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Book Review



VERTICAL

BURN



A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

VERTICAL
BIIRN

EARL EMERSON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Part 1](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Part 3](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Part 4](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[Chapter 76](#)

[Chapter 77](#)

[Praise for *Vertical Burn*](#)

[Preview of the forthcoming title *Into the Inferno*](#)

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This book is dedicated to the brave men who've been assigned with me on Ladder 3-C over the years: George Ramos, Jerry Travis, Craig Davillier, Greg Mejlaender, Mark Buck, Dan Bachmeier, Dav Iranon, Jay Mahnke, Matt Hougan, Ron MacDougall, Erik Lawyer, Chris O'Reilly.

He had never been more alone. Smoke and flames engulfed him in dizzying waves. The truest form of death, the knowledge that death is imminent and unavoidable, pressed on him from every side. Such fear sends a torrent of chemicals raging through the body, numbing every thought except concern for self.

—JOHN N. MACLEAN, *Fire on the Mountain*

We are all dead men on leave.

—EUGENE LEVINE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Because this novel was written over a period of three years, various sections of the narrative were created while the Seattle Fire Department was undergoing fundamental changes in equipment carried, staff, and operating procedures. The author has taken the liberty of leaving several anachronisms in the story. For instance, the novel has a Battalion 1 and a Battalion 1 aide, while the department has eliminated these positions. The novel operates with three-person engine companies while most engine companies in Seattle now operate with four firefighters via the NFPA two-in/two-out rule. This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance the characters have to real people is purely coincidental.

PART ONE

LEARY WAY

1. I WAKE UP SCREAMING

When the lights came on, John Finney found himself admiring the arch of Diana's lower back through her ribbed undershirt, admiring her supple thigh muscles as she swung her legs over the edge of the bunk and the way two hours of sleep had frizzed her chestnut hair. Her back was to him as she stepped into her boots and pulled her pants up over blue silk running shorts.

It was 0304 hours, June 9.

On their way out of the bunk room they passed evidence of Engine 10's earlier departure: twisted blankets, pillows darkened with swirlies of drool, a set of reading glasses askew on a *Fire Engineering* magazine. Finney always turned his pillow over when they got a run in the middle of the night. He reached the hole just as Moore grabbed for the thick brass pole. In a voice husky with sleep and rough-edged as Rod Stewart's, she said, "I guess this is the most dangerous thing we'll do all night huh?"

"It's a long drop," he joked.

She wrapped herself expertly around the pole and vanished. They'd been bantering back and forth all evening, flirting really, and she was teasing him for warning her about the long drop at Station 1. Finney cautioned everyone. Two years earlier a sleep-addled firefighter let go of the pole ten feet too soon and woke up screaming.

By the time the bearlike captain lumbered around the front of the rig and climbed into the high cab, Finney had fired up Ladder 1's diesel engine and turned on the department radio. Reidel, the tillerman, checked in through Finney's headset. "Ready to rock 'n' roll, boss." Reidel kept at his fingertips a ample supply of the worst action movie lines. Finney grinned.

"How the hell could we possibly be the first-in truck all the way out on Leary Way?" asked Captain Cordifis.

"I don't know," Finney said. But it had surprised him, too. There were thirty-three engine companies and eleven aerial truck companies in Seattle, and at least five of those truck companies should have been dispatched ahead of them.

As they traveled north through downtown on Third Avenue, the electronic whoop of the sirens reverberated off the tall buildings. Finney heard the familiar clinking of the alarm bells on the MS

air masks Moore and Baxter were donning in the crew cab behind him. Then, from the east shore Lake Union on Westlake, he saw smoke in the northern sky. Lots of smoke. They had a good one. That was what Finney was bred for, fighting fires.

He glanced at Cordifis, who was putting a piece of chewing gum into his mouth. Bill Cordifis had been to the Ozark Hotel fire, where they lost twenty-one civilians. He'd been at the Villa Plaza apartments, where eight hours of fire burned more than two hundred people out of their homes. He'd seen a woman jump six hundred feet off the Space Needle. Smoke in the sky didn't bother Cordifis any more than it bothered Finney.

Engine 22's radio report came over the air. "Engine Twenty-two at Leary Way Northwest and Eighth Avenue Northwest. We have a three-story warehouse approximately seventy by fifty. Constructed of tilt-up concrete. Heavy black smoke coming from the rear of the building. Engine Twenty-two laying out a preconnect and establishing Leary Command."

Captain Vaughn was riding Engine 22 tonight, and if Cordifis didn't take command from him, he would be the Incident Commander until a chief showed up.

The building was set back from the north side of Leary Way, a couple of blocks north of the Lake Washington Ship Canal in a neighborhood that was evenly divided between residential and commercial properties. When they got close, the smoke in the street forced Finney to slow to a crawl. He didn't want to run over anybody.

Then the wind shifted, and it became clear that Vaughn had underestimated the size of the building by at least half. In front were several moving vans parked close enough to the loading dock that radiant heat would ignite them should the fire grow worse. But it wasn't going to grow worse. They would go inside and put it out just like they always did.

2. THE GIRL WITH THE FAN

Although no flame was showing, heavy black smoke floated off the roof area, curled down the wall and blotted out large portions of the street. As far as Finney could tell, nobody had approached the building yet. Engine 22's crew was off somewhere in the smoke, probably looking for a hydrant. Standing in his thick yellow bunking pants and coat, the captain from Engine 22 was surveying the building and evaluating their resources. One engine company. One truck company. By now the street should have been swarming with units.

On the rig radio, Cordifis said, "Ladder One at."

"Okay, Ladder One," answered the dispatcher.

"Moore, Baxter," Cordifis said, "get a door open. Reidel, follow me."

After parking the ladder truck, Finney strapped on an MSA backpack and regulator with thirty minutes of compressed air in the cylinder. Then he grabbed a chain saw and a pike pole out of the respective compartments and approached the building, crossing paths with Diana Moore as she headed back to the apparatus. As the driver, Finney was almost always the last one ready. "What's going on?" he asked.

"A fan. I got it."

Baxter broke a large window in front of the building with the Halligan tool, the falling glass sounding like an armload of dropped plates. Captain Cordifis, who had been speaking with Captain Vaughn near Engine 22, turned and walked toward the broken window. "Supposed to be somebody trapped inside," he said. "I guess a band practices in there all night."

"Hell," said Baxter. "We'll never find them in that smoke."

Near the front of the building the four of them, Finney, Cordifis, Baxter, and Reidel, were suddenly enveloped in a pall of smoke that made their eyes water. Cordifis began masking up as Baxter and Reidel, already covered, disappeared through the opening. Speaking to their backs, Cordifis said, "Tommy and Art, you guys go left. Find an exit for that smoke. John, you and I'll go right. The girl's going to stay with the fan."

Cordifis was an old-timer who meant no disrespect by calling Moore a "girl," or by leaving her outside to tend the fan. Finney hoped she realized that, but thought she probably didn't.

Finney put down the chain saw and pike pole. He wouldn't be needing them to search. Now his tools consisted of the small department-issued flashlight on a clip on his chest and the four-pound service axe in a scabbard on his belt, the axe no truckman was ever without.

Inside, Finney could see Cordifis's lantern for about four feet, after which it vanished. He kept track

of the captain through the Darth Vader sound of his breathing in the facepiece and the casual conversation they always maintained when they worked together. He liked to keep a leash on the captain so he didn't get into trouble. Cordifis had seen better days and sometimes couldn't keep up with the rest of the crew.

It wasn't too many minutes before Finney heard the wooden-bladed, gasoline-powered fan firing up behind them, sounding like a small airplane. The racket would serve as a marker for their entrance point. They were searching a forty-five-thousand-square-foot building, but Finney couldn't see past the end of his arm.

Department protocol decreed that fans wouldn't be set up without hose lines in position, lest the additional fresh air being pushed into the building feed the fire, but Finney knew Cordifis wasn't afraid to bend the rules whenever the rules didn't suit the situation. Finney had worked under by-the-book officers before, and he would take Cordifis's commonsense approach any day. At least Cordifis knew how to think for himself—a quality Finney valued in emergency situations. Once the fan was running, the air would clear and they could finish their search before their rescue operation turned into a body recovery. If it turned out they were fanning the fire, they would turn it off after their search was complete.

The building would begin clearing as soon as Baxter and Reidel opened an outlet for the fumes, preferably smaller than the entrance and near the seat of the fire. The structure would become like a balloon with a pinhole in it, smoke rushing out that pinhole. The technique was amazingly effective. Finney heard a second fan rev up and knew Moore had set it up in tandem with the first to generate additional pressure inside the building. Still, the smoke wasn't clearing. What the hell were Baxter and Reidel doing? They should have had an outlet hole by now.

Finney and Cordifis searched a series of small interconnecting rooms along the front side of the building, and as they exited each room, Finney placed a piece of white tape diagonally down the outside of the door to signal that the room had been searched.

Even though they weren't doing much more than walking, Cordifis was breathing with effort. The PPE—personal protective equipment—weighed more than fifty pounds; when fastened, their heavy coats were as warm as Arctic expedition parkas. Just walking was a chore. Much as he wanted to move more quickly, Finney forced himself to adapt to the captain's pace. There was no point in wearing his gear out.

They moved about in the smoke for five minutes before they both bumped into a high counter and found themselves treading on material that felt like gravel. Moments later, the smoke abated somewhat and Finney suddenly realized he was outside the building, walking on nuggets of broken glass from the window Baxter had broken. They'd circled back through the interconnecting rooms without realizing it. It was easy to do and embarrassing as hell.

"Where's that damned fan?" Cordifis asked irritably, when he realized they'd screwed up. "This place should be clear by now." Both fans were gone, as was Diana Moore. It surprised Finney. Usually you could count on her.

"You want to go back in and search, or do you want me to get the fans back?"

Cordifis's reply was to head back inside. Bypassing the rooms they'd already searched, they moved along the front wall of the building. Minutes later, they found a door at the right corner of the building on the far side of a loading area. When Finney opened it, he was greeted by a long flight of descending concrete steps.

In the basement they found a huge subterranean space with a high ceiling and a floor of rough concrete. There was no smoke. By the time they'd searched the area, Cordifis's five-minute warning bell was ringing, though Finney had two thousand pounds left in his bottle, a little less than half what he'd started with. Cordifis generally ran out of air before he did, but Finney was thinking this was too soon even for him. They would get fresh bottles together.

When they'd made their way outside, a ragged group of spectators in robes, T-shirts, and slippers were congesting the smoky area where Captain Vaughn had set up his command post. Finney grabbed a battle lantern for more light and two spare bottles off Ladder 1. He looked up the street for additional units but saw none. By now they should have had two chiefs—three, counting the safety chief. There weren't even any additional engines on scene. What the hell was going on? Finney carried the spare bottles over to Cordifis and changed the bottle on his back while Cordifis spoke to Vaughn.

"But she was right there," Cordifis said angrily. "She could have shut it off in two seconds."

"You know that's not the way we fight fire," answered Vaughn.

"With the fan up, we'd be able to see something. What we're doing now, this is like playing Pick Up sticks with our butt cheeks."

"I've got Ladder Five going to the roof from the other side of the building. If you want them inside searching with you, I can do that."

"More butt cheeks isn't going to help. I want ventilation is what I want. I want those fans."

Vaughn walked away. A chain saw started up somewhere, the two-stroke engine screaming as the crew of Ladder 5 cut holes in the roof. Cordifis gave Finney a disgusted look, while Finney shrugged out of his own backpack and laid it on the ground to change the bottle. Bill was right, as usual. That would be a whole lot easier with the fans.

Cordifis stepped around Ladder 1 and addressed someone Finney couldn't see. "Hey, you bastard." Finney missed whatever insults came next as Engine 22's engine and built-in pump roared.

As Finney slung his backpack and tightened the shoulder straps, Robert Kub stepped into view from around the front of Ladder 1. He wasn't the one Cordifis was giving a hard time to, for Finney could still hear Cordifis's loud, angry voice.

Finney had come into the department with Kub, the only African American in his recruit class, and as with most of those he came in with, he felt a special bond toward the man. For the past twelve years Kub had been working for the fire investigation unit, Marshal 5, so he often didn't arrive at a fire scene until the firefighting units were packing up to leave. Finney thought it was unusual to see him this early in a fire. "What are you doing here?" Finney asked, screwing his low-pressure hose onto the regulator at his waist.

“Dispatcher called me at home. There’s another good fire down on Othello, but I came here.” Finney wagged his eyebrows. “More potential.”

“Oh, we got potential all right.” Finney grinned, as he left Kub and walked around the nose of Ladder 1 in time to see Cordifis heading toward the building and away from another off-duty firefighter, Oscar Stillman. Finney knew Cordifis and Stillman were good enough friends that a greeting of “Hey, you bastard!” often served as an endearment between them. Just like every other building fire, this was turning into a reunion.

Stillman, who had nothing to do here but watch, turned around and flashed his gapped teeth at Finney. “God, how the hell are you, young man?”

“A little early to be up, isn’t it?” Finney followed Cordifis while Stillman tagged along behind him.

“I was coming back from my biannual Tuesday-night card game when I saw the smoke from Aurora. I was the first motherfucker on the scene.”

“You see any band members come out of there?”

“I ain’t seen nothing but this goddamn smoke. Thought maybe my first wife was in there cooking dinner.”

When Finney caught Cordifis, they donned their face masks and stepped into the building just as Baxter, Reidel, and Moore emerged, accompanied by ringing alarm bells. The trio told them they had searched along the left wall of the building and found only storage racks and empty rooms.

Diana Moore stepped up to Cordifis as he was pulling the straps tight on his blue rubber facepiece and said, “Sorry about the fans. The IC told me to put them back. I didn’t know what to do, so when I saw these guys through the smoke, I joined up.”

“Don’t worry about it, darlin’. You did right.” Finney thought he detected an amused twinkle in Diana’s eye at the word *darlin’*. He had to hand it to her. She had enough self-confidence to let things pass.

Finney was beginning to get a bad feeling about this building. Even though he could hear more units rolling up the street behind them now, he knew you didn’t find this much smoke in a building and then squander fifteen minutes without putting water on it. You found the seat of the fire as expeditiously as possible. You stormed in and you tapped it. Ninety seconds could make the difference between a tapped fire and a grounder. They’d already been here ten minutes. Engine 22’s pump was running, but the lines on the ground were not yet flowing water. So far, nobody had found the seat of the fire. Couldn’t find any fire at all.

In a building this large there was too much space for superheated gases to accumulate. Finney knew that if those gases got hot enough and blended with oxygen in the proper ratio, they would ignite, and anyone luckless enough to be inside would be trapped in a flashover. In a house fire the rooms would go from two or three hundred degrees to twelve hundred in the time it takes to snap your fingers. In a place this big the higher temperatures would chop a man down where he stood. The body recovery team would find the soles of his rubber boots melted to the concrete floor.

3. REARRANGING DECK CHAIRS ON THE *TITANIC*

Back inside, Finney and Captain Cordifis found the door to the basement they'd already searched and using the east wall as a benchmark, they moved north from there. The building was filled with home furnishings shrink-wrapped in thick plastic and loaded onto wooden pallets, the pallets stacked on huge metal racks, the racks extending higher than they could see in the smoke.

They were moving faster now and they both knew they needed to cover as much ground as possible. The wall they were using as a reference point was mostly bare, as was the space nearby, and they moved almost without impediment.

Sooner than Finney thought possible, they arrived at the far right corner of the rear wall and worked their way along it, Cordifis an arm's length from the wall, Finney an arm's length from Cordifis. They were heading west, paralleling their original traverse across the front wall.

Finney was beginning to feel warm from the movement, so he knew Cordifis had probably been sweating profusely in his bunkers for some time. Although the manufