” Carl bellowed. “We’re in no hurry back here.”

Leonard ignored Cupcake for the rest of the short trip, and started his report on the laptop bolted to a swinging arm in the patient compartment. He was tempted to quote Jablonski’s request to ‘put in a bad word for him,’ but decided that would be making more trouble than there needed to be. The docs would probably peg him as a potential malingering as soon as he opened his mouth. So Len decided, instead, to just document what Carl had reported about the mild pain of his headache and not having any other injuries, and let the documentation paint its own picture. He did, however, quote Carl’s remark about ‘the fun stuff,’ simply because he was getting irritated by the man.

A few minutes later, the back-up beeping signaled Leonard that they were pulling into the ambulance bay at the hospital. He and Chris brought the gurney in, where they were met by the charge nurse.

“Brought us one of your own, I see?” the nurse asked.

“Yep. This is Carl Jablonski, 29. He had a loss of consciousness of approximately one minute after a blast where he was hit with a piece of plywood and knocked into a chain-link fence. No swelling evident on the head, no neck pain, no other injuries. He reports a 3 out of 10 headache. Vitals were all normal.”

“All right. We’ll take care of him from here. Thanks, Len, Chris.”

“See ya later, Steve,” Len replied.

They changed the linens on the stretcher, returned to the rig, and radioed in to dispatch that they were returning to the fire scene. Chris drove, while Len completed the last details in his brief report.

“All right, how’d you do it?” Chris said, once Len closed the laptop.

“How’d I do what?”

“Get Jim to quietly agree to taking fifteen minutes off. He was bitching and moaning until you showed up, and then all you did was say his name and he shut up. I don’t know whether to be
impressed, or frightened,” Christine said.

“How about both?” Len said. “What’d they call that guy with the power over the horses—the Horse Whisperer? Maybe I’m, I don’t know, a Firefighter Whisperer.”

Chris laughed. “Yeah, I noticed you didn’t take any of Cupcake’s guff either.”

“I find him highly ignorable.”

“Well, you’re a nicer person than me, then, because I just find him highly offensive.”

“Being male probably makes it easier to take him.”

They drove in silence until they were nearly back at the scene.

“Len?” Chris asked.

“Yep.”

“You were really upset, before. When Jim and Carl got knocked down.”

“Well? I don’t like seeing my friends get hurt. And that whole thing was totally freaky. It barely looked like the place was even on fire—just that nasty yellow smoke—and then, BLAM! I think maybe Cap knew something like that was coming.”

Chris was silent again until the end of the block.

“Is it going to be a problem for you?”

“What?” Len said, scowling.

“Part of our job involves standing by at these scenes. Twice, now, you’ve been … bothered, I guess, by watching. What I’m saying is, I understand if it gets to you. And nobody would mind if you didn’t watch. That’s all.”

“Hmm. Okay. I’ll think about it.” Leonard knew, though, that the problem was more complicated than that. And he knew, too, that it was only going to get harder to see Jim in danger. He liked his job—he really did—he just didn’t like Jim’s job.

And that? Was going to be a problem.

~!~!~!~

The fire was nearly out by the time Len and Christine arrived back at the scene. The structure had mostly collapsed in on itself, and the various crews were inundating it with water from various angles. The buildings on either side escaped relatively unscathed, which was the initial goal that Pike had set, as soon as it was clear that the burning structure wasn’t going to be salvageable. After an hour or so of watching the firefighters douse, turn, lift, poke at, and otherwise disturb the rubble to be sure the fire was well and thoroughly out, Len had a new appreciation for the fact that putting out the obvious fire was just part of what the firefighters did. They had to make sure there were no remaining hot spots that could cause the remains of the structure to start burning again after they left.

The scientist in Leonard was fascinated by the thermal imaging camera. Jim had showed it to him at the station once. He had Len look at the stove. All the pilot lights for the burners were invisible to the human eye, but jumped out brightly on the thermal imaging camera. Jim had Len make a heat hand-print on the kitchen counter, and drew a smiley-face on the table with water, which cooled as it
evaporated and left a black signature visible to the TIC.

But what they were doing now didn’t seem like fun at all. Chopping at and prying up parts of the collapsed structure, spraying underneath with water, and repeating. It was still almost two hours until shift change, and people were starting to get tired. It was a warm night, and the heat of the fire and the humidity from the steam were poaching the firefighters inside their gear. Pike sent Chekov over to the triage area to cool down and rehydrate when one of his hands cramped up and he couldn’t let go of the tool he was using—a sure sign of heat exhaustion. Len made him drink and rest until he peed, much to the young man’s intense embarrassment. But it was a definite sign that he’d beaten off serious dehydration. He sent Chekov back into the fray, and then frowned at a thought.

“Chris? This is probably a stupid question, but …”

“Oh boy—I can’t wait to hear what you think is a stupid question. Shoot, Len.”

“So … the guys can just whip it out and take a piss whenever they need to. How does Gaila handle that? I’m only asking because it seems like if it’s a logistical problem, she’s at high risk of dehydration.”

“I love that you’re not embarrassed to ask that,” Chris said, reaching into one of the lower cargo pockets of her pants. She handed a small cylinder to Len. “Here. All rolled up in a convenient and discreet package.”

Len inspected the package. “Go-Girl,” he read aloud. “Don’t take life sitting down.” The package depicted a hot pink funnel-like object, and it didn’t take much imagination to envision its use.

He handed the cylinder back to Christine, and she put it back in her pocket.

“You learn something new every day,” he said.

Half an hour later, Pike declared the overhaul task to be complete, and dismissed the ambulance. Len took the driver’s seat, and hit the “in service” button that automatically let dispatch know they were available.

Dispatch took them at their word, and immediately sent them to an alpha-priority call—abdominal pain in an otherwise healthy young man—in the territory of the next station over. They transported the young man to the hospital, with Chris handling the patient in the back and Len driving, and returned to the station just before shift change.

Len hit the shower at 0730 sharp, figuring he’d just wait around the station until the engine and ladder returned. He wasn’t going to let a little thing like the crushing need for sleep get in the way of fulfilling his promise—or perhaps threat—of driving Jim home after the shift. As he showered, his mind was filled with a precise, video-like instant replay of the backdraft that took Jim and Cupcake down. He couldn’t stop the movie, and it repeated over, and over, and over. Slow motion, fast-forwarded, and, worst of all, with various alternate endings.

“Turning into a fuckin’ TiVo,” Len muttered, as he towed off.

“What was that, McCoy?”

Len jumped. He thought he had the locker room to himself, but Dave Eggert from C-shift’s engine company was doing something at his locker.

“Just doin’ a little instant replay. Two of our guys got knocked down by a backdraft. They’re okay, but it freaked the living shit outta me. Never seen anything like that before.”
“Shit! Who went down?”

“Kirk and Jablonski. They’re fine, though. Just a helluva thing.”

“That’s for sure.” Dave slammed his locker shut. “You headin’ out?”

“Stickin’ around till the ladder crew gets back. Told Jim I’d drive him home—I know, he’s fine, but like I said, it was a helluva thing.”

Eggert laughed. “You’ll get used to it. We all get knocked around every now and then. Besides, if Pike let him stay on, he’s fine to do a little thing like driving.”

“Yeah, probably, but I figure once I make a threat like that, I have to follow through so he’ll know I’m serious next time.”

“Spoken like a parent. You have kids back in Georgia?”

“Ah … no.”

“Sorry, none of my business. But Jim Kirk is kind of like a big kid, so that’s probably a pretty good strategy.”

Len snorted and cracked a small grin. “I s’pose so.”

“Anyhow—see ya, Len.”

“Take it easy, Dave. Safe shift.”

“It’ll be mighty safe if your guys never bring the apparatus back.”

“They said they’d probably be done by 0800, or they’d call in for relief. It was pretty intense.”

“I bet.”

Dave exited the locker room, and Len pulled on his civvies. The brief conversation had at least distracted him from his mental reruns of the backdraft. Leonard found he could think about the incident again without triggering an instant replay, but the sick feeling of seeing an anonymous figure in turnout gear, as limp as a ragdoll, dragged away from a living, breathing fire—that stuck around.

As he closed his locker, Len heard the sound of the apparatus bay doors opening, and the rumble of one diesel engine, then another. He entered the bay, and saw seven exhausted men and one equally exhausted woman exit their vehicles, peel their sweaty turnout gear off, and hang everything on their racks. Jim went back to the ladder truck, and brought Jablonski’s gear with him. He hung it up next to his own, while everyone else trundled off to the locker rooms.

For a moment, Leonard and Jim had the apparatus bay to themselves.

“Bones! Hey, I’ll just take a quick shower, and—”

“No. You’ll grab your stuff, and get in the van, and I’ll take you home. Now.”

“But Bones, I totally reek!”

“I don’t care how you smell.” Leonard cursed the quiver in his voice.

“C’mon, Bones; you—”
Jim stopped when Len grabbed him gently by the upper arm. They locked eyes, and Jim’s expression changed from irritated to … something else.

“All right,” Jim said. “I’m okay, Bones. Honest. I’ll just get my stuff, and we can go.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Len said gruffly. He ran a shaking hand through his hair, and waited for Jim to return from the locker room.

They didn’t speak on the way to the van.

Or once they got on the highway.

When they reached the exit that would take them to Leonard’s house, Jim raised his eyebrows as Len took the exit.

“I thought you were taking me home,” Jim said.

“I am. I’m taking you to my home. It’s closer. Which means it doesn’t take as long to get there.”

“Are we in a hurry?” Jim asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you mad?”

“No,” Len sighed. “You … I … fuck. I can’t do this while I’m driving.”

“Pull over, Bones,” Jim said. “Just—you’re killing me. If you’re dumping me, pull over and do it now, instead of—”

Leonard slammed his fist against the button on the dash that turned on the hazard lights, and abruptly pulled onto the shoulder of the road.

“I’m not dumping you, Jim. Jesus. Not that. I—”

“Then what, Bones? What?”

Leonard threw the transmission into ‘park’ and yanked the parking brake up. He unfastened his seatbelt, climbed across the console between the two front seats, and grabbed Jim by the front of his shirt, pulling him in roughly. He clamped his mouth over Jim’s, tasting sweat, soot, ash, and the metallic flavor of too much compressed air.

His other hand, in counterpoint to the one engaged in twisting Jim’s shirt, cradled the side of Jim’s face delicately. He traced over the roughness of a day’s worth of stubble, the silkiness of an earlobe, and came back across to a wet cheek.

Wet?

He pulled away to see why Jim was crying.

“Bones?”

They weren’t Jim’s tears. Leonard swiped his hand angrily across his face, and pulled in a deep, shuddering breath.

“Damn it, Jim.” Another breath. “I thought you were dead. Everything looked fine—and then …
“Ahhhh, Bones.” Jim reached out, and wiped a teardrop away, with far gentler treatment than Len had graced himself with. “I’m okay.”

“Well I’m not!” Leonard looked at what his hand was doing to Jim’s shirt, and let go. “You weren’t even doing anything insane! You were just walking past a boarded up window, and—and then the whole place blew up, and I can’t stand there and watch that, Jim! I can’t!”

“I can’t promise you that nothing will happen, Bones. I can’t do that.”

“I know. And … I don’t know what my point is. I don’t know what I want,” Leonard admitted. “Your job is important. What you do is amazing. And I couldn’t ask you to stop.”

“What do you need, Bones? What can I do? Tell me, and I’ll do it. I swear.”

Leonard pulled in a deep breath, trying to pull himself together.

“I need … to take care of you. I need you to let me. I can’t do it while you’re working. But after? That’s what’s gonna make me be able to take it. Can you let me do that?”

Jim’s piercing blue eyes softened, as he finally began to understand. “Sure, Bones. I don’t know exactly what you want me to do, but sure. You can take care of me. I’ll let you. I won’t put up a stink. And there won’t be any whining. You tell me what you need to do, what you need me to do, and that’s what’ll happen. Okay?”

Leonard nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“Even if it seems weird to you, Bones. I’m no stranger to weird.”

“But you have to tell me if I cross a line.”

“I’ll tell you. ‘Finish line,’ okay? That’s what I’ll say.”

Leonard closed his eyes and let out another breath. “Jesus, Jim. This isn’t about … I don’t have in mind a situation where you’d need a safeword. It’s about … I don’t know. It’s about my insecurities, all right? And I don’t want to make myself feel better at your emotional expense.”

“Then don’t think of it as a safeword. Just think of it as … an unambiguous code that a line has been crossed. Which I doubt it will be.”

“Okay.” Leonard refastened his seat belt, returned his hands to the steering wheel, and put the van in gear. He cleared his throat, and spoke up again.

“This is what I need to do. I want to get you rehydrated and fed, and then get you in the shower and help you get cleaned up. Then I wanna take you to bed, and when we’ve got that out of our systems, I wanna hold you while you sleep.”

“Okay, Bones.”

They drove in silence for the remainder of the way to Bones’s newly rented house. They exited the van silently, and went in the side door, taking them through the kitchen.

Leonard pointed to the seat that had become Jim’s at the table. Jim sat down, wordlessly, and waited to see what was next. Len put a pint glass and a pitcher of water in front of him.
“Drink until you can’t anymore,” he said. “You’re dehydrated.”

“Okay, Bones. Thanks.” Jim filled his glass and drained it, while Len looked on. A drop of water spilled from the glass, and made a trail through the soot and dirt on Jim’s neck. Len watched as the droplet rolled downwards, disappearing under the now-grubby collar of his t-shirt. His eye was caught by the pulse-point in Jim’s neck—slow and regular, slow and regular. Leonard allowed the rhythm to soothe him for a moment. Jim poured and drank another pint of water as Leonard looked on.

Len returned to the kitchen, and within three minutes, had whipped up scrambled eggs and toast, and poured orange juice. He pulled his own chair around the oval table until he was so close to Jim they were touching as they ate their breakfast.

“Let’s leave the dishes,” he said, “and get in the shower. ‘Cause you were right—you really do reek.”

There was no tub in Len’s house, but that situation was made up for by the fact that the shower enclosure was double-sized, tiled all around, and perfect for two. He led Jim into the bathroom, and started the water running.

Jim stood there, waiting, seeming to understand that he was not to undress himself. He allowed Len to strip him, and waited to enter the shower stall until they were both unclothed. Len guided Jim into the water stream, and watched as Jim closed his eyes and let the spray wash over his head, through his hair, rinsing out the stiffness of sweat and grime, and down his neck, obliterating the trail made by the stray droplet earlier.

“Keep your eyes closed, darlin’.” Len poured a dollop of shampoo into his hand, and rubbed his palms together, then through Jim’s spiky hair. When he was satisfied he’d gotten to every part of Jim’s scalp, he used his body to gently nudge him back into the spray, tipping his head back and using his hands to direct the flow of water to rinse Jim’s hair thoroughly.

Len soaped up a washcloth, and started washing Jim gently, from top to bottom. He could feel Jim getting more relaxed under his touch, and felt himself calming down as well.

“s nice, Bones,” Jim said. “But … is it okay if I get a little turned on?”

Len finally had a chuckle to give to Jim. “Sure thing, long as I can too. But we’re waitin’ till I lay you down in my nice new bed to do anything much about that.”

Once Len was sure he’d washed away the grime, soot, sweat, ash, and yes, fear, he stood behind Jim for a little while, just holding him close against his chest. They were both half-hard, but they both understood that it wasn’t time to do anything about that yet. Len held his palm over the center of Jim’s chest, feeling the strength of his heartbeat. As they were similar heights, Len was just able to rest his chin on Jim’s shoulder. Jim leaned back into Len, letting him partially support him.

“Checking to make sure I’m still alive, there, Bones?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Len let the water flow over them for another minute or so. He’d been half expecting—okay, three-quarters expecting—that Jim would be full of wisecracks, overly cheerful quips, or just plain feistiness. But darned if the kid didn’t actually seem to get it.

The water started to cool, so Leonard shut it off. He pulled a big fluffy towel—another purchase from the Kirk-ordered shopping spree—from the bathroom cupboard. He rubbed Jim’s hair dry.
gently, and towed him off, wrapping him in the towel when he was done. He repeated the process on himself, but hastily. He hung the towel up, and stood, naked in body and soul, and looked at Jim for a moment.

Jim was standing, arms at his sides, stiller and calmer and more patient than Len had ever seen him. His skin was flushed from the warmth of the shower, and his eyes no longer had the dull look of dehydration. He had some bumps and bruises—more than he usually did, and many were fresh—but he looked healthy, and alive, and at that moment, Leonard thought he was the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen.

“Jim,” he murmured, as he finally let himself step closer, finally allowed himself to touch in a way that wasn’t meant to soothe.

Jim’s eyes closed, and his head tipped back of its own accord, giving Leonard access to his throat and neck. Len kissed up and down the length of one carotid, and then the other, feeling Jim’s pulse quicken as he, too, realized the tone of the encounter had changed, and that they were on to a new act in the play.

Leonard kissed his way up the center of Jim’s throat, to his chin, and, with a hand on the back of Jim’s neck to gently tilt his head down again so he could reach, captured Jim’s lips, which parted to let him in. This time, instead of soot, darkness, and metal, Len tasted life, bright and shining. He pulled the towel off from around Jim’s waist, and pressed their bodies together.

They both sighed into the kiss, and one of them—Leonard couldn’t be quite sure who—moaned a little, as their skin, damp from the shower and the lingering humidity and warmth of the bathroom, connected, from knees to chest. Len pulled Jim in tightly, feeling the strong muscles of his back with one hand, and the hard-soft-roundness of his ass cheeks with the other. Jim’s hand trailed down Len’s back, almost hesitantly, as if he weren’t completely sure he was allowed to do anything yet.

They remained pressed together, hands roaming everywhere, as if they were exploring each other for the first time. Len nudged Jim’s long, lean legs apart with a knee, and rearranged their limbs so they each had a thigh pressed between the other’s. Their semi-hardness was a thing of the past, as they both rocked and gently swiveled their hips to generate the friction they desired.

The humid air picked up a chill, and at the first hint of a shiver from Jim—though he couldn’t tell if the cause was the cooling of the air, or something else entirely—Leonard pulled away.

“C’mon, sweetheart. Bedroom.”

“Yeah, I think so, Bones.”

They both shivered slightly as Len opened the door and the cooler air of the hallway hit their naked, slightly damp bodies. Len kept a hand on Jim as they crossed the hallway to the bedroom. He urged Jim onto his back on the bed—not that it took much urging—and returned their bodies to the same positions they’d been in in the bathroom, except this time with his weight pressing Jim into the bed, and ramping up the intensity of the friction between them.

Jim gasped as Len rocked his hips experimentally, and Len replied with a soft hum of pleasure. He trailed one of his hands from Jim’s shoulder, down his arm, to clasp his hand, entwining their fingers. Jim squeezed back, at the same time caressing Len lightly up and down his back with the other hand.

Len held onto Jim’s hand, and broke their kiss, just to move on to other things. He found every nick, every ding, scar, and mark, old or new, and kissed them all, spending more time on the ones he knew were fresh from today’s close encounter with the backdraft.
“Bones,” Jim whispered, “I’m okay.”

“Startin’ to believe that, darlin’. Startin’ to. Gotta run a few more tests, though, just to be sure.”

“Better safe than s—fuck, Bones!”

Len’s lips finished their first-aid routine, at a bruise on the point of Jim’s right hip, and gently but without warning closed on the head of Jim’s cock. He had to let go of Jim’s hand to do what he wanted, which was to work the bottom of the shaft with his hand while swirling and laving the head with his mouth. Jim moaned and panted as Leonard worked on him, and shouted as Len tongued the tiny slit.

Len pulled back, just for a moment, to look at Jim, spread out for him on the bed, and saw how alive he was, how vibrant, how perfectly and completely undone. He returned to his delightful task, and this time, heeded Jim’s warning that he was about to come, finishing him off with a hand, just to be able to see Jim’s face as ecstasy pulled him briefly from the world. Len watched, still, as Jim returned to himself, as he slowly opened his eyes and found Len’s.

“Did I pass?”

Len chuckled, and moved up Jim’s body to kiss him. “Yeah, you sure did. Flying colors.”

“That’s good. Because you know what you should do now, since you’re sure I’m okay?”

“What’s that?”

“I’m pretty sure you should fuck me. It’s, you know, life affirming and all.”

“If you insist,” Len said.

“I do, I really do,” Jim said. “Because Bones—look at you. Or, I could blow you, which is also fun, but I think you really need to fuck me, and frankly, I really need to get fucked.”

“So what am I waiting for, right?” Leonard said.

“My point exactly,” Jim said. He squirmed around until he was able to hook one ankle over Len’s shoulder, and double-jointedly opened a drawer under the bed, managing to grab the lube and a condom with one hand. “Tada!”

“Show off,” Len said, grinning. He appropriated the lube, squeezed some onto the palm of his hand, and rubbed his hands together to warm the substance. “Since you’re feeling so flexible, why don’t you move those pillows up there under your sweet ass, so we can get down to it.”

Jim showed off some more, bridging to shove pillows under his lower back. “And for my next trick, I’ll—”

“You’ll lie back, and you’ll get stuffed full of my cock, like you were born for it.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was gonna say, uuhhhhhn, Bones …”

Len started with one finger, pulling, gently stretching, and every so often, reaching in and stroking the spot that he knew would get the reaction he was looking for. He quickly added a second digit, scissoring, turning, spreading, until the third joined easily. His other hand fondled Jim’s balls, stroked the inside of his thigh, did whatever it felt like, and soon Jim’s cock perked up again, and got its share of attention as well. Inside another minute, Jim was panting and writhing again, and Leonard’s
cock felt painfully hot and hard as he rolled the condom over it.

“Ahh, Bones, you gotta fuck me now now now, gonna come again and I want to feel you …”

Len clenched his jaw and bit his lip to hold onto what was left of his control as he added another squeeze of lube to his gloved cock, and pushed the head up against Jim’s hole.

“More more more, now, Bones, do it do it! Please!”

They groaned together as Leonard took Jim at his word, pushing in slowly but steadily, until his balls rested against Jim’s ass.

“Go go go,” Jim said, his voice practically a sob, and Len didn’t need any more begging or pleading; couldn’t have stopped anyhow. He pulled out not quite all the way, and pushed back in, faster and harder than before, and started a steady rhythm, echoed by the sounds they were both making. The pace of the thrusts and cries increased in parallel, and Len’s hand worked up and down on Jim’s cock in time with the rest of their music.

Jim came for the second time that morning, clutching the sheets and shouting, and the rhythmic shuddering and pulsing of his muscles around Len’s cock sent him right over the edge, calling Jim’s name.

“Ahhhn, Jim, mine, mine!”

Len collapsed onto Jim, their chests slippery against each other with clean sweat. Once Len was aware of anything again, he realized he was being lifted several inches each time Jim breathed, and rolled off, still staying as close as he could without crushing Jim. With the very last iota of energy he had left, he grabbed the box of tissues from the floor by the bed, removed the condom, cleaned them both up a bit, and tossed the whole mess, wadded in another tissue, onto the floor, for consideration later in the day. He pulled the sheet and a light blanket over them, and flopped back down onto the mattress.

He rested his head on Jim’s chest, and listened to his breathing, his pulse. His eyelids were heavy as he picked his head up one more time to kiss Jim on the lips, and then laid his head back down, right over Jim’s heart. Jim’s arms came up and circled around Len, and they snuggled under the light covers.

“Love you, Bones. Really love you.”

Len’s own breathing stopped, just for a moment, until he recalled how important respiration was.

“Love you too, Jim.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: When a fire is starved of oxygen—for instance, in a compartment that has few or no openings to let air in—combustion slows, but the fuel (combustible solids, and the flammable gases they let off when broken down by high heat) remain at high temperatures. If oxygen is suddenly let in—for instance, if a door is opened, a window breaks, or fire burns a hole through the structure—combustion can increase drastically
and explosively, in an extremely dangerous event. A sulfurous smoke color, the appearance of the fire “sucking” air into the structure, and the appearance that a fire is “breathing” by puffing smoke and sucking air alternately through the same holes or cracks are all warnings of potential backdraft.
Chapter 12: Extensions

1310, that afternoon.

“Hey, Bones.”

“Mmmf.”

“It’s one o’clock.”

“Gaaaah. No, it’s not.”

“Is, too.”

“Coffee …”

The bed jiggled as Jim stood up.

“How can you survive in the wild?”

“Guh. Just …”

“Coffee, coming right up. BRB.”

Leonard put a pillow over his head, and slept for five more minutes, until someone removed the pillow from his head and kissed the back of his neck.

“Sit up, Bones. I don’t know how to start an IV, so you’re gonna have to sit up and drink the damned coffee.”

Len sat up, and swung his feet off the edge of the bed.

“Holy crap. I feel like I ate a sandbox, and I didn’t even get blown up yesterday.” He accepted the coffee from Jim, and took a few sips. “But enough about me. You feeling okay?”

“Yeah, Bones. A few bumps and bruises. But I’m completely fine.”

Len nodded. “Okay. I think that’s actually starting to sink in. I’ll try to stop asking.”

“Good, ‘cause we’ve got four days off, and I have Plans for us.”

Len was certain he could actually hear the capital ‘P.’ “Oh, lord. Should I be worried?”

“Nah. Well, unless you don’t want to meet my family.”

“Meet your—Jim, are you ins—”

“Relax, Bones. I don’t mean like that. Or, maybe I do mean like that. I just mean, come over to the farm on Sunday, have a big meal with my mom and brother, and his family, and just hang out. After all, we’re heading to Georgia together soon, and it might be nice for them to see who I’m going with. It’s none of their business that we’re … whatever we are.”

“Oh. Sure. That sounds nice. Sorry I flipped.”
“I think I’m getting used to it. C’mon—let’s make some breakfast.”

Len and Jim decided pancakes were in order, even though it was early afternoon. Len whipped up the batter in under five minutes.

“Wow, that was fast. Where’d you learn that?” Jim asked.

“Oh, when Joss and I were in med school, we were so poor that we had pancakes for dinner almost every night.”

“Um. Sorry. Bad memories?”

“No. Things were great, then. Only this last year was bad. But his behavior does kind of … corrupt the good memories, I guess. But good pancakes are still good pancakes.”

Jim set the table while Len was at the stove with the griddle.

“You know what, Bones?”

“What, darlin’?”

“Not that any sane person should take advice from me about any kind of relationship, but, I think when we go to Georgia to pick up your stuff, you oughta talk to him.”

Len sighed, and scooped a batch of pancakes onto a plate, which he stuck in the oven. “I don’t know, Jim. I don’t really see what good it would do. I know some people believe in this thing called ‘closure,’ but I think from my end I got that already when I packed my bags in front of him—and her, actually—and left. That felt pretty god-damned closed.”

“Yeah, but …”

Len whipped his head around and looked through the pass-through to the dining area. “But what, Jim?” His words came out snappier than he meant them to, and he instantly felt ashamed.

“Never mind,” Jim said.

“Sorry,” Len said. “Really—I didn’t mean to snap. I do actually want to know what you think. I really do.”

Jim was silent for long enough that Len started to get worried.

“Jim?”

“Just thinking, Bones. I wanna get this right.”

“Oh. Okay,” Len said quietly, as he flipped the final batch of pancakes on the griddle.

“Okay. See, here’s the thing that I’m thinking about,” Jim said, finally, coming back into the kitchen and sitting on the counter. “Your ex is bi, and betrayed you by having an affair with a woman. And now you’ve gotten involved with me. Also with a gate that swings both ways. Plus a reputation for kind of being a slut. Which I think is pretty unfair, actually, but that’s beside the point. What I’m really getting at is, aren’t you worried … you know, about the same thing happening?”

Len turned the stove off, and moved the griddle off the hot burners, as he put the last batch of pancakes on the plate in the oven.
“Should I be? I mean, I’m open to things being … transparently open, is the best phrase, I guess. If
that’s what you would want. But like I said before—Joss and Marie? That wasn’t part of our deal.
He’d been having an affair with her—by which I mean, getting physically and emotionally involved
with her, behind my back. Without any discussion about it. We’d both had other liaisons, short term,
a couple times, that we’d discussed beforehand. But this was a year-long affair, that I knew nothing
about until I did. Completely different.”

“Something you gotta know about me, Bones,” Jim said, looking him right in the eye. “I’m loyal like
a dog.”

Len smiled. “I know. But I’m not your master. We’ll decide together what we are. What our rules
are.”

“People see me as a rule-breaker. But Bones—for this? For you? I’m not.”

“I know, darlin’. And neither am I.”

Jim laughed out loud. “I wouldn’t think you’d be capable of breaking rules.”

“Uh, been to rural Georgia lately? Just by who I am, I break a big one right there. Plus, I’m not sure,
but I think you just called me a stick-in-the-mud.”

“Dogs love sticks, though. And mud.”

Len snickered. “You know, the first day I was at the station, I made an analogy between you and a
big friendly dog, and Cap’n Pike said something about how I made an image get stuck in his head of
you running around drooling and humping people’s legs.”

“Just yours, Bones,” Jim said, hopping down from the counter and grabbing Len and rubbing his
crotch on Leonard’s hip.

Len smacked him lightly. “Puppy! And if you lick me, I swear I’ll hit you with a rolled up
newspaper.”

“Just gimme pancakes, and I’ll behave.”

Len took the platter of pancakes out of the oven, as well as the two plates he’d put in to warm, and
put them on the table, between the butter and syrup Jim had already set out.

“Real good, Bones,” Jim said around a mouthful of pancakes.

“My dad’s recipe,” Leonard replied.

They chatted about this and that while they finished their pancakes. Jim told Len a story about an
absurd rescue he’d taken part in, in which a highly intoxicated man had wound his equally
intoxicated brother up in a roll of barbed wire as a prank, and once they were both sober, he realized
his brother was well and thoroughly trapped. He also related a chilling tale of the dangers of methane
—a farm accident where a man had passed out in a manure pit, and his cousin, who went in to rescue
him, also passed out from lack of oxygen. Another relative, who understood what was going on, had
to make the hard decision not to jump in himself. By the time the fire department arrived with their
SCBA units, to pull the men out safely, one had died, and the other had suffered irrevocable brain
damage.

“So,” Jim said, after they finished eating. “You’re coming with me to the farm on Sunday.”
Len nodded. “Yep.”

“That’s great, Bones. But I gotta warn you—I know I said it’s none of anyone’s business what we are to each other, but …”

“I imagine,” Len said, “your family will probably figure it out.”

Jim nodded. “Which kind of makes me think about it.”

Len tilted his head and squinted. “Think about what?”

“What are we, Bones?”

Len tilted his chair back on two legs, crossed his arms, and looked at Jim. “Well, that kinda depends, now, don’t it?”

“Depends on what?”

“Whether we think we’re the same thing.”

Jim got up, brought the coffee pot to the table, and refilled both their mugs. He returned the empty pot to the kitchen, and sat back down at the table. He fiddled with his mug, turning it around and around, and finally took a sip and set the mug down on the table.

“I meant it. What I said this morning,” Jim said.

“I did, too,” Leonard said quietly, not needing to ask what Jim meant.

“So that means we’re … what, exactly?”

Leonard put his chair back down on all four legs. “Well, now, there’s a thing, all right. There’s no good label, is there? ‘Boyfriend’ sounds juvenile. We don’t live together, and we haven’t made promises about forever.”

“But,” Jim said slowly, “we’re together. Right?”

Len smiled at him. “Yeah. I think that’s a good way to put it. We’re together, but we can’t exactly hang up a sign that says that, either.”

“Are you okay with my mom and my brother hearing that? I mean, that we’re together?”

“Sure, darlin’.”

“Okay. Good. ‘Cause like I said, they’ll figure it out in about ten minutes. If they haven’t figured it out already.”

“It’s fine, Jim. And now that we’ve got that out of our way, what’re we gonna do with what’s left of our Friday?” Len asked, picking dishes up off the table.

“I dunno. I’m so tired I don’t think I can do anything.”

“Well, Netflix will surely allow us to instantly watch any amount of total tripe, so how ‘bout we just settle down on Mrs. Petty’s ol’ Naugahyde sofa, here, and rot what’s left of our brains?”

~!~!~!~
Sunday, noon.

“Don’t be nervous, Bones,” Jim said.

“Seems to me I’m the one should be sayin’ that,” Leonard replied. “You’ve been gnawing on your fingernails all morning, and you’re gonna wear a hole in the legs of your jeans wiping your hands down them like that.”

“Yeah, okay, all right. It’s just, I’ve never brought anyone home before. So I’m nervous.”

“About what I’ll think, or what they’ll think?”

“Bones, they’re gonna love you. And maybe I’m biased, because they’re my family, but I think you’ll like them a lot too. It’s just that I don’t wanna deal with what they might say about what an excellent guy like you is doing with a guy like me.”

Leonard sighed. “That again? Now Jim, I thought I’d fucked all that nonsense outta you this morning.”

“Maybe we should go back to my place and try a little harder,” Jim suggested.

“Not if you want to be able to actually sit at the table with your family, sugar.”

“Oooh, Bones, you’re totally egging me on. But here we are. If we left now, someone would be sure to notice.”

“Well, it’ll have to keep, then. But I really don’t think they’re gonna say anything like that.”

The gravel from the driveway spat up underneath the car as Jim drove up the long, narrow driveway, to a nondescript-looking white house. There was a pickup truck in the open garage, and behind that was a minivan.

“Oh good; Sam’s here. You can meet the whole gang all at once.”

“Which is which, again, nephew-wise?” Len asked, as he got out of the car with the two pies he’d baked that morning.

“George is eight, and he’s like me; Peter is six, and he’s like Sam.”

“And their mother is just totally left out of the equation, somehow?”

Jim laughed. “Yeah, Aurora sometimes feels a little left out. But, actually, she’s quiet and smart like Sam, too, so there’s that.”

“So I take it George is loud and smart like you, then?”

“He’s loud and smart, all right,” Jim said.

Len sighed as they went up the stairs to the front door. “I would really like to know what it’s gonna take to convince you you’re actually smart. But that’s a discussion for another—”

The door was flung open, and Jim was instantly tackled by two small boys.

“Uncle Jim! Uncle Jim! We were waiting and waiting and waiting and now you’re here!”

“Hey, Peter and George! Or is it George and Peter?” Jim teased. “Yep, now we’re here. Guys, this is
my good friend Leonard McCoy.”

“Howdy, boys. You’ve got a pretty cool uncle, you know.”

“I’ll say!” said Peter. “He knows a lotta stuff! Not just like my dad—not all about one thing. But about a lotta things.”

“What does your dad know about?” Len asked. Even though he knew Sam was a research biologist studying something about bovine diets, he was curious to hear a six-year-old’s perspective.

“What cows eat, and how much it makes them fart.”

“Ah. I bet he knows a lot about that.”

“What’s your job?” George asked. “Are you a firefighter too? You look strong enough to be one. But I bet Uncle Jim could still beat you in arm wrestling.”

“He certainly could. My job is being a paramedic. That means I take care of hurt and sick people when they first get hurt and sick, and take care of them in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.”


“All right, George,” Jim said. “We get the idea.”

“I’ll tell you some interesting stories, if it’s okay with your folks. But the answers to your questions are yes, no, yes, and yes.”

“Awesome! Does he have awesome stories, Uncle Jim?”

“Totally awesome,” Jim said seriously. “One time he took care of a guy whose hand got cut off. He took the guy and the hand to the hospital, and the doctors sewed it back on.”

“Whoa … they can do that?” George said. Peter just backed away, looking pale.

“Sometimes. I’ll tell you more later,” Len said.

“Where are all the grown-ups?” Jim asked.

“Everyone’s on the back porch. Grandma’s got the grill going. But we wanted to wait for you,” George said.

“Well, we better go out there, don’tcha think?” Jim said. “I can’t let you two hog Len up, now can I? C’mon, Bones.”

“Bones?” Peter said.

“That’s my nickname for Len. Something like what they used to call doctors in the Army or Navy, a long time ago.”

“Y’all better hope he doesn’t come up with nicknames for you. ‘Cause it’d likely be something like Toaster, or Suitcase.”

“You talk like a cowboy,” Peter said.

“I’m from Georgia,” Len replied, passing through the back door that Jim held open for them all.
“Are there cowboys in Georgia?” George asked.

“I don’t think so,” Len said.

“Jim!”

“Hey, Mom.” Jim bent down to hug the willowy woman who greeted them. “Everyone, this is Leonard McCoy. Bones, this is my mom, Winona, and Sam and—where’s Aurora?”

“She’s not feeling great—sends her apologies, but she really needed to stay home.”

“Well, shoot,” said Jim. “I hope she feels better soon. So anyhow, Bones—that’s almost everyone.”

“Nice to meet all of you. Call me Len.”

“Well, call me Win, please,” Jim’s mother said. “And what do you have there?”

“Oh—I made some peach pies this morning. Where should I set them down?”

“Right on the table, there. They look terrific—thank you.”

“They do look great,” Sam said. “And we make it easy—we all just use our plain old names,” Sam said. “We banned Jim from giving us any crazy nicknames years ago.”

“Well, don’t forget that your first name is actually George,” Jim said.

Win gestured to the porch furniture. “Have a seat, boys—no, not you, kids. You go out and run around—burn off some steam. I meant Jim and Len. We’ll eat in half an hour or so; I’ll call you. Now shoo!”

The spring-loaded screen door slammed itself shut as George and Peter ran out to the yard. Jim and Len sat next to each other on a cushioned wicker sofa.

“Sure you don’t want me to run around and burn off some steam too, Mom?” Jim asked.

“And abandon your friend to the likes of us? Now, Jim.”

“Seems pretty safe so far,” Len said.

“Jim tells me you’re the best paramedic he’s ever worked with,” Win said abruptly.

“Well, I aim to do my best,” Len said, suddenly discomfited.

“And he hits the bullseye, every time,” Jim said. “I mean, I don’t get to watch all that often, but word gets around, you know? Sulu and Gaila both said you’re tops at all the MVAs.”

“Do you think you’d ever go to medical school?” Sam asked. “I’ve heard a lot of paramedics do that eventually.”

Len took a few seconds to answer, and Jim held his breath, waiting to see what Len would say.

“Well, please don’t pass this along, but I already did. I didn’t apply for any residencies, though. So I can’t really practice.”

“Wow,” Sam said. “Is it too late, or can you still do a residency?”

“I could still do it. I’m considering it. I’ve just got … a few things to work out, first.”
“Like what?” Sam pressed.

“Geez, Sam; enough with the prying,” Jim said, though he was dying to hear the answer. It would keep, though. “Keep your research work at your lab, brainiac.”

“Time to flip the burgers. And Len, don’t worry, we got plenty of non-meat stuff too,” Win said.

“Thanks,” Len said. “Can I give you a hand?”

Len helped at the grill, rolling the corn while Win flipped the burgers.

“Just like Jim, I’m not one to beat around the bush. So my burning question,” Win said, as she closed the grill again, “is this. Do you feel the same way about him as he does about you?”

Len raised his eyebrows. “So, he told you we’re together?”

“Well, you can’t ever truly know what’s inside another person’s head. But my honest answer to you is ‘yes.’”

Win nodded slowly.

“Good,” she said. “Good. Jim … has trouble with connections. On the surface, he opens up to people really quickly—too quickly. But for the important things? He keeps all that tightly inside. He doesn’t trust people.”

“I know he doesn’t. And neither do I,” Len said. “But I trust him. And I’m pretty sure he trusts me, too.”

“He does,” Win said. “That was the first thing that tipped me off, actually—him saying something about if he ever got hurt on the job, he was glad you’d be there to look after him.”

Len scowled. “Let’s hope that never happens.” He decided not to mention the backdraft incident, figuring that Jim probably hadn’t said anything about it to his mother.

Win and Len simultaneously looked towards the porch as they heard Jim whooping. Somehow, Sam had gotten him in a clinch, and was rubbing his knuckles on Jim’s head, noogie-style.

“Bet you had your hands full,” Len said.

“Oh, I still do,” Win said. “I watch George and Peter after school. They’re just like those two, except closer in age and with the ages reversed. And, speak of the devil.”

George and Peter stumbled past the grill, carrying a large truck tire.

“Grandma, look what we found! Can we use it? Please? Pretty please?” George begged.

“Well, that depends on what for,” Win said.

“A tire swing,” George said. “We’ll just get Uncle Jim to go up that tree there—” George pointed at a towering oak— “and hang it off that big branch.”
“Oh lord,” Len said to himself, cringing at the height of the branch.

Win chuckled. “Your dad and uncle had a tire swing in that tree when they were kids. Though I don’t quite remember that branch being so high.”

“So can we?” Peter asked, chiming in.

“I don’t see why not, if Jim and your dad say it’s okay. But after lunch!” Win shouted after them, as the two boys tore up the steps to the porch.

Len and Win could hear the boys begging excitedly to Jim and Sam, who must have said yes, as the shrieks of joy were deafening, even heard from the grill.

“What you said a minute ago—about hoping that never happens?” Win said quietly.

“Uh huh?”

“I hate his job. I hated his father’s job, too—though I know you’ve heard that it wasn’t the job that got him, in the end.”

“I did hear about that. I’m sorry.”

Win shook her head. “It was so long ago, Len. But I think Jim hasn’t ever gotten past it.”

“No. But Win?” Len looked at her seriously. “I look out for him. I can’t save him from himself, on the job. But never doubt that I look out for him, however I can.”

Win reached over and squeezed Len’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

~!~!~!~

After lunch, Jim embarked on the tree-swing project with his nephews. Len was roped into the planning, which he was impressed to see that Jim did thoroughly. He had his nephews wrapped around his finger as he talked them through figuring out how much rope they’d need, and planning a way to suspend the tire from the rope so it wouldn’t tear through. Then they all piled into Jim’s car for a trip to the hardware store, and returned with their supplies.

“And now, Bones, comes the exciting part—that you won’t wanna watch,” Jim said. “C’mion, boys; help me drag the big ladder out of the barn.”

Len watched as the boys trooped along with Jim to the red barn that looked like something out of a children’s book. Jim obviously didn’t need their help, but knew exactly how to keep them engaged in the project. They exited the barn with a large extension ladder, with Jim in the middle carrying the entire weight of the thing, and Peter and George ‘helping’ at either end.

“Oh, now, boys; everyone needs to stay waaaaaay back while I put this thing up.”

Jim laid the ladder out on the ground, and inspected its halyard, and the dogs that would lock in place to keep the fly of the ladder at the desired height when it was extended. He looked up at the tree branch, and then checked out a particular place on the ground. He laid the ladder out flat on the ground, with the foot right on the spot he’d been checking out.

“Hey, Bones, gimme a hand here for a sec, will ya?”

Len trotted over to see what Jim needed.
“There’s no building, see, so I need you to be the building.”

“Uh, I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about, darlin’, so just tell me what to do. And you do know that there’s no way in hell I’m goin’ up that thing, right?”

“Of course, Bones. All I need is for you to step on that bottom rung to keep the foot of the ladder from sliding out when I raise it.”

“I think I can probably manage that,” Len said, following his instructions.

Len stood on the bottom rung with one foot as Jim smoothly raised the ladder straight upwards. When it was completely upright, they stood face to face, with the ladder between them.

“Hi,” Jim said, beaming at Len. He held the ladder steady.

“Hi yourself,” Len said back. “You’re tops on those kids’ lists, you know, for best playmate ever. Mine, too, for that matter.”

“And looky, we’re playing fireman together!” Jim said.

“Yeah, okay, but we’ll leave the parts with the hoses till later. What next?”

“Just hold onto the sides of the ladder—yeah, just like that—and keep your fingers out of the way as I raise it up.”

Len looked backwards over his head to see where the branch was.

“How will you know when you have it high enough?”

“I’ll know. Trust me. I’ve done this a time or two. Your fingers clear?”

“Yep.”

Jim raised the fly of the ladder, pulling down on the halyard several times, until it looked right.

“Okay, Bones. Now I’m gonna put my foot on the bottom rung, and you’re gonna walk backwards and let the ladder down onto the branch.”

“All right. Are you sure it’s gonna reach?”

“Yes, Bones; I’m completely and totally sure. Or do you wanna place a bet?”

“Well, with the kind of stakes I imagine you have in mind, I’m sure we’d both end up winning anyhow, so I’ll just take your word for it.”

“Good plan. You ready? Just walk your hands backwards, and I’ll steady the ladder.”

Len did as Jim asked, and after just a few steps backwards, the weight of the ladder was gone from his arms and resting instead on the tree. Len stepped back to where Jim was, and looked up at the branch. The top end of the ladder was resting perfectly on the branch, with a rung above the branch for safety.

“See?” Jim said smugly. He leaned in close to Len to whisper in his ear. “So I totally woulda won that blow job.”

“Well, you’ll probably be getting one anyhow, and so will I, so don’t sweat it, sugar.”
Jim stomped the foot of the ladder into the ground, and tied off the halyard. “Okay, Bones, so this is gonna be the part you don’t wanna watch.”

“Maybe I’ll just help your mom with the dishes for a little while.”

“Good plan,” Jim said. “Okay, boys!” he shouted. “I’m ready for that rope. Come on over!”

Len disappeared inside the house, and found Winona at the kitchen sink with Sam.

“How can I help in here? ‘Cause frankly, I can’t stand to watch the ladder action. Can I rinse, or dry, or something?”

“Oh—sure, Len. Grab a dishtowel,” Win said. “You afraid of heights like me?”

“I don’t know about like you, but my knees start to quiver when I’m on a stepstool,” Len said.

“Jim would climb the Eiffel Tower if they’d allow him,” Sam said.

“Or even if they wouldn’t,” Win said. “He’d find a way to talk someone into letting him do it. Or, more likely, he’d just do it, and then charm his way out of trouble later.”

Len smiled. “That sounds about right. You know, my very first rescue call in Cedar Rapids nearly did me in—it was a kid who got hurt in a tree-house, and I had to go up there. But Jim helped me out, and didn’t make a big deal outta my being scared. I really appreciated that.”

“Huh,” said Sam. “I wondered what it was.”

Len frowned. “Wondered what what was?”

“Wondered what it was that got you to take him seriously. So many people just blow him off at first glance. I think it’s because he’s got this combination of too-off-the-wall and too-good-looking that nobody ever sticks around to find out more,” Sam said.

“I find it an oddly appealing combination,” Len admitted. “Especially once you see the smarts and the compassion hiding out under the first impressions. But don’t tell him I said so.”

Sam laughed. “Wouldn’t dream of it. That ego could already sink a battleship.”

“Well, as long as we’re boosting the egos of the Kirks, those are some mighty fine boys you’ve got, Sam. They’re sharp, and nice, and they seem real happy.”

“Thanks, Len. I’m a very lucky man.”

“Sorry I couldn’t meet Aurora. I hope she feels better soon.”

“Oh, from past experience, it shouldn’t be too much longer now,” Sam said, eyes twinkling.

Winona put the pot she was washing down on the counter.

“George Samuel Kirk Junior, do you have something you’d like to share with the class?”

“Yes, ma’am! Just that we’re hoping for a girl this time.”

Len wasn’t sure what to make of being pulled into the family hug, but he figured it was all related to how Jim didn’t have any concept of personal space. Jim would be thrilled when he heard the news—he obviously doted on his nephews, and would be ecstatic to be an uncle again, no matter what the
The Kirks settled down after a few minutes, and Len quietly dried dishes while Sam told his mother more about the pregnancy.

“So the baby’s due in … April?” Winona asked.

“Yes. Six months to go.”

The three finished the dishes, and returned to the back porch, just as Peter barreled through the door.

“Whoa, there, tiger! What’s the emergency?” Winona asked.

“Uncle Jim says could Len please help him with the ladder? That he’d do it himself but there’s no building, whatever that means.”

Len chuckled. “I still don’t have any idea what he means, either, but I can help him out.”

Len followed Peter back out to the tree, where a long, thick rope dangled from the branch. It was secured at the top by a very professional and safe-looking knot.

“Hey, Bones! Can you walk that ladder upright again for me?”

“Cause there’s no building, right?”

“Yup.”

“I still have no idea what you mean, but sure.”

They reversed the process they’d done before to set the ladder up, and Jim returned the ladder to the barn.

“Okay, boys. Remember what we were gonna do next?”

“Yeah!”

Len looked on fondly as Jim coached his nephews through the rest of the swing set-up process. Jim allowed them to do as much as they could on their own. In another fifteen minutes, the swing was ready to go.

“Okay, Uncle Jim—let ‘er rip!” George said.

Jim took a running leap at the swing, and tested its soundness until his nephews’ protests that it was safe for them to try finally had an effect.

The boys—minus Jim, who was dragged onto the porch by Len—played on the swing for the rest of the afternoon. The adults sat on the porch, chatting about this and that. Sam shared his news with Jim, who was as delighted as Len expected he’d be. As the day grew tired, and afternoon started fading into evening, Sam put his hands on his knees and stood up.

“Well, I should get the boys home,” he said. “I promised Aurora I’d have them and a pizza home in time for a school-night supper.

“C’mon, Bones; let’s go get the kids.”

A few minutes later, Jim marched through the porch door with George over his shoulders in a
fireman’s carry, and Len came through with Peter in a more conventional piggy-back carry.

“Why don’t you keep going, right out to the car,” Sam suggested, relieved that there didn’t seem to be a battle ensuing about their departure.

“Will you come here with Uncle Jim again?” George asked.

“I sure hope so,” Len said.

“Good. Cause you’re almost as fun as him.”

“Almost, huh?” Len said, smiling. “See you kids next time.”

On the other side of the car, Sam said something to Jim, but Len couldn’t hear what it was.

“You got that right, Sam. And I won’t. See you soon. Drive safely.”

Jim moved away from the car and joined Len, putting his arm around his shoulders. They watched as Sam’s car went down the driveway. Two quick beeps sounded at the end, as the car turned onto the road.

“What’d he say to you, just then?” Len asked. “That he was right about, and that you wouldn’t?”

“That you’re a keeper, and that I’d better not eff this up.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad he approves. I liked him, too. And your mom. A lot. Straightforward, no games.”

“Neither of them puts up with bullshit, I can tell you that,” Jim said. “And I’m really glad you liked them.”

“So what now?” Len asked. “Do we hang out with your mom, or take off? Either way is fine with me.”

“We go in for a little while, but take off soon. She’s gotta be up early tomorrow. Farm stuff.”

“Okay.” They entered the house again, to find Winona once again in the kitchen.

“Mom, anything we can help with before we head out?”

“I don’t think so, Jim. Can you two make it next Sunday?”

Jim looked at Len, who nodded.

“Don’t see why not,” Jim said. “But the next weekend, we’ll be off starting Sunday, and that’s when we’re heading down to Georgia.”

“All right,” Winona said. “So next Sunday it is. Have a safe week—you two watch out for each other, all right?”

“We will, Mom.”

“Thanks again, Win. It was a great afternoon. We’ll see you next week.”

Winona hugged and kissed Jim, and then, to his surprise, Len. The two men left the house, and started the short drive to Jim’s house. Jim beeped the horn twice at the end of the driveway, which
Len gathered was a tradition.

“So? What’d you think?” Jim asked.

“Everyone’s terrific, Jim. And I loved seeing you with the boys. They completely worship you, you know.”

“Well, can I help it if I’m the awesomest uncle on the planet?”

“Apparently not,” Len said. “And ‘awesomest’ isn’t a word.”

“Well, I just said it. So if it’s not a word, then what is it? A toilet plunger? An ostrich egg? A barrel of whiskey?”

Len rolled his eyes. “You know, I think my eye-rolling muscles have doubled in size since getting together with you.”

“Well … my Scrabble game has improved.”

They drove for a little while, and Jim turned onto the street his place was on.

“And Bones?” Jim cleared his throat. “The other thing that’s happened is, I think, for the first time in my life, I really feel settled and happy.”

Len swallowed back a lump in his throat, and reached over and put his hand on the back of Jim’s neck.

“I’m glad, Jim. Love ya. And yeah, I’m happy too.”

TBC

A/N: When a fire spreads outside the area where it started, the parts that are in previously fire-free areas are called extensions.
Chapter 13: Fully Involved

Next rotation, second night shift.

It seemed to Leonard that, much like when your new love interest has a particular kind of car, and you then start seeing that make and model everywhere, once he’d been to Roma once, he was there nearly every rotation. Tonight was no exception. At 0115, the ambulance was called, along with law enforcement, to the aftermath of a closing-time fight at the establishment.

When the ambulance arrived, three men were sitting on the curb, two of them bleeding heavily, and the third vomiting into the gutter. Leonard processed that view from behind the windshield, and called in to dispatch.

“Dispatch, from Ambulance Two.”

“Ambulance Two.”

“We’ve got three patients; requesting another rig at our location.”

“Copy, Ambulance Two; dispatching another rig to your location.”

A moment later, as Len was getting out of the rig with some equipment, he heard the paging tones summon an ambulance from a station further into the downtown area. He and Chris approached the scene cautiously, stopping to talk to the police officer at the perimeter.

“Evening, officer. We good to go in?”

The officer nodded. “The two guys who are all bloody were pounding the shit out of each other. The other guy? Well, when we cleared the place out, he could hardly walk, and his ID is definitely fake, so we’d like you to have a look at him, too.”

“Sure thing, Chris, sorry about this, but I’m gonna have you take a look at Mr. Fake ID, while I check out the worse one of the other two.” It was apparent from looking at the two fighters that one, who was now lying on the ground, was in much worse shape than the other, who was sitting and shouting at the cops.

“No problem, Len. To be honest, I think I’d rather deal with a puking drunk than a guy who was just brawling.”
Chris went over to the intoxicated young man, who was now sitting with his head between his knees. Len approached the pale man on the ground, and started his work.

“Hi there, I’m Len, and I’m a paramedic from the fire department. It looks like you got cut up pretty bad. Can I help you out this evening?”

“Sure,” the man said listlessly.

“Tell me about what happened,” Len said, in his best non-confrontational tone.

As he listened to the man’s reply—a rambling, semi-coherent, and medically-useless tale of an old grudge and too much alcohol—Len found a non-bloody part of the man’s skin, near his ankle, and felt it with the back of his bare wrist. As he suspected, the skin was cool and clammy. That, along with the paleness, were sure signs of shock—probably because the fellow had lost a lot of blood. He set up an oxygen mask for high flow, and placed it on the man’s face.

“That okay?”

The man nodded, as Len covered him up with a blanket.

“What’s your name?”

“Ben Daniels. But Buck, there—he started it.”

“Ben, I’m not interested in who did what. I’d just like to know where else you’re hurt.”

“He hit me on the head with a bottle, and then sliced my head open real bad. Also got me on my arm here.”

Len inspected the bandage on the man’s forearm. It was an adequately-applied pressure bandage, put on by someone who had a good idea of what they were doing. He looked up, inquiringly, at the cop who was supervising the fighters.

“My partner and I were first on scene, and he’s an EMT. The guy’s arm was spurting, so once we broke up the fight, he bandaged that cut up real tight.”

“Well, he did a fine job, because it hasn’t bled through.” He looked at his patient. “Ben, I’m gonna take a look at this cut on your scalp, here.”

The laceration was long, and had bled copiously, but was now just oozing. Len moved on to more of his initial assessment, now that he was sure the guy wouldn’t bleed out on him.

Len took a set of vitals as he was asking the fellow his standard questions.

“Ben, do you recall how much you’ve had to drink?”

“Uh, I dunno. Probably five, six beers. And a coupla shots.”

Len was quiet for a moment as he got the man’s blood pressure, which as low, as he expected. The pulse didn’t make sense, though—it was in the low eighties—much lower than he’d have expected for someone who’d lost so much blood.

“Okay. Officer, can you step away for a moment please?”

The officer understood that as code for ‘give me a minute alone with this guy,’ and kept his distance, but remained close enough to intervene if anyone tried anything.
“Ben, this is just between you and me and the doctors at the hospital, but I need to know if you’ve taken any other drugs today.”

Ben looked behind him at the cop, who was doing something with his phone.

“Uh, I did some meth tonight before I came in here. Just one hit, but it was a good one.”

“Okay. Anything else? Even over the counter stuff, or regular prescriptions?”

“I got high blood pressure. I take pills for that. Meto-something-or-other.”

“Metoprolol?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Did you take it today?”

“Yeah. About two in the afternoon. When I got up. Um … sometimes I accidentally take two. Like, if I get up, and then go back to bed again. I maybe did that today. I dunno.”

Terrific, Len thought. Beta blockers—maybe a double dose—meth, alcohol, and hemorrhage. At least the beta blockers accounted for the unexpectedly low pulse. It didn’t mean the guy wasn’t shocky—it just meant his heart wasn’t able to help his system compensate for the blood loss by beating faster, courtesy of the beta blockers. This guy was a half-drained, polypharmaceutical mess.

“Okay, Ben. Here’s what we’re gonna do. You’ve lost a lot of blood, and you definitely need some stitches, so you need to go to the hospital. I’m gonna put an IV in your good arm, here, to give you some fluids to help replace some of that blood you’ve lost, and then we’ll head to the hospital.”

“Fine.”

Len looked over at Chris. “Chris, what’ve you got?”

“Highly ETOH, but stable. I checked out the other fighter, and he’s got some minor lacerations, and is pretty intoxicated, but also stable.”

“Okay. This guy’s going in ALS, so if your guys are stable, I’ll leave you with the two of them and have one of the cops drive our rig in. The other rig should be here any time.”

“Sounds good.”

Len started the IV, but Ben was too out of it even to complain about the two tries it took to get the line in. He hailed the officer, who had been keeping an eye on the situation the whole time.

“Officer, you authorized to drive our rigs? ‘Cause this guy’s gotta go now. The other two can wait till the next rig gets here, but we can’t leave them without an EMT.”

“Sure, no problem. Lemme just check with my supervisor.”

The officer called in on his radio, and got the go-ahead to drive the rig in and have his partner pick him up at the hospital. Len had the officer glove up, and the two of them transferred Ben onto the stretcher. As they wheeled the stretcher towards the waiting rig, Len’s attention was caught by a heated exchange at the front door of the Roma.

A tall, heavyset man, apparently in his fifties, with the red face and pulpy nose of a chronic heavy drinker, was shouting at a police officer.
“Is it my fault if idiots choose to beat the crap out of each other at my establishment? I don’t think so!”

“Well, Mr. Nero, it is your fault if underage customers are served alcohol. Your bartenders need to have the equipment, training, and instructions to identify fake IDs. As far as I could tell, they had none of those. And that, sir, is your responsibility.”

Len’s blood chilled as he realized he was looking at the man whose drunken driving had killed George Samuel Kirk Senior, twenty-eight years ago.

“Uh, McCoy?”

Len jumped as he realized he’d completely stopped the progress of the stretcher.

“Sorry, Officer,” he said, as they loaded the patient into the rig.

In the ambulance, Len hooked his patient up to the monitor. Nothing about his vitals had changed significantly since the first set Len took a few minutes ago.

On the way in to the hospital, Len gave a radio report to the on-duty ER doc, and then called in to dispatch to let them know that Chris would be riding in with the other rig, and not to expect them to be available until the other rig arrived at the hospital.

Ben’s eyes drooped closed halfway to the hospital. The monitor showed his pulse had slowed, and was down in the seventies. Perfectly normal for someone who had all their blood in them, but not so hot for someone who’d hemorrhaged severely.

Len shook his shoulder. “Ben? Wake up, pal.”

