

First aid man Casey Durban steered the ambulance out of the hospital parking lot and headed back towards the firehouse. 'I hate the quarry,' he said, 'I swear they hire those quarrymen dependin' on their size, ya know, like ya can't work there unless you're six feet tall and two hundred pounds of muscle.'

In the passenger seat, Lieutenant Eli Sheffler, the senior first aid man, nodded his head in acknowledgement as he jotted notes on a form attached to a clipboard. Not getting a response, Casey glanced sideways, but Eli's straight, light brown hair had fallen over his forehead, hiding his face.

'Didja hear me?' Casey asked.

Eli looked up. In contrast to Casey, whose eyes were as brilliant green as his hair was red, Eli looked almost drab. His brown eyes were very nearly the same shade as his hair. His face, while not unattractive, was pale, making him appear to be just recovering from a long illness.

'This had nothing to do with the quarry,' Eli said, 'The underside of the railroad bridge is an arch. It doesn't take much intelligence to see that big trucks, like the gravel trucks, have to drive under the bridge right in the middle of the arch in order to clear it. That jerk in the car had no business trying to squeeze through the underpass between the truck and the wall. His impatience destroyed his car, messed up the first gravel truck and made the second one tip over and spill its load trying to avoid hitting the first one.'

'Now the jerk's got a broken arm and broken ribs, the second truck driver just about had a heart attack from fright, and the quarry's got to take a front-end loader off the job to help tip the truck upright and clean the gravel off the street. All because that jerk couldn't wait half a minute for the trucks to come through. He should be arrested if you ask me.'

'All I said was I hate the quarry,' Casey protested lamely.

'Well, it's foolish. The quarry's just a big hole in the ground and the men that work there are just plain people. There's nothing scary about them.' That said, Eli slouched in his seat, listening to the swish-swish of the windshield wipers, and relishing the few quiet minutes before they got to the firehouse. Eli didn't like the quarry, either, but he wasn't about to let Casey know it.

Casey angled the ambulance on Court Street in order to back into the firehouse. The three sets of bay doors were open and both fire trucks had returned. Volunteers were congregated in the ambulance's bay, trading storm stories as they finished wiping off tools. Their voices, interspersed with raucous laughter, ricocheted off the glazed yellow block walls of the apparatus floor. Mickey hollered at them to get out of the bay, then he motioned Casey in.

'That was some accident, wasn't it?' Mickey said, walking with Eli towards the watch office at the rear of the apparatus floor.

'The guy was a real jerk,' Eli answered, entering the watch office. The front was a half-wall topped with a counter. Eli sat down at the built-in desk to write his report while Mickey leaned on the counter.

'Did you see how we had to pry the car apart to get him out?' Mickey asked. 'What a mess,' he added happily as he sauntered over to Jake's office, also at the rear of the apparatus floor. A plate-glass window gave Jake a view of the apparatus floor from his office, and through the window Mickey saw Jake talking on the phone, or rather, listening to someone else talking on the phone. From the way Jake's forehead was creased in a scowl, it didn't appear he was enjoying the conversation.

Mickey walked in, flopped onto the single hard-backed oak chair across from Jake's desk, and began to write out his report.

When he caught Matt Gardner's name, he looked up and gave Jake a sympathetic smile. No doubt the police chief was letting Jake know in his usual tactless way that he wasn't pleased with something having to do with the fire department. There always seemed to be something Matt could

find to complain about.

Tipping his chair back on two legs as he collected his thoughts for a moment, Mickey stared past Jake at the small window that faced the alley between the firehouse and the Teller Building. With the rain, only minimal light entered, making the yellow tile walls look gray. The high humidity imparted a combination of odors: grease and oil from the engines; a mustiness from damp clothing and boots.

Mickey loved the smell.

“If I was claustrophobic, this office would have me screaming in terror,” Mickey said, although Jake wasn’t listening to him. Jake’s desk and chair, an oak filing cabinet, and the chair that Mickey was sitting on took up all the space. On the back wall were an assortment of framed firefighting photographs of the New York City Fire Department, where Jake, Freddy and Mickey had worked, and a couple of recent photographs of Jake and Laura Darvey riding Laura’s horses.

Into the phone Jake said, “Yeah, Matt, I agree. Yes, I’ll be over later to discuss it. Yeah, goodbye.” He hung up and raised both hands above his head, stretching upwards as if trying to grasp something just out of reach.

“What did Matt want?”

“Mobile radios,” Jake groaned, still stretching.

“Are you going for ‘em? Ya know, Cleveland’s got radio receivers in some of their fire trucks, tuned into the police frequency. It’s been working out real well.”

“Yeah, well, Matt thinks we should get radios in both our stations, in his police car, and at least in one of our engines. For a change, I agree with him. The only problem is asking the mayor and council for money to buy the stuff.” Jake left his office and started up the stairs to the second floor. “Com’on, Freddy’s got lunch ready. He was madder’n hell at how Cochran talked, but maybe he’s cooled down some.”

The kitchen was on the far side of the dormitory, along with a linen closet and another bedroom that was currently empty since Freddy had moved into an apartment. The dormitory had six beds, three against each of the longer walls, with each separated by a chair that acted as a nightstand. They were rarely used since the volunteers usually responded to alarms right from home. In the middle of the dormitory was a brass pole protected by a circular guard rail. To their left as they entered the dormitory was the washroom and beyond that, Jake’s room, where he was living until a decent apartment was available or, as Freddy and Mickey believed, until Jake and Laura decided what they were going to do with their lives.

The kitchen was half the size of the dormitory. The cooking area took up one corner, an oak table with six leaves and a dozen chairs filled the middle, and in the far corner, four beatup lounge chairs were grouped around a radio.

Freddy was at the stove, dishing out something that vaguely resembled the picture on a box of noodles. At first glance, Freddy could have passed for a brother of Jake and Dave McCann, who were identical twins. Freddy’s brown hair was the same shade as Jake’s and Dave’s, and the three men were slightly under six feet tall. Unlike the McCanns, however, Freddy was of stockier build, and instead of dark brown eyes, his eyes were a piercing blue. At thirty-four, Freddy was a year older than Jake, two years older than Mickey and Eli, and ten years older than Casey.

Sniffing the air as he entered, Jake asked, “What’s for lunch?”

“Poison,” Freddy growled and cast a withering glance at Jake, which Jake ignored. After sixteen years’ friendship, Freddy’s threatening expressions, verbal or otherwise, made little impression on Jake or Mickey.

“I had that for dinner last night,” Jake said, holding out two plates, one for himself and one for Mickey.

“What is this?” Eli asked, moving his fork around the edges of the food on his plate.

óDon't worry, it's kosher,ô Freddy snapped.

óI don't care if it's kosher, I just want to know if it's edible,ô Eli said.

Underneath the table a large red and white spotted dog stretched, gave a huge yawn that ended in óhooohooommmmaa,ô and lazily got to her feet. Pushing her way out between Eli and Casey, the dog came over to Jake to be petted.

óNot now, Hank,ô Jake said, sitting down, but he petted her anyway until she got bored and moseyed over to her blanket by the exterior kitchen door.

óHey, this is pretty good,ô Casey said, pointing at Eli's plate with his fork. óTry it, it's chicken and noodles.ô

óSo, Eli,ô Mickey said, ówhat were you saying before about the quarry?ô

óI heard from one of the cops that the owners of Liberty Sand and Gravel hired an engineer named Chandler to evaluate the operations, make suggestions for modernizing the machinery, and then make sure it all gets done.ô

Jake nodded, óI'll bet that's who moved into the new house on Overlook last Saturday.ô

THE QUARRY

by

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