

Just One Day

by Starr

"Gage, get out of the way!"

"Yeah, move it! I can't see!"

Paramedic John Gage rolled his eyes as he made it to the couch and sat in front of the tv at Station 51. "It's just the news, guys. Relax."

"No, Johnny, it's not just the news," his partner, Roy DeSoto corrected with a grin. "It's the *weather*."

Gage returned the grin. "Oh, right. The *weather*."

Chet Kelly shushed them impatiently. "Quiet, she's on." He leaned forward in his chair, as did Marco and Mike, their eyes glued to the screen as the new WKPV weather girl sauntered in front of a map of California, reading -- badly -- from a teleprompter about the five day forecast.

Gage and DeSoto exchanged bemused looks. Sharon Summers had become the latest obsession of the single members of the A-shift, with the exception of Johnny, who thought she looked a little too much like an old girlfriend to suit his taste. Every night after dinner for a week there had been a mass migration from the dinner table to the television to catch her two minute report, not that any of them could tell you what the weather was going to be the next day when they were done watching. Ms. Summers had definitely not been hired for her meteorological skills.

The camera shifted back to the anchor man and Marco leaned back with a happy sigh. "Now *that* is quality entertainment."

"Careful, Marco," Chet said, wagging a finger at him, "that's the future Mrs. Chet Kelly you're talking about."

"In your dreams, Kelly," Marco shot back. "She wouldn't even give you the time of day, and you know it."

Roy watched the verbal sparring match and chuckled. "You guys do realize that you're arguing about someone you're never going to meet, don't you?"

Captain Stanley looked up from the newspaper he was flipping through and frowned at the television. "What did he say?"

"Roy said that they were arguing about--" Johnny started to answer.

Stanley waved him off. "No, the guy on the tv. I think he just said something about the Fire Department. Turn up the sound."

Mike leaned over and turned it up as everyone's attention turned to the reporter on the screen.

-- a fire that was raging in the industrial complex downtown." Footage of a smoky fire appeared on the screen, the reporter's voice offering commentary over it. "The fire had fully engulfed the warehouse, and was threatening the buildings to either side." True enough, the fire was blowing through the roof of the building, and the wind was whipping dangerous embers around. It made for a striking picture against the twilight sky.

Captain Stanley was studying the screen intently. "I remember this," he said slowly. "Last week, down at the old lace factory."

Marco's brow furrowed. "Why the heck are they showing week old footage?"

"Slow news day?" Chet offered with a chuckle.

The picture panned over the firefighters that were scattered around the building, hoses laying hundreds of gallons of water onto the fiery structure from every side, but making little headway against the beast. The reporter continued, "Firefighters at the scene made no attempt to enter the building to try and extinguish the blaze, which destroyed the structure. It was later confirmed that one man died in the fire."

Johnny shifted in his seat. "Is it me, or is this guy's story just a little slanted?" he muttered.

The picture jostled, and a voice that clearly belonged to John Gage could be heard ordering the men to get behind the tape that had been strung further down the street. "When we were seen filming, we were forced from the fire scene," the reporter's voice continued in its solemn monotone. After a few seconds of showing the cameraman's shoes, the picture panned up to catch Gage's soot covered face as he reached out and grabbed the lens. "I told you, turn that damn camera off," he was yelling. There was a muffled reply, and the picture went dark. The television screen once again came back to the reporter in the studio. He turned a grave expression on his television audience. "Which brings me to the subject for tonight's "How I See It". The Fire Department. Public servants, paid to serve the needs of you and me, John Q Public. But whose needs were being served this day? Certainly not those of the poor soul whose business, the sole means of support for his family, burned to the ground." More footage appeared on the screen, this time of the blackened hull of the factory, taken some time the morning after the fire, smoke still rising in some spots from the rubble. "And certainly not those of the man who perished in the flames, his young life cut short by a tragedy that should never have happened."

A collective exclamation went up from the men huddled around the tv.

"What?!?"

"I don't believe this son of a --"

"He's got to be --"

"Quiet!" Stanley barked. His eyes were still on the tv, his expression strained.

A new face appeared on the screen, the distraught owner of the building. A microphone was shoved in the old man's face as he looked at the ruins of the factory, tears streaming down his cheeks. "My son, my son," he kept sobbing softly, apparently oblivious to the reporter and the microphone capturing his words.

"It was your son that died in the fire?" the reporter's voice asked from off camera.

"Why? Why did this happen?" The old man broke down and buried his face in his hands, sobbing, the camera still rolling for an obscene amount of time before finally cutting back to the studio.

"Why indeed," the reporter intoned. "The Fire Department is charged with protecting our lives and property. In this case, they did neither, and I, for one, would like to know why. What went wrong that let this man down so completely that he's lost everything he has in the world - his business, his son, his faith. Faith in a system that is supposed to keep these kinds of tragedies from happening."

The room had grown deathly quiet, everyone's stunned attention riveted to the reporter's scathing commentary.

The reporter gave a small, dramatic sigh. "Unfortunately, I don't have the answers, and the Fire Department isn't giving any. They just sound their sirens a little louder to block out the questions. They remove prying eyes from where they might see the truth. And they spout official jargon instead of telling us what we want to know. Perhaps they're just too busy rescuing someone's cat from a tree to care about the public they're supposed to be protecting. Whatever the reason, there's one thing I know for a fact. There's a man out there today who's life will never be whole again." He folded his hands on the desk. "This is Chris McGee, and that's 'How I See It'." He turned to the anchor man. "Back to you, Pat."

The anchor man shook his head sadly in practiced response. "Thanks, Chris. That's a terrible tragedy." He let the moment hang in the air for a two count for effect, then looked into the camera. "In world news tonight..."

Mike leaned over and turned the tv off, cutting him off in mid-sentence. The room took on a heavy silence, which was finally broken by Johnny's coffee cup smashing down onto the table with enough force to make it shatter. Everyone jumped at the crash.

"Johnny," Captain Stanley warned, "calm down."

"But Cap," the young paramedic sputtered angrily as he got to his feet, "did you *hear* that guy? I mean, how the hell can he get away with saying stuff like that about us?"

"I heard, and I plan to make a call to the guy's boss about it."

"But he--"

"Gage, I said I'd handle it." Stanley's tone was hard, and had the intended effect. Johnny's mouth snapped shut with an audible click, and he walked silently to the closet and got the mop and broom out. As he cleaned up the remains of his mug, his face stayed hot, mirroring the temper that was being contained within.

"Cap, we *got* that guy out of the building," Roy said slowly, fighting a difficult battle with his own temper, "and he was already dead when we got there."

"I know that," Stanley replied with a sigh. "Just like I know that a surround and drown is SOP for a building that's as far gone as that one was when we got to it."

"But the way that guy tells it, it sounds like we just sat around roasting marshmallows while we watched that old man's place burn down," Marco muttered angrily.

The sound of broken ceramic tinkling into the garbage pail was the only sound in the room for a minute as they sat in shocked contemplation of the verbal attack they'd just been subjected to.

Gage finished cleaning up and slammed the closet door, staring at it as he seethed. Roy, getting a bad feeling that his partner was about to lose what little control he was keeping on his explosive temper, got up and started towards the truck bay. "C'mon, Johnny."

Gage looked at him, his head cocked to one side. "What for?"

"I think we need some supplies from Rampart." They both knew they'd restocked the drug box on their last

run, but it was as good an excuse as any to get out of the station where Gage could safely vent outside of Captain Stanley's earshot. Where both of them could.

As the paramedics were getting into the squad, the phone in the Captain's office started to ring. He rose slowly, his expression grim. "And that would be the Chief..." He went to his office and closed the door behind him.

Roy drove towards Rampart, taking his time. He glanced at his partner, who was sitting in the far corner of the squad's cab, arms tightly crossed. "Well?"

Gage's jaws remained tightly clenched, afraid that if he started talking, his temper would again get the best of him.

Seeing the rage shining in his friend's eyes, Roy sighed. "Okay, so I'll say it. Everything that reporter had to say was a steaming pile of bull, and he's going to have to take back every word of it after Cap gets through with him."

"No, he won't," Johnny replied tightly.

Roy gave him a quick look. "Of course he will. He--"

Johnny shook his head. "He won't, because everything he said was the truth." He ticked off on his fingers. "He said that we fought the fire from outside. That's true, we did."

"After we got the victim out and half the roof collapsed," Roy reminded him.

"Yeah, but that doesn't matter." He ticked another finger. "The place burned to the ground. True. Not that we could've prevented it. It was past saving by the time we got there. But again, that doesn't matter."

Roy started to see where Johnny was going with this train of thought, and he didn't like it one little bit, because he knew he was right.

A third finger. "He said the guy died. True. He was dead when we got to him, sure, but who cares about that? He never said he died because we did anything wrong, he just *implied* it." His hand curled into a fist as he stared out the side window. "And that's what everyone's going to remember."

Roy chewed this over. "You left out one thing."

"Yeah," Johnny sighed slowly. "My little cameo kicking them out of the fire scene." He ran a hand through his hair. "They didn't belong there in the first place, and then when they started taking pictures of the victim's body before we got it covered..." He shook his head in disgust. "No one should have to turn on the news and see that, especially not the poor kid's family."

"More selective editing," Roy commented, pulling the squad into Rampart's parking lot and shutting off the engine.

"So, when Cap calls the station and talks to this guy's boss, all he's gonna be told is 'sorry you didn't like the story, we didn't say anything that can't be verified, take a hike'." He looked like he was about to hit the dashboard for a second, then blew out a frustrated breath and opened his door. "Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

Roy followed his partner, wondering how long he was going to be able to keep his temper bottled up before

he finally exploded. They were on the last day of their shift, so maybe the time off would do him some good, give him a chance to work it out. Hell, he was going to need to work it out himself. Maybe Joanne had some chores for him to do. A little physical exertion worked wonders for the temper.

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As Roy pulled into the parking lot of the station three days later, he couldn't help but notice the sun gleaming off every inch of his partner's Land Rover. He grinned. 'Probably waxed the poor thing within an inch of its life' he thought with amusement. The good humor stayed with him as he entered the locker room, and saw Johnny engaged in an animated discussion with Marco about the baseball game from the night before. 'Guess he did work it out of his system,' he thought with relief. Glancing down at the blister on his left palm, he wondered if maybe his partner hadn't come up with a less painful way to work off excess anger than hacking away at a dead tree all weekend.