Ben’s eyes opened slightly, but then closed again.

“Ben?”

Len pinched the muscle between his neck and shoulder, hard, and Ben grimaced, but his eyes remained closed.

“Come on, Ben—you need to stay awake.” He pinched again, and got another grimace, and some head movement, but that was all. He looked at the monitor—the heart rate was going down fast, his blood’s saturation with oxygen was deteriorating, and his BP was still in the toilet.

“Hey, Officer? Lights and sirens, and step on it—this guy’s going south.”

This guy had so much shit in him that Len was leery of giving him the standard dose of atropine to boost his heart rate without talking to medical control, so he got back on the radio and reported the changes. The doctor ordered atropine to boost the patient’s heart rate anyhow. Len pushed the drug into the IV line, and watched the monitor.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the atropine took effect and the patient’s heart rate increased. When a patient had tons of different drugs on board, you never knew what was going to work and what wasn’t.

Four minutes later, they arrived at the hospital, and Len transferred his patient to the ED staff. He changed the linens on the stretcher, washed up, and restocked his medications and fluids. There was nothing he could do except wait for Chris. He took a bathroom break, in a bathroom away from the ED and thus not frequented by wretchedly ill patients carrying who knew what, and went down to
the all-night coffee-shop to grab some caffeine. He returned to the rig with his brew, moved the
ambulance out of the bay to make room for the incoming rig, and waited for Chris in the relative
quiet and calm of the driver’s seat of the ambulance.

He tilted the seat back as far as it would go, and listened with half an ear to the chatter on the radio.
When Len was halfway through his cup of coffee, his own station’s tones caught his attention. He
turned the radio up to listen to the dispatch information.

“Engine 1, Ladder 1, Engine 4, respond as second alarm assignment to Central Station’s incident;
structure fire with possible entrapment, at 2048 Elm St., that’s 2-0-4-8 Elm Street. 0149.”

Len’s heart started pounding, like he’d given himself some of that atropine. A second alarm meant it
was serious. Entrapment meant Jim would likely be going in for search and rescue—about the most
dangerous thing a firefighter was asked to do. Jim would be in danger, and Len wouldn’t be there.

Len dug through his memory to see if he could dredge up the names and faces of the ambulance
crew on B-shift at Central Station. The EMT’s face came to him, but he couldn’t remember the guy’s
name. The medic was … was … Sanford! That was it. Barney Sanford. As far as Len could tell, the
guy was solid. But he wasn’t Len.

Len wished he wasn’t on duty, so he could replace his coffee with some bourbon, to calm his
jangling nerves. But he wouldn’t do anyone any good by doing that now, so the nerves would just
have to jangle away. He just prayed that he could keep his mind on the job he had to do, even
knowing that Jim might be doing something dangerous. Would be doing something dangerous.

Had he told Jim at all today, that he loved him? Len ran his mental video of the day
on rewind, until he got to a moment where he was sure he’d said those words. They’d been lying in
Jim’s bed, in the middle of the afternoon, just having made love after a decent day’s sleep. He was
pretty sure he’d said it, then. In fact, he was certain they both had. On the days between the two
night shifts of a rotation, they didn’t do much outside of the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen—there
just wasn’t time. But they’d had a good day—what there was of it, before they had to be at work at
5:30 in the afternoon.

Len checked his watch: 1:52. A whole three minutes had passed since the engine and ladder were
dispatched to the structure fire—they were certainly still en route. He sighed and leaned back into his
seat, starting to wonder why he hadn’t yet seen the second rig bring in Mr. Fake ID and the other
fighter. He sipped his coffee, and waited. And waited. There was nothing on the radio chatter to help
him figure out what was going on at the fire scene; the people there would be operating on a short-
range tactical channel that wouldn’t clog up the airwaves with their incident’s communications.

1:54. Still no rig; still no Christine. Still nothing useful on the radio about the structure fire.

1:56. Something was happening on the radio.

“Dispatch, Engine 1.”

“Engine 1.”

“We have a firefighter and a victim trapped on the second floor of our structure fire. Send us a third
alarm assignment and a second ambulance.”

“Third alarm assignment, second ambulance, copy.”

Fuck. Shit, shit, shit!
Leonard’s mind went wild as he heard Ambulance 4 toned out to the structure fire. Len now knew the geography of the area well enough to realize that it would take Ambulance 4 a long, long time to get to the address of the structure fire. He wished Chris would show up—from the hospital, their ETA would be about seven minutes.

Who was trapped? Pike sounded calm, but that was part of his job. But would he have sounded so calm if one of his boys or girls was trapped? Len found himself hoping not.

1:57. The passenger’s-side door of the rig popped open, and Christine got in.

“Sorry that took—”

“Never mind.” Len got on the radio. “Dispatch, Ambulance 2. We’re available, at St. Lukes. Our ETA to the structure fire would be seven minutes.” He was already headed out the exit of the hospital’s parking lot.

“Copy, Ambulance 2. Respond to the structure fire, 2048 Elm St. Ambulance 4, cancel.”

“Len, what’s going on?” Christine asked, strapping herself in to her seat.

“Our station is on a second alarm assignment to a structure fire with entrapment. They’ve got a firefighter trapped with a victim, and Pike just requested a third alarm and another rig.”

Christine’s face froze in a silent “oh.” She didn’t speak for several seconds.

“We don’t know who, do we?”

“No.”

They didn’t talk as Len sped to the scene. A minute later, the radio crackled to life. Len recognized Pike’s voice once again.

“Dispatch from Engine 1.”

“Engine 1.”

“Be advised the victim and firefighter have been extricated; EMTs request a delta response for the second rig.”

“Copy that, Engine 1.”

Len flipped on the lights and sirens as Christine told dispatch they’d received the request.

The siren wailed, along with Len’s heart. As he approached an intersection, he switched the siren to “yelp” mode to attract the attention of other drivers. He imagined the siren yelping out “Not Jim!” “Not Jim!” as he proceeded cautiously through the red light.

Four tense minutes later, they were at the scene. They threw their equipment onto the stretcher, and headed to the safe zone, where Len could see a pile of gear next to a man being assisted by another firefighter. He relaxed slightly as he saw the patient’s arm move on its own, clutching the grass. He relaxed further when he saw that the arm was heavily furred with dark brown hair—not Jim.

The scene a few yards away from the downed firefighter was not so promising. Len could tell from the movements of the EMTs that CPR was being performed. He moved in closer and got a better look—it was the civilian victim, grey and lifeless-looking.
“Where do you need me?” Len asked Sanford, the paramedic working on the victim.

“She’s flatlined, and we’ve been on her for six minutes now. Go get our guy, please?”

“Got it,” Len said. “Chris, swap in for CPR, okay?” He cast his eyes quickly about the scene to try to locate Jim, but couldn’t tell one person from another. He pushed his worries aside, as well as he could, gave a hand to help up the EMT from Ambulance 1, who was exactly the face he’d pictured, and whose name badge read “Frank McCarthy.”

“Frank, who’s your downed man?” Len asked quietly, before they approached the fireman, who was on the ground, groaning audibly between clenched teeth.

“Ronnie Cozart. Reasonably stable, with a leg injury only. Probably bad. He was pinned for about ten minutes by a ceiling beam.”

“You gonna be all right with this?”

McCarthy looked hesitant, but set his jaw and nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’ll be the bad guy, all right?” Len was sure McCarthy would understand that meant that Len would be in charge of doing anything that would hurt Cozart. And there would probably be something, if only a splint job.

McCarthy nodded, and knelt by Cozart.

“Hey, Amadeus, it’s your turn, pal. This is Len McCoy, from Station 7. We’ve gotcha, okay?”

“Fuck, Frankie; it fuckin’ hurts so bad!” Cozart whimpered.

“Ronnie, are you hurt anywhere else?” Len asked, as he started checking Cozart for other injuries. He still couldn’t see the leg well, since he still had his bunker pants on. His boots, luckily, were already off.

“No. Shit, can you fucking give me something?”

“I gotta see your leg first, and get some vitals, all right? Frank, can you get him on some O₂ and get his vitals?”

“Sure, Len.”

Len dug into his trauma kit for the Kevlar shears that would cut through turnout gear, and started chomping them up the inseam of Cozart’s pants, trying to get his uniform pants at the same time to avoid having to disturb the injured limb again later.

It was bad—the unnatural flatness and sagginess of the limb, plus the amount of blood pooled in the padding of the pants told him that much. As he worked his way up one side of the pants and then the other, to fully expose the leg up to the hip, Cozart’s groans and whimpers progressed to outright screams. Len let the sounds pass over him as he kept a steady hand on the shears. He gently pulled the cut-up pants-leg aside to expose the injury.

A six-inch segment of Cozart’s lower leg was crushed. Bone was showing in several places, with plenty of blood but no arterial spurting. Sometimes, in a crush injury, the arteries sealed themselves off, just like in a traumatic amputation.

“Vitals?” Len barked to McCarthy.
“Pulse 110 strong and regular, BP 150/90, respirations 28 and intermittently shallow.”

So signs of severe pain, but no signs of severe shock. Len grabbed an IV pack, and started prepping Cozart’s arm.

“Ronnie, I’m starting an IV so I can give you something for the pain, all right?”

“Yes, Jesus, fuck! Oh God, just hurry!”

Len started the IV easily, estimated the fellow’s weight at 85 kilograms, and dosed him accordingly.

“Frank, can you grab the splints?”

“Already got ‘em.”

Len examined the injury further. There were no pulses in any of the places he checked in Cozart’s foot or ankle, and his toes were a dusky blue color.

“Ronnie, can you feel which toe I have here?”

“What are you talking about? I can’t feel anything except my fucking leg, man!”

“Okay. Can you wiggle your toes?”

Nothing—but Len hadn’t expected anything.

“Try some more, Ronnie—wiggle those toes.”

“I am, damn it!”

There was no movement that Len could see.

“Okay, Ronnie. Easy.”

“Shit, shit shit,” Cozart groaned. “The shit you gave me ain’t doin’ it, man. Can’t you fuckin’ knock me out? And how bad is it?”

Len placed a hand gently on Cozart’s chest as he tried to sit up to see his leg.

“I’m not gonna lie, Ronnie; it’s bad. But we’re gonna get you right to the hospital, and they’re the best there, all right?”

Ronnie didn’t say anything for a minute, and Len could tell he was desperately holding back the tears.

“How’s the pain, Ronnie, on a one-to-ten scale?”

“Down to a nine, from about a twenty,” Cozart said, again through gritted teeth. “Jesus! I’m gonna fucking lose this leg, aren’t I? Or it’s already gone! That’s it, right? Fuck, that’s why you won’t let me look! I have to see it—let me up! Now!”

Len held Ronnie down gently at his chest as he struggled frantically to sit up.

“Ronnie, listen to me! You have to lay back, and be as still as you can, all right? If you move around, you’re gonna hurt yourself worse!”

“I can’t! I can’t! I hafta—”
“McCarthy—you hold him; I’m gonna have to sedate him.”

Len pushed a sedative into the IV line, and watched as Cozart’s eyes glazed over.

“I hafta … see …”

“You’re gonna be all right, Ronnie,” McCarthy said, keeping a hand on his friend’s chest. “We gotcha, buddy.”

Leonard poured saline over the open wound and exposed bone, and dressed the wound. He splinted the leg solidly, from toe to hip, and got two other firefighters to help him roll Cozart onto a backboard, so as to lift him to the stretcher in the safest way possible for his horrendous injury. Ronnie’s shouts had diminished to mumbles and groans, but he was still able to respond to verbal instructions, albeit slowly. Len got another set of vitals, which definitely reflected all the central nervous system depressants he’d just loaded Ronnie up with, but were still within acceptable ranges given the situation.

Leonard peeled off his bloody gloves, and put them in the biohazard bag at the side door of the ambulance, and replaced them with new gloves as two firefighters from Cozart’s shift moved the stretcher into the ambulance. He could hear them talking quietly to Cozart as they loaded him up. With luck, Cozart would remember nothing of the incident, as the sedative Len used had the side-effect of preventing long-term memory formation as well.

Len scanned the area for Jim, but still couldn’t find—wait. There were two figures up on the roof of the structure, and they looked to be the size of Jim and Cupcake. The figure holding the chainsaw turned so his back was to McCoy, and Len could briefly see the letters “KIRK” reflecting the lights set up to illuminate the scene. So okay, he was all right for now.

Len could hear Ambulance 1’s medic on the radio with medical control, receiving permission to stop treatment on the civilian victim. He wasn’t surprised. When he heard the end of that conversation, he got on the line and called in his report, as Christine packed up their bags and put everything back in the rig. Frank McCarthy rejoined his partner, and Chris got in the driver’s seat of Ambulance 2.

Len buckled himself in on the bench next to the stretcher.

“How you doin’, Ronnie?” he asked quietly, as he hooked his patient up to the monitor.

In the privacy of the rig, and away from his co-workers, Ronnie let the tears squeeze through his clenched eyelids.

“I’m so screwed, man. It’s bad, I know it’s real bad,” Ronnie said, words slurring under the influence of the drugs. He was so loaded up with drugs McCoy was surprised he was still talking.

“Everybody’s rooting for you, Ronnie. And we’re on our way to the hospital, okay?”

“Yeah.”

The tears flowed freely, now, inhibitions also dulled by the drugs.

“I’m so fucking scared!”

“I know it, Ronnie. I know you are.”

Len experimentally squeezed his patient’s hand, and Cozart held on as if for dear life. He didn’t let go the entire drive to the hospital, and when it was time to unload, Leonard had to peel Cozart’s
fingers off his tingling hand so he could help Chris unload the stretcher.

They unloaded Cozart as gently as possible, but there was the one inevitable bump when the locking mechanism released the stretcher, and Cozart yelped.

Len handed his patient over to the receiving nurse, and gave her the yellow copy of his triplicate cheat-sheet. The nurse read over the paper carefully, and looked over at Len.

“All right, I’ve got the patient,” she said.

“Thanks,” Len said. He hesitated before his next sentence, but said it anyhow. “Take good care of him, all right? He’s one of ours.”

“I know,” the nurse said gently. “We will.”

Len returned to where Chris was stripping the linens from the stretcher, and helped her wipe it down and replace the linens. They both washed their hands at the sink, and then looked at each other.

“Need a minute?” he asked Chris, who had dealt with the death of a patient.

“Not right now,” she said. “Later, though, when we have a minute, I’ll take a minute.”

“Okay.”

“You okay?” Chris asked Len.

“Same as you. Thanks.”

Len radioed in to dispatch that they were available at the hospital.

“Ambulance 2, copy. Return to structure fire on Elm Street.”

“Copy, returning to Elm Street incident.”

As they drove back, they crossed paths with Ambulance 1, driving slowly to the hospital with its sad cargo. Len made a mental note to track down Frank McCarthy tomorrow at a decent hour, and see how he was doing. The first patient he worked on at the fire had died, and the second was one of his coworkers.

As they approached the scene, it was clear things had settled down considerably. Both the aerial ladders had been withdrawn, and there was only steam and wispy smoke coming from the burnt-out skeleton of charred wood that had once been a building.

Len parked the rig in the safe zone, and he and Chris approached the scene, with their gear on the stretcher.

“Cap?” he said to Pike, who was observing something and making a note in a small notebook he carried in his shirt pocket.

“Len. How’s the guy from Central Station?”

Len hesitated. The leg injury was very bad, but the man would certainly survive, barring complications.

“The leg was real bad, Cap, but he should make it, unless there’s complications. Which there can be, from crush injuries.”
Pike nodded slowly, showing he understood the unspoken part of the answer—that Len didn’t know whether the limb was salvageable.

“Okay. Just a heads-up for you, Len—we’re anticipating that there are a couple of bodies still in there. Two kids are missing. That’s always rough for the guys, when they find them.”

Len nodded. “Are the kids’ parents … around?”

“The mom was the first victim. Neighbors say it was just the mom and two kids in the upstairs apartment. Everyone else was accounted for.”

“All right. Has everyone been rehabbing appropriately?”

“Oh yes; I nearly had to pull Jim out when he wanted to go back in to try to find the kids after running down three air bottles, but Spock made him see reason and take a break—he may have invoked your name, actually, since you seem to have some strange power over him. And that was right before Cozart got hit.”

Len shuddered as he understood what Pike wasn’t saying—that if Jim hadn’t been forced to take a break, it might’ve been him who was in the room when the ceiling collapsed. It might’ve been Jim’s leg that was crushed, not Cozart’s.

Pike’s radio crackled to life. The high pitch of the voice identified it as being Gaila’s.

“Cap, we found, uh, the kids’ room. Bravo-Charlie corner, second floor. Access via the ladder. It’s stable in here; no hot spots. But … we could use a hand in here. Couple of backboards, too.”

“Copy, Gaila,” Pike said. “Come on out for now.” He turned to Central Station’s captain. “Matt, you got anyone available?”

“Chris, my guys are fried. I was actually about to pull Cozart’s partner for the rest of the shift—he’s losing it. Can you send your ladder operator, and maybe your lieutenant?”

“Sure. Gimme three to get things squared away, and I’ll send them in. Can you have your ladder operator bring them down when they’ve recovered the bodies?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I can do that.”

Pike radioed instructions to Spock and Scotty to shut down the ladder truck as soon as possible, and report in to him, and told Kirk and Jablonski they were to take instructions from him for a while.

“Kirk, Jablonski, you’ll pull a second line off the engine, and continue with your overhaul assignment.”

“Copy, Cap,” Len heard Jim say.

Pike sighed, and activated his radio again.

“Dispatch, Engine 1.”

“Engine 1.”

“10-79, at our location.”

“Copy that, Engine 1.”
Linn County rarely used 10-codes anymore, having switched over to a policy of clear language. But everyone had a scanner these days, since it was legal to broadcast digital scanner output to the Web. So for a few situations, like requesting the coroner, people still used codes, even though most listeners would know what they meant.

Len and Chris returned to the rig, and, with a heavy heart, Len unloaded two body bags from the compartment he hated having to open. He tucked the bags under one arm, and pulled two backboards from another compartment and leaned them against the rig. He carried the bags and one of the boards over to the scene, and Chris carried the other board.

Len got another brief glimpse of Jim, as he pulled a line off the engine and headed back inside. His movements were slow and deliberate—he was tired, and he knew it, and Len was glad to see he was being extra careful. He saw two smallish figures—Gaila and Chekov—approach the engine. They removed their facepieces—Len noted that Chekov turned away from everyone to do so, and had his suspicions of why—and each had some water, as they waited to complete their grim task.

A minute later, Spock and Scotty reported in, packed up and ready to go.

“I need you two to go in with Gaila and Paul for body recovery. Everyone’s fried, guys, and you two are probably the freshest. Sorry.”

“Aye, Cap. We understand,” Scotty said.

Spock nodded. “Certainly, Captain Pike.”

Pike turned to Gaila and Chekov. “You two okay to go?”

“Yessir,” Chekov said, standing up.

“Yep, good to go,” Gaila said.

Len squinted at Chekov—he looked pale, and his eyes were rimmed in red. The kid looked damned upset, but Len didn’t think that was a reason to pull him, and apparently, neither did Pike. The reality was, he’d chosen an occupation where he was going to see hard things, and he’d either adjust, in his own way, and hopefully with the appropriate support, or move on.

“Okay, people,” Pike said, nodding to the team of four. “Central’s ladder will be your egress.”

Spock, Scotty, Gaila, and Chekov trudged to the ground ladder at the window of the room they needed to be in for their unpleasant job. They passed the backboards up, and Chekov, the last to ascend, carried the body bags up.

Several minutes passed, and Central Station’s ladder operator positioned the tip of his device at the window. After another minute, a figure emerged from the window onto the ladder, which was at a very shallow angle. The bright blue of the backboard appeared, with a black bag strapped to it, and another figure held the other end of the board. The figures descended the ladder, and passed their burden to firefighters waiting below. From the movements of the people on the ground, Len could tell their cargo was very light indeed—the saddest kind of burden in an already very sad situation.

The second pair proceeded down the ladder with their burden, also apparently very light.

“Cap, the ambulance is free until the Coroner arrives, if that’s appropriate.”

Pike nodded. “I think it is.”
Len escorted the bearers of the bodies to the ambulance, and closed the doors quietly once the bodies had been loaded in. He looked each of the four firefighters in the eye, and squeezed their shoulders as they departed, except for Spock, who Len had learned over the months was the kind of person who preferred a nod to a touch.

Everyone went back to work, because that was what you did.

Two hours later, just before shift change, the bodies had been transferred to the care of the coroner, the State Fire Investigators had arrived, and everyone was dismissed except the officers who had been present for the incident. The engine, the ladder, and the ambulance drove in a procession back to the station, and when they arrived, everyone exited their apparatus silently. It was ten minutes until shift change, and they could hear the voices of men from the C-shift in the day room.

Jim approached Len almost hesitantly. Len looked in his eyes, and saw sadness, and extreme fatigue, but also something else.

“Bones … take me home?” he said quietly.

“Sure thing,” Len said, wishing like crazy that he could just clutch Jim to him right now.

“But … I gotta have a man-to-man with Paul, first—is that okay?”

“Of course.” And just then, it dawned on Len that of course, Jim was the perfect person to talk to Paul. There was no way the kid would bare his soul to Gaila, who had taught him to be tougher than tough, and Spock was about as approachable as a nuclear submarine. Cupcake was a known asshole, and Scotty and Sulu had already geared down and gone outside, probably to debrief each other. In Pike’s absence, it made absolute sense for Jim to talk to Chekov, and Jim knew it, and was stepping in.

Jim nodded, and looked over to where Chekov was going through the motions of hanging his gear overly precisely on his rack.

“I’ll wait, as long as you need me to,” Len said. “Go.”

“Thanks, Bones.”

Len watched, surreptitiously, as Jim went over to Chekov, and, steering him gently by the shoulder, led him out the side door to the picnic table.

Len hit the showers, and, as he was getting out, saw Paul coming in.

“Okay?” he asked quietly.

“Not really. I will be, though.”

“I know you will.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

They nodded to each other, as Paul went to his locker, and Len to his.

Len went to the bank of lockers that held his, and found Jim sitting on the bench, still in his uniform, with his forehead up against Len’s locker. He sat down next to Jim, and Jim raised his head.

“Bones. I’m totally wiped out.”
“Me too. You wanna get a shower before we go?”

Jim looked Len right in the eye. “No.”

“All right.”

Len opened his locker, and quickly pulled on his clothes. “Let’s go,” he said to Jim.

They got in the van, and Len started driving.

“My place, or your place?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jim said. “Yours is still closer.”

“All right.”

They didn’t ask each other if they were okay, because they both knew the answer was ‘no.’ Len drove silently for a few minutes.

“I went to the academy with Cozart,” Jim said. “We’re not good friends, or anything, but … that’s kind of a bond, you know?”

Len nodded. “Yeah, Jim.”

“He was real bad, wasn’t he,” Jim asked.

“Yeah.”

“Is he gonna lose his leg?”

“I think so, Jim. I suppose it’s possible he won’t, but it didn’t look good. It was a severe crushing injury. Lots of vascular damage.”

“That’s what I thought. I, uh, helped get the beam off him. And, um, I could tell it was bad.”

They drove silently for a while.

“Thanks for talking to Paul, Jim. That was mighty fine of you.”

“I was the right one to do it,” Jim said.

“You’re exactly right.”

“He’ll be okay.”

“And you?” Len asked.

“I’ll be okay. But God, Bones. Two little kids, and their mom.” Jim looked up. “Did you work on the mom?”

Len shook his head. “Just Cozart.”

“Jesus,” Jim said. He took a swig from his water bottle. “You okay?”

“Pretty wiped out,” Len said. “Just—drained, I guess. Cozart … that was tough. He knew it was bad. But …”
“But what, Bones?”

“But god damn it, Jim, I was just so fucking glad he wasn’t you!” Leonard’s vision blurred as the emotions he’d been suppressing all morning finally hit him, hard.

“Pull over, Bones,” Jim said, and Len could hear the tears in his voice, too.

Leonard pulled over, glad that they were off the highway and on a side road, nearly to his house.

They rested their foreheads together, and Jim put his hand on Leonard’s neck. They stayed that way for several minutes, neither one of them saying a word.

Jim sniffed, finally, and swiped his wrist across his face.

“I was really fucking glad he wasn’t me, too. And that feels pretty damned awful.”

Len reached across the console and ran his hand through Jim’s matted hair. “Let’s go home.”

“Okay.”

Leonard signaled left, and got back onto the road. Five minutes later, they pulled into the driveway of his house, and went in through the side door.

“Too tired to eat, Bones.”

“Me too.”

“Help me in the shower?”

“Of course, darlin’.”

“Then I just gotta go to bed.”

“Me, too.”

They both got in the shower, and helped each other wash away some of the fear and ugliness of the shift. Leonard had nearly forgotten about his incident at the Roma, but the face of Johnny Nero flashed into his vision briefly when his eyes were closed as Jim shampooed his already-clean hair. He decided to leave that tidbit until later, when it would be possible to mention it.

When they were both clean, and the humid air didn’t smell quite so badly of soot and death; blood and tears; sweat and fear, Leonard turned the water off, and they each helped the other dry off.

Len closed the blinds and the opaque curtains he’d bought, and turned off the alarm clock. At eight ten in the morning, they fell into bed, twined their limbs together, kissed each other once more, and, faces pressed together, fell into the deep sleep born from emotional and physical exhaustion.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A burning structure is said to be ‘fully involved’ if the fire has extended into most or all compartments of the structure.
A/N 2: Yes, the numbers of the stations and the apparatus are a mess! This is based on the town I live in, which once had many stations, and now has four, some with names, and some with numbers. The apparatus numbers don’t match the station numbers. It’s all historical, and I’ve imposed this idiocy on my fictional Cedar Rapids Fire Department.
Automatic Mutual Aid

Chapter Summary

WARNING for graphic descriptions of trauma.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14: Automatic Mutual Aid

Someone’s phone was beeping, elsewhere in the house, when Jim and Len woke up just before three that afternoon.

“Is that mine, or yours?” Jim asked, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

“Dunno. I think our pants are in the bathroom. I’ll go check.”

Len rolled out of bed and pulled on a pair of boxers. He went across the hall to the bathroom, rifled through their clothing, and returned with both their phones.

“It’s both of us,” Len said, frowning. “Huh—it’s Pike.”

“Shit,” Jim said. “That’s … probably bad news.” He called his voice mail, and put it on speakerphone. He sat close to Leonard, leaning in to him for support.

“Jim, it’s Chris Pike. Captain Trotter from Central just called me, and asked me to pass on some news to my crew. Ronnie Cozart lost his leg. He’s in the ICU now, and can’t have visitors, but he should be in a regular room in a day or two. Anyhow, call me back—I’m trying to get some people to help out around his house, that sort of thing, while his wife is with him at the hospital.”

There was a pause on the line, but then Pike’s voice continued.

“Good work, yesterday. I mean it. He could’ve been dead if you hadn’t all done everything so perfectly to get him out. It was a tough call, and we’ll debrief for sure next shift.”

“One more thing, Jim. I know you’re good friends with Len. I don’t know him well enough to know how he’s gonna take this—the docs said there was nothing he could’ve done differently, and I’ll make sure he hears that—but … give him a call, if you can. I’d appreciate it. As I appreciate that you talked to Chekov. I spoke to him this afternoon, and he said you really helped him out. So thanks for that as well. Anyhow—take care, and call when you can.”

They sat in silence for a moment, taking in the news.

“I guess mine’s probably the same,” Len said. He put his voicemail on speakerphone as well.

“Len, it’s Chris Pike. I’m afraid I’m calling with bad news. Ronnie Cozart’s captain wanted me to
pass along the news that Ronnie ended up losing his leg. The docs told Cozart’s wife that nothing anyone did at the scene could’ve prevented it—they think the beam crushed all the major arteries instantly. I just wanted you to know that.”

“Anyhow—I don’t know if you’re able to do this, but when someone in the department gets hurt, we all try to help the family out any way we can. Give me a call if you can help out at all. Every little bit counts.”

“And one last thing. Jim’s probably gonna take this pretty hard. Like it was somehow his fault, for not getting Cozart out fast enough, or something like that, which is absolute bullshit. Jim and Cupcake managed to lift that beam off him before the airbags were even set up. But Jim always seems to try to carry every heavy load on his shoulders. So if you could maybe give him a call, see how he’s doing—I’d appreciate that. I hate to meddle, but to be honest, you’re the first person I’ve ever seen him really listen to.”

“I guess that’s it. Take care, and call me if you can help Cozart’s family out at all.”

Len stared at his phone.

“Jesus,” Jim said. “Well, I guess Pike’s got us both pegged.”

Len nodded slowly, and looked at Jim, frowning.

“You were thinkin’ that, weren’t you. That you coulda been better, or faster, or somethin’.”

Jim rubbed his face. “Yeah. Maybe a little. Like, maybe if we’d gotten the beam off sooner, he wouldn’t’ve been as bad.”

“And?” Len asked. “Do you believe that?”

“I … I guess I can see that it’s probably not true. I’m not gonna lie—I thought about it a lot. But … if I try to think rationally, I know I did everything I could humanly do.”

“Knowing’s sometimes not the same thing as feeling, though, is it,” Len said quietly. “Like, I know I did right by Cozart. But I still feel like I coulda done somethin’ more for him. But I saw that leg, up close and personal. And he asked me, Jim. He asked me how bad it was. I didn’t lie—I said it was real bad. But he freaked out, and there was nothing I could do for him but sedate him. That almost feels like lying, you know? When a patient is so beside themselves that they’re gonna hurt themselves worse, and the best thing I can do for them is to sedate their ass?” Len shook his head. “Doesn’t feel right. I know it’s the best thing—but I don’t like it.”

Jim chewed on his thumbnail. “Well, I dunno, Bones. If it was me, I’d—”

“It damned well better never be you, kid.”

“If it was me,” Jim continued, “and I couldn’t take it, I hope you’d—how did you put it? Sedate my ass.”

“Yeah, but you know what you’d hate? You’d hate not remembering. The most effective, best tolerated sedative in our drug kits also makes you not remember. Cozart probably won’t remember a thing from after I first laid eyes on him. Maybe a bit before that, too.”

“Huh.” Jim gnawed on another fingernail.

Len tugged his hand gently.
“Would you stop that?”

“Just thinking. You’re right. I’d hate not remembering. You got any sedatives that don’t mess up memory?”

“Yeah.”

“If it ever comes down to it—”

“Jesus, Jim!”

“—is there any reason you can’t use that one? Instead of the one that makes you forget?”

“It doesn’t make you forget, it just—” Len stopped himself. “Fuck it. It doesn’t matter how it works.”

Jim frowned. “I’m serious, Bones. Promise me, okay? If you ever have to sedate me, don’t use the mindfuck stuff, okay? Because you’re right; I’d hate that.”

“Stop it, Jim! Just fucking stop it with that kind of talk!” Len shouted. “Just—I can’t take it!”

They stared at each other for a long, long moment.

“Sorry,” Len whispered. “God, I’m sorry, Jim.”

Jim pulled Bones to him, and took his face in his hands. “I love you, Bones. No matter what. All right?”

“I’m sorry,” Len repeated, leaning his cheek into Jim’s palm.

They sat that way, Len nuzzling Jim’s palm slightly but otherwise not moving, for a long minute.

“I’ll quit the department,” Jim said, shattering the silence.

“What? Jim, no!”

“I’m serious, Bones. If my job is gonna push us apart, I’ll quit.”

Len shook his head. “Absolutely not. I’ll deal, okay? We’ll deal. We’ll … find a way to not let your job come between us. Like, the thing we did before, after the backdraft?”

“When you took care of me.”

“Yeah,” Len said, ducking his head in embarrassment. “That … helped.”

“Well, my weird confession is that I kind of liked it. When I saw where you were going, I’ll admit I got a little creeped out. ‘Cause, you know. I’m Jim Kirk. Invulnerable. I can take care of myself. But … I liked it.”

“Yeah?” The corners of Len’s eyes and lips crinkled, ever so slightly.

“Uh huh. Any time. Any time you need to. Because I’m yours. Body and soul, Bones, I’m all yours.”

Len traced Jim’s cheekbone, and ran a hand through his hair, leaving it on the back of Jim’s neck.

“And that’s why you can’t quit, Jim. It might save your body, getting out of the crazy business you’re in, but your soul?” Leonard shook his head. “I like it exactly the way it is, sweetheart.”
“God, Bones, you get me right there,” Jim said, patting the center of his bare chest with his palm. “Every time.”

“Yeah?” Leonard covered Jim’s hand with his own.

“Uh huh.”

“Do I get you anywhere else?” Leonard said, eyeing Jim slyly.

Jim smirked, and moved his hand on top of Len’s. He slid Len’s hand down, down, over his chest and belly, to the predictable destination. “There, too.”

“Ummm,” Leonard said, grinning, one eyebrow raised skeptically.

“Give it time, Bones. And anyhow, c’mer, you dirty old man.”

“Not dirty,” Len said, lips skittering over Jim’s neck. “We just took a shower b’fore bed, remember?”


“Not old, either. Or would I be able to get it up faster ‘n you, darlin’?” Len straddled Jim and presented him with the evidence of his youth.

“Okay, not dirty, and not old. Man, though, yeah. And mine.”

“Yours,” Len agreed, finding Jim’s hand and lacing their fingers together.

“Off,” Jim said to the boxers Leonard had put on to retrieve their phones. Len cooperated, lifting his weight off Jim and kicking the shorts away once Jim had slid them down to his knees.

“Aahhh, Bones,” Jim said, looking up at his lover. “It’s all so … you’re so … I just really need …”

“What do you need, sugar? You got it,” Len whispered. He trailed his lips down Jim’s neck, as Jim tilted his head back, eyes closed, and clutched Len to him as though he was his lifeline, his air pack in a fire, his floating seat cushion. Jim produced a tremulous sound, not quite crying, but not quite not.

“Shh, it’s all right, darlin’,” Len said, not realizing that Jim didn’t know he was making any sounds. “What’s goin’ on?”

Jim opened his eyes, and a tear trickled out of each of them.

“I was scared, Bones. I was so scared in there. When Cozart’s partner called the mayday, and Captain Trotter sent me and Cupcake in to help pull him out—Bones, you shoulda seen that room.”

*No thanks*, Len thought to himself.

“I don’t know why the ceiling collapsed, because that room hadn’t really burned yet. Definitely hadn’t flashed over. But it was gonna, Bones. It was getting so fucking hot in there, even with the stream the other team had going on the fire, and Cozart was screaming bloody murder, and we all knew that if we didn’t get him or the fire out in like a minute, we were gonna … Bones, we woulda had to *leave* him!” Jim drew in a shuddering breath. “Or else die with him.” Jim let go his clutching grip on Len, to cover his face, to hide from what he was about to say.

“And he was screaming, begging us to kill him if we couldn’t get him out. You know what he said?
He said if we couldn’t get him out, and if someone wouldn’t put a halligan through his skull for him, he’d pull his facepiece so he’d die that way instead of by burning up.”

Len felt—actually felt—the blood drain from his face and head, and put a hand down to steady himself. “Jesus Christ, Jim. That’s an awful thing to go through, for all of you who were in there. You should’ve said something, this morning, right away.”

Jim shook his head. “I couldn’t, Bones. I was just too used up.”

“But you got him out,” Len said.

Jim laughed a sour, harsh cackle that didn’t remotely resemble his usual peals. “The water, Bones. The water beat the fire. It was a steam-bath in there, but not a firestorm. So yeah, we got him out. Me and Cupcake had his upper body, and Cozart’s partner had his legs. Was carrying them kinda weird—by holding the cuffs of his pants. Then as soon as we had him on the ground, he went an’ puked in the bushes. Now I know why.”

Jim was suddenly breathing hard, and Len noticed he was pale and sweaty, and trembling slightly.

“All right, sweetheart. Take it easy. It’s all right. You’re not feelin’ well, are you.”

“Think I’m gonna hurl, Bones.”

Len moved fast. He helped Jim sit up, cringing at the cold clamminess of his skin, and grabbed the plastic-bag-lined wastebasket from under the nightstand, setting it in on Jim’s lap.

“Don’t move. Just try to breathe slow and deep.”

Len ran to the kitchen, ignoring his nakedness, and quickly slopped some milk into a glass, also ignoring the mess he made on the counter.

“Drink this, Jim.”

Jim accepted the glass without question, hands shaking as he drank the milk down in one go. Len took the empty glass back, and set it in on the nightstand, watching Jim like a hawk the entire time.

Jim’s color returned, and the shaking disappeared.

“What the fuck was that?”

“When was the last time you ate anything?” Len asked.

“Oh. Probably midnight,” Jim said.

“Well. In that case, you and I have a hot date with some peanut butter and jelly.”

“But I don’t even really feel like eating!”

“Tough shit, Jim. That ‘what the fuck’ you just had was a little hypoglycemic episode. So you need to eat,” Len said, scowling. And then, uncrinkling his eyebrows, relaxing the set of his jaw, “Please.”

“Okay, Dr. McCoy. Kinda had something else in mind, there, before I freaked out on you, but it’ll keep.”

“It better,” Len said, watching Jim carefully as he pulled on some clothes. The shakiness and pallor were gone, and Jim’s movements were as fluid as always.
They went into the kitchen, and a minute later, the coffee was brewing, and the sandwiches were being devoured.

“Geez,” said Jim, biting into a large apple, after his second sandwich. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

“Your body did.”

Jim sniffed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

They put their plates in the sink, and looked at each other.

“I guess we should call Cap back,” Jim said. “Ronnie and his wife have a couple of greyhounds—maybe Captain Pike will know if they need a hand with the dogs.”

“Good thinking,” said Len. “Friends of mine in Savannah have two rescued greyhounds, and if they didn’t run ‘em every day, they’d start tearin’ things up.”

Jim called Pike’s landline number, and the phone rang once on the other end before being picked up.

“Pike.”

“Hey, Cap. Jim Kirk.”

“Jim. I guess you got my message.”

“Yeah. Really stinks. Bones said he wasn’t surprised, though.”

“You talked to him already?”

“Oh. Uh, yeah.”

“Good. Well, nobody who saw that leg was surprised. But—he’s alive, and he’ll make it.”

“Yeah. Thanks for what you said—about how you knew we all did what we could. I started beating myself up, you know? But I thought about it, and it didn’t make any sense to keep on with that.”

“Huh,” Pike said. “Good for you. McCoy talk some sense into you, by any chance?”

“Maybe,” Jim said warily. “Anyhow—what can we do to help Angelina out while Ronnie’s down? I wonder if they need someone to take their dogs for a while.”

“Hm,” said Pike. “That’s a good point. They probably do. Angelina’s pretty much been at the hospital the whole time, and I don’t expect that’ll change for a while.”

“Well, Angelina probably doesn’t need the whole universe calling her right now. But … I guess let Captain Trotter know I’d be happy to work something out for the dogs. I could take ‘em when I’m not on duty, and maybe have ‘em at my mom’s farm when I am.”

“Thanks, Jim. And thanks again for talking to Chekov. I’m glad you realized he needed that, and it sounds like you did a great job.”

“No problem, sir. I just thought about what a certain lieutenant said to me about seven years ago, in a similar situation, and it all came out right, I think.”

“Still remember that, do you?” Pike said. “Well, we were both a lot younger back then, weren’t we.”
“Not me. I haven’t aged a bit,” Jim said.

“You know, Jim, despite the doofus act, and your pretense at an ego the size of Alaska, you’ll make a mighty fine captain someday. And if you ever tell anyone I said that, I’ll deny it.”

Jim held the phone away from his head for a second, looking at it as if it had somehow malfunctioned. “Thank you, sir,” he said finally.

“You’re welcome. Someone will get back to you about the dogs. And I should go—I’ve got a call coming in on my cell from Matt Trotter.”

“Bye, Cap.”

“Bye.”

Jim put his phone on the table, and spun it slowly a few times.

“What’d he say to you?”

“He said,” Jim said, frowning slightly, “that I’d make a good captain someday.”


“That’s insane,” Jim said. “I mean, can you imagine? Me, in charge of people? In a life-and-death situation?”

“Yes.”

Jim opened his mouth, and then closed it again. He was still making like a fish a couple minutes later, when his phone rang. The caller ID said “restricted number.”

“Hello?”

“Kirk? This is Matt Trotter, from Central Station’s B-shift.”

“Yessir. How can I help out?”

“Chris Pike said you could take care of the Cozarts’ dogs for a while, and if you don’t mind, Angelina would gratefully take you up on that.”

“Sure thing, Cap. I can pick ‘em up any time. What’s the best way to go about it?”

“Well, they live right in Cedar Rapids—not too far from the hospital, luckily—so if you don’t mind, the easiest thing on Angelina would be if you picked up her keys at the hospital, got the dogs, and then gave the keys to their neighbor.”

“I can do that, any time.”

“That’s terrific. That’ll be a real load of Angelina’s mind, that someone they know will be looking after the dogs.”

“It’s the least I can do. And Cap—how’s … how’s Ronnie doing?”

Trotter’s sigh came through loud and clear over the cell phone connection. “He’s been snowed under since the medics brought him in. He’s stable, but he doesn’t know about his leg yet. It’s gonna be tough for him. Real tough. You know they’re expecting, right?”
Jim froze. “No. I didn’t know that. I guess I hadn’t really talked to Ronnie in a while.”

“No for about seven months or so, I’d say.”

“Wow. That’s … complicated.”

“It is. Makes this whole thing a little different for Ronnie than it might’ve been. Can’t say as how I understand it at all—or that I’d want to.”

“Wow,” Jim repeated. “Okay. I guess I’ll head up to the hospital and get those keys, then.”

“Thank you. I’ll talk to you later, then.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Jim put his phone down again, and buried his face in his hands, elbows on the table.

“Bad news?” Len asked.

“Not … exactly. Ronnie’s wife is expecting. Soon. I had no idea.”

Len whistled. “Yeah. I heard you say ‘complicated.’ Good word.”

“Understatement of the century, too. And Bones?”

“Yeah, Jim?”

“I sure hope you like greyhounds.”

“Liked Eric and Tom’s two just fine. Well-mannered animals, just so long as they got a good run every day.”

“Those your friends in Savannah?”

“Yeah. Don’t have too many left. Most of our friends took Joss’s side. They didn’t see the difference between the kind of relationship he and I had agreed on, and what actually happened. It was a damned shame side-taking was necessary. But apparently it was, and they took mine. I stayed with them after I left Joss, for the two months between then and when I came out here.”

“Wow. Two months? I guess I sort of had the impression you packed a bag, got in the van, and left the same day.”

Len laughed. “Now, I’m not sayin’ it wasn’t impulsive to come to Iowa, of all places. But I couldn’t exactly leave one job without another. So yeah. Not quite two months.” He cleared his throat. “So—you gotta go up to the city, right?”

Jim rubbed his forehead. “Yeah. I better get going, actually.”

“You mind if I maybe don’t go?” Len said. “I don’t know the family, and they won’t let anyone in to see Cozart yet, so I think I’d rather sit it out. I’ll call Cap back, and let him know I’ll make some meals to stock up their freezer. That’s what I can do, I think.”

“That’d be perfect, Bones.”

“Good. I’ll get on that tomorrow. Do the shopping after we go to your mom’s—and then cook on Monday.”
“Perfect,” Jim reiterated.

“Gimme a buzz when you get home with the dogs,” Len said. “And, uh, I could come down, if you
wouldn’t mind a little company.”

Jim burst out laughing. “Well, I guess I don’t have to figure out a way to try to convince you to come
over tonight, even though there’ll be two dogs there, too.”

“Well, it wouldn’t take a lotta convincing, because you’ll be there.”

“Yeah?”

“Course, you idiot.”

Jim stood up, and kissed the top of Leonard’s head. “Love you. I’ll call you in a couple hours—it’ll
take a while to get the dogs, and then I’ll just go ahead and run ‘em before it gets dark.”

“Good. I’ll get some takeout for dinner on my way.”

“Kay. Bye.”

Jim left, but returned five seconds later.

“Uh … my car’s still at the station.”

“So it is,” Len said. “All right. I’ll take you up to the station, then. Let’s go.”

~!~!~!~

Len did some laundry and some cleaning, and then planned a list of meals he could make for the
Cozarts to put in their freezer. Really, for Angelina to put in the freezer, as it was likely Ronnie
would be eating hospital food for some time yet.

Halfway through making the list for chicken marsala, he realized he’d never called Pike back. He
swiped away the shopping list app and pulled up the number Pike had called him from, and returned
the call.

“Pike.”

“Cap, it’s Len McCoy.”

“Len. You doing all right?”

“Yeah. It’s tough news, but pretty much what I was expecting. And I’ve been in this business long
enough to know there was nothing else I coulda done. And you?”

“I’m fine, thanks for asking. Just trying to make sure all my boys and girls are taking things okay,
and trying to help Matt Trotter with some arrangements for the Cozarts. It’s hard for everyone when
one of us goes down. But it helps everyone, somehow, to help the family.”

“About that,” McCoy said, and filled Pike in on his plans.

“That’s terrific, Len. They’ll really appreciate that. The neighbors have a key, and are handling all
the deliveries and that sort of thing.”

Pike gave Len the neighbors’ contact information.
“Oh,” Len said, pretending it was an afterthought. “I talked to Jim, like you said. He’s doing fine.”

“Good,” Pike said. “Coming from you, I’ll actually believe that.”

“What, you didn’t believe him when he said he decided not to beat himself up?”

As soon as those words were out of Len’s mouth, he realized he’d screwed up. That he’d as good as told Pike he was there when Jim said those words to Pike.

But Pike didn’t seem to notice.

“Well, it’s good to have a second opinion. He’s been known to make it sound like he’s okay when he’s really not.”

“Hm,” Len said.

“Anyhow—thanks for checking in, and thanks in advance for filling up the Cozarts’ freezer. I’ll let you get on with your day.”

“Okay, bye.”

Len finished his lengthy shopping list, and decided he might as well go to the store. Over an hour later, he was back, and filled the refrigerator and the cupboards with his purchases. It was too soon to cook—Jim would be calling soon.

Len booted up his laptop, and read his emails from the last twenty four hours. One of the messages was a digest from his medical school class’s alumni group, with updates from various people about how their residencies and careers were going. Len stared at the message for a long time, and closed his email reader. He opened his browser, and started a task most of his classmates had completed four years ago.

He was jolted from his work when the phone rang. He listened to the Verizon Lady telling him who was calling.


Jim had obviously gotten hold of his phone again.

“Hey, darlin’.”

“Hey. I’m home, with two tired-out dogs. Sorry it took so long—some stuff came up. I’ll tell you about it later. You still up for coming over?”

Len looked at the clock on his laptop—it was already eight o’clock. He’d been so engrossed in his task that he hadn’t realized how much time had passed. His stomach growled, reminding him of his promise to bring dinner.

“You bet. Pizza, or Chinese?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just as long as it comes with a side of Bones.”

Len chuckled. “Well, that can be arranged. I’ll stop by Mama Fong’s on my way. See you soon.”

“Hey, you sound, I don’t know … distracted or something.”

“Well, I had some things come up too. I’ll tell you about it when I get there. You’ll like it.”
“Good. See you soon.”

~!~!~!~

Len struggled up to Jim’s front door with his laptop and a huge bag of takeout. The door swung open before he could try to figure out how to manage without putting anything down.

“Yo, Bonesy-baby.”

“Yo, ‘hot sexy fireman boyfriend.’ And it’s a damned good thing I was at home when you called, and not in the middle of the fucking grocery store, thank you very much.”

“Um, oops?”

“Oh, my ass. Take this,” Len said, thrusting the bag at him. “Because you’re not touching my laptop. Ever.”

They went into the apartment, and Jim set the bag on the table. Len deposited his laptop on a side table in the living room, and then found Jim in the kitchen getting plates out. He cupped the side of Jim’s face, his gentle touch belying the crankiness of his words, and kissed him.

“Everything okay? You said something came up, so I EEEEP!” Leonard jumped a foot in the air as a wet nose nudged his crotch inquiringly.

Jim laughed. “Bones, meet Millie. Millie, no. Sit. And that’s Pete. Good boy, Pete. Pete’s a little shy; Millie’s not. They’re both friendly, though.”

“Jesus. I forgot about the dogs.”

Bones eyed the two greyhounds, who looked up at him with big eyes that seemed to take up most of their small, narrow heads.

“Well, you two are probably wondering what the hell is going on right now, aren’t you,” Len said, kneeling on the floor and letting Millie sniff him—his hand, thank you very much. “But it’ll all turn out all right. You’ll see.”

Pete thumped his skinny tail on the floor, as if he agreed.

Millie licked Len’s face, and put a paw up on his knee. “Yeah, all right. Doggie kisses. How ‘bout you, Pete? Or are you too dignified for that?”

Pete’s tail thumped again as he heard his name.

“Gotcha,” Len said. “Good to know. Now that we’re all on the same page, your host and I would like to eat supper, if that’s all right with you two.”

The dogs didn’t protest, so Len washed up at the kitchen sink, pulled two beers out of the fridge, and set them on the table, where Jim was starting to open the take-out containers.

“I’ve got it all worked out. Days we’re working, Mom will have these guys at the farm. And when we’re not, I’ll have ‘em.” Jim looked at Len. “Uh, if that’s okay with you.”

“That’s fine, Jim. I like dogs just fine, just so long as they don’t rule the roost.”

Millie and Pete sat near the table, looking at the diners expectantly, wondering if perhaps these two humans would give them some of their food.
“Oh, these two are well trained. Millie, Pete, go lie down,” Jim said, pointing at the two large dog beds in the corner.

Pete made a sound that sounded for all the world like a sigh, and he and Millie plopped themselves down on their beds, ever vigilant for potentially falling morsels.

Len served himself up a plateful of food, and remembered he hadn’t finished his question.

“So, what came up, anyhow?”

Jim sighed, and frowned at his plate. “Ronnie woke up for the first time while I was getting the keys from Angelina. He wasn’t supposed to be awake yet. He was in a lot of pain, and didn’t remember what had happened.”

“Oh.” Len grew slightly queasy, realizing that some of that was his doing.

“I … explained. And then he realized that his leg was gone. It was … Bones, it was awful.”

“Jesus.” Len put his fork down. “Sorry, Jim.”

“He, uh, remembered a little bit before they snowed him under again. He looked right at me, and … God, Bones. He said …”

Len waited several seconds.

“What’d he say, Jim?”

“His eyes were all glassed over, and he looked right at me, and he said it. ‘You shoulda left me.’”

“No,” Len said, instantly. “No, you shouldn’t have. And you know it, and he’ll know it too. It might take a while, but he’ll know it.”

“He wasn’t even supposed to be awake, Bones! And he could come up with that!”

“Lemme tell you something, Jim. I think he’s one of these people who needs more drugs than other people their weight to achieve certain effects. I gave him enough shit to take down a rhino, and he was still talking in the ambulance.”

“That’s … that’s kind of what the doc said, who came in and kicked us out. That’s what he said to Angelina, I mean.”

“Did you stick around with her, for a little while?” Len asked. “I mean, if she was on her own?”

“Yeah. His folks are flying in tonight, from Philly. And her sister’s coming tomorrow. But yeah, I stuck around with her for a little while.” Jim poked at his food, and moved some things around on his plate. “It was so hard for her to see him like that.”

“I’m sure it was,” Len said.

Jim took a deep breath, and blew it out again. “All right. I gotta stop thinking about this. Good luck with that, right?”

“Well, maybe I’ll tell you about what I was doing when you called.”

“Perfect. Tell me,” Jim said, spearing a piece of broccoli.
“I did some research. I made a list of places I’ll interview for residencies.”

“Bones! That’s excellent! So … you’re gonna do it?”

“Maybe.”

“Why wouldn’t you?” Jim asked, head tilted.

“Because, the places are everywhere, Jim. All over the country. Only one of the places on my list is local. And … Jim, this is kind of a bombshell, but … would you think about maybe going with me?”

“Yes.”

Len continued, talking faster and faster as he went on. “All the cities on my list have career fire departments. I checked. And they all seem like decent places to live. I mean, I know you’re born and bred here, but if there’s any chance you’d—”

“Yes.”

“Hear me out, okay? All the places on my list are large enough cities that the fire departments are always looking for people. And you’ve got experience and everything, so it probably would be easy for—”

“Bones. Stop,” Jim said, smiling as he covered Len’s hand with his own. “I said yes, two rants ago.”

Len’s eyes squinted at Jim. “You did?”

“Yup. You wasted four perfectly good sentences of justification. I’d go with you if I’d be unemployed, or working in a grocery store stocking shelves. With a fox, in a box. In the rain, on a train. In a house, with a mouse. Et cetera.”

“No foolin’?”

“None at all. When do we go?”

Len laughed, with a slight tinge of hysteria coloring the sound. “Uh, nothing starts till July. I’ll interview this winter, and get set up with the crazy computer system or whatever the hell it is that decides who goes where. It’s called ‘matching.’ They tell you towards the end of March where you’re going, or if you didn’t get matched. It’s totally bizarre. But that’s how it works, nationwide. Don’t much like the idea of a computer deciding my fate, but that’s how it works.”

“That is a little strange. Logical, I suppose, but still strange. Like Spock. What happens if the computer doesn’t hook you up with one of your choices?” Jim asked. Len noticed Jim was finally eating, and decided maybe he ought to do the same.

“Oh, then they call it ‘scrambling.’ You get a list of places with unfilled positions, and scramble around till you get an offer.”

“That’s more like real life, I suppose,” Jim said.

“You wanna look at my list after dinner?”

“Yeah.”

They finished their meal, and cleaned up. Len opened his laptop, and showed Jim his list.
“Seattle—wow, that’d be cool. Miami—very sexy. Cleveland—I’ve got a cousin there.”

Jim scanned the rest of the short list, inserting comments.


“Well, their program is pretty new. And to be honest, all I know about any of these programs is what I could find on line, and what I heard from a couple old classmates. But I put that on there, because, what the hell. It’s right here, so I might as well find out about it.”

“Seriously, Bones. Don’t settle for something you don’t want on my account. Seems to me like you kind of do that in your life. You let Joss go first with his residency, and then put your career off again when he got that job. And I’m telling you, I’ll go anywhere. Okay?”

Len looked down at the floor, realizing Jim was absolutely right. “Okay.”

“Find out about all the programs you want. I’m not saying don’t apply to the Iowa City program. If you like it, that’s great. I’m just saying don’t settle. Not on my account. Promise me that?”

“Yeah,” Len said slowly. “All right. I promise.”

“And I promise you that I swear it doesn’t matter where we go. As long as it’s us, it doesn’t matter where.”

“And your mom? What’ll she think of this?” Len asked.

Jim laughed. “She’s been trying to get me to ‘branch out,’ as she calls it, for a while, now. To be honest, what she would really like is if I went back to school, and did something a little more … not firefighting. But I like it, Bones, and it’s useful, and it’s what I do.”

“But maybe we shouldn’t say anything to her just yet, okay?” Len said. “I mean, she’s your mom, but to be honest, I guess I’d be a little uncomfortable with saying anything about it to anyone at all, just yet. At least until I’ve started some interviews.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I really don’t know what my chances are, having been out of med school for four years. I just don’t know what the programs will think of that. And I’m not all that comfortable with the idea of explaining that my ex-boyfriend and I decided not to try to match together, and all that. I’ll tell them there were family circumstances, and that’s all. And I just don’t know how that’s gonna go over.”

“But … it’s not like you’ve been sitting around twiddling your thumbs. Hell, you’ve been practicing emergency medicine this whole time.”

Len frowned and shook his head. “Not even close, Jim. Being a paramedic is like … having a cookbook. You have a list of ingredients you’re allowed to use. A list of recipes you can make for certain occasions. Sometimes, you can get permission from medical control to deviate from the recipe, maybe add a little more salt, or use pecans instead of walnuts. But you can’t make up your own recipe, and you can’t use your own ingredients. And even if you know a better recipe, because you learned it in medical school, if it isn’t in your cookbook, you can’t use it. So it’s not the same—you’re not a chef; you’re a short-order cook.”

“Well, that’s a good explanation,” Jim said. “But still—don’t sell yourself short, Bones. And you better believe we’re gonna practice these interviews.”
“Like … role-play?”

“Yep.”

“Uh … that could be weird.”

“Nah. I’ll be some snooty old doctor, and you’ll charm the pants off me,” Jim said. “No problem.”

“Never takes much to get the pants off you,” Len said, cracking a small grin, for what seemed like the first time in weeks.

“Nope,” Jim said. He sat back on the sofa, one leg tucked up under him, and smirked lightly at Len. “But maybe it’d be fun to make you have to work for it, sometime.”

“Yeah, but not today, all right? Because just … not,” Len said.

“No. It wouldn’t be fun today,” Jim admitted.

“Well.” Len returned Jim’s smirk. “What would be fun today? Seemed like maybe you had something in mind, earlier. Somethin’ we agreed would keep.”

“Umm …”

“Now don’t tell me Jim Kirk is gonna go shy on me? Well, that’s just precious.” Len’s smirk, eyebrows and all, was his personal best, he thought.

“Shoot, Bones! I’m trying to work up the nerve, here, and you’re … you’re flummoxing me.”

Len issued a dirty chuckle. “First time for everything, now, ain’t there?”

“Yes! That’s my point, exactly. Except—I don’t know if it really is. I don’t think it is. But I’m not actually sure.” Jim looked at Len, and chewed on his lower lip. Len stopped him, by leaning in and kissing that lip instead.

“Well, you’re gonna hafta explain that one, darlin’. ‘Cause you just plain lost me.”

“Okay. Uh … shit.” Jim stopped trying to explain himself for a moment, and instead pulled Len to him, and kissed him back, working them both up as he tried to gather his wits. Which, if he’d thought about it at all, might not have seemed like a good strategy.

“That’s not a very good explanation, sugar, but I like it just the same.”

Jim pulled himself up off the couch, and re-arranged his body, so when he let gravity take hold of him again, he was straddling Len, who looked up at him, questioning but trusting at the same time.

Jim pressed Len down into the sofa, sliding one hand under Len’s t-shirt and up his side as his other hand traced Len’s expressive eyebrows, ever so gently.

“Jesus, Bones. You’re just so … everything. I love how you make me feel. And I love everything we do together. All of it.”

“And?” Len whispered. “Ask, Jim. If it’s not my cup of tea, I’ll tell you. And who knows—maybe we’ll try something new, and—”

Jim finally just blurted it out. “Bones, Bones, I really, really wanna fuck you, so bad, but I don’t know if you go that way, and if you don’t that’s okay, but if you do, oh god oh god, Bones—can I?
Can we?"

Len wrapped his arms around Jim, and pulled him in so hard the breath was forced out of both of them.

"Yeah, Jim. I was startin’ to think you’d never ask. But that’s a definite, absolute, you-better-believe it ‘yes.’"

"Yeah?" Jim said, nuzzling in to Len’s neck. "‘Cause you’re such a … a toppy top, that I thought maybe … uh …"

"Joss wouldn’t top. And I was startin’ to be afraid maybe you wouldn’t. But I do want you to; oh yes, I do, sugah."

"Bones, bonesbonesbones, you should know by now, there’s hardly anything I wouldn’t,” Jim said, right in Len’s ear, as he simultaneously nibbled the earlobe and eased Len’s shirt up to his armpits. "Unless you wouldn’t. Then I wouldn’t."

