

From The Heart

Icabu

Dick Hammer pulled into the small parking lot of LACoFD Station 94. This out-of-the-way brush station was his home away from home. Dick's heart was heavy with the decision he'd finally made. For four years he parked his truck in the same spot. For four years he stood before the same crew. But, even out here in the desert, change is inevitable.

Dick passed his engineer, Mitch Sommers, who was leaning against the big red rig sipping a steaming cup of coffee. Dick felt his engineer's eyes bore into him as he entered his office. *They know today is the day.*

Dick motioned for Mitch to come in to the office; watching the engineer's slow approach. *He looks sure that I'm going... wish I was.*

"What's up, Cap?" Mitch sipped at his coffee.

Dick gave his engineer a knowing glance. *You know damn well 'What's up'.* "Tell the guys I'll talk to them later this morning." Dick shuffled half a dozen sheets of paper around on his desk to find the duty roster. "Get the morning details going. I've got matters to see to here." He handed the clipboard to Mitch. "Assemble the guys at the table in forty-five minutes or so." He held on to the clipboard for an extra moment, giving Mitch a thankful nod.

"Sure, Cap," Mitch answered with a return nod.

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Mitch heard scurrying feet and the scuffing of chairs as he entered the kitchen. He eyed the anxious faces of the men sitting nervously around the table. His coffee cup tapped on the table as he released his grip on it. The silent spell was broken.

"What did Cap say?"

"Is he leaving? Did he tell ya?"

"Wha'd he decide?"

Mitch backed up a couple of steps at the rush of questions. He held up his hands to quiet the onslaught. When silence returned, Mitch pulled the clipboard from under his arm. A grin quirked the corners of his mouth, "Chuck, latrines; Granite, dorm; Maury, kitchen. Roger, check out the utility truck. You and Granite will be inspecting the fire roads in B-17 later."

A chorus of groans and mutterings accompanied the firemen as they filed out for their appointed duties.

“Oh,” Mitch called. He chuckled as everyone ran back into the kitchen. “Meet back here in about forty-five minutes. Cap wants to talk to us.”

More mutterings drifted across the bay as the crew hastened to their work details.

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Jeremy Grant took the stairs to the dorm two at a time. He quickly stripped each bunk, swishing the old linen under and around the beds for sweeping. *Always kill two birds with one stone whenever possible.* Pausing at the last bunk, Jeremy wiped the sweat from his face with a discarded pillowcase. A smile dimpled his face as he surveyed both the stripped beds and the shiny floor. *Thank you, fellow Academy recruit Johnny Gage, for one of your rare good ideas.* He quickly stripped the last bed; not forgetting to ‘sweep’ underneath, and then tied all the discarded linen in a large ball for laundry pickup.

Jeremy took more time to make the bunks. *Mitch’ll be in here inspecting right after the meeting, I bet.* Jeremy’s dimples flashed again. *Funny, Mitch only finds time to inspect the dorm after I clean it. Bet he’s trying to figure out how I get it done so fast.*

After finally getting the last bunk made with fresh linen, Jeremy ran down the aisle between the bunks, sliding to a stop by the fire pole. With a quick glance down to the apparatus bay floor below, he leapt down the opening, grasping the pole mid-way down. Landing with a thud, he swung around to dash for the kitchen

“Damn it, Granite! Don’t use the pole unless the tones go off. You damn near landed on me!” Mitch yelled with surprise and ire.

Jeremy shrugged. “Sorry, Mitch. Didn’t want to miss Cap’s meeting.” He took a half step back from the engineer’s angry glare.

“Well, it hasn’t started yet, so slow down,” Mitch added a little less harshly.

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Mitch joined the others at the table. “He’ll be here in a minute.”

Jeremy leaned over to Chuck. “Who do you think we’ll get to replace him?”

Chuck scowled back. “Shut up, Granite.”

Everyone quieted as Captain Hammer entered the kitchen.

Dick could feel five sets of eyes follow him as he headed for the coffee pot. *Gotta have coffee first.* Dick filled his cup and took a long swallow of the warm brew. He closed his eyes briefly, then turned around, leaning against the counter. He studied the five faces in front of him for a moment. *A great crew . . .*

“You guys know that Headquarters has asked me to captain the A-shift at the new station in Carson. Well, the deadline is today and I’ve informed HQ that I’m taking the transfer.” Dick watched the faces again. *Not much change. I guess they all figured I’d take the job.*

“It wasn’t an easy decision.” Dick felt he needed to explain. “This has been a great assignment. You guys are the best.” Dick paused to swallow the lump in his throat. His vow not to get emotional was slipping.

Dick sighed happily as Mitch rose and purposefully strode over to him, hand extended.

“Congratulations, Dick. That’s one hell of an assignment. You’d be stupid to turn it down.” Mitch pumped Dick’s hand vigorously, with a wide grin. “And we know you aren’t stupid,” he added.

“Thanks, Mitch. I think.” *Don’t know what I’m going to do without you to bail me out of these awkward situations.*

The rest of the guys took their engineer’s lead and lined up in front of Dick.

“Good luck, Cap,” Roger Dellinger shook Dick’s hand and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Roger.” *This man will be calm and steady when ‘the big one’ hits and California sinks into the sea.*

“Give ‘em hell, Cap!” Chuck Knight eagerly pumped Dick’s hand and nearly knocked Dick over when he also clapped his shoulder.

“I’ll do that, Chuck.” Dick rubbed his shoulder. *Never seen a more dedicated man on a hose . . .*

“Don’t do anything I would, Cap,” Jeremy ‘Granite’ Grant said with a smile. “Really, congrats, Cap.” He clasped Dick’s thumb in a ‘hip’ handshake.

“I don’t think I could, Granite. Thanks.” Dick fumbled with the awkward handshake. *You’re as hardheaded as a slab of granite, but I’d want you beside me when things get rough.*

“They got the best man for the job. Congratulations, Dick.” Maury Lanier warmly shook Dick’s hand in both of his.

“Thanks, Maury.” *A great firefighter from a great firefighting family....*

Dick took a deep breath as his crew crowded around, chatting amiably. Clouds of doubt blurred his resolve on the decision. He had seesawed back and forth many times in the past two weeks.

But, finally, the challenge of starting up a new station, with the new paramedic program, in one of the busiest areas of the county, was just too good to let pass.

“Okay, guys. We still have a job to do.” Dick picked the clipboard up off the table. “Roger, you and Granite need to check out the fire roads in B-17. The brush fire season is here and those roads have to stay clear. Report any slides or washouts to Dispatch. They’ll get crews out to fix ‘em up.

“Mitch, we’ll take the engine out and test the hydrants in that new subdivision on Brook Lane.” Dick put on his best ‘Captain’ face and ushered the men out to the trucks.

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Mitch backed the engine into 94’s small bay. If he missed his marks by even half a foot, the utility truck wouldn’t fit in the bay beside the big rig. As usual, there had been no calls while they tested the hydrants. Mitch laughed as Chuck stomped past him, headed for the dorm. Chuck’s shoes made audible squishing sounds; his shirt and pants displayed a darker shade of blue where dampness still clung to them.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Maury claimed in self-defense. “He should know better than to stand in front of the hydrants when I’m testing ‘em.”

“I think you’re supposed to yell ‘FORE’ before opening the hydrant. Gives the bystanders a chance to get out of the way,” Mitch explained with a chuckle in his voice.

“Yeah, well, maybe they ought to pay more attention, too.” Maury rummaged through the ‘fridge, looking for something to prepare for lunch.

The phone rang; Mitch picked it up. “LA County Fire Department, Fireman Sommers.” Mitch listened for a moment. “Just a minute, sir.” He put the call on hold and ran around to the captain’s office. “Cap, HQ’s on line one.”

Dick looked up from his report forms. “Thanks, Mitch. Pull the door closed for me, would you?”

Mitch returned to the kitchen and sat down at the table, leafing through a magazine.

“What was that all about?” Maury asked from the sink.

Mitch shrugged. “Don’t know.”

Chuck entered the kitchen, tucking in his shirttail. “Don’t know what?”

“Cap just got a call from HQ,” Maury informed.

“Maybe it’s about his replacement.” Chuck opened the newspaper that lay on the table.

“Hmm,” Maury thought out loud. “That could be it.”

“I’m sure Cap will let us know if it’s any of our business,” Mitch added before the rumor mill could get out of hand.

Chuck sighed loudly.

The engine crew looked towards the apparatus bay as the utility truck backed in beside the engine.

Roger and Jeremy ambled in and headed straight for the coffee pot. Dick Hammer followed them. Jeremy filled Roger’s and Dick’s cups then emptied the remaining few drops into his own cup with a frown.

“Gentlemen,” Dick started, with an authoritative tone. His crew instantly grew silent and attentive. Dick let a grin spread across his face. “HQ just called to inform me who will take over as Captain of 94s in two weeks.” Dick studied the rapt faces before him, his grin still firmly in place. *Glad HQ let me break the news to Mitch.*

“Well?” Jeremy asked, bouncing eagerly on the balls of his feet.

Dick turned to Mitch, his engineer for the past four years. He reached his hand out to the still uncomprehending firefighter. “Congratulations, Mitch. You just happen to be next up on the Captains list. 94s is yours.”

Mitch numbly pumped Dick’s hand. His mouth dropped open, he closed it again. He frowned confusedly, and then smiled happily. All of this happened in about three seconds, the same amount of time it took the information to sink in to the rest of the crew.

“Congratulations, Mitch,” Roger said, slapping Mitch’s shoulder.

“Yeah, man. That’s incredible. Congratulations!” Chuck echoed.

“The luck of the draw,” Maury added.

“How lucky can we get?” Jeremy added with glee. “I was worried we’d get someone like Hookrader. This is great!”

Mitch looked straight into Jeremy’s eyes. “Don’t think that you’re going to get away with anything, Granite.”

Jeremy frowned. “Me? Whatever do you mean?” He mustered as much innocence that he could; it wasn’t much.

Further conversation was interrupted by the tones. “Station 94, brush fire. Cow Lick Gulch, at B-14. Brush fire, Cow Lick Gulch at B-14. Time out, 1336.”

The crew scrambled to the trucks and roared off into the dusty hills.

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It was late, twenty minutes after eleven that night, when the exhausted crew returned from what ended up becoming a full brush response. Cards were drawn for shower position; high cardholder got cleaned up first. As the men rotated through their showers, they wolfed down a makeshift dinner, leaving cleanup for later. They clomped up the steps to the dorm; each fell into their bunk, asleep as soon as their heads hit the crisp pillowcases.

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A-shift duty at the desert station remained much the same after the change in command. The new engineer, Hernando Spanoza, filled the gap like a missing puzzle piece. Camaraderie was high as Mitch Sommers entered his third month as the A-shift captain at Station 94.

Station 94’s alert tones broke the pre-dawn silence; the automatic lighting pierced the darkened dorm where the sleeping firefighters sprang into action. “Station 94, Station 86, Truck 60, Engine 98, Deluge 16, Battalion 18. Structure fire with explosions. ChemCorp chemical plant, one hundred ChemCorp Way. Structure fire with explosions; one hundred ChemCorp Way. Approach with full protective gear. Time out, 0517.”

Fear gripped Captain Sommers’ gut as Engine 94 raced towards the ominous orange glow in the desert. His mind played back the countless drills the crew had practiced since ChemCorp built their expansive compound in 94’s desert backyard. On many a hot day, Dick had the station out in the desert, in full turnout gear, dousing ignited barrels of chemicals either stored or manufactured at the Chem Corp complex. Then, after each practical drill, came the uncounted hours spent at the station going over the ignition and burning properties of the chosen chemicals. Mitch mentally tallied seventeen trips the station took with Captain Hammer to the Chem Corp complex for detailed tours and inspections. *We’re as prepared as we can possibly get.* Mitch’s thoughts snapped back to the present; he watched a massive fireball climb into the sky following an earth-shaking explosion. *This is no drill.*

Mitch pulled a second two and a half inch line off Engine 94 after Chief Crider informed him that the Plant Manager had accounted for all employees. *At least we don’t have to worry about trying to find someone in this mess.* Mitch handed the nozzle off to Maury and Roger and sent them across Jeremy and Chuck’s line to a burning cache of barrels. Mitch’s ear caught the deeper rumble of the engine as the second line was charged. He ran a practiced eye over the gauges and nodded approval to Hernando. *He runs this rig like he was born to it.* Mitch smiled briefly behind his air mask.

Mitch paced back and forth, keeping one eye on his hose crews and the other on the engine. He jumped as his HT crackled his name. Chief Crider’s voice asked for an update on this corner of the blaze. Mitch peered carefully at the hose crews, then keyed his mic. “Battalion 18, Captain

Sommers. We have containment on Building Thirty-Six. Dousing hot spots in there now. The storage area between Building Thirty-Six and Thirty-Eight is still out of control.”

“Ten-four, Mitch. I’ll send help your way when I can. Battalion 18 out.”

A second alarm call echoed across the desert.

Mitch slipped the Handi-Talkie into his turnout coat pocket and jogged over to Building Thirty-Six’s blown-out garage door opening. Jeremy and Chuck had worked their way back to the opening, all open flame now extinguished. Damp, heavy smoke poured around them, out the jagged opening, and into the near-dawn morning.

Mitch felt Chuck flinch as he firmly grasped the intent firefighter’s shoulder. “As soon as you’re done in here, assist Maury and Roger at the storage area around back.” He swung his arm to the left. “Come in from the back side and lay down a heavy fog.”

Chuck nodded his head, displaying comprehension. “We’ll just be a couple more minutes.” His thumb pointed back over his shoulder to the lightly smoldering spot in front of a large laboratory style metal cabinet.

“Great,” Mitch nodded in return.



An explosion knocked the back wall of Building Thirty-Six into itself. Large chunks of cinderblock crushed the large metal cabinet inside. The back section of the roof collapsed, cutting the room in half. Three firefighters tumbled towards the opening at the front of the building, surrounded by clouds of smoke and dust.

Mitch scrambled to his feet even before the debris finished raining down around him and his crew. *Jeremy! Chuck!* Mitch quickly surveyed the scene. He saw the hose flatten and knew Hernando was on top of the situation. He caught movement through the smoke by the doorway. He was relieved to see Jeremy’s familiar visage behind the facemask that approached.

“Have you seen Chuck?” Mitch bellowed as Jeremy grabbed his arm.

“He’s outside already. Come on, the storage area blew!”

“Damn!” *Maury and Roger. This nightmare just won’t quit!* Mitch stumbled across the scattered debris, briefly registering how lucky they were to escape serious bodily damage.