The shift started out slow, with only two calls coming in before lunch - a minor MVA with only a few bumps and bruises, and a false alarm triggered by a faulty automatic alarm at an office building that was under renovation. The dust from the work kept setting it off, and they'd already logged four calls there since the work had started. This time they were issued a warning that if they didn't get it fixed, they would start seeing some hefty fines coming their way.

The crew had just sat down to a lunch of chili dogs and cheese fries when the klaxons went off. Johnny groaned and rolled his eyes. "Would it be too much to ask to just once make it through a meal without having to eat and run?"

"Station 51, structure fire. 1565 West Alameda. One five six five West Alameda. Cross street Conway. Time out 12:22."

There was a mad scramble for a few stolen bites of food before everyone ran for the truck bay. Captain Stanley acknowledged the call through a mouth full of fries, and handed Roy a slip of paper that had a small smear of cheese at the corner.

As he adjusted the chin strap on his helmet, Roy said, "Who's bright idea was it to have chili dogs, anyway? Do you *know* what they taste like reheated?"

As someone who could and did eat anything and everything, even Johnny had to agree on that point. "Maybe we should stop and get a pizza on the way back," he suggested.

As they pulled onto Alameda, they could see black smoke billowing up from the roof of a store in the middle of a small strip mall. People were milling around the parking lot, which was a congested mess of cars and pedestrians alternately fleeing and gawking at the fire.

Captain Stanley quickly sent Marco and Chet up to the roof, and had Roy and Johnny pull a second line to the front door. The sign on the plate glass window read "Angelo's Pizza Emporium." They exchanged a quick look. "Maybe we'd better get chinese," Roy tossed over his shoulder as they went in.

A frantic looking teenager raced up to Stanley, his face as white as the apron that flapped around his waist. "I swear, I don't know how it happened! It's not my fault!"

Hank put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You work in there?"

The kid nodded rapidly, his long blond hair flapping in his face. He pushed it back absently. "Mr. Mannetti left me in charge while he ran some errands. I had a few pies in the oven, and the next thing I knew, there

was all this smoke and ...and..." His eyes widened as he saw the firemen taking axes to the roof of the store in an effort to vent the smoke out. "Oh man, Mr. Mannetti's gonna be *pissed!*"

"Is there anyone still inside?"

Again the hair flew in his eyes as he shook his head, and Hank had the sudden urge to take a pair of scissors to it. "No, I made sure they were all out before I left." His gaze went back to the pizzeria and his shoulders slumped. "Mr. Mannetti's gonna kill me for sure. Then he's gonna fire me."

The fire ended up being confined to the kitchen area, and was easily extinguished without causing major damage to the rest of the store. Captain Stanley assured the distraught teen that it looked like the cause of the fire had been in the wiring in the wall behind the pizza ovens, which he patiently repeated to Angelo Mannetti when he showed up a few minutes later and nearly keeled over when he saw what was going on.

As the men of 51 were repacking the hose onto the engine, Roy picked a familiar face out of the crowd that had gathered to watch. He thought about pointing him out, then thought better of it, only to have Chet catch sight of him as well. "Hey, isn't that the reporter guy from the other night?" he asked Johnny, who was next to him. Roy cursed under his breath and tossed a quick look at his partner's expression.

Johnny looked at where Chet had indicated, and his eyes narrowed slightly. "Yeah, it is." He straightened from their task and continued to stare.

Worried about what was going through Johnny's mind, Roy straightened as well, ready to put himself in his partner's path if need be. "Johnny...?"

He tore his gaze from the reporter with obvious effort and looked over at Roy. He managed a half grin. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna do anything stupid."

"Well, that would be a first," Chet quipped.

Marco muttered something about the pot calling the kettle black, and the five firemen got into a rousing round of potshots, which helped pass the time as they packed the heavy, wet hose. Somewhere in the middle of their conversation, the reporter, Chris MacGee, spotted them and wandered over. He stood off to the side of the engine, watching and listening, and finally shook his head in disgust.

"Nice to know you guys don't let a little thing like some poor guy losing his business get in the way of your good time," he commented snidely. "Seems you're holding true to form."

The words brought immediate silence to the group. Johnny turned slowly to face him. "Man, I don't know what your problem with us is, but why don't you take it someplace else?"

MacGee recognized him and grinned. "Well, look who it is." He put his hands up in mock self defense. "Gonna toss me off the fire scene for trying to report the truth again, hotshot?"

Johnny tensed, and Roy put a restraining hand lightly on his arm, silently reminding him of his earlier promise not to do anything stupid. A quick look passed between them before Johnny turned back to MacGee. "You got moved off the fire scene because you weren't supposed to be there," he said tightly. "The police had that yellow tape strung up for a reason. Or did you think that applied to everyone except you?"

"I was trying to report the news," MacGee countered.

"You were trying to take pictures of the victim's body," Johnny shot back. "Since when is that reporting the news?"

"Someone died at a fire. That's news."

"Reporting it is one thing. Showing it is just being a ghoul," Johnny said with a shake of his head. "Is that something people really need to see? Especially the guy's family? Did you ever think about them while you were trying to get your 'story'?"

MacGee crossed his arms, his posture antagonistic. "I take it you have a problem with what I consider newsworthy."

"No, I have a problem with you making commentary about things you know absolutely nothing about." Johnny felt Roy touch his arm again, and shrugged him off.

The reporter's eyebrow raised. "Is that so? And what is it that I know nothing about? The fact that you let that factory burn to the ground, or the fact that the guy's son died?"

Hands clenching, it took all the willpower he had left to keep from throwing a punch at MacGee. "See, that's what I'm talking about. You know nothing about what we do, or how - or why - we do it. But you go on the air and rattle off some half-assed remarks that the public will take as fact, and they have no idea that all you're giving them is half-truths and lies."

MacGee's eyes flashed angrily. "I stand by my story," he said loudly.

Roy glanced around, and belatedly realized that the tête-à-tête between Johnny and MacGee had acquired an audience. He tapped his partner on the shoulder. "This isn't the time or the place, Johnny," he said quietly.

But Gage's fury had reached a peak, and he took no heed. "You have no idea what it is to be a firefighter. What it takes to be a firefighter."

"I don't have to wear a pretty blue uniform to know what a cush gig you guys have," MacGee snorted.

The paramedic's eyes widened slightly. "A cush..." His face flushed with rage. "You wouldn't last one day."

"Puh-leeze," MacGee retorted, rolling his eyes. "Not only could I *do* the job, but I could do it standing on my head."

"Care to put your money where your mouth is?" Johnny shot at him.

Roy, who had followed the exchange with growing ill ease, cleared his throat. "Uh, Johnny..."

"What did you have in mind?" MacGee asked suspiciously.

"A ride along," Johnny said, totally oblivious to Roy now. "You spend one shift with us, just one day, and see if you don't change your opinion of what being a firefighter is all about."

Roy's brow creased. "Uh, *Johnny*?" he tried again, more urgently this time.

"You're on, hotshot," MacGee said, pointing a finger at Johnny. "And when I'm done, I'm gonna do a story about you guys that'll be even better than the first."

That managed to get through the paramedic's last reserve of self control. He took a step towards the reporter. "Listen, you little--"

A hand clamped down firmly on his shoulder, and this time he knew it wasn't Roy. He bit his words off and looked around into the terse face of Captain Stanley. "Problem here?" Hank asked. His voice was soft, but held a warning tone.

Johnny swallowed. "No, Cap. No problem."

Hank studied his face a second, then directed his gaze at MacGee. "Mr. MacGee, I think this discussion is over." He paused, then added thoughtfully, "But I do think Gage is right."

The eyes of his men swung and gave him identical "huh?" looks, but it was Gage who looked the most surprised.

"If you're going to insist on doing stories about us, I'd rather you did a little research and got it right the next time," Hank continued. He paused, then added, "Unless, of course, you don't think you can handle it. In which case I'd understand if you declined." He let the understated dare lay on the table and waited to see how the reporter would respond. He couldn't show it in front of his people, but the man had managed to get under his skin as well.

MacGee mulled the offer over, suspicious of the motive behind it now that it was coming from the Captain, then gave a short nod. "Yeah, sure, okay. Why not. Just tell me when."

A fleeting smile crossed Captain Stanley's face. "Call me at Station 51, and we'll arrange a date." He turned to his men. "Finish getting that hose packed, and let's get a move on." With that, he disappeared around the other side of the engine.

MacGee smirked at the firemen and gave a short wave. "See ya around, guys."

Johnny glared after him as he disappeared into the crowd, which was dispersing now that the show was over. "Y'know, Roy, that guy is a real--"

"Just pack the hose, Junior," Roy said, cutting him off. "Just pack the hose."

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The morning that Chris MacGee was due to arrive at Station 51, A-shift had arrived early at Hank's request. He used the time to lay down the law about the next 24 hours. MacGee was to be treated with respect, just like any other member of the public at large; he was to be baby-sat and kept out of harm's way at every scene; and, above all, there were to be no visits by the Phantom. The last had elicited louder grumbles than the first two, since planning had already been in progress for days for something special in the reporter's honor, but one look at Hank's face made it clear that he was quite serious about it, and the grumbles faded into sullen silence.

"So, uh, who gets baby-sitting duty?" Marco asked when Hank was done talking.

"I'm glad you asked that," Hank answered. "Since this was Gage's idea, Mr. MacGee is going to be his responsibility--"

Gage nearly tipped over the chair he was leaning back in. "What?! Hey, wait a second!"

--except when the situation becomes too dangerous for him to tag along. Then I'll ask you to keep an eye on him, Mike."

The engineer nodded silently, but he shot a 'thanks alot' glare at Gage.

"Aw, c'mon, Cap!" Gage protested. "How are we supposed to do our job if we've got to watch what's his name?"

"The name is MacGee, and nobody has to watch me." Everyone's head swung around to the voice. MacGee was standing in the doorway, what looked to be a permanently smug expression affixed to his face. "I'll be the one watching you." He eyed the group up for a moment, then advanced into the room. "Besides, you're the one who invited me to your tea party, Gage. Don't tell me you're having second thoughts now?"

'More and more by the second', Gage thought miserably.

Captain Stanley jumped on the opportunity to go over the ground rules again. "Mr. MacGee, as I discussed with you and your producer yesterday, there are certain rules that you're going to need to observe while you're riding with us. Whatever one of my men instructs you to do --"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember the lecture." MacGee let out a short, disgusted breath. "Listen to orders, don't go into fires, stay out of everyone's way, yadda, yadda, yadda." He gave Hank a baleful look. "I've got it."

There was a moment of dead silence in the room, everyone waiting to see if Hank was going to lose his usual even temper or not. There was a brief struggle on his face, then he gave a tight smile. "I hope so. I'd hate to see you get yourself killed." There was a brief pause. "The paperwork would really mess up my day." He turned on his heel and strode out of the kitchen. A few seconds later, they heard the door to his office slam shut.

MacGee's smug smile widened at the sound. 'He enjoys being an SOB,' Roy realized suddenly. Couple that with Johnny's short fuse and... He groaned inwardly. It was going to be a very, very long shift.

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Roy wandered around the front of the squad and stood watching Johnny as he waxed the hood with zealous vigor. 'Better he gets his frustration out on the squad than on MacGee', he sighed to himself. It had been a rough morning for everyone, but for Johnny in particular. MacGee had decided that his greatest pleasure for the day was going to be trying to get the young paramedic to lose his temper. To Johnny's credit, he'd held his tongue thus far, but they still had a long way to go till the end of the shift.

"You're going to take the paint right off," he said offhandedly.

"I just can't believe we haven't had a single run this morning," Johnny said over his shoulder, his efforts not lessening. "I mean, of all the days to be light, why did it have to be today?" He gave a final swipe at the hood and stepped back, looking over his job with a critical eye before turning to Roy. "I'm not gonna make it, Roy," he said in a lower voice. "If MacGee doesn't knock it off with the wise cracks, I'm gonna kill him before the day's over."

Roy gave a hesitant grin, not a hundred percent sure his friend was totally joking. "It's almost lunch time. Hot food on the table is a sure way to get a call," he offered.

As if in response to his words, the klaxons sounded over the loudspeaker. "Thank God," Johnny mumbled.

"Squad 51, woman sick. 349 West Adobe Drive. Three four nine West Adobe Drive. Cross street Bishop. Time out, 11:55."

"Oh, no," Johnny moaned as the address came over. "No, please, not today."

Roy looked at him over the hood of the squad. "Isn't that..."

"Rita," Johnny finished.

"Our favorite hypochondriac." Roy shook his head and climbed behind the wheel without another word.

MacGee emerged from the kitchen. "So, hotshot, looks like you're finally gonna get to show me how great you are at your job," he said, sliding into the squad past Gage, who was holding the door open.

The paramedic closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. "Rita, for once, please just really be sick."

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Gage's bad luck held, and they spent the better part of twenty minutes listening to Rita recite a long list of symptoms that had come straight out of the previous night's episode of Marcus Welby. If they were to believe everything she told them, she was suffering from both a brain tumor and a ruptured appendix, all while going into labor (quite a trick since she wasn't even pregnant). Regardless, they treated her with the same professionalism they would any other patient, not willing to risk missing a true ailment by assuming that everything she claimed was just in her very confused head.

Rampart advised them to transport her as a precaution, and for once Johnny was glad to accompany the patient in the ambulance rather than drive the squad. MacGee had remained silent and at a discreet distance during their patient assessment, but he'd glimpsed that smug smile on the reporter's face as they'd loaded Rita onto the stretcher, and he just knew that there was going to be one of his patented smart-ass remarks to go with it once they were alone.

The look on Roy's face when they met up at Rampart was enough to confirm his suspicions. Roy was standing at the nurses' station filling out paperwork when Johnny approached. "Where's our shadow?"

His partner gave him a look that was generally reserved for Chet when he was up to his Phantom pranks. "Last I saw, he was dogging Dixie, trying to dig up dirt on us."

Johnny winced. "Someone else I need to apologize to."

"If you want someone to apologize to, you can start with your long suffering partner." Roy slipped his pen back into his breast pocket and leaned against the counter. "You do realize that MacGee is out to rake us over the coals no matter what happens today, don't you?"

Johnny ran a hand through his thick black hair and sighed, his expression dejected. "Yeah, I kinda got that feeling. But I was hoping that once he saw what we really do out there, it would change his mind." He scowled slightly. "Looks like it's the wrong shift for that to happen, though."

Spotting MacGee strolling back down the hallway towards them scribbling furiously on his pad, Roy picked up the drug box and started towards the exit. "Things could still change, Pal," he observed. "Just be careful what you wish for."

The afternoon yielded a few more calls for the station than the morning had - an MVA where a drunk had missed his driveway and ended up in a drainage ditch; a small brush fire started by an errant cigarette butt tossed from a passing car; a newlywed couple suffering from a mild case of food poisoning from her first attempt at pot roast; and a ten year old with cuts and bruises and a good bump on the head after trying to ride his bike up a makeshift ramp "just like Evel Knievel".

MacGee hadn't said much to anyone during or after the calls, but he'd been furiously scribbling in his notebook all afternoon. Whenever he was done with an entry, he'd close the book and grace anyone nearby with that obnoxiously smug grin of his. Even Roy had gone from trying to intercede when one of the guys threatened to pound on the reporter to joining them in their plotting. Talk of a Phantom strike was bantered around until it was decided that Hank's wrath would be worse than anything the reporter could throw at them. In the end, all they did was talk, but it was a good outlet for their frustration.

It wasn't until after dinner that things took a decided turn for the worse.

"Station 51, Station 27, Squad 19, Squad 32, multi-vehicle accident with heavy rescue. Midtown Freeway, north of exit 7. Be advised, Lifeflight is enroute. Time out, 20:42."

MacGee was the first into the squad, his face beaming with excitement. Johnny slid in next to him and, noticing the look, shook his head in disgust. The man still didn't get what the job was all about. He didn't see that whenever there was a call, it meant someone was hurt or in trouble. All he saw was the spectacle of the situation, how big a headline it would make.

Captain Stanley acknowledged the call and handed Roy the address on his way over to the engine. Roy hopped in and started the squad, pausing only slightly when he saw the aggravated look on his partner's face. Deciding it would be better not to know, he left the question on his lips unspoken.

They made good time until they got to the Freeway, which had come to a snarled standstill. They eased their way around the line of cars on the on-ramp, then cautiously moved along the breakdown lane. When they finally got to the scene of the accident, they rolled to a stop and stared for a shocked second at the disaster that was spread out before them. At least ten vehicles had been involved, but the condition they were in made it impossible to make an exact count. Some were crumpled to half their size; others were in several pieces, strewn over a great distance. It looked as though a bomb had gone off.

"Thank God it wasn't rush hour," Roy muttered as he exited the squad.

MacGee followed the paramedics out of the squad, his eyes wide as he surveyed the wide swath of destruction confronting them. "Jesus, where do you start?" he breathed as he took it all in. He started as the drug box was pushed into his hands, and looked questioningly at Johnny.

"We're going to need all the hands we can get," the paramedic said brusquely. "Stay with me, and do what I tell you to do." With that, he strode to the nearest of the accident victims, pinned in what had once been a station wagon, but was now the size of a compact car. Roy was two steps ahead of him, heading for the car it had impacted.

MacGee opened his mouth to protest that he was just an observer, that he had no right to tell him what to do, but something in Johnny's tone made him stop. His mouth snapped shut, and he followed obediently behind him.

Unable to pry the door open, Johnny had managed to wriggle his torso into the driver's side window, and

was trying to find a pulse on the woman that was slumped on the front seat, her seat belt still fastened. He cursed under his breath and pulled himself back out, brushing absently at the shards of glass that clung to his turnout coat. He dug a black tag out of his pocket and affixed it to the woman's sleeve. He looked over at Roy, who grimly shook his head to tell him that he hadn't had any better luck with his patient.

MacGee stared at the tag dumbly, its purpose not registering. "Aren't you going to help her?" he asked, trying to peer into the car for a better look. Except for the small smear of blood at the corner of the woman's mouth, she looked as though she were sleeping.

Johnny brushed past him, his eyes already searching out the next victim. "There's nothing I can do for her."

MacGee looked at the woman again, and this time he saw the odd angle of her neck and the glazed look to her staring eyes, and it finally sunk in. "Oh." The dead body held his attention for a long moment, both fascinating and chilling him. Then he hurried to catch up to Johnny, who was already at the next car, which had escaped relatively unscathed. He watched as he did a quick exam of an elderly man who was holding a bloody handkerchief to his forehead. A green tag was affixed to the man's sleeve, and Johnny started moving to the next car. MacGee grabbed his arm. "How come you're not helping *him*?"

"He can wait."

MacGee's jaw dropped. "He's hurt!"

"His injuries aren't life threatening. He can wait." Johnny tugged his arm free.

The smug look returned. "Okay, I get what this is. You're looking for the hero rescue. Something that'll make points on your record, maybe get you a medal."

Johnny swung around, his face livid, and for a split second, they both thought he was going to throw a punch. Instead, he took a deep breath. "This is triage, MacGee. We assess the extent of the injuries, and treat the most severe first. If I take the time to put a bandage on that man's head, then someone else may die because I didn't get to them in time." He took another breath, but the rage was still clearly evident on his face. "Now, either help me, or stay the hell out of my way." He turned and stalked away.

MacGee bit back a retort as some small part of his mind told him that he was out of his league on this, and that for once in his life he should just shut up and listen. Annoyed, he shifted the drug box to his other hand and followed the paramedic.

He found Gage and DeSoto on their knees next to a young woman who was laying in a bloody heap on the pavement a few yards in front of what had once been a gorgeous black GTO. Now it was a twisted hunk of scrap metal. The blown out windshield gave testimony to how the woman had exited the vehicle.

"Bring me the box!"

MacGee snapped to attention at the command, only then realizing that he'd zoned out into a kind of trance staring at the wreckage. He knelt next to Johnny and slid the box over to him, trying desperately not to look at the woman's ravaged face, but unable to stop his eyes from being drawn to it. She could have been twenty-five or sixty-five -- he couldn't tell, there was too much damage, too much blood. White bone showed through hair that might have once been blonde, but was now stained red, and through the bone, gray matter peeked out. He felt his stomach do a slow roll and forced his eyes closed, wishing the image gone with little success.