"Oh, but I really, really would, sweetheart,” Len said, all snarkiness gone from his voice as he sat up slightly to let Jim pull the shirt over his head. He gasped and arched as Jim’s mouth found an already peaked nipple and worried it until Len was sure he’d explode, just from that. And when Jim’s breath somehow panted hotly in his ear at the same time, he—

"Shit!” Len sat bolt upright, nearly tossing Jim off of him.

Millie’s pointy head, tongue lolling out from between the pointed canines, smiled back at him.

"Jesus!” Len said to Millie. “Okay, we’re goin’ to the bedroom, and closin’ the god-damned door, right the fuck now! Because I’ve got somethin’ really fuckin’ hot coming to me, you hound dog, and I know you’re probably spayed, so you can’t possibly understand, so just—"

Jim chuckled and pulled Len up from the couch. “Cockblocked by a dog. Not for long, though. Go lie down, Millie. Good girl. C’mon, Bones, that’s it—one foot in front of the other, almost there.” Jim closed the bedroom door, and spun Len around so they faced each other. He could see Len’s pulse pounding in his neck.

"You okay there, Bones?"

"Peachy."

"Um.” Jim looked at the floor for a second.

"What’s goin’ on, sweetheart?"

"Uh, can I ask you something, as long as we’ve been interrupted by the dog anyhow?"

"Course you can. You can always, always ask me whatever you want."

"Okay. Uh, if Joss wouldn’t, but you wanna … you know, switch things up a little, uh, you have, right?"

"Yeah, darlin’. I have. Remember how I said he and I would sometimes agree on goin’ outside the home for things we weren’t gettin’ inside the home, but needed?”

"Oh. Uh-huh."
“Sometimes he needed … a womanly touch. And sometimes I needed, well, a good hard fuck. So we each had—oh lord, I hate the word, but it’s the right one—fuck buddies for that sort of thing. That we knew about, and agreed were okay. And it was fine. So yeah, I certainly have.”

“Okay. Good. So, did the dog totally wreck the mood, or—”

Len answered by grabbing the bottom of Jim’s t-shirt and pulling it upwards, and wasn’t disappointed when Jim raised his arms to help the garment disappear. He went straight for Jim’s sweatpants, making sure to catch the waistband of his boxers at the same time, to save a step later.

“Mmm, you’re hot for it, huh, Bones,” Jim said, all shyness and hesitancy gone, as he worked open the button on Len’s jeans. He dragged the zipper down, tooth by tooth, and palmed the rapidly-filling cock he found under the denim.

Len couldn’t help it—he thrust his hips forwards, filling Jim’s hand with his erection.

“Mmm, you’re hot for it, huh, Bones,” Jim said, all shyness and hesitancy gone, as he worked open the button on Len’s jeans. He dragged the zipper down, tooth by tooth, and palmed the rapidly-filling cock he found under the denim.

Len couldn’t help it—he thrust his hips forwards, filling Jim’s hand with his erection.

“Okay, so maybe not slow,” Jim said. “You want it fast, baby?”

“Fuck yeah,” Len panted, his hips moving forward to Jim’s thigh and hip, and backwards to the hands parting his cheeks, not sure which direction was the best.

“Okay, so maybe not slow.” Jim said. “You want it fast, baby?”

“Hard and fast?” Jim said, moving his hands aside to yank the covers off the bed and lay Len down on the mattress.

“Well, I know what to do about that,” Jim said, removing the jeans entirely too slowly for Len’s increasing urgency, laying a hot breath onto the crotch of Len’s briefs as he slowly pulled the heavy denim jeans down to Len’s ankles.

Len kicked the pants aside, almost frantically, and lost what little patience he had left, removing his own briefs and pressing his naked body against Jim’s.

“Yeah, look at you, Bones,” Jim whispered. “I never shoulda worried. Guess I might just take my time with you, drive you crazy, like you always wanna do with me, huh?”

“No! Jesus, Jim, you gotta—”

Jim chuckled as he ran his fingertips down the valley between Len’s strong back muscles, down, down to the cleft of his buttocks.

And darned if Len didn’t whine, maybe whimper a little, as Jim used a knee to nudge his legs apart, and, both of them still standing, ground his thigh into Len’s groin as he let his fingers stray into the hot cleft they’d found.

“Okay, so maybe not slow,” Jim said. “You want it fast, baby?”

“Fuck yeah,” Len panted, his hips moving forward to Jim’s thigh and hip, and backwards to the hands parting his cheeks, not sure which direction was the best.

“Hard and fast?” Jim said, moving his hands aside to yank the covers off the bed and lay Len down on the mattress.

“What do you fucking think, genius?” Len growled, every part of him trying simultaneously to flex upwards to meet every part of Jim that wasn’t already touching him. Jim leaned down and kissed him in a way that made it feel like the fire between the two of them had stolen all the oxygen from the room, leaving him with nothing to breathe but the breath of his lover.

“I fucking think,” Jim said, pulling back for a moment, “that could be arranged. ‘Cause holy shit, Bones.”

Without taking his eyes off Len, Jim opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out the lube and a condom, and set them in easy reach. He squeezed a healthy dollop of the clear liquid into his palm, and let it warm, as he allowed his other hand to trace circles on Len’s belly, then spiral down to palm Len’s cock, which jumped at his touch.
Len once more arched into Jim’s touch, but kept his wits just enough to take that opportunity to shove a thick pillow under his hips, as long as they were up anyhow. He looked up at Jim, who was lightly biting his own bottom lip as he gazed down at Len.

Len saw the look on Jim’s face—the lip between his teeth, the wide eyes with already-dilated pupils, and the ever-so-slight crinkling of the brow line. He reached up to touch Jim’s cheek, and Jim, as always, leaned into his touch. The wrinkle in his brow smoothed out, and his eyes closed slightly.

“Jim,” Len murmured. “No stalling, sweetheart. Don’t be nervous—it’s me. We’re so easy together, you and me, that no matter what happens it won’t go wrong.

“I know,” Jim said in a hoarse whisper. “God, Bones, look at you.”

“Pretty busy lookin’ at you. Now c’mon, darlin’,” Len said, pulling one of his legs towards him and hooking it over Jim’s shoulder in an unsubtle hint. Their discussion hadn’t cut the mood at all; they’d hardly touched each other, but both their cocks were turgid and hot, and already leaking pre-come.

Jim seemed to finally notice that he was holding a quantity of lube, and began putting it to work. He slicked up the fingers of one hand, and ran them along Len’s perineum, from balls to hole, and circled with the tip of a finger until it slid in. His other hand stroked Len’s cock, much more gently than usual. Len almost protested, until he realized how erotic the combination was—being penetrated and stretched, and not timidly, either, at the same time as his cock got the lightest of treatments. He found his hands wanting to clutch whatever was handy, and they found Jim’s sturdy legs. He allowed the sensations to wash over him, uttering moan-sighs along the way.

“Mm, yeah, right there,” he said lazily, as Jim’s probing, pulling fingers stroked across the exact right spot. He hadn’t even noticed when the second finger came into play, and barely noticed the third. He did notice, though, when Jim suddenly did … something, that made him see stars and thrust his hips involuntarily.

“Fuhhh … Jesus, what the hell was that?”

Jim’s smirk was back, and Len honestly couldn’t say he minded one bit.

“You’re the one who’s studied anatomy; you figure it out. Actually, don’t. Just lay back and take it, baby.”

Len decided at that moment that he’d just do whatever Jim said, probably forever.

Len clutched at the bedsheets and shouted as Jim did that again.

“Fuck, Jim. Now, nownownow!”

Len groaned as Jim’s hand suddenly weren’t touching him any more. He heard the subtle sound of a condom packet opening, and craned his neck up to watch as Jim dressed for the occasion and fumbled with the lube.

“Now, darlin’. Do it!”

Jim nudged the head of his cock up against Len’s well-prepared entrance, and slid in, just barely.

“Boooones,” he said, and Len was quite sure he’d never heard anything that sounded so filthy as that single, drawn-out syllable.

“Go, sugah. I ain’t gonna break.”
Jim slid in, tantalizingly slowly, partly teasing, partly letting Len get used to him.

“Fuck, Bones.”

“Yeah, darlin’, that’s what I’m hopin’ for. Good ‘n hard.”

Jim pulled out, and pushed in again, not as slowly as before.

“Aw, yeah … go, go!”

Jim took Len at his word.

Len saw stars, and became lost in them. He was vaguely aware that his own hand was working his cock in time with Jim’s thrusts, which more than met the hard-and-fast criteria he’d been hoping for. He couldn’t tell who was making what sounds, and it didn’t matter. He tried to tell Jim when he was about to come, but he couldn’t; not with words. His legs wrapped around Jim’s torso, just as Jim pushed in harder than ever, and stayed there, rigid, and oddly silent, as Len felt heat pulse inside his very core. Jim’s low groan was the last straw, and Len called out wordlessly as his muscles spasmed, and his cock spurted jets of white between his body and his lover’s. Jim’s weight collapsed onto Len, who rolled them to their sides with a stray bit of energy he didn’t even know he had, and they stroked and petted each other’s sweat-slicked skin for a long, long time.

They were alive.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Mutual aid agreements are arrangements made in advance between neighboring companies or districts to allow manpower and apparatus to be requested from adjacent districts in the event of a major incident. An agreement for automatic mutual aid does not require that a chief from the requested district be consulted when aid is requested; the dispatcher can automatically call out the adjacent district.
Rehab

Chapter 15: Rehab

Monday morning

“You don’t have to come with me,” Jim said to Len.

“I know I don’t have to. But it’s the right thing to do. If there’s anything he needs to say to me, or ask me, to help him feel better, that’s the least I can do,” Len said. “Even if he cusses me out, blames me—I don’t mind.”

“I’m kind of preparing for that sort of thing myself,” Jim said. “To be honest, I’m kind of dreading this visit, after what he said last time I was there.”

“Well, he was pretty loaded with drugs at that point, Jim. Certainly not thinking straight, for any number of reasons. My bet would be he won’t even remember what he said.”

“Yeah, but he might still feel the same way—wishing we’d left him to die—even if he doesn’t remember his first moments of waking up after the surgery. When he said those things.” Jim turned his coffee mug around on the table a few times, and took a long sip of the brew. “I guess I wish Angelina had said why Ronnie asked to see me today. Just so I’d … you know, have some idea of what to expect.”

“It’ll be what it’ll be.”

Jim sniffed. “You’re the calm one all of a sudden.”

“Well, I guess I’ve gotten jaded to this sort of thing. I mean, patients will sometimes heap abuse on you, partly because they’re in unbelievably horrific situations, and partly because sometimes they just need someone to blame. And the medic in the back of the ambulance with you is pretty handy that way,” Len said.

“I didn’t mean I don’t think you care,” Jim said.

“I know.”

The timer on the oven beeped, and Len removed the muffin tins.

“Perfect,” he said.

“Just one, Bones? Pleeeeeease?”

Len scowled towards the table. “I already said, not unless there’s one that comes out mangled. And I know the trick of purposely mangling one, too, so don’t try that either. I swear, you’re worse than the dogs. They’re just sitting there, looking up hopefully.”

Jim made an indignant little noise. “I didn’t even do anything!”

“You were thinking about it, though.”

“You know, there was this cartoon George and Pete used to watch when they were younger—Clifford the Big Red Dog? And the dogs had this saying: ‘If it’s on the floor, or headed that way, it’s for the dogs, and that’s okay!’ I kind of think they had the right idea. Maybe I’ll just hang out on the
floor and wait to see if you drop one. ‘Cause Bones: anything called ‘Mama McCoy’s Magical Movement Muffins?’ I gotta try it.”

“They’re just bran muffins, Jim. To get the innards going. Opiates work great on pain, but boy, do you get clogged up after a couple days on the good stuff.”

“But you put chocolate chips in them!”

“Just so there’s some hope Ronnie will actually eat them. Which reminds me: don’t give any to the dogs, since chocolate is deadly poisonous to them. And you’re not gonna give up, are you.”

“Have you _met_ me?” Jim said.

“Up close and personal, darlin’.”

Jim batted his eyelashes.

“Jesus,” Len muttered, as he turned the first batch of muffins out onto a cooling rack. “I surrender. Here. Be careful, it’s still hot.”

“I win! I win!”

“Does the phrase ‘no blow jobs for a week’ mean anything to you?”

“Shutting up,” Jim said, around a mouthful of muffin. “Mmm, tell your mom these are great.”

“I would, if she still spoke to me.”

Jim hastily swallowed his large bite of muffin. “What?”

“I said, I would, if she still spoke to me.”

Jim stared at Len. “How many months has it been now, and I didn’t even know this?”

“A couple, and it’s because I don’t ever talk about my family. And whatever part of you has any adult sense kindly figured that out and didn’t pester me about it.”

“Skeletons in the closet, Bones?”

“My mother’s a Southern Belle. If I’d kept certain things in the closet, where they belong, maybe we’d still be speaking.”

“Oh.”

Len squinted at Jim.

“You had no idea, did you.”

“Um. No.” Jim had the good grace to look embarrassed. “It’s not entirely false, this idea that I tend to be a little self-centered. From time to time. I thought I was doing better with that. But I guess not.”

“You’re fine, Jim. I don’t exactly volunteer a lotta information about life back in Georgia.”

“But I could’ve asked. About your family. Especially since, like, you’ve met mine.”

“Well, I wouldn’ta said much. ‘Cause there’s not much to say. My dad died a long, painful death from cancer. The way in which his last few months passed was a travesty against life. In a better
time, a better place, someone would’ve been allowed to give him what he was asking for. What was coming anyhow. But maybe without the pain and indignity of sixteen months of agony that his doctors—and my mother—called ‘preserving the sanctity of life.’”

“Sorry, Bones. I’m really sorry,” Jim said.

“‘s all right. It was a long time ago.”

“It’s not all right. I’m sorry that happened.” Jim abandoned his hard-won muffin, albeit temporarily, and went into the kitchen to hug Len. “I’m sorry.”

Len let himself be hugged, and realized, after a moment, that it was exactly what he needed. He leaned in to Jim, and rested his head on Jim’s shoulder. They held onto each other for quite some time, and, in one of those magical moments, slowly let go at the same time.

“Thanks, darlin’.”

“Any time, Bones.” Jim looked at the clock, and sighed. “But we oughta get going, if we’re gonna be there by ten.” He grabbed the muffin from the table, and finished it in two bites.

“Yeah. Okay. You sure it’s okay for us to show up at the same time?”

“Why not? I mean, ten is the start of general visiting hours, and today’s the first day he’s wanting visitors, so probably a bunch of people from B-shift will show up at ten.”

Len sighed. “I meant, will it make people suspicious. About us.”

“Oh,” Jim said, frowning. “We can park far out in the parking lot. Then nobody’ll see that we showed up together. That okay? Or would you prefer to drive separately?”

“No,” Len said. “I guess that’d be pretty ridiculous. Okay. You’re right. Lemme just put these muffins in the box, and then we can go.”

Len packed up the muffins, and they got in Jim’s car.

“Can I ask a question?” Jim said, after he backed the car out of the driveway.

“Go for it.”

“So … what should we expect? I mean, about how Ronnie is, physically? I don’t really know anything about, uh, amputation.”

“Okay. With any luck, they were able to keep his knee joint. That’ll make it a lot easier to use a prosthesis later. But as for how he is right now … the good thing is, he didn’t have any other injuries. So unless there were complications, he should be stable and out of the woods. But he’ll be having a lot of pain. Partly from what’s essentially a broken bone, partly from closing the wound. And, they might’ve kept some of the damaged areas to try to create a longer stump, to make it easier to use a prosthesis later. So if he’s still got some of the really injured areas, that’ll be hurting him. Also, sometimes people with amputations get this thing called ‘phantom pain.’”

Jim nodded. “I’ve heard about that. It’s where they think they’re feeling something from the part that’s not there anymore, right?”

“Yeah. It can be pretty difficult to treat. But it’s not a foregone conclusion, either.”

“Okay. Anything else I should know?”
Len scrunched up his face as he thought. “Well, he’ll look like total shit. And I mean that. Emotional stuff aside, his whole system has been through the wringer. Bodies don’t like to be cut up.”

“Uh, yeah. I guess not.” Jim cleared his throat. “But it’s the emotional stuff that I’m most worried about, Bones. I mean, what do I even say to him?”

Len shook his head. “I don’t have a good answer for that, Jim. Partly because I don’t know him at all, and you do. But I think you’ll know what to do. You’re not a bullshit artist—you tell it like it is. And you’re a good listener—the kind of listener that can get people to say stuff they maybe didn’t want to say, but needed to say. Like your brother said, about how you should be an interrogator for the CIA. So just be you, and I’ll bet he’ll appreciate that.”

“Okay,” Jim said. “I’ll try.”

~!~!~!~

Twenty minutes later, they were exiting the stairwell on the third floor of the hospital, and looking for room 319. They were headed in the right direction. A nurses’ station was at the entrance to the unit they were looking for, so they stopped there to check in.

“Hi,” Jim said. “We’re uh, here to see Ronnie Cozart, in 319. Is this an okay time?”

The nurse checked the list. “Uh, his wife said they were expecting a Jim Kirk at ten. Is that you?”

“That’s me,” Jim said.

“Okay, great. You can head on back.”

“Thanks.” Jim flashed his blinding smile, and it seemed to Len that he almost couldn’t help it.

“I can come back another time,” Len said, as they walked down the hallway.

“Naw, at least come in and say hi, and drop off the muffins.”

“Okay,” Len said. “But from what the nurse said, I really think he’s just expecting you.”

“We’ll see what happens, okay?”

Jim tapped on the door cautiously.

“Come on in,” said a voice that was hoarse but indisputably Ronnie’s.

Jim and Len walked in, and were both relieved that there was no roommate.

“Hey, Ronnie,” Jim said.

Cozart did indeed, as Len had warned, look like complete and utter shit. His skin was pasty, and the dark lankness of his hair brought out a greenish tone in his face. The most obvious thing, though, was the tightly bandaged stump below his left knee.

“Jimbo. Thanks for coming. Pardon me for not getting up, ha ha, right? And, uh … you’re from the B-shift at 7s too, right? Sorry, I’m terrible with names.”

“McCoy. Leonard McCoy.”

“He’s our medic,” Jim added, just to get that out of the way.
“Oh,” Cozart said, nodding to Len. “I sort of think I remember that Barney was working on the civilian. So you, uh …”

“Yeah. I treated you at the scene. I’m really sorry to hear about your leg.”

“I know you did everything you could,” Ronnie said. “I don’t remember a thing, though. But thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Len said. “Uh, I brought some muffins. They’ve got a lot of fiber, which is important when you’re on the kind of drugs they’re loading you up with right now.”

“Thanks a lot, man. Really. For everything.” Ronnie said.

“You’re welcome. And I know you wanted to talk to Jim, so I’ll go get some coffee, and leave you guys to talk,” Len said.

He flicked his eyes over to Jim’s for just long enough to catch a panicked no-don’t-leave-me look, which Jim subdued quickly.

“You’ll probably see my wife down there,” Ronnie said. “You can’t miss her. Redhead, gorgeous, and really, really pregnant. I had to send her out for a while. To make her take a break, you know?”

“I do,” Len said, recalling hours, days, spent at his father’s bedside. He looked down at Ronnie again and noticed a sheen of sweat on his lip and forehead. “Do you need more pain meds? I can get a nurse on my way out.”

Ronnie shook his head, and pointed to the infusion pump over his bed. “Nah. I got this nifty button to press. But I’m holdin’ off for a bit—kinda want a clear head for a little while.”

“Don’t let the pain get on top of you,” Len warned. “That stuff works better when you keep up with it. But—I understand about the clear head. You take care, all right? And Jim, I’ll be down in the coffee shop.”

“Thanks,” Ronnie said.

Len took off in a hurry, not because he found the situation particularly difficult, but because he wanted Ronnie to be able to talk to Jim while he could. Because there was no way he wasn’t going to need the drugs.

The hospital’s coffee shop was small, but had coffee and baked goods from an excellent local establishment. Len got a cup of coffee, and a newspaper, and cast his eye around the lounge.

There was indeed a gorgeous, heavily pregnant red-haired woman seated at one of the smallest tables. She looked like she hadn’t slept in a week, and like she’d been crying recently. Len thought for a second, and then went up to her.

“Excuse me, but are you by any chance Angelina?”

The woman looked up.

“Why yes, I am. Are you one of Ronnie’s friends?”

“I’m a good friend of Jim Kirk’s—we’re both on B-shift at 7s. Len McCoy.”

“Nice to meet you, Len. Would you like to sit down?”
“Sure, thanks, unless you’d rather be by yourself. I can totally understand needing a break. I just left Jim with Ronnie, by the way.”

Angelina sighed. “Ronnie pretty much just threw me out. I don’t really need a break. He just wants to talk to Jim on his own. I’m glad he’s talking to someone, because he sure isn’t talking to me.”

“Jim’s interesting, that way,” Len said slowly. “A lot of people just think he’s a nuisance, but anyone who’s ever talked with him about something really serious knows there’s a lot more to him than annoying hyperactive mannerisms and a pretty face.”

Angelina laughed. “Well put. You know, Jim and Ronnie were at the fire academy together. They really hit it off—neither one of them was exactly the typical firefighter, and they both had some trouble with the whole culture there, so they gravitated towards each other.”

“I don’t know Ronnie at all. What’s similar about him and Jim, would you say?”

“Well—um, how long have you been with the department?” Angelina asked, hesitantly.

“Just a few months. Just moved here from Georgia. I’m not a firefighter—I’m the paramedic for the shift. It’s been a little tricky settling in, since my last job was at a private ambulance company. So believe me, nothing you’ll say will offend me,” Len said.

“All right. Well, I would say Jim and Ronnie are both an awful lot smarter than most firemen. They both always want to know ‘why,’ both are really interested in the aspects of firefighting other than ‘be a tough man’ and ‘put the wet stuff on the red stuff.’ I’m not saying I think firemen are dumb—not at all. You can’t be outright stupid and survive in that job. But they were both … odd ducks,” Angelina said. “And—well, how well do you know Jim?”

“Uh, quite well, actually,” Len said.

“Okay. The other thing was, when Ronnie accidentally found out Jim was bisexual, Ronnie didn’t mind, and that was a new experience for Jim. The fire service isn’t known for being a modern, liberal establishment.”

“I hear you,” Len said. “I know Jim had a hard time with my predecessor along those lines.”

“Huh. Maybe that was it,” Angelina said.

“That was what?” Len asked.

“Well, about a year ago, Jim just kind of … dropped off the face of the earth. Ronnie tried to pull him back in—they used to hang out a lot—but Jim kept giving some lame excuses about how he maybe wasn’t a good person to know. How maybe being friends with him might not be good for Ronnie’s career.”

Len drummed his fingers on the table and frowned.

“Now I really want to kill that guy,” Len muttered.

“Did someone do something to Jim?” Angelina asked, eyes widening.

“Yeah. Sort of. I … shouldn’t really say too much. But I know it really shook him up. Because, you know, you have to trust the people you work with. You have to trust the EMTs who are the ones who are gonna take care of you if something …” Len stopped, suddenly remembering who he was talking to. “Sorry.”
“You … you took care of Ronnie, didn’t you,” Angelina whispered.

“Yeah. Yeah, I did. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

“Frankie—Frank McCarthy—he said … he said you were really good. That you really knew what to say to Ronnie.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“He said you didn’t feed him any bullshit about how everything was going to be fine. Because it wasn’t, and I think everyone knew it.”

Len nodded. “Ronnie knew it.”

“Ronnie doesn’t remember anything, though. And I’m glad,” Angelina said.

“That’s a side-effect of one of the drugs. Some people get upset when they can’t remember what happened,” Len said.

“And Jim—he was the one with the bad luck to be there when Ronnie woke up. That whole conversation is hazy for Ronnie, but Jim said all the right things. Ronnie wanted to hear the truth, and Jim gave it to him. And that,” Angelina said, “is why Ronnie asked for Jim to come in today. Because he wants—no, needs—to hear the whole thing again, with a clearer head, from someone who isn’t going to feed him patronizing, babying bullshit.”

“Jim’s certainly good at telling it like it is,” Len said.

“It’s a good thing someone is,” Angelina said darkly. “Ronnie’s getting pretty sick of bright cheerful talk from people who have no idea. No idea at all. I mean, Ronnie’s lost his livelihood, his work, the work he was passionate about. It’s undeniably and irretrievably gone. Sure, he’s alive. And I’m glad he is, and he’s glad he is too. Finally. And he’s also lost his … I guess you’d call it his vision, his hopes, for what he was going to be like as a father. He’s having to … rewrite himself, from the ground up. People keep telling him he’s still the same person, but he’s so much a person who’s about what he does. And a lot of the things he does, he won’t be able to do any more. Even little things, like running with the dogs. That was the best part of his day—and it’s gone. And everyone keeps saying things like ‘well, you can still do such-and-such,’ or ‘look at this elite runner with a prosthesis.’ Which is not what he needs, now. He needs someone to acknowledge what he’s lost, and not just try to get him appreciate what he still has.”

Len nodded slowly. “I think Jim has thought a lot about loss. And some of Ronnie’s losses are things that he didn’t even have already, but now won’t have. Like, for instance, mourning the loss of the idea of himself as a father with two legs. I can believe that could be just as hard as mourning the loss of something you did already have.”

Angelina stared at Len.

“That’s … that’s exactly it. And all the people here are really nice, and from what I can see the medical care is excellent. But … I thought the other day that maybe he’s more like a wounded veteran, you know? And maybe he’d be better off at a VA hospital, or something.”

“Huh. I see what you mean. But he’s not a vet, is he.”

“No. So that’s not an option,” Angelina said. “And to be honest, I think a lot of his co-workers aren’t going to know what to say to him. These guys look death in the eye every day, but talking about life? It’s hard for most of them. So I’m glad Jim could make it this morning.”
“Good,” Len said. “And, not to pry, but how are you doing?”

Angelina made a sound between a sniff and a snort. “Well, I can’t sleep anymore anyhow. What with being a host to the most efficient parasite known to woman. I’m just … trying to figure out how the hell I’m supposed to do everything I have to do. And my boss is a bitch from hell. She’s already resentful of the fact that I’m going to be taking a maternity leave. So this situation is just going to set her off even worse. This morning, I just told her I had a family emergency and wouldn’t be in. And the company is too small to be required to offer Family Medical Leave Act time. If we could afford it, I’d quit right this second. I only work part time, but right now I just don’t want to leave Ronnie alone. So I can’t see how … damn it.”

She wrenched a napkin from the dispenser on the table, and blew her nose, and then used another one to blot her eyes.

“Sorry.”

“Geez. No.” Len cleared his throat. “I bet Captain Trotter would get some guys lined up to hang out with Ronnie for when you can’t be there.”

Angelina nodded. “I asked about that. The thing is, Ronnie would have a cow if he thought he was being babysat.”

“Well, at risk of overstepping, here, what if you made it all about you?”

Angelina cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“What if,” Len said, “you made it clear to Ronnie that you know he doesn’t need a babysitter, but that you don’t feel right if there’s not someone with him? Would that … come across as being honest?”

Angelina’s eyebrows rose, wrinkling her freckled forehead. “You know, that’s not a bad idea. And it’s actually completely true, too.”

“Truth gets you places. Not always where you want to go, but sometimes.”

Angelina’s phone made a pinging sound. She looked at the screen, and huffed in annoyance. “I have to turn that alarm off.”

“Oh?”

“It’s reminding me to feed the dogs before I go to work. But the dogs are at Jim’s place, and I’m not going to work today.”

“The dogs are doing great,” Len said. “They settled right in. They’re very sweet.”

“Oh—are you a neighbor of Jim’s?”

Leonard immediately realized he’d said something supremely stupid, and mentally flailed for an appropriate response that might get Angelina off the road Len had just built right in front of her.

“Oh …” he said, mind whirling for the right thing to say.

“Oh,” Angelina said, in a quiet voice. “I see. Don’t I?”

Len sighed. “Yeah. I guess you do.”
“Sorry—I guess you didn’t exactly want people to know that. I won’t say anything.”

“Thanks,” Len said. Because there was really nothing else he could say.

“And thank you,” Angelina said, after a short pause. “It was … refreshing, talking to you. And thanks for looking after the dogs.”

“You’re welcome. Please, y’all should let us know what else we can do, okay?”

“Well, there is one thing maybe you could help with,” Angelina said. “But I’m not sure.”

“Try me,” Len said.

“Jim said he’s going out of town for a few days after the next rotation. I’m fine with the dogs staying with his mom, but if you’re not going …”

“Ah,” Len said. “Actually, he’s going back to Georgia with me for a few days, for some business I have back there. Sorry. Otherwise, I’d be happy to keep the dogs for a couple days.”

“No problem,” Angelina said. “In fact … I’m glad that’s how it is. I don’t know Jim all that well, but … I’m glad he’s with someone sensible. And …”

Len waited a few seconds, and then prompted her.

“And what?”

Angelina frowned. “And, am I guessing right that maybe other people in the department don’t know about the two of you?”

“Yeah. I had a pretty bad experience at my last place of work, so we’d just as soon keep it under wraps. Plus, someone might take exception to us working the same shift at the same station. Which I don’t see as a big deal, since neither of us is even remotely in charge of the other.”

Angelina’s frown deepened. “But what if …”

Again she didn’t finish.

“What if what?” Len asked.

She shook her head. “Never mind. But, I promise I won’t say anything to anyone—not even Ronnie —so don’t worry about that.”

“Thank you.”

Angelina shifted in her seat.

“You all right?” Len asked.

“I think maybe the baby is taking exception to the stress of the last few days,” she said.

“Have you been able to take care of yourself properly?” Len asked. “I know it’s hard, when someone you love is in such a bad situation.”

“I’m trying,” Angelina said. “I think it’ll be easier now that Ronnie’s in a regular room, and can have real visitors. Now I just hope the three of us can all be home together, once there are three of us.”
“When are you due?”

“Six weeks. They haven’t given me any clear idea of how long Ronnie’s gonna be in here.”

“I can’t imagine it’ll be nearly that long. He’s stable, and doesn’t have any other injuries. He’ll probably get some inpatient rehab, when he’s strong enough for that.”

“Is that where he’ll learn to get around, and that sort of thing?”

“Yep. I don’t actually know this hospital well enough to be able to tell you if they have a rehab unit here or not, though. They’re tops for trauma, though. You can be sure they did everything possible for Ronnie.”

“I know. And I know you did, too. When …” Angelina teared up, and yanked another napkin from the dispenser on the table. “When Captain Trotter called … all he could say was ‘his leg, Angelina—you have to come now.’ So I think it must’ve been pretty obvious that …”

She covered her face for a moment, and cried into her napkin.

“Shit,” she said, voice shaking, after a minute. “I’m sorry. I’m totally unloading on you.”

“It’s all right,” Len said quietly. “You need to, and I don’t mind.”

“Thanks.” She blew her nose, and plucked another napkin and dried her eyes. “You know, I think I actually want to get back up to him right now. Even if he and Jim aren’t done.”

“All right. I’ll walk up there with you, and I’ll get Jim to leave if that’s what you’d prefer.”

“We’ll see how they’re doing,” Angelina said.

They got on the elevator to go up to the third floor, and just as the car started upwards, Len’s phone pinged with the sound that heralded a text message from Jim.

[ hey bones can u come back up]

Len typed his reply: [on my way w angelina.]

“Sorry,” he said to Angelina. “It was Jim, seeing if I could come back up.”

“I guess you can,” she said, smiling wanly as the elevator door opened.

Len tapped on the door of Ronnie’s room to signal their arrival, and held the door for Angelina.

“Hey, baby,” Ronnie said. His glassy eyes, and the slushiness in just those two words evidenced that he’d pushed the button to deliver a metered dose of painkiller through his IV. The white knuckles on the fist clenching the push-button control suggested, though, that maybe the dose wasn’t quite doing it. And the red rims around his eyes probably weren’t related to the drugs.

Len shot a quick glance at Jim, who looked worn out, but no longer ill at ease.

Angelina kissed Ronnie, and brushed his hair off his forehead. “Oh, honey; you let it get really bad, didn’t you.”

“Hadta be able to listen, talk, ya know? Hadta talk to Jimbo. He talked an awful lotta sense into my thick head, baby.” Ronnie squeezes his eyes shut tightly, and Len could see he was squeezing the bones in Angelina’s hand as well.
“Ronnie, I’m gonna go fetch your nurse,” Len said, “if that’s all right with you.”

Angelina replied for him. “Please, Len.”

Len went out to the corridor, and to the nurses’ station. The nurse who was there looked up.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“Hi, I was just in with Ronnie in 319, and he purposely wasn’t using his PCA so he could have a clear head for a while. And now there are the predictable results.”

“I was afraid he was going to do that,” the nurse said. “Okay. Let me see what orders we have for him.” He pulled his chart up on the computer, and scanned the orders page. “All right—I’ll be in in a second. Thanks for letting me know.”

Len nodded, and returned to the room, where everyone was as he’d left them. The nurse followed shortly, asked Ronnie a couple of questions, and pushed something into his IV. Len watched as Ronnie relaxed some, and as Angelina did as well.

“Is there anything we can do for you two before we head out?” Len asked. “Anything you’d like brought here, or any messages we should pass along to people?”

“I think,” Angelina said, “visitors would be good. Is that right, honey?”

“Yeah,” Ronnie said. “Did’n wan’ anyone to see me. But tha’s stupid. Gotta start gettin’ back on my foot, ya know? Get it? Foot.” He grinned and pointed at Jim. “He tol’ me that one.”

“That’s our Jim,” Len said. “Always knows the exactly right inappropriate thing to say. C’mon, Jim. Let’s get out of these nice people’s hair.”

“Waitasecon’.” Ronnie’s eyelids were drooping, but it was clear he wanted to say something, and he was looking right at Len.

“What’s up, Ronnie?” Len said.

“Yer good fer Jimbo. Don’ let ‘im get away, all righ’?”

Len smiled. “I don’t plan on it. Take it easy.”

~!~!~!~

Jim was uncharacteristically quiet in the car on the way home.

“Wanna talk about it?” Len asked.

“Yeah,” Jim said. “I guess, without telling you anything he said that was personal. Which there was plenty of.”

“I bet. Angelina said she wasn’t talking to him about anything. So I’ll bet you got the floodgates open somehow, didn’t you.”

“Man, you’re not kidding, Bones. I don’t even know what I did. I just listened, mostly, except when he asked me stuff. And what he asked me about was all about what happened, and that sort of thing. He remembered some stuff, but not a lot. I guess … I kinda think he just needed to talk to someone who kind of had the whole picture, and who wasn’t going to feed him bullshit. Everyone’s trying to tell him how lucky he is to be alive, and he knows that, but nobody’s really letting him be angry
about losing his leg, and his career. One of the nurses actually said something to him along the lines of how he should be glad he can retire from firefighting. As if it was something he was stuck in somehow.

“Anyhow—I let him be mad about his leg, and sad about his job, and scared about the future. I think he was just kind of … waiting to let that all out. And why he picked me as the one to let it out to … that’s a total mystery.”

Len shook his head. “You said it already, Jim. That you let him express the things that other people were trying to stop him from expressing—the anger, the sadness, the fear. And he knew you well enough to know that you’d let him.”

Jim nodded, slowly. “Yeah, I guess maybe that’s it. I mean, that I let him. And—well, we were pretty tight for a long time, me and him.”

“Until about a year ago, Angelina told me. What happened, Jim? It was something about that Selig guy, wasn’t it. The medic who got fired,” Len said, seething inwardly, but not letting Jim see it.

Jim sighed. “Yeah. I mean, I everyone on the shift figured out pretty fast that my gate swings both ways. I don’t exactly keep it a secret. Nobody seemed to give a shit, except Cupcake, who’s an asshole anyhow. But Selig? He made no secret he loathed me. And he was getting ready for something, Bones. I think he was getting ready to try to get the department to throw me out. And before that, he was gonna try to cast suspicion on others—my ‘known associates,’ he called them, as if I was a mobster or something. So … I don’t know. I guess I freaked out about that. That he’d go after my friends. Try to convince the world that everyone I liked was gay and should be booted from the department.”

“And that would be legal how, exactly?” Len said. “For the department to fire people based on their sexual orientation? I looked it up before I came to Iowa. State law prohibits employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.”

Jim frowned. “Really?”

“Really. Federal law doesn’t. Iowa state law does. There’s supposed to be a poster in every workplace that says what the protected classes are.”

“No shit?”

“None at all. Georgia follows the minimum requirements of federal law, so my workplace could’ve fired me if they’d wanted. Ain’t that just nice? But not here.”

“Why didn’t I know that?” Jim said, scowling. “I should’ve known that.”

“Well, now you do. Doesn’t mean people can’t make things difficult for you, should they choose to do so—even in Georgia, most folks I knew who were gotten rid of because they were gay got other reasons from their employers. And I knew one guy who was fired because of ‘mistakes’ he kept making—that other people made sure happened,” Len said. “So I’m not sayin’ it couldn’t’ve happened, but to be honest, from what I’ve heard about this Selig asshole, I don’t think he woulda been able to pull it off.”

“Oh,” Jim said. “Wow, I feel enormously stupid right now. And enormously hateful towards the state of Georgia. Where we’re going in five days.”

“It’ll be fine, Jim,” Len said soothingly. “And I talked to Eric and Tom, and they said of course we can stay with them.”
“And the other thing we talked about?” Jim asked, carefully keeping his eyes on the road.

Len sighed. “Yes, I have an arrangement to meet up with Joss. And yes, you’re right, it has to happen.”

“And that’s not all, is it.”

“No. Mother. I can’t exactly show up in Savannah and let her hear through the grapevine that I came and went without word one to her. So I’m having dinner with her the night before we leave.”

“You want me to come? Or no?”

“Now why would I put you through that?” Len said, scowling. “She’ll just be sarcastic, and snarky, and make all sorts of veiled comments, and make you feel like the worst person in the world.”

“What I meant, Bones, was would you feel better if I went with you?”

“Oh. Yes. Yeah, of course it would, darlin’. But it can’t happen that way. I can’t show up with you, unannounced, and I can’t ask her if I can bring you. Not yet. But what I will do, though, is make sure she knows I’m happy, and make damned sure she knows you talked me into applying for residencies. She might’ve been able to keep happily pretending Joss and I were roommates, up until I put my career off for his.”

“Huh,” Jim said. “I didn’t really think I had to work too hard to talk you into anything.”

“No. But you made me really think about it. Made me realize it was really possible. And, most importantly, you said you’d go with me.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, grinning. “I did. I will. I can’t wait. Heck, even with all the unpleasantness about this road trip, I’m looking forward to it. A thousand miles, in the car, with my best friend. Awesome.” His grin flipped to a frown. “Except the way back. With one of us driving the truck, and the other driving the van. That won’t be as fun. The motel sex will be awesome, but not the thousand miles back.”

“Well, our road trip’s about to sound even better to you.”

“Oh yeah? Do you have something really kinky planned—you know, for the motel?”

“Not unless you count having already sold the van to Eric’s partner Tom as kinky. So we’ll drive back together, in the truck, and I’ll buy a normal car when we get back. And no, you don’t get to pick it.”

“Bones, Bones!” Jim said, drumming on the steering wheel in undisguised glee. “You’re blowing me away with your awesomeness! And it’s okay if I don’t get to pick the car. I didn’t get to pick the bed, and we have plenty of sex there, so I’m not worried about the car. Not at all. Nope.”

TBC

A/N: Rehab stations at active scenes help protect physical and mental health during strenuous fireground operations. Two important hazards that rehab addresses are overheating and dehydration. Body temperature, pulse rate, and other factors are looked at to monitor firefighters at the rehab station.
Status: En Route

Chapter Summary

Jim and Leonard make their way to Savannah. Leonard’s territory, Leonard's rules.

Note/warning: Anything about any place in this story is fictitious. I've never been to any of the places in the story. I don’t know what people's attitudes are there. Please don’t take anything in this story as commentary on or criticism of any specific place. I did, however, grow up in the South. Attitudes presented in the story are based on what I grew up with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 16: Status: En Route

B-shift’s next rotation was mercifully unexciting. The only noteworthy run was the rare combination of the ladder and the ambulance getting sent together on a rescue call. A man doing routine maintenance on a recently-filled silo somehow fell in, and survived only because a family member thought to run to the house, shanghai the deceased great-grandfather’s oxygen tank, and lower it down into the silo. The tank and tubing provided the man with the oxygen he needed to survive until the ladder crew brought him up, but of course didn’t prevent him from breathing in dangerous silo gases as well. By the time Jim had brought the man safely to the ground, their patient was in severe respiratory distress.

That run also required an extra set of hands in the back of the ambulance—which of course Jim volunteered to be. Jim’s job was to squeeze the bag that delivered oxygen-enriched breaths to the patient’s lungs, which were rapidly filling with fluid, in effect drowning him. Len monitored vitals and administered the few drugs that could actually help the patient. By the time they transferred the patient to the care of the hospital, his lung sounds were terrible, and his O$_2$ saturation levels were poor, despite the extra oxygen.

After they left the hospital, Jim asked the predictable question as he buckled himself into the jump seat of the ambulance and Christine started driving them all back to the station.

“What do you think, Bones?”

“Nothing good, I’m afraid. They can really load him up with the diuretics—the stuff I was giving him in the ambulance, that makes your body kick fluids out—but he’s in pretty bad shape. With his history of heavy smoking, I don’t give him very good odds.”

Jim frowned. “How’d you know he’s a heavy smoker? All I could smell was silage.”

“Well, while you and your crew were hauling him outta there, I was busy getting a medical history from the son.”

“Oh,” Jim said. “Duh. Here I was, set to be all impressed by some kind of voodoo.”
Jim let Len work on his paperwork as Christine drove, but couldn’t just sit there, not saying or doing anything.

“So, Steeple, what’ve you got planned for your eight day break?”

“Not much. I’m gonna stay at my mom’s and dad’s for a couple days, just for fun. I have a Skype date set up with Roger—which is great, since we only manage that once a month or so. And that’s about all. Just doing things that have nothing to do with work. How about you, Jim? Overtime, as usual?”

“Nope! Road trip! Going to Georgia with Bones. He’s gonna tie off some loose ends, and I’m just going along for fun. I’ve actually never been that far from Iowa.”

Len looked up from the laptop. “Seriously, now?”

“Seriously. Chicago is the farthest I’ve ever been from Iowa,” Jim said.

“And loose ends, huh, Len?” Chris said.

“Yep. Picking up some stuff I left, taking care of some paperwork, that sort of thing,” Len said, acutely aware Christine knew nothing of his background in Georgia.

“Oh dear,” Chris said. “Are you having to … finalize things with your ex?”

“In a manner of speaking. Legally, there’s nothing more to be done,” Len said, which wasn’t a lie. “But I do have to talk with the ex. Not so much lookin’ forward to that.”

“Well, Jim, just make sure Len doesn’t get hooked in to staying! We need him around here,” Chris said.

“No danger of that, Christine,” Len said. “None at all.”

“Nah,” Jim said. “No worries there, Steeple. Because you’re right, we really need him around here.”

“Best medic I’ve ever worked with,” Christine added.

“Well, thanks, Chris,” Len said.

Jim wisely kept his mouth shut.

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The last night shift before their trip was unbelievably quiet, especially for a Saturday night. The ambulance had a couple evening runs, but only two runs in the dead of night, neither of which took very long. Jim and Leonard had a short nap at Len’s house, and hit the road in the van by noon. Jim took the first shift driving.

“All right, get it over with,” Len said. He covered his ears and cringed expectantly.

“ROAD TRIIIIIIIPPPP!” Jim shouted.

“You done?”

“Yeah. And I burned us a road trip mix CD,” Jim said.

“Of course you did. Where is it,” Len said, smiling despite himself, “and I’ll pop it in.”
“Front pocket of my backpack,” Jim said.

Len fished around, and found the CD easily. It was labeled in Jim’s familiar leftward-slanting printing, and started with “Life is a Highway.” Len was glad to see that Jim had picked the original version, and not the one from the children’s movie. Some of the songs were predictable, but Len was glad to see “Magic Carpet Ride” and some others that didn’t have roads or cars in the title.

The weather was perfect, the company was easy, and they made their goal of Paducah, Kentucky—nearly the halfway point—easily. They’d booked a room in the cheapest decent place they could find online, and arrived at the Motel 6 just before ten that night.

They had a brief argument in the van, just before checking in.

“Why does it matter, Bones? It’s not like we know anyone here!”

“It’s Kentucky, Jim. And it’s not a room with two double beds. I’ll check in, and I’ll text you the room number, and you show up there.”

“Seriously? We cross the Mason-Dixon Line and you instantly go all paranoid?”

Len scowled. “First of all, the Mason-Dixon line is between Pennsylvania and Maryland.”

“You know what I meant.”

“And second of all, paranoia is a belief that is unfounded in reality. Worrying about evil cohabitation not being dealt with kindly in a red state isn’t exactly paranoia.”

Jim frowned at Len. “You’re really serious, aren’t you.”

“Deadly. Jim, Iowa may be the middle of nowhere, but believe me, it’s a thousand times more liberal there than Down Here. I don’t know anything about the town we’re in, but when people start to talk remotely like me, I start to get more worried. We’ve officially entered homophobia-land, and when I say we need to keep a low profile, you have to trust me. All right?”

“All right, Bones. Of course I trust you,” Jim said quietly.

“I mean, it’s not like we walk around Cedar Rapids holding hands,” Len said, more mildly than before, “but there, we don’t have to worry about someone putting a Molotov cocktail through one of our windows because they don’t like that we’re constantly stayin’ together at your place or mine. So all I’m sayin’ is, here, we need to behave like … well, like we’re at the fire station.”

“I can do that,” Jim said.

“Once we’re at Eric and Tom’s place, we’re fine. Their neighborhood is fine. But I don’t know the first thing about the Motel 6 in Paducah, Kentucky.”

“Okay. Sorry. You check in, and I’ll wait for your text.”

“Thanks. Sorry I went all ballistic. I’ll kiss it better once our door is closed,” Len said, with the through-the-eyelashes look that Jim could never, ever resist.

Five minutes later, Jim was heading to room 221, where he tapped on the door cautiously, after making sure the corridor was deserted. He ducked inside quickly when Len opened the door, and found himself being embraced tightly.

“Sorry, darlin’. I’m sorry,” Len said, kissing the angle of Jim’s jaw tenderly.
“Bones, it’s okay. You’re right. We think we’re one country, but there’s so many ways we’re not. We’re in your territory now, and we’ll follow your rules.”

“Which don’t apply,” Len said, trailing his kisses up the shell of Jim’s ear, “behind closed doors.”

“Except for maybe not being too loud,” Jim said. “And I know how good we are at that.”

Len chuckled. “Well, we may just have to have a quietness contest.”

“Sam used to try to get the boys to be quiet for some length of time by having quiet contests. Whoever could be quiet the longest got a prize. Doesn’t work anymore—they know the trick.”

“What’ll the prize be, sweetheart?”

“We don’t need a prize, Bones. But I promise to try not to bite you to keep myself quiet.”

“Hmm, that’s too bad. Because … darned if that isn’t hot as hell. So feel free to go back on that promise.”

“Oooh, kinky!” Jim said. “But you know what? Road grime. Your van’s spotless, but nine hours on the road, and a man wants a shower.”

“Two men want a shower,” Len corrected. “And unfortunately, they’re gonna hafta take turns, cause their cheap motel bathroom sucks. So you go ahead, and I’ll putter around.”

Jim started stripping. “I love it when you putter.”

“I love it when you strip,” Len said, watching raptly.

Jim shifted his movements, ever so slightly, so he wasn’t just taking his clothes off to get in the shower.

“And if you keep doin’ that, you aren’t gonna get your shower for another while, yet.”

Jim kept doing it. In just his boxers, he somehow managed to make the act of removing his socks incredibly sexy. Then, while taking his boxers off, he fisted his own cock, looking Len right in the eye.

“See, now that’s exactly what I was talkin’ about,” Len said, licking his lips.

“What’re you gonna do about it?” Jim asked, the sparkle of his blue eyes taking most—but not all—of the challenging tone away from his words.

“Well, I think the first thing I’ll do about it is this,” Len said, coming right up to Jim and pressing his entirely clothed body against Jim’s entirely naked one, face to face, eye to eye. He grabbed a double handful of ass cheek, and pulled away just enough to begin a trail of kisses, starting at the notch between Jim’s collarbones, and reaching a nipple. He teased the nub, slightly salty with the day’s sweat, until he felt it was properly peaked, and then crossed to the other side. He heard Jim’s sharp intake of breath as he applied his treatment symmetrically.

“That’s good, Jim. Nice and quiet,” Len said. “And you weren’t ever planning on a shower just yet, were you?”

“You got me,” Jim said, and he gasped as Len’s hand replaced Jim’s own on his rapidly hardening cock. “Gaahh, Bones …”
“Yeah, I know just how you like it, sugar,” Len said. He spun Jim lightly, turning him so Jim faced the room, and Len’s still-clothed body faced Jim’s side, and ground his crotch into Jim’s hip.

“You feel that? You feel how hard I am for you, behind these jeans?”

“Off, Bones. Can I take ‘em off?”

“Sure, darlin’. But what’s the hurry?” Len said, slowly rotating his pelvis against Jim’s, all the while jacking Jim’s cock at an excruciatingly slow pace.

“Jesus, Bones! It’s not fair!”

“Now, what’s not fair?”

“I was gonna tease you, and now you’re … uuhhn, holy fuck, Bones!” Jim stood there, hands at his side, not trying to touch or move, as he somehow knew that wasn’t part of his partner’s plans at the moment.

“Mmm,” Len said. “Thought I’d just remind you not to play with fire. Though I’m startin’ to learn that all firefighters have more than a little bit of pyromaniac in them, and not all that deeply buried, either.” The matter-of-factness of his words countered his sultry tone.

“’s true, Bones. But I gotta … gotta touch you. I like hot things, so I gotta.”

“You go right ahead and do that, sweetheart.”

Once Leonard had given permission, which Jim understood that he needed on this occasion, Len’s clothing started flying off, shirt landing on the desk, jeans covering the nightstand drawer that would certainly contain Gideon’s Bible, underwear remaining on the floor where they fell.

With clothing no longer in the way, Len continued working Jim’s cock, but moved their bodies so they stood close together so he could wrap his large hand around both cocks together. The dry friction skirted the edge of too much, but that was the kind of mood they were both in, so it suited them fine.

“Fucking hell, Bones, shit, uhhhn, can’t be quiet, can’t, can’t, can’t …”

Len, who was thoroughly in control of both the situation and his partner, and who also knew that his own controlled vocal response would be unlikely to pass through walls, floors, or ceiling, knew just what to do. As always.

He used his spare hand to pull Jim in gently, by the back of the neck, for a kiss as deep as the Mississippi is long. And, as he saw, felt, and heard Jim starting to fall apart, he guided Jim’s head down to his shoulder, making him press his lips against the substantial McCoy deltoid, muffling Jim’s sounds. Jim’s hips stuttered frantically a few more times, and then, as surely as if Len had told him what to do, Jim clamped his teeth into the meat of Len’s shoulder muscle, letting the sound of his scream out only through his nose.

The sudden pain, sharp and exactly, exquisitely what he wanted—no, needed—pushed Len to his own climax at nearly the same moment. They held each other up, Jim resting his forehead on the juncture of Len’s neck and shoulder, and breathed the air like there wasn’t quite enough to go around.

Jim’s head stayed down longer than Len thought was entirely suitable.
“You all right, darlin’?”

“No. I fucking bit you, Bones! I don’t even want to look.”

“Well, I fuckin’ asked for it, now, didn’t I? Pretty much made you do it, if I recall. And it’s not like it’s a pound of flesh gone; it’s just gonna be a real sexy bruise in the shape of your perfect, shiny white teeth.”

Jim looked up, finally, and ran his fingers over the dented but unbroken skin.

“Why?” Jim asked, looking Len in the eye.

Len looked straight back at him.

“It’s complicated,” he said, finally. “Look, let’s take a nice shower, even if it’s a little cramped, all right? And I’ll try to figure out how to best explain my complicated little kink.”

They shuffled into the bathroom, and Jim silently started the water running in the shower, which was your garden-variety combination unit, doubling as a tub and a shower, and not particularly good at either. It was clean, though, and the polyester curtain was bleached bright white.

“Didn’t mean to upset you, Jim,” Len said, as they waited for the water to run hot. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like hurting you.”

“You didn’t hurt me.”

“Oh, like hell I didn’t! Look at that!” Jim said angrily, spinning Len so he faced the mirror.

Len traced his fingers over the mark reverently, flushing as he did so.

“Holy fuck,” Jim breathed, watching Len’s reaction. “You really do get off on that, don’t you?”

“I do. And when I said you didn’t hurt me, what I meant is that there’s no permanent damage. I wouldn’t let that happen, for my sake and yours,” Len said, having forgotten about the shower.

The steam billowed in the bathroom, fogging the mirror, and bringing out the scents of sweat and sex.

“It’s something about being here, isn’t it,” Jim said. “Something about being in the South again.”

Len froze. “Sam was right,” he said. “He was right when he told you that you should be a CIA interrogator. Because yes, Jim, that … habit … coming forward like that, has everything to do with the fact that we’re in the South. Where I grew up, knowing from an early age that I was bad, bad, bad.”

Jim stared openly at Len. “Your territory, your rules. But fuck, Bones; I’m sure as hell not gonna … punish you, every time we have sex. So—we gotta get you back outta the South.”

“I’m not gonna disagree with you there, Jim. Not a healthy place for the likes of me. Not healthy at all. I don’t know, my own personality certainly has something to do with my … poor self image. I mean, it can’t just be the latitude, or the culture, because I know several perfectly well adjusted gay men who’ve lived their entire lives in the South. But not me. And I guess I didn’t even really know until I left, what a big effect it had on me. And you …”

“I what, Bones?”
“You … just make everything so easy. Everything that’s been hard for me, my whole life? You just make it easy.”

“Jim Kirk, your personal lubricant.”

“You just can’t be serious for five minutes, can you.”

“Well … not when it’s us. I guess that’s my, I don’t know, defense strategy or something. When things that involve me get serious, I hide behind the humor.”

“At least you know that,” Len said. “C’mon—let’s get in that shower. I’m pretty sure it’s ready.”

They both fit—just barely. But neither one of them minded the close quarters. They cleaned each other up, with a fair bit of fooling around involved, and emerged smelling a lot better than they had when they first entered the bathroom.

Len walked around in nothing but a towel, picking up their clothes, and laying out what he wanted for the next day. Jim went back into the bathroom, and brushed and flossed. They’d figured out early on in their relationship that they couldn’t be in the bathroom with each other when they did their dental routines without one of them getting annoyed at the other, so they decided that these routines would simply have to be private. Jim reemerged, minty and fresh, and flopped onto the bed, buck naked. He folded his hands behind his head, and watched Len.

“What?” Len said.

“You’re too sexy for that towel.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh huh.”

“Just a minute.”

Len took his turn in the bathroom, and reappeared sans towel.

“That better?”

“Much. Did you rush through brushing your teeth, just like always?” asked Jim.

“Sure did. You obsessively brush and floss every nook and cranny?”

“Sure did, Bones. Now c’mere. You’re even sexier without the towel, and I wanna sex you up in this big bed we’ve got.”

Len slid in next to Jim, and quickly found himself pinned by a hundred and eighty pounds of lean muscle.

“Bones,” Jim murmured. “Don’t know if I said it enough today, but I love you like crazy.”

“Me too, Jim. Love you more than I can really understand. And … thanks for coming with me.”

“Aw, c’mon. I knew this trip was gonna be a bitch for you. So how could I not come? And now, be quiet. Be vewy, vewy quiet. Because none of those wascally Southern wabbits wanna hear us gettin’ sexy.”

Len grinned, despite himself. “I’ll try not to get weird.”
“Won’t let you. It’s just you and me, here. Windows closed, doors closed.”

“And don’t you dare say to lay back and think of Iowa.”

~!~!~!~

They made Savannah by seven the next evening. Len drove the last leg, since he knew where he was going. When they were fifteen minutes out, Len had Jim text an ETA to Eric, and when they arrived, they were met in the driveway by Eric, Tom, and two dogs. Eric turned out to be tall, slender, and somewhat effeminate, while Tom was the opposite—short, broad, and tough-looking, with a thick mustache and a handshake that didn’t mess around. Jim’s first thought was that the fellow was the stereotype of a fireman, even though he knew Tom was a middle school principal.

There was much backslapping, hugging, and general glee, with comments on Len’s healthy appearance.

“And guys, this is Jim. Who I’ve told you all about already.”

“About a hundred times,” Eric said, grinning widely. “Glad to meet you, Jim. Now, let’s all of us get inside where it’s a civilized temperature. Because this humidity, my friends? I think I’m melting.”

“You always think you’re melting,” Tom said. “Leo, Jim, let me help you with your bags, so we don’t have to come back out here again.”

Jim turned to Len, and mouthed “Leo?” as he made an outrageous face. He got the expected eye-roll in return.

As Jim slid the van door open, Tom leaned in and spoke quietly.

“Actually, I completely agree about the weather, but don’t tell Eric I said so.”

“My lips are sealed,” Jim said. “How ‘bout yours, Bones?”

“Oh, I’ve been part of this tug-of-war before; I know how to stay out of it.”

Jim noticed Tom didn’t ask about the nickname, which suggested their hosts had already been warned about Jim’s nickname for Leonard.

Tom took their bags to the guest room, and Eric met Len and Jim in the blissfully air-conditioned living room with drinks so cold the condensation on the outside was frost. Jim’s mind boggled at the fact that Eric was carrying the glasses on an actual tray.

“Oh, Eric, I love you,” Len said, accepting the glass.

“Mint julep?” Eric asked Jim, holding the tray out to him.

“Never had one, but doesn’t look like something to pass up,” Jim said.

Eric glared at Len. “Now, Leo, you’ve been neglectful,” he said.

“I’ve been homeless,” Len said, “and also trying not to think about Georgia. At all. But I did think about mint juleps when I was at your mom’s place, that first time, and saw the mint patch by the tree where you put up that tire swing,” he admitted to Jim.

Tom lumbered down the stairs, and took the next-to-last glass.
“A tray, Eric? For fuck’s sake. You’re turning into your mother.”

“Why, thank you,” Eric said.

The four men conversed easily for over an hour, mainly about mutual acquaintances, and although Jim didn’t usually know what they were talking about, he didn’t feel at all out of place. Tom turned out to be fascinated by the scientific aspects of fire behavior, and Jim, who was equally fascinated, was happy to instruct. They all ended up in Tom’s half of the study watching YouTube videos of flashovers and backdrafts, somewhat to Len’s dismay. After a video of a violent backdraft that hit a bit too close to home, Len called it quits.

“Okay, this is creeping me out a little, so I’m gonna go hit the shower. Try not to scare the nice people too badly, Jim, all right?”

“Sure, Bones. Sorry. I guess those were the best ones anyhow,” he said apologetically to Tom. “Um, ’scuse me a sec, will you?”

Jim followed Len upstairs, catching up with him in the guest room.

“Sorry, Bones. It’s just—he was interested, you know?”

Len quirked a smile. “Yeah, I know. That last one was just a little … too much like a few weeks ago.”

“Sorry. I’ll lay off—I promise.”

“No need—I just don’t wanna watch, darlin’. That’s all.”

“And Bones—’Leo?’ What the fuck?” Jim said, grinning hugely.

“That’s what I go by, here, to everyone except Joss, unfortunately. So I decided to leave it in Georgia.”

“But it’s so … cute!” Jim said.

“And that, sugar, is why it stays in Georgia.”

“So … let’s get this straight. You can call me ‘sugah,’ and ‘darlin’,’ and ‘sweetheart,’ but I can’t call you ‘Leo?’”

Len nodded. “Correct.”

“Okay. So, um, I’ll just go downstairs so our hosts don’t think I’m having my way with you in the shower.”

“I don’t think we could shock them even if we tried,” Len said, “and stop right there, because no, it’s not polite to try. You had it right the first time. Skedaddle back downstairs, and scare our hosts some more.”

“Nah. I think we’re done with that. See you in a bit.”

Len smacked Jim’s ass as he turned to leave the room, and Jim couldn’t stop himself from turning around and kissing Len, like he meant it.

“Have a nice shower,” Jim said.
Downstairs, Jim shifted the topic to Eric’s and Tom’s work. Eric had been two years ahead of Len and a year ahead of Joss in medical school, and was finishing his psychiatry residency. They talked about their jobs in general, and Jim found himself interested in Eric’s work.

“You know,” Jim said, “I have a friend back in Iowa who I don’t think is getting what he needs, mental health wise.” He told Ronnie Cozart’s story, focusing on the problems that Ronnie was having with getting people to actually let him be upset, angry, and scared.

“Don’t get me wrong—it’s a great hospital. They’re just not taking care of … all of him. You know?”

Eric nodded. “I do indeed know. Consider this, though, Jim. Is it possible that the hospital psychologist or social worker, or whoever, was offering the right kind of help, but your friend was pushing it away? And won’t admit to anyone that he was pushing it away?”

Jim sat silently for a moment, contemplating that idea.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I really don’t know. I saw the social worker once, actually. She’s probably about twenty five, and she’s probably spent her whole life in school, and she looks like a stiff breeze would take her right down. I could imagine …”

“Imagine what?” Eric asked.

Jim frowned. “That maybe he wouldn’t think she could take it. Take the brutal truth of what’s going on in his head.”

“A lot of people go into mental health fields because they’ve experienced something that affected them profoundly, and want to be able to use their life experiences to help others. Not always, but often. And you can’t always tell by looking what kind of trauma someone has experienced. Even with your friend—you can see right away that he’s lost a leg, but you don’t know the circumstances, or how the events leading up to the loss affected him. So I’m not saying that the social worker at the hospital is necessarily any good, but just that she might be able to understand more than he can give her credit for.”

Jim nodded. “I can imagine that, actually, the more I think about it. Ronnie’s a pretty traditional guy, in a lot of ways. Like, he’s really protective of his wife—almost to the extent that it annoys her, actually,” Jim said, the corner of his mouth quirking upwards slightly. “I bet he’d do better with a guy therapist, actually. But there are hardly any, I bet. And probably—and no offense, all right?—probably not a lot who come across as macho enough that someone like Ronnie is gonna take them seriously. And hey, Dr. Clean,” he said to Len, who returned with wet hair and clean clothes.

“True,” Eric said. “It’s a failing of the field. But it’s getting better all the time, now that more and more men are doing jobs that are traditionally women’s, and vice versa.”

“We’ve got a female firefighter on our shift,” Len said, joining the conversation, as he sat on the couch next to Jim.

“She’s awesome,” Jim said. “And she’s at the point where she doesn’t have to keep proving it, either. Makes things easier for everyone. People are finally starting to figure out that brute strength isn’t everything. On our crew, you want the muscle? Call Cupcake. You want speed and agility? Call Gaila. You want someone to fit into a small space? That’s our Probie.”

“And what do they want you for, Jim?” Eric asked, noticing Jim had omitted himself from the lineup.

“Really crazy shit,” Jim answered instantly. “Especially involving heights. Which really don’t faze
me in the slightest."

“I just about piss myself on a weekly basis watching him. The other day it was the top of a silo. Air pack, turnout gear, and all.” Len shuddered visibly. “But at least nothing was on fire. It was only poisonous silo gases that time.”

“And once I got the guy out, I got to help Bones in the ambulance on the way to the hospital,” Jim said. “That was a treat. I mean, the guy was in deep shit, but Bones … let me just say, your particular brand of competence is extremely sexy.”

Leonard blushed.

“Are you actually blushing?” Jim said. “Go me!”

“Go you, straight to the shower,” Len said. “Cause damn.”

“Yeah, all right. Back in a jiff. Feel free to talk about me while I’m gone.”

They did exactly that.

“All right, Eric,” Len said, as soon as he heard the water running upstairs. “Go ahead. Say it. I know you’ve been waiting all evening.”

“That,” Eric said, “is one extremely hot piece of property you’ve invested in. I had to turn the thermostat down five degrees when you guys walked in the door.”

“Bet he looks super hot in nothing but turnout pants and suspenders,” Tom said.

“Surprisingly,” Len said, “the guys don’t tend to walk around the station like that, for some reason. Nor does our one woman. Which, if my gate swung that way, would probably also be hot.”

“And he’s pleasant, and smart, and obviously really hooked on you. Can’t imagine a much better combination.” Eric said. “Good for you, Len. Good for you.”

“So much for my plan to remain a monk for at least a year, huh?” Len said ruefully.

“And not to be out to anyone. Awesome story about how he figured it out, by the way. He’s one smart cookie,” Tom said.

“Oh, lord,” Len said. “I forgot that was your word, too.”

“What?”

“Awesome,” Eric said.

“I can’t help it,” Tom said. “I’m around middle schoolers all day.”

“Jim’s a lot like a middle schooler in many ways,” Len said. “But a lot of it is an act. Sort of.”

“Sort of?” Eric asked.

“But you’re both right. He’s fun to be with, and he’s really smart, even though he pretends he’s not, and, uh, yeah. The other stuff you were saying too, Eric,” Len said, blushing again. “And boy, if anyone had told me six months ago, when I was sitting here crying in your living room—”

“And punching the walls, don’t forget that,” Tom added helpfully.
“Yeah, sorry about that. I see the dent is gone, though. Anyhow, I wouldn’t have believed it. But here I am. And to be honest, I’m happier than I can remember being in a long time.”

“It shows,” Eric said.

They were all silent for a few moments.

“So what’s the plan for the next couple days?” Tom said. “You guys are just here for two nights, right?”

Len nodded. “And I have loads of fun planned for myself. Barrels of monkeys. Tomorrow morning I’m going to see my mother, oh joy. And then in the afternoon I’m meeting up with Joss—don’t say it, Tom, I’ll explain—and that’ll really be terrifically fun too. Then Jim and I are gonna load the truck, and then we’re taking you two out for dinner. Then the next morning we need to get an early start.”

“I hate to say it,” Eric said, “but except for the dinner part, which sounds great, it all sounds rather grim.”

“Well, yeah. And about meeting up with Joss—Jim talked me into it, of all people.”

“It’s a good idea, Leo,” Tom said. “Despite what I think of him. I mean, you didn’t speak to him the entire time you were staying here. And I doubt you’ve spoken much since you left.”

“A couple times. I guess … I’ve kind of gotten over being mad at him for screwing up my life, because it’s turning out pretty well. But I haven’t gotten over having my trust shattered like that. That sort of thing …” Len shook his head. “It sticks with a guy, you know?”

“Not personally, thank goodness,” Eric said, “but I believe it.”

“Anything … uh, that I should know, before I see him tomorrow?” Len asked.

“Well, he’s still seeing Marie,” Eric said. “Openly, now. He tried to make it seem like they didn’t get together until after you left. Some people believe it—but nobody who ever met you.”

“That’s … strangely comforting,” Len said. “That people who know me don’t believe it.” He cleared his throat. “Anyhow. I’m actually dreading seeing my mother more than I’m dreading seeing Joss. Because—and I just realized this recently—he doesn’t have any power over me anymore. Hasn’t for a long time. Not since before I talked to him again for the first time, once I was in Iowa.”

“Good,” Tom said. “That’s the way it should be.”

“Amen to that, brother,” Len said. “Not much I can do about my mother, though.”

“You taking Jim to meet her?” Eric asked.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Len said, laughing. “That would be a bloodbath.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tom said. “I bet he could charm the pants off her and the rest of the pumps ’n’ pearls brigade. Well, skirt and stockings,” he amended.

“Maybe,” Len admitted. “Okay, he probably could. But I can’t handle it, this time around. Not yet.”

Len’s phone chose that moment to ring. He checked the caller ID. “Speak of the devil,” he said. “’Scuse me, gentlemen.” He stepped into the study.
“Hello, mother.”

“Leonard! Are you here?”

“Yes, we got in about an hour ago. I was going to call you in a minute,” Len lied.

“No, you weren’t. But now you don’t have to think about it. In any case: ten o’clock, here?”

“Of course,” Len said.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you, Leonard. I really am. I know we haven’t always gotten on, but … I’ve missed you.”

“Well, let’s both try to keep it civil then, tomorrow,” Len suggested.

“Yes, let’s do.”

“But that doesn’t mean,” Len said, “that we’re going to pretend I’m anything I’m not. Just so that’s clear.”

“That’s … reasonable,” Mrs. McCoy said.

Len nearly lost his lower jaw. He’d actually meant his suggestion to be slightly antagonistic, but she took it as worded. That was … new.

“All right. I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

“See you then.”

Leonard returned to the living room in a daze, to find Jim back with the group.

“Geez, Bones—you all right?”

“Just talked to my mother,” Len said, frowning slightly.

“Oh,” Jim said. “Was it bad?”

“No,” Len said slowly. “No. She was … reasonable,” he said, echoing his mother’s word. “We’re going to try to be civil, and neither one of us is going to pretend things are anything other than what they are. So we’ll see how that works.”

“Skeptical, are we?” Jim asked.

“Let’s put it this way,” Len said. “Most of my interactions with my mother, especially since my father died, have been one of two things. Either we don’t mention anything about my life—work, home, nothing—and she pretends I’m a nice, normal, straight, highly-eligible bachelor doctor. Or, she tries to help me mend the many errors of my ways.”

“Gah,” Tom said. “Don’t remind me.”

“I think my father tempered her frenzy, at least a little bit, while he was still alive. But after he died, and it was just the two of us, there was nobody to take the edge off. So, maybe moving away was a good thing,” Len said, frowning. “Huh. I never thought of that.”

“Guess you’ll find out more tomorrow, huh, Leo?” Eric said. “I know I’m a gossipy bitch, but I’m dying to hear what happens.”
“I promise to share anything that’s shareable,” Len said. “But … not from when I talk to Joss.”

“No, of course not,” Eric said. “That has to stay between the two of you. But I’ll tell you, it’s … awkward, having to be in the same hospital with him sometimes. It’s bizarre, really—he kind of pretends like the two of you … never were anything.”

“Probably the only way he can live with himself, once he realized what he’d really done,” Tom said.

Len stared at the floor and fiddled with his empty glass, tracing paths through the condensation that still coated its outer surface. “I think that’s one of the reasons I had to leave—physically leave Savannah, and get far away. Because I knew he was going to do that. I knew it. And now that I’ve been away for a while, and my life is better—way better—I can honestly say I don’t care what he’s doing. I know our six years together weren’t meaningless. I’m not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Hell—I don’t even hate him. It’s just … sad, that he did things the way he did. And if I were Marie, I’d be thinking twice.”

“I don’t think she’s gotten to the ‘thinking once’ part yet, Leo,” Eric said.

“Maybe not.” Len set his glass down on the coaster, firmly but not angrily. “Anyhow. Let’s talk about something else. This is giving me a headache, and I want to save all my good drugs for tomorrow.”

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At nine in the morning, Len and Jim went to the U-haul franchise, and signed out the truck they’d reserved. The manager was giving them his standard spiel about using the side mirrors, and remembering that the height, width, and length of the vehicle were all greater than anything they’d driven before, and then checked with his two clients to make sure they understood. Len could tell Jim was about to explode, having to hear this lecture, but Jim waited politely until the man was done.

“I think we’ll be all right. I know how to drive fire trucks, and he drives ambulances. So a little moving truck shouldn’t be a problem. But thanks—you’re right. It can be tricky getting used to just using the side mirrors.”

Jim took the driver’s seat, and looked down at Len before he closed the door.

“So, I’ll see you at the storage place at four, okay?” Jim said.

“Yeah. Loading a van with heavy shit in ninety-five degrees will be a treat after the rest of the day,” Len said.

“You’ll do fine,” Jim said. “And I’ll still go with you to your mother’s if you want. I mean, wouldn’t it be handy to have a fireman around when you go into the dragon’s lair?”

“She’s not that—” Len cut himself off, and sighed. “Okay, yes, she is. But really—I’ll be fine. I’ve been practicing dealing with her since before you were born, remember?”

“Okay, old man. See you later.”

“Enjoy the sights, darlin’. Wish I could show you around—but maybe next time. See you at four.”

They parted ways, Len in the van to drive to the house he grew up in, and Jim in the moving truck, which he would park at Eric and Tom’s before going sightseeing. Len drove the short distance to his childhood home, which was in one of the classier neighborhoods of Savannah. He pulled the van into the driveway, slightly pleased that its appearance would probably annoy his mother. He saw that
one of the garage bays was open—surely a sign that he was to pull his eyesore inside. He parked the
van, and left the garage, closing the door behind him, just in time to see the front door swing open.

Mrs. McCoy stood in the doorway, looking exactly the same as she always had, even though she
was nearing seventy. She’d been thirty-seven when Leonard, her only child, was born into a
marriage that everyone had begun to assume would remain childless. Having a child who was fifteen
years removed from the children of her peers had thrown her social life into terrible disarray, a fact
which she had never let Leonard forget.

“Hello, Mother,” Len said, kissing her dry, heavily-made-up cheek. He would taste her makeup and
powder for the rest of the day, he thought.

“Leonard,” she said. “You look … well.” Her face was strangely expressionless, as if she were
trying to frown in confusion, but couldn’t quite manage.

*Botox,* Len thought. *Of course.*

“To be honest, I’m doing quite well. I like my job, and I know good people, and I like Iowa. And
you look terrific as always,” Len added, realizing he’d committed a breach of protocol by not
immediately praising her appearance. But *Botox,* for Pete’s sake.

“Come sit down. I made coffee. No, no—sit down, Leonard. I’ll get it.”

Leonard was glad that she took him to the family living room, and not the parlor. He’d wondered
which she’d choose, and was oddly relieved to still be considered close family.

Susannah McCoy returned with the coffee, and again, Leonard found himself relieved. Yes, she’d
used a tray, but it held only mugs, spoons, an insulated carafe, cream, and sugar. The silver coffee
service was nowhere to be seen.

She was really trying.

“Thanks, Mother,” Leonard said. He doctored his coffee, and took a sip. “Perfect.”

“Thank you,” Susannah said. “Now. Enough pussy-footing around. We’re here to talk, so let’s talk.”

“All right. What should we talk about?” Leonard asked, feeling ridiculous.

“I’ve missed you,” Susannah said abruptly. “More than I thought I would. Things have been …
difficult, for us, since your father passed. But … I’m coming to understand that was more my fault
than yours.”

Leonard was supremely glad he was firmly seated in a stable chair, since otherwise he probably
would’ve fallen over backwards. He couldn’t think of anything to say, so he just nodded.

“You’re not … the way you are, just to spite me. And I recognize that it’s not a choice you made.
Nobody in their right mind would choose to grow up in Savannah the way you are.”

Leonard was supremely glad he was firmly seated in a stable chair, since otherwise he probably
would’ve fallen over backwards. He couldn’t think of anything to say, so he just nodded.

“You’re not … the way you are, just to spite me. And I recognize that it’s not a choice you made.
Nobody in their right mind would choose to grow up in Savannah the way you are.”

“Gay, Mother. Just say it,” Leonard said, and immediately regretted it. “Sorry. That was rude.”

“No, it’s all right. You’re correct. I should say it. Gay. My only child, my only son, is gay. And I
only have so many years left, so it’s foolish to throw them away for the sake of … I don’t even know
what. So what I’m really trying to say, Leonard, is, can we try again? Can we try again to be family,
like we were before?”
“Before you caught me and Billy Latham fooling around in the pool-house when we were seventeen? Or before I went to paramedic school instead of college? Or before I dashed your and Dad’s dreams once again, by not applying for residencies? Or before I ran away to Iowa? Which ‘before’ are we talking about, here?”

Leonard knew his words were cruel, but he also knew he had to test his mother, push the boundaries to see if she was serious.

“Before I stopped treating you like my son, and started treating you like some unwanted burden. How about that ‘before,’ Leonard?”

Len could hardly breathe. “That … would be really good, Ma.”

“Good,” Susannah said, smiling ever so slightly. “Good.”

Leonard worked hard, for the rest of the morning, to be pleasant, but still himself. His mother was happy to hear about his new job, and seemed genuinely pleased that Len seemed to be getting settled in Iowa. Leonard listened to Susannah’s talk of family friends, and noted but didn’t dwell on the wistful tone she took when talking about her friends’ grandchildren. For the first time ever, though, she didn’t say a word about how put out she was that she obviously wouldn’t be getting any grandchildren of her own. They had the first honest, pleasant conversation that Leonard could remember for a long, long time—certainly since his father died three years previously.

Leonard decided it was time for him to put the rest of his cards on the table.

“Ma, there are a couple things I want to tell you about.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. The first thing is, I’ve been seeing someone, for a few months now, and it’s serious.”

To her credit, Susannah nodded. “Yes, I thought you might be. You seem … too happy for you to be alone. I’d like to hear about him, if you’d be willing to tell me.”

Len could see the pink flush of discomfort in his mother’s cheeks, but knew it would be unfair not to take her at her word. He swiped a finger across the screen of his phone to bring up his favorite picture of Jim, and passed the phone across the coffee table to his mother.

“That’s him. Jim Kirk. He’s one of the firefighters on my shift.”

This was it—the real test. Len braced himself for the expected ‘Really, Leo? A fireman? With what, a high-school diploma?’

But it didn’t come.

“He’s quite striking,” Susannah said. “Especially his eyes. What’s he like?”

Len let out the breath he didn’t even know he was holding. “He’s … smart, and kind to everyone who deserves it and most people who don’t, and brave, and … a lot of other things. He’s from Iowa, and his family all lives in the area, and they’re wonderful. His nephews worship him, and he’s terrific with them. There’s one thing in particular I think you’d appreciate about him.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“It’s the second thing I wanted to tell you about. He convinced me that I should apply for
residencies. So I’m going to, this coming year. Who knows what’ll happen, but I’ll never find out if I don’t try, right?”

“Leo, that’s … I can’t even tell you how pleased I am to hear that. Not just so I can say ‘my son is a doctor,’ but because he’s right. That’s what you should be doing.”

“You won’t mind, though, will you?” Len asked, a teasing glint in his eye. “Getting to say ‘my son the doctor?’”

“I’ll admit it; that will be enjoyable. But I think I can honestly say I’m pleased for you more than I am for myself. It’s what you should be doing, Leo. Your father knew it, and I knew it, and I think you knew it too. And maybe if your father and I hadn’t … driven you away, it would’ve … ah …”

“Happened on a more typical timeline?” Len suggested.

“Well put.” Susannah paused, and looked away for a moment.

“What is it, Ma?”

“Is he … did Jim come with you? To Savannah?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“Would you … be willing to let me meet him? I mean, if he wanted to, and it worked with your schedules, and … well, I’m just saying I’d like to meet him, if it works out.”

Len nodded slowly. “How about if I call him, and we’ll take you to lunch somewhere? Somewhere casual,” he added. “And I’m serious about that.”

“I’d like that,” Susannah said. “I’ll clean up the coffee, if you want to give him a call.”

“Thanks, Ma.”

Len waited until his mother was in the kitchen, and called Jim.

“Hey, hot stuff. You done at your mom’s? We could have lunch, maybe.”

“Hey, sugarpants. Slight change in plans …”

Twenty minutes later, Jim and Len sat next to each other in a booth at a diner, across from Len’s mother. And for the very first time in her life, Susannah McCoy felt that rather than losing one son, maybe, just maybe, she’d gained another.

~!~!~!~

After their lengthy lunch, Jim and Len traded vehicles, so Jim could take Mrs. McCoy back home in the van rather than the moving truck. Len had to go straight to meet Joss, and found himself going into the meeting with a far clearer head than he’d been expecting. The morning had, when he was honest with himself, blown his mind enough that he didn’t entirely trust that the events had been real.

Len didn’t expect any surprises from Joss, though. At least, not any nice surprises. He sat at a table in the coffee shop they’d agreed on as neutral territory, though in Len’s mind everything in Savannah belonged to Joss now. In front of him was a cappuccino, and across from him was Joss’s favorite coffee drink from this particular shop. Ten predictable minutes after their appointed time, Len’s heart skipped a beat as he saw a familiar figure enter sideways through the door.
He didn’t know what to do. Hugging was right out. Shaking hands seemed absurd. He decided just to get up like he would when any acquaintance arrived, and offer a strictly verbal greeting.

“Joss,” he said.

“Leo,” Joss said in return. “It’s … weird to see you.”

“It’s weird to see you, too. And that was nicely honest,” Len said.

“Well, I figure that’s what we’re supposed to do, right now—be honest.”

“That sounds good,” Len said. “So, I guess I’m not actually really sure what I want to talk about. Which is bad, I suppose, since I was the one who asked to see you.”

“Well, I can start,” Joss said. “To be honest, I’ve been really worried about you. And I’m even more worried about you now that I see you. You’re pale, and you look like you’ve lost weight. You’re not … dressed like yourself. And I don’t have any idea what you’ve been doing with yourself. I mean, do you have a job? Nobody even knows, Leo. It’s like you just disappeared. I mean, I didn’t even know where the hell you were, until a couple weeks ago when you called to ask to see me. And then you turn out to be in Iowa? What the hell?”

Len leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “I’m pale because it’s just about autumn in Iowa, which is also quite a bit farther from the equator than this sauna. I’ve lost weight because I’m in better shape than when I was living with you. I’m dressed how I feel like dressing, and not how someone else wants me to. I have a great job, thank you very much, and yeah, I disappeared from the people who dicked me over. Eric and Tom and a couple other people knew where I was, because I felt like keeping in touch with them. But you, and Marie, and her friends, and people who I thought were our friends, but actually turned out to be just yours? I disappeared, all right. And it’s pretty presumptuous of you to think that I’m not doing well. Because I’m doing great. And how are you doing?”

“Uh … fine.”

“And you’re done with your residency. Congratulations. That must be nice. How’s that job?”

“It’s … good.” Jocelyn stared across the table at Leonard. Neither one of them said anything for a minute that felt like a month.

“So I do have one thing I’m curious about, Joss, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“No. Uh, go ahead.”

“When people ask you about me, what do you tell them? I mean, I’d imagine that’s probably tapered off in the last few months. But what do you say?”

“Oh, I’ve been telling people that we broke up, and that you moved, and I didn’t know where you were, and they should email you.”

“I see. That’s fair enough. And some of them did, you know. Email me, that is. Humberto and Jill from the ER, and Penny, and one or two others. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell them the real story. Didn’t tell them how I came home sick that day, and found you fucking your girlfriend in our bed, and—”

“Jesus, Leo; keep your voice down, will you?” Joss hissed.

“I’m speaking in a normal conversational tone of voice, Joss. Why, are you afraid that someone will
overhear, and remember that the illustrious Dr. Garner used to be shacked up with a man?” Len said.

Joss squinted at him from across the table. “What the hell has come over you?”

“Nothing. Nothing except common sense. I get it, all right? I get that you were always ashamed of us. That you never really saw us as forever, even though you put a ring on my finger and said ‘I do.’ That you—”

“That was your idea, Leo—not mine! And it wasn’t even legal! I mean, not illegal—but not recognized. I don’t know why I even went along with it.”

Len shook his head slowly. “I recognized it. And I thought you did, too. But now? I don’t know why you went along with it, either. But I understand, now. I mean, I grew up with the same kind of shame as you did, being ‘not quite right’ down here in the South. And now I understand the difference between you and me.”

“And what’s that, oh wise one?” Joss said.

“You’re a coward. I’m not. You fucked things up between us on purpose—maybe not on the timetable you’d planned, but you did it nonetheless. You could’ve had your cake and eaten it too, but that’s not how you chose to play it. And now you’re pretending we never meant anything to each other. But you know what? We did, and you’re deluding yourself if you think otherwise. Think about our week on Key West, sometime, if you ever feel like remembering that we loved each other. I think about it. And I’m sad that it didn’t turn out to last, and I’m angry about the way it ended. But I’ll never, ever forget, Jocelyn Garner, that you and I were once deeply in love with each other. And I hope you won’t, either.”

Len sipped his cappuccino, and watched Joss watch him lick the foam off his lip.

“I didn’t forget,” Joss whispered. “I just … I can’t be that guy, Leo. I can’t do it. So I guess you’re right. I’m a coward. I had two paths open to me, and it turned out I went down the harder one, and I couldn’t hack it. You’re right.”

Len just nodded, not feeling the need to rub it in. There was another long pause, and they each finished their coffee drinks without saying anything.

“So I’m going to do something now that’s maybe a little bit … uncowardly, I guess,” Joss said finally.

“All right. What is it?” Len asked.

“It would be cowardly for me to let you hear this from someone else. So I’m telling you, now, that Marie and I are getting married.”

“Thanks for telling me,” Len said. “And when the announcement is in the paper, will it say that it’s your first, or second?”

“That was uncalled-for, and it won’t say either one. We decided that was best.”

“That’s probably true. Well, congratulations. I hope you’ll both be happy,” Len said. “And I mean that. I don’t bear you any ill will. Not anymore.” Not as of about five minutes ago, Len realized.

Joss nodded. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”
“And, rumor has it you’re seeing someone.”

“Rumor has it right,” Len said. He pulled up Jim’s picture, and slid his phone to Joss. “Jim Kirk, firefighter and rescue man extraordinaire on the ladder truck at my station,” he said, smiling as he quoted Jim’s self-introduction on the first day they met.

Joss looked at the picture. “A **fireman**, Leo? Seriously?”

“Very, very seriously.” Len stood up, ignoring the screech his chair made on the floor. “Goodbye, Joss. Have a nice life.” He walked away from the table, and out of the coffee shop, never looking back.

~!~!~!~

Len walked around the Historic District of Savannah for a little while, stopping at a few places that he particularly liked. He went into the city’s one remaining locally-owned bookstore, browsed for awhile, and finally, laughing at himself a bit, bought a “then and now” photo book of the city to put on his coffee table. Despite his mixed feelings about the place where he grew up, it was, and always would be, his hometown.

At four o’clock, he parked in front of the gate of the self-storage facility, and waited for Jim. The van pulled up just a minute or two later, and Len went over to the driver’s-side door and leaned in through the open window.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

“Hiya, Bones. How’d it go?”

“It was … you were right. It was a good idea for me to see him one more time. It was cathartic. I feel a whole lot lighter.”

“You tell him to go fuck himself?”

“No, actually, I told him I wasn’t mad anymore, which is true, and to have a nice life. He’s marrying his girlfriend, by the way. He had the decency to tell me that, at least, so I wouldn’t find out from someone else, or by accident. So I guess what you said about closure? You were right. Anyhow, I’ll tell you more some other time, but right now I’m kind of burned out.”

“Wow,” Jim said. “That’s not how I imagined it going, but … good.”

“And, did you see the sights?”

Jim laughed. “Sort of.”

“What do you mean, sort of?”

“I saw your cute little bare-naked baby bottom, for one thing.”

“Come again?”

“Later, for sure—both of us, in that big comfy bed we were too tired to make good use of last night. But I drove your mom back home, and she invited me in, and she showed me your old room, and then she got out the photo albums—you were a really cute kid, Bones! Like a little elf!”

“Oh, lord,” Len said. “You really did it, didn’t you? You actually tamed the dragon lady. You know, she never once had a conversation with Joss when I wasn’t around? Never **once**! I mean, she let him
in the house, because she had to, but … she kind of liked to pretend he didn’t exist.”

“I dunno, Bones. I kinda think she’d tamed herself already. Because she was nice. Not just cordial, but nice. Just like at lunch. Oh—and she gave me something to give to you. Hang on …”

Jim bent over the console to the passenger’s seat.

“Tada! Walla Bear!”

He was holding up a tattered koala bear, its grayish-brown fur matted with age and cuddling.

“Leo, I’ve missed you so much!” Jim said in a high, squeaky voice, waggling the bear as he spoke for it. “Can I go to Iowa with you? Pleeeeeease? I promise not to crap in your bed!”

“Jesus,” Len said. “Put that thing away.” He was distinctly red in the face.

“But I want to go to Iowa! If you don’t take me with you, I’ll cry and cry and throw myself from a balcony.”

“Infant,” Len said, smiling at Jim. “All right. Walla Bear comes to Iowa.”

“Yay!” Jim made the bear say, dancing it up and down.

“Good lord. Get out of the van, you moron. We have work to do.”

Jim leaned out the window and kissed Len quickly, and set the bear on the seat. He got out of the van, and had just closed the door when the sound of splintering glass shocked them both. Jim felt something cold on his cheek, and then something hot.

“Burn in hell, fags!” a voice shouted, from a rusty brown Dodge pick-up. The truck sped away, and Len caught only the expected Confederate flag sticker on the tailgate, and a gun-rack in the rear window. The first character on the truck’s tag was B, but the rest of the letters and numbers were conveniently obscured by mud.

The smell of stale beer suffused the hot air, and Len turned back around after he realized he couldn’t read any more of the license plate.

“Jim!” he said in alarm.

A trickle of blood ran down Jim’s cheek, and a piece of green glass protruded a few millimeters from his right eye. He raised his hands to feel the wetness.

“Stop!” Len said, and Jim froze without question.

“Don’t touch it—there’s a piece of glass right near your eye. Don’t move, and don’t try to pull it out. Just let me get my bag.”

Len opened the side door of the van, simultaneously pulling his cell phone from his pocket and punching in 9-1-1.

“Chatham County 9-1-1, what’s your emergency?” Len cringed, as he realized he recognized the voice of the dispatcher. At least it was someone who didn’t hate his guts.

“I need law enforcement at I-Deal Self Storage,” Len said. “A driver just threw a beer bottle out his window and injured my friend.”
The dispatcher launched into the standard questions designed to help determine how serious a person’s injuries are, but Len interrupted.

“Listen, Terri—it’s Leo McCoy. My friend just has a minor laceration, completely under control. I just need the cops, all right?”

The dispatcher didn’t say anything for several long seconds. “You know I can’t do that, Leo.”

“Yeah, I know. Just—can you do me a favor? Call the bunk room before you dispatch, and see if you can get them to send someone who doesn’t hate me. Please?”

Terri paused. “After I dispatch. That’s the best I can do.”

“Thanks. I’ll … I’ll email you sometime to explain. Sorry to mess up your protocols.”

“Don’t worry about it. Dispatching police, and Mercy Ambulance. Remain where you are. You may hang up now,” Terri said, ending the call.

Len pulled his bag out, and found Jim studying the wound in the side mirror of the moving truck.

“That was close,” Jim said.

“You okay? Other than that?” Len asked, as he opened his bag.

“Startled, is all. I mean, I’ve been called some names before in my day, but beer bottles? What the fuck?”

“Yeah, well, welcome to Georgia. Hold still.”

Len deftly removed the sliver, and was profoundly relieved to see that it wasn’t as bad as he’d thought. The piece of glass was long, and an inch wide at the outer end, but tapered to a thin point where it entered the skin, and didn’t appear to have penetrated very far. The wound bled a little more after he pulled the sliver out. He put the bloody sliver on a 2-by-2 piece of gauze, and pressed another piece to Jim’s cheek.

“Hold that there, with just gentle pressure, to stop the bleeding. We’ll clean it up after the cops are done with us.”

“After the—Bones, what the hell? It’s just a little, tiny—I mean, it’s not even gonna need a band-aid!”

“My territory, my rules, remember? I don’t hold with letting rednecks assault people. I’ll know the cop, and I’ll know the EMTs who’re gonna make you sign their pretty yellow refusal form, and it’s too fucking bad if they don’t like me. But I’m not gonna sit here and do nothing after some asshole threw a beer bottle at your head.”

“Okay.” Jim said. He sat on the running board of the truck, pressing the gauze to his cheek, while Len got out some supplies for cleaning the wound. A minute later, a patrol car pulled up next to them. Len watched as the officer got out from the passenger’s side, and heaved a sigh of relief.

“A friendly one?” Jim asked, watching as the officer properly pulled on a pair of purple nitrile gloves.

“Yeah.”

“Afternoon, gentlemen. What’s going—Leo?”
“Hiya, Freddie.”

“Leo McCoy! Well, fuck me blind! What are you doing back in town?”

“Getting beer bottles thrown at us by a redneck in a pickup truck, apparently.” He held out the 2x2 with the bloody piece of glass on it. “Hi, Brian,” he said to the second cop, who’d emerged from the vehicle.

“Leo? Holy shit! Didn’t you move to, like, Kansas, or something?”

“Well, he’s back, dumb-ass, and some redneck chucked a beer bottle at his friend, here.”

“Jim Kirk,” Jim said. “I’d shake hands, but I’m kinda bloody.”

“And it’s Iowa, actually. I’m just down here to pick up some stuff. Jim here’s helping me out. He’s on my shift at the fire department where I work now.”

“Shit. Well, welcome to Savannah,” said Freddie.

Freddie made fast work of getting their statements, while Brian picked up the glass and put it into a bag, and bagged the gauze-wrapped piece of bloody glass as well. Just as he finished, a white ambulance pulled up behind the police car. Freddie gestured for the EMTs to approach.

“Well, fuck,” Len muttered, as the EMTs emerged from the cab.

“Great,” said Jim. “I’m just signing their damned paper anyhow.”

“Yeah. Sorry about these guys,” Len said.

“Leo, Leo, Leo. What kind of trouble have you gotten your friend into here?” The EMT looked at Jim, and pulled a second pair of purple gloves on over the first.

Len sighed. “Just give him the fucking refusal form, Clint.”

“It appears you have a facial cut. Are you declining treatment?”

Jim nodded. “We’ve got it under control, thanks. Sorry to waste your time, but I know dispatch had to send you.”

“We recommend that you seek proper medical evaluation and treatment. Facial injuries can bleed profusely, and leave scarring. Any open wound can become infected.” Clint continued his required litany of doom and gloom. “Do you understand these recommendations, and the possible complications?”

“Yes,” Jim said patiently.

“Are you still declining treatment?”

“Yes, I’ll see my personal physician. I promise,” Jim said.

“Sign here, please,” Clint said.

Jim took the clipboard, and signed in the two places that Clint indicated.

He handed the pen back to Clint, who made no move to take it back.
“Have a nice day. Enjoy your stay in Savannah,” Clint said, shoving the paper into his aluminum clipboard. He returned to the ambulance, and made a tremendous show of properly removing his gloves and using vast quantities of disinfectant on his hands afterwards.

“Douchebag,” Len muttered, as the ambulance drove off.

“Oh, sorry about all this,” Freddie said. “And you know we probably won’t get the guy.”

“Yeah, I know,” Len said. “I just can’t let something like that go, though, you know?”

“Sure, Leo. Well, uh, we oughta call in available,” Freddie said. “Good to see you.” He hesitated.

“You too, Freddie. And is there something else?”

“Iowa, huh?”

Len nodded. “Cedar Rapids Fire Department. Real good folk.”

“Good. Glad to hear it. Take it easy, all right?”

“We will. Thanks, Freddie, Brian,” Len said.

“No problem.”

The cruiser drove off, leaving Jim and Len to the task they’d tried to start half an hour previously. Len gently removed the gauze, and cleaned the area with a saline-dampened gauze pad.

“You don’t need a stitch or anything—just a butterfly. I know it’ll look ridiculous, but let’s put a band-aid on there, too, just for while we’re moving stuff,” he said.

“Sure, Bones. Your territory, your rules. And—” Jim winced as Len dabbed the wound with disinfectant—“sorry. That was my fault. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t think anyone was around.”

“Well, to the best of my recollection, you didn’t hurl any beer bottles at anyone today, so I don’t see as how it’s your fault, Jim,” Len said.

“But I see what you mean, now.”

“I’m sorry to say I think you do,” Len said. He applied the band-aid to the tiny cut, and gave Jim some wipes to clean his hands with. They threw their mess into the trash bag in the van.

“Well, let’s do this thing,” Jim said.

They pulled the van right up to the storage unit, and forty-five minutes later, the van was full of boxes and decent furniture.

Len and Jim took Eric and Tom to dinner at an excellent seafood restaurant. They recounted their tale of woe, to much cursing by their hosts. But Len’s description of his morning with his mother, and Jim’s tales of the afternoon, cheered everyone up. When they got back to the house, everyone was in a good mood.

“Well, I’m gonna clean this van up a bit, and then it’s all yours, Tom,” Len said. “She shouldn’t give you any trouble. And I left the signed title on your desk in the study.”

Tom shook his head. “Don’t worry about cleaning, Leo. For crying out loud, you practically gave
the thing away. So absolutely no cleaning, you hear?”

“Well, then, all right,” Len said.

“We’ve both got an early morning,” Eric said, “so I think we’re gonna turn in. Make yourselves at home.”

“We will,” said Jim. “And we’re planning an early start, too. Trying to be on the road by seven.”

“Well, we can all have cereal together, then,” Tom said.

“Perfect,” Len said. “G’night.”

“Good night.”

Len waited until Eric and Tom were all the way up the stairs, and flopped down onto the couch.

“C’mere, darlin’.”

Jim obediently sat next to Len, who held Jim’s face gently and inspected the cut. The butterfly closure was holding the edges together perfectly.

“I’m fine, Bones.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“And what’s the verdict?”

“You’re fine, sugar. Extremely, extremely fine.”

“Well, then, let’s go upstairs and be really, really bad guests.”

“You’re on,” Len said. “And I’ll …”

“What, Bones?”

“I’ll try not to … be weird.”

“You just go ahead and be as weird as you want, Leonard McCoy.”

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Cereal and coffee were served at six thirty.

“Thanks a ton for putting us up, and putting up with us,” Jim said to their hosts. “It was a great time. And y’all should totally come up to Iowa sometime. Maybe in the winter, when there’s snow, you know?”

Tom looked at Len.

“Did your boyfriend just say ‘y’all?’”

Len nodded. “I do believe he did.”

“Awesome.”

Goodbyes were said, and promises to visit were exchanged in both directions.
“Don’t forget,” Len said, “you could get married in Iowa.”

“Jesus, Len, we know! It wouldn’t stick down here, which you know perfectly well,” Eric said.

“Might be nice, though,” Tom said.

Eric smacked his butt, and everyone laughed.

“All right. We’re hitting the road,” Len said. He hopped into the driver’s seat of the truck, moving Walla Bear to the dashboard. Jim got in and buckled up, and Len backed the truck out of the driveway. Given the hour, he resisted tooting the horn, but they both waved out the window.

An hour later, they were on the open road, fifty miles closer to their destination. Jim watched Len relax a bit as they left Chatham County. They switched drivers at a rest stop after three hours, and continued straight through to Chattanooga. As they passed the “Thank you for visiting Georgia” sign, and then the “Welcome to Tennessee” sign, Jim saw Len close his eyes briefly, and sink back slightly into his seat.

They stopped for a quick lunch in Chattanooga, and were back on the road, with Len driving again, by one o’clock.

“We’re making really good time,” Len said. “I was thinking, maybe we should just plow straight through. Get there by two a.m. or so. Late, but doable with enough coffee. And we’re both used to that kind of shit anyhow.”

“I’m game,” Jim said.

An hour later, both their phones chimed the arrival of a text message, one right after the other.

“I’ll look, since you’re driving. Oh—mine’s from Ronnie Cozart. Bones, it’s awesome! He’s going home tomorrow!”

Len’s mood lifted even further. “That’s great, Jim. Is mine from him as well?”

“Yep. You want me to read it?”

“Yeah.”

“Same message.”

Jim texted their congratulations back quickly, and told Ronnie they’d be back in town the next day, and would be happy to bring the dogs over from the farm, or could also keep them for a couple more days if that would be useful. An hour or so later Ronnie texted back, saying he needed a day or so to practice getting around the house, without dogs knocking him down.

Jim and Len stuck to their plan, and made their stops as quick and multi-purposed as possible. Just before two in the morning, they pulled the truck into Len’s driveway.

Len turned off the truck, and looked at the dark house for a moment. “It’s good to be home,” he said.

TBC
A/N: Mobile radios (the kind that are mounted on the dashboard in emergency vehicles) often have a set of “status buttons” that send specific frequently used messages to dispatch. They can tell dispatch things like “call acknowledged/waiting for crew,” “en route,” “at scene,” “available,” “not in service,” and other messages that would plague the poor dispatchers to no end if crews had to actually tell them all these things on every run.
Chapter 17: Multiple Origins

In the morning, Len and Jim unloaded the truck into the house, and took the truck to the U-haul in Iowa City. Jim dropped Len off at Len’s place, and then picked the dogs up from his mother’s house while Len got busy unpacking some things. In the early afternoon, Len was starting to get annoyed at not being able to move furniture into the places that he wanted it by himself, and was about to break down and call Jim to help when his phone rang.

“Call from: Jim,” the Verizon voice said.

Len smiled and answered.

“Hey, darlin’. What’s goin’ on?”

“Bones, I’m bored, and I miss you, and can I come over? And can I bring Pete and Millie? We just ran, and they did their business, and all that.”

“Well, seein’ as how I was about to see if you’d come over to help me move some furniture, that sounds just fine. And you might as well bring the pooches; I can’t have my own dog in this place, but I don’t see how Mrs. P. could object to them hanging around for a little while.”

“I don’t see how she could either, especially since she thinks you shit gold bricks.”

“Is that what she said?” Len said, trying and failing to imagine the word ‘shit’ coming from Mrs. Petty’s lips.

“Well, not in so many words. But you fixed her sink, and it took two trips to the hardware store, and then you mowed her lawn! Believe me, Millie and Pete won’t be a problem. So can I come over, like, now?”

“Any time.”

“Good, because I’m just pulling into your driveway.”

Len looked out the window, and sure enough, there he was. He hung up, and opened the door.

“What if I’d said ‘no, this is a terrible time?’” he said, as Millie and Pete bounded inside, Jim trailing at a more sedate pace.

Jim just raised his eyebrows, and made a point of brushing against Len as he went in the door.

“Yeah, okay, never mind,” Len said. “I’m gonna put you to work, though.”

“Slave boy, at your service. I am yours to command,” Jim said.

“Don’t tempt me.”

Jim wagged his eyebrows.
“Okay, tempt me later. But right now, we need to put this over here, and that needs to go there.”

Half an hour later, all the heavy things were where Len wanted them to be.

“Wow, it actually looks like someone under seventy lives here now,” Jim said, as they sat in the living room, taking everything in.

“Yep. It’s about time,” Len said. “It’s funny, I thought I felt settled a couple weeks ago, but now I actually do feel settled.”

“Well, don’t get too used to it, because who knows where we’ll be come July, right?” Jim said.

Len sighed. “You know what, Jim? Let’s just … live for awhile. I mean, sure; there’s changes coming up—no matter where we go, even if we end up staying here, it’s gonna be different. Not working together, and me working crazy resident hours—if that thing even happens. Who even knows. So yeah, we might be someplace completely different in eight months, or maybe nothing will pan out, and we’ll be doing exactly what we’re doing now, till we get too old for it.”

Jim sat there grinning, which for some reason made Len scowl.

“What?” he snapped.

“I like hearing you say ‘we’ and ‘us’ and all that shit.”

Len’s scowl softened into an expression he used only with Jim. “Yeah, well, I kinda like sayin’ it.”

“Good. Because ‘we’ have some work to do with the dogs today, and until they go back home,” Jim said. “Be right back—I gotta get something from the car.”

Jim pecked a mystified Len on the cheek and dashed out the door, only to return in less than a minute, bearing two pairs of crutches.

“What the …”

“I picked these up from my mom’s house. Don’t even ask me why we had two pairs of crutches. But you see, the dogs need to learn they’re not toys, and not to be scared of people on crutches, right? So I figured we should walk around the house with them, to get the dogs used to them.” Jim started swinging through the house on his crutches, pretending his left leg wasn’t functioning.

Millie immediately darted up to him, and sniffed the crutches. She jumped backwards when Jim took a step, and watched him suspiciously. Pete stayed where he was, sitting in the middle of the living room floor next to the coffee table, and watched, with ears perked up and head cocked. Jim swung through the kitchen and dining room, and back into the living room, and Pete stood up and barked sharply, just once.

“It’s okay, Pete. Come,” Jim said. He wedged one of the crutches under his arm, and held his hand out for Pete to sniff. Pete skulked over, head down, and sniffed the crutches. Jim stayed absolutely still.

Len watched this whole display for several minutes.

“You know, every now and then, you do something that makes me think you’ve gone completely bonkers, but then it turns out to be the smartest thing in the world, and something that nobody else on the planet would ever think of.”
“I don’t know whether to be bashful or offended,” Jim said. “Maybe a little of both?”

“What made you think of that, anyhow?”

“Oh, when we were running this afternoon, I was messing around with a stick, and started using it like a walking stick, and Millie got really excited about it, and tried to play with it. That made me think of Ronnie coming home with crutches.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon and evening walking around Len’s house on the crutches, until the dogs were completely unfazed by these strange new sticks. Len thawed some leftovers he had in the freezer, and they had a simple, relaxed evening at home.

“Gotta buy a car in the next couple days,” Len said. “Found a couple things on Craigslist that maybe we could take a look at tomorrow, if you’re not busy.”

“Sure thing, Bones.” Jim looked over at Len, next to him on the sofa, and smiled. It was that unusual smile—the shy one, that Len could only recall having seen a couple of times.

“What?” Len asked, no snarkiness in his voice at all this time.

“I really love you,” Jim said, leaning into Len’s shoulder.

In the golden evening light, streaming through the window, the tiny butterfly bandage near Jim’s eye seemed to stand out more than it had in the daytime. Len carefully traced his thumb across Jim’s cheekbone, around the cut, and over his temple.

“I sure do love you too, Jim.”

They fell asleep entwined together on the couch, both exhausted from the trip. One of the dogs whined and pawed at the door, and Len got up sleepily to let them both out in the back yard. Once the dogs were back in, Len, still half asleep, pulled a mostly-asleep Jim to his feet. They stumbled to the bedroom together, and within thirty seconds, were fast asleep again.

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One month later.

Shifts came, and shifts went. Within what seemed like just a few days, but must surely have been weeks, the leaves changed colors, and fell from the trees. Len discovered the new chore of raking, which he was assured would be followed in short order by shoveling. He also discovered the joy of snuggling up under a down comforter on a cold night, and the great difficulty of getting out of bed at 6:15 in the morning when it was cold and dark, and the bed was warm and still occupied.

Jim, of course, insisted on dressing up for Halloween, making himself a pirate costume with felt and a glue gun. The Cozarts joined them at Len’s house, where many trick-or-treaters were expected. Ronnie engaged in a bit of one-upmanship with Jim, also dressing as a pirate, but supplementing his costume with a fake peg-leg made out of a broomstick. He was still on crutches, not yet ready for a prosthesis, but was adjusting as well as could be expected, settling into his ‘new normal.’

Baby Cozart’s arrival was imminent. Nearly the entire Cedar Rapids Fire Department was on call to drive them to the hospital when the anticipated moment came. But Jim and Len won the prize, because the baby decided that Halloween looked like so much fun that she didn’t want to wait another year. Angelina’s water broke just before nine, and the group of trick-or-treaters at the door at that moment were treated to the entire remainder of the candy. Len drove them to hospital in Iowa City, where they’d decided to have their baby, since neither Ronnie nor Angelina could bear walking
in the door of St. Luke’s in Cedar Rapids for this happy occasion. Jim took their house-key once again, and picked up the dogs.

More shifts came, and more shifts went, until suddenly it was the middle of November. Len had his share of hair-raising calls, including two more calls at Roma. At one, he caught another glimpse of Johnny Nero, and that time, he told Jim about it.

“I can’t believe the authorities haven’t shut that place down yet, Jim. Half the time I go there, they’re getting busted for serving under-age customers.”

“Well, I guess it’s just like everything else in government. Takes forever to do the right thing.” Jim said. “And I guess if you’re rich enough, it’s even harder for the government to go against you.”

Len frowned. “Doesn’t look like that place would be all that profitable.”

“Word on the streets is that Roma isn’t all that Johnny Nero has going for him. I just try not to pay too much attention.”

“Did he at least do time, Jim? For what happened with your father?”

Jim snorted. “Six whole months. And he only got that much because he already had a DWI conviction before. And there he is, richer than Croesus, still driving around, and probably still driving around under the influence, too.”

“Well, at least he looks like crap. Heart attack or stroke waiting to happen.”

“Like I said, Bones; I try not to pay too much attention. I’m content just to let him be an asshole.” Jim frowned. “I guess. I mean, there’s not really anything I can do about it, right?”

“I guess not. I did mention to the cops, last time I was there, that things seemed to be getting worse. Probably overstepped my bounds a bit, because I got a Look, with a capital ‘L,’ from one Officer Hannigan.”

“I’m sure you did,” Jim said. “I think they get a whole class in police academy on how to do that. Anyhow—can we change the subject?”

“Okay. What do you want to talk about?”

“Who said anything about talking?”

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Late November

These things always seemed to happen during the night shifts. It made sense, really, but it made the work harder. And there was something about seeing horrors at night that made it them horrible.

“Engine 1, Ladder 1, Ambulance 2, Engine 4, Truck 4; structure fire with reported entrapment, at the corner of 54th St. and Franklin Street. Structure fire with reported entrapment, 54th at Franklin. Entrapment reported on second floor, Franklin side. Time out: 0327.”

Everyone on the shift recognized the address as that of Roma. Len had been there nearly every rotation since he started at CRFD, so it was old hat to him, but he knew Jim would be thinking about the owner. He squeezed Jim’s arm quickly on his way past the gear rack where Jim was getting geared up, and they locked eyes for just a moment.
The moment was long enough for Len to convey ‘I know that place brings up bad thoughts,’ and for Jim to convey ‘Thanks, Bones.’

Len let go, and nearly collided with Pike as he headed to the ambulance. Pike gave him a fleeting look that he wasn’t sure how to interpret, but there was no time to dwell on it. Len boarded the driver’s side of the ambulance, and he and Christine followed the larger apparatus out of the bay, towards their familiar destination.

It was well after closing time, so with any luck, nobody was inside except the one person reported to be upstairs. The upstairs of the building seemed to have a couple of apartments, and possibly an office, though Len had never had the pleasure of being called upstairs at that address. He couldn’t imagine anyone possibly wanting to live upstairs of the Roma, but perhaps the rent was too cheap to pass up. Or, Len realized, perhaps it was owner-occupied.

They’d find out when they got there. Just like always.

The vehicles screamed through the city, in full emergency mode, no doubt waking more people than they warned. When they arrived at their destination, ahead of the other station, even Len could see the place was in trouble. Flames were belching out of the windows on the side with the front door, and smoke pushed through the upstairs windows on that side as well. The victim was hanging out the window on the other side, luckily for him.

Len immediately recognized the man—Johnny Nero.

God damn it.

People would be putting their lives at risk for the sake of this fuckwad. No, not just people—Jim.

Len watched helplessly as everyone scrambled to rescue Nero. There were no flames visible in the room he was in, but the first floor below the room where he was trapped flashed over as Len watched, the windows darkening with soot.

The room must have been getting hot—very, very hot. Nero was hanging out the window, screaming that he was burning up, even though there were no flames visible upstairs at all.

Len knew the first priority in a situation like this was to get the victim out safely. He watched as Cupcake threw a ladder up to the second floor window, and he and Jim scrambled up. Len could see Jim gesturing to the man to stand away from the window, as he cleared all the glass and the sash from the frame, making the largest possible opening. He entered the room, staying as low as possible, and a moment later, civvy-clad legs appeared on the ladder. Cupcake spotted the man from below, helping him get his feet situated on the ladder.

Len’s bowels clenched as he saw flames appear in the room that Jim was still inside. Jim couldn’t get out, yet, because he was still helping Nero get his bulky frame out the window. Len watched in horror as the flames rapidly took the room over, rolling over the ceiling like some kind of hellish fog. He saw Nero duck down to avoid the flames, but he still didn’t move down the ladder to make room for Jim. He probably had no idea that there was still someone waiting to leave the room, or else thought that Jim’s gear made him invincible. Which unfortunately was far from true. Once a room flashes over—and this one was close to it, from what Len had learned about fire behavior—a fully-protected firefighter only has seconds to get to safety.

Len could no longer see Jim. But then, almost in slow motion, the adjacent window shattered outwards, and the glass and sash were swept away from the inside. Shards of glass sprayed through the air like angry diamonds, and everyone on the ground ducked instinctively and moved away from
the window. Something bright red dropped out the window to the ground, bouncing once and landing about feet from the building. Then, Jim emerged, head first, low down at the bottom of the window, and he did some kind of maneuver with his body that Len couldn’t quite understand, leaving him hanging from the sill, with one arm and one leg still inside the room. Len could see Jim looking towards the ground, and he imagined that the thought process was ‘burn or fall?’

There really wasn’t a choice, and although the drop looked terrifying to Len, once Jim swung his legs down and was hanging from the second-floor window by his hands, the distance from his feet to the sidewalk below was only about eight feet. He dropped, along with Len’s heart, and rolled, his carbon-fiber air tank grating on the ground. He came up again on his hands and knees, stripping his super-heated gear off. Even in the unseasonably-warm thirty-degree air, his body steamed.

If he could get his gear off by himself, he was probably okay, Len thought, taking a deep, calming breath.

“Chris, this guy’s gonna have smoke inhalation for sure, maybe some burns as well,” Len said, doing his best to keep his voice from shaking. He knew he didn’t actually need to say anything to Christine; knew she was observing the situation just as he was, and could see Cupcake and Spock helping Nero over to the triage area.

Helping, not carrying, was a good sign for the patient. But Len couldn’t keep his eyes off Jim, who, back on his feet again, but bent over with his hands braced on his knees, was saying something to Pike, and pointing at the red object on the ground. Pike nodded, and then gestured Jim over to the triage area.

As Jim headed over, Len knew what he had to say, so he said it.

“Chris, you have a look at Jim; the other guy is probably gonna need ALS,” Len said. To himself, he said, *Jim’s fine, Jim’s fine.*


Cupcake and Spock set Nero down on the stretcher.

“Mr. McCoy will take care of you; he is an excellent paramedic,” Spock said, as he and Cupcake turned to go back to the scene.

Len turned 95% of his attention to his patient.

Nero was alert and breathing, but coughing. His face was flushed, and he had the pulpy red nose of a chronic heavy drinker.

“Sir, I’m going to put an oxygen mask on you, all right? Then we’ll see how you’re doing. Are you injured anywhere?” he said, as he slipped the mask over Nero’s face.

Nero shook his head. “I don’t … think so. It was … fucking hot in there … but there wasn’t even … any fire! I breathed … a shitload … of smoke,” he said, hacking and coughing between each phrase.

“Do you think you breathed in any really hot smoke, or were you mostly by the window?” Len asked. He didn’t see soot around or in Nero’s mouth or nose, and his face wasn’t burned, but there was always the chance of a heat injury to the airway, which would need to be dealt with promptly.

“No, no; as soon as I could tell the downstairs was on fire, I wanted to get to the other room, where the fire escape was, but the fire spread faster than I—uh, there was already fire there. So I went in the office and shut the door, and went straight to the window. That’s what you’re supposed to do,
“You did fine. I’m gonna need to take your shirt off, to get you on a monitor,” Len said, as he removed the soot-stained, sweat-soaked garment. The fact that the shirt was sweaty indicated Nero was sweating right now, because any sweat that was produced upstairs would’ve been long since evaporated by the heat. He counted eight breaths in fifteen seconds—but there could be any number of reasons for that. His heart was pounding away, and the rhythm didn’t seem particularly regular.

Once Nero’s shirt was off, Len put him on the cardiac monitor, noting as he did so that the skin on Nero’s back was flushed pink. The basics came through quickly—pulse 158—way too high for a man his age; BP 204/108—also high. And the respiration rate of 32 was alarming as well, but fortunately, his carbon monoxide levels weren’t terribly elevated. So the pinkness of his skin was likely superficial burns.

Len started asking standard questions about medical history, medication, and allergies, while keeping one eye on the cardiac monitor. He didn’t particularly like what he was seeing there.

With the 5% of his attention that wasn’t where it was supposed to be, Len noticed Jim’s voice breaking through the cacophony of the active fire scene.

“Steeple, I’m fine. I swear. I got really hot, and I maybe turned my ankle a little when I dropped, but I swear there’s no permanent damage. Maybe first degree on the back of my neck, but that’s it. Honest. And I’m not gonna try to fake you out with Bones sitting right there, okay?”

“Good,” said Christine. “So enjoy your oxygen while I get a set of vitals, okay?”

“Sure,” Jim said. “Looks like it’s just about under control over there, anyhow. And I don’t mind being done for the day after having to bail out like that.”

Len breathed more easily, and returned 99% of his attention to his patient. He reminded himself of what he’d told Jim all those months ago—that a patient was a patient, and that he’d give everyone his best. Even this patient who, over twenty-eight years ago, had taken the life of his lover’s father, and set the difficult stage for Jim’s life.

“Sir, your heart is beating really quickly right now—faster than I’d expect from just the fright of what you just went through, which I can’t even imagine. And it’s a little bit irregular, too, so I’d like to get you to the hospital to have you checked out, all right?” He looked at the monitor; the arrhythmias were becoming more pronounced, though his patient didn’t seem to be noticing.

“Sure, whatever you say,” Nero said. He looked behind him, noticing for the first time that there was someone else in the triage area. “Hey, is that fireman okay?”

“He’s the one who got you out of there,” Len said curtly. “I’m gonna need to start an IV, here, to give you some fluids, and in case you need any medication.”

“Sure, whatever,” Nero said. “He got me out of there? Is he okay?”

“You’re going to feel a poke from the needle,” Len said, as he put the line in Nero’s forearm. “And yes, he should be fine.”

Len really wanted to tell Nero exactly who had risked his skin to get Nero’s sorry ass out of there. But it wouldn’t be in the interests of his patient right now to have added anxiety placed on him.

Len frowned, as he thought of anxiety, which his patient was not expressing. He hadn’t yet uttered one word about how the establishment that was his livelihood was going up in flames. Or, he
corrected himself, had been going up in flames, as Jim was right—it seemed that the fire was under control. Not yet out, but even Len could tell from the tenor of the voices of Pike and the responding teams on the radio that the immediate crisis was on the wane.

Len filed that piece of information away for later. Right now he needed to get his patient stabilized and on the road.

“Sir, you said you were on metoprolol for your blood pressure. When was the last time you took it?”

“This morning—well, noon, which is morning for me.”