Mitch pushed his way through the gathering crowd of firefighters that had descended upon the storage area. He found Maury assisting Roger through the crowd. A trickle of blood ran down the side of Roger’s face from an abrasion at his temple. Mitch quickly joined Maury with assisting their dazed crewmate to the first aid station set up behind Engine 60.

Mitch hovered nearby as the paramedics pored over his injured men. A muffled blast from the still raging inferno behind him pulled Mitch's attention back to the awesome task at hand. *These guys are in good hands.* Mitch gave both Maury and Roger a thumbs-up, and then turned to join the rest of his crew.

Mitch returned to the storage area to find that the mass of firefighters had gained containment on the fire that had downed their comrades. Pride lifted Mitch's mood as he caught sight of the rest of his crew, Jeremy and Chuck, right in the center of the group determinedly brandishing their two-and-a-half against the fiery foe.

"Looks like we've got good containment here," Chief Crider yelled from behind Mitch.

Mitch turned to face the Chief. "I think so. I was about to relieve my crew, sir. Let them know that Roger and Maury are going to be all right."

"You do that, Mitch. They deserve a break. Glad to hear your men are okay." Chief Crider turned away to answer a call on the handi-talkie.

Mitch waded through the sea of firefighters and tangle of hoses to retrieve his crew. He helped them haul the hose back near the engine. Mitch smiled as Hernando greeted them with cold bottles of water.

Mitch lifted his facemask long enough to gulp down the refreshing water. He turned to survey the complex and cringed as he spied Chief Crider headed their way. So far, the needed break had lasted barely three minutes.

"Mitch," the Chief greeted abruptly. "I need a crew down at Building 42. There's a fire door protecting a pair of 5,000-pound LP tanks that needs to stay intact. We don't want those tanks to blow – they were filled just yesterday."

Mitch gulped down a pinch of fear. "Yes, sir. We're on it." Mitch turned to Jeremy and Chuck, who were looking expectantly from the tailboard of the engine.

"Oh... Mitch," Chief Crider yelled to the weary captain. "I've called in a third alarm to give you some help. You won't be alone over there."

"Right, Chief. And thanks." Mitch gathered his remaining crew and assisted them with stretching a line to the back of Building 42. He jogged back to the engine to get the bolt cutters for the lock on the chain link fence surrounding the big tanks. He got his crew set up and returned to the engine, replaced the bolt cutters and checked on Hernando.



The shriek of sirens and air horns split the early desert morning once again as third alarm

responders snaked up the dark ribbon of asphalt. The sun just began its rise over the desert horizon. Station 51's Crown Firecoach, with Captain Hammer sitting anxiously in the passenger seat, headed this latest round of cavalry. The sirens quieted one by one as the fire and rescue vehicles pulled up to the staging area at the sprawling ChemCorp chemical plant. The entire southeast wing of the complex blazed angrily. A white-helmeted assistant fire chief directed each arriving truck to assist with containing the hellish inferno.

Dick Hammer watched as thick black clouds of smoke billowed from the blazing chemical plant buildings; it drifted over the desert landscape and choked off the rays of the rising sun. He flinched as explosive concussions faltered the steps of the determined firefighters as they hauled heavy hoses to the involved structures and to protect volatile exposures. *This nightmare has finally come true*, Dick thought as Mike Stoker navigated the maze of emergency vehicles, hoses, and firefighters.

Engine 51 pulled along side of Engine 94. Dick gave his old engine a quick appreciative look as he jumped down from the Crown.

"Good morning, Captain Hammer." A very hot, sweaty, and soot-streaked Captain Mitch Sommers greeted and shook hands with the fresh arrival.

Dick took in the conflagration behind his former engineer as he pumped Mitch's hand. "Got your hands full here," Dick answered, noting the ragged appearance of the friend before him.

"You bet. Glad for the help." A close blast caused both captains to duck for safety behind the Crown as debris scattered at their feet. Dick watched Captain Sommers dash for his engine as soon as the way was clear.

Dick's handi-talkie demanded his attention. After a quick conversation, he tucked his radio away in his turnout coat pocket and sought out his paramedics.

"DeSoto," Dick yelled through his mask and motioned with his arm. He closed the distance between him and the senior paramedic.

"The first aid station asked for an extra paramedic." Dick pointed down the line of emergency vehicles. "It's down there behind Engines 86 and 60."

"Right, Cap." Roy hurried off to the Squad to gather the necessary gear and then lugged it down to the first aid station.

Dick turned to the rest of his crew. "Kelly, Gage!" Upon getting the desired attention, Dick continued. "Take a two-and-a-half over to Building 42, around back, keep those LP tanks cool. 94's has a crew back there on the fire door."

Dick paused a moment as the two young firefighters grabbed several links of the heavy hose and headed towards the burning complex.

“Lopez!” Dick’s remaining crewman jogged up to him. “Let’s pull a two-and-a-half over to Building 38; there’s an out of control blaze reported in there.”

“You got it, Cap.” Marco began to stretch out lengths of hose.

Dick paused by his engineer, waiting as Mike adjusted pressure to Kelly and Gage’s line. “The store’s all yours. Call me if there’re any problems.”

Mike nodded and gave a thumbs-up, then attached Dick’s line to the truck.

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Mitch made his way to the business end of the two-and-a-half inch line manned by his crew. Chuck clung to the nozzle with Jeremy supporting from behind. Mitch grabbed both of their arms. “Chuck, take a break,” he yelled through his mask and over the noise of the hose. Jeremy slid up to the nozzle in a much-practiced move and Mitch took over the support position.

Mitch noticed fingers of flame licking around the fire door in front of him. He inched Jeremy closer to the protective metal door. Spray and steam blurred his view as their water stream attacked the encroaching fire and heat.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mitch saw two of Dick’s crew from 51s dousing the two large liquid propane tanks. Mitch knew it was vital that the fire door hold to protect those two tanks. A red glow at the left edge of the door drew his full attention to his task. *If those tanks blow...*

Mitch fretted at the deepening red area around the fire door. If he concentrated his spray in one area, another area heated to the glowing point. A quick glance over his shoulder at the huge LP tanks showed wisps of steam rising off the doused tank closest to him. *This isn’t working.*

Mitch laid his gloved hand on Jeremy’s shoulder, preparing to abandon their attack. He needed to get his and 51’s crew out of there and notify the rest of the contingent of the imminent danger.

The walls in front of Mitch shook briefly. The next, and last, thing Mitch Sommers saw was the huge fire door flying at him. *Mom...*

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Chet and Johnny kept their two-and-a-half trained on the liquid petroleum tanks. The scorched air around them felt hot enough to send the two tanks, and everyone in the vicinity, into orbit.

Johnny steered Chet to a strategic spot in front of the tanks that provided the most coverage over their charge. A glance over his shoulder at 94s crew sent a shiver down his spine. Some of the wall around the fire door appeared to have a faint red tint to it.

The hose jerked in Johnny's hands as Chet switched positions. The cold shiver in Johnny's spine now froze his entire body. He couldn't take his eyes off the scene behind him.

A thunderous flash explosion inside the building ripped the steel fire door from its hinges. Johnny's wide eyes imprinted the instant's view of hell in his memory as it swallowed the crew from 94s and turned his world black.

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Dick caught up to Marco just as Mike pressurized the line. The two-and-a-half inch line jumped with the power of the contained water. Dick grunted as they hauled the heavy hose and positioned themselves inside the burning building. Dick steered Marco to a heavily involved storage area.