Johnny was busy taking the victim's vitals as Roy set up the biophone. "MacGee, are there any ambulances

here yet?" he asked distractedly.

MacGee was still trying to hold down his dinner, and refused to open his eyes. "What?"

"Do you see any ambulances on scene yet?" Johnny repeated, his tone slightly annoyed. When he still didn't get an answer, he looked over his shoulder and got his first look at MacGee's green complexion. His tone softened. "Why don't you go wait for the ambulance? Tell them that this lady is at the top of the list for transport."

MacGee nodded and got up, opening his eyes only when he'd turned away and he knew he wouldn't have to see the woman's face again. "I'll tell them," he said as he turned, his voice hoarse.

Watching the reporter walk away, shoulders slumped, arms hugged tightly to his stomach, Johnny suddenly felt a twinge of guilt. He knew it wasn't easy to deal with what he'd forced him to see, but MacGee had wanted a taste of what it was really like on the job. It didn't get more real than this. He exchanged a look with Roy, who was speaking with Rampart, then turned his attention back to their patient.

MacGee walked zombie-like through the maze of mangled cars, trying to determine if there were any ambulances among the many emergency vehicles that now lined the road in both directions. The wild array of flashing lights created a dizzying strobe effect, forcing him to look away. He could see paramedics and firefighters moving from car to car all around him, could hear the shouts for a backboard, a K-12, manpower to try and pry the remains of a pickup truck off of the car it had landed on after becoming airborne -- he swallowed hard as he realized that the car in question had been a convertible. He felt the blood pounding in his ears, his vision blurred, and his stomach heaved violently. He barely made it to the edge of the roadway before Chet's fried chicken dinner rudely came back up.

He stayed on his knees, gasping for breath, trying to block out the sounds of the saws, the shouted commands of the firefighters, the crying of the injured. It wasn't supposed to go like this. This wasn't what he'd signed on for. It was supposed to be a fluff assignment. All he was supposed to do was follow the fireboys around and watch them make fools out of themselves. He'd been sure the story would just write itself. Now all he wanted to do was go home, get drunk, and forget this day had ever happened. He wasn't sure how long he'd been there when he felt a hand laid gently on his shoulder. He looked up into the sympathetic face of Roy DeSoto.

"You okay?" the paramedic asked gently.

MacGee felt his face flush in embarrassment. 'Well, at least it wasn't Gage who saw me like this,' he thought miserably. He got unsteadily to his feet. "Yeah, fine. I just..." He trailed off.

Roy nodded understandingly. "It's a real mess out here. Hard not to feel sick about seeing so much life wasted needlessly." He paused. "Look, you can just go hang out in the squad if you want..."

"No." The reporter shook his head. "I'm okay, really. Gage said you guys needed the extra set of hands." He scrubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand. "What about the ambulance?"

Roy's shook his head. "They haven't made it through this mess yet. But Lifeflight's landing in a few minutes. We're going to get her out on that."

"Hey, DeSoto!" Richie Smith from Rescue 27 was gesturing from a nearby car that was resting on its roof. "I could use a hand here!"

Roy started over to him, then hesitated and studied the reporter's face. "You sure you're okay?"

His stomach still tight but mercifully no longer churning, MacGee managed a weak grin. "Yeah, no problem." He watched as Roy hurried away, then sucked in a deep breath and made his way back through the carnage to where Johnny was conferring on the biophone with Rampart about his patient.

"Pupils are blown and non-reactive," Johnny was saying. His voice was grim. "BP is still 70/45, respirations have dropped to eight." He glanced up at MacGee questioningly.

"Your partner said Lifeflight should be here in a few minutes," he told him. "No ambulances yet."

Johnny scowled at the news. "Rampart, patient will be arriving by Lifeflight, but we have no exact ETA on transport at this time."

"Transport as soon as possible," Doctor Early responded. He, too, sounded grim. He held as little hope for the victim as Johnny did, but it was their duty to try their damnedest to the bitter end. Miracles sometimes happened.

Rising to his feet, Johnny took a quick look around, trying to determine if everyone involved in the accident had been found. There were firemen and paramedics clustered around a few of the more severely damaged cars, and he could see a few bodies on the pavement covered by sheets to shield them from prying eyes. He glanced at MacGee, and saw that he was doing the same thing. He no longer looked eager for a scoop; he looked slightly shell shocked. 'Good,' he thought. 'Let him get a good look at what it's all about. Let him see the faces behind the headlines.'

The Lifeflight helicopter finally arrived, and Johnny was able to turn his patient over to them. He watched as it lifted off, shielding his eyes from the dirt and grit the down wash kicked up.

MacGee stood beside him, squinting. "So, is she gonna make it?"

"Maybe." Johnny's shoulders slumped a fraction. He was a bad loser.

"Hey, Gage!"

Johnny's head whipped around at the sound of Mike Stoker's voice. He saw the firefighter motioning wildly for him. Grabbing the biophone, he hurried over to him.

MacGee grabbed the drug box and followed, coming to a grinding halt when he realized that they were approaching the convertible with the pickup on top of it. His stomach did another slow roll.

"What's up, Mike?" Johnny asked, eyeing the precariously balanced truck warily.

"We've got a live one," he answered excitedly.

"In the truck?"

Mike shook his head. "No, in the car."

The paramedic's eyebrow shot up as his gaze fell from the truck to the car beneath it. "In *there*?" he asked incredulously.

Mike nodded. "I couldn't believe it myself. We'd just finished getting the driver's --" He faltered slightly. "-- the driver out of the truck when we heard someone yelling for help from inside the car. We just got the driver's side door off, but she's on the other side. Wedged in there really good, too, but she's conscious, and she doesn't seem to be hurt too bad. At least from what she says."

Johnny took the flashlight Mike offered and hunkered down next to the squashed car. Peering in, he could see that the convertible top had been up, but its steel frame had splintered like toothpicks when two tons of truck had rolled on top of it. The top of the front seat was mashed down, holding most of the weight of the truck, creating a small space less than two feet high along the front seat. As the beam from the flashlight washed through the tiny pocket, he found himself looking into the frightened face of a teenage girl curled up on her left side on the passenger side of the car.

"Oh God, please help me," she whimpered softly. "I don't wanna die."

Johnny flashed her an easy smile and dropped immediately into paramedic mode. "Don't worry, you're not going to die," he said soothingly. "We're going to get you out." He spoke over his shoulder to Mike. "Get some manpower and tools over here, pronto."

Mike nodded and took off at a jog, yelling for Chet to grab the jaws.

Johnny stuck his head further into the car. "Are you hurt?"

The girl shook her head slightly. "I-- I don't think so. My leg hurts a little, and my head. I think I hit it on the side window when the car spun around." She bit her trembling lower lip at the memory. "But my right leg is all caught up under the dashboard. I can't move it."

Sensing that the girl was hovering close to the edge of panic, Johnny found his most soothing tone and said, "That's okay, we're going to take care of that." He cast a quick glance at the truck that was teetering just above his head, then squirmed his way a little further along the front seat towards her. "So, what's your name?"

"Nicole," came the tremulous reply.

"Well, Nicole, I'm Johnny." He reached out and touched her shoulder. "I need to check a few things out, just to make sure you're okay."

"Okay." She sounded calmer by a small degree now that she was no longer entombed alone inside the wrecked car.

Voices could be heard outside now, and the clatter of heavy tools as they were placed next to the car. Johnny pressed his fingers to Nicole's neck below her jaw line and took a quick pulse and respiration count. That done, he squirmed in as close to her as he could get and shone the flashlight over her body, trying to get a picture of how she was laying and where she might be pinned. It was hard to tell, but it didn't appear as though any of the weight from the truck had impacted her, but was rather had been absorbed by the top of the front seat she had slid lower than. He moved the light to her legs, and saw that she'd pretty much told it like it was -- her left leg was curled under her, but the right leg disappeared under the twisted remains of the dashboard that had smashed inward during the accident. He touched her shoulder again. "Well, Nicole, looks like you were right about being stuck. How does your leg feel? Any pain?"

"Some," she answered. "Not too bad, though."

"Is it a sharp or dull pain?"

"Um..." She considered it for a second. "It was sharp right after the accident, but now it's more like it's throbbing from the knee all the way down."

Gage stored the information away until he could talk to Rampart. "Can you wiggle your toes?"

A grimace crossed her face. "Yeah, but it hurts." The grimace turned to a hopeful smile. "But that's good, though, right? That I can move them?"

He returned the smile and gave her shoulder a small squeeze. "Yes, that's a very good thing." He cocked his head at the sound of Mike's voice calling for him. "Nicole, I'll be right back." He started to inch backwards on the seat.

"No, please!" she cried out desperately. "Please don't leave me!"

"It's okay, Nicole, I just have to talk to the firemen who are going to help me get you out of here. I'll only be gone for a minute or two," he said softly. "I promise, I'll be right back."

She stared at him with wide, terrified eyes that were starting to fill with tears. "You promise? You won't leave me here?"

"I'd never do that." Again the easy smile. "Two minutes. You can time me." He started once again to move backwards, trying to minimize his movements so as not to upset the delicate balance of the truck above his head. His feet finally hit the pavement, and he extricated himself from the car with a relieved sigh.

Mike was waiting for him. "Any luck just pulling her out?" he asked hopefully.

Johnny shook his head. "Nope, she's stuck, all right. She's bunched up on the passenger side of the front seat on her left side. Her right leg is jammed under the dash. The only way to get to it is from the other side."

"So we have to pop the other door."

"Yeah, only..." The paramedic's gaze went to the truck. "If the truck is being supported by the car's frame, and we take the door off..." He left the thought unfinished.

Mike nodded thoughtfully, his eyes troubled. "We can try to brace it, but that could get tricky, what with the way it's laying. It's already off balance from when we took the first door off."

MacGee followed the exchange silently, his head moving back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match. He was still getting past the fact that there was someone alive in the collapsed mess of the car.

Johnny blew out a frustrated breath and ran a hand through his hair. "Well, we don't have much choice. We have to do something to get her out of there." He looked around. "Where's Roy?"