“All right. I’m going to give you some more of that through the IV, which should calm your heart rate and blood pressure, and then we’ll get on our way to the hospital. You try to relax. It looks like the fire is under control, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

Len frowned as his patient’s heart rate increased as he gave what should have been good news.

Leonard checked in with the doctor in the ED over the radio, and began slowly pushing a small dose of the drug. He turned to surreptitiously check on Jim, who was sitting calmly, occasionally lifting his oxygen mask to drink from a water bottle. He was writing in a small notebook that he’d likely begged off of Christine. A moment later, Pike came over, and took the notebook from Jim.

“Jim. You doing okay?”

“I’m fine, Cap. Honest. Got pretty hot, and twisted my ankle, but—”

“That’s not what I meant, kiddo,” Pike said. “And you know it.”

Ah, Len thought. So Jim knows who he pulled out of there. Good. He returned his attention to his patient, checking the monitor and pushing a little more of the drug.

“Actually, I think I am, Cap,” Jim said slowly.

“All right,” Pike said. “Christine, can he ride up front with you?”

“Uh, no, Cap. He needs to be on the O₂, and we’re strictly prohibited from having oxygen running into the cab.”

“It’s okay, Cap,” Jim said, with a calmness Len wished he felt himself. He pushed the rest of the drug through the IV port, and flushed the line with saline.

All the readings had come down enough that he felt he could initiate transport.

“Okay, Christine,” he said, “let’s get going. I gather Jim’s coming in as well?”

“You bet,” she said, as she helped load the stretcher onto the ambulance.

Len extended a hand to Jim, who allowed himself to be helped through the back door. They exchanged a look as Jim sat on the bench by the patient’s feet and buckled up, and Len reconnected his oxygen to the mains in the rig. This time the looks meant ‘I’m okay, Bones,’ and ‘Later, darlin’.’

Nero’s numbers continued to remain elevated, but less alarmingly so, and the arrhythmias had declined in frequency. He wasn’t exhibiting any other symptoms, so Len just continued to monitor him. After all, the guy was doing well enough to be carrying on a conversation, which he continued.

“Kid, you pulled me outta there, huh?” Nero said to Jim.
“Yes,” Jim said.

“Johnny Nero. That’s my place. I guess it’s pretty much a loss, huh?” Nero said, shaking his head.

Jim didn’t reply.

“Thanks a lot for what you did. I owe you big time,” Nero said. “So if there’s ever anything I can do —”

“I was doing my job,” Jim said neutrally. “That’s all.”

Len watched, chewing on the insides of his cheeks a little, as Jim leaned back against the padded wall of the ambulance, and closed his eyes. Len knew perfectly well that the maneuver was a conversation ender, and not a display of exhaustion, but Nero misread Jim’s withdrawal. Or perhaps read it as it was intended for him, personally.

“Is he okay?” Nero asked Len. “Hey, kid!”

“Mr. Nero,” Len said. “You need to stay calm. Please. And he’ll be fine.”

But in the end, despite his words of calmness to Nero, Len couldn’t resist it. He knew it was wrong, wrong, wrong, but he couldn’t help it.

“Really, he’ll be fine. Sure, he was still stuck in the room he got you out of when it finally caught fire, but once he jumped out the window he was safe.”

“Jesus,” Nero said, and McCoy instantly regretted his words, as Nero paled—as much as one can when essentially sunburned, and closed his own eyes.

“Mr. Nero?” Len said in alarm. “Try to stay awake, okay?”

“I’m awake,” he said heavily. “It’s just … I never meant to …”

“Just relax, okay? He’s fine.” Len said, regretting his dig.

Everyone was silent for the rest of the trip to the hospital. The diesel engine thrummed, and the brakes squeaked. The patient compartment reeked of smoke—not the clean woodsmoke smell from a campfire, but the acrid, unpleasant odor of a modern structure fire, where everything burning was synthetic and petroleum-based. If you breathed through your mouth, you could taste the toxic byproducts of plastic combustion.

Leonard was profoundly relieved when they arrived at the hospital. He gratefully handed his patient off to the ED nurse, and gave his report to her. Once Nero was officially in the care of the hospital, and Len had washed up, he went in search of Jim. All the exam rooms’ curtains were closed, so he couldn’t tell which one held Jim.

“Chris,” he said, “did you see where they stashed Jim?”

“Room nine,” Christine said. “And listen—I need a break. I’ll call us in for ten minutes, all right?”

“Sure,” Len said. “I’ll see you back at the rig in ten.”

Len knocked on the wall just outside of the closed curtain on exam room nine. “Jim?”

“Yeah, Bones.”
Len stepped through the curtain, heart pounding, and closed it again. He looked Jim over intently, and then leaned in and kissed him on the lips, tasting sweat and soot, and not caring in the slightest. Jim’s hand on the back of his neck told him the semi-public kiss was welcome, but a loud beep from the monitor in the next room reminded Len where they were, and he pulled back.

“Jesus Christ, Jim,” Len said. “Are you really sure you’re okay? And I mean like Pike meant, in case you were wondering.”

“I really am, Bones,” Jim said, frowning slightly, as if he didn’t completely believe his own words. “I don’t quite understand why, but I really am.”

“And the rest? Lemme see your neck,” he said, and Jim leaned forward cooperatively. His neck was pink, in a line between where the Kevlar ear-covering fabric from the helmet didn’t quite meet the collar of his coat, leaving an inch-wide gap where his neck was covered only by a flame-proof fabric hood.

“You got such a big head, and such a long neck. They gotta get you some gear that’s gonna cover you properly. I’ll talk to Pike today,” McCoy grumbled, getting gruffer as he realized Jim really was, in fact, mostly unharmed. “And the ankle?”

Jim held his foot out, filthy sock and all. Len whisked the sock off, palpated the ankle, and asked Jim to move it this way and that, and couldn’t find anything to complain about, at least relating to the ankle itself.

“We don’t wear shoes anymore? Is that it?” Len griped. “It’s thirty degrees out, you idiot!”

“Well, I had to take my boots off with my bunker pants, because the gear was just holding the heat in,” Jim said calmly. “And besides, thirty isn’t cold.”

“Yes it is,” Len snapped, scowling. “I’ll bring your shoes and jacket from the station when I pick you up here after my shift.”

“Okay, Bones. C’mere,” Jim said, pulling Leonard towards him again. He kissed Len, as good as he’d gotten before, and let him go again.

“He’s just a guy, Bones,” Jim said. “A scared, pathetic guy, who pissed himself from fright. A creep, and an ass, and he probably torched the place himself. But he’s just a fucking guy, and a pretty pathetic one at that. And that’s why I’m okay. I think.”

“All right,” Len said quietly. “Okay, darlin’. We’ll talk more later. Rest up, all right?”

“I will. And if I’m not still here when you come back, I’ll be in the coffee shop.”

“With no shoes on.”

“Yeah.”

~!*~!*~!

Dispatch returned Len and Chris to the scene, where it seemed that something unusual was going on. The place was crawling with cops—more than you’d expect for crowd control. The coroner’s van was there as well.

“Do you get the sense,” Len said to Christine, “that maybe we missed some interesting radio traffic while we were on break?”
“I’m afraid that’s exactly the sense I get. Gaila’s taking a break—she’ll know.”

They got their basic equipment and rehab supplies ready, and then went over to Gaila.

“Looks like we missed something,” Chapel said.

“Fraid so,” Gaila said. “Body in the ladies’ room. And obvious multiple origins downstairs. Plus the gas can Jim found upstairs.”

“Body, I understand, unfortunately,” Len said. “And I saw Jim toss something out the window—and it was a gas can? Who the hell keeps gasoline upstairs? But ‘multiple origins?’ What does that mean?”

“When fires start by accident, there’s usually one point of origin—a bad electrical connection, or a pan of grease on the stove, or a cigarette butt smoldering in the trash, or a candle knocked over by a dog’s tail. When there are multiple sites that look like the origin of a fire, it’s suspicious. And you’re right—nobody keeps gasoline upstairs. Jim probably tossed the container out the window because the room was getting fucking hot and he didn’t want the can to blow up on him. But also because it was potentially evidence.”

“Hoo boy,” Len said. “Jim didn’t say anything about that. But I guess he had other things to—” Len cut himself off, as he realized none of the things Jim had to think about were anyone else’s business.

“I’m sure he did have other things to think about,” Gaila said. “I heard he had to bail out from a window when the room flashed over.” She shook her head. “Sometimes, if I didn’t know better, I’d almost think he was looking for trouble. I guess it just finds him, though, all on its own.”

“He’s fine, by the way, thanks for asking,” Len said dryly.

“Uh, I knew that, from Cap,” Gaila said, shooting him a rare frown. “Or I would’ve asked. Anyhow—I gotta get back to it.”

“Sorry,” Len said quickly. “I guess—I’m just kind of touchy about my friends getting fried on the job.”

Gaila’s frown softened. “Yeah, Len. I know. We all are. No offense taken.”

“Be safe,” he said.

“Thanks,” Gaila said. “And now—break time’s over. Back to work.” She dropped her empty water bottle in the trash, and headed back to the scene.

An SUV marked “State Fire” pulled up an appropriate distance behind the ambulance. Two men got out, and headed straight for Captain Pike.

Len had a feeling the rest of the shift was going to be long, especially for anyone who was inside the building, and might have seen something relevant. He counted himself lucky on that front—he didn’t see the inside of the building at all.

He turned to say something to Christine when something suddenly clicked in his head, so loudly Len was sure others could hear. He stopped dead in his tracks.

“What’s wrong, Len?”

“I … I think I need to talk to Captain Pike,” he said slowly. “Or—I don’t know who, actually. But
I’m not actually sure if I can, since it’s something my patient said. Oh, fucking hell, Chris. What a can of worms. I can’t even tell them I might’ve heard anything, because they’d know who it was from, and that could be using a possibly confidential conversation to incriminate my patient. And I can only say this to you because technically you were in the same room, even if you didn’t hear everything he said. Jesus, Chris—what do I do?”

“I think,” Chris said, “you don’t say anything to Pike yet, and you call the state EMS board first thing after your shift, and get legal advice. Because no matter what is going on, it sounds like you’ll need it. Write down what you heard, while it’s still fresh, and get advice from higher up.”

“Right,” Len said. “Of course. Of course that’s what I need to do. Jesus. I can’t even think straight.”

“And,” Chris added, “you should ask Jim if he heard anything in the back of the ambulance. He’s not bound to confidentiality.”

Len rubbed his brow, feeling the creases left behind by what he felt like had turned into a perpetual scowl. He thought he’d left that in Georgia, months and months ago, but he’d been wrong before.

“I … I don’t … I’ll ask him,” Len said, as his mind fumbled with the complexity and ugliness of the situation.

There was no way for Christine to know, of course, that no court on the planet would listen to anything James T. Kirk had to say about one John Nero.

And a body in the bathroom—the best that could possibly be was an accident. Someone passed out in there, and whoever torched the place didn’t even bother to look before splashing gasoline all over the bar and lighting a match. And if it was Nero—which Len was starting to suspect, based on how the man had behaved—well, the man deserved to rot in jail for the rest of his life.

Pike came up to the ambulance, and looked inquiringly at Len’s ashen face.

“Everything okay, Len? You look like you saw a ghost.” Pike gently pulled Len away from Chapel, for a private conversation.

“It’s … I don’t know,” Len said. “Jim’s fine, of course—but this whole … mess here …” He had to look away, knowing he knew something he couldn’t say.

“Okay,” Pike said. “I think I understand, actually. That you may have something to tell me, that you can’t actually tell me. And I’m not asking you anything. But let me give you this,” he said, pulling a business card from his pocket and handing it to Leonard. “Just in case.”

Len looked at the card—contact information for the state fire investigator. He heaved a sigh of relief that Pike understood what was going on. “Thanks, Cap. Seriously. I’ll talk to someone at State EMS tomorrow, first thing, and get some advice on this … situation.”

“And Len—I understand the full extent of the complexity of the situation. Jim’s family and I go way back. Okay?”

“Oh … yeah. I kind of thought maybe you knew that part,” Len said. “I’m glad someone around here besides me knows about it.”

“As am I,” Pike said. He looked Len straight in the eye. “And you and I need to have a talk tomorrow evening, as soon as we’re back on shift.”

Jesus. Len thought he’d faint just from the rapid changes in his blood pressure and pulse. “Uh,
“Relax, Len. I’m not mad. Nothing bad’s going to happen. I just think that it’s time for … clarity.”

Len sniffed. “Clarity. Yeah.”

“Or we could talk before the shift starts, if you’d prefer. Your choice. But we do need to talk.”

“Yeah, I guess we do. And—I guess your office is … appropriate. Since it’s kind of department policy matter, I think.”

“It’s not, actually. I’m considering it personal at this point, unless you think otherwise.”

For the thousandth time, Len wished the word ‘y’all’ was in general usage in the North, because its use or absence would have clarified that sentence immensely.

“I guess … if you want it to be a three way conversation, it should be before shift, because the absent one of the three of us is going to be told to stay home tomorrow.”

“Again, your choice. Talk it over. Call me after one. I never sleep past one when I’m on nights.”

“Okay.”

Pike released the ambulance from standby just before six a.m., when most of the salvage and overhaul that could be done without destroying potential evidence had been completed. Len headed to the coffee pot, but changed his mind, feeling the sourness of stress bubbling up in his esophagus. He poured himself a glass of milk, instead, and drank it while he pondered his dilemma.

He was bound to confidentiality, unless he felt the patient was a threat to himself or others. And there was the catch—this man, if he had in fact torched his bar (there, Len thought, I finally actually thought those words)—was indeed a potential danger to others. And he had possibly killed someone, even if it was by accident. He Googled the Iowa State EMS Board on his phone, called them, and left a message with his specific concerns. He wouldn’t love being woken up by their reply, but if he was, at least it meant it was timely.

Miraculously, the ambulance got no more calls that morning. At 0731, Len changed into his civvies and headed out the door for the hospital, after retrieving Jim’s shoes from under his gear rack, and his coat, a clean pair of socks, and his keys from his locker. He drove to the hospital on autopilot, and went in the front entrance of the emergency department like a normal person.

“Hi, Rennie,” he said to the admissions nurse. “You folks still have Jim Kirk stashed back there? I’ve come to relieve you of the burden, if he’s ready to go.”

“You may have to wheel him out, since last time I looked he was sleeping like a baby, but he’s ready. Come on back.” She buzzed the door open for him, and let him into the ED, which was quiet in the early morning of a weekday. The nurse led him back to exam room nine.

“See you later, Len,” Rennie said.

“Thanks.”

Len slipped quietly past the closed curtain, and took in the sight before him. Jim was curled up on his side, the back of his hand jammed up against his chin in a position that would break Len’s wrist if he tried it, but was the position he always found Jim sleeping in in the morning. Or whenever they woke up, in this crazy life they’d made for themselves. He suddenly imagined Walla Bear tucked in the
crook of Jim’s arm, and laughed quietly. He’d have to pester Winona for a look at a photo album next time he was at the farm. In fact, he wondered why he’d never had such a thing foisted on him before, since his own mother certainly wasted no time in treating Jim to embarrassing childhood pictures.

“Jim,” Len said quietly, stroking his hand over Jim’s cheek and temple, and resting it on the back of his neck, which was indeed marked with a one-inch stripe of bright pink, halfway between his hairline and the prominence of his seventh cervical vertebra.

Jim’s eyes blinked open lazily, and he wiped a string of drool from the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, hey, Bones. Is the shift over already?”

“Sure is. You ready to get outta here?”

“Yeah. Not supposed to go in for the next shift, either. On account of a very mildly sprained ankle. I tried to tell the doc it really wasn’t that bad, but she—”

“She had your number, is what. You could make it worse, or, even more likely, hurt yourself some other way while guarding that ankle, whether you were trying to protect it or not. So don’t be ridiculous. Just listen to—” Len stopped short and scowled at the grin on Jim’s face.

“I love to get you going like that. Relax, Bones. I didn’t argue with the doc at all. Honest. She’ll confirm my story, if you care to ask her.”

“Might just,” Len said. “Since I want to get a disposition on that Nero fellow. And here’s some socks. Let’s just throw those other ones right in the trash, since lord only knows what you might’ve picked up on them walking around on this floor.”

Jim pulled his socks on silently, and started putting his shoes on as well.

“Bones, I don’t think he made it.”

Leonard froze. “What? He was stable when I brought him in. Not fabulous, but he didn’t have the look of a guy who was gonna totally tank.”

“All I know is, some cops came in, and ten minutes later, somebody coded, and it didn’t sound like it all came out okay. And then the cops left. But you should check with the doc.”

Len rubbed his brow, feeling the frown lines returning again, along with a headache he’d probably been ignoring for hours. “Jesus. All right. I should do that. Why don’t you wait here? Dr. Barnes won’t say anything to me in front of you anyhow.”

“Okay.”

Len passed through the curtain once again, and scanned the open ED area for Dr. Barnes. He found her sitting at her computer, entering something in a chart.

“Dr. Barnes,” he said.

The doctor jumped slightly, startled by Leonard’s quiet greeting.

“Len,” she said. “What brings you here? Oh—are you picking up your stray firefighter?”

“Yeah. Poor thing doesn’t even have any shoes. So I’m here to collect him, and take him to the pound. If they’ll have him.”
“Oh, he’d find some way to charm himself in the door of the SPCA if that’s what he really wanted,” she said, rolling her eyes. “But he’s ready to go.”

“Thanks,” Len said. “I, ah … also wanted to ask you for a disposition on the guy I brought in with him. Johnny Nero.”

Dr. Barnes’s face fell. “I thought you might. He crashed, Len. Nothing you did, or didn’t do, I’m sure of that. He was stable when the cops came in—I mean really stable, all his numbers on the monitor were nominal. We didn’t have any labs back, yet, but to be honest, he didn’t look that bad. He was pretty much just in holding pattern so he could get his coronary arteries looked at. So when the cops came in, we didn’t really have a good reason not to let them interview him. Ten minutes into the interview—bam. Straight into v-fib. Didn’t convert, then he flatlined, and we couldn’t get him back. Sorry to have to tell you that.”

Len didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything at all.

Dr. Barnes looked up at him, frowning. “Did you know him?”

“Uh … not exactly. It’s complicated, and at this point I’m quite sure I’m not at liberty to say anything else.”

Barnes nodded. “I understand. I did hear there was a fatality at the fire, and when the police came in to talk to him, well …”

Len nodded in return. “Like I said, though, I don’t think I can say anything. Sorry, Dr. Barnes; it’s not exactly fair, but that’s how it is. I’ll fill you in if and when I can.”

“Not a problem,” she said. “See you next time.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Len returned to room nine, where Jim was sitting on the edge of the gurney, waiting.

“You were right. He’s dead, Jim. Dr. Barnes said it was sudden, and unexpected. Probably a massive MI.”

“Let’s talk in the car,” Jim said, as they walked out of the ED.

“Good plan. Or even better, when we get home. You need anything on the way?”

“I’m fried, but I’m starving, actually. Could we stop somewhere?”

“I guess I’m pretty hungry, too. How about if we go to the Queen? We can get that booth in the corner by the kitchen, and nobody else will be around.”

Jim nodded. “Thanks, Bones. And—after, could we go to my place? I just kind of need to be home, I think. Talk to my mom later. You know?”

“Sure. There’s one more thing, though,” Leonard said heavily, acid bubbling up again as he clicked his keyfob to unlock the car.

“What is it?” Jim said, once they were both in and buckling up.

“Pike. He … wants to talk to us both. He didn’t say it in so many words, but I’m guessing he’s figured out we’re together. He says we’re not in trouble, but that he had to talk to us. I’m supposed to call him after one.”
Jim nodded. “Okay. And Bones—seriously, don’t be nervous. Pike—well, he knows a lot about me. He has a cousin who was a cop in Iowa City with my dad. The ICPD watched out for our family forever, you know. That’s what they do. But anyhow, his cousin got wind that I was applying to the academy, and after I finished, Pike kind of eased my way into CRFD. Given my, uh, adolescent background, it wasn’t a sure thing that I’d get a job anywhere. So he has no interest in seeing me crash and burn. So to speak. The worst that would happen is that one of us might be asked to work a different shift, or at a different station. But he’ll be on our side. For sure.”

“All right,” Len said. “I didn’t either exactly confirm or deny what he wasn’t exactly saying. Not exactly. But he knows.”

“And that’s okay, Bones. At worst he’ll probably just be pissed off that we didn’t say anything.”

“Of course we didn’t. I mean, it’s Iowa, and not fucking Georgia, but still.”

“But still,” Jim agreed.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Gaila was kind enough to explain the chapter title already. So I can use this note to explain that I’ve given poor Cedar Rapids far more full-blown structure fires than a city that size would have in reality. Dramatic license, right? Also: ALS stands for Advanced Life Support. There are different levels of EMT certification. Some, like Christine, are certified to provide Basic Life Support. Others, like Len, can provide Advanced Life Support.
Jim and Len entered the Queen Diner, and were greeted by the owner, an absolute bear of a man, but with just a mustache, and not the bushy beard one might expect on such a Grizzly Adams type. Neither Len nor Jim were small men, but they were both dwarfed by this fellow.

“Well, Jimmy! I know you’ve been coming in a lot, but I just haven’t been able to make it out of the kitchen to say hi. How’ve you been, anyhow? And who’s your friend?”

“Hey, Steve. This is my friend Leonard McCoy—he’s the paramedic on my shift. Among other things. Bones, this is Steve Runyon—the Freddie Mercury fan, remember? We were at high school together.”

Steve and Len shook, and Len could tell he was being sized up. Apparently Jim’s ‘among other things’ wasn’t clear enough.

“You look like you just had a rough shift, Jimmy,” Steve said, finally taking his eyes off Len.

“Rough doesn’t even begin to cover it, Steve. Fire with two fatalities. And we’re not allowed to talk about it. Just … watch the local news tonight.”

“Geez. Sounds nasty. Sorry to hear about it.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Anyhow—I see the penalty box is free. Can we have it?” Jim gestured towards the isolated booth near the kitchen door, that was usually the last to be filled.

“On purpose?” Steve asked, eyebrows raised. “Sure, I guess.”

“We’re starving, and we need to be able to debrief where nobody’ll be sitting behind us,” Jim explained.

“Oh. No problem. You know what you want? I’ll get it started.”

“Our usual?” Len asked Jim, who nodded.

“Two greek omelets, an order of corn nuggets, and two coffees,” Jim said to Steve.

“Actually, I’ll skip the coffee,” Leonard said.

Jim laid the back of his hand on Leonard’s forehead, only half joking. “Are you ill, Bones?”

“Heartburn. Stress. Too much coffee already, and I have to be able to sleep today,” Len explained.

“You want decaf? I’ll put a pot on,” Steve said, as he showed them to the booth.

“Sure, that’s great,” Len said, even though he didn’t really want it.
“Are you limping?” Steve asked Jim, just as they got to the booth.

“Um … no?” Jim said.

“Liar,” Len said. “He jumped out a second floor window a few hours ago, to save his hide, right before the room he was in blew up.”

Steve whistled. “Jesus, Jimmy. You need to get outta that crazy business. Lemme know if you ever want a job here—I’ll fix you right up. It’s not exciting, and the pay’s shit, but you won’t get yourself killed.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Jim said, frowning. “Thanks. I’ll … let you know.”

Steve went back to the kitchen.

“You’re not actually considering that, are you?” Len asked. “You’d hate working in a diner.”

“Yeah, I would. But sometimes … I don’t know, Bones. Sometimes I think it’s just not worth it.”

“I know, darlin’. But … think about the times that are worth it. Shit,” Len said, shaking his head. “Listen to me. It almost sounds like I’m trying to convince you not to quit.”

Jim snorted lightly. “You are, Bones. That’s what you do. You make sure I do the right thing. I’m not quitting. I could just … use a break. This whole thing today—I don’t even know what it was. I mean, I’d bet you dollars to donuts that Nero torched his own place for the insurance. Why the hell else would the gas can have been up there in the room he was hiding in? And you heard what he said in the ambulance. He said ‘I never meant …’ and then he shut up.”

“Jim, even if he did set his own place on fire for the insurance, it’s more than that now. They found a woman, dead, in the ladies’ room, downstairs in the bar.”

Jim gaped at Leonard. “Holy crap, Bones! Did he kill her, and then torch the place to cover it up?”

“I don’t know,” Len said. “I really don’t know. And the bitch of it is, we’ll probably never find out.”

“Oh, we’ll find out all right,” Jim said darkly. “Believe me, we’ll find out.”

“Yeah,” Leonard sighed. “I guess we probably will, when you put it that way.”

Jim rested his elbows on the table, and put his forehead in his hands. “I’m so tired, Bones. I just wanna have breakfast with you, and go home, and go to bed for the rest of the day. Maybe the rest of my life. I dunno.”

Len slid out of his side of the booth, and next to Jim, so they both had their backs to the rest of the diner. The booth was small, and they were crammed together, and Jim leaned into him gratefully. Len leaned right back, and put his hand on the back of Jim’s neck, below the bright pink stripe. It was as much physical comfort as he was ready to give, and it wasn’t nearly as much as he wanted to. He wasn’t mentally far enough from Georgia to be able to do any more than that, so it would have to be enough for now. They sat there silently, leaning into each other, Len’s hand on Jim’s neck, until Steve came out with their food.

“You guys gonna be okay?” Steve asked simply, looking back and forth between them.


Len dug into his pocket and pulled his credit card out, handing it to Steve. “Can you run the check
now? I’ve gotta get him home as soon as he eats.”


The fact that Jim argued neither about Len’s taking the check, or about getting him home soon, said more to Len than any argument could have.

Jim ate his food slowly but deliberately, which told Len he was having to force it down, despite the fact he was starving. Three quarters of the way through his meal, when Leonard had already finished, Jim put his utensils down suddenly.

“Bones, I gotta get out of here,” he said, just loudly enough to be heard over the noise of the diner. “I’m gonna lose it.”

Leonard didn’t question him. He hastily signed the credit card slip, and exited the booth. Jim squeezed his frame out of the booth as well, and half-dragged Len to the rear exit a few yards from their seats, and around the back of the building to where Leonard’s car was parked.

“Let’s go home,” Len said, opening the door for Jim.

Jim sat down in the passenger’s seat and buried his face in his hands before Len could even close the car door. His shoulders started to shake. Len knelt down next to him and held him as well as he could as he sobbed silently. Len murmured soothing, meaningless non-words to him, and stroked his hair, carefully avoiding the burnt patch on the back of his neck, though he doubted Jim was in a state to even notice any mild physical pain.

Finally, after several minutes of nearly silent sobbing, Jim uncovered his face, unashamed of the tears and snot, the redness and the sniffling. The luminosity of his blue eyes was sharply enhanced by the redness of their rims.

“Bones … I never got to meet my dad. Not once. And I grew up making a monster out of Johnny Nero. Badder than the Big Bad Wolf, worse than the worst movie monster ever. But you know what? He was just a pathetic, stupid jerk, just as scared as the rest of us. And now he’s gone, and I don’t have anyone to hate any more, and underneath all the hate, I’m just so … sad. So sad I can hardly stand it. What do I do, Bones? What do I do?”

“You be as sad as you need to be, sweetheart. For as long as you need. And you spend time being sad with your mom, and Sam, too. And I’ll help however I can, by being there, or by not being there, or whatever you want. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jim said. He wiped his face with the back of his forearm, like a little kid. “Okay. I … I think what I need right now is just to go home, to my place, and sleep all morning with you. And then when you have to go to work, I’ll go to my mom’s. I’ll stay there tonight. Maybe see if Sam can come over.”

“That’s a good idea. You ready for a drive?”

“Yeah. Probably fall asleep on the way. I’m just so damned tired.”

~!~!~!~

Jim did indeed fall asleep on the way to his place in Riverside. He woke up when the engine cut out in his driveway. They both trudged wearily inside, took a quick and silent shower together, and fell into bed. Len set an alarm for one thirty, which wasn’t really adequate sleep, but he needed to talk to Pike and get that out of the way.
“Jim,” he said, with the last of his alertness.

“Yeah.”

“I think I’ll talk to Pike on my own this afternoon. Let you go be with your mom. Is that all right with you, sugar?”

“Sure. Like I said, he’s not gonna eat you alive.”

Len smiled. “I know. I am kinda curious what he will do, though. Now c’mere,” he said, gathering Jim up in his arms. Jim rested his head on Len’s chest, and within moments, they were both asleep.

~!~!~!~

Len’s quiet alarm woke him at one thirty, but Jim didn’t stir in the slightest. He didn’t wake even when Len disentangled their bodies from each other and padded softly out of the room in the sheepskin slippers that were Jim’s birthday present to him. He closed the bedroom door quietly, and went into the living room to make his phone call.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Cap, it’s Len McCoy.”

“Len. Thanks for calling. You picked Jim up at the hospital, right? Is he okay?”

“He’s got a very minor ankle sprain, and burnt strip on the back of his neck—just first degree, but that still smarts plenty. Which reminds me—I don’t think his gear fits as well as it should. Maybe you could look at that when he’s back—next rotation, because they took him off for tonight’s shift.”

“I’ll absolutely look into that. Thanks for mentioning it. Wrists and necks are the most vulnerable places for problems related to ill-fitting gear. But Len—how is he, emotionally? And I don’t think I’m making a wild leap assuming that you know that.”

“He’s … well, without getting into confidences, this whole thing is pretty rough for him. I think you should talk to him, but not today. He needs to rest, and then he’s going to Winona’s tonight. So I’m thinking, maybe the, uh, conversation you suggested, which I suppose is actually a good idea, should be just you and me. You name the venue.”

“Well, I live five minutes from the station. Would you be willing to stop by my place, say, half an hour before our shift starts?”

“Sure.”

Pike gave him directions, and they hung up.

Len took inventory of himself, and decided the two hours before he’d need to get ready to leave for Pike’s place would best be spent sleeping. The second night shift of the rotation was always a bitch, and there was no need to make it any worse than it needed to be. If he was massively shift-lagged the next day, so be it. He reset his alarm, and quietly crawled back into bed, doing his best not to wake Jim.

Jim didn’t seem to really wake up, but rolled towards Len and glommed onto him like an octopus. Len let him glom as much as he wanted to. He didn’t fall back to sleep right away, though. He lay there for a while, listening to Jim’s breathing, and thinking of his own father. It seemed like he had just fallen asleep again when the alarm pinged again at three thirty. This time, Jim woke as well.
“Hey, darlin’.”

“Mmph. Hey, Bones. C’mere.”

“Just for a minute. I gotta get up—gotta go see Captain Pike.”

Jim sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Oh, yeah. I forgot.”

“That’s okay. I have to be there by five, so I oughta get moving a bit.”

Jim sat straight up in bed. “Shit, Bones! I was gonna call my mom this morning, before I went to bed, and I forgot! How could I do that?”

“Because you were exhausted, Jim. Physically and emotionally exhausted. You needed to sleep.”

Jim relaxed a bit. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll call her this afternoon. Probably just say I need to talk to her, and can I come over. Don’t like dropping bombshells over the phone.”

“Good, Jim. You do that. Let’s have something to eat, before I have to go.”

“’kay. I never know what to call it—what you eat when you wake up in the afternoon after a night shift.”

“I call it grilled cheese,” Len said. “How’s that sound to you?”

“Perfect.”

~!~!~!~

Len rang Chris Pike’s doorbell at 5:00 sharp.

“Come on in. Coffee?”

“Thanks.”

Pike disappeared into the kitchen, and returned with two mugs of black coffee.

“I’m not gonna beat around the bush, Len. You and Jim are involved, right?”

“Yeah. We figured you’d catch on sooner or later.”

Pike nodded. “I have a few things to say about that.”

“Thought you might,” Len said, sipping his coffee.

“Okay. First thing’s easy: I don’t have a problem with homosexuality. Second thing: Iowa, for some reason, has decided to be one of the leading states in gay rights. I suspect that’s probably pretty different from what you’re used to. So all I’m saying, is, try to start thinking like an Iowan, and not a Georgian, if you can. You boys could’ve told me about this long ago, and I would’ve preferred that to figuring it out, but I understand where you’re coming from.

“Third thing: CRFD regs don’t say you can’t be involved with someone on your shift, unless one person directly supervises the other, which isn’t the case for you and Jim. Those three things,” Pike said, looking Len in the eye, “are the easy things.”

“So what are the not-so-easy things?” Len asked.
“You’ve probably already thought of this one,” Pike said. “In fact, I’ll send you straight for a psych eval if you haven’t. But—this is a dangerous job, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. And Jim seems to attract more than his share of danger. I’m not saying he’s reckless—not at all. Just that … he has some kind of need to be a hero, a need to be the one who does all the crazy shit. And that kind of attitude is something the fire service is trying to get away from.”

Len nodded. “I could tell you my theories about why he’s like that, but that’s not what you’re getting at. What you’re getting at, is, I could end up having to treat him, in a life-or-death situation. I know that. He knows that. I can’t say I’m fine with it, but to be honest, I’d rather it be me than someone I don’t trust. Jim had a pretty fucking awful experience with my predecessor, in case that escaped your attention. The guy pretty much threatened to kill him, and then threatened to wage a war within the department between himself and anyone who was friends with a fag.”

Pike blinked a few times. “I … didn’t know about the threats. I knew Neal Selig was a god-awful bastard, and a sexist, racist, homophobic pig, but I didn’t know how bad it got between him and Jim.”

“Well, Jim’s not exactly the type to go crying to you about something like that, now is he.”

“No,” Pike said. “But I should’ve known.”

“Well, you can add ‘devious snake’ to your list of insults to Selig, then. It went so far that Jim started backing away from people he’d been good friends with in the department, to try to protect them. Like, for instance, Ronnie Cozart. Who now understands that whole situation, by the way, and he and Jim have been spending a good bit of time together.”

“Good,” Pike said. “That’s good. Good for both of them, I think.”

“Yeah. Even though Jim sometimes acts like a twelve-year-old, other times, he’s the most thoughtful, mature, considerate person I’ve ever met,” Len said.

Pike snorted. “You should’ve seen him when he was twelve,” he said. “That’s when I first met him. He was at war with the world. I’m still not quite sure who won that war.”

“It was a tie,” Len said.

“I suppose so,” Pike replied. “But—we’re getting off topic. Back to the whole business of you potentially having to treat him. He trusts you—I see that. And he doesn’t trust easily. And I believe you when you say you’re prepared to have to treat him.”

Len nodded. “I am.”

“All right. I won’t be a pain in the ass and suggest that one of you look for a transfer on those grounds, then.”

“What other grounds are you thinking of?” Len asked. “Be frank. Or, I should say, please continue to be frank.”

“When we’re at an active scene, and Jim is doing something potentially dangerous, are you able to devote your full attention to your patients?”

Len rubbed his chin. “Now, that there’s a tricky question. Nobody ever devotes their full attention to anything. But I can honestly tell you that my patients get the attention they need. No matter what. When Ronnie Cozart was down, and Jim was in that building, Ronnie got my attention. Not Jim. This morning, Johnny Nero got my attention. I’ll admit, I was slightly distracted by Jim, but I hope
you can admit that the situation was outlandish. I’d’ve probably been distracted even if he wasn’t my … whatever he is.”

“Outlandish is a pretty good word,” Pike said. “Nero already had plenty to answer for, but he’s got even more, now. It’s quite clear the fire was intentional, and the fact that the gas can was upstairs with him is pretty damning. The young woman whose body was found was probably unconscious in the bathroom when the fire was started. Certainly still alive. So he’s got another death he has to answer for.”

Len shook his head. “Not in any criminal court. He crashed and died at the hospital. He was stable, and awaiting some further testing, but he had some kind of cardiac event while the police were interviewing him, and the docs couldn’t get him back.”

Pike leaned back in his chair and frowned. “That’s … complicated. For Jim, I mean. But also for the investigation. But I’m mostly thinking of Jim.”

Len snorted. “You’re not kidding it’s complicated, and you’re also obviously very in tune with his head. I’m not gonna go into details—again, not gonna violate any confidences—but he’s having a pretty hard time. He’s planning on spending the night at his mom’s, thank goodness, or I’d probably be asking for the next shift off.”

“I’d’ve given it to you, too.”

“I know. You … look out for him, don’t you? He said something about that. About how you maybe helped him get a job in the department?”

“Maybe just a little. Sealed juvie records are only so sealed in a small-town environment, you know?”

“Jim said very much the same thing to me.”

“So yeah, I helped a little, but when they saw his academy records—which showed what he could do when he was actually motivated—he didn’t actually need a lot of help. But I like to think maybe I had just a little bit to do with shaping the man he’s become today.”

“I’d wager it was more than a little,” Len said.

“Well, thanks for that, Len. I appreciate hearing that. Because I’ve certainly tried to be a mentor to him, while also trying very, very hard not to have him feel like I was trying to take any kind of paternal role.”

They sat in silence for a minute, and Leonard was betting with himself whether the talk he thought was coming would actually happen.

It did.

“But sometimes I can’t help it,” Pike said. “So let me get this part of tonight’s entertainment out of the way.”

“All right,” Len said. “I figured this was coming. So go ahead.”

Pike nodded. “I’ve come to appreciate that you’re a kind and caring man, Len. And I can see how much the two of you mean to each other. And how much Jim has grown in the last few months.”

“I’ve grown, too,” Len said. “It’s a two-way street. He’s made me realize a lot of things I never
understood before.”

“He has a way of doing that in regular relationships, too, so I would imagine it’s … amplified, in an intimate relationship. But here’s my point. It’s probably completely unnecessary, but I’m saying it anyhow. I know things can go wrong in relationships, and that’s a fact of life. But if you ever, ever hurt him unilaterally, you’ll have me to deal with.”

“I know. And Chris? I couldn’t possibly. All right? I just … couldn’t.”

“I didn’t think so. But I had to say it, because … well, I’m not sure there’s anyone else in his life who would. Winona and Sam, they’re terrific, but they don’t kick asses very well.”

“You won’t have to kick my ass. I promise.”

“And I hope to God I won’t have to kick his, either,” Pike said, frowning.

Pike’s statement filled Len’s heart with … something. Happiness, he supposed. And surprise—that someone cared whether he got hurt.

“Not seeming very likely,” Len said. “He gave me a whole song and dance about how he’s shit at relationships, and pushes people away, but I haven’t seen any of that. And that’s all I’m gonna say on that topic.”

Pike nodded again. “I think we understand each other.”

“I think so,” Len agreed.

“So—off to work, then. Oh—one more thing. The guy who’s subbing for Jim today? Jeff Pinard is his name. He’s a complete shithead. I almost want to put Chekov with Jablonski today, just to keep Carl and Jeff apart as much as possible, since they bring out the absolute worst in each other, but I don’t want to inflict Pinard on Gaila. So … just try to ignore the Pinard/Jablonski dynamic. It’s only for fourteen hours.”

“I’ll take that under advisement. I have some things to catch up on, so my laptop and I will just lay low,” Len said.

“I apologize in advance on behalf of the entire department for anything they say or do. I’ll call them on it if it gets out of hand, of course, but I can’t really tell them not to be rude. Offensive, I’ll call them on. Rude, is just … them.”

“I understand,” Len said, understanding what Pike was saying without actually saying it. “Anyhow—that thanks for the chat, and the coffee. I’ll see you at the station. I mean, unless there was anything else?”

Pike shook his head, then reconsidered. “Well, this is probably overstepping my bounds a bit. But I did want to say … I don’t think I’ve ever seen Jim so happy before.”

Len smiled. “That’s another two-way street, there. Folks ‘round here don’t know me so well, but I got the same comment about myself when we were down in Georgia recently.”

“Glad to hear it. And—I’m glad we had this conversation. Really.”

“Me too,” Len said. “Thanks for not making any of this difficult.”

“It’s difficult enough already without any help from me, I would guess,” Pike said.

“You’re welcome. See you at the barn.”

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The ‘Pinard/Jablonski’ dynamic, as Pike put it, was indeed extremely off-putting. Paired with someone much like himself, Jablonski regressed past ill-mannered frat-boy and well into ape territory. Len just hunkered down into his laptop and ignored them, and noted that Gaila, Christine, and Chekov had also withdrawn from the part of the ready room they had taken over.

Len’s ears automatically tuned into part of their conversation, right after the ambulance got back from a run, shortly before ten p.m.

“Well, I don’t care if that pansy-ass needs a shift off because he has a boo-boo. I can always use the overtime,” Pinard said.

Len looked up from his laptop. He saved his document, and closed the computer. He was about to get up, when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Not worth it, Len,” Christine said quietly. “Besides, I just tattled to Cap that the gorillas are getting out of hand.”

Pike indeed came into the ready room, heading casually to the kitchen area. He grabbed his mug of its hook, and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“And speaking of him, why do you let him keep calling you that gay nickname? I mean, you let a faggot call you ‘Cupcake?’ What the fuck?” Pinard said.

Pike stepped up to the duo, and made his presence known. The room suddenly got even quieter than it was when Pike walked in.

“What’s up, Cap?” Pinard said.

“What’s ‘up,’ is that I won’t tolerate slurs against my crew. Not from the public, and certainly not from another firefighter. You’re banned from the ready room for the rest of the shift, except to silently enter to get food or drink. Dismissed,” Pike said, and returned to the kitchen area. He opened the refrigerator, and poured a splash of milk into his coffee. With his back to Pinard, he took a sip, and set his mug on the counter. After a few seconds, he turned around, and saw Pinard still standing there, slack-jawed.

“Did you misunderstand?” Pike said.

“Uh, no sir.”

Pinard left the room, leaving Pike and Jablonski face to face.

“Would it have killed you to defend your partner?” Pike said to Carl.

“Uh, nossir. He’s a good man—Kirk, I mean. Even if … I mean, he’s a good man. That’s all.”

“Yes, he is. I’m glad we agree on that.”

Pike sat at the table, and reached for the newspaper in the middle. “Anyone reading this?”

Everyone shook their heads. Pike picked up the paper, and drank his coffee while reading Section A.
For a few minutes, nobody in the room said a word. Gaila turned the TV volume on, and then things seemed more normal. Or, at least, less silent.

Len was about to open his laptop and continue working on his document—the draft of a cover letter for interview requests at his various residency possibilities—but then changed his mind. Instead, he picked up his phone and texted Jim.

[You still up?]

Two minutes (or approximately sixty times his usual response time) later, Jim texted back.

[yep call you in 5] was Jim’s reply.

[Okay.]

Leonard assumed he was probably talking to Winona, or maybe Sam. He got himself a cup of coffee, and on his way back to the table, Chris Pike’s eyes caught his. Len paused, and mouthed ‘thank you.’ Pike nodded, and returned to his paper, which Len wasn’t entirely convinced he was actually reading.

A few minutes later, Len’s phone vibrated in his pocket. The display said the call was from Jim. He answered, making his way out of the ready room.

“Hey. I’m just going to grab my coat so I can go outside. How’re you doing?” Len went to his gear rack and grabbed his coat so he could go outside, the only place where it was possible to have a private conversation.

“Hiya, Bones. I’m doing okay, actually. I’m at my mom’s, like I said. Sam came over for a little while, on his own, and we all just ... talked. I ... uh ... it was really good. We mostly ended up talking about Dad—well, Mom talking, and me and Sam listening. And the whole time, Mom was getting phone calls from old friends of Dad’s from ICPD. I got a few too. And I got a call from the Chief, too, commending me for my ‘professionalism and heroism in the face of personal adversity.’ Heroism. Can you believe that? I mean, I was just doing my job. The whole thing is just ... surreal.”

“I bet,” Len said. “No flak, I hope, for actually rescuing the guy?”

“No. Everyone seems to know better than that, thank goodness. Or at least to know better than to say it, even if they’re thinking it.”

“I think everyone who puts their life on the line for others would have to understand that you can’t choose who you save and who you don’t, unless it’s a horrendous case of having to triage. But it wasn’t.”

“Nope. Anyhow—I’ll have plenty of time to think about stuff tonight. Mom just turned in for the night, and there’s no way I’m sleeping for another few hours.”

“Don’t ... Jim, promise me you won’t beat yourself up over any of this. Or if you feel like you’re going to, call me. I’m staying awake for this shift. So call me, all right? And if I don’t answer, it means I’m out on a call.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna beat myself up, Bones. Honest. But I’ll call you if I feel something coming on. I mean, other than sheer, unadulterated lust for your hot bod. That, I probably shouldn’t call you at work for. But it might be fun to make you—”

“Are you sure you’re actually a grown-up?” Len said, scowling fondly—an expression he’d
invented solely for one James T. Kirk.

“Uh, not always,” Jim said, laughing. “I keep you young, though, Bones. Admit it.”

“Either that or drive me screaming into an early grave.”

“Nah—you don’t have any more gray hair than when I first laid eyes on you. And you know what I realized?” Jim continued.

“What, darlin’?”

“Except on shift, we haven’t not slept together since we first slept together. I’ll miss you tonight.”

“Me too. Even though I won’t be sleeping.”

The tones sounded, announcing an MVA call for the engine and the ambulance.

“Hey, I gotta go—MVA.”

“Be safe, Bones. See you in the morning. Love you.”


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Ten minutes before the end of the shift, which had been about average in terms of number and complexity of calls for the ambulance, Len’s phone buzzed again.

[im @ ur house], Jim texted.

[Good. See you soon.]

[ill tuck you in]

[Punctuation: it’s not just a good idea. It’s the rule.]

[old fart. there. happy? still tucking you in tho unless ur not 2 tired 4 luv]

[Never too tired for you until you tire me out.]

[ha ha good c u soon <3 u]

[I heart you too. I love you, even. See you in half an hour.]

[k]

Len shoved his phone back in his pocket, and jumped as someone said his name.

“Len!” said a female voice.

Leonard turned and saw Colleen Platt, the paramedic from C-shift.

“Hi, Colleen.” Len always thanked his lucky stars that his counterparts on the shifts that typically took over after B-shift always arrived in a timely fashion. Colleen was in uniform and ready to go.

“ Heard B-shift had quite a call at Roma the other night.”


“Yup. We won’t be going there again any time soon. And if it does ever re-open, it’ll have to be under new management. Which can’t possibly be worse than the old.”

“True. And hey, you’re pretty tight with Jim Kirk. I saw he wasn’t here this shift. He okay after that bailout?”

“ Mostly. Just a turned ankle. Which isn’t a big deal for most people, but if you’ve got one, you shouldn’t go up on a flaming rooftop with a running chainsaw. Hypothetically speaking.”

The ambulance’s tones dropped, three minutes before the shift was over.


“Thanks,” Len said. He clocked out, and went into the locker room to change into his civvies, and was in his car five minutes later. Twenty minutes after that, he was opening his front door. Three minutes after that, he had been tenderly stripped and was in the shower with Jim.

“Gonna take care of you this time, Bones,” Jim said.

“Mmm,” Len replied, relaxing under the stream of warm water, enjoying the feeling of Jim’s hands and fingers massaging shampoo into his scalp, not to mention the feeling of their naked, slippery bodies sliding against each other. “Shoulda just come home naked, saved a few minutes on both ends of the trip.”

“I’m sure nobody at the station would’ve raised an eyebrow if you’d gotten into your car naked as a jaybird.”

“Nah. Mmmm, ‘s nice,” Len murmured, as Jim finished rinsing his hair and soaped his body up. He found himself becoming aroused and relaxed at the same time, a rare combination for him. Jim read him perfectly, though, continuing his gentle ministrations but turning to face him and coat his neck with a line of kisses as they rinsed under the perfectly warm spray. As Jim’s kisses reached Len’s lips, Len wrapped his arms around Jim lightly, and traced his way up and down the strong muscles along either side of Jim’s spine, as they both moved their bodies side to side against each other’s gently, their cocks slickly crossing and uncrossing against each other.

Out of the corner of his mostly-closed eyes, Len saw Jim swipe his hand across the soap. He felt Jim’s hand slip between them, catching their cocks together. Len closed his eyes the rest of the way as Jim started stroking them both lightly, with a languorous pace which, if Len were in a different mood, would have been sheer torture. As it was, it was perfect, and Len hummed a gentle noise of bliss into Jim’s kiss.

Jim clasped Len’s hand with his free left hand, and they twined their fingers together, as Len used his remaining hand to stroke as much of Jim’s skin as he could reach without interrupting the proceedings. After a while, Len could tell from Jim’s breathing that he would come soon, and he opened his eyes to watch Jim’s face as he came.

Jim didn’t come with his usual shout, but instead with hoarse words, almost a sob. “Ah, Bones!”

“Love you, darlin’,” Len said, and followed his words with a chaser of a low groan into Jim’s neck as he came.

Jim milked them both through the aftershocks, stopping only when it was almost too much. At the same time, the water began to run cool, so they helped each other rinse off again, and turned the water off. They helped each other dry off, and Len was suddenly so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open, as he groaned and flopped onto the bed.
Len suddenly realized he hadn’t really asked Jim how he was, but he was already half asleep.

“You doin’ okay, Jim?”

“Shh, yeah, Bones. I’m really good, actually. You go to sleep, and we’ll talk when you wake up.”

“Don’ lemme sleep past one,” Len said, with the last of his wakefulness. Just as he felt Jim’s body snuggle up against his, the fog claimed him. He slept a deep, dreamless sleep, sorely needed after a rotation that was far more stressful for him than he’d realized.

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Len wasn’t sure if it was the scent of coffee or the familiar hand rubbing up and down his bare back that convinced him to finally open his eyes. He blinked a few times, and sat up. Jim handed him the coffee, fixed just the way he liked it, and he took a few sips.

“Hi,” Jim said, after Len had had what Jim thought was enough coffee that he might actually speak.

“Hi, yourself, gorgeous.” Len sniffed the air. “Is that what I think it is?”

“I don’t know,” Jim said, flashing his perfect grin. “What do you think it is?”

“Waffles?” Len said hopefully.

“Then it is what you think it is!” Jim said gleefully. “Now, I’m not saying there wasn’t some swearing involved for the first couple, but once I got the hang of it, they came out mostly in once piece. Wanna eat?”

“Yeah,” Len said. “You made waffles.” He pulled on some flannel pants and his slippers, and pulled a sweatshirt over his head.

“Wait!” Jim said, as Len was about to open the bedroom door.

“Okay, what?”

“Come over here,” Jim said, moving towards the shaded window. One of Len’s first improvements to the rental house had been adding blackout curtains to the bedroom windows, so he and Jim could sleep in darkness after night shifts.

Len joined Jim by the window. Jim pulled the curtain open all at once.

“Tada!”

The world outside was blanketed in white. Several inches of snow had fallen while Len was sleeping, and it was still snowing lightly.

“Wow,” Len breathed. “It’s like a different planet!”

“So here’s what we do, Bones. We have waffles—and like I said, some of ‘em aren’t exactly perfect, but we’ll eat ‘em anyhow. And then we get our coats and boots on, and we go play in the snow. I tested it out already—it’s perfect for snowmen and snowballs. Packing snow, you know?”

Len shook his head.

“No, of course you don’t. But never mind. It’s gonna be so awesome! Your first time ever playing in the snow, and I get to be your playmate!”
Len smiled, ever so slightly. Because of course it would be awesome.

“Gotta catch you up on some things over breakfast, though, Jim,” Len said.

“Oh, me too, Bones. Me too. So let’s go eat, and catch up.”

Leonard entered his kitchen, and burst into rare laughter. A plate on the counter was piled with bits and pieces of waffles, topped with one single perfectly-formed square.

“Not exactly perfect,” Jim repeated.

Len pulled Jim in by the waistband of his jeans, and kissed him thoroughly. “I don’t care how they look. You made waffles, for fuck’s sake!” He kissed him again. “I love you dearly, you know that?”

“I do know that, Bones,” Jim said, looking at him intently. “I really do know it.”

“Now let’s eat this mess while we catch up a little. I’ll go first with the catching up,” Len said, piling his plate with bits and pieces of waffle.

“Wait a second—that’ll be my plate. I want you to have the one that actually came out right, since I made them for you.”

Len smiled, and knew better than to argue. He piled more pieces onto the plate, and handed it to Jim. He served himself a plate of the one whole waffle, plus some pieces, and sat down at the table, where Jim had put a pitcher of warmed-up syrup and a butter dish.

“You’re gonna kill us, you know, with all this real butter. You used it in the waffles, too—I can smell it.”

“Well, Bones, let’s put it this way. It was in your fridge. So I didn’t think it was poisonous.”

“All right, you got me there,” Len said, as he drizzled syrup over his waffles. “And since we’re sitting down, I’ll start with the catching up. You know Pike wanted to talk to me yesterday?”

“Uh huh,” Jim said with his mouth full. “Bet he was fine, though.”

Len nodded as he chewed and swallowed. “He was. He had us all figured out, of course, but didn’t ask about timing or details. Very proper. He mainly wanted to grill me about whether I thought having you doing dangerous things while I was treating patients was distracting. I said it was, but not systematically so. And I think that’s getting better, actually. I mean, the other morning was a bit … harder, I’d say, even though I knew you weren’t badly hurt. And honestly, the number of times that I’m at a scene where you’re doing something crazy, and where I’m actually treating a patient—that’s pretty small. And he knows it. I didn’t have a hard time paying attention to Ronnie when I knew you were still inside, that time. So honestly, I think that part’s all right.”

Jim nodded. “Good. And the other part? About if I get hurt? He asked you about that, I bet.”

Len sighed. “Yeah. And here’s the honest truth, Jim. I honestly think I’ll freak out for about as long as it takes for you to be brought over to the safe zone, and then I’ll do what needs to be done.”

Jim looked at Leonard seriously. “What if that’s a long time, Bones?”

Len frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“What if—and this is pretty unlikely, all right? But what if it’s something like Ronnie, where I’m pinned, or trapped, or missing? It could be a long time before you get to do what needs to be done.”
Len put his fork down. “Jesus, Jim. You know how much I hate that shit.”

“Well? There’s no point in denying that it could happen. So what would you do? I know you’d be freaking out until you have some control over the situation—meaning, I’m there on your stretcher for you to deal with, so what if another patient comes to you while you’re in the middle of that?”

“I … hadn’t thought about that. Probably because I didn’t want to think about it. And I guess Pike didn’t think of it either. But,” Len sighed, “I think the wise thing to do if you were really in that kind of situation would be to call another rig in. We’d need one anyhow, if there were already one ALS patient plus … you on the way. Jesus.”

“Sorry, Bones. I had to say it, though. Because honestly? That’s the only situation where I’d be worried that you might not be able to handle it. I sure as hell couldn’t. I mean, if our situations were reversed. Hell, I wouldn’t be able to handle treating you at all, if our situations were reversed. And treating you for something life-threatening? I couldn’t come close to that.”

“I know I could do that, Jim. Because—and I’m not saying this to brag, or anything—but I think I’d be your best chance.”

“I know you’d be my best chance,” Jim said. “I have absolutely no doubt about that at all, Bones.”

“Good. And let’s try to avoid any of these situations,” Len said. “Please, pretty please, with a cherry on top.”

“About that,” Jim said.

“You’re not quitting,” Len said instantly. “I won’t allow it.”

“No, no no no, Bones, that’s not what I mean. We’re catching up, okay? I want to catch you up on some of the things I was thinking about last night.”

“Oh. Sorry. Go on.”

“All right. I’ve kind of had this … tendency, I guess you’d say, to be the one to do the crazy things. Let’s face it—being a truckie puts you in some pretty nasty situations. Search and rescue, rooftop operations, and so forth. And I think,” Jim said slowly, “I maybe was looking for the dangerous work. Looking for the places where I could be a hero. Looking for a way …” Jim said, and stopped.

“A way to what, Jim?” Len got up from his seat and moved to the chair next to Jim’s, so they were pressed up against each other, just like in the diner the previous morning.

“A way,” Jim said, looking Len in the eye, “to prove that I was good enough. To prove,” he said, looking away and taking a deep breath, and then returning his gaze to meet Leonard’s, “that my life was worth my father’s death.”

“Aw, sweetheart.” Tears came to Len’s eyes, and he put an arm around Jim. “You know you didn’t cause his death.”

“That’s the thing, Bones. I knew it, but I didn’t really believe it. Not until yesterday. Not until I understood that Johnny Nero was just a … a guy. A bad guy, probably even evil. But now I get it. I really get it.”

“That’s good, Jim. I mean, I’m sorry it took what it took for you to come to that epiphany, but I’m glad you got there.”
“And what this all means for me,” Jim said, “is that I’m not sure it’s worth it. Worth looking for the hardest, most dangerous tasks. I mean, I love my job. And it’s true—I risk myself to save others. But my point is, maybe I don’t feel the need to be … as extreme about it any more. Maybe I don’t have so much to prove.”

“I think,” Len said, “anything you had to prove, you’ve proven a thousand times over, Jim. Even those things you didn’t really need to prove at all.”

“I think you’re right, Bones. You know, when we were in Savannah, while you were in the shower, after I scared you off with all those backdraft videos? Tom was asking me about some of the things I did in my job. And I could see it, while I was watching him and Eric, as I was telling them about some of the crazier episodes. I could see it in how they looked at me. They really thought I was nuts. And maybe … maybe I was a little. But I’m not, anymore. I think I’m done looking for the crazy shit, Bones. Maybe I’ll go for apparatus operator training. Or even see if Pike wants to put Chekov with Cupcake for a little while, and I’ll swap to the engine company. We’ll see. Something will come up.”

Len swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. “You can’t possibly know how much it means to me to hear you say that.”

“Thanks, Bones,” Jim said quietly. “You’re just the best. And I think … knowing you, being with you, has made me a better person. By a lot.”

“Goes both ways, darlin’. And that’s the truth.”

Jim reached across the table and pulled Len’s plate across, and they both ate a little more.

“So, Bones, I bet you didn’t tell me everything Pike said to you, didja?”

Len quirked a lopsided smile. “Nope. He warned me he’d kick my ass if I hurt you.”

“Figured,” Jim said, grinning at his dwindling mess of waffle pieces.

“And don’t get cocky, because you might just get that same talk.”

“Good,” Jim said, his smile broadening.

“Not that he’s gonna hafta do any kicking of my posterior,” Len said.

“Mine, either.”

“Good. So our asses are safe,” Len said.

“Except from each other.”

“Shut up and eat your waffles. This southern boy wants to go frolic in the snow.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Firefighters have to be brave to do their jobs. But sometimes, they have to be
brave enough to make a choice that will keep them safe—a different kind of courage. “Courage To Be Safe” is a trademarked program aimed at fostering that second type of courage, to help reduce firefighter line of duty deaths.
Means of Egress

Chapter Summary

WARNING for a scene of peril at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 19: Means of Egress

Two Weeks Later (mid December)

“Huh, wonder what this could be,” Jim said, as he tossed the junk mail into the recycling bin and began opening the one envelope that didn’t look like junk. It was a plain manila envelope, with no return address, but a Cedar Rapids postmark. It held a stack of at least twenty-five pages of photocopies. He started scanning the first of the many pages.

“Holy shit! Bones—listen to this!”

Jim began reading from the cover letter, printed on plain white paper, again with no indication who the sender might be. He sat down on the sofa, and gestured for Len to join him.

Dear Jim,

I can’t tell you who I am, which you’ll understand when you read the contents of this envelope, but a few of us thought you ought to have this information. We trust you will be judicious and share the information only with immediate family.

The letter, of course, was unsigned.

The top of the first page—and all subsequent pages, as Jim discovered as he thumbed through the pile—was stamped “CONFIDENTIAL.” Sitting shoulder to shoulder, Jim and Len began to read.

The first several pages were an interview transcript. The name of the interviewer, and his or her initials in the transcript, were blacked out, but the name of the interviewee was clear: John R. Nero.

Jim and Len read through the entire document, rapt. It was a whirlwind confession—he had indeed torched the bar with an eye towards collecting insurance. He gave specific details about exactly where he’d splashed the gasoline, and exactly how he’d set up the string fuses in multiple places in the downstairs area, so the whole first floor would be sure to burn.

He described how, to make it look more convincing as an accident, he’d planned to be “trapped” briefly in the room with the fire escape, and bravely rescue himself via the metal platform, steps, and ladder. But he hadn’t practiced, and didn’t realize he was unable to heft his substantial bulk over the waist-high windowsill. In his panic, he forgot to let go of the gas can, carrying it with him to each room where he tried desperately to escape.
A few lines of the transcript jumped out more boldly than the rest:

☑️: You realize that your actions put all the firefighters at the scene in mortal danger? Particularly the ones who had to rescue you?

JN: I didn’t mean to put anyone in danger. I had it all carefully planned, so nobody would get hurt. I’m not a wicked man. But I [2-second pause] killed someone, once, by accident, when I was driving drunk. But hell, you know that already. So I had this thing all set up, so nobody would be at risk except me. But I didn’t [4-second pause] I didn’t think about the firemen. Especially that boy who got me out. He got me out just before the room really burst into flames, and he was still in there, and he had to jump out the window. Do you know his name? I’d like to thank him.

☑️: His name is James Kirk.

[Eight-second pause.]

JN: He’s not [three-second pause] he’s not related to George Kirk, is he?

☑️: His younger son.

[Sound of deep breaths, and coughing.]

JN: I can’t [five-second pause with sounds of heavy breathing]

☑️: Mr. Nero, does the name Tanya Williams mean anything to you?

JN: What? [coughing] No. I don’t know who that is. Am I supposed to?

☑️: When you doused the downstairs with gasoline, did you enter the women’s bathroom?

JN: I never go in there.

☑️: Mr. Nero, before you doused the downstairs in gasoline, did you check to make sure nobody else was inside the building?

JN: No—it was after closing time, and the bartender is supposed to[three-second pause] No, no no no! There was [pause] that woman’s name, was she [unintelligible] [coughing, heavy breathing]

☑️: She was found, deceased, in a stall of the ladies’ room. The exact cause of death is unclear at this time but it appears she was still alive when the room filled with smoke.

JN: No no no, I never meant [Sound of a cry.]

☑️: Nurse? Nurse!

[many voices, unintelligible]

Unknown Speaker: You gentlemen need to leave. Now. [three-second pause] Out! [shouted]

☑️: Interview terminated at 0643 due to suspect’s need for medical treatment.

Jim and Len finished reading at the same moment, and looked at each other.

“Fucking hell,” Len said. “Jesus Christ, Jim. That’s … fucked up.”

Jim just nodded, and took a deep breath.
“I told you we’d find out, Bones. One way or another. And we did. We found out.”

“We sure as fuck did. Who do you think sent this?”

Jim shook his head. “I don’t know. My dad had a lot of friends in ICPD, and CRPD. I guess maybe some of them are still around. Obviously, whoever was doing the interview did their homework. Or knew my dad.”

“You gonna sleep better, now? Or worse?”

Jim didn’t have to think about it. “Better. I didn’t kill him. Even if I was, I don’t know, unconsciously slower than usual because I knew who he was, I didn’t kill him. He killed himself. One way or another, he killed himself.”

~!~!~!~

Winter came, and Len found that except for driving the rig on slippery roads, he quite enjoyed the season. He was granted interviews at four of his five top choices for residency positions—only Seattle sent him a ‘no thank-you’—and spent several of his off-rotations out of town. For the Miami trip, they were able to schedule it during an eight-day break, and decided to turn it into a vacation. They flew into Miami, and stayed there for four days, and then drove up to Savannah, and spent two days there with Len’s mother before flying back to Iowa. At the end of it all, Len felt that all the interviews had gone well, and that he would be happy in any of the locations.

His first choice, however surprising it was to both him and Jim, was the University of Iowa program, which was housed at the university hospital in Iowa City. The program appealed to him because it was very new, and had none of the dead wood or old-boys’-club feelings he got to some extent at all three of the other places where he interviewed. He wouldn’t be crushed if he didn’t get a spot at the U of I Hospital, but it was by far his first choice. To participate in the matching program, he had to sign a contract agreeing that, if he was matched with one of his choices, he would take the position. It was a big step, but Jim had held his hand in the fall when he signed the paper, promising again that he’d go wherever fate took Leonard.

After the final interview, there was nothing to do but wait until mid-March, when the results of the matching program would be released on Match Day. First, on the Monday before Match Day, he would find out whether he had matched at all, and a few days later, on Match Day proper, he’d find out where. Leonard thought it was an insane system—using a computer program to optimize hospital preferences and applicant preferences—but he didn’t have a choice in the matter. He hoped he’d match somewhere, but if he didn’t, he could apply for an unfilled position, or just stay a paramedic. That wouldn’t be so bad, he told himself. He liked his job. He just wanted to do more.

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In mid-winter, Pike called Jim into his office at the beginning of a shift.

“Close the door, please, Jim,” Pike said, the smile on his face taking away any apprehension Jim had.

“Sure, Cap.” He clicked the door closed, and sat down in the chair that Pike indicated. “What’s up?”

“You are, apparently. For promotion. How would you feel about spending some time in officer training this summer?”

Jim’s jaw dropped.

“Me?”
Pike made a show of looking behind Jim. “I’m pretty sure you’re the only one here. But yes, Jim; you. You’ve proven yourself again and again, and in the last year you’ve matured so much that I couldn’t help but recommend you for promotion.”

“Wow. I … wow.”

“You don’t have to answer right now. But soon would be good. And my suggestion to you would be to accept. Declining a promotion calls into question whether someone is planning on staying in the fire service as a career.”

“I … okay. Here’s the thing. I know I want to. But there some stuff going on, and I honest to goodness won’t know until the middle of March whether I’m going to be able to say yes or not.”

“Oh?” said Pike. “Is this something I should know about?”

“Uh … yeah. Um … can you give me a minute?” Jim asked.

“Sure. He’s in the EMS supply room,” Pike added.

“Thanks—oh. Yeah. You’ve got my number, huh?”

“Every digit,” Pike said. “I’ll be here, with my mound of papers. Come back in when you’re ready.”

“Thanks. And—thanks.”

Jim flew out of the room, and skidded to a stop in the doorway of the EMS supply room.

“Bones!”

Len jumped a foot in the air. “Fuck, Jim! How many times have I told you not to sneak—”

“Bones, listen, it’s important. Pike put me in for promotion—I had no idea, I swear! And they’re offering me officer training this summer—which, if I pass, means I’ll probably get promoted to lieutenant. But we don’t know where we’ll be, and Pike doesn’t know anything about any of that, and … Bones, what do I tell him?”

Len put the box of non-rebreather masks he was inventorying back on the shelf. “How about if we tell him together? I mean, we weren’t planning on saying anything until after Match Day, but this changes things, doesn’t it.”

Jim nodded. “I … I think we should tell him.”

“I agree. So let’s go do it.”

Len closed and locked the supply room, and the two of them went to Pike’s office.

“Ah,” Pike said. “I’ll admit it—you’ve got me on the edge of my seat. So, what’s going on? Something good, I hope?”

“Maybe, or maybe nothing at all,” Len said. “Here’s the deal. Remember on my first day, when you asked me if I had any plans for medical school, and I said something along the lines of how it wasn’t happening at the moment?”

“I take it that perhaps it might be happening?” Pike said.

Len shook his head. “It’s already happened, actually. I graduated from med school a few years ago.
But I didn’t apply for residencies because my, uh, partner at the time was a year ahead of me, so we decided he’d go first, and I’d go next. Things … didn’t go the way we’d planned, and I kind of gave up on the idea.”

Jim never in his life expected to see Chris Pike’s jaw fall the way it did, and he had to restrain himself from closing it with an outstretched finger.

Len continued. “But Jim talked some sense into me, and I applied. To four places, including U of I in Iowa City, which is my first choice. But we won’t know until mid-March if I got a placement, or where. And Jim’s going with me, wherever I go. Residencies begin in July, so we’re here till sometime in June, in any case.”

“You’re a doctor?” Pike said.

“I have the piece of paper and the exam results that would let me put ‘MD’ after my name if I wanted, but none of that is useful in this country without a residency under your belt. So … sort of.”

Pike stared at him for another few seconds. “Well, fuck me,” he concluded.

“So what it boils down to, Cap,” Jim said, “is that I’d love to accept the offer, but I don’t know if I should unless I know whether I’m going to be here. What do you think?”

“Accept it,” Pike said instantly. “It’s easy to put someone else in your slot in officer training—which isn’t until June—if you find out in March that you’re not going to be here.”

Jim nodded. “Okay. I gratefully accept the offer, and I’ll let you know as soon as we know, if we’re not going to be here.”

“Please do,” Pike said, having regained his usual composure. “And Len, even though I would greatly hate to lose either one of you, let alone both of you, I hope you get an offer.”

“Thank you, Captain Pike,” Len said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t completely honest with you, but it was just too … tricky, I suppose, to deal with the idea of everyone knowing I’d finished medical school but didn’t continue with a residency. It would take explaining of things I didn’t want to explain about my personal life to make things clear, and I just wasn’t ready to go there.”

Pike nodded. “I understand. And as long as you’re both here, there’s something along those lines I’ve been meaning to discuss with the two of you.”

Jim and Len looked at each other.

“Okay—lay it on us, Cap,” Jim said.

“You both do a pretty good job of looking like good friends around the station. But it seems to me that people who are paying attention probably suspect it’s more than that. Most of the people on this shift would consider both of you to be their friends. Well, okay, maybe not Cup—goddamnit, Carl—but everyone else. Consider a couple of things. First, do you really need to hide the most important thing in your lives from them? And second, what if you both end up leaving in July? Do you tell people then, and leave them feeling like you didn’t trust them until trust wasn’t necessary anymore? Or do you leave a huge mystery behind you, when you both suddenly move to the same city?

“I know enough of the brass in this department that I can assure you that even though some of them might not adore the idea of two men in a relationship, there also wouldn’t be a witch hunt, or a conspiracy to get rid of either of you. So I’m not suggesting anything other than thinking about how people—no, not people; your friends—might feel, either way. That’s all,” Pike said.
“All right,” Jim said, nodding. “We’ll talk about it.”

“I see your point, Chris,” Len added, “but I’m still working on shaking off the attitudes and habits I picked up from a lifetime in Georgia. I haven’t figured out yet whether my … my own comfort with people knowing certain things about me is something I can change, or whether it’s something like my accent—something that might fade with time, but that I’ll always have.”

“Let me put it to you this way, Len,” Pike said. “I would wager that it’s not really a question of whether people know something about you. What I was really trying to say before was that I think people do know you two are more than friends. I think it’s more of a question of people wondering why you two don’t trust them to know that.”

Len looked at the floor. “I know. People can’t possibly not know. It’s just …”

Jim interrupted. “A lot of people where Bones worked in Savannah were total shits to him, just because he was gay. I mean, when we were down there, some redneck in a pickup threw a bottle at me, and I got this teensy weensy little cut that wasn’t even worth mentioning, but the point was, dispatch had to send an ambulance, and Bones’s former co-worker stood right there in front of me and looked me in the eye as he double gloved himself. And Bones took worse than that every shift. So we’ll talk about it, Cap. But that’s the history. Just so you know.”

“All right,” Pike said. “Everything we said in this room today is just between the three of us, of course. But … let me know what you decide, if you like. And I’ll do everything I can to smooth the way, regardless of what you decide.”

“Thanks,” Jim said. “Like I said, we’ll talk about it.”

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They talked about it. After a great deal of soul searching, Len realized Pike was correct—it was a bit of a slap in the face to friends to potentially be making them feel that they couldn’t be trusted with the information that he was gay, and, more specifically, that he and Jim were a couple. They agreed that at lunch on the first shift of the next rotation, if the full crew was at the station, they would broach the topic.

On that particular shift, Sulu was the day’s chef. He was universally agreed upon as the shift’s best cook, which pretty much guaranteed that everyone would be at the table right away, unless there was a lunchtime call.

The ambulance had a run for a pendant activation (or, what the crew liked to call ‘I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up!’) at 11:30, which Jim and Len were afraid would foil their plans, but the patient was uninjured, and just needed assistance to get up from the floor after a fall likely set into action by one of the many felines in the home. She signed the refusal form, stating that she didn’t want to go to the hospital, and understood the risks of not being examined by a doctor, and Len and Christine were back at the station at 12:05, just as lunch was ready.

The entire crew of ten sat around the large table in the ready room for a family-style meal. Sulu had made lasagna, including a small pan made with a vegetarian meat substitute. Everyone served themselves lasagna, beans, and fruit salad, and the food was eaten with gusto, by everyone except for Len, who was picking at his meal uncharacteristically.

“So, who did anything exciting over the weekend?” Gaila asked. “And drinking isn’t exciting, so put your hand down right now, Scotty.”
“Well, I hung out with my family. Went sledding with my nephews, on the hill behind my mom’s farmhouse,” Jim said.

“Which is probably why I feel like I was in a car wreck,” Len said, seeing his opportunity, and crafting a segue to his next point. Jim helped a bit.

“You’ve gotta loosen up, Bones, when you’re hurtling down the hill. That way, when you crash, it doesn’t hurt so bad. And you know when you’re sledding with me, we’re gonna crash.”

“Oh, believe me, I know,” Leonard said ruefully. But he was stalling, and he knew it. “I … folks, we’re not sure whether you maybe guessed this already, but Jim and I are together.”

“As in, Together together,” Jim added helpfully. “With a capital ‘T.’”

Chekov raised both arms in the air and yelled triumphantly. “YES! I win!! Pay up, everyone.” Gaila punched him in the shoulder, and he winced.

“What the fuck?” Leonard said, scowling.

Chekov suddenly looked frightened. He moved his mouth feebly, but no sound came out.

“What was the bet,” Len asked, glaring at Chekov.

“Ah, you see, it’s like this, Len,” Gaila said, glaring at Chekov. “We had a bet, amongst the engine company—Cap excepted of course—no offense, Cap, but we didn’t think you’d, uh, approve of the betting.”

“None taken,” Cap said, “and I don’t.”


“You spilled it, Probie. So you tell him,” Sulu suggested.

“Uh, you see, ah … we had a betting pool on when one of you would finally decide to tell us. You know. Tell us that you’re, like, an item,” Chekov said. “And I had this rotation.”

Jim and Len looked at each other, and Len let out a heavy sigh.

“We’re that obvious, huh?” he said.

“No, no no no, Len,” Christine said. “I mean, you’ve both been nothing but discreet. In a cute sort of way, though. Really. Right, Gaila?”

Gaila nodded. “But guys? Seriously. Save the planet. Carpool. It’s ridiculous, really, how you come in two separate cars, and then greet each other like you didn’t just brush your teeth together half an hour before.”

“Actually, we can’t brush our teeth together,” Jim said, “because he—”

“Jim,” Len said, scowling his just-for-Jim scowl.

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. So, I guess people kind of, you know, knew?” Jim said.

“I had suspected,” Spock said, “largely based on the fact that you attend to and follow instructions with an entirely different attitude when they come from Mr. McCoy than from others, that there was a high probability that your relationship had become one of an intimate nature. However, as I do not
engage in unproductive gossip. I remained unsure until approximately one minute ago.”

“I wasn’t totally sure until a few weeks ago,” Scotty said. “But seeing you making out in the alley behind the bar where we went for my birthday kind of clinched it. I wasn’t trying to spy, but you ran out so fast I thought for sure one of you must’ve been sick. So I checked. And got quite an eyeful.”

Len protested mightily. “Now wait a second, we didn’t—”

“Uh, Bones?” Jim interrupted. “Remember how hung over you were the next morning?”

“I wondered why he dragged you outside,” Sulu said, snickering.

“Oh, crap,” Len said, planting his face in his upturned palms.

“Yes,” Jim said. “You kind of … well, let’s say you gave a new meaning to the phrase ‘emergency exit.’ It was really hot, actually, when you shoved me up against the alley wall and—”

“Enough!” Len said. “Jesus. All right, Jim. I think people get the picture. Fuck, this was just supposed to be a little ‘by the way’ and it’s turned into … whatever the hell this is. Now let’s change the subject. Who’s read a good book lately?”

“So Len, do you actually have your own place, or are you two both living at Jim’s place still?” Christine asked. “You don’t seem like the elaborate lie type, but—”


“Uh, I saw a movie,” said the one person who had remained silent throughout the revelation and its aftermath.

“That’s excellent, Carl,” Leonard said sincerely, turning to Cupcake. “Tell us all about it.”

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Winter progressed, and from McCoy’s point of view it was spectacular, though Jim assured him it was completely average in terms of snowfall. On the Monday before Match Day, Len would find out whether he had indeed matched with one of his choices, and he would then have to wait a few more days for notification of where he had matched.

That Monday, in the middle of March, happened to be the second day-shift of a rotation. Len checked his e-mail on his phone obsessively, and was unable to concentrate on anything. He was practically begging the tones to drop so he would have something to take his mind off the waiting. Predictably, since he wanted something to happen, nothing happened. He jumped up, ready to go, when the tones sounded, but the call was an alarm activation, and needed only the two fire apparatus.

On his nine a.m. compulsive email check, the message he was waiting for was in his inbox. He opened it.

He had matched.

He startled Christine by letting out a yelp. A yelp of what, he wasn’t entirely sure—it just needed to be let out after months—no, years—of uncertainty. He felt simultaneously relieved and terrified—he was actually going to progress with his stalled career, and in just a few years, barring complications, he would be a certified Emergency Medicine physician.

“What’s up, Len?” Christine asked.
“Uh, I just got an email I’ve been waiting for.”

“You mean, the one you’ve been checking for every thirty seconds since you walked in the door?”

“Yeah, that’s the one!” The mixed emotions were sorting themselves out, and Len beamed at her.

“Would you care to share your good news?”

“Friday. I’ll share my good news on Friday.”

Christine squinted at him.

“So, you got part of your good news today.”

“Yep.”

“And you’ll get the rest on Friday?”

“Uh huh.”

“Anything you’d care to say about that, Dr. McCoy?” Christine asked, returning his beaming grin with a sly one.

“Uh …” Len said, his grin fading.

“It’s all right—your secret has been safe with me for the last several months. I figured you’d gone to medical school, because you know way more than you’re supposed to, but weren’t practicing for some reason. And I know Friday is Match Day because Roger’s father is the director of the Oncology residency program at U of I.”

“Uh, yeah. You got it right. My ex was a year ahead of me in med school, and we decided not to have him wait and then try to match together. Because, you know. Georgia, two men, et cetera.”

“Well, I take it congratulations are in order then?”

“Yeah. So now I just have to wait till Friday to find out where we’re gonna be come July.”

Christine raised her eyebrows. “‘We?’”

“Uh, yeah. Jim’s going with me. Unless we stay here. Then he’s staying here. And damn it, Christine, nobody’s supposed to know about this except Pike!”

Christine patted Len’s hand.


“Thanks,” Len said.

“What specialty are you going into?”

“Emergency Medicine. I thought about Family or Internal for a while, but honestly, I think I’m too cranky to deal with the same patients in the long term. Not that I won’t get my frequent fliers in the ED, but that’s still different.”

“I’m glad you’re choosing that. And, since we’re sharing stories, I’ll give you mine. Roger’s supposed to come home this summer. I was accepted to nursing school last year, but I deferred
because he got deployed. But we’ll get married when he comes home, and then I’ll start school in the fall.”

“That’s great, Chris. I always wondered why you were staying an EMT-B, but now I know you’re not. I’m glad.”

The apparatus bay doors opened, and the engine and the ladder lumbered in.

“Anyhow,” Chris said, “congratulations. And I’m dying to hear your news on Friday. Where did you interview?”

“Miami, Cleveland, Chicago, and here. U of I is my first choice—and not just because it’s home for Jim.”

“Good—well, let me know.”

The diesel engines shut off, and voices filled the bay as the firefighters put their gear back on the racks. People poured into the day room. Len stood up to greet Jim.

“Jim,” Leonard said, gesturing to the door to the outside.”

“Shoot, Bones—just tell me! Yea, or nay?”

“Yea!” Len said, his face cracking open in his second genuine smile of the day, but a thousand times brighter than before, because of who it was for.

“Wooo-hooo!” Jim shouted, grabbing Len in a bear hug and lifting him off the floor. “All right!”

Len couldn’t find it in him to be annoyed at the public display of affection.

“You do realize, though, that we’re going to have to tell everyone now?” Len said, once Jim put him down.

“You better,” Scotty said. “Because that, laddies? Was quite the display.”

“Oh, stop pretending you’re Scottish,” Jim complained. “You’ve never left the Midwest.”

“Tell us what?” Gaila insisted.

“All right, all right,” Len said, pretending to grumble. “Let’s wait till everyone’s in here, though. It’s only fair.”

Gaila stuck her head into the apparatus bay. “Hey! Everyone! In the ready room! Len’s got some more exciting news that was supposed to be a secret but isn’t going to be anymore.”

Spock and Cupcake, who had been working on some tools from the ladder truck, came into the room, trailed by Pike, who already knew what the announcement was going to be, since Len certainly wouldn’t have announced that, by the way, he wasn’t going to be doing a residency after all.

Gaila, who was clearly in charge of the proceedings, did a quick head count. “All right. Everyone’s accounted for. Now spill it, Len.”

“All right. You see, a few years ago, I graduated from medical school.” He paused while the appropriate noises of surprise were made. “But I didn’t go on to a residency, which is the next step. But I applied over the winter, and just found out I got a placement.”
There were cheers all around.

“Where?” Sulu asked. “And in what field? And you’re a secretive bastard, by the way.”

“Thank you, and Emergency Medicine, and I’ll find out where on Friday. Either Chicago, Miami, Cleveland, or here.”

“And yes, I’m going with him if he doesn’t get the U of I spot,” Jim said.

“Wait,” Cupcake said, frowning. “You mean I have to break in a new partner?”

“Seventy-five percent chance, pal,” said Sulu.

“I’m afraid it’s a hundred percent, Carl,” said Pike. “May I, Jim?”

“What the hell, Cap. Go for it.”

The room got noisy again when Pike told everyone that if Jim stayed in town, he was up for promotion.

“Don’t worry, Carl,” Paul said. “I’m sure they’ll find you a very nice probie all of your own.”

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“Bones, you’re gonna wear a hole in the carpet! I swear, I’m gonna drug you if you don’t calm down,” Jim said on Friday morning. He’d done his best—which was pretty good, if he said so himself, to keep Len in bed as long as possible, so the period of time taken up by pacing and obsessive email checking would be as short as possible. But even the Jim Kirk bedroom eyes—or any other portion of his anatomy—didn’t work that particular Friday morning.

Finally, at ten o’clock, the email arrived.

“You open it, Jim. I just can’t do it.”

“Okay,” Jim said, turning Len’s laptop towards himself and clicking on the message to open it.

“Wait—wait! You were supposed to argue!”

“Bones—you got it! You got U of I! You’re gonna be a doctor, and I’m gonna be an officer, and it’s all just working out more perfectly than anything ever does. I’m starting to wonder what the hitch is.”

Leonard leaned back into the couch, and collapsed sideways into Jim. He felt like he could breathe, really breathe, for the first time in weeks. “No hitch, darlin’. No hitch.” He put his arms around Jim, and was enfolded in return. “Clear sailing, from here on out.”

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Two weeks later, Jim received a phone call in the middle of a night shift. Sam and Aurora’s baby had been born—a perfect little girl. Jamie Winona Kirk came squalling into the world weighing six pounds nine ounces.

“We were gonna put the names the other way around—Winona Jamie—but then when we saw how she never stopped moving, and heard how loud she was, we realized we had the names backwards,” Sam said.

“You … you named your baby … after me?”
“C’mon, Jimmy! You know we Kirks can’t ever come up with any original names. Reduce, reuse, recycle, right?”

“But …”

“No buts, little bro. Come by the hospital after you get off shift, okay? Len, too.”

“Of course,” Jim said, still dazed. “Of course we will.”

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By late May, trees were getting leaves, and Jim and Leonard were getting impatient. Jim’s officer training was set to start at the end of June, the week before Len’s residency began. Len had given his notice for the end of the second week of June, and Jim had put in for vacation for the week before his training started. They would have a week to spend together before the real craziness started, with Jim being in Ames on weekdays for a month, and Len starting his residency, where he knew he’d be worked like a dog. They were both counting the shifts until their week off.

“Oh, Bones—this is the last shift of this rotation,” Jim said, on the way to the station. “Then two more rotations, and then we get our week off together.”

“And not a moment too soon, sugar.”

“You can say that again.”

Len, being Len and not Jim, didn’t say it again.

Len had just started to be able to reliably nap during the night shifts, and nobody complained when he and Jim pushed two bunks together in the back of the dorm area. Jim didn’t always fall asleep, but he sometimes did, and they both found they had more energy after a pair of night shifts when they’d slept at least a little.

Some shifts didn’t allow that luxury, and this was one of them. The ambulance had been toned out immediately for a possible cardiac call that Len was pretty sure, from what he saw on the monitor, would in fact turn out to be something after all. When Len and Christine returned, the engine and the ladder were out on an alarm activation, but they returned quickly, just in time for the engine and the ambulance to go to a motor vehicle accident—a bad one, where two patients had to be extricated from crushed vehicles.

By midnight, every apparatus had been deployed at least three times, and everyone was crabby. The ambulance had the longest runs, typically, since they often had to take patients to the hospital as well as perform their on-scene tasks. Len and Jim had given up on napping, because they were both the type that had trouble ramping down after an intense period of time. They sat at the table in the day room, Jim reading a magazine, and Len reviewing yet another medical school textbook.

Jim finished his magazine, and sat there picking at a hangnail. Len lifted his eyes from his textbook, and scowled as Jim chewed on the skin around the edge of his nail.

“Will you stop that?”

“What?”

“Picking at your nails like that. I mean, look at your hands. Every single fingertip is red around the nail from all the picking and biting.”
“Well, I can’t help it if I don’t have perfect doctor hands like yours, Bones,” Jim said.

“But you could help the constant picking.”

“Speaking of constant picking, just leave it alone, Bones. I swear, you’ve been nagging me about this or that all day. Give it a rest.”

Len scowled at him. “Well, if you’re not gonna stop, I don’t have to sit here and watch.”

“Fine.” Jim chose a new finger and began gnawing at it, looking Leonard in the eye as he did so.

Len got up and sat in the TV area, even though he wasn’t remotely interested in what was on.

Five minutes later, Jim passed by the TV on the way to the bathroom.

“You’re sulking, Bones.”

Leonard sat on the couch, scowling, with his arms crossed high on his chest. “I am not.”

“Are too!”

“No I’m—Jesus. Just go away.”

“Fine,” Jim said, and he stalked off. He tried to slam the door, but the pneumatic closing device didn’t allow that small satisfaction to occur.

Ten minutes later, he still wasn’t back in the ready room, and Leonard was still sulking in the TV area. Scotty muted the volume during a commercial.

“Lovers’ spat,” he said. “How cute. Will there at least be hot make-up sex after the shift?”

“Damned well better be,” Leonard said. “Otherwise I’m not sure why I put up with his infantile behavior sometimes. And mind your own business,” he added.

Leonard sulked a little while longer, and then realized he was being ridiculous. He got up to find Jim and apologize, when the tones sounded.

“Engine 1, Ladder 1, Ambulance 2, Engine 4, Truck 4; structure fire with entrapment. 2010 West 110th Street. 2-0-1-0 West 110th Street. Callers report multiple people entrapped on second floor. 0038.”

Everyone scrambled to their apparatus, and they were soon on their way to the fire. When they got there, a woman was leaning out of a smoke-filled second floor room, shouting something nobody could hear.

Faster than Len imagined was possible, Jim had a ground ladder off the truck, and had raised it and placed it with the tip at the windowsill. He flew up the ladder, and tried to help the woman out of the window. Len couldn’t hear what she was shouting at him, but she seemed to be refusing to go. She pointed at the closed window in the next room over, and Jim said something to her.

Jim’s voice, muffled by the SCBA facepiece, came on the radio. “Child reported to be trapped in the room at the center of the Bravo side of the building. Use the window adjacent to the laddered window.”

The woman finally got on the ladder and allowed Jim to help her down. He whisked her over to Christine and Len, who got busy assessing her.
“My son, my son! He’s only three! He’s in that room, next to mine, and I couldn’t get to him! I tried to, but I couldn’t even open my door, the doorknob was so hot!”

“They’re getting him now, Miss,” Christine said, gesturing to the ladder truck’s gigantic ladder, which Scotty was extending towards the child’s bedroom window. “You breathe this oxygen, all right? And they’ll have your son down in no time.”

Christine and Len went through an initial assessment with the woman, and she seemed unharmed except for some minor smoke inhalation and some major terror. She was understandably extremely worried about her son.

The three of them—Len, Christine, and the mother—watched, as Jim and Cupcake climbed up the ladder to the window. Meanwhile, the engine crew was heading inside downstairs to locate the seat of the fire, and put it out.

Jim and Cupcake reached the tip of the ladder. The window was low enough that the aerial ladder was at a very shallow angle, allowing them to stand upright at the tip while Cupcake cleared the glass and sash away from the window, leaving the window opening completely cleared. Dark black smoke billowed out.

The house was old, and the window was a tight squeeze for a large firefighter in all his gear, but Jim rolled through the window, staying as low as possible. Cupcake followed, having a slightly more difficult time entering due to his greater bulk.

Flames rolled across the ceiling of the room, and joined the dark smoke pushing from the window.

“Oh my god ohmygod, his room’s on fire!” the mother shrieked. Len put a gentle restraining hand on her, as she tried to rise from her seat on the stretcher.

“Miss, these guys know what they’re doing. If he’s in there, they’ll have him out in—”

He wasn’t even finished with his sentence before a figure appeared at the window, shimmying out head-first onto the ladder. The figure crouched on the ladder—Len could tell it was Cupcake, from how he moved—and turned to accept a small bundle from the hands reaching out from the window.

The flames were rolling out the top of the window, and, rather than staying high, they started to get lower and lower. Len held his breath, waiting for Jim to come out the window, but instead, on the radio, he heard the words he never, ever, wanted to hear.

“Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! Firefighter Kirk is down at the egress window! Additional manpower and a hose line needed at the aerial ladder immediately!”

Len sank to his knees as his vision closed to a small tunnel. He could barely hear the sudden commotion over the static in his ears. All he could do was watch. And wait.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: When a firefighter enters a hazardous area, s/he must always be aware of the best means of egress. The fewer ways out there are, the more dangerous an area is.
Calling the Mayday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20: Calling the Mayday

Day 1

Len was only vaguely aware of what happened after hearing on the radio that Jim was trapped. Even at a safe distance from the building, he could hear the sound of the alarm on Jim’s air pack that said he wasn’t moving—dweeeeee dooo, dwee doo; dweeeeee doooo, dwee doo—over and over and over. He saw Spock scramble up the ladder and take the child from Cupcake, who immediately returned to the tip of the ladder, lying on his belly, his head and shoulders disappearing into the window opening and then popping back out again.

Len’s brain filled with a replay of his last words to Jim: Just go away. The words played over and over, on autorepeat. Just go away. Just go away. The words merged with the sound of the alarm, until they were one and the same in Len’s mind. He put his hands over his ears, to drown out the sound of the alarm, and was left only with his own words. Just go away.

Two firefighters from Truck 4 ascended as soon as Spock was down, pulling an uncharged hose line up with them. Len couldn’t see exactly what they were doing, but within seconds the flames receded, and the color of the smoke changed from dark black to gray. The cloud of smoke and steam around the window Jim had collapsed under obscured most of what was happening, but Len saw Cupcake dive into the window again, and, just as Spock arrived in the safe zone with the child, a limp form was being half-shoved, half-pulled out the window.

Spock set the child down, and Christine immediately checked him over. He was unconscious, but breathing, albeit slowly and ineffectively. Len stared as Christine started assisting the child’s breathing with a bag valve mask, blowing puffs of oxygen-enriched air into his lungs. One of the policemen on the scene had moved the mother away from the scene, and sat her in the back of the ambulance.

“Leonard.”

Len snapped his attention to the voice. Spock.

“We need another rig. Now,” Leonard said, his voice flat except for the shaking.

“It is on its way. Captain Pike ordered a second ambulance as soon as Jablonski called the mayday. Leonard, you must attend to the child.”

Len shook himself, like a cat that had gotten sprayed with water, and turned his attention to the child. The sooner he stabilized the child, the sooner he could help Jim. But at the moment, there was nothing he could do for Jim. So he pulled himself together, and did his job.

“Hyperventilate him, Chris. I’m gonna drop a tube.”

Christine increased the rate of breaths while Leonard got the supplies ready to intubate the child. He clipped the fingertip sensor of the monitor onto the child’s index finger, and quickly saw that the child had elevated carbon monoxide levels. There was enough soot around the child’s mouth and nose that he was also worried about his possibly inhaling hot smoke, and damaging his airway. But
he was able to place the endotracheal tube correctly on the first try, and Christine hooked the bag up to the end of the tube, and continued to ventilate him. Len checked the child for burns or injuries—he might have some first degree burns on his back, but there was nothing serious. He started an IV line in the child’s arm, for rehydration, and in case drugs were needed quickly, but there really wasn’t much more he could do for the child on the scene. He jotted some notes quickly and ripped the page off and taped it to the stretcher.

He risked a look up at the aerial ladder. One firefighter was holding a spray of mist over Cupcake and another firefighter as they stripped Jim’s gear off his limp body. His helmet clattered to the ground, and his turnout coat followed, plopping wetly onto the sidewalk. Len wasn’t entirely sure, but he thought he saw Jim’s arm move on its own as the men loaded him into the Stokes stretcher, maybe trying to push hands away from him.

“Chris, can you monitor him and keep bagging while I check Jim out?” Leonard said. His composure had returned, and he was as ready as he could be.

Christine nodded. “I’ll shout if anything changes.”

Spock, Cupcake, and two firefighters Len didn’t recognize brought the bright yellow Stokes over. Len was simultaneously relieved and terrified to hear the agonized sounds coming from Jim. Screams and groans meant he was alive, conscious, and breathing, though. As the four men set the Stokes down on the ground, Len first took a moment to take Jim’s face, which looked pale and frantic, but unburned, and make him look in Len’s eyes.

“Jim, darlin’, I gotcha, okay? I gotcha.”

“Bones … oh fuck … hurts so bad …” Jim said between panting groans. He reached for Leonard with an arm that was burned on the wrist, but the hand was intact.

“T’was mine,” Len said, and then knew he’d already taken too much time with his reassurances.

“Spock, I need another set of hands here,” Len said, as he slipped the oxygen mask on Jim. He taped it down, as he could already see, even though Jim was mostly on his back, that the back of his neck was badly burned.

“You may have mine, Leonard.”

“Did he have his air on the whole time?” Len asked, as he started cutting Jim’s clothes off to assess the damage.

“Affirmative. He was on his right side, in a fetal position, with his anterior body against the wall. Less than five minutes elapsed between the mayday and the extrication.”

So airway burns were unlikely—a good sign, Leonard thought, as he steeled himself to see what was underneath Jim’s clothing. “More info, guys. Everything you’ve got.”

Cupcake spoke up. “I heard something fall just after he handed me the kid. Then he didn’t come out. When I got back in, there was a bookshelf on his legs.”

“Loss of consciousness?” Len asked. Pants were off—fronts of the legs looked fine.

“I don’t think so,” Cupcake said. “I could … uh … hear him … uh … the whole time—sorry—” Cupcake cut himself off as he ran to the gutter and vomited.

“Not … knocked out … just … down,” Jim gasped.
“Don’t try to talk, sweetheart,” Len said, as he zipped his shears up the front of Jim’s uniform shirt, and found that the front of his torso was fine. He checked Jim’s arms, and the right was less burned than the left—possibly because he’d been lying on it.

Ambulance 4 came in hot, and Frank McCarthy and Barney Sanford emerged.

“Who should we take, McCoy?” Barney said.

“The kid’s ready to go. Smoke inhalation, possible inhalation injury. Notes are taped onto the stretcher. Haven’t notified the hospital.”

“Got him,” Sanford said, and Leonard put all thoughts of the child from his mind, and returned his full attention to Jim.

“Spock, roll him to his right on three. One, two, three.”

Jim yelled as Len and Spock moved him. Len poured an entire bottle of saline over the back of Jim’s uniform shirt, and eased it away.

Even though Leonard knew what he expected to see, it didn’t make it any easier. Jim’s back was burned, from just below his waist well into his hairline, except for an imprecise rectangle in the middle of his back that Len thought must be where the SCBA tank afforded his skin some protection beyond what his turnout gear offered.

“God damn it,” Len swore, and gulped back the lump in his throat. He ripped open the burn pack and draped Jim’s back and neck with the sterile sheet.

“Spock, get me pulse and respiration,” Len said. He put the BP cuff on Jim’s upper arm, avoiding the burned areas as much as possible, and wrote down his reading on the back of his glove. Too low, as he expected.

“Pulse one hundred forty, respirations thirty,” Spock said a few seconds later.

“Blankets,” Len barked. “Cover him up, he’s getting cold.”

He snatched an IV pack off his pile of supplies he’d laid out for the burn patient he was expecting. He activated the lapel microphone on his radio.

“St. Luke’s from Ambulance 2. Please pick up for a burn patient.”

He started an IV while he waited for a response.

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“St. Luke’s from Ambulance 2. Please pick up for a burn patient.”

“I have a male firefighter, 28, conscious, alert, and breathing, with burns to approximately thirty percent of total body surface area following a five-minute entrapment in a house fire. SCBA was intact throughout, and there’s no evidence of inhalation injury. Burns are mostly second degree, with third degree localized to the back of the neck and lower scalp.” He reported the vitals, and requested the use of pain relief.

The doctor on the other end of the connection verified the information, and gave permission for narcotic painkillers—not a second too soon, as Jim was out of his mind with pain, and Len was out of his mind for Jim.

“Establish a second IV, and transport directly to UI. Monitor airway, and sedate and intubate at any
The University of Iowa hospital, where Len would be starting his residency, had the only burn center in Iowa. It was farther away than St. Luke’s, but far better equipped to deal with Jim’s injuries.

Len repeated the instructions, and signed off. He opened his drug pouch, which never left his person except when it was under lock and key at the station, and set up to finally, finally take the edge off Jim’s pain. He pushed the morphine slowly into the IV, and felt something uncoil in his gut as Jim’s cries and anguished groans morphed into quieter moans. He started the second IV, and looked up for the first time since Jim was brought down.

“Let’s get moving,” Len said. “I need a lot of hands for this transfer, Spock. Four people.”

Spock found a fourth person to join himself, Len, and Christine in moving Jim from the Stokes to the stretcher. Len didn’t even notice who it was, as Jim yelled when they moved him.

Spock, quite uncharacteristically, caught Len by his shoulder before he could climb into the back of the rig. “Leonard. Do you require additional personnel during the transport? Captain Pike has stood down our ladder company.”

“I … yeah. Someone drive, and then Christine can help out in the patient compartment.”

“Very well,” Spock said. “I will drive, while Mr. Scott attends to the ladder truck.”

Leonard climbed into the back of the rig, and slammed the doors shut, and cranked the heat up to maximum. It seemed counterintuitive to warm a burn patient, but when one’s skin is gone over part of one’s body, heat is lost quickly. He figured he had a few seconds alone with Jim, and nothing needed to be done urgently. He took off his metaphorical paramedic hat for a moment, and put on his boyfriend hat.

“Jim, I …” Leonard choked back his tears.

“Shorry, Bonezh,” Jim slurred.

“No, no no no,” Len said, taking his hand, carefully avoiding the burns on his wrist. “No, darlin’. I’m sorry. I’m sorry started that stupid fight with you, and I’m sorry I told you to go away, and I’m so, so sorry this happened. But everything’s gonna be okay.”

“’s bad, righ? Don’ lie.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad. You have second-degree on your back, and your wrists. A patch of third degree on your neck. But nothin’ else. We’re takin’ you straight to the UI hospital, where they have a burn center. I’m stayin’ with you, darlin’, as much as they let me.”

“call … Mom. Sam.”

Leonard hardly noticed as Christine came in the passenger compartment, and the ambulance started moving.

“I will.”

“hurts … so bad.”

Len squeezed his eyes shut. A tear made its way out of the corner of each eye. “Lemme see what I
can do. Try not to talk any more, sweetheart. I love you like crazy.”

“me … too.”

He hooked Jim up to the monitor to get a continuous readout of his vitals. He got back on the radio, and relayed Jim’s vitals, as well as his weight and his strong physical condition pre-injury, and they approved more medication.

He pushed the drug through the IV very slowly, over several minutes.

“Any better, darlin’?”

“yeah.” Jim’s voice was barely audible through the oxygen mask. His eyes closed, and even though the monitor was keeping track of his vitals, Len kept a hand on Jim’s chest to feel his chest rise and fall with each breath.

Ten minutes into the trip, the ambulance hit a large pothole, bouncing everyone hard. Jim was instantly more alert, and cried out in pain, despite all the drugs in his system.

“Bones! Fuck!”

Len hadn’t let go of Jim’s hand, but he gripped it tighter. He leaned down to be closer to face-to-face. “I’m here, Jim.” He stroked Jim’s cheek with his other hand. “I’ll always be here,” he said quietly. He continued holding Jim’s hand and stroking his cheek, while keeping an eye on the monitor. Jim’s blood pressure was lower than he liked, and he was whimpering in pain.

“Chris, squeeze that fluid through, will you please?”

“Sure, Len.”

Ten long minutes later, the ambulance pulled into the unfamiliar bay at the University of Iowa hospital in Iowa City. Two nurses and a doctor were waiting, and Len followed them in with Jim, giving the doctor—one of the attending physicians who he had met during his interviews—the rundown on Jim’s condition. Jim clutched his hand weakly the whole way, and Len made up for his weak grasp with his own strong one.

Dr. Palmer listened to Len while he started checking Jim over himself.

“All right. You did an excellent job, McCoy. We’ll take care of him from here.”

Len hesitated. “He’s my partner. I’d like to stay with him if I can.”

Dr. Palmer frowned. “I thought he was a firefighter—wouldn’t your partner be another EMT?”

Len hadn’t said anything about his personal life in the interview, because it wouldn’t have been either necessary or professional. “Not that kind of partner. My boyfriend. I need to stay with him, when it’s possible. Please.”

Dr. Palmer didn’t even blink. “All right. Sorry I misunderstood. You can stay as long as it doesn’t become a problem for either one of you. And—I’m glad to see you again, but very sorry about the circumstances.

“Thanks. I, uh, need to call his family. When would be the best time to do that?”

“Now. He’s remarkably stable at this point. We’ll get a Foley in, because we’ll have to monitor urine output, and then they’re expecting him upstairs. The burn unit doctor is on his way down. I’ll explain
your family situation to him, if you want to go ahead and call the rest of his family.”

“Okay,” Len said. The rest of his family, Palmer had said. Those, Len thought, were exactly the right words.

Len crouched down near Jim’s head, and spoke to him.

“Jim, I’m gonna go out for a minute, and call your mom and Sam, okay? I’ll come back as soon as they say I can.”

“’kay.”

Len squeezed Jim’s hand one more time, and got a faint squeeze in return. He left the curtained-off room, and entered the main area of the emergency department, to find Spock and Christine waiting.

“He’s stable. They’re transferring him up to the burn unit shortly. And I have to call his family.”

“Do you want us to wait with you while you do that?” Christine asked.

“I … I think I’d be better off with privacy. But thank you. Thank you both. And I’m obviously taking myself off duty at this point.”

“Nobody would expect anything else, Leonard,” Spock said.

“I’ll … be in touch,” Len said.

Len suddenly felt as if he had one of those cartoon ten-ton weights sitting directly on top of his head. He leaned on a nearby counter for support, and rubbed his brow.

“Len?” Christine said.

“Jesus. I’m about to call his mother, and I don’t even know what to say.”

Christine looked around, and zeroed in on someone to talk to. “Hang on a second, Len.” She strode over to the desk of the person she’d singled out, and talked to him for a minute, gesturing towards the room Jim was in and then to Len. The man nodded, and stood up.

“I’m Ben Ellison, the charge nurse for this shift. Would you like a private area so you can talk to family?”

Len nodded. “Leonard McCoy. And I’d appreciate that. Thanks.”

Christine clasped Len’s shoulder quickly before she and Spock left. “Call the station when you can, all right?”

Len nodded, and followed the nurse, who showed him to a small room containing nothing but a couch, table, phone, wastebasket, and box of tissues. Which Len knew he was going to need, as soon as he was on his own.

“Thanks very much—this is very civilized. Could you let Dr. Palmer know I’m in here?”

“Sure. Take as long as you like.” Ellison closed the door, leaving Len alone.

He sat there, experimentally, waiting to see if the tears would come. But no, the dam was firmly closed, but with the weight pressing on him more urgently as each minute went by, it would likely burst soon. He looked at his phone. Three in the morning.
Nobody ever calls at three a.m. with good news, unless a birth is involved.

Len steeled himself, and called Winona’s number. The phone rang only twice before Winona picked up, sounding groggy and panicked.

“Hello? Who is it? What’s wrong?”

“Win, it’s Len. You need to come to the UI hospital, right now. Jim got burned in a fire. It’s not catastrophic, and he’s stable. But it’s bad enough.”

“Oh god oh god oh god I’m on my way. Can you call Sam? I don’t have a cell phone.”

“Sure. And Win, he’s in the best of hands.”

“What … what happened?” Len could hear the rustling of fabric in the background, and assumed he was on speakerphone while Winona threw clothes on.

“He was getting a little boy out of a fire. Something happened right after he handed the boy out, and he was stuck. Just for a couple minutes. He has burns on his back, wrists, and neck. We’ll know more after the doc from the burn unit looks at him.”

“I’m on my way. Uh, fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Bye.” Winona hung up.

Len pressed the ‘end’ button on his phone, and steeled himself for a conversation that he knew would be harder than talking to Jim’s no-nonsense, level-headed mother. Sam was brilliant, but never struck Len as someone who would hold it together in a crisis. He pulled up Sam’s contact information, and pushed ‘send.’

“Len?” said a female voice. Aurora. Of course—she was up with the baby. “What’s wrong?”

“Aurora, Jim’s been hurt in a fire. He’s stable, but he’s got some bad burns. They’re about to take him up to the burn unit.”

“No, oh no,” Aurora said, tears springing in to her voice. “How bad?”

“About thirty percent of his body, on his back and neck and wrists. No other injuries to complicate things. He’s in a hell of a lot of pain, but he’s stable. Win’s on her way. I think Sam should come.”

“Of course, of course! Oh no, Len. This is …” Aurora couldn’t continue.

“Yeah, it is,” Len said, barely able to talk past the lump in his throat. “Listen. Try to get Sam to call me before he leaves. I don’t want him calling while he’s driving, okay? We don’t need any more Kirks in the hospital.”

“Okay.”

Len suddenly felt the dams opening. “I have to go,” he said hastily. “We’ll be in touch.” He pressed ‘end’ abruptly, and fell onto his knees, grabbing the wastebasket just in time and heaving into it. The tears came as fast as the vomit, and as violently.

When his stomach was empty, Len wiped his face angrily and grabbed a pillow off the couch. Still kneeling on the floor, he buried his face in the pillow and screamed into it, as hard as he could,
repeatedly punching the couch itself until his knuckles were raw. Spent, he sat cross-legged on the floor, elbows on his knees, face in his palms, unable to do a thing.

There was a tap on the door. Len didn’t know what to say or do, so he didn’t do anything. He just sat there.

The door opened.

“Leonard,” a voice said quietly.

Len found the energy to look up, but he found he didn’t have to look up very far. Daryl Palmer crouched next to him.

“How can I help?” he asked.

“I … can I see Jim again? Please?”

“Of course you can. We’ve still got him down here. I ordered more pain medication, so he’s pretty groggy, but he’s more comfortable. I also gave him a little diazepam, because he was starting to get quite anxious. Understandably. Dr. Isaacs from the burn unit is having a look at him.”


“Don’t worry about it. Happens all the time.” Palmer stood up, and reached a hand down to Len.

Len allowed himself to be helped up. He blew his nose, and wiped his face off.

“I think I’m ready.”

“All right. Mask up, please—as you know, infection is the greatest concern after hemodynamic stability.”

“Yeah.”

Palmer handed Len a surgical face-mask, and they went back into the room. Jim was glassy-eyed and limp, but made eye contact with Len before his eyes drooped shut again. Two nurses were supporting Jim across his chest as they leaned him forward, and a doctor that Len hadn’t seen before was checking his back carefully.

“Hey, darlin’,” Len said, resting his hand on Jim’s leg, which he knew was unhurt.

Jim opened his eyes and blinked slowly.

“Will, this is Len McCoy, Mr. Kirk’s partner,” Dr. Palmer said.

“Boyfriend,” Len added, to avoid having the same misunderstanding twice, even though his term of endearment should have made that clear.

“Mr. McCoy, I’m Will Isaacs, from upstairs in the burn unit. I’m just having a look at Mr. Kirk, here, so we can talk about what’s next.”

Len nodded dumbly. “Okay. What’s next?”

“Let me tell you what I see. Or, do you want to look? Some people prefer not to.”

“Not me. I mean, yes, I need to look.”
“Go around to his side opposite me. Good.”

Len blanched, as everything looked even worse than it had even half an hour ago. He knew that was often the case, but the devastation to Jim’s body was one of the hardest things he’d ever had to look at. He swallowed hard, and nodded to Dr. Isaacs.

“About half of the burn area—here, and this area here—is mid-partial-thickness, meaning about half the dermal layer is damaged. That’s also what we see on his wrists. Most of the other half—especially around the edges here—is superficial partial thickness, which accounts for his high level of pain right now.”

Len nodded.

Isaacs continued. “Here, on his neck, it’s more severe. He’ll need some grafting, for his neck to heal properly. Once we get him in the OR for debridement, which will be soon now, since he’s stable, I’ll be able to tell what other areas might need grafting. I suspect he’ll need some, in addition to the neck. Are you following this okay? I understand you’re a paramedic.”

Len nodded. “Yeah, I’m getting it fine.”

“As for the superficial partial-thickness areas, the best treatment is ointments and closed dressings. Ah, nurses, let’s lay him back again.”

The two nurses laid Jim gently back onto the nearly upright bed. His eyes opened again, and searched the room until he found Len. Len took his hand, very gently, avoiding the bandages on his wrists.

Len cleared his throat. “Uh, how long are we talking about?”

“I think, because of the extent of the burns, he’ll probably be with us for a few weeks. But barring complications, there’s every expectation that he’ll be completely healed up and feeling normal in under a year.”

“He’ll … he won’t be able to go back to being a firefighter, will he?”

“I can’t say one way or another right now,” Dr. Isaacs said. “And for now—we need to get him prepped for the OR. It’s best to do the debridement and close anything that needs to be closed with grafts as soon as possible.”

“All right. Uh, his mother will be here any second. She should … sign anything that needs to be signed.”

“All right. The burn unit has a nurse who goes over everything with the families.” Isaacs paused as he stripped off his sterile gloves and tossed them in the bin. “He’s got a lot going for him. He’s young, and strong, and in excellent shape. He got top-notch care at the scene—you can pass that along to whoever brought him in—which is probably why he’s so stable now.”

“Ah, Will, Leonard here brought him in. They work the same shift.”

Isaacs stared at Len. “You treated him at the scene?”

“I also would’ve preferred that it didn’t happen that way—believe me,” Len said. “But we knew it could happen, with us working on the same shift.”

“I’m not criticizing, Mr. McCoy. Just … well. I couldn’t have done it.”
“Yes, you could’ve, if you were the one who was there. As opposed to the alternative? Running away, or doing nothing? You could’ve,” Leonard said.

“I … yes, when you put it that way, I suppose so,” Isaacs said. “In any case: good work. And I’m sorry you both went through that. You can have a few more minutes, and then we need to get him to the OR, as soon as his consents are signed.”

“Thanks. Uh, can we have a few minutes alone?”

“Sure. He’s pretty sedated, but there’s no reason why not.” Isaacs gestured for the nurses to go with him. He closed the sliding glass door behind him, and Len was alone with Jim.

He had no idea what to do.

He settled for pulling a chair up to the side of the bed, taking Jim’s hand, and stroking his thumb over the back of Jim’s hand.

“Jim … I don’t think you can hear me. I kind of hope you can’t, actually. But …” Len blinked as his eyes filled with tears. “I love you so much. And I’m so sorry I picked that stupid, stupid fight with you tonight. And the last words I said to you before … this … were ‘just go away.’ You gotta know, darlin’, you gotta know I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what my problem was. But I don’t think I’ve ever regretted anythin’ as much I regret that right now. Because I really, really, really don’t want you to go away.”

He didn’t think he had any tears left, but he was wrong. The tears flowed freely, and Len rested his head on the bed next to Jim’s leg. After a minute or so, he felt a hand on his head.

“Don’ cry, Bones,” Jim said, his speech slurred and just barely audible.

“I’m sorry,” Len said reflexively, his eyes meeting Jim’s open but glassy eyes.

“’s okay. Know you din’ mean ih.”

“You’re gonna be okay, sweetheart. All right? They’re taking you in to the OR to start fixin’ you up, any time now. Your mom’s coming—she’s probably signing papers now—and Sam’s coming. We all love you, Jim. So just hold on, all right, darlin’?”

Jim smiled slightly. “Holdin’ on … t’ you.”

A few minutes later, the door slid open and shut again, and a nurse and an orderly appeared.

“Dr. Isaacs wants us to take him up to the OR now,” the nurse said.

“Okay.” Len gently squeezed Jim’s hand once more, and let it go. He stood up, and kissed Jim gently on the forehead. Jim opened his eyes.

“They’re takin’ you up for surgery, darlin’. I love you, and I’ll see you soon.”

He kissed Jim on the forehead, and Jim’s eyes drooped shut again. The nurse and the orderly pushed the bed out. Waiting outside the door were Winona and Sam.

“That’s his mother and brother. Can they just have a minute?” Len said.

“Sure,” the nurse said.

Winona caressed Jim’s cheek, and said something to him quietly. He opened his eyes just a bit.
“Mom.”

“Yeah, Jimmy; Sam and I are here.”

Sam moved so Jim could see he was also there, insofar as Jim could see anything.

“Sam.”

“Hey, bro. Take it easy, okay? Love you.”

“Tell th’ boys … I’m tough.” Jim’s eyes closed again.

“I will, Jim,” Sam said.

“We need to go,” the nurse said gently. “There’s a family waiting area just outside the burn unit. Your names should be on the list up there already. If not, just tell the nurse in charge that you’re his family, and they’ll set you up.”

“Thank you,” Winona said.

The three of them went upstairs to the family waiting area. There were tears. There were hugs. There were a lot of phone calls to other friends and family. Len called the station, and got Pike, who was devastated at the severity of Jim’s injuries, but was able to accept that he’d probably be okay, in time. It hadn’t occurred to Len that Pike would be feeling awful, having essential sent Jim into the situation that injured him.

“Len, if you’ll allow me to go into your locker with my master key, someone will bring your car to the hospital, and anything you want that you’ve left at the station.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Len hadn’t even thought about the fact that his car—and his car and house keys—were twenty miles away, even though his house was only a five-minute drive from the hospital. “Thanks. Uh, the car, and my keys of course, and my laptop. I think that’s in the ready room. That would be really helpful, if someone could do that.”

“Consider it done. What else can you think of that you might need?”

“Uh … to be honest, I can’t really think right now.”

“Understandable. But seriously: the second you think of something, call me or Christine. We’ll get it taken care of. And tell Winona the same. Any help she needs at the farm—it’ll be done.”

“Thank you,” Len said. “Thanks a lot, Chris.”

“You’re welcome. One more thing, and I’ll let you go. Where do I find you to give you your keys?”

“Family waiting area outside the burn unit. Third floor. Oh—we’re at the UI hospital in Iowa City.”

“I know; Christine and Spock told me.”

“Oh. Right. See? I can’t think.”

“Don’t worry, Len. Okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll try. Thanks, Chris.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll be by around eight or so with your car.”
“Thanks.”

Len took a quick breather after his talk with Pike. Then, for the first time in as long as he could remember, Leonard picked up his phone to call his mother for comfort.

“Hello? What’s wrong?”

“Ma, it’s Leo. I’m fine. But Ma … Jim.” The tears started again.

“Oh Lord, Leo—what happened?”

“He got burned in a fire. He’s supposed to get better, and be fine, but … it’s so bad right now.”

“Oh, Leo. I’m so sorry. I’ll catch the next flight.”

Len nearly said something like, no, you don’t have to do that, but he stopped himself. She had nothing urgent to do. And she cared about him, and it seemed like she cared about Jim, too. For her to say that she’d drop everything to come help in any way she could was … well, it was nothing short of miraculous.

“Thanks.

“Tell me, Leo. If you don’t mind talking about it. Tell me what happened.”

And he did. For the first time since he was a child, Len poured his heart out to his mother. And it felt good.

~!~!~!~

Three interminable hours after Jim was brought upstairs, Dr. Isaacs appeared in the family waiting area, in fresh scrubs. Len’s heart rate spiked, even though the expression on the doctor’s face was promising.

“Mr. Kirk did very well. He remained stable throughout the procedure, he tolerated the anesthesia perfectly, and we were able to place a full-thickness graft on his neck, and several partial-thickness grafts on some more severe areas on his back.”

Everyone sighed with relief.

“What now, though?” Winona asked. “What will it … be like for him?”

“First of all, he’s heavily sedated right now. You could call it a medically-induced coma. This will give his body the best possible chance for early healing. Because of the heavy sedation, he’s on a ventilator—to breathe for him. You need to understand, it’s not because he’s doing badly—he’s doing very well. But when you see him, he may look sicker than you’re expecting him to look, because of the ventilator, heavy bandaging, the IVs and catheter, and all the monitoring equipment. But he’s doing very, very well.”

“But when he wakes up?” Winona asked. “What then?”

“We do a good job with pain control here,” Isaacs said, “which is important. Right now, the priorities are to prevent infection, promote healing, and keep him as hydrated, nourished, and comfortable as possible. He’ll sleep a lot. And every moment he’s awake, we’re going to try to get him to eat. People with significant burns need huge numbers of calories for the healing process. He probably won’t have much of an appetite, but you can bring in anything he likes that’s high in calories.”
“That’s about all he likes,” Len said.

Winona and Sam both laughed a little.

“That’s my boy,” Winona said. “Never one for the empty fiber and vitamins.”

The tension ramped down a notch, as Len, Winona, and Sam started to actually believe that maybe everything would be okay.

“When can we see him?” Len asked.

“Once we have him set up in his room. You’ll need to wear a mask and a gown. Infection is the worst enemy at this point. And one of the nurses will come in and explain a little more to you about what to expect when you see him. Right now, I’m going to check on him again. But in an hour or two, you can spend a short time with him, one at a time,” Isaacs said.