Perspiration streamed down Dick's face as the fog spray instantly turned to steam against the raging flames. Dick realized the fogging was not having the desired affect. Instead of cooling the area it was quickly turning into a pressure cooker.

"Tighten it down, Marco," Dick yelled. Immediately, a powerful stream of water attacked the burning crates.

Dick huffed as he hauled the large hose as they repositioned at another flaming storage bin. *I've been away from the hose too long. This work is definitely for the young.*

A powerful blast shook Building 38 knocking Dick and Marco off their feet. The hose automatically shut off when Marco lost his grip on the handle. Cautiously, the pair stood up, carefully checking the walls and ceiling around them. To Dick's trained eye, it didn't appear that the explosion was in this building.

Marco picked up the hose again and braced to release the waiting pressurized water. Constant beeps from Dick's handi-talkie and the deep tones of the triple air horn blasts sent warnings to the firefighters.

"Drop it! Run!" Dick commanded to Marco.

They both raced out of the building.

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The frantic triple blast of air horns signaled withdrawal as flames licked unhindered at the dual LP tanks. Firefighters throughout the chemical complex dropped their hoses and ran for safety.

After completing the ordered withdrawal air horn blasts, Mike Stoker quickly shut down the pumps on Engine 51 and disconnected the manifold line. As soon as he placed the clamp on the supply hose and disconnected it from the engine, he jumped in the driver's seat and moved the engine away from the hazard area.

Dick Hammer exited Building 38 at a dead run, Marco Lopez close on his heels. Dick was glad to

see the engine out of immediate area. He slowed and grabbed Marco's arm when he brushed past.

"Get the Squad out of here!" he directed Marco.

In a flash, Marco pulled the Squad behind Engine 51.

"Stoker, what's up?" Dick was a little winded.

"A big explosion in Building 42. Apparently, the fire door blew and the big LP tanks are going to go," the engineer informed his Captain.

Shit! Dick followed the lines from engines 94 and 51 towards the partially demolished building. He pushed between several firefighters scrambling to escape the impending disaster. His chest pounded as he neared the hellish scene. The hulking fire door now lay folded around a support beam, as if it were merely aluminum foil. The heat from the flames shooting from the gaping blast hole sent trickles of sweat down his back. That sweat turned cold as he spied three fallen firefighters scattered under the LP tanks.

Dick's hastily pulled his handi-talkie from his turnout pocket. "All units, HT-51. We have at least 3 Code-I's outside Building 42, in the back at the LP tanks!" Dick rushed to the nearest fallen firefighter.

Dick reached out for the injured man. Although face down, the name 'Kelly' stenciled on the back of the turnout coat peeked out from under the skewed air tank. Dick's chest tightened as he recognized his own crewmember. With haste, tempered with care, Dick pulled the unconscious firefighter over his shoulders. He met Roy DeSoto and three firefighters from 98s as he cleared a rubble pile on the way out. Dick held up three gloved fingers on his right hand, signaling to the other rescuers that there were at least three more Code I's in there.

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Roy DeSoto took a quick second to palpate a pulse at the neck of the firefighter lying under the overheating LP tank, a reflex action considering the imminent danger. A rapid but strong beat registered against his fingertips. He expelled his held breath, but gasped when his digits came away stained red. Blood red.

Roy quickly and carefully pulled the injured man from under the tank. His heart skipped a beat as the light from the fire at his back danced across the bloodied face. *Johnny!*

"Get him outta here now!" Roy started at the urgent voice from one of 98's men. He gathered his partner across his shoulders and hurried out to safety.

Roy gently lowered Johnny on a yellow blanket stretched out near Squad 51. Captain Hammer already had oxygen on Chet Kelly. Roy glanced up as the other two injured firefighters were carried on past the squad. *60's paramedics can handle them.* Roy carefully removed Johnny's

broken air mask, revealing a bruised swelling on the young paramedic's forehead. A gash across Johnny's nose freely bled. Roy carefully, yet firmly, applied pressure to stop the bleeding.

The pressure point under Roy's fingers shifted oddly. *Damn! Broken nose...* Johnny started to cough, choking on the blood.

"Mike," Roy turned to the engineer beside him. "Help me turn him."

Mike set down the oxygen case he had retrieved from the engine and assisted Roy.

A small pool of blood formed under Johnny's mouth and his breathing eased. Roy quickly applied a cervical collar and began checking his partner's vitals.

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The force of the LP tanks exploding made the ground shake like the area's natural menace. Engine 98 and 94's utility truck remained too close and debris peppered their red paint. Dust and soot settled over the two vehicles in a mottled blanket. 94's utility truck's windshield spider cracked from a large chunk of blast debris; Engine 98's warning lights no longer flashed as flying debris shattered them. A moment of eerie silence gave way as bullhorns unleashed new orders, and handi-talkies crackled to life.

In an odd twist of fate, the fierce blast extinguished much of the inferno in a split second where three alarms of firefighting companies had labored for hours with little perceptible diminishing. The earth-shaking explosion had consumed much of the available fuel and sent it skyward in a blinding fireball. But, every man there would gladly fight this beast for days to not have paid its high price.

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Roy slipped the bag of Ringers under Johnny's shoulder. He smiled at the groggy brown eyes looking up at him. Roy gave his partner's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Hang in there, Johnny. You're going to be all right." Roy raised the head of the gurney to a forty-five degree angle and, with Mike's assistance, lifted Johnny onto it. Roy frowned at the audible moan from Johnny as they sat him on the gurney. *Did I miss something?* He mentally reviewed his examination findings. *Probable concussion, left pupil slightly sluggish; broken nose; blood loss; no other palpated injuries – and I triple checked the ribs. Must be his head pounding. Sorry I can't give you something for that, partner.* The attendants assisted with lifting Johnny into the back of the ambulance. Roy sighed helplessly as jostling the gurney elicited another groan from his partner.

Roy turned to assist with Chet, who was already gabbing up a storm, his main complaints being a headache and ringing in his ears. Roy had found a sizable bump behind his left ear. The ambulance attendants brought the stretcher and Mike and Captain Hammer carried Chet to the waiting ambulance. Roy shook his head; Chet's rambling monologue never missed a beat.

Roy jogged behind Engine 60 to check if another ambulance was on the way. Chet could wait if one of the others were more seriously injured. Roy stopped in his tracks, an instant lump rose in

his throat. Firefighter boots extended beyond yellow blankets covering two still forms. He had to pull his eyes away from the boots. He recognized Chuck Knight with 94's sitting on the ground near the blankets, head bowed, arms hugging knees, tears tracing paths through the soot and grime on his grim face. Roy turned quickly, grabbed the drug box and biophone and jumped into the back of the ambulance. He concentrated on his two patients, pushing the grim scene to the back of his mind.



Dick watched the ambulance pull away, lights flashing and siren wailing. He rubbed at a knot forming at the back of his neck. *Roy said they'd be all right, but still...* A hand on Dick's shoulder interrupted his thoughts. He turned to find Battalion Chief Crider and Captain Lee of 60s wearing very grim faces.

"I'm sure they're gonna be all right," Dick told the solemn pair, gesturing towards the retreating ambulance.

"Dick," Chief 'Rusty' Crider began. "There were two Code Fs in there as well."

Captain Lee coughed lightly and stared down at his shuffling feet.