The engineer jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Saw him over with Smitty from 27. Heart attack victim trapped in his car."

"Damn," he muttered softly. He picked up the biophone. "Rampart, Squad 51."

There was a slight pause, then, "Squad 51, go ahead."

"Rampart, we have a female victim of an automobile accident, age approximately eighteen. Pulse, ninety three and strong, respirations normal. The victim is conscious and alert, but currently trapped in her vehicle, and we are unable to assess for injuries."

"10-4, 51. Advise when you have access to the patient."

"51." Johnny held the phone out towards MacGee. "Now, if something changes while I'm in the car, I'm gonna need you to talk to the hospital for me."

MacGee stared at him, not making any move to take the handset. "What? Me?"

"Yeah, you. If the girl's condition should suddenly change, I'll need to relay that to Rampart and get instructions back. Since Roy's not here, you're hired." Johnny tried again to get him to take it.

"Hey, Gage, I don't know..."

Johnny sighed, knowing he was asking a lot of the reporter, but also knowing he needed the extra help he could provide. Everyone else's hands were going to be full trying to get the girl out. "It's no sweat, MacGee. You just press the button and tell them what I tell you to say, then you tell me what they say back. Look, chances are you won't even have to do anything, she looks pretty stable. I'm just making contingent plans."

"But..."

Johnny pressed the biophone into MacGee's hand. "All you have to do is talk. That's what you do, right? Talk?"

The reporter stared down at the handset, defeated. "Yeah, that's what I do."

"Johnny, we're ready to get started," Mike called from the other side of the car.

Nodding, Johnny slapped a hand on MacGee's shoulder. "You'll do fine." He ducked down and slowly made his way back into the car's interior. "Hey, Nicole, how you doin'?"

The girl's face brightened considerably when she saw him. "I'm fine, but you're late."

He smiled. Humor was a good indicator. "Sorry. I was just making arrangements for your coming out party. Now, things are going to get a little loud while they're working on the door, but I'm going to be right here the whole time, okay? There's nothing to be scared about."

She did look scared as they started prying at the door frame with the Jaws, but Johnny stayed right next to her, letting her know he was there, keeping a comforting hand on her arm through the din, trying to reassure her that everything was going to be fine. He was actually doing a good job of it, too, until the sound of the tool was overpowered by a loud, ominous, creak of metal on metal. The Jaws died immediately, and there was an eerie silence.

"What was that?" Nicole squeaked. "What's happening?"

"It's nothing to worry about," Johnny assured her, even as his own eyes warily surveyed the truck that rested mere inches above them. It shifted ever so slightly as he was looking at it, and he flinched involuntarily.

Nicole saw it as well. "It's gonna fall! We're gonna die!" she shrieked.

Fighting down his own rising fear, he said in his best paramedic voice, "We are *not* going to die. Just calm down, okay? Everything's going to be fine." He raised his voice louder. "Mike, what's the holdup?"

"Just putting up a few more supports," came the muffled reply. "We'll start cutting again in a minute. The door's almost off."

"There, you see?" Johnny said with a smile. "Nothing to worry about."

True to his word, Mike had the door off the car a few minutes later, and fresh air wafted into the car's cramped interior. After a brief review of the twisted dash and how it was pinning Nicole's leg, the Jaws were brought in again, and in a few short minutes she was free. A backboard was slid in underneath her.

"Okay, they're going to get you out of here, now," Johnny said.

"You're coming too, aren't you?" she asked worriedly, clinging to his hand.

"I'm just going to make sure you don't get hung up on anything," he assured her, glancing up at the ragged remains of the convertible roof's framework. "Then I'll be out to take a look at that leg and the bump on your pretty head."

He watched as she was pulled gently out of the car, stopping her twice to bend back the pieces of metal that hung low enough to block her path. Once she'd cleared the door, he started to back up along the seat, looking forward to getting back out into the open air. The creaking had begun again, and he wasn't about to press his luck any further than he already had. His knees had just cleared the end of the seat when he felt his turnout coat snag up on one of the pieces of metal, stopping his progress. He tried to reach around and unhook it, but it had managed to catch him square in the middle of the back where he couldn't reach it.

MacGee had seen the paramedic's legs come out and then stop. He watched for a second, then stepped closer to the car. "Yo, Gage, you planning on coming out, or are you on a coffee break?"

"I'm trying," he snapped back. "I'm hung up on something." He tried again to pull himself free, and the creaking grew more ominous.

The truck began to shift forward from its precarious placement, and MacGee's eyes widened. "Gage, get out of there!" he yelled. "The truck's going over!"

Looking up, Johnny saw the cab of the truck start to come down towards him, and he flattened himself on the seat in a frantic attempt to save himself, screwing his eyes tightly shut as he waited for the weight of the vehicle to come crushing down onto his back.

The creaking turned into a horrific screech of stressed metal giving way as the supports let loose and the truck fell forward into the protective pocket of the front seat.

MacGee had flinched away as the truck fell, shielding his face. Now, looking back, he swallowed hard. There was no way the paramedic could still be alive in there. Was there? Cautiously, he approached the ruined car and peered inside. He blinked in amazement. The steering wheel had stopped the truck's decent and was supporting almost its full weight, creating a minuscule pocket of free space that the paramedic had managed to fit his lanky form into. "Gage, you okay?" he asked cautiously.

There was a brief hesitation, then a muffled reply. "I'd be better if someone got me out of here."

MacGee grinned, admiring the fireman's ability to keep his cool under the circumstances. He looked around and saw two of the other men from 51 heading over at a run.

Suddenly, the steering wheel gave a loud groan and started to bend under the immense weight that was balanced on it. MacGee's eyes widened and he shouted to the approaching men, "Hurry!"

"Get me the hell out of here!" Johnny yelled, his fingers fumbling under him to release the buckles on his

turnout coat, which was still hung up on the metal rod.

Acting on reflex, the reporter grabbed Johnny's legs and gave a hard pull.

Johnny bit back a yell as the sharp end of the rod ripped through the thick material of the coat and into his back. He shrugged the coat off as he was slowly pulled backwards, praying that the rod wasn't going to skewer him before he got clear of it.

MacGee took a second grip on Johnny's legs just as Mike reached them. The two of them pulled as hard as they could, and the three men landed in a tangled heap on the pavement just as the truck snapped through the steering wheel and landed squarely in the front seat of the car. All three of them just sat staring dumbly at the sight for a moment.

Looking more than a little rattled, Johnny shook his head. "Man, that was *too close*."

"Tell me something, Gage," MacGee said as he slowly made it to his feet, his heart pounding as though it wanted to exit his chest. "Is working with you always this nerve wracking? Or did I just get lucky?"

That brought a shaky laugh from Mike. "Mr. MacGee, you have no idea!" He got up as well and offered a hand to Johnny, helping him up.

Johnny ran a hand through his hair and blew out a shaky breath. "Too close," he said again softly. Then his expression changed and he was all business again. He turned to Mike. "Where's Nicole?"

"Nicole?" he echoed, looking confused, the near tragedy still uppermost in his mind. "Oh, right, the girl. She's over on the shoulder." He gestured to the side of the road.

Picking up the biophone, Johnny headed over. MacGee grabbed the drug box without being told and followed. The teenager was laying on the backboard at the side of the road. Johnny was glad to see that she was far enough away that she hadn't been able to see what happened with the truck.

Her face lit up when she saw him. "You're late again," she said with a small smile as he knelt next to her.

He favored her with a crooked grin. "Well now, I'm sorry about that, Nicole, I was unavoidably detained. But any of these guys will tell you, I'd never stand up a pretty girl."

She giggled, her attention successfully diverted while he checked her over for injuries. Johnny was amazed to find nothing worse than a bump on her head and a shallow cut along her right calf where the dash had sliced into it.

Putting her into one of the ambulances that had finally made it to the scene, Johnny promised to stop in at Rampart later on and check up on her. He smacked the ambulance's doors and sent it on its way, then turned and surveyed the remains of the accident. Tow trucks had started to arrive, and firemen and paramedics were packing up their equipment, all of the victims either on their way to the hospital or waiting for the coroner's wagon to come for them. He glanced down at his watch, and was amazed to see that over two hours had passed from the time they had first been toned out of the station.

MacGee walked up to him. "So, what's next?"

"We're done," Johnny answered. "We clean up, make sure we have all of our stuff, and go home." He reached down to grab the biophone, wincing as he lifted the heavy piece of equipment.

MacGee caught the grimace that crossed his face. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah, just got a little scraped up when I was in the car." He shifted the biophone to his other hand, but it didn't relieve the pain in his back.

Stepping behind him, MacGee parted the torn shirt and let out a low whistle. "Jesus, Gage, you've got the Grand Canyon back here. You should have a doctor take a look at it."

"Nah, it's okay." Johnny headed back to the squad, sure that his injury was being blown out of proportion by the reporter until he tried to lift the biophone up into its compartment. A fresh streak of pain cut through his back, catching him totally off guard. He sucked in a breath through clenched teeth.

MacGee's brow creased. "Yeah, sure it's okay." He turned and flagged down a passing fireman. "Hey, have you seen DeSoto? Paramedic with 51?"

Charlie Winter from engine 27 paused. "Yeah, I think I saw him getting into an ambulance a little while ago. He's probably at Rampart." He gave MacGee a strange look. He'd heard that 51 was going to have a reporter riding with them, and everyone had been taking bets on how long it would take Gage to take a swing at the guy. "Hey, aren't you --"

"Thanks, Charlie," Johnny said quickly. "Guess I'll head over and pick him up."

The fireman nodded and continued on his way, casting a final curious glance over his shoulder.

"So, we're heading to the hospital to get your partner?" MacGee asked, sliding into the squad.

"Yup." Johnny got in carefully, thinking that maybe having Brackett take a quick look at his back might not be such a bad idea, and started the engine. Before pulling out, he reached for the HT that usually sat in his turnout coat pocket so he could notify dispatch as to the squad's status. Only then did he remember that the coat, and the HT, were now sandwiched inside of the convertible. He let out a groan. "Cap is gonna kill me!"

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When they'd met up with Roy at Rampart, all it had taken was one look at Johnny's back for him to steer him into an exam room and have Doctor Brackett take a look at it. It hadn't needed stitches, thankfully, just a few butterfly bandages to close the deeper end of the four inch furrow between his shoulder blades. But it was definitely going to be sore for a while. Brackett prescribed him a mild pain killer, but he'd have to wait until he was off duty to take it.

Roy had been less shocked by the story of Johnny's misadventure than by the enthusiastic retelling it was given by Chris MacGee on the way back to the station. He gave Johnny a "what was that?" look, but he'd merely shrugged, a little bewildered by it himself.

The rest of the guys had already settled into their bunks by the time they arrived back at the station, and Johnny, Roy and MacGee followed suit. They hadn't been there twenty minutes when the klaxons went off, eliciting a round of groans.

"Squad 51, possible overdose. 134 North Ridge Road. One three four North Ridge Road. Cross street Lexington. Time out, 11:52."

MacGee, still on his adrenaline rush from the earlier accident, and not used to being in bed before midnight

anyway, bounded out of bed and into the borrowed bunker pants Roy had shown him how to lay out for easy access. Roy and Johnny did the same, albeit less enthusiastically, while the rest of the crew rolled over and pulled the covers over their heads in an attempt to not wake all the way up.

"MacGee," Johnny said as they got into the squad, "a bit of advice. Pace yourself. This could end up being a long night."

The reporter merely grinned. "Don't worry about me, hotshot. I'm a night person."

Johnny merely rolled his eyes in response.

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"Squad 51, victim of violence. 8742 Wisteria Court, Apartment 2G. Eight seven four two Wisteria Court, apartment 2G. Cross street Ballard. Time out 01:10."

"The Murphys are at it again," Roy sighed as he rolled out of his bunk.

"Which one do you think it is this time?" Johnny asked, stifling a yawn.

"You know these people?" MacGee asked, fumbling with his pants. He'd laid them out himself when they'd gotten back, and he hadn't gotten it quite right.

"Could you guys take this somewhere else?" Chet mumbled sleepily.

The trio headed down to the squad. "You know these people?" MacGee asked again.

"Yeah, Bill and Elaine Murphy," Roy said as they waited for the station door to roll open. "Nice people, actually, except when they drink."

"And they drink whenever Bill's unemployment check comes in," Johnny finished. "Last time we were there, they'd been fighting over what she made for dinner, and she'd brained him with the skillet. Gave him a nice concussion."

MacGee's mouth hung open. "Why don't the cops arrest them?"

"They do," Roy said. "But when they sober up, whoever isn't in jail bails out the one that is, and they refuse to press charges."

The reporter shook his head. "Then you should stop responding to them. I mean, if they want to kill each other, let them!"

Johnny shook his head. "Doesn't work like that. We're public servants, remember? They call, we respond. Doesn't matter if it's once or twenty times. It's the job."

"Damn waste of time," MacGee grumbled.

"Maybe," Roy acknowledged. "But that's what we're here for."

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"Engine 51, dumpster fire, behind 1530 Chaucer Blvd. One five three zero Chaucer Blvd. Cross street Palamino. Time out, 02:27."

MacGee muttered a muffled curse into his pillow, then started to swing his legs over the edge of the bunk.

"S'not us," Johnny mumbled over at him. "We don't have to go."

"Thank Christ." MacGee thumped back into the pillow gratefully. He got five more minutes of sleep before the klaxons sounded again.

"Squad 51, possible heart attack. 921 Silver Street. Nine two one Silver Street. Cross street Lansing. Time out, 02:33."

Rolling to the edge of his bunk, Johnny flung a pillow at MacGee's unmoving form. "C'mon, MacGee, no rest for the weary."

"Drop dead, Gage," the reporter shot back, but there was less venom than grudging humor than there might have been. He tugged on his bunker pants and stumbled to the squad, fighting with his hopelessly twisted suspenders. Somehow, his research just wasn't turning out the way he'd expected.

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"God, I hope that's the last call for the night," MacGee lamented as they pulled the squad into the station.

"I thought you were a night person?" Johnny said, his eyes gleaming. He'd seen a definite change in the reporter's demeanor in the past eight hours, and he was beginning to believe that he was starting to get the true picture of life as a firefighter.

"Yeah, well, even night people need some sleep," MacGee groused. "Why bother having beds if you don't get to sleep in them?"

"Just because we have beds doesn't mean we get a good night's sleep every night," Roy interjected.

"Or most nights." Johnny opened the squad's door just as the klaxons sounded again.

"No!" MacGee slumped back against the seat. "Oh, come on!"

Johnny closed the door. "Like I said, it's gonna be a long night."

"Station 51, Station 27, Engine 32, Station 116, Engine 15, structure fire. 725 Industrial Row. Seven two five Industrial Row. Cross street Pratt. Time out 03:40."

Roy restarted the squad and shook his head. "A very long night."

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The sight that greeted them when they got to the scene was less than confidence boosting. A large warehouse that was being converted to office space was fully engulfed, flames shooting over fifty feet into the air. 51 was directed to the far west corner of the structure.

MacGee stood next to the squad looking at the fire, his mouth hanging open, totally in awe of the fiery beast before him. "My God..."

"Yeah, that about sums it up," Johnny said, shrugging on his SCBA.

"I can't believe how... *powerful* it is," the reporter said softly. "I can feel the heat all the way from here."

"You're learning to respect the beast," Roy observed as he put on his own gear. "That's good. When you don't respect it, it can sneak up and get you."

"MacGee, you stay with the squad. This is one time you don't get to tag along," Johnny said. He was expecting to get an argument, but didn't get any response at all. He looked up from adjusting his straps. "Mac, did you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," MacGee said vaguely, his gaze still locked on the blaze. "Stay with the squad. No problem."

Roy exchanged a bemused look with his partner, then they headed over to the engine, where Hank put them on a line into the building. Water was already being poured onto the roof by 116's tower ladder, and each of the additional engines had lines going into their respective sides. But the beast was hungry this night, and they appeared to be fighting a losing battle.

MacGee sat on the running board of the squad, taking in the flurry of activity that surrounded the fire scene. Radios squawked with instructions. Men dragged lines from both engines and nearby hydrants, creating a spider web of hose that nearly obscured the pavement beneath. Some went inside the building, some stayed outside, some were climbing ladders to the roof. He had no idea how they knew what to do, or how they kept track of who was where. To him, it was utter chaos. But he could see that to the men who performed these same ritualistic drills over and over again, it was more of a controlled chaos, the kind that only they could understand. The longer he watched, the higher his opinion of the firemen rose.

A small commotion caught his eye, and he wandered over to where a police officer was politely but firmly telling a camera crew to stay behind the fire line. 'Freelancers,' MacGee theorized, judging from the lack of station call letters on their equipment. From the snatches of conversation he caught, it wasn't the first time the officer had had to move them back, and he was starting to get more than a bit annoyed. The camera crew in question wasn't making his life any easier, either, spouting the first amendment and the people's right to know. "Jerks," MacGee muttered, before realizing this was the exact same conversation he'd had with John Gage two weeks earlier, back when *he'd* been the one trying to cross the police line. He cringed inwardly. 'Well, that was different,' he tried to tell himself. 'Yeah, sure it was,' another part of his brain answered sourly. 'Hypocrite.'

The officer won the discussion, and the camera crew moved to the other side of the yellow tape, but MacGee could tell from their faces that they had no intentions of staying there. He debated searching out Captain Stanley, but figured he stood little chance of finding him in the mass confusion, and opted instead to stay out of it. Crowd control was the police's job; he was just here as an observer. Who was he to play tattletale when the guys were just trying to make a living?

A sudden explosion ended the internal debate, sending MacGee to the ground, arms thrown over his head protectively as glass and debris rained down around him. He cautiously picked up his head once the sound had diminished, although the roaring stayed in his ears, then made his way to his feet, shards of glass streaming off his back. He stared dumbly at the warehouse, wondering why it looked so different before he realized it was now minus one whole wall. "Christ almighty..." he breathed, his gaze falling to the tangle of hose that led into the rubble. He tried frantically to remember which side of the building the men from 51 had gone into, a sickening feeling growing that it was *that* side. Men scrambled to the decimated wall and started moving the rubble, trying to create an opening, while others redirected their hoses to fight back the flames that had found renewed fervor in the explosion.. After what seem hours, but was in truth only minutes, two men were carried out, and two others were helped out, limping, their arms thrown around their brother firemen's necks for support.

He started to run over towards the injured men, then skidded to a stop and reversed course, heading back to

the squad instead. He'd lug enough of the paramedics' equipment to know what the important stuff was, and grabbed the drug box and biophone out of their compartments. He hurried over with them, puffing a little at the weight he was dragging by the time he reached the improvised triage area.

Soot covered all of the men's faces, so at first he couldn't tell them apart, but he finally picked out Johnny's voice and connected it to the right person. He placed the equipment at the paramedic's feet. "Do you need anything else?" he panted.

Johnny looked at him strangely for a split second, then glanced at the equipment. "Yeah, get the oxygen and a couple of blankets." He caught MacGee's unsure expression and clarified. "The right rear compartment."

Nodding, MacGee quickly went and retrieved the required items, having to quickly sidestep several firemen who came in to take up the hoses abandoned by the injured men. Taking ragged breaths by the time he got back, he thought ruefully, 'Yeah, sure you could do this standing on your head. Putz.'

He deposited the gear next to Johnny, who was taking vitals on one of the downed men, whom he finally recognized as Chet, who was cradling his left arm. Roy was working on Marco, applying pressure to a long gash on his right leg while the fireman muttered soft curses in two languages. The two paramedics looked none too good themselves - Roy had rivulets of blood running down his cheeks from a series of small cuts that covered his face, and Johnny had a lump the size of a goose egg blossoming on the left side of his forehead. But mindless of their own injuries, the two paramedics continued to work on their patients.

A sudden bright light shone on the group, making MacGee blink and look away. He cursed, shielding his eyes and blinking away the spots that swam in his vision, and squinted into the light to find its source. A few yards away, the camera crew from earlier had crossed the police line yet again and set up shop, filming the small circle of men, the spotlight from the camera arcing over them slowly.

"Jesus!" Johnny swore, ducking his head down to get the light out of his eyes. "Will someone get them the hell out of here?"

Almost before he knew he was doing it, MacGee stalked over and threw his hand over the camera lens. "Turn the camera off and get the hell out of here," he barked.