The nurse came in, as promised, and showed some pictures of heavily bandaged patients with wires and tubes and ventilators. Len was accustomed to seeing such things, but knew it would still be hard to see Jim that way.

Sam seemed to be having the hardest time. He was pale, and had hardly said anything the entire time they were waiting. After the nurse left, Winona took a bathroom break, and Len saw his chance.

“Sam?” Len said. “How can I help?”

Sam shook his head. “It’s the boys. And—this is going to sound terrible, but you’re not a parent, so you wouldn’t really understand.”

“That’s true, about my not being a parent. But I’ve dealt with a lot of families who have had horrible things happen, so if you wanna try me, try me.”

“Okay,” Sam sighed. “Here’s the thing. The boys worship their Uncle Jim. And they’re both really sensitive. They’ve both asked me before if Uncle Jim would ever ‘get burned up in a fire.’ I didn’t lie—I said he could get hurt, or die, because of his job. George wouldn’t even speak to Jim for a week after we talked about that a couple years ago. So what do I even tell them, Len? I don’t even know!”

“I think,” Len said cautiously, “that you tell them the truth. I think you also don’t let them see him for a while—at least not until he’s off the vent, and can talk. Once they see he’s still himself, even though he has a lot of bandages, I think they’ll be okay.”

“That’s … I think that’s good advice. Thanks,” Sam said.

“I’d be happy to talk to them too. I won’t, however, tell them anything that would upset them. I was there, and it was pretty god-damned upsetting.”

Sam’s jaw dropped. “You were—Len, did you have to …”

“Yeah. We knew it could happen. It was … Sam, it was really hard.” Len broke down again, as he allowed himself to think of the endless minutes before Jim was extricated, and his screams of agony, and the not-knowing of so many things.

“Jesus, Len. But you obviously did a good job—I mean, the doc who talked to me first in the emergency room said something about the paramedics doing everything perfectly.”

“The thing is, Sam, there was hardly a damned thing I could do for him. Sure—oxygen, fluids, sterile
sheet, as much morphine as I was allowed, and then I begged my bosses for more, and he got a little more—just took the edge off, really. And hold his hand. I could hold his hand,” Len said sourly.

“You could,” Sam said. “But nobody else who would’ve been able to treat him could do that. And let me tell you, if I was in that situation, I’d want all the hand-holding I could get.”

“Yeah,” Len said faintly. “Me too.”

“And Len,” Sam said, sounding more and more like himself. “You’re family. To me, and Mom, and Aurora, and the boys. Lean on us. Don’t feel like just because you’re not married, or because you’re a man, that counts for anything less. It’s so clear your his, and he’s yours, and we’re all here for you.”

“Thanks,” Len said gruffly. “That … really means a lot, Sam.”

An hour later, the nurse came back, and said they could go in, one at a time, for a few minutes each.

“You go first, Win,” Len said. “I had a lot of time with him already; I’ll go last.”

Winona nodded, and the nurse took her to get gowned up. She returned fifteen minutes later, red-eyed.

“Mom?” Sam asked, hugging her gently.

“He looks worse than before. I knew what to expect with the tubes and machines and everything, but I just wasn’t expecting him to look so … sick. He doesn’t just look like he’s sleeping.”

“He’s not, Win. He’s down way deeper than that. But it’s his best chance now—it’s a head start on healing that he desperately needs,” Len said.

“I know. I just wasn’t ready,” Win said. “Anyhow—your turn, Sam.”

Sam didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “I … don’t know if I can do it. I honestly don’t know. If he looks worse than before, I don’t know if I should go see him. I have a tendency to … get things stuck in my head, and then I can’t stop seeing them. I don’t want to have a picture of him like that stuck in my head.”

“You don’t have to,” Len replied. “He won’t know anyone’s there.”

“I know,” Sam said. “But I’ll know. I’ll know I wasn’t there. So I’m going.” He nodded to the nurse, who led him out.

They were back in five minutes, with Sam in a wheelchair, paler than a bleached sheet.

“Sam?” Win said. “What happened?”

“Fainted,” he mumbled. “Took one look at my little brother, and passed out cold.”

“That happens a lot,” the nurse said. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Some people just react that way.”

“I’ll try again later,” Sam promised.

The nurse led Len out for his turn. She helped him into a gown, shoe covers, gloves, and a surgical mask, and let him into Jim’s room.
“Can I touch him at all? Hold his hand?”

“Sure you can,” the nurse said. “Just don’t move him at all, okay?”

“I won’t.”

It was over eighty degrees in the room, and humid. And Winona was right. Jim looked like death warmed over. Which, Len thought, was a pretty apt description of a medically-induced coma. Semi-death.

The bandages were air-tight dressings, designed to keep bacteria away, keep the wounds moist with the ointments under them and promote healing. Len couldn’t see under the blankets, which he didn’t move, but he assumed there would be a new bandage wherever they used as a donor site for the grafts.

Len looked at the monitor. Everything looked remarkably good, considering what had just happened to Jim. Good, he thought. Looking good.

But then, Len realized he’d been looking at Jim through dispassionate medical lenses. He wasn’t in charge of that any more. That wasn’t his job. His job was to be Jim’s anchor, to get him through this hell as intact as possible. He took off the blinders he had to wear as a medical professional, and took Jim’s hand, ever so gently. For the first time since the beginning of the ordeal, there was no response at all. Nothing.

“How the hell am I gonna get through this, Jim?” Len said. “How?”

Except for the steady beeping of the monitor, Jim didn’t answer.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: When a firefighter is trapped, injured and in urgent need of assistance, missing, or imminently out of air, s/he or his/her partner calls “Mayday, mayday, mayday” over the radio, and reports the situation. This is called “calling the mayday.” There are trainings on when and how to do this, which is something you never want to have to do, but have to know how to do.
Chapter Notes

A/N: I did my best with research, to try to make this chapter realistic. But I did try not to go crazy with the medical stuff, since the story is about the characters, and not the treatment. Hopefully the balance worked out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 21: Overhaul and Salvage

Day 2: Early Afternoon

Jim was kept heavily sedated until the afternoon of the following day. Leonard insisted on being present for the first dressing change, because he felt like he would do better seeing the true extent of Jim’s injuries, now that they’d been debrided and grafted where necessary, than imagining what they might look like. After some discussion, and verification of the fact that he was indeed an MD who would shortly be a resident downstairs in the ED, Dr. Isaacs approved his request.

The third-degree area on Jim’s neck had been grafted with a full-thickness section of skin taken from Jim’s abdomen. The donor site was stitched closed into a line that would be barely noticeable when it healed. But there were also two areas—one on the back of Jim’s left shoulder, which had been facing upwards and completely exposed during the entrapment, and another right below the full-thickness graft on his neck—that had been grafted with a partial-thickness graft. In that case, the donor site was on an upper thigh. The donor area was carefully selected to be generally covered by clothing, and to be a site that wouldn’t bear weight during his recovery, because in a sense, once the skin had been shaved from the donor site, that area was much like a second-degree burn in terms of pain and damage.

“I’ve been working here for ten years,” said one of the nurses, “and I’m amazed every day by the advances. We used to routinely have to change dressings twice a day, and for massively burned patients that could take hours. Now, with the advances in materials and technology, we have dressings like these—” she gestured to the packages waiting to be applied—“that stay on for days at a time, and don’t adhere to the wound, so aren’t nearly as painful to remove. And they’re coming up with new things all the time. Like this treatment that uses a patient’s own skin cells, in a solution, and aerosolizes the solution and sprays it over the burned areas. They’re getting unbelievable results in trials, and I wish we were a trial center.”

Len watched as the nurses first applied thick layers of cream, then bandages saturated with more medication, and then an occlusive layer, that would keep moisture and heat in, and air and bacteria out, and finally an elastic layer to keep everything tight.

The most disturbing thing, Len thought, was seeing Jim limp and unresponsive throughout the procedure. He knew it was on purpose; he knew it was the best thing right now for many reasons; he knew it was reversible. But it still bothered him. A lot. So he decided to let himself be bothered, and let the flood of emotion wash over him, after the procedure was complete, and he was left alone with Jim.

Dr. Isaacs came in a few minutes later.
“Dr. McCoy?”

Len looked up, confused, not used to that form of address.

“Please, call me Len, or I’ll think you’re talking to my father.”

Isaacs smiled. “All right. I suppose you’ll have plenty of time to get used to the title downstairs, when you’re the doctor and not family.”

Len nodded.

“I think it’s time to let Jim start waking up,” Isaacs said. “He’s already starting to fight the vent, so we’re going to extubate him in just a minute and keep a close eye on him while he starts to come up.”

“All right,” Len said shakily. “Uh … I’ve obviously seen extubations before, and people regaining consciousness, but … what should I expect in this particular case?”

Isaacs nodded. “Good question. He’ll be groggy at first, and he may not remember what’s happened, especially if he had any Versed in the field or in the ED.”

“Well, I can tell you for sure he didn’t have any in the field. I know they sedated him in the ED, but I think they used diazepam. He has a thing about not being able to remember stuff—we had a discussion about that once when I had to sedate a patient who was a friend of his with Versed.”

“Okay. The other thing to expect is that it may take a little while to appropriately titrate his pain meds. We want him to be comfortable, but not so sedated that he can’t eat or that his respirations are depressed. One thing about burn injuries is that they kick the body into a hypermetabolic state. Even though he won’t be moving around much, he’ll be burning thousands of calories a day, just in healing. So we don’t want him to be unable to eat. In fact, he’ll probably get sick of having high-calorie, high protein food shoved at him all the time,” Isaacs said.

“That’ll be interesting to see,” Len said wryly. “I’m always nagging him to eat more vegetables, and less french fries and red meat and dairy.

The ventilator made a hiccuping sound.

“Okay, he’s really fighting it—he’s starting to try to breathe in his own rhythm. I’m actually going to ask you to step out while we do this, Len, if you don’t mind. This would be a good time to go down to the cafeteria, grab some food, make some calls. Even though he’s fighting the vent, he won’t really be coming around to any kind of awareness for another hour or so.”

“All right. I don’t particularly want to see unpleasant things happening to him that I’m not going to learn anything from,” Len admitted. “But I do want to be there when he wakes up.”

“Good choice. Why don’t you come back in half an hour or so?”

Len went back to the family area, and found his mother in conversation with another woman about her age, whose son had been injured weeks ago in a grilling mishap. She stood up as soon as Len entered the room.

“Leo? How is he?”

“They’re gonna let him wake up. They told me to take a break for a little while, so they can take him off the ventilator. I’m allowed to come back in half an hour.”
“Well, then, let’s get you fed.”

Susannah led Leo down to the cafeteria, and had him sit at a table while she got him food and coffee. They ate together quietly. Neither of them could think of much to say.

“I’m glad you came, Ma. Thanks.”

“Oh, Leo. How could I not come?”

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Half an hour later, Len was back by Jim’s side in his burn unit ICU room. He already looked better, with one less machine attached to him. Len watched the steady rise and fall of Jim’s chest, and tried to match his own breathing to Jim’s rate. He sat for fifteen minutes, silently watching the proof that Jim was alive.

A furrow appeared in Jim’s forehead, just like it did when he was dreaming. But Len didn’t think that was it this time. He took Jim’s hand and held on.

“You’re wakin’ up, Jim. It’s all right. You’re wakin’ up in the hospital. I’m here, and your mom and Sam will be here later.”

Jim moaned softly, and the furrow in his brow deepened.

“C’mon, darlin’. Keep wakin’ up.”

Len pushed the call button to summon a nurse, just in case things got bad.

Seconds later, a nurse came in—the one who’d talked to Len the most during the dressing change earlier.

“Is he waking up?” she asked.

“Looks like it.”

As if he heard what they were saying, Jim’s eyes opened slowly and he moaned again.

Len put his masked face right in Jim’s line of sight.

“Jim? Hey, sweetheart. You’re doin’ real good. Keep on comin’ back, just like that.”

Jim’s half-open eyes met Len’s. He mouthed ‘Bones,’ but no sound came out.

“Yeah, I’m here. Your mom and Sam will be here soon, too.”

“Thirsty,” Jim whispered.

The nurse, on the other side of the bed from Len, held a cup of lukewarm water with a straw in it up to his lips.

“Small sips, Jim,” she said.

Jim took several small sips, not moving his body in the slightest. The sight of Jim awake but motionless was just as disturbing to Len as the sight of him unconscious and on a respirator. It just wasn’t right, for him not to be moving.
“Do you know where you are, Jim?”

“Hospital,” Jim whispered.

“Yeah. You remember what happened?”


“You had a tube down your throat for a while. It’ll feel better soon,” Len said.

“Why?”

“You had surgery, to get rid of the burned tissue, and to do a couple grafts, and then they kept you sedated for a while,” Len answered.

Jim’s eyes darted around, which, in the absence of body movement, Len interpreted as alarm. His eyes squeezed shut, and he made a small sound. Len stroked his arm, between the burned wrist and the IV.

“How long?” Jim croaked out.

“Just a day. You’re doing great, darlin’. How’s your pain?”

Jim’s eyes were still squeezed shut.

“Not ‘s bad as when it happened. Hurtin’ plenty,” he said hoarsely.

“Give us a one-to-ten, Jim,” the nurse said.

“Seven. Tired.”

“Jim, I’m going to give you a little more pain medication, all right? And we’ll see how that does,” the nurse said.

“Yeah. Bones?”

“Still here, Jim.”

“’kay.”

The nurse returned as quickly as she’d left, and pushed some medication into Jim’s IV port. “A little fentanyl for now,” she said, knowing Len would want to know.

Len stroked Jim’s arm again, waiting for the meds to kick in. Jim had a few more sips of water.

“Better?” the nurse said, after a couple minutes.

“Yeah. Why’s my leg hurt? Didn’t think I hurt my leg. And maybe my belly? But not so bad.”

“That’s the donor sites for the skin graft—where they took skin.”

“’kay.”

Jim’s eyes drifted closed. Leonard wasn’t sure why he thought so, but he didn’t think Jim was sleeping.

“I’ll be back again in a little while,” the nurse said quietly. “Call if you need anything.”
“Thanks,” Len said.

The door opened, and closed. Jim’s eyes opened again, looking brighter and wetter than usual.

“Bones, I’m so fucked,” Jim said. As he blinked again, a tear fell from the corner of each eye, but he made no move to wipe them away. “How bad is it?”

“You’ve got mostly second-degree burns, and a patch of third degree on your neck. I know it’s awful right now, Jim, but they say you’re doing great. You’ll be here in the hospital for a couple weeks. But they said that except for the grafts and the donor site, the scarring should be minimal.”

“Don’t care about that,” Jim said. “I just … I can’t even move. If I even twitch, it’s like …” Jim closed his eyes again.

“It’s like what, darlin’? You can tell me anything; you know that.”

Jim’s face screwed up in a way that Len had only seen once before, when he was pouring out his heart in the front seat of the car after they had breakfast just following the Roma debacle. “It’s like I’m back in that room, and I’m trapped under that bookshelf, and I can’t move, and it’s so hot, and I can feel myself burning!” And without moving his head or his body at all, Jim started sobbing. “God, Bones; I thought I was dead. And I knew you were out there, knowing what was happening, and there wasn’t a fucking thing either one of us could do about it. I was so scared!”

Leonard wanted nothing more than to gather Jim up in his arms and hold him while he cried, just as he did after Johnny Nero died, and Jim could finally be sad instead of angry. But he couldn’t do that. There wasn’t a lot of Jim that he could touch right now without hurting him. He could wipe the tears away, though, so he did that.

“You’re not there, Jim. You’re here, you’re safe, with me. Your mom and Sam are coming any time. And I wish like anything I could hold you in my arms, but I can’t. So you close your eyes, sweetheart; yeah, just like that,” Len said, as he stroked Jim’s forehead and cheek. “And you think about us lyin’ together, and I’m holding you, and you’re holding me, and everything’s okay. Because it’s you and me, and nothing else. I’m holding you, right now, in my mind, and your mind.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, between shaky breaths. “Yeah, you are.”

“We’re holding each other,” Len continued, not sure where what he was saying was coming from, but it seemed to help, so he went on. “After we played in the snow. The snow’s still falling outside, and everything’s quiet, and white, and cool. If we opened the shades, we could see the snowman we made, outside your window. We can hear kids playing outside. It’s a day off from school, because there’s so much snow. We’re just snuggled together, under your down comforter, and it’s perfect. We drift off to sleep without a care in the world.”

Len continued talking, and watched as Jim’s face lost the tension it was holding, and felt his chest rise and fall more slowly, with none of the shuddering of sobs. He was asleep, for real this time. Not closing his eyes to shut people out, and not unconscious. Just sleeping.

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Day 3.

Len came out of Jim’s room and took his mask and gown off, tossing them in the laundry bin. As he was stripping off the disposable shoe covers, a woman approached him.

“Dr. McCoy?”
Len looked behind him quickly, and then felt ridiculous. *Gonna hafta stop doin' that in a hurry,* he thought.

“‘Yes?’”

“I’m Sylvia Barnard, one of the social workers for the unit. I’m wondering if we could have a word in my office for a little while.”

“Sure. Jim’s sleeping, and his mom is in there with him anyhow.”

“Great. Come on back,” she said, pushing her graying hair back from her face.

The office was comfortable and homey, like a living room.

“I understand from Dr. Isaacs that Mr. Kirk is doing really well, medically,” Ms. Barnard said.

“Yeah. All things considered, of course. He’s still having a lot of pain, obviously, but he’s balancing fluids really well, and he’s able to eat, and he’s thermoregulating surprisingly well.”

“I read his chart, of course, so I know the basics. But I’m wondering what else you can tell me about him, that might be helpful in getting to know him a bit. The medical staff works wonders here, with getting people healthy and home in record time, but there’s a lot more to a full recovery than growing skin.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Len said.

“One of my jobs is to help our patients—and their families—be as mentally and emotionally ready as possible for discharge. For patients like Mr. Kirk, who mostly have partial-thickness burns, physical readiness to go back home sometimes happens faster than the emotions can keep up with.”

Len nodded slowly. “I can see that. I mean, two days ago …” Len stopped, and found he couldn’t go on.

“Exactly,” Ms. Barnard said.

They sat there quietly for a moment. Ms. Barnard didn’t press Len to continue, but he went on anyhow.

“Jim’s had some big things happen this year.”

“Feel free to tell me about anything that you think it would be okay with him for you to share. I haven’t had a chance to speak with him for more than a few moments. But I’ve spoken to his mother, and she said the same thing—that Mr. Kirk has had a lot of big changes this year. And she also said you’d be able to tell me more about a lot of those events.”

Len frowned. “The thing is, I’m just not sure how comfortable Jim would be with me telling a stranger all about him.”

“I understand. That’s completely fine. I’ll be talking to him as soon as he’s up to it, anyhow.” She paused, and set her folder down on the table. “So how about if you tell me about yourself, for starters? You’re the one who spends the most time with him, and you’re the one he’ll be going home to.”

“We don’t actually live together,” Len said. “I mean, well, we have separate places, but … yeah, okay. We spend all our time together. If I’d gotten a residency placement elsewhere, we’d certainly
have gotten one place. So I guess it’s time to fix that.” He looked up at her. “He was going to start officer training, in about three weeks. I guess that’s not happening. And I’m starting my residency, downstairs in the ED, in four weeks. And that scares the shit out of me—I mean, I’m gonna be working eighty hour weeks, and he’s gonna be … what? Sitting at home by himself? Still here? I don’t even know.” Len rubbed a hand across his brow, and leaned back into the sofa.

“It’s not too soon to start thinking about these things,” Ms. Barnard said.

“It’s just … overwhelming,” Len said.

“Let’s talk about that. In fact, let’s start from the beginning. Dr. Isaacs explained that you witnessed the accident, and that you treated Mr. Kirk at the scene. That’s a lot to deal with right there.”

Len could feel the all-to-familiar lump gathering in his throat. “I could see the flames coming out of the window he’d just passed a kid through, but then he didn’t come out. And then I heard his partner on the radio, saying he was trapped. I thought he was dead, but then Cupcake—uh, that’s Jim’s crazy nickname for his partner—and two other guys shoved him onto the ladder, and I thought I could see him moving as they stripped his gear off, and his gear was smoking,” Len said, tears beginning to flow. “God, I’d forgotten that. It was smoking. And it was then that I realized, even if he wasn’t dead, nothing was ever, ever going to be the same.”

“No,” Barnard said quietly. “No, it’s not. It will be fine, most likely, but not the same.”

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Day 6.

“Okay, Jim. Swing your legs over the side of the bed, and just get used to being in a different position. Even though you’ve mostly been pretty upright, to keep the weight off your back, this is different,” the physical therapist said.

“Yeah. I’m a little lightheaded, I guess.”

“When you’re ready, let me know, and we’ll get your feet on the floor. The belt around your waist is just a precaution, in case you get wobbly.”

“Got it.” Jim sat at the edge of the bed for another minute. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“All right. Easy does it. One foot on the floor—good. The other—however works for you. Great. Look—you’re standing up!”

Len held one of Jim’s arms, and the PT held him from the other side. With the IVs gone, and just a port taped to one arm, it was much easier to hold on to him. Jim swayed slightly, and Len tightened his grip.

“We gotcha, Jim.”

“I’m ready to go,” Jim said.

“Slow and easy,” the PT said. “It’s not a race.”

“Sure it is,” Jim said. “Only I won already. As in, I’m still here. And I’m standing up, which four days ago, didn’t seem possible.”

“Well, then,” said the PT, “let’s go for a walk.”
“What’s tricky,” Jim said, frowning, “is that I wanna look at my feet, ’cause I’m not all that sure where they are right now, but I can’t move my neck so well just yet.”

“Just take it slow,” the PT said.

Flanked by Len and the PT, Jim walked slowly and stiffly to one end of the corridor, and then to the other, near the entrance. As he approached the entrance to the unit, the door swung open. The two figures in the door stopped, and stared.

“Oh my word!” said Winona. “You’re walking! You’re out of bed, and you’re walking around!”

“Good for you, Jim,” said Susannah McCoy, beaming at both him and Len. “Good for you.”

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Day 9

“Well, that sucked,” Jim said shakily, after the new dressings were secured in place. “But not nearly as bad as last time.”

“Everything looks so much better,” Len marveled. “Why, there’s some places, all around the edges, where it’s just perfect, new, pink skin. I never would’ve believed it, that it could happen so fast.”

“Fast, my ass,” Jim grumbled. But there was a tone to the grumble that Len recognized as optimism. “Though I guess I’ve been unfairly accused of being fast before. So I can take it.”

“You think you can eat something in a little while?” Len asked.

“You gonna push some fries and a milkshake on me? Maybe a burger? None of that empty fiber and vitamins, right?”

“No, darlin’; just the evil stuff. Don’t get used to it, though. Because sooner than you know it, I’ll be back to nagging you about vegetables and regularity and balanced meals and such.”

“Looking forward to it, Bones,” Jim said, grinning fondly up at Len. “Broccoli, and cabbage, and beans, oh my. Looking forward to it.”

“Me too. Me too.”

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Day 11

“B-shift’s on today,” Jim said, as Len helped him pull a loose, light-weight shirt on over his bandages. He’d marked the white-board calendar with the B-shift’s schedule, as one more link to the outside world. “And I’m pretty sure this is the rotation where Chekov gets his black helmet.”

“That’s right,” Len said, snapping his fingers. “He said the other day—when he came by when you were sleeping—that he couldn’t wait not to be a probie anymore.”

“He’s ready,” Jim said. “He’ll do fine. Hell of a smart kid. Just needs to get over the whole thing of feeling like he has to prove himself.”

Len arched a brow. “Do the words ‘pot’ and ‘kettle’ ring any bells to you right now?”

Jim went still. “I’m done with that, Bones. Jesus, I was done with that after Roma burned down.
After Nero kicked the bucket. I wasn’t doing any kind of stupid stunt when I got hurt, you know. It was an uncomplicated search and rescue. It’s just that the goddamned bookshelf fell on me. Or whatever the hell it was! It wasn’t my fault, Bones!” Jim shouted. His face was red, and he was breathing hard.

Len sat next to Jim on the bed and reached for his forearms—his new habit of where to grab Jim to comfort him, as shoulders were still off limits. “No no no, Jim—I know that. I didn’t mean to accuse you of doing something stupid that got you hurt.” He bit back his usual phrase, about how going inside a burning building was actually a pretty stupid thing to do. “I just meant, when you were his age …”

“Yeah,” Jim said, blowing out a breath. “I know. Sorry I overreacted. I don’t have the best self-control these days.”

“That’s completely allowed,” Len said.

There was a tap on the door.

“Come in!” Jim said.

“Everything okay?” the nurse asked.

“Yeah, fine. I was just shouting at the best boyfriend in the universe, because I’m a total ass these days,” Jim said.

“Didn’t mean to butt in; just needed to check that everything was okay,” the nurse said. “Anyhow—you have a visitor, if you’re up for it. Fellow named Ronnie Cozart.”

Jim brightened immediately. “Excellent! Hey, actually, I’ll go get him. I wanna walk around some more anyhow. Maybe I’ll drag him to the PT gym and make him watch me do some exercises this time.” He looked at Len, and then back at the nurse. “Actually, could you tell him I’ll be out in like five minutes?”

“Sure,” the nurse said. She left the room, and closed the door.

Jim looked solemnly at Len.

“I’m really sorry,” he said. “I know you didn’t mean it that way—I mean, now that I’m actually thinking, I know you didn’t. And I sure as hell didn’t mean to yell at you.”

“I know, darlin’; I know you didn’t. It’s all right. Crap, Jim; I just wanna hug you right now, more than anything.”

Jim stood up. “How about we try a modified hug? In which, unlike in the traditional platonic hug, you keep your hands firmly below the belt. And I’ll see how far I can get my arms around you. Good stretching exercise, you know?”


Jim leaned in to Len, and Len wrapped his arms around him, extremely careful to avoid the bandages. He knew exactly where they ended, and kept his touch below their borders. Jim rested his head on Len’s shoulder, which was about as far as he could move his neck, and reached around Len’s body as well as he could. Which turned out to be pretty well.

“God, I’ve missed touching you,” Len whispered. “This whole time, I’ve wanted nothing more than
to crawl into bed with you and hold you; stay like that until you’re completely healed.”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s forget all about dressing changes, and PT, and grafts, and hypermetabolic states, and not being able to close my eyes without feeling like I’m under that window again, and not being able to turn my head, or look down, and all that stuff. Let’s just forget it all,” he said into Len’s shoulder, “and go home, and get in your bed, ‘cause it’s bigger, and just lie there for like a year.”

“Sounds good to me, darlin’. I’ll tell the folks downstairs I’ll start next year.” Len nuzzled Jim’s cheek, and soon Jim raised his face to Len’s and they were kissing, for real, for the first time since the accident. Their tears mingled, and Jim finally pulled away, his eyes bright and wet.

“I love you so much, Bones,” he said. “You’re my rock. I’d be lost in here without you.”

“I’d be lost anywhere without you,” Len said. “And I can’t believe how much I love you.”

Jim kissed Len again, quickly, and then swiped a hand across his face. “C’mon. Ronnie’s probably wondering what the hell happened to us.”

Jim and Len walked out to the entrance of the unit, and found Ronnie waiting in the lounge area outside.

“Hey, Ronnie!” Jim said brightly.

Ronnie’s jaw dropped.

“Holy crap, Jim! I mean, holy crap!”

“I know, right? Up and around, all that jazz. And with the shirt covering up the damage, you’d never know. Well, except I’m kinda stiff like C-3PO. And if you touch my back I’ll yell real loud.”

Ronnie continued to stare. “Four days ago, you were, like, a different person.”

“Don’t be too fooled. I’m having a really good day. And it’s still early. I’ll sleep half the day, and eat half the day. In fact, I think I’m turning into a cat, which is really annoying, because I would kind of like to get a dog sometime.”

Len and Ronnie exchanged a quick glance.

“What?” Jim said. “Uh oh, did something happen to one of your dogs?”

“No, they’re fine. Just this cat thing, you know? Of all the people I know, you’re the least like a cat.”

“Yeah, whatever. Okay. Anyhow—today you’re gonna watch me in the gym for a change.”

“Bring it on,” said Ronnie.

“I’m gonna go take care of some things,” Len said. “I’ll be back by lunchtime, okay?”

“Sure, Bones. Love ya.”

“Me too, darlin’. At risk of sounding like a mother hen, don’t overdo it, all right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

In actuality, Leonard had nothing he needed to get done. His mother had gone back home, and he’d moved his resignation from work up a couple weeks. Nobody complained about the short notice. But
it was important for Jim to spend time with people other than family. And he and Ronnie now had even more in common than they did when they first met at the fire academy, eight years ago.

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**Day 12**

Len’s phone jarred him out of deep sleep at four a.m. The caller ID showed the call was from the hospital. His heart pounded, and his hands shook so badly it was difficult to push the button to answer the call.

“Hello? What’s wrong?”

“Leonard, this is Cindy Granger, one of the night nurses on Jim’s unit. He’s not feeling well right now—he’s running a temperature—and he’s asking for you. He’s pretty agitated.”

“I’m on my way,” Len said. An infection could be deadly at this point, and he and Jim both knew it. “Is it an infection?”

“We don’t know. Dr. Isaacs is on his way as well. Jim does have some upper respiratory symptoms, so we’re all hoping it’s just a virus.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Leonard made it in eight. He dashed up the stairs, too impatient for the elevator, and was panting by the time he burst through the double doors.

“Whoa, slow down, Leonard,” the nurse said. “Dr. Isaacs is in with him. You can go in, but you’ll need a mask and gown, because he’s taking a look under the dressings.”

“Aw, Jim,” Len muttered. “What happened?” he asked the nurse. “He was doing so well! He was ten times better yesterday!”

“We’re not sure yet. Dr. Isaacs should know soon. Do you want to go in, or do you want to wait outside until they’re done?”

“Of course I want to go in,” Len said. He went to the cabinet that had sterile packages of masks and gowns, and pulled a set out. He scrubbed his hands, and the nurse helped him into the garment, and put gloves on him.

“Thanks.” Without even looking at the nurse who’d assisted him, Leonard flew into Jim’s room. Jim was leaned forward in the position that worked best for dressing changes, teeth clenched and eyes shut tightly. His hands were clenched into fists, knuckles white, and he groaned as Dr. Isaacs peeled the bandages back as gently as possible.

Len knelt down so he was right by Jim’s head.

“Jim, darlin’. I came as fast as I could. You’re feelin’ pretty shitty, huh.”

“Bones,” Jim gasped. “Do the snow-day thing.”

Len launched into the routine he’d started the first day Jim was awake, and had used many times since, when Jim was having his dressings changed, or was feeling more pain than normal for some reason. He talked about playing outside together on a snowy day, and then snuggling up together afterwards. He’d made the imagery more and more detailed each time, and gave it his all on this
occasion. He had Jim making snow angels, and building a snowman, and then they lay in the snow
together and watched the flakes falling. Jim’s knuckles regained some color, and his breathing
slowed and got less ragged as Leonard walked him through their winter wonderland.

Len watched out of the corner of his eye as Dr. Isaacs swabbed a few spots, likely to culture for any
bacterial growth, dropping each swab into a labeled tube.

“All right, Jim,” Isaacs said, finally. “I’m all done poking you. Everything still looks really good
under there, but I took some swabs to culture, just as a precaution, since you’re running a
temperature. We’ll get you bandaged up again, and try to get you feeling a little better, and then we
can talk a little more, all right?”

“Yeah,” Jim said, his voice sounding more normal.

Len stayed with Jim as two nurses re-dressed his injuries, which took about an hour. Jim coughed a
few times during the procedure, which caused him to tense up and breathe harder again.

“Hurts when you cough, huh?” Len said.


Dr. Isaacs came in again after the bandaging was complete.

“Jim, Len; I honestly think this is a virus. But I’m going to start you on some prophylactic broad-
spectrum antibiotics, Jim, just to prevent any secondary infections. I’ll be surprised if there’s any
growth in the cultures; usually, if there’s an infection in the wounds, it’s visible before there are any
systemic effects. You do have a fever, but it started along with upper respiratory symptoms. But
we’ll know in forty-eight hours if the wounds are infected, which, again, I doubt.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Len said. “Can you do something for the cough?”

“Jim?” Dr. Isaacs asked. “Is that cough bothering you a fair amount?”

“Yeah,” Jim said, coughing again. “There’s this reflex, you know, to cover your mouth? But when I
do that, it stretches everything out all of a sudden. I know I’m supposed to work on range of motion,
but I don’t think sudden jerky movements is what the PTs had in mind. Plus I guess just plain
coughing hurts.”

“Is it hurting inside your chest, or on the wounds themselves?”

“Just my back and shoulders,” Jim said. “And I sneezed earlier, and I’d prefer not to repeat that for,
oh, another hundred years or so.”

“All right. Your cough is pretty junky-sounding, so I don’t want to suppress it too hard, since your
body needs to get the extra secretions out. But I think the best balance will be a small dose of
codeine, along with something to loosen up the phlegm. The codeine will suppress the cough, and
take the edge off the pain, as well. I know you were glad to get off the opiates, but I really think this
is the best option for now. I’ll also have the respiratory therapist come in and see you today; they’ll
help you clear out the secretions, and give you some breathing exercises that will help stave off
pneumonia.”

“Pneumonia?” Jim said, eyes widening. “Do you think I’m getting pneumonia?”

“Not at all,” Isaacs said. “But shallow breathing, and not coughing, plus an upper respiratory
infection, plus the lowered immunity you have now anyhow, make it a possible complication. But
the antibiotics and the breathing exercises should take care of that. Okay?"

“Yeah,” Jim said. He coughed again, and closed his eyes. “Yeah, let’s do something about this
cough.”

“All right. Codeine and guaifenesin, coming right up.”

Two hours later, at a time of day that was approaching decent, Jim was feeling a little better. His cold
symptoms had become full blown, but the cough was better.

“I guess maybe I overdid it yesterday,” Jim admitted, once it was just him and Len in the room for a
while.

“Nobody’s saying that, Jim.”

“I am. I started to feel a little, I don’t know, not so great, yesterday afternoon, after Ronnie left. But I
just kept pushing through the day, because I was having such a good day. Guess maybe I learned a
lesson.” Jim blew his nose, and added the tissue to the pile on his lap.

“I think that’s a dangerous day—the day when you’re first really starting to feel better,” Len said.

Jim snorted. “Ronnie said the same thing. He kept tryin’ to get me to slow down, lie down for a
while. Said he did the same thing, the first day he was really feeling better. And that he felt like crap
the next day. And hell, he lost an entire body part! I just got burned, is all.”

Len frowned. “You know, he didn’t lose any organs. You lost a third of the largest organ in your
body. The one that keeps things in that are supposed to stay in, and keeps things out that are
supposed to stay out. I’m not tryin’ to give you an excuse for oneupmanship, but pretty much any
physician would say there’s no comparison, in the initial stages. Which I feel compelled to point out
you’re still in.”

“Yeah, yeah; all right. Anyhow. Subject change. Sort of. You know what Ronnie’s doing?”

Len shook his head. “No, what?”

“He’s going back to college in the fall! He did a couple years at the U of I before he went to the fire
academy, but he’s going back!”

“That’s terrific, Jim. For a while, he sounded like he was kind of at a loss for what to do with
himself.”

“Yeah.” Jim sighed. “Speaking of which. I’ve kinda been thinkin’ about some stuff.”

“About what you’re going to do?”

“Uh huh. I’m not gonna try to go back to the job, Bones.”

Len froze. He’d been assuming that Jim would do anything he could possibly do, put himself
through any rehab that would help, to be able to do the officers’ training on the next cycle.

“You’re not?” Len said, frowning.

“I’m not. I just …” Jim closed his eyes, which was his new way of looking away, since he couldn’t
yet move his neck comfortably.

“Just what, darlin’? It’s your choice; I’ll support you no matter what you choose.” Len caressed Jim’s
cheek with his gloved hand.

“I don’t ever want to be near a fire again, Bones. I just don’t. Maybe I could probably find some way to get past that fear, but to be honest, I don’t want to. The idea of gearing up and purposely going towards a fire, into a burning building? I … can’t do that anymore. I’m not that guy anymore.” He opened his eyes again, and took Len’s hand.

“I talked to Sylvia a lot, over the last couple days,” Jim continued. “It was … it was hard to admit I’m not that guy any more. But I’m not. I’m sorry.”

Len smiled, and shook his head. “You don’t have to worry about what I’m gonna think about that, Jim. You know I’ll support you, no matter what. But if you don’t wanna go back to that craziness, well, that’s fine with me. And it sure as hell doesn’t make you any less of a man in my book. I didn’t fall in love with you because you’re a kick-ass macho heroic fireman stud who looks hot in turnouts.”

“Smoking hot,” Jim said. “Last time I wore turnout gear, I was literally smoking.”

Len rolled his eyes. “You’re unbelievable, you know that?”

“Yep. But my point is: I honest to goodness thought about whether I wanted to try to go back. And once I got past the … I don’t know, the shame, I guess, of feeling like I was a weakling for saying I didn’t want to even try, I was fine with it.”

“You talk about that with Ronnie at all?” Len asked.

“Yeah. I was really glad he was there yesterday. Because he had the same thing, you know? He could’ve tried to requalify—there are actually a few career firefighters with prostheses of various kinds. But he went through the same thought process as I did. And we both thought about what we’d be putting our families through by trying to go back.”

“Yeah,” Len said, “your mom will be really relieved to hear your decision.”

Jim sighed. “I meant you, Bones.”

“Me?”

“No, the other Bones—see? The lady from that TV show is right behind you. Yes, you, you idiot.”

“Oh,” Len said. “Oh.” He frowned, as he considered what Jim had just said. “But Jim, if you’re not going to be happy doing something else, and you’re not trying to go back to the fire service because you think I—”

“Auuugh! Bones! Were you not listening to anything I just said? I decided not to go back, because it’s the best choice, for about a thousand reasons. And yes, you’re a big part of that. When I was lying there, under that bookcase, starting to cook, I thought, ‘I gotta get outta this. Gotta get back to Bones.’ I wasn’t thinking of my mother, or my brother, or the boys, or my car. It was you, Bones. Just you.”

Len blinked a few times, and then stood up, pushed his mask up, and kissed Jim, as thoroughly as he could given the situation. It was inadvisable, but necessary.

“Are you insane?” Jim said. “I’m sick! Lord only knows what I’ve got.”

“You’ve got me, is what you’ve got,” Len said. “Forever. Whether you like it or not.”
“And now you’ve got my cooties.”

Len gazed intensely at Jim.

“What, Bones?”

“Marry me,” Len said.

Jim blinked once, and again. “When?”

“As soon as we can get the paperwork done. Tomorrow. The next day.”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Len asked.

“Really,” Jim said. “Unless you didn’t mean it. ‘Cause you know, I understand that whole blurtin’ things out phenomenon.”

“Of course I meant it, you idiot.”

“Then yes, you cantankerous curmudgeon. As soon as possible.”

Len leaned in and pushed his mask up again, kissing Jim once more.

“Think they’ve got a honeymoon suite in this joint?” Jim asked.

Len smiled. “It’ll keep, sweetheart. It’ll keep.”

“Can you find out today what we need to do?”

“For sure. You know anyone who knows anyone?”

Jim laughed, and coughed, but he didn’t seem to care at the moment. “Of course I do. Try Steve at the Queen Diner, first of all. In fact,” Jim said, eyes widening, “holy shit, Bones! He did one of those crazy on-line ministry-of-whatever-the-fuck things, when some friends of his—two women—wanted to get married, right after that became legal in Iowa. Maybe he’s still got it. Would that be okay with you, or is that too freaky?”

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn, as long as it’s legal. Don’t know if I’ll be able to catch up with him today, though.”

“Doesn’t matter, ‘cause after all, tomorrow’s another day, Bones,” Jim said. “But I don’t feel a whole lot like Scarlett O’Hara, so let’s quit with that theme, all right?”

“Looks like you forgot how shitty you’re feeling, though. Anyhow I’ll ask at the county registrar, too, or whatever the hell we have here in Iowa.”

They sat there, grinning at each other. Len’s smile didn’t show under the mask, but his eyes said it all,

The door swung open, and one of the nurses came in. She looked at the two of them.

“Aren’t you supposed to be sick, and sad?” she asked Jim.

“Would you be sad, if you were marrying him?” Jim asked, pointing to Bones. “Hot damn, Kelly!
Me and Bones are getting married!"

“That’s terrific, Jim! Congratulations to both of you.” She handed Jim a tiny plastic cup with some pills in it, and a paper cup of water. “These are the antibiotics and the codeine for the cough. Hopefully you’ll be feeling better soon,” she said, frowning, “though it already looks like you’re doing better.”

“His fault,” Jim said, pointing to Len as he swallowed the pills.

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\textit{Day 14, early afternoon.}

“You’re awfully calm,” Pike said, pulling on the collar of his dress uniform, “considering you’re getting married in five minutes.”

“I guess I don’t really have any good reason to get worked up. If I can handle the last two weeks, I can handle saying ‘I do’ and getting a ring stuck on my finger by my absolute favorite person on the entire planet.”

Pike laughed. “All right, you got me there. But seriously, Len. I couldn’t be happier, for both of you. I mean, obviously, I wish this had never happened,” he said, gesturing at the hallway of the unit.

“That makes three of us,” Len said.

“But, it did happen. And he’s doing amazingly well. And he’s a lucky, lucky man, to have you.”

“I’m feeling pretty damned lucky now, myself,” Len said. He checked his reflection in the mirror, and was satisfied.

“All right,” Len said. “Let’s do this thing.”

There was a tap on the door of the unit’s family room.

“Come on in!” Len said.

Dr. Isaacs stuck his head in. “My goodness,” he said.

“Well, you know,” Len said.

“I do indeed,” Isaacs said. “So, are you doing the superstitious not-seeing-each-other-before-the-wedding thing?”

“No—I was just in Jim’s room five minutes ago. Why?”

“Come on back to his room with me for a minute,” Isaacs said. “I’ve got an early wedding present for both of you. I promise—you’ll want to see it right away.”

“Okay …” Len said. “This is mysterious.”

They entered Jim’s room.

“Dr. Isaacs has an early wedding present for us, that can’t wait,” Len said.

“Uh, okay,” Jim said.
Isaacs whipped out a piece of paper. “I’m thrilled to report,” he said, “that all of your cultures are negative. No infection. You’ll be out of here early next week, if things keep going the way they are.”

He handed the paper to Len, who looked it over.

“That’s really good news, Jim,” Len said. “It means whatever has been making you feel sick isn’t an infection in your wounds.”

“And … early next week? Like, I’ll be going home less than a week from now?” Jim said.

“Yes,” Dr. Isaacs said, smiling widely.

“But … but I can’t!” Jim blurted. “I’m not ready! I can’t take a shower! I can’t put my clothes on without help! I’ll … I’ll starve to death, naked and smelly!”

“Jim,” Len said calmly. “You won’t go home by yourself, remember? We’re both staying at the farmhouse with your mother until you’re ready to be on your own while I’m at work. And after that … well, we might even want to consider looking for a place together. Since we’ll be married, and all.”

“Think about how things were a week ago, Jim. This is the end of your second week here. You didn’t take your first steps until eight days ago. Six days ago, you were still barely moving your arms unless you had to. And now we’re constantly telling you to slow down, and you’re gesturing up a storm when you talk. Two days ago, you were sick as a dog, and today, sure, you’ve got the sniffles, but that’s all.”

“And I’m gettin’ married,” Jim added, calming a bit.

“And you’re getting married,” Dr. Isaacs said. “So: I apologize for any upset my news caused, but I wanted you to know, before you got hitched, that it looks like everything is fine.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Jim said. “And sorry about the freak-out.”

“You’re welcome, and don’t worry about it,” Dr. Isaacs said.

“Now that you’re done hyperventilating,” Len said, “how about if we get on with this show? And don’t keep our guests waiting.”

“All four of them,” Jim said. “But like we said—big party later this summer. Huge. Epic.”

“A party to be reckoned with,” Len said solemnly. He kissed Jim once more. “See you at the fake altar.”

“Cool.”

Five minutes later, Jim and Len stood facing each other in the family area, which they were allowed to hijack for the occasion. Chris Pike, Christine Chapel, Sam, and Winona stood in the center of the room, and Steve Runyon from the Queen Diner stood at one wall, facing everyone else.

“Winona, Sam, Christine, and Chris. Leonard and Jim have asked you to be their witnesses today as they join in marriage. Given the current circumstances, they asked me to keep it short and sweet, so I will. With emphasis on ‘sweet.’”

Steve looked at Jim and Leonard, who were facing each other and holding both each other’s hands, and continued.
“James and Leonard found each other by fortuitous accident, when Leonard landed in Iowa just over a year ago. Despite initially finding each other irritating as hell—and I heard this separately from each of them, so I’m not making any gaffes by revealing it—they quickly became fast friends, and eventually, something much more. They both also tell me that they have become better men through knowing the other, and anyone who knows either of them will agree with that.”

Steve turned to Jim. “Jim, you are about to become the husband to a man who is described by his friends and family as caring, kind, conscientious, sometimes cantankerous, highly intelligent, and fragile in his own way. Nurture and care for him as he will you. Allow yourself to be tempered by him, as he will by you. And for heaven’s sake, pay attention to what he says, because this man has one hell of a level head on his shoulders. It may be a challenge to keep up with him, on the nurturing end of things, but I know you’re up to it.”

This time, Steve looked at Len. “Len, you are about to become the husband to a man who is described by his friends and family as unbelievably energetic, passionate, smart—sometimes even a smart-ass—flexible, and fragile in his own way. Nurture and care for him as he will you. Allow yourself to be tempered by him, as he will by you. It may be a challenge to keep up with him, in many different ways, but I know you’re up to it.”

“And now you each have something to say to the other, if I’m not mistaken.”

Len nodded. “Jim, you’re the zest in my life. Your physical and mental energy and bravery astound me every day. You make the world a better place, through all the things you do, and I know you’ll continue with that passion in whatever comes next for you. You’ve let me look at myself in a whole new way, and I’m a better person for being with you. I love you like I’ve never loved before. Will you be my husband, through whatever life brings us?”

Jim beamed at him, his blue eyes shining with a kind of tears Len hadn’t seen recently. “I sure will, Bones.”

“This ring, just like our love for each other, has no end. Soon, it’ll be on your finger, but for now, this’ll have to do,” Len said, as he slipped a chain with Jim’s ring on it over Jim’s head, and let it rest gently on his neck.

Jim cleared his throat. “My turn. Bones, you keep me sane. You know what I need, even when I don’t. You’ve saved so many lives, and you’re gonna keep right on doing that. Mine was one of them—and I don’t just mean because of the last two weeks. I’m a way better man with you than I ever was before. In fact, I think I may be an adult now. I love you like I’ve never loved before. Will you be my husband, through whatever life brings us?”

“I will, Jim.”

“This ring, just like our love for each other, has no end. And you actually get to wear yours, you lucky dog,” Jim said, as he slipped the ring onto Len’s finger. The knuckle gave him some trouble, but it all worked out.

Steve spoke again. “Jim, Len, you are now officially and legally wed. You know what to do.”

Len and Jim had made a point of practicing this moment. Jim called holding Len a ‘range of motion exercise,’ and Len made sure he practiced multiple times a day. Len, in turn, practiced exactly where to put his hands, to hold Jim like he meant it, but without hurting him. The kiss went on just longer than propriety dictated, but nobody batted an eye.

When they finally parted, they didn’t even notice the applause and words from the other people in
the room with them. They pressed their foreheads together, and they ignored their tears.

“Darlin’, I love you so much,” Len said.

“Can’t live without you, Bones,” Jim whispered back.

After a few more seconds, they remembered they weren’t alone, and, holding hands, turned to their small audience, none of whom had particularly dry eyes themselves.

“Thanks, everyone, for doing us the honor of being here this afternoon,” Jim said. “And I hate to be a party pooper, but I’m feeling the need to be a patient again pretty soon. But before I go pass out, I have two pieces of good news. First, the blip the other day was just a cold. The cultures all came back negative—so no infection. Second, the doc said today that I can probably go home early next week.”

“So hold on to your hats, people,” Len said.

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Afternoon and evening visiting hours were a zoo. Gaila, Sulu, Chekov, Scotty, Spock, and Cupcake all descended before their night shift began. The rest of Jim’s family came that evening, as did several people from the Emergency Medicine department, Len’s landlord Mrs. Petty, and various off-duty EMS personnel from the department. The Cozarts came, with baby Jillian, who was just starting to crawl, and was highly irritated that she wasn’t allowed to do so at the hospital.

Len could see Jim was completely exhausted, and kept everyone’s visits short. By eight o’clock, when visiting hours officially ended, Jim was nearly asleep.

“Guess what, darlin’?” Len said, leaning with his head next to Jim’s on the pillow.

“What, Bones?”

“Special treat. They’re bringing in a cot, and I get to stay over tonight. Just this once.”

“Awesome. I’m not gonna be very good company, though.”

“Sure you are. Plus, through whatever life brings us, right?”

Jim smiled. “Yeah.”

Dr. Isaacs came in just after visiting hours were over, to check on Jim, and an orderly rolled the cot in just as Isaacs entered.

“This is so against regulations I don’t even know what to say,” Dr. Isaacs said, “except please, please, don’t sue us. And for the love of god, keep it rated PG. I don’t want to hear about any nurses walking in on anything, all right?”


“What, Jim?” Isaacs asked.

“Okay, uh, wow. You’d think after everything that’s happened, I wouldn’t be embarrassed by anything anymore. But, let’s put it this way. The equipment seems to be out of service, and I’m gettin’ a little worried about that.”

“I think I know what you’re getting at, but could you be a little more specific?” Isaacs said.
“Nothin’s happening. No matter what I think about. And believe me, there’s plenty to think about,” Jim said, waggling his eyebrows at Len, who face-palmed. “No morning wood, either, the whole time I’ve been here. Is that … normal?”

Isaacs nodded. “To be honest, I’d have been very startled to hear otherwise. Your body has other things to deal with now, and it knows it. Give it time.”

“Well, I suck at that,” Jim said. “Anyhow, how much time?”

“I would say a good benchmark would be once you’ve been bandage-free for a week or two. So, another few weeks.”

Jim scowled. “Terrific.”

“It’ll keep, Jim,” Len said.

“Yeah, yeah. Baby steps. Fuck.”

“Please try not to worry, Jim. You’re doing so incredibly well. All your bodily functions should return to normal in time. And on that note, I’m going to head out for the night. Congratulations to you both. And thank you for giving us all something to be very, very happy about today.”

“Likewise, Dr. Isaacs,” Len said fervently. “Likewise.”

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Late that night, a night-shift nurse came in to check Jim’s vitals and give him another dose of antibiotics. She’d been warned, of course, about the overnight guest, and tried not to wake him as she gently woke Jim up.

“Meds and vitals, Jim,” the nurse said.

“Sure,” Jim said, only half awake.

The nurse took the measurements she needed, and wrote down the information. She watched Jim take his medication.

“Congratulations,” she whispered.

“Thanks,” Jim whispered back.

The nurse left the room. Len opened his eyes, and blinked up at Jim.

“Pretending, Bones?”

“Pretty much.”

Len stood up, and leaned over Jim’s bed. “Some wedding night, huh?” He kissed Jim, who reached up and put a hand on the back of his neck.

“C’mere, Bones,” Jim said, pulling Len towards him. He deepened the kiss, holding Len’s face with both hands.

“Hmm,” Jim said, as Len pulled back to look at him. “Think you’ll fit up here with me?”

Len backed away from Jim and looked down at him, appalled. “No! I’ll hurt you, for sure! Or I’ll fall
off, or … or something bad will happen.”


Jim was still holding on to Len’s hand, tightly. He took the hand—the left one—and brought it to his lips, and kissed the shiny new platinum band that adorned its ring finger.

“It was a good day, Bones.”

“Yeah. It sure was. And we’ll have a lot more.”

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Day 18

“Today’s the day, Jim,” Sylvia Barnard said, as she sat with Jim first thing in the morning on his eighteenth day at the University of Iowa Hospital’s burn center. “How are you feeling about getting out of here?”

The last few days of Jim’s hospital stay had been devoted to getting him, Leonard, and Winona ready for Jim’s discharge. They’d learned how to help him with the things he still needed help with, and how to assist with his range-of-motion exercises. They’d learned how to change the simpler dressings that Jim had, though he would still need to return to the hospital every other day to have the ones over the grafts changed.

“To be honest,” Jim said, “I’m anxious about how much stress it’s going to be on Bones and my mom to deal with me for the next few weeks.”

“Do you anticipate giving them a hard time?” Sylvia asked.

“No … I’m over that sort of thing. Learned a few lessons the hard way.”

“But?” Sylvia probed.

“But I don’t like being weak, okay? I don’t like being dependent. I’m afraid I’ll be a burden. I mean, Bones only has two weeks before he has to start his residency, and he’s gonna hafta spend that whole time being nursemaid to a sack of bones with only half its skin still on it.”

Sylvia looked at Jim over the tops of her glasses.

“Oh, don’t do that look,” Jim said. “Please. Just … say what you have to say.”

“All right,” Sylvia said. “If I were to pick up the phone right now, and call your husband, and tell him what you just said, what do you think he’d say to you?”

“That’s easy,” Jim said. “Watch this.” He scowled furiously. “’Damn it, Jim. I don’t know where you get those damned fool notions of yours, but you can take them and shove them up your pretty ass.’ Something like that,” he concluded, minus the Southern accent and the scowl.

“All right,” Sylvia said. “So. In a few months, you’ll be able to do anything you need to do, physically. And he’ll be working eighty hours a week downstairs. Are you gonna be annoyed that he’s such a burden?”

“Oh, of course not!” Jim said, and looked mildly offended. “And okay, okay! I see your point.”

They sat there for another few moments. Jim played with a fidget-toy on the table.
“I guess I’m thinking about a lot of stuff, and some of it isn’t just about going home.”

“Okay. Anything you want to talk about?” Sylvia asked.

Jim put the toy down, and looked up at Sylvia. “When my friend Ronnie—my friend from the academy, who lost his leg last fall—when he had his accident, it seemed like there was nobody he could talk to about what happened, and how … scared he was … who would really understand.”

“Do you feel like that, too? Tell the truth—I won’t be offended.”

“Kind of. Except for Ronnie. He got it. Because he’d been in pretty much the same place as me. And, because he’s had the same kinds of work experiences as me. Even when firefighters don’t get hurt, we see people on the worst days of their lives every single time we pull a shift. Day in, day out, there’s fear, and pain, and loss, and grief. We see so much shit it’s unbelievable.”

“I can’t even imagine,” Sylvia said.

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “You, personally, probably can, given what you’ve seen here. But here’s my point. If you’re a soldier, and you get hurt, you’re at a military hospital, and there are people there who did the same kinds of jobs as you did; saw the same kinds of horrors. But consider this: law enforcement officers, firefighters, EMS workers—a lot of us end up getting hurt—physically or emotionally—but there’s no special hospital for us. Nobody who’s really gonna get it.”

“I think you’re probably right about that, Jim. While I’ve seen plenty of things, it’s not the same as having done the same kind of job as you, and been in the same kinds of horrifying situations as you. I’ve seen other people’s pain, but I haven’t had my own of that nature.”

“Exactly!” Jim said. “That’s exactly right. So … here’s my question for you. I’ve gotta do something with myself now. Sure, I could get a medical retirement in a flash. But I can’t sit around on my ass for the rest of my life. It’d kill me, and plus, I’d drive Bones stark raving mad. So what I’d like your opinion on, is, do you think I could do the kind of job you do, except kind of … specialized, for people like me, or Ronnie, or cops, or all the EMTs who get injured by their patients? Could I be any good at that?”

“Jim, I think if that’s what you want to do, you should go for it. It’s a narrow enough field that you’re talking about that you probably couldn’t limit yourself just to that clientèle, but there’s a tremendous need for men who can help other men. You’d certainly have the street cred to be accepted by many male trauma survivors. And I do think you’d be good at it. In fact, I can’t say who, obviously, but another patient here told me they’d rather have their sessions with you than with me, because, and I quote, ‘Jim gets the guy shit.’”

“Yeah?” Jim said.

“Yeah.”

“So, what do I have to do? What kind of, like, degree do I have to get? I mean, I’m gonna sign up for college anyhow—if they’ll let me in, that is,” Jim said, frowning.

“Why on earth do you think you wouldn’t be able to get into college?” Sylvia said. “You’re obviously extremely smart, and you work hard.”

“Uh, I barely made it through high school. I have a juvenile record, too. I never took any of the precollege classes or any of those tests that the college-bound kids were taking. I wasn’t considered ‘college material.’”
“Well, let’s see what we can do about that, why don’t we? The University of Iowa would likely be interested in helping a non-traditional student with your career background. Would you mind if I made some phone calls, to see who you should talk to?”

“You’d do that?” Jim asked.

“Of course. I just asked you if I could, so of course I would,” Sylvia said, smiling wryly.

“Oh. Duh. Yeah. I’d appreciate that. I don’t even know where to start,” he admitted. “College seems like a foreign country. Anyhow—what kind of major do you do, to, you know, work with people?”

“Well, my degree is in social work. That’s a graduate degree—about two years after a four-year undergraduate degree program.”

“Six years?!”

“That’s about right.”

“I’ll do it in five,” Jim said.

“Somehow, it wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if you did.”

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“This is ridiculous,” Jim said, as a nurse pushed his wheelchair to the front entrance.

“It’s the rule,” the nurse said. “But I kind of agree with you,” she said, quietly enough that only he could hear. “I mean, we’re telling people they’re well enough to go home, and then we make them take a wheelchair to the car?”

Len was waiting in the pick-up/drop-off area. He’d already loaded Jim’s few things into the trunk.

“You ready to blow this joint?” he said, opening the passenger’s-side door for Jim.

“You better believe it.”

Jim got in the car. “Thanks again,” he said to the nurse. He’d already said his big goodbyes at the ‘graduation’ they had for him just before he got in the wheelchair. And that’s what it had felt like—graduating from one part of his life, into a new one. What Ronnie called ‘the new normal.’

Len pulled away from the hospital grounds, and Jim promptly fell asleep. Fifteen minutes later, they were at his mother’s house. George and Peter ran screaming up to the car.

“Oh, crap, Bones. I’m not sure I have the energy to be Uncle Sunshine,” Jim said, watching the boys jump up and down outside the car.

“I talked about that with them,” Len said. “Lemme get out first, and I’ll remind them.”

The boys had been to see Jim at the hospital, once he was allowed to leave his room and go to the family room, to which other patients’ sounds of distress wouldn’t carry. But Len knew that the boys would think that Jim was ‘all better’ once he got home, and that was definitely not the case. He and Winona and Sam had explained to them that their uncle would still be tired and hurting a lot when he
came home. The boys’ response was ‘that’s not fair!’ But the adults made it clear that they would need to be extremely gentle with their uncle for quite some time. ‘Uncle Jungle Gym’ would certainly make a reappearance, but not for a while.

Len got out of the car, and was hugged by both boys as he knelt down to talk to them at their height. George and Peter nodded solemnly, and calmed themselves down, but still managed to look like they were about to explode. Jim wondered what was going on when Len put his finger to his lips, and Peter covered his mouth to hide some giggles.

Len opened Jim’s door.

“It’s safe to come out now,” he said. “Remember, no hugs yet.”

“But we can high five until the cows come home,” Jim said. “Uh, Bones, can you help me out here?”

Len helped Jim get out of the car. He was still stiff, and still had trouble moving his neck, so getting out of a low sedan wasn’t easy. Jim exchanged a frantic round of loud high-fives with the boys, and each of them took one of his hands on the way up to the house.

“Now, what I want to know is, what’s the big secret?” Jim said.

“What do you mean, Uncle Jim?” George said. Peter snorted with suppressed giggles.

Jim looked at Len. “Help me out, here, Bones.”

Len’s eyes gleamed. “Not a chance. You’ll figure it out soon enough.”

Winona met them halfway to the house. She nearly threw her arms around Jim, but he instinctively put his arms up in self-defense.

“Uh, sorry, Mom,” he said.

“My fault,” Winona said, laughing ruefully.

“Soon enough,” Jim said.

“Not for me,” Len grumbled.

Jim leaned over to him and talked right in his ear, so his nephews and his mother couldn’t hear. “You can grab my ass, though. And anything else you want.”


“Well, let’s not stand around out here, boys,” Winona said.

“Yeah!” Peter blurted. “You have to come in right now, Uncle Jim! Right now!”

“All right,” Jim laughed. “I’m dying to see what the big secret is.”

“It’s actually a very little secret,” Winona said. “But yes, do come in.”

They all went in the house, and as soon as the door was closed, Winona said, “Let her rip, boys.”

The boys whooped to the closed door of the study, and flung it open. A tiny ball of golden fluff zipped out of the room, and dashed straight towards the new arrivals, yipping wildly.
“Jim, meet Maisy,” Len said. “She’s ten weeks old today. Half Golden Retriever who got off her leash, and half bad dog in the park. She’s yours.”

Jim knelt stiffly down to the floor, holding his hands out for inspection. Maisy licked his hands, and sniffed carefully at the bandages around his wrists.

“She’s … Bones, you got me a puppy?” Jim said, twisting at the waist so he could look up. Len knelt down to save him the effort. Neither of them noticed as Winona quietly went up the stairs, carrying Jim’s bag.

“Yeah. I thought you might want a little company while I’m working eighty-hour weeks. I cleared it with your landlord, and Mrs. Petty.”

Jim petted the wriggling ball of fluff. “Bones, she’s perfect. Absolutely perfect.” He gently picked her up, and she licked some moisture off his cheeks that was definitely not tears. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Len added his kiss to the doggy kisses Maisy was administering.

“How long have you been keeping this little secret?”

“Oh, just over a week. Ronnie and I found her for you, just before that day he visited. We both about crapped ourselves when you up and said you’d like to get a dog sometime, since he’d just come from dropping her off here.”

“She’s just perfect,” Jim repeated. He set her gently down on the floor, and stood up. He wobbled a bit, and Len grabbed him by the waist.

“Okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. Just stood up too fast. And, I hate to be a party pooper, but I’m completely beat.”

“Let’s go upstairs, then, to our room.”

“Our room?” Jim said, raising his eyebrows.

“Yeah. C’mon.”

Len followed Jim up the stairs.

“Uh, what room is ‘our room?’” Jim asked, when they got to the top of the stairs.

“Your old room.”

“That? That’s been a storage room for the last eight years,” Jim said.

“Well, it’ll store us for a little while. Go on, open the door.”

Jim pushed the door open. The room looked nothing like the box room he’d been used to. It had been freshly painted, and there was a brand new king-sized bed in the center of the outside wall.

“It’s one of those mattresses where you can adjust the firmness by adding or removing air,” Len said. “Each side is independent. Dr. Isaacs recommended it. You can have your side as soft as you want, without me killing my back on my side. Here’s your remote control, and there’s mine.”

“But how …?”
“Remember how we took up a collection for Ronnie, and he got living room furniture that wasn’t so saggy he couldn’t get up out of it without a forklift?”

Jim nodded.

“Well, Cap and, of all people, Jablonski, took up a collection. I asked Dr. Isaacs what would be the most useful thing to have, and he recommended this. It’ll go with us to wherever we end up.”

“We totally need to move in together,” Jim said, starting to strip his clothes off.

“We totally do,” Len said. “And can I help you with that?”

“Uh huh.”

Len helped Jim strip down to boxers and the oversized t-shirt he always wore over his ever-shrinking bandages. Jim carefully laid himself down on his side of the bed, holding the remote.

“Remote controlled bed,” Jim said. “Very science-fictiony.”

“Nah,” Len said. “That’d be a bed that automatically detects what you need, and adjusts itself. And had built-in cooling and heating. And a sex mode, where you could get it to do interesting things.”

“I think you’ve been hanging out with me too much,” Jim said.

“Not nearly enough, darlin’. Not nearly enough.”

Jim adjusted his side of the bed to a very soft setting, and rolled to his right side, facing Len.

“Missed you, Bones.”

Len lay on his side, and pressed in as close to Jim as he possibly could, and they tangled their limbs together and kissed until Jim’s eyes drooped shut. Len carefully curled himself around Jim’s form, and held him gently as he drifted off to sleep.

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Day 22

Jim’s phone rang in the middle of the afternoon, after he’d woken up from a nap following taking Maisy out for a short walk. Len was out doing errands, and Winona was at the farm office, so Jim was on his own for a while.

“Hello?”

“Jim? This is Sylvia Barnard.”

“Oh, hi.”

“Hi. How are you doing?”

“Really well. I was in for a dressing change yesterday, but you weren’t around. The dressings are getting smaller and smaller. Only a little while longer, and then I’ll be out of ‘em, just in time for the heat of the summer.”

“That’s excellent, Jim. Anyhow, I’m calling because I got you the name of the right person to contact at the university. She’s in charge of recruiting and retaining non-traditional students. I explained your
situation, and she’d be delighted to help out. She remembers hearing about you on the news the day after the fire where you got hurt.”

“Awesome! Thanks a lot. I, uh, hope I’m not like a celebrity or anything,” Jim said nervously.

“I doubt it. Though you could be if you wanted to, I suppose. There were plenty of reporters calling the hospital after you were admitted, and we of course told them where they could go. But if you wanted to give them your story, I’m sure—”

“No thanks,” Jim said. “I’ll stick to my plan, I think.”

Sylvia passed along the contact information, and Jim promised to call that afternoon. He did, and the application packet was on its way in the mail by the end of the business day.

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Day 30, 0645.

“Bones!” Jim whispered. “Bones, wake up!”

“Huh? Wha? You okay?”

“Better than okay. I just heard my mom leave to go down to the cow barn, and I’ve got somethin’ over here with your name written aaaaaall over it.” Jim took Len’s hand, and slid it down his abdomen, and further.

“Mmm,” Len said, chuckling.

“Equipment’s back in service.”

“I’d say so,” Len said, manually appreciating said equipment. “Whaddaya say we test it out?”

“That’s kinda what I’m hoping,” Jim said. “And, well, like you said, this is a test. This is only a test. So, you know.”

“I bet we can have ourselves a nice time regardless of what happens with the equipment. So what’s your pleasure, darlin’?” Len said, already helping Jim remove his shorts.

“Anything that doesn’t involve pounding me into the mattress, or me doing a lot of work, unfortunately,” Jim said.

“Well, that still leaves lots of territory. Lots,” Len said. “You okay lyin’ down, ‘s long as I don’t squish you?”

“Sure am, Bones. ‘Fraid you’re gonna hafta do most of the work, though.”

“Now, you know I don’t mind that,” Len said. “But here’s one thing. Can we take your shirt off? Or is that too much?”

“Long as we’re careful,” Jim said.

“Careful’s my new middle name,” Len said, as he helped Jim sit up, and pulled the t-shirt off in the way that was most comfortable for Jim. He helped Jim lie back down again, and looked down at him, from his position above him, where he straddled Jim without resting any weight on his body.

“C’mon, Bones; get naked,” Jim said. “Wanna see you, feel all of you.”
“Yes, sir,” Len said, whipping off his shorts and tossing them aside. He carefully kept his weight off Jim’s upper body as he leaned down and brushed the fronts of their bodies together, and started kissing Jim’s neck.

Jim gasped at the contact, and Len pulled back. “Too much?” Len whispered.

“No, fuck no, Bones. It’s just … I think I’ve forgotten what it feels like to feel good.”

“Let’s make sure you remember, then. You tell me if it’s too much, sweetheart.”

“Ah, Bones,” Jim sighed. He trailed his hands all over Leonard’s body, and was delighted to find that his range of motion in his shoulders was up to the task. He shivered and groaned softly as Len covered the entire front of his body with hands, lips, and tongue.

Len relished the feeling of Jim’s hands on his body, anywhere and everywhere. He moved his body so their cocks brushed together, and Jim cried out and clutched at Len’s shoulders, which is where his hands happened to be at the time.

“Fuck, Bones!”

“Too much?”

“Fuck no. I … uh, I’ve probably kinda got a hair trigger at this point.”

Len stroked himself to catch up to where Jim seemed to be.

“Bones, lemme do that,” Jim demanded.

Len acquiesced, letting Jim’s hand take the place of his own too-familiar right hand. It didn’t take much for Len to feel like he, too, could come any second, so he stilled Jim’s hand, and leaned down to kiss him again, supporting his weight with one trembling arm, and holding their cocks together with his other hand.

He sat back up again, resting his weight on his knees, and worked their cocks together in one hand. Jim’s hands were clenched in the sheets, and he cried out at every pull.

“Bones … Bones … I’m coming, I …” Jim let out a long groan as he climaxed. Len slowly stroked Jim’s softening penis with one hand, while continuing to fist his with the other hand, and he soon followed Jim in orgasm. He remembered just in time not to collapse his weight onto Jim, instead collapsing onto his side.

“Love you Bones; love you, love you,” Jim whispered. “Missed you so much.”

“Me too, Jim.” They lay there, face to face, side by side, until Len started to feel itchy.

“Be right back,” he said, throwing a robe on and exiting the room. He returned with two cool, damp washcloths, and cleaned both of them up.

“We still got time for a little snuggling, right?” Jim said.

“Sure thing. I’m not goin’ anywhere till your appointment at the hospital this afternoon, and neither are you. Except to take Maisy out.”

They lay together for a long, long time, touching as much as they could. After a while, Jim’s stomach started growling.
“Guess we oughta get up, huh?”

“Mm hm,” Len said. They sat up, and got dressed.

“You know what, Bones?”

“What?”

“I think everything’s gonna be okay. I think we’re gonna be okay.” Jim paused, hesitant to take the next step. But he took it. “I think I’m gonna be okay.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Once a fire is put out, there’s still a lot more work to be done. ‘Salvage’ is the process of removing or covering things in the structure that are still usable, to protect them from further damage from water or debris. ‘Overhaul’ is the process of making sure there are no remaining hot-spots in the structure that could re-kind the fire. This often requires pulling down ceilings, pulling plaster or sheetrock off walls, and other actions that may appear to damage the structure further, but prevent the ultimate damage of a rekindled fire.
A/N: A fire is considered to be under control when it is shrinking rather than growing, and is anticipated to be put out without complications, and without exposures being endangered. The fire is not yet out at this point, but the water supply, manpower, and equipment are all expected to be adequate to extinguish the fire. (Since this is the last chapter, I put the note at the beginning this time, so the end is really the end.)

Chapter 22: Under Control

Day 36: Monday.

Len went with Jim to his outpatient appointment, one last time before he started his residency. Jim was allowed to drive again, now that his neck mobility had improved. Today they were keeping their fingers crossed that the remaining bandages would be off for good. The compression garments he’d been measured for when he left the hospital had arrived, and he’d likely start wearing those instead.

The nurses removed the bandages, and Dr. Isaacs came in to check things out.

“Everything looks terrific, Jim,” he said. “Really, really good. So no more dressings. Let’s have a look at the compression garment, and see how that fits.”

Jim sighed, and started putting the tight-fitting neoprene garment on. It fit snugly, as it was meant to, and was very, very warm.

“Good,” Isaacs said, checking the fit. “Twenty-three hours a day, seven days a week. I know it’s a drag, but they really work to keep scars as flat as possible. You don’t look like you’re developing any hypertrophic scarring, but you’ll still have better results if you wear these as directed. Some people also find the garments help with itching.”

“I don’t know how I’ll be able to tell if it helps with itching or not, if I’m wearing it all the time,” Jim grumbled.

“Good point,” Isaacs said. “It is your choice, though, whether or not you wear it. I strongly recommend it, though.”

“Yeah, I know. I will,” Jim said.

“We’ll get air-conditioning,” Len promised. “Anything that makes it easier.”

“Jim, I’ll see you again in a month for a re-check, so you’ll only be coming up here for PT, now. They’ll check your compression garment for fit, and get it re-made as needed.”

“Like, if I start pumping iron again and get really huge,” Jim said.

“Or, if you keep eating like you’re hypermetabolic, and get a different kind of huge,” Len said.

“Yeah, yeah; I know. Back on the straight and narrow,” Jim said.
“So: see you in a month, Jim. And Len, I’ll see you around the hospital. You start on Wednesday, correct?”

“That’s right,” Len said. “I still can’t quite believe it.”

“Well, any time you want to do a couple weeks up here, you’re more than welcome. We do sometimes get ED residents up here for a rotation, now and then. It’s a refreshing change from the plastic surgeons.”

“Thanks,” Len said. “But to be honest, that would feel a little too close to home at the moment. After a while, though, definitely. You do incredible work.”

“Thanks. We’d love to have you. You’d obviously have some insights that most other residents wouldn’t have.”

“I wish I didn’t have them,” Len said. “But I do. So maybe I’ll put them to use.”

“Please do.” Isaacs turned to Jim. “Jim, I can’t tell you how pleased I am with how well you’ve recovered. I have a feeling you’re going to go on to do great things. If you’d keep in touch, I’d be grateful. I can understand if, once you’re done with your rehab, you never wanted to set foot here again, but you can email any time.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Jim promised. “Sylvia’s helping me try to get into college for the fall, so I’ll for sure let you know what happens with that. And, you’re right—I kind of need a break from being around here for awhile. But, if you ever have someone who, I dunno, might need to talk with someone who’s been where they’ve been, I’m open to that. Not now,” he amended, “but maybe in a couple months.”

“Thank you, Jim. That’s very generous. Those sorts of things come up a lot, actually. Let us know when you’re ready, and I’m sure we’ll have some fellows who will want to talk with you.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know.”

“Oh—one last thing, Jim,” Dr. Isaacs said. “I see you’re still wearing your wedding ring around your neck. But you haven’t had any swelling in your hands in the last three times you’ve been here, so you can put it on.”

“Really?” Jim said.

“Really. Your fingers, like many men’s, have large knuckles, but are thinner between the knuckles. So if it goes over the knuckle, you’re fine. And on that note, I’ll leave you two for now. See you in a month, Jim.” Isaacs shook hands with both of them, and left the room.

“Bones?” Jim said.

“Yeah, darlin’,” Bones said. “Can I put it on your finger?”

“Please,” Jim whispered. He unfastened the chain, and handed it and the ring to Len.

Len took Jim’s hand, and cleared his throat. He looked Jim in the eye. “This ring,” he said, “just like our love for each other, has no end.” He pushed the ring onto Jim’s finger, and worked it over the knuckle without a great struggle. He kissed Jim’s hand, and then pulled him close to kiss him for real. He slid his hands around Jim’s waist, as high as he thought he could without touching areas that were still too sensitive, but his fingers encountered the flesh-toned neoprene before they got to any of the too-fragile areas. He forced himself to continue moving his hands up, ever so slightly, touching
what was not-Jim somehow even more than the bandages had been. He let his hands fall back down to the waistband of Jim’s shorts, and still kissing him, traced the patch of skin between the bottom of the neoprene and the top of the khaki shorts.

Jim pulled back, and reached across to take Len’s left hand with his own. He held their two hands next to each other, and looked at the rings together.

“Thanks, Bones,” Jim said. “Thanks for having this idea, of us getting hitched. Thanks for marrying me, and … everything. I love you.”

“Love you too, Jim. And that ring looks good on you.”

“They both look good on both of us,” Jim said.

“Yeah, they do,” Len said. “A matched set.”

Jim put his shirt back on over the compression garment. He and Len said goodbye to the nurses, since his physical therapy would be in the outpatient clinic from now on. They left the hospital together. Neither of them was comfortable walking around holding hands, but they walked so close to each other their shoulders bumped at every step.

“Straight to Home Depot, Bones. Because although I don’t wanna be a whiner, I need that air conditioner right the fuck now.”

“You got it, darlin’.”

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Day 39, evening.

Jim’s phone chimed at eight in the evening to herald a text from Len.

[On my way home. Feed me.]

Jim made sandwiches and a spinach salad, and was waiting in the living room of the farmhouse when Len came in.

“Bones! Dr. McCoy! How was your first day?”

“Predictably boring. Mostly orientation, but then we got to hang around the ED later. One of the guys is a real go-getter, and he’s staying late. But frankly, I’m already pretty familiar with the ED environment, so here I am.”

They sat at the table to eat, and Jim quizzed Len some more.

“And the other residents—what are they like?”

“Fresh out of med school, every single one of ‘em. There’s five of us—two women and three men. One of the women is a couple years older, but nobody’s my age. They all seem like a reasonable lot, though I’m a little worried that the go-getter guy might be annoying. Oh—and the attending who we were shadowing this evening was Dr. Palmer—you probably don’t remember him, but he saw you in the ED when you first came in.”

Jim shook his head. “That’s all kind of fuzzy.”

“Anyhow, he took me aside and asked after you. He’s glad to hear you’re doing well.”
“Tell him thanks,” Jim said. “And, I know you’re not gonna bring it up, so I’ll ask. Did you do like you said you were gonna? Are you out to everyone?”

“Yeah,” Len said.

“And?”

Len sighed. “Everyone was totally blasé about it, except go-getter-guy. Abe Daly—guess I might as well start using people’s names. He went on and on about how some of his best friends are gay, et cetera. But whatever. Nobody’s gonna give me a hard time, at least.”

“Good,” Jim said, nodding. “So anyhow, what’s next?”

“We get our shift schedule tomorrow. Everyone’s afraid of the whole night-shift thing, but that’s also old hat to me,” Len said around a bite of sandwich. He frowned, and continued. “Though now, I’ll be leavin’ you alone in our bed. And I don’t like that, much.”

“Well, I’ll just keep your shift schedule until school starts. I mean, if I get in. How ‘bout that?”

“Seriously?” Len said.

“Sure, why not? I mean, I’m used to that sort of thing. And it’ll mean I get to see you.”

“Can I tell you again how much I love you?” Len said.

“Sure. In fact,” Jim said, leering at Len, “how tired are you?”

“Not that tired,” Len said. “In fact, suddenly, I’ve gotten a tremendous second wind for some reason.”

“Good. Mom’s at a movie with her friends, so we’ve got the whole house to ourselves.”

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Day 45

Len was on day shifts this week, so Jim took Maisy for a long walk in the morning, and then stopped by his apartment. It was time, he thought, for him and Bones to get out of the farmhouse. Which meant they really needed to find a place for the two of them to live. Neither one of their places was entirely suitable in the long run, and they both hated moving, so they didn’t want to move until they found something that seemed like it could be relatively permanent. So Jim decided he’d start making some phone calls, and looking on Craigslist, so perhaps they could be situated by the fall.

He picked up the pile of mail that was under the slot in the front door, and went through it while Maisy ran through the apartment, sniffing everything. Most of the mail was junk, but there was one fat manila envelope.

It was from the University of Iowa.

“Fat envelopes are good,” he reminded himself as he tore the flap open anxiously.

He was in. He’d been assigned an advisor in the Psychology department. Classes started in five weeks; orientation in four.

Jim took a deep breath, and started reading about his future.
“Okay, Bones. Which one did you like best?” Jim asked. They’d finished a day with a realtor, looking at houses in their price range. Their mortgage co-signed by Susannah McCoy, had been approved, and they were ready to settle down. Len hadn’t wanted to accept his mother’s offer to co-sign on the loan, but Jim easily convinced him he was being ridiculous. Between Jim’s fire department pension, and Len’s salary, it would be a tight squeeze, but they both knew it was absurd not to accept Susannah’s help, and it might actually damage Len’s new relationship with her to decline.

“I bet you know,” Len said. He moved a toy spaceship off the coffee table of the living room in the farmhouse, and kicked back on the sofa.

“The one with the holly bushes in the front, and the good kitchen,” Jim said, sitting down right next to Len. “I hope. Because that was my favorite, too.”

“That’s the one,” Len said, grinning.

“It doesn’t hurt that the price was just knocked down. Yay for us for buying after all the new professors and shit have already settled in.” Maisy’s wet nose nudged Jim’s hand, and Jim reached down to scoop her up. She settled half on Jim’s lap, and half on Len’s, and promptly fell asleep.

“Yay indeed. But I’m afraid we’re boring the dog,” Len said.

“She won’t be bored by the yard,” Jim said. “Already fenced in, so we don’t have to deal with that.”

“True. She’ll be happy there. We’ll be happy there,” Len added. “Let’s call Marlene right away, and ask her what kind of offer we should make.”

“Okay.”

Two days later, after an offer, a counteroffer, and second offer from Len and Jim, the deal was made. They’d close just after Jim started school, and move in during his first weekend off from classes. They went out for an early dinner, to celebrate before Len had to work a night shift at the ED.

“Bones, I’m so stoked!” Jim said, ignoring his steak for the moment. “We’re gonna be homeowners! Can you believe it? You and me!”

“I can believe it,” Len said. “Can you believe you’re settling down?”

Jim scoffed, and finally cut a piece from his steak. “C’mon, Bones. I settled down like six months ago. And then I settled down even more, sixty-six days ago.”

Len shook his head, and speared an olive from his pasta dish. “I can’t believe it was only two months. It seems like, I don’t know, two years.”

“Or two seconds. I’m still kind of overwhelmed sometimes. Ronnie said the same thing—that there were times that he would just have to stop what he was doing, and sit down, and contemplate the total change in his life, but also think about how many things hadn’t changed. And one day, he realized he wasn’t keeping track of how long it had been any more, since That Day,” Jim said. “I’m not there yet.”

“You will be,” Len said. “I bet starting school will help.”
“I sure as hell hope so,” Jim said. “I’m going out of my mind. Helping at the farm is out of the question, what with having to not get overheated. And there’s only so much I can do around the house.”

“You sure learned to cook, though,” Len said.

“I’ll be your house-husband,” Jim said. “Meet you at the door in a sexy outfit when you come home from a long day at the hospital. Might not always get twenty-three hours of pressure garment wearing, but I kinda don’t think that’ll matter all that much.”

“You don’t get that many hours now,” Len reminded him.

“But it’s so hot,” Jim whined. “And I can’t help if I’m super horny all the time, now that I’m feeling better. Making up for lost time, you know?”

“And then some,” Len said, “but I’m not complainin’. No sir, not me.”

Jim scowled suddenly. “Shoot. I hope we don’t have to, like, schedule things, when I start school.”

“We’ll work it out,” Len said. “I’m sure.”

“We better.”

“We will.”

“Or I’ll drop out so fast your head will spin.”

“No,” Len said calmly, “you won’t.”

Jim sighed. “No, you’re right. I won’t.”

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Day 88, Tuesday morning.

“Jim, a word,” Professor Stewart said, when class was dismissed.

This course, a freshman writing seminar where the topics they’d write about all had to do with psychology, was the only small class Jim was in, and by far his favorite. All freshmen had to take a writing seminar each semester, but there was a wide range of topics to choose from. There were only thirty students in the class, so the professor was getting to know each of them individually.

“Sure, Professor,” Jim said. He adjusted his cap, picked up his books, and put them in his bag, a backpack still being completely out of the question.

The professor was sixtyish, and had been teaching for years. Jim had selected the class when he read that one of Professor Stewart’s research interests was about psychological consequences of mass disasters.

Jim approached the front of the room with some trepidation, as he’d frequently been in trouble in high school. He’d been on his best behavior, and couldn’t imagine what he’d done to offend, but the look on Stewart’s face suggested he’d done something.

“Jim, I don’t claim to understand the fashion of youth today, but in many circles, it’s not considered appropriate to wear a baseball cap indoors. I would appreciate it if you’d remove it during class. It may not distract the other students, but I find myself noticing it constantly.”
“Oh,” Jim said flatly. He’d taken to wearing the ball cap, brim facing back and down, to cover the scarred and bald patch on the back of his head, and the odd-looking graft on his neck, after hearing ‘ohmygod’ and ‘oh man’ one too many times.

“Sorry,” Jim said. He took the cap off, and ran his fingers through his hair. He stood there for a moment, debating whether it was appropriate to say anything else. He decided on the truth—just as he’d do with, say, an unfamiliar fire captain or chief.

“The thing is, sir, I wear it so I won’t distract the students behind me. I was burned in a fire a few months ago, and—well, let me just show you.”

He turned and showed the professor his scars, and turned back around and pulled the collar of his shirt aside so he could also show him the otherwise-hidden pressure garment.

“I also have to wear this thing, which is really hot and uncomfortable. So I apologize if I fidget a lot; I’m just really uncomfortable a lot of the time. Especially in this room, because there’s no air-conditioning.” He looked at the professor, hoping like crazy he hadn’t just overstepped his bounds, or violated one of the many unwritten rules he seemed to come across all the time.

“I see,” Professor Stewart said. “I’m sorry. I had no idea. Please—wear the hat if it makes you feel more comfortable.”

“Well, like I said, I just wear it so I won’t distract the kids behind me. But, you know, maybe in a class this size, I could just, I don’t know, say something to everyone about what happened, and then not wear it.”

“I’d encourage that,” Stewart said. “Not because I don’t want you wearing the hat—but because it might be good for you, and for them. But it’s completely up to you.”

“All right,” Jim said, nodding. “I’ll say something on Thursday at the beginning of class.”

“Good. Can I ask—and feel free to tell me to mind my own business—how this happened?”

“No big secret, Professor. I was a firefighter. I was inside a burning building, and things went wrong. What happened sure wasn’t lucky, but since it did, I’m lucky to be alive, and in as good shape as I’m in.”

“I’m sorry,” Stewart said. “That’s terrible. I’m wondering: does what happened have any bearing on your choice of this class?”

Jim nodded, which he was finally able to do again. “You bet. There’s still some time before I have to decide for sure, but I’m hoping to go into social work. Work with emergency services people.”

“That’s a terrific goal, Jim,” Dr. Stewart said. “Say, do you have a class now, or could you walk with me to my office?”

“Sure. No more classes till two o’clock.”

On the way to the office, Dr. Stewart asked Jim some more about his experiences as a firefighter, and what made him think about going into social work. Dr. Stewart told Jim about some of his own research, and before Jim knew it, they were in Dr. Stewart’s office.

“I have a proposal for you, Jim,” Dr. Stewart said. “I need an undergraduate research assistant. That kind of work is usually only given to seniors, and occasionally juniors, but I think your background, and interests, and maturity, would make you a perfect candidate for the job. If I can get permission to
hire a freshman, would you be interested? It would be about ten hours a week, with the option of more hours during school breaks, if your family commitments would allow that.”

Jim’s jaw dropped. “Seriously? I’d definitely be interested. And I’m married to an emergency medicine resident, who works eighty hours a week, so yeah, I’ve got plenty of time.”

“Good,” Dr. Stewart said. “Excellent. I’ll find out as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Dr. Stewart. I really appreciate it. I think I’d really enjoy that a lot.”

“So would I, Jim. See you Thursday.”

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The next afternoon, Jim got an email from Dr. Stewart. He’d gotten permission to hire Jim as his undergraduate research assistant, beginning the following Monday. Jim arranged to meet with Dr. Stewart after class again on Thursday, to work out the details. He swelled with pride as he called Leonard to tell him the news.

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On Thursday, Jim walked into class, still wearing his cap. Something was different in the room, but it took him a minute to realize that it was the new window-unit air conditioner humming away in the background. Jim stopped at the front of the classroom.

Jim gestured to the air conditioner. “Dr. Stewart—did you …”

Stewart nodded, smiling.

“Thanks,” Jim said simply. “That’ll really help me out.”

“You’re welcome. Did you want to say something to the class today?”

Jim nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I can’t go the rest of my life wearing a ball cap, so I might as well get used to explaining to people, right?”

Jim took his seat, and when everyone was seated, Dr. Stewart made an announcement.

“Jim would like to say something before we get started,” he said simply.

Jim went up to the front of the room.

“So, I’m Jim the old guy,” he said, and the eighteen-year-olds all tittered. “I’m getting a late start because I’m having an unscheduled career change. I have some things I’m trying to get used to, these days, and I’m hoping maybe you’ll all help me out with one of them. See,” he said, taking his cap off, “I wear this because I got burned in a fire three months ago, and I’m … having trouble getting used to people seeing the scars. So I’m gonna quit wearing the hat. I got burned the worst on the back of my neck and head. The weird looking skin there is a graft. And there’s a bald patch on the back of my head. I guess I’ll just show you,” Jim said, turning around. He heard a couple intakes of breath, but that was all. He turned back around.

“And you might also see the compression garment peeking out under my shirt—it’s like a wet-suit, and it helps keeps the scars flat as they grow,” he said, pulling the neck of his t-shirt down one shoulder so the beige neoprene showed. “But—anyhow, just ask me questions if you want, after class. And thanks for helping me get used to this. That’s all.”
“Thank you, Jim, both for your frankness and for your service to our community as a firefighter. And now, let’s move on to talking about structuring a persuasive essay.”

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Day ??

Jim rushed to meet Ronnie Cozart for lunch. They had lunch together every Wednesday and Friday, and it was always enjoyable and helpful for both of them. They had no overlap in any of their studies, partly because Ronnie had already done two years of college coursework, but also because Ronnie was studying physics and chemistry.

It was nearly fall, and some of the leaves were just starting to turn. More importantly, for both Ronnie and Jim, the weather was getting cooler. For Jim, that meant that the compression garment was less unbearable, and for Ronnie, it meant less sweat and irritation in the socket of his prosthesis.

Jim found Ronnie at their usual table, along with one other fellow.

“Jim—hey. This is my friend Alex,” Ronnie said. “He’s the grad T.A. in the materials science class I’m taking.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jim said. “I’ll be right back—gotta get some chow.” Jim looked at the selections, listened to his inner Bones lecture him about fat and cholesterol, and chose the turkey sandwich and some fresh fruit. He sat back down at the table.

“I was just telling Alex—you know what today is?” Ronnie said.

Jim shook his head. “No idea. First day of fall?”

“Not exactly,” Ronnie said. “It’s one year, for me, since That Day.”

“Wow,” Jim said. “A year. It doesn’t seem like that long. Or, I dunno, maybe it seems like longer. I guess that depends on how you look at it.”

“That’s for sure,” Ronnie said.

“Ronnie was telling me about your accident,” Alex said. “How long ago was it?”

“It was …” Jim frowned, and put his sandwich down. “Huh. I used to know, every day, exactly how many days it was. It was at the beginning of June. But I guess I’ve lost track of how many days.” Jim stared off into space for a few seconds, and then pulled himself back to reality. “Anyhow, I’m mostly fine, now.”

“Good for you, Jim,” Ronnie said quietly.


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*Mid October: morning.*

Len had a day off, and it was the university’s fall break, so he and Jim had a rare full day to spend together. Jim quietly got up just before seven to let Maisy out into the yard, then went to the bathroom himself and tiptoed back to the bedroom, to find Len wide awake and waiting for him, naked, in their bed.
“Jim,” Len said, smiling at him with a glint Jim knew and appreciated. “I hope you’re planning on getting back in here.” Len patted the sheets next to him.

“You do, huh?” Jim said, half of his mouth quirking upwards. “Why? You got something planned?”

“Thought we could strip each other down and fuck each other into next week. Unless you’re too busy. Studying, and such,” Len said, licking his lower lip in a way that made Jim’s toes curl.

“Lemme check my calendar,” Jim said. He stripped his boxers off, and turned around and picked his phone up off the low dresser, leaning forwards, and swaying his hips back and forth. He was pretty sure he could feel Len eye-fucking him, so he teased a little more before he turned back around.

“As it turns out, I’m clear till six, when I’ve got a dinner date with my husband,” Jim said. “The only thing I have to study today is anatomy. Oh, and sexual response of the human male.”

“As it turns out, I’m also free,” Len said. “Now. You gonna get over here, or am I gonna have to come get you?”

“I’ll make it easy on you, old man,” Jim said, climbing back onto the bed. He backed himself against the wall at the head of the bed, and unzipped his pressure garment to peel it off. “Might not get my twenty-three hours today,” he said, tossing the jacket-like object aside. He sat cross-legged, with his back against the wall.

“That’d be a terrible, terrible shame,” Len said, maneuvering himself so he was in front of Jim. “But I’m a doctor, so I can write you an excuse note,” he said, tracing with his index finger along the line the lower border of the garment left along Jim’s abdomen.

Len burrowed his face into Jim’s chest, inhaling the concentrated scent of Jim-ness that the pressure garment kept in all night. The faint rubbery scent that the garment left behind when it was new was long gone, and just Jim was left. Hands at Jim’s hips, he tugged gently, to try to get Jim away from the wall.

“C’mon, last I checked, that wall didn’t need to be held up. C’mon down here with me,” Len said. The bedclothes swished gently as he moved them aside.

Jim inched away from the wall, facing Len, and, when there was room, he lay on his back, pulling Len down on top of him. Len inhaled again, dragging his nose and slightly open lips lightly across Jim’s chest, raising goosebumps on both of their bodies with the light contact. He flicked one nipple with his tongue, and pulled back and blew on it gently, to watch it form a peak, and then found it again with his tongue. He treated its neighbor the same way, and enjoyed Jim’s quiet sighs of pleasure as he worked his lips up to his clavicle, over to his suprasternal notch, up past his prominent thyroid cartilage, and then along the angle of his jaw to the shell of his ear.

In the last couple of months, they’d found that Len could finally rest his whole weight on Jim without causing discomfort, so he did so, and they both vocalized their pleasure at the full frontal contact.

As Len was hoping he would, Jim turned his neck and lifted his chin to expose more to Len’s attentions. With Jim’s neck turned and extended, Len could see the line that marked the beginning of the full-thickness skin graft that covered the worst burns. He traced that line with lips and tongue, and felt Jim stiffen and go still.

“Bones … don’t. Please.” Jim turned his head back again.

Len pushed up on his hands and knees, and closed his eyes, sighing. He’d heeded Jim’s nonverbal
cues, for the last several months, and avoided paying any sensual attention to any of his scarred areas, but he couldn’t let them fall into that habit. He couldn’t.

“Jim … I miss you, damn it,” he said softly. “I miss the half of you that I’m not allowed to look at, not allowed to touch, not allowed to love.”

“Yeah, well, half of me—or, more specifically, thirty percent of me—isn’t very lovable anymore,” Jim said, turning away. “I don’t want you to see the scars. I don’t want you to remember what happened. I don’t want to remember what happened. So why can’t you just be satisfied with my front half, and forget about the rest? That’s where most of the good stuff is anyhow.”


“Bones, no! That’s not what I mean, and you know it. That’s not how we love each other—not just that way.”

“Fine, Jim—then please understand this: I love all of you. All of you. And we’re not gonna forget what happened—neither one of us. I sure as hell wish it never happened—God, I do, Jim, more than anything—but it did.” Len paused, and collected his thoughts, because he wanted to get this right. “When I see your scars, do you know what I think?”

Jim shook his head.

“All I think, when I see them, is how god-damned lucky I am to have you with me still. How precious life is, and—” he had to swallow hard, past the aching lump in his throat, to continue—“how all I want to do, for the rest of my life, is hold you, and love you. All of you.”

Jim covered his face with his hands. “But Bones … it’s so … ugly. I’m so ugly.”

“Stop it, Jim! You’re not ugly. Every bit of you is gorgeous. Hell, I’ve probably spent more time looking at your scars than you have, since I don’t need two mirrors to see ‘em. I bet you think I try not to look, don’t you? When we’re in the shower, or when I’m rubbing the lotion in, when you won’t even let me have the lights on. But I look, Jim. I look as hard as I can. I know your scars, just like I know the rest of you. Like, I bet you didn’t know there’s this one spot, just over your left shoulder blade, that’s a heart shape. It’s fading, now, but I bet it’ll always be there. Did you ever notice that spot?”

Jim shook his head. “Why would you even look? It’s so … awful.”

“Because it’s you, Jim. I love everything about you. Everything. And damn it, I’m gonna prove to you I don’t find anything about you ugly at all. Prove to you that you’re not ugly.”

“How?” Jim asked. “How can you prove the opposite of what I believe? The opposite of what I know? How can you prove the opposite of the truth?”

Len closed his eyes again, in pain for himself, but mostly for Jim.

“Roll over, on your belly. Please?” he asked.

“Bones …” Jim whispered, whimpered. “I can’t.”

“I’m begging you, sweetheart,” Len said. “Can you hear how my voice sounds? I’m desperate for you. I want to make you feel good, show you how much I love you—all of you. Please, darlin’.
Please let me. Please let me try. If turns out to be too much, right now, just tell me when to stop, but we’ll at least have gotten somewhere we haven’t been yet. So please, I’m begging you. Let me prove to you how gorgeous and perfect you are.”

Jim was silent for a long, long minute. Len could hear his breathing—in, out; in, out; over and over. He was reminded, for a moment, of the regular and too-even sound of the ventilator, on Jim’s first day in the burn unit. He quickly put that thought from his mind, and concentrated on the sound of Jim’s normal, natural breathing. Len tasted acid, and his insides quaked at the thought of Jim refusing him this request—this plea.

“Close the shades,” Jim said, almost so quietly that Len couldn’t hear him, “and leave the lights out. And I’ll try. I’ll try, Bones. That’s all I can promise.”

“That’s all I need, sweetheart.” Len closed all the shades, and returned to the bed. It was dim in the room, but Len knew his eyes would adjust to the light level. And it wasn’t about his eyes, anyhow. It was about Jim. And Jim could have it as dark as he wanted, and this would still work. Could still work.

Len took a calming breath as he heard Jim’s body sliding across the cool cotton sheets. He carefully climbed onto the foot of the bed, letting Jim get used to this position that now felt so unnatural for him. He breathed out, slowly, as he finally saw the entirety of Jim’s posterior surface, laid out for him, only him.

“Oh, Jim,” he murmured. “My love, my husband, my life.”

He placed his hands gently on the backs of Jim’s calves. They were narrower than they’d been last spring, before, but still strong and elegant. He traced the shallow valley demarcating the division of the two heads of the gastrocnemius muscle, feeling the flat, hard surface with his palm. Jim’s body was taut like a piano string, waiting for the hammer to fall and send it into jangling vibration.

“Your legs are so strong,” Len said, gently running his palms over the backs of Jim’s calves, the hollows behind his knees. “I remember that time in the PT gym, just before you got out, when you were on the leg-press machine. Remember that? That poor girl who was working with you completely lost it when you pressed the whole stack of weights like it wasn’t even there. And she made you quit, because you ‘shouldn’t be able to do that.’” Len chuckled at the memory of the expression on the young woman’s face.

“You remember that? It was the day before you got out. Three days after we got married.” He traced the cool metal of his ring over the back of Jim’s knee, and felt him shiver.

“I remember,” Jim said.

Len’s hands moved up past Jim’s knees, to the backs of his thighs. Jim’s arms were at his sides, his hands locked against his thighs like a soldier standing straight, stiff as rigor mortis. Len covered Jim’s wire-tense hands with his own, and heard the gentle tap of their rings contacting each other. He straddled Jim’s lower legs, careful not to put any weight on his extended knees, and grasped Jim’s hands gently but firmly.

“Try to let go, darlin’,” Len said. “Let me move your arms a little.”

“Oh, Jim,” Len said. He could do it—he knew he could handle Len touching and moving his arms. His arms, at least till they reached the shoulder joint, were fine.

Len felt Jim’s whole body relax, ever so slightly, and he slid Jim’s hands up towards his shoulders,
so he was lying in a more natural, more relaxed position.

“That’s good, Jim. That’s good. How are you feelin’?”

“I feel … exposed,” Jim said.

“An honest answer,” Len said. His hands were resting on the lightly-furred backs of Jim’s thighs—a comfortable place for both him and Jim at the moment. He slid his palms upwards, fingers cupping the twin swells of Jim’s buttocks, thumbs stroking the creases between his cheeks and thighs.

“Now, how can you possibly say all the good stuff is on the front?” Len asked, teasing with his light touch. He let the drawl creep farther into his voice than usual, because he knew Jim liked it. “This is for certain my second-favorite part of your anatomy,” Len said, hands gently caressing and kneading, thumbs marking the boundary creases they found. “Round, and firm, and succulent, with just the right amount of give. I could say more, if you want.” Len said, easing his knees farther up the bed, to extend his reach, letting his voice distract Jim from his feeling of exposure.

“Say more, Bones. I love to hear you talk.”

“It’s not time for dirty talk, though, darlin’. We’ll do that later, if you want.”

“I want, Bones. You know I always want,” Jim said, his voice no longer quite so harsh and strained.

“I do too, sweetheart. But now it’s time to talk about other things. Like how perfectly my hands fit here,” he said, shifting upwards slightly, so his fingers turned outwards to Jim’s hips, and his thumbs dipped into the dimples of his sacral bone. “Like your ass was molded on my hands, for a perfect fit.”

“Or maybe your hands were molded on my ass,” Jim said. Len could hear that most of the tension was gone from Jim’s voice, and the lump in own his throat grew again.

“Maybe,” he said huskily. “But it sure does feel good, putting my hands on you.”

“Yeah. It does,” Jim said.

Len slid his outward-turned hands up further, to Jim’s narrow waist. He traced the remnants of the wrinkly lines left by a night’s sleep on top of the gathered elastic of his boxers, and then moved upwards to trace the faint line left behind by the bottom of the pressure garment. Jim didn’t protest that Len’s hands were moving upwards, so he kept going.

He’d been allowed to touch, occasionally, in the last couple months, with fingertips and open hands, so he knew what kind of movement and pressure Jim could tolerate on his new, fragile skin.

He decided to take a risk—but that was the name of the game. He said what was on his mind.

“Here’s where the bottom edge of the burns were. You don’t have any scarring here; it’s smooth, and pink, and soft, like baby Jamie’s skin.” Len gently caressed Jim’s smooth lower back, over his kidneys, and the bottom of his rib cage. He didn’t mention how, at the first dressing change, even this relatively mildly burned area was raw and weeping, with most of the epidermal layer dead and gone, debrided away in the first surgery. It was astounding to Len how it was so perfect, now.

“Perfect,” he said, echoing his own thoughts.

He slid his hands up further, into the areas that were definitely scarred, but hadn’t needed grafts. There were patches of perfect, fragile, pink skin, with islands of redder or whiter scar tissue, tiny
areas of deeper burning, where grafts hadn’t been needed because they would heal from the outside in. He felt Jim tense slightly, as his hands entered this more sensitive territory.

Len decided not to say anything, and let his actions speak. He leaned down and kissed the lowest of the scarred areas, ever so lightly, and skirted his lips across to another island of redness. He pulled back for a moment, and put his palms over the unburnt oval area in the center of Jim’s back where his carbon-fiber SCBA tank had shielded him from the worst of the heat.

“Your air tank saved you, in so many ways,” Len said, stroking the one unscathed patch on Jim’s upper back.

He slowly slid his hands outward, over Jim’s shoulder blades. The skin was whorled with scars, random patterns of furrows and raised areas, that no scientist yet understood the exact reasons for.

“These scars, Jim. They’re here. It’s true. But to me, they’re not ugly. When I see them, when I feel them, all I think about is how close I came to losing you, and how grateful I am that I didn’t. I think about how amazing your body is, how these areas healed themselves, with just the aid and protection of some creams and bandages. You healed these parts, yourself, and that’s beautiful to me, Jim. It’s strength, and perfection, and beauty.”

Jim listened to Len’s voice, and to his words, and slowly, slowly, the truth of them started to sink in. Slowly, slowly, Len’s gentle hands, sliding across the scars, massaged the truth into Jim’s body, into his skin, into his soul.

Jim jumped as an unexpected sensation hit him out of the blue. He couldn’t identify it—couldn’t say whether it was hot, or cold, or … anything. It was electric. It happened again, and this time, on the undamaged skin where his air tank had protected him, where the nerves were undamaged, he could tell it was wet. At the same time as he processed that sensory information, he heard Len’s choked-back sob.

“You’re so perfect, Jim. So strong and beautiful, and I nearly lost you,” Len said. “God, Jim. I wouldn’t have made it.”

“Bones, shhh. It’s all right. We’re here, together, right? We’re okay,” Jim said. “I’m okay.”

Len swallowed hard, tasting the metallic taste of suppressed tears, and briefly removed one hand from Jim’s body to swipe his forearm across his face. “I feel exposed, now, too.”

“We’re safe,” Jim said. “We’re safe, naked and exposed as we are, Bones, because it’s us. Right?”

“Yes,” Len said. They both understood that something had shifted, something had changed in the balance of what was happening. Something good.

“Say more, Bones,” Jim said.

Len moved his hands even further up, into the areas on each side of Jim’s upper back, where Dr. Isaacs had used thin layers of skin, harvested from Jim’s upper thigh, to graft over the deepest burns, after the ones on his neck. The donor skin was run through a machine to perforate it, to allow it to stretch to several times its usual surface area, so skin taken from one rectangular patch on Jim’s upper thigh covered two wide swaths across his upper back. They later learned that those two areas were where the seams had popped on his turnout gear, leaving him exposed to the intense heat in the room.
“Here’s where the grafts are,” Len said.

“Looks like lizard skin,” Jim said. “Those’re the worst parts of all.”

“Not to me,” Len said. “To me, it looks like the pattern of shadows you see when light comes through a window screen on a spring day. Or, maybe like the patterns of the powdery feathers of a moth’s wings. Delicate, ethereal, beautiful, but also functional. And it’s such an amazing thing that your body could do—using skin from your leg to cover those terrible wounds, and help heal them. Your body, helping itself. It’s perfect, Jim.”

Jim felt Len’s fingers sliding delicately over the grafted areas. The sensation was confusing, because the nerves were damaged in unpredictable patterns, and his brain couldn’t quite work out where Len’s fingers and palms really were. It wasn’t unpleasant, though—just different.

He was perfectly able, however, to process that Len had shifted further up his body again, and was now straddling his rear. He could feel Len’s flaccid penis nestled up against him, which another time, given the fact that they were naked and in bed, might have bothered him, but he understood that their experience right now was sensual, not sexual—a difference that Jim hadn’t fathomed until he’d spent several months with Len.

All his senses were heightened. He could hear his own pulse, and feel every square inch of the front of his body pressed into the bed. He imagined he could even hear Len’s fingers traveling across his skin, but decided his brain was playing tricks on him, turning sensation into sound. He could smell his own scent, mingled with his husband’s, and tasted the memory of ten thousand kisses pressed to his lips. His brain was playing tricks on him, for sure, because he was convinced he could see Len’s intense expression, his perpetually-flared nostrils that always made him look turned on, the parallel wrinkles between his brows from a lifetime of disapproving scowls, his lush lips that Jim suddenly yearned to suckle at, bite delicately. Later.

“Bones,” Jim said softly.

“Too much?” Len asked.

“No, it’s … no. It’s a lot. But it’s not too much.”

“That’s good, darlin’.”

Len took a deep breath as he slid just one hand up to the area on Jim’s neck and lower scalp, where the wound had required a full-thickness graft taken from his abdomen, where only a nearly-invisible straight line remained. He knew Jim could only feel the edges of the graft, since nerves hadn’t yet grown into the middle sections, and knew that Jim despised the bald spot over his occipital protuberance, which would eventually be cosmetically revised to give him a more normal hairline.

He let his hand rest on the back of Jim’s neck, without moving it at all.

“It’s all right, Bones,” Jim said, sliding his right hand around to cover Len’s hand on the back of his neck.

“I’ve always loved your neck,” Len said, and Jim knew it was true—Len always went straight for his neck when they got physical, almost vampire-like in his attention to the area.

“And I’ve always loved your belly,” he continued. He slid his hand away, and Jim let his hand fall back to the cool sheet. “Now I can kiss them both at the same time,” Len said, as he folded himself over Jim’s body to gently nuzzle the periphery of the grafted area.
Jim unexpectedly laughed, breaking the solemnity of the mood. “Bones, that’s so gross!”

“It’s not gross,” Len said, his breath and lips tickling Jim’s hairline as he traced the grafted area. “It’s amazing. Astounding.”

Jim relaxed again, and stayed relaxed as Len retraced every square inch of his back with his fingers. He felt himself melting into the bed, wondering when he’d end up in a puddle on the floor under the bed, as Len gradually replaced his fingers with his lips, kissing the uneven topography of his healing back.

“How are you feeling now, Jim?” Len asked, after an unidentifiable length of time had passed. It could’ve been two minutes, or half an hour, or two hours—Jim had no idea.

“Good,” Jim said. “You’re making me feel good, Bones.”

“Can I turn the lights up, darlin’?”

Jim tensed again, and Len felt it.

“It’s okay, Jim. Whatever you like.”

“Not yet, Bones. Maybe soon. But I’m not quite ready for that yet,” he said quietly.

“That’s all right. At your own pace, sugar.”

“But keep pushing me, a little more each day, Bones,” Jim said, after another moment. “I need it. Just a little—like this morning. You know how hard you can push.”

“All right,” Len said. “I can do that.”

“Thanks,” Jim said. “I love you a whole lot, Bones.”

“Me too, Jim. More every day, if that’s even possible.”

Len let his hands rest on Jim’s shoulders, relishing in being allowed to touch Jim fully again. He knew they weren’t done, that things weren’t completely fixed. But they were better.

“I gotta get off my knees, Jim. And I gotta pee somethin’ fierce.”

“’kay,” Jim said.

Jim felt a sudden sense of loss as Leonard’s body moved away from his, and immediately knew he needed to fill the void as soon as possible. He heard one of Len’s knees crack as he got out of bed, and listened to the gentle padding of his feet as he went into the bathroom. He grinned as he overheard Len’s ‘oh thank god,’ and the racehorse-worthy length of time he spent relieving himself. After the flush and the running of water in the sink, all was silent for a few seconds, and Jim got impatient.

“I sure as hell hope you’re coming back here, because I still don’t need to study,” he shouted into the dim room, in the general direction of the bathroom.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Len’s voice appeared right in his ear.

“That’s good, because I do have some other things on my mind, sugar.”

Jim rolled to his back again, wondering how the hell Len had gotten around to his side of the bed
without Jim’s noticing, but quickly put any thoughts of supernatural powers out of his mind when his husband pinned him to the bed.

“Bones, you mean business,” Jim said appreciatively, pulling Len’s weight onto him.

“You up for business?”

Jim responded by flipping them over, so he looked down at Len’s hooded hazel eyes. Len reached up to touch Jim’s cheek, and Jim could smell the hand-soap from the bathroom.

“Fuck yes, Bones.”

Len immediately found himself being ravished, and he readily surrendered to Jim’s need. He was sure Jim had somehow grown another mouth, and two more pairs of hands, because they were everywhere, all at once, overwhelming him with several times Jim’s normal intensity, which was overpowering enough. He heard someone breathing hard, and couldn’t tell if it was himself or Jim. He heard someone making sounds that were half-gasp, half-moan, and Len knew he was making those sounds when Jim’s mouth covered his, and he could suddenly hear his own sounds amplified inside his head.

Jim’s mouth left his, and dragged down his chest, and kept going. Every neuron in Len’s body seemingly fired at once when Jim’s lips closed over the head of his cock. He could feel the vibrations of Jim’s hum of satisfaction, all the way to the tips of his toes at one extreme, and his scalp at the other. He clutched at handfuls of the sheets, to try to keep himself from grabbing Jim’s head and yanking it towards him, just to get more, more, more of the heat and suction and wetness and and “Jesus Christ, Jim!” he couldn’t help shouting, as Jim’s finger, which he’d somehow managed to lube up, found its way inside, and stroked his prostate before he even knew what the hell was happening.

He knew he was lost, done for, a goner, even before Jim slid a second finger in with the first, and how the hell he’d gotten hold of the lube was still a mystery beyond reckoning. He writhed and moaned unabashedly, as Jim worked him open at the same time as he did magical things with his mouth and his other hand.

After a few minutes, Len was holding on by a thin thread, when Jim popped his mouth off Len’s cock, and pounced upwards to kiss him deeply.

“Now, now!” Len groaned into Jim’s kiss.

“Now?” Jim said, his cock poised teasingly at Leonard’s entrance.

Len was so undone he couldn’t even think of an appropriate obscenity, so instead, he grabbed Jim’s ass and pulled him in as hard as he could. “Now, you fucking nnggggghh!” Len panted at the intensity of the pleasure-pain of Jim’s hard and fast entrance, which he had begged for and gotten in spades.

Jim held still with precise control, quivering but otherwise not moving a muscle as Len adjusted.

“Now,” Len gasped again, still at a loss for other words, and felt his breath leave him as Jim pulled out most of the way, grabbed Len’s leg and hoisted it over his shoulder, and thrust back in again. The new angle let Jim’s cock brush over Len’s prostate in both directions, wrecking him further than he’d ever thought he could go. He locked his eyes onto Jim’s as a lifeline to the world, and an incredibly short—or was it long?—time later, he fell off the precipice Jim had brought him to, and groaned out his lover’s name as he came, with seizure-like intensity. His vision was just returning
when Jim suddenly went still.

“Bones,” he groaned, as his eyes rolled back, and a pained expression washed over his face while his hips stuttered and his muscles clenched, until everything let go, and he collapsed on to Len.

Len stroked Jim’s back as they came down, with firm pressure from flat hands, since he knew Jim’s sensitive new skin would be easily overstimulated by a light touch right now. As they both ran out of energy, he rested his hands over Jim’s shoulder blades, and delighted in Jim’s acceptance of that touch.

Jim kissed Len sleepily, one more time, before he rolled off, reaching into the nightstand to find some wet wipes so they could clean up without moving. He tossed the used wipes aside, thanking modern consumer innovations, and cuddled in next to Len, who was already half asleep.

“Love you, darlin’,” Len slurred.

“Love you,” Jim said.

With Len’s arm stretched up Jim’s back, and his hand resting on the back of his neck, they fell asleep.

~!~!~

Six years later.

Jim tore down the stairs and burst through the first-floor stairwell door, scrambling to not be any later for his lunch date with Leonard. He skidded into the cafeteria, and searched the room for his husband. He found his dark head hunched down over a table in the corner, and forced himself to slow down as he approached.

“Sorry, Bones; sorry sorry sorry I’m so fucking late,” Jim said.

Leonard arched an eyebrow at him. “Do I look concerned?”

“Uh—I guess not. Should I be offended that you’re not concerned?”

“Not unless that gets you off, for some reason. On second thought, let’s just say ‘no,’ you shouldn’t be offended. Because I know how hospital life is.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “My last session ran way over. It’s a guy who really shouldn’t be getting discharged just yet, but you know the system—they practically have to crash and burn before they get what they really need. So his wife’s a wreck, and I felt like a total ass that I couldn’t do anything other than explain the system.”

Len nodded. “I do know the system, and I know how much we both hate that aspect of it. Reactive, rather than proactive. And I also know how much you hate things that are stupid.”

“You said it, Bones.”

Len looked at the emptiness in front of Jim. “You planning on eating, as long as you’re down here?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I’ll be right back.”

Len watched Jim as he proceeded through the cafeteria line, chuckling to himself as Jim looked longingly at the short-order grill, but passed it by. It had been an adjustment for the two of them to be working at the same hospital, where Jim was finishing his first year of employment, as a social
worker on the physical and medical rehab unit, and Len was now an attending physician in the ED. Jim returned with his sandwich, fruit, and iced tea. “How’s your day been?”

“Slow—it’s usually slow for the first half of the day shift. You know—the frequent fliers aren’t up yet, kids are in school and not falling out of trees, and so on. How about you?”

“Not so great. We lost a patient last night, who nobody expected to lose. Blood clot, they think—guy had multiple fractures from a car wreck, and was just starting to get up and around again. And then my last session.” Jim shook his head. “Anyhow—let’s talk about something else. Like tonight. Where are we going, anyhow?”

Len smiled. “I told you, it’s a secret. You’ll see when we get there.”

“Aw, c’mon, Bones! Gimme a hint! Just a teensy, weensy little—”

“I swear, sometimes I really, really wonder, Jim,” Len said, scowling fondly.

Jim’s phone buzzed, marching a few inches across the table. He looked at the caller ID. “Huh. From somewhere in the hospital. I better pick up.” He put the phone to his ear, and pressed his index finger against his other ear to block out the noise of the cafeteria.

“Jim Kirk,” he said.

“Jim? This is Mary Hendricks.”

“My boss,” Jim mouthed silently to Len.

“Oh, hi, boss. What’s going on?”

“Sorry to interrupt your lunch break, but I just got word that there was a serious fire, with multiple injuries, in Des Moines. They’re sending our burn unit two burn patients—both firefighters. Dr. Isaacs asked if I would lend you to him for these particular patients. I said I thought it would be a perfect idea, but that I’d check with you first. If you want to do it, I’ll free up your schedule so you can spend as much time as is needed at the burn unit.”

“Absolutely,” Jim said instantly. “I’ll absolutely do that.”

“Excellent, Jim. The burn unit usually likes to have social workers with more experience, because it’s such a tough job, but everyone here knows perfectly well that your life experiences are no match for several more years of social work experience, for these two patients.”

“I … I appreciate your confidence.”

“Sylvia Barnard can help you with anything specific you need, but we all agreed you’d be the best person to work with these guys and their families.”

“Thank you,” Jim said. “I’ll do my best.”

“We know you will. They’re being stabilized at the hospital in Des Moines, but at least one is nearly ready for transfer, so expect the first patient around four this afternoon, if that’s okay for your schedule.”

Jim glanced at Bones. “I’ll make it okay,” he said.

“Thank you. After your next appointment, your schedule is cleared for the rest of the day, so you can
touch base with Sylvia. Let me know how things are going, okay?”

“I will.”

The call ended, and Len raised his brows enquiringly.

“We’re getting two firefighters from Des Moines in the burn unit. I’m assigned to them,” Jim said. “They’re coming tonight—so, sorry about our date, but I’m gonna hafta cancel.”

Len shook his head. “That’s no problem, Jim. And it’s a perfect idea. They’ve really got their heads on straight, putting you on those cases. You’ll do great. I can’t imagine a better person for the job. Those guys and their families will be lucky to have you.”

“I hope so, Bones. I sure as hell hope so.”

Jim finished his lunch hastily, and saw his next client, doing his utmost to keep his attention on the individual in front of him instead of on the clients who were not yet even at this hospital. At three o’clock, he finished his session notes for the day, shut down his computer, and went up two flights of stairs to the floor that housed the burn unit.

He stood outside the double doors, and took a minute to remind himself of what he’d see, hear, and smell when he went through the doors. He reminded himself that although he’d been an informal visitor, for a few burn patients from time to time, this would be different.

This was his new life. His new normal. His new way to fight fire.

Jim pushed the doors open, and went in.

THE END.

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