Realization hit Dick like a blow to his gut. *94's men were in there with my men! Oh, God, who... how... WHY?* Dick took a reflexive step away from the bearer of the horrible news. "Who?" He finally found his voice.

Dick felt a firm hand grip his elbow. "Dick, it was Mitch. And Fireman Grant." Rusty's voice echoed in Dick's stunned head. The grip tightened at his elbow. Dick found himself needing the support.

After a moment Dick pulled away from the Chief's grasp. He bowed his head, absorbing the news in private. He noticed the wrapper from Gage's IV lying by his feet. Desperation rooted in Dick's thoughts. *Paramedics! Maybe...* He lifted his desperately hopeful eyes to meet Rusty's solemn gaze.

"There was nothing that anyone could do, Dick. I'm so very sorry," Rusty tried to sound reassuring.

Dick turned away from the Chief and Captain Lee. He leaned on the side of Squad 51. In a moment of frustration, he kicked the squad's tire.



Dick Hammer entered Rampart's Emergency Department following the longest two and a half hours of his life. He had accompanied Chief Crider to visit Mitch's wife and Jeremy's mother. *Mitch's two-year-old son is the spitting image of his father.* Dick shook his head to rid his mind of the haunting visions. *Widow Grant is completely orphaned, her only child now also gone.* Dick detoured to the men's room to compose himself. After a few deep, calming breaths and

splashes of cold water on his exhausted face, he continued on his route to the duty desk.

“Hi, Nurse McCall.” Dick was surprised how calm and friendly his voice sounded.

“I bet you’re here to check on our two star patients,” Dixie replied.

Dixie’s kindness brought a hint of a smile to Dick’s face. “No, I’m here to see about Gage and Kelly.”

Dixie turned to the nurse behind her. “Carol, hold down the fort. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.”

Carol Williams nodded acknowledgement at Dixie and flashed a smile at Dick.

Dixie hooked her arm through Dick’s. “They’re in 207. I’ll take you up there.”

“Thank you, Dixie. Are they all right?”

“Well, you know how hardheaded those two are,” Dixie began. “Johnny’s got a mild concussion and a broken nose; he’s got some heavy bruising. Chet has a slight concussion; he’ll be released tomorrow.”

The elevator doors opened, depositing the pair on the second floor.

Dick stopped in the hallway. “How about Gage? When will he be released?”

“He’ll be staying at least an extra day. It’s not serious,” she reassured. “When the patients are special we tend to run on caution’s side.” Dixie’s warm smile relieved Dick’s edginess and they continued down the hall to room 207.

Dick paused at the door for a couple of seconds, then rapped lightly twice and pushed it open.

Dick could tell by the solemn mood that permeated room 207 that his two injured crewmembers knew that the demon fire had turned deadly. Gage appeared to be sleeping, so Dick strode to Kelly’s bedside.

“How’ya feeling, Kelly?” he asked in a soft voice.

Chet laced his fingers behind his head. “Doin’ okay, Cap. Just a headache.” Chet shot a glance to the other bed in the room and lowered his voice. “What happened, Cap? Mike and Marco came in and said that two guys . . . didn’t make it through that blast Gage and I were caught in.”

Dick sighed and sat heavily in the chair by the bed. “They were right, Kelly. Mitch Sommers and

Jeremy Grant from 94s took the brunt of the blast. They didn't make it."

"Oh, man," Chet exclaimed. He threw an arm over his eyes, as if a shield from the news.

"Don't worry about that now, Kelly. Just work on getting better." Dick rose and gave Chet's shoulder a comforting squeeze.

Dick crossed the room and settled in the chair by Gage's bed to give Chet a private moment. *John does look better now that he's cleaned up.* Dick did notice that the darkening bruise on the paramedic's forehead had spread. All around Gage's eyes was noticeably darker, almost raccoon-like. Dick slumped in the uncomfortable chair. *So this is how they keep visiting times short.* He glanced over at Kelly again. *Chet sure is quiet now. Being the survivors of a deadly incident is going to be hard on these two... Hell, on both of these crews.*

Dick jumped up as a nurse entered the room. She smiled at him.

"I need to check on Mr. Gage. The bane of head injury patients." She smiled apologetically.

Dick moved around to Kelly's side of the room as the nurse roused Gage. Dick smiled as the young paramedic groused at the nurse, until noticing her curves, perky young face, and silky blond hair. Dick wasn't sure if it was the young nurse's bedside manner or Gage's charming efforts; either way, both appeared to enjoy the proceedings.

"I don't think there's any way of turning him off, Cap." Chet sat up, watching the exchange across the room.

"Let's hope not, Kelly." Dick knew how close these two had just come to being 'turned off'. Dick stepped back across the room as the young nurse came over to give Kelly the once over.

"Hey, John," Dick began. "You're looking better now."

"That's good to know, Cap." Johnny's voice wobbled slightly. "They get the fire out?"

Dick sat back in the chair. "Yeah. There's probably some clean up going on still. Quite a mess out there."

Johnny was quiet for a moment. Dick thought he may have gone back to sleep.

"Cap?" Johnny asked in a quiet voice.

"Yeah, John."

"Roy didn't know who it was that didn't make it."

“It was two firemen from Station 94. They took the brunt of the blast that got you and Kelly. There was nothing that anyone could do.” *Keep repeating that and I may actually believe it myself.*

Dick started as Johnny jerked his head to stare back at him.

“Who?” The word was strangled through Johnny’s clinched teeth.

Dick sat up, faced the intent young man squarely. “Captain Mitch Sommers and Fireman Jeremy Grant.” Dick saw that the second name utterly deflated the injured paramedic.

Johnny turned away from Dick. “No . . .” he gasped.

Dick stood and gently placed his hand on Gage’s shoulder. “Did you know Jeremy?”

Johnny’s breathing quickened. “Yeah, kinda.” He blinked excess moisture out of his eyes. “We went through the Academy together. I never expected this to happen to Granite.”

“You can never expect something like this, John. Both of them are going to be sorely missed.”

“You’re right about that, Cap.” Johnny closed his eyes tightly.

“Rest, John. We’ll all get through this together. We’re here for you and each other.” Dick gave Johnny’s shoulder a reassuring pat. “I’ll be back to see you guys later. Get some rest.”

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A couple of minutes after Captain Hammer left, Chet looked over at Johnny. “Hey, Gage.”

“What, Chet?”

“I’m really sorry, man.”

“Thanks, Chet. Really.”

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“You two sure you’re up to this?” Dick Hammer eyed Chet Kelly and John Gage cautiously; it had only been three days since the explosion.

“I’m fine, Cap,” Chet assured. He continued buffing his belt buckle.

“Gage?” Dick flicked his eyes away from John’s bruised face and the memories it invoked.

Johnny studiously straightened the accoutrements on the dress uniform jacket hanging on his locker door. “They discharged me. I’m fine, too.”

Dick shook his head. “All right, then. We pull out in twenty minutes.”

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Dick forced his jaw muscles to relax as Mike Stoker pulled the Crown up to the number two spot in the long line of LACoFD apparatus in front of the Midtown Community Church. With regret, Dick’s mind replayed the outburst at the station when Gage refused to take Lopez’s seat in the engine and instead held fast to the position beside DeSoto on the tailboard. *What makes these young firemen so stubborn?*

Dick’s gaze settled on the black cloth covering the hose bed of Engine 94 directly ahead of him. *We truly aren’t indestructible. Must be age that brings that revelation . . . and these humbling experiences.* He looked down to where his crew gathered in a tight knot. Gage and Kelly stood together, talking quietly. *I sincerely hope those two reach that age.* Dick relaxed a little as he noticed how the rest of the crew hovered near the recently injured pair. *This crew takes care of their own.*

Dick dismounted the rig and, as a group, Station 51’s A-shift entered the church.