The camera man jerked his head up from the viewfinder angrily. "Hey, what's wrong with you, man?"

The second man with him pointed at MacGee. "Hey, I know you! You're from KPV, right?"

MacGee's hand remained firmly over the lens. "Yeah, so what?"

The man grinned. "Hey, this is perfect! We've got some great stuff here, so like, maybe you can talk to your station about buying it? This is real exclusive stuff, man, nobody else has gotten this close."

MacGee felt a momentary flash of his old self rise up, looking for the hot story, then it was gone. "No dice." He scowled, aware that the camera was still rolling. "Look, pal, I already told you, turn the camera off."

The freelancer scowled. "Oh, sure, I get it. You want the scoop for yourself. What, you got your own crew around here somewhere? Who'd you pay off to get inside?"

"There's no crew, just me, and I'm not looking for any damn story..." MacGee trailed off. Wasn't he, though? Wasn't that what this whole day had been about? His eyes drifted over to the circle of injured firefighters. Just one short day ago he'd been positive he was going to come away with a scathing expose on

them, something that would catch the attention of the producers and guarantee him a shot at the anchor seat. Now here he was, caught between the person he'd begun the shift as, and the person he was now, no longer a dispassionate reporter looking for a headline, but someone who knew these men, had eaten with them and talked with them, seen pictures of their families and laughed silently as they cracked wise with each other. Somewhere in the past day he'd crossed the line from outsider to insider, and for the first time, everything that Gage had tried to tell him about why he'd pushed the camera away from the fire victim hit home.

Realizing that the freelancer and his camera man were waiting for him to finish, he decided that he'd been given a chance to make up for being such a jackass in the past. He grabbed the camera, popped the tape out, and shoved the empty camera back into the man's hands before either of them could react. "I said, turn the camera off. Now get off this fire scene before I have you thrown off."

"Hey, man, you got no right! This is hot news," the freelancer said angrily. He gestured over at the cluster of injured firemen. "Stuff like this, it gets noticed. We might even be able to get a regular gig out of it, if we play our cards right. You don't want in, fine. There's plenty of other stations we can sell to. But stay the hell outta our way." He made a grab for the tape.

MacGee glared at him and held the tape out of reach, unable to believe he was about to get into a fight over doing what he himself had done a hundred times -- filming the sensational. But this was different. No one needed to see these men bloody and in pain, especially their families.

"Do we have a problem here, folks?" an authoritative voice asked from behind him.

Officer Vince Howard stood with his arms crossed, his expression conveying his annoyance at seeing the two men on the wrong side of the line once again.

The freelancer's eyes widened at the sight of the policeman, his attitude changing immediately. "No, officer," he stammered, "no problem." He hooked a thumb at MacGee. "We're with him." His voice dropped. "C'mon, man," he whispered to MacGee desperately, "last chance to get in on this."

Eyes narrowed, MacGee replied, "Forget it." To Vince he said, "Never saw them before, officer. They don't belong here."

Vince's face drew into a scowl. "I thought I told you two to stay on the other side of that line."

MacGee looked at the tape in his hands, wondering what kinds of great footage it contained, then shook his head, annoyed at himself. This do-gooder stuff was evidently going to take some practice. "Officer, you might want to hang onto this," he said, holding the tape out. Vince took it, his eyebrow going up a notch, and he nodded his thanks.

Feeling good about himself, MacGee left them to sort it out and turned back towards where Marco was being lifted onto a stretcher. Chet was on his feet, albeit unsteadily, being helped by Johnny over to where the ambulance had pulled up. The two paramedics had a quick discussion after both men had been loaded in, and MacGee chuckled to himself. He'd heard this discussion a half dozen times during the course of the day and could quote it almost verbatim -- Gage was suggesting that he drive the squad to Rampart, and Roy was pulling rank and telling him to ride with the patients. His mouth nearly hit the pavement in shock when he saw Roy climbing into the back of the ambulance. Johnny closed up the door and gave it two raps, then started over to gather up the equipment that was still strewn on the ground. MacGee grinned as he walked over to help him. 'I'll be damned,' he thought with amusement, 'Gage actually won one.'

"So, how are they?" the reporter asked as he stooped to snap the drug box shut.

Johnny regarded him silently, as though checking to see if there had been any real concern behind the question. "Chet has a broken arm, and Marco has a deep cut on his leg. He might need some surgery." Johnny let out a long breath and shook his head. "They were damn lucky. We all were."

"What happened, anyway?" MacGee asked. "Why the explosion?"

"Paint thinner," Johnny spat out angrily. "They had a whole flat of paint thinner stored in there."

MacGee looked a little confused. "Didn't you know that? I mean, aren't they supposed to tell you guys stuff like that?"

"Yeah, they are." Johnny shook his head. "Seems it slipped the owner's mind. Convenient, since he didn't have a license to store hazardous materials."

MacGee stared at him in shock. The thought that someone would put these men's lives on the line so he wouldn't get a summons was mind boggling. His understanding and appreciation of just how much these men put their lives on the line every day just kept going up and up.

They walked back to the squad with the equipment in silence. On the way to Rampart, MacGee noticed that Johnny kept putting his hand to his face, rubbing the bridge of his nose, as though to clear his eyesight. He wasn't too concerned until they started to drift to the side of the road. "Yo, Gage!"

The wheel jerked in Johnny's hand. "What?"

"You wanna stay on the road?" MacGee studied his face more closely, but the dark cab made it hard to see much. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," the paramedic answered crankily. "Just don't yell at me like that when I'm driving." His driving improved for the rest of the trip, but he looked unnaturally studious at the wheel, like he was forcing himself to stay awake. They pulled into Rampart's parking lot, and he turned off the engine, but he made no move to get out.

MacGee opened his own door and got out, not realizing that Johnny wasn't doing the same. He walked around the squad to the driver's side and rapped on the roof of the squad. "Hey, c'mon, let's go, hotshot. The sooner we find DeSoto, the sooner we can get back to bed." When Johnny still didn't emerge, he sighed and pulled the door open. "I take back the night person remark, okay? I need my sleep." The cab's interior light kicked on and illuminated the paramedic's face, making MacGee stop short and gape. The left side of Johnny's face had swollen and bruised dramatically since they'd left the fire scene, his eye nearly swollen shut. "Jesus, Gage!"

Johnny mumbled something unintelligible in response, his head lowering to rest on his hands on the steering wheel.

"Aw, shit, Gage, don't do this to me!" MacGee stood frozen for a second in panic, then bolted for the emergency room doors.

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The waiting room at Rampart was full of firefighters, a few still in full turnout gear, others changed into street clothes, having been relieved from their shifts. Word had spread -- not just around the fire scene, but to other stations that hadn't even been involved in the call -- that there were men down, and that one of them was in serious condition.

Chris MacGee sat off in one corner, not wanting to intrude on what seemed to be a very fraternal gathering. He watched as men from different companies drifted in and out in what appeared to be a never ending stream, checking on the fallen firefighters' conditions and comforting the distraught men from 51, slightly mystified by the outpouring of concern these men were showing for their injured colleagues. They didn't act like people who just worked together. They reminded him more of a family coming together in their time of need. A very large family, with rules and traditions that he probably wouldn't be able to grasp in a month of interviews, much less a one day ride along. They were the kind of things that only a member of the family got to learn, and no matter how much he had gleaned during his brief stint with them, he would still always just be a visitor.

Word had come out that Chet Kelly had a simple break to the ulna. He had been sent up to have it set and casted, but had otherwise been given a clean bill of health and would be going home shortly. Marco Lopez's leg injury had required vascular surgery to repair the damage done, but his prognosis was also good. He'd be spending at least a week recuperating in the hospital, and a few more at home before he'd be able to report back to duty. Roy had taken a few stitches on his forehead along the hairline, while numerous other cuts and abrasions on his face were simply cleaned and left to heal on their own. He'd been gulping aspirin almost since the wait began, but he kept tersely refusing offers to take him home to get some rest.

The man they were all keeping vigil for was currently up in surgery. Tests had revealed a small subdural hematoma forming on Johnny's brain, courtesy of the debris that had taken his helmet off, and very nearly his head with it. The building pressure had caused his blurry vision and disorientation, but the doctors were upbeat about his chances of pulling through without complications, thanks to the fact he'd been on his way to the hospital before the symptoms had even begun. Still, any brain injury was dangerous, and the atmosphere was tense as they waited for news.

Tired of sitting on the hard plastic chairs, which he personally believed to have been designed by a sadist, MacGee wandered down to the cafeteria, where he bought himself a large cup of coffee. As an afterthought, he grabbed a tray and bought as many coffees as he could carry, then recruited a candy striper to help him and purchased every donut that they had. He brought it all up to the waiting room, where the treat was met with subdued thanks from the weary firemen.

Captain Stanley took the proffered coffee and mumbled a thank you, then did a double take on the person handing it to him. "Oh, Mr. MacGee," he said distractedly. "I didn't realize you were still here."

"I've been trying to stay out of the way," he answered, passing the last cup to Del Marten, who was sitting next to Hank, hunkered forward in his chair, hands clasped, staring at the floor. He took a small sip, then put the cup down on the floor between his feet and returned to his previous position, his expression never changing.

Glancing at his watch, Hank said, "Guess we kept you around a little longer than you expected. I'll have one of the guys drive you back to the station for your car."

MacGee shook his head. "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to stick around and see how Gage makes out."

Looking a bit surprised, Hank gave a small shrug. "Sure, fine."

The look wasn't lost on MacGee. "Well," he said slowly, "it's just that I figure I started this shift with these guys, so I should finish it with them. No matter where that is." He paused. "I think I've still got a few things to learn."

Hank looked at him searchingly for a moment, then a small smile crossed his tired face. "Sounds to me like you've already learned a lot, Mr. MacGee."

Looking at the group of men scattered around him, MacGee gave a slow nod. "Yeah, Captain, I think I have."

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"Ow! Chet, watch your elbow, wouldja?"

The fireman shifted on the edge of Johnny's hospital bed. "Well, quit hogging all the room," he retorted. "I can't see the tv if I sit the other way."

Johnny rolled his eyes and rearranged his pillows, trying to put himself out of the reach of Chet's cast-encased elbow, which was still looming closer than he liked. "You could use a chair," he suggested.

"Cap and Marco already have them spoken for."

Roy, who was leaning against the wall, spoke up. "I could go find some more," he offered. He was almost as concerned about the cast being within accidental striking distance as Johnny was.

"Nah," Chet said with a sidelong smirk at Johnny, "I'm fine right here."

Johnny just rolled his eyes again, but the corners of his lips gave away the smile that was lurking underneath.

Mike Stoker, the last of A-shift to arrive, came into the room, interrupting any further discussion on the seating arrangements. "Hey, guys." He walked over and handed Johnny a small box. "To help wash away the hospital food taste," he said with a wink.

Chet peered over at the box in the paramedic's hands and grinned widely. "Hey, chocolate covered macadamia nuts! My favorite!" He made a grab for the box.

Moving fast, Johnny stuck the box of treats onto the night stand, out of Chet's reach. "Not a chance, Kelly. Keep your grimy mitts offa my candy!"

Mike took a place against the wall next to Roy, who asked the question they'd all been dying to ask. "Okay, Cap, we're all here. So, what's this all about?"

Hank sat up a little straighter in his chair and looked around at his men. "Actually, it was Chris MacGee who asked for this get together." He put up a hand to quiet the influx of comments and questions. "He wanted to make sure we were all together to watch his broadcast tonight. And no, I don't have any idea what he's going to say." He checked his watch. "Should be on in a few minutes."

Chet picked up the remote he'd snaked from Johnny right after getting to the room and turned from the movie that was playing with muted sound to the right channel for the news. Sharon Summers was just finishing up telling everyone what a gorgeous weekend it was going to be. The camera swung over to the anchorman, who realized the changeover a second too late to get the lecherous gleam out of his eye. He cleared his throat and adjusted his papers. "Thank you, Sharon. And now, over to Chris MacGee, for this week's "As I See It."

The shot switched to MacGee. The men in the hospital room all leaned forward minutely, dying of curiosity but at the same time afraid that they were about to get the same lambasting they'd received the first time they'd been in this position.

"Thank you, Pat." MacGee looked solemnly at the camera, hands folded on top of the desk in front of him. "There are times in our lives that we have complete faith in what we believe, that we know it to be the absolute, unshakable, undeniable truth, that there's no way that what we see isn't what actually is." He took a breath. "But I've come to find that there are times that what we see is only the surface of what actually is, and what we believe is only our own clouded perception of that truth, shaded by our own ignorance and assumptions."

The men exchanged a round of looks, then brought their attention back to the television.

"Not too long ago," MacGee continued, "I had a lot to say about what I, at the time, believed to be the undeniable truth about LA County Fire Department. As a result, I was invited to spend a day with one of the local fire stations, so that I might get a better appreciation of what goes on during one of their shifts. Being a journalist, and wanting to be sure I was presenting a fair picture, I accepted."

"More like he was wanting to dig up more dirt to finish burying us with," Marco muttered.

"Twenty-four hours may not be enough time to develop a fair opinion of many things," MacGee continued, "but what I experienced in just one day with these firefighters was sufficient to make me realize that I had done them a great disservice in my earlier report. They are not the one dimensional, self-absorbed people I took them to be, but rather a group of complex and flexible professionals. The roller coaster of boredom and frenetic activity that is a normal day for them would send most people off the deep end of sanity."

"He must be talking about you, Chet," Johnny said with a grin. "You went off the deep end a long time ago."

"Stow it, Gage," Chet shot back. "I wanner hear what the guy has to say."

"Kicking back with a game of cards one minute, taking a wrecked car apart piece by piece to save the life of a trapped woman the next, their ability to switch gears from one extreme to the other and back again is amazing, if not head spinning. These are ordinary people who do an extraordinary job, people who kiss their loved ones good-bye and go to work every day knowing that they'll be putting their lives on the line every time the klaxon sounds and they're sent out on a run. Of course, not every call is an inspired act of heroism. Some... most... are simple, ordinary, mind-numbingly boring. But it's those other few where these people really shine. It's the kind of catastrophe that usually tops the evening news -- the fires, the car accidents, the breathtaking rescues that are captured on film and get broadcast over and over, sensationalized to the point we stop seeing them on any kind of personal level. But it's what the camera doesn't show us during these events, what we see but don't really *see*, that defines what these people are. They might not consider themselves heroes, merely working class Joes doing a job, but I think there are probably a lot of people whose lives they've touched that would think differently."

Hank looked over at Johnny in amazement. "Gage, I'd love to know what the hell you said to this guy."

Johnny looked just as amazed as he did. "Cap, I wish I knew."

MacGee had shifted to a different camera, this one a close-up. "I'm not a person who changes his opinion on things often, but when I'm wrong, I do admit that I'm wrong, and when that wrong has been broadcast into thousands of homes and taken as truth, then I also have an obligation to set things right. So, to all of the fire fighters watching, and especially to the men at 51, I give my sincerest apologies, as well as my thanks for letting me share that one day with you. Yours is a job that I could never do -- that I would never *want* to do -- but I sleep better these days knowing that there are people like you out there doing it." The camera pulled back slightly. "And that's "How I See It."

The shot cut to the anchor, who was staring at MacGee with something akin to shock. At a loss for one of his usual quips to go with the reporter's commentary, he cleared his throat and reshuffled his papers. "Well, yes, um, thank you, Chris." He faltered for a second, then found the right camera and smiled. "We'll be right back, after this commercial break."

Chet snapped the television off, and the group sat in stunned silence, much as they had after MacGee's last commentary on them. They'd all hoped that his opinion of them had changed, but none had expected this.

"Wow," Johnny said finally. He shook his head slightly, mindful not to rattle it too hard and bring back one of the pounding headaches that had plagued him since his surgery. "That was some speech."

"Yeah," Roy added, "I was expecting a retraction or something, but that...." He shook his head as well, at a loss for words.

"There's more." Hank picked up the two wrapped packages that had laid at his feet since his arrival. "MacGee sent these to the station yesterday. He said this one was for everyone, and this," he handed the smaller of the two to Johnny, "was for you."

He looked at the package in puzzled silence, then, almost suspiciously, tore off the wrapping paper, which he noted with amusement was a children's pattern of fire engines and Dalmatians. It took a few seconds for what he was looking at to register, then he burst out laughing. To satisfy everyone's curious stares, he turned the box around to show them. It was a bottle of spot remover, with an addendum scrawled in red magic marker under its list of claims. "Guaranteed to remove all bullseyes, targets, and other beacons of disaster, even on the most stubborn paramedics."

The room roared with laughter.

"Who knew the guy had a sense of humor?" Marco said, wiping at his eyes.

"He had to," Chet threw in. "He survived a day with Gage, didn't he?"

Johnny gave him a sour look, but was still grinning. "Ha, ha."

"What's in the other one, Cap?" Mike asked.

With two swift strokes, Hank tore the wrapping from the second package. Contained within was a wooden plaque, which he quickly read, then passed around for the others to see. The look of pride on his face was soon mirrored in their own.

The last to read the plaque, Johnny looked up, his expression a mixture of amazement and satisfaction. "Guess we made an impression, huh, Cap?"

Hank nodded, taking the plaque back and looking it over once again, already figuring out where it should hang back at the station. "I guess we did at that."

I Wish You Could author unknown

I wish you could see the sadness of a business man as his livelihood goes up in flames, or that family returning home, only to find their home and belongings damaged or destroyed.

I wish you could know what it is to search a burning bedroom for trapped children, flames rolling

over your head, your palms and knees burning as you crawl, the floor sagging under your weight as the kitchen beneath you burns.

I wish you could comprehend a wife's horror at 3am as I check her husband offorty years for a pulse and find none. I start CPR anyway, hoping against hope to bring him back, knowing intuitively that it is too late, but wanting his wife and family to know everything possible was done.

I wish you could know the unique smell of burning insulation, the taste of soot-filled mucus, the feeling of intense heat through your turnout gear, the sound of flames crackling, and the eeriness of being able to see absolutely nothing in dense smoke - sensations that I have become too familiar with.

I wish you could read my mind as I respond to a building fire - 'Is this a false alarm or a working, breathing fire? How is the building constructed? What hazards await me? Is anyone trapped or are they all out?' Or to an EMS call, 'What is wrong with the patient? Is it minor or life threatening? Is the caller really in distress, or is he waiting for us with a 2x4 or a gun?'

I wish you could be in the emergency room as the doctor pronounces dead a beautiful five-year old girl that I have been trying to save for the past twenty-five minutes, who will never go on her first date or say the words "I love you, Mommy" again.

I wish you could know the frustration I feel in the cab of the engine, the driver with his foot pressing down hard on the pedal, my arm tugging again and again at the air horn chain, as you fail to yield right-of-way at an intersection or in traffic. When you need us, however, your first comment upon our arrival will be "It took you forever to get here!"

I wish you could read my thoughts as I help extricate a girl of teenage years from the mangled remains of her automobile. 'What if this were my sister, my girlfriend, or a friend? What were her parents' reactions going to be as they open the door to find a police officer, hat in hand?'

I wish you could know how it feels to walk in the door and greet my family, not having the heart to tell them that I nearly didn't come home from that last call.

I wish you could feel my hurt as people verbally, and sometimes physically, abuse us, or belittle what I do, or as they express their attitudes of "It will never happen to me".

I wish you could realize the physical, emotional, and mental drain of missed meals, lost sleep, and forgone social activities, in addition to the tragedy my eyes have viewed.

I wish you could know the brotherhood and self-satisfaction of helping save a life or preserving someone's property, of being there in times of crisis, or creating order from total chaos.

I wish you could understand what it feels like to have a little boy tugging on your arm and asking, "Is my mommy okay?" Not even being able to look in his eyes without tears falling from your own and not knowing what to say. Or to have to hold back a longtime friend who watches his buddy having rescue breathing done on him as they take him away in the ambulance, you knowing all along he didn't have his seat belt on - sensations that I have become too familiar with.

Unless you have lived this kind of life, you will never truly understand or appreciate who I am, what we are, or what our job really means to us.

I WISH YOU COULD.

~fini~

Author's note: I'd like to express my undying gratitude to the men and women who put their lives on the line every day for the benefit of us, John Q Public, who never seems to appreciate them nearly enough for their efforts.