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The sea of dark dress uniforms sparkled with shined buttons and pendants. Dick let his eyes sweep the crowded pews, not focusing on any of the solemn faces. His own ears heard his eulogizing speech emphasizing heroism, bravery, and courage. It was standard fare, but he meant it anyway.

A motion to Dick’s right caught his eye. Mitch’s wife hugged two-year-old Mitchell, Jr. comfortingly. The young boy had stood and pointed at the flag draped casket in front of him with a tear-streaked face. Dick couldn’t imagine what words of comfort the mother could find to whisper to her distraught son, but Mitchell returned to her side, nestled under her sheltering arm.

Dick paused his speech, swallowing the sudden upwelling of emotions. His adam’s apple bobbed noticeably as he fought to regain composure. *Mitch, I sure wish you could bail me out of this.* He glanced at his crumpled notepaper. The hastily scrawled anecdote notes mocked him. Dick could not bring himself to voice these personal memories of his two friends. *I’m just not ready to close the book on these two yet.* He cleared his throat to fill the growing silence in his speech. Skipping his personal memories, Dick continued, extolling the more standard firefighter personality traits.

Dick gratefully returned to his seat. His mind raced with the unvoiced memories of the two men that now lay before him, shrouded in Ol’ Glory. *There’s no glory in this,* his mind snapped back at him.

A flickering candelabrum caught Dick’s wandering gaze as Battalion Chief Crider’s speech echoed through the crowd. He jerked his eyes away as the warm candlelight brought forth memories of the horrible chemical blaze that precipitated all of this. He found himself studying the LACoFD shield temporarily hung on the front of the dais. He found comfort in the familiar objects and phrases.

Finally, the speeches were over. The immediate relatives were ushered out to the waiting limousines. The guests filed out, forming a parted-sea from the massive wooden church doors to the shiny red fire trucks adorned with mourning cloth.

Dick took his place at the head of Mitch's casket, Chuck and Maury lined up behind him. Mitch's two brothers and a cousin stood stonily across from the firefighters. At the pastor's cue, they lifted Mitch and slowly made their way to the head of the convoy, Engine 94.

Twelve men carried their burden out of the church and through the parted masses. As they passed by, heads bowed, hands quickly motioned bodily crosses, and mouths whispered silent prayers.

Dick steered to the right and carefully helped lift Mitch onto the hose bed of Engine 94. His friend's final trip in the engine was about to begin. With a silent salute, Dick returned to Engine 51 and stepped up to the cab. He glanced at Jeremy's flag draped casket resting in 51's hose bed. *It is a sad day when Fire Engines become hearses.* Dick took his seat beside Mike Stoker and did his best not to stare at his friend riding on the engine ahead.

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John Gage sat in the front pew of the MidTown Church, on the right, with the five other pallbearers for Firefighter Jeremy 'Granite' Grant. He worked his jaw, grinding his teeth, but kept the tears at bay. Nervously, he slid his sweaty palms down his pants legs, resting them on his knees. He clenched his shaking hands into fists. The start of a headache pulsed behind his bruised left eye.

Speeches and prayers blurred through John's ears. He slumped slightly, growing weary from the lengthy service; his head now throbbed. He stared at the flag draped casket in front of him. Every friendly memory he conjured out of his pained brain, ended with the fiery gates of hell swallowing his friend. *No!* He squeezed his eyes shut tight to erase the images. He felt glad to have his now pounding head scatter his concentration.

When the other pallbearers for Jeremy stood, Johnny forced his concentration back to the service. He lined up behind Roger Dellinger from 94s at Jeremy's casket. Under his breath, he whispered a silent plea for his stamina to hold out long enough to perform this last duty for his friend. He slipped his trembling hand through the ornate handle. On cue he lifted, surprised at how light the load was, then realized he shared the weight with five others. His heart felt a hundred times as heavy.

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Roy DeSoto sought out his partner, as a magnet seeks its opposite pole. He assisted the bearers lifting the casket into Engine 51's hose bed. He eyed his trembling partner carefully, not sure if the trembling was from injury of body or soul. Roy concluded some of each, as his partner's pained eyes caught his for a moment; the bruised lids slowly dropped to hide the deep sorrow as Johnny turned to mount the rig. Roy mounted also, as the diesel roared to life.

Roy kept watch over his partner as Engine 51 made the slow trek to the cemetery. The violent effects of the blast that killed Jeremy and Mitch still showed on Johnny's face. A string of stitches cinched the gash across the bridge of Johnny's swollen nose; the bruises began to show the technicolors of healing. *I'm sure the visible wounds will heal sooner than the inner.* Concern creased Roy's brow as the usually bright and snappy eyes, now dull and unfocused, stared past him at the crowds of solemn onlookers lining the street. He focused on Johnny's white-knuckled grip on the engine's chrome handrail momentarily, and then returned his stare to the black mourning cloth covering the hose bed. Both paramedics bowed their heads in silent respect as the engine passed under the flag that hung from the extended ladders of Trucks 8 and 85 as the convoy entered the cemetery.

Roy started slightly as Engine 94's air horn began sounding the years of service for Mitch Sommers. He found himself inwardly counting as the mournful sound filled his soul. . . . *Five, six, seven . . . Seven years.* Roy sensed Johnny tense beside him as Engine 51's air horn sounded for his partner's friend. Again, he silently counted. . . . *Three, four . . . Merely four years.*



The crew of Station 51's, A-Shift, sat together at the gravesite, alongside the remainder of Station 94's A-Shift. Captain Dick Hammer sat between the two groups, pulling strength from his current crew and lending as much support to his former crew as humanly possible. The wailing tones of the lone piper's 'Amazing Grace' gripped Dick's heart. He had to swallow several emotional lumps as the sadly familiar song echoed across the cemetery.

After a single bugler sounded a soulful report of taps, the official service concluded and the crowd began to disperse. Dick made his way over to Widow Sommers and Mrs. Grant. He gave each a warm and comforting embrace, whispering heartfelt condolences. He picked up young Mitchell, Jr. and walked over to Engine 94.

"Far twuk," the much too solemn young man voiced. "Da Da's?"

With a moist twinkle in his eye, Dick patted the engine's fender. "Yeah, little Mitch. This will always be your Daddy's truck." Dick opened the cab door and let the miniature Mitch Sommers 'drive' the rig. *This one sure didn't fall far from the tree.* Dick silently wondered if finding out what happened to his father would temper the young boy's enthusiasm for the fire department. *Can't really blame him if it does.*

"Dick? Where's Mitchell?" Darla Sommers asked, voice strained.

A little sheepishly, Dick stepped away from the cab. He tried to gauge Darla's response to seeing her young son sitting in the seat that her husband had occupied for so long. He quickly decided it was time to get the boy down and back to his mother. "Come on, Chief. Time to go."

Dick lifted the dark suited toddler from the engine and returned him to his equally dark clad mother. "I'm sorry, Darla. Thought the boy might like it, that's all."

Darla held tightly to her child. “I’m sure he does, Dick. Just not right now, okay?” She turned away, accompanied by her stoic brothers-in-law.

“Of course . . .” Dick whispered as she departed. He huffed a despairing breath, stuffed his hands deep into his pants pockets, and leaned heavily against the engine.

“Cap? Dick?”

Dick looked up to see Roger Dellinger briskly closing the distance to the engine. He pushed himself away from the coolness of engine’s metal body. “Yeah, Roger. What’s up?”

“Um, Cap, can you give us a hand over there?” Roger nodded towards a knot of firefighters by the gravesite.

Roger’s countenance put Dick in Captain mode. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s Chuck. He’s taking this pretty hard. Could you talk to him or something?” Roger’s voice cracked.

Dick straightened his suit. “Of course, Roger. Let’s go.”

Dick’s old crew parted at his approach. His heart sank when he saw Chuck Knight huddled in the gravesite chair, elbows on knees, palms dug into his wet eyes. Chuck rocked slowly back and forth.

“It shoulda’ve been ME!” Chuck whispered hoarsely as he rocked.

Dick kneeled in front of the distraught firefighter and gently touched his shoulder. “What do you mean, Chuck? Should’ve been you? Why?”

Chuck didn’t look up. His hands balled into fists, pounded on his knees, accentuating his clenched teeth speech. “Mitch relieved me. I was taking a break...” His emotion overcame him once again.

Dick understood Chuck’s deep despair. It would take a lot of support and help to get him through this. “Chuck, listen to me. Listen.” Dick waited for the man to compose himself. “I can’t say I know exactly how you feel, but I can say that I understand. Every Captain does.” Dick let that hang in the air a moment. *I sent two crewmen to the hospital, Pal. That’s no fun either.*

“This just proves that everyone has their time.” Dick paused to look at the caskets behind him. “This was theirs,” he whispered. He turned back to 94’s gathered crew. “It just wasn’t ours... this time.”

“But . . .” Chuck stammered.

Dick held up his hands. “No buts, Chuck. We don’t make those rules. We just have to find a way to live with them.”

Chuck sighed with a cough. “It sure ain’t easy . . .”

“No, Chuck, it isn’t.” He patted Chuck’s shoulder more heartily. “We’ll be here for you. We’re all here for each other.”

The rest of 94s crew showed their unified support by giving Chuck a pat on the back and supportive words.

Dick’s mind whirled as he glanced over to Engine 51, his engine. His crew stood beside the rig. Dick noticed Gage hunched wearily. He found himself torn between the two crews. He watched 51’s crew shoulder Gage to the engine’s tailboard. All of 51s crew hovered close-by as DeSoto saw to Gage’s condition. *They are a special crew.*

Dick looked at the distraught faces around him. *This is a special crew, too.* Again, he glanced up at 51s crew; saw their tight support for each other. His heart ached for the men from 94’s gathered around him, needing his support. Yet, the friendships and camaraderie forged with 51’s pulled at him.

Dick squeezed Chuck’s shoulder. “I’m here for you guys.”

“Thanks, Cap.” Chuck stood and the group headed for their engine.

Dick clapped each of them on the back and then veered over to his crew.

“Everything okay, Cap?” Roy asked in a low voice.

Dick looked at the concerned faces. “Under the circumstances, I guess so.” He watched as John rose from the tailboard, a little slowly, took a deep, steadying breath and rubbed at a spot above his left eye. Dick thought he looked a little pale under all the bruising.

“You all right, Gage?” Dick asked with genuine concern.

“Yeah, just one doozy of a headache, Cap,” John answered, running a slightly trembling hand through his dark hair.

“Okay, guys, mount up,” Dick commanded gently. “Gage, in the cab. Lopez . . .”

“Gotcha, Cap,” Marco answered.

There were no arguments this time. *It's been a hard day on all of us*, Dick realized.

The familiar sound of Engine 94 caught Dick's ear as he watched 51s crew get settled. Dick watched a moment as the familiar truck pulled away, still adorned in mourning. Dick settled into the Crown. "Back to the barn, Mike."

"Right, Cap," the quiet engineer said. The diesel rumbled and the engine pulled away from the gravesite.



Mike Stoker backed the Crown into the empty bay at Station 51, the squad out on a run with C-shift.

Dick retired to the office; Captain Johnson graciously retreated to the day room. Dick heard the C-shift crew join his in removing the mourning cloth from the engine and repacking the hosebed. There wasn't much to hear; the shuffling of feet, a few quiet voices, and an occasional clank of a hose coupling as it was loaded on the engine.

Dick hung up the phone with headquarters as A-shift crowded at the office door.

"We're heading out now, Cap," Roy informed. The others nodded and mumbled agreement.

"Okay, guys. I'll see you tomorrow." With farewell waves the crew departed.

"Gage," Dick called. The younger paramedic reappeared at the doorway. "I've got a replacement for you tomorrow. You need some rest." The look from the eager paramedic almost made Dick regret the brief stand down, but the bruised face and tired eyes glaring back at him sealed the deal.

"Right, Cap," Johnny sighed, and disappeared from the doorway once again.

Dick also arranged for replacements for 94's A-shift. Not one firefighter he phoned turned him down on the extra duty. It warmed his heart, but at the same time, filled him with remorse to have to ask.

Just as Dick finished the mounds of paperwork, from his crew injuries and the fatalities at 94's that he volunteered to take care of, the station tones blared and C-shift scrambled to the trucks. The sudden silence left in their wake nearly unnerved Dick. He quickly filed a copy of the reports and stuffed 94's copies and the copies for headquarters in manila envelopes and headed out the door.



Dick paused outside the bar, listening to the laughter and music inside. *Maybe this isn't such a good idea*. He turned to leave and literally ran into Chief Rusty Crider.

"Hey there, Dick. How's it going? Come on in and join us for a couple of rounds. Looks like

you could use some company.” Rusty Crider encircled Dick’s shoulders and ushered him into the bar. Dick didn’t have the opportunity to decline.

Dick sat in the crowded bar at a small table with Chief Crider, Captain Ben Lee of 60s, Chief George Thursted, and Captain Jose Rivera of 16s. Dick looked around the room. His attention became lost in the firefighter memorabilia decorating the bar. His thoughts wandered to the two stations he felt responsible for now.

The clank of a glass on the table in front of him brought Dick out of his reverie. He stared at the amber liquid, and then glanced up at the others at the table. Realizing, too late, that he had spaced out much longer than intended.

“Hey, welcome back, Dick,” Rusty Crider laughed. “We ordered for you since you ignored the nice waitress.”

“Um, thanks.” Dick took a swig of the drink: bourbon on ice. “Thanks. Really.” Dick reached for his wallet.

“Never mind that, Dick. It’s on my tab tonight.” Rusty Crider said with a sympathetic smile.

Dick nodded at Rusty. “Thanks again.” He downed another swig, feeling the warmth as it coursed down his throat.

“Heck of a day, Dick. How’re you doing?” Ben Lee asked quietly.

Dick looked around the table at the concerned faces. “I’m doing all right, guys. All right.”

“That’s good to hear, Dick,” George Thursted said. “How are your men?”

“They’re doing pretty good. The paramedic, John Gage, was banged up pretty bad. He’ll be out next shift.” Dick was glad to shift the conversation away from himself.

“Good to hear they’re on the mend,” Ben Lee added.

A moment of awkward silence followed.

“Well,” Rusty Crider began. “Has anyone heard what is going on with 94s?”

“All I know for sure is that a boot has been assigned there,” George volunteered.

“Hey, Dick, maybe you should go back to 94s and to get things settled down,” Jose Rivera said half jokingly.

Dick just stared at the Captain from 16s. Jose had voiced the quiet thoughts that had plagued Dick's mind over the last couple of days.

Another moment of awkward silence ensued.

"Rusty, weren't you at 86s years ago? That would be a nice station to go back to," George interjected into the stagnant conversation.

"Uh, yeah," Rusty began. "That was a great station. I'd go back in a minute."

"I was up there on some coverage a few times, nice area," Ben Lee added. "I started out at 48s. I think I'll leave that one alone."

"Oh, 48s isn't that bad," George countered. "Now, 116s, that's another story. I don't think I ever slept a night through there. That place about worked me to death."

"I hear 51s a pretty busy station. Right, Dick?" Jose prodded.

"Huh?" Dick heard his name, but not the question.

"You still with us there, Dick?" Rusty questioned.

"Um, thanks for the drinks guys. I think I'll head on home. The wife will start worrying soon." Dick's chair scraped loudly against the hard wood floor as he stood to leave. Condensation drips slid down his still half full bourbon glass.

"Take care, Dick," George called.

"See you next shift, probably," Ben said.

"Take it easy," Rusty added.

Jose waved.

Dick waved briefly. He heard their conversation return to the merits of several different stations as he exited into the early evening air.

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Dick took the long way home, avoiding the rush of the freeway. He thought hard about Jose's statement at the bar. *Go back to 94s...Settle things down...* The distraught faces of 94s remaining crew, his friends, danced in his mind. He truly wanted to help these men cope with their sudden and crushing loss.

Then, 51's crew blazed a trail through his troubled thoughts. The paramedic program fascinated

him. It still amazed him to watch DeSoto and Gage bring a patient back from the brink of death with a few cases of equipment and a phone hookup with a doctor. He really enjoyed the challenges of the new station.



“There you are. Dinner’s in the oven.” Betty Hammer halted her dishwashing chore and set a place setting at the dining table.

“Sorry I’m late, dear.” Dick sat at the table even though he wasn’t hungry. “I finished up the paperwork. For 94s too.”

“I thought it was something like that.” She set the warmed foil-covered plate in front of Dick.

Dick pulled the foil away revealing a lightly steaming plate of meatloaf, boiled potatoes, and green beans. He busied himself with folding the foil into a small square.

“I noticed that John made it to the service,” Betty said. She placed a cup of coffee beside Dick’s plate and sat across the table with a cup for herself.

“Yeah. He’s a friend of Jeremy’s. They went to the Academy together. I couldn’t have kept him away,” Dick replied, still creasing the foil into an ever-smaller square.

Betty placed her hand over his, removing the folded foil. “What’s on your mind, Richard?”

Richard? Uh-oh. Dick let out a sigh, picked up his fork, and pushed his green beans in and around the potatoes. “I was talking to Rusty Crider and Jose from 16s, and some others this afternoon. A couple interesting things were said.” Dick shrugged his shoulders. “Just got me to thinking, that’s all.”

“Well, it appears to have you thinking pretty hard about something. What is it?”

Dick realized that he had pushed some of the food off his plate. “Sorry,” he apologized. He pushed the plate away.

“You didn’t answer my question, dear,” Betty insisted.

Dick listened to the quiet in the house. “Where are the kids?”

“They’re staying with friends. Joey and Billy are at the Thompson’s and Colleen is at Mary and Jim’s. Now, spill it.” Betty’s voice took on a slightly demanding tone.

Dick rubbed his hand across his face. “The guys at 94s are pretty shaken up.”

“And...” Betty prodded.

“And, Jose kinda mentioned me going back to 94s to settle things down.” Dick looked up to catch Betty’s expression.

“And...”

To Dick, she seemed noncommittal. “And, I’ve been giving it some thought.”

“Hmm. Well...” Betty began.

“On one side, I really want to be there to help the guys at 94s,” Dick rambled. “And on the other side, I really enjoy working at 51s.”

“I see. Well...” Betty tried to join the debate.

“I know Chuck is taking this very hard. Mitch relieved him right before the explosion. I might be able to help him if I’m there. George Thurston said headquarters is sending a boot to 94s. I’d kinda like to be there to make sure there isn’t any resentment towards him. He certainly shouldn’t start his career like that.”

“Okay. That sounds reasonable,” Betty agreed.

Dick shook his head. “51s is a great career move. It’s an interesting challenge; I especially like having hands-on experience with the new paramedic program. These guys are a great crew, too. Also, Gage and Kelly were injured in the blast. I don’t want to abandon them, either.”

“Now, Dick, you can’t possibly captain both stations,” Betty cautioned.

Dick slammed his hand down on the table. “I know that. That’s the problem. That’s the big problem.”

“What’s in your heart, Dick? What’s truly in your heart?” Betty’s voice softened to almost a whisper.

Dick hung his head. “Both of them are; they truly are.”

“Of course.”

Dick closed his eyes for a long moment. He slowly raised his head and looked his wife in the eye. “94s. They have been torn apart. They need a familiar face at command. I wouldn’t feel right having someone else put into that awkward situation. I know these guys; they know me. I can help them heal; help make them whole again. It won’t be the same – nothing can do that.”

“What about 51s?”

Dick let out a brief sigh. “They’re a very strong crew. I’ve watched them closely through this. They will be there for each other. They may be bruised, but they’re still together. I don’t think I can offer them anything they don’t already have themselves.”

Betty took Dick’s hand in hers. “Whatever you decide, I’m here for you.”

Dick gently squeezed her hands. “Love you…” his voice was barely a whisper.

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Following another busy shift at 51s, maybe his last, Captain Dick Hammer reported to the county’s Fire Department Headquarters for his requested meeting with Fire Chief Houts. Dick’s resolve hardened as he passed through Firefighter’s Hall – where photos of those fallen hung. Dick’s step faltered briefly as he passed the two newest Hall photos. He quickly turned the corner to the Chief’s office.

The sun was bright and the sky a typical southern California blue as Dick stepped out of headquarters’ double doors. He squinted in the brightness, feeling as if a heavy weight had been removed from his shoulders. He strode through the parking lot; a warm breeze ruffled his hair as he leaned against his car. Gazing out at the hillsides, he reflected on the recent meeting with Chief Houts.

The Chief cautiously agreed with Dick’s proposal. He gave Dick good counsel and respectfully admired Dick’s fortitude in weighing out this viable option to a complex problem. To avoid any more complicating factors, Chief Houts went to the Captains List to replace Dick at 51s. Overall, Dick felt at ease after putting his decision into motion.

Dick drove away from headquarters with almost a smile. There was still a lot of healing to go through. His next shift would be back at the desert station. He briefly thought of the contrast between the laid back atmosphere of 94s and the hectic pace at 51s. He sighed. *Good luck, Captain Hank Stanley. You’ve just received one of the best assignments in the Department.*

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Dick Hammer pulled his truck into the familiar parking space at Station 94. Again, it was with a heavy heart that he’d made his decision. *I do regret leaving 51s . . . But this is where I’m needed.* He sighed as he walked across the parking lot, staring out at the desert. *The desert remained the same; I changed.*

Author’s Note: Many, many thanks to Cathy Fox for her encouragement and tactful editing, and so much more. :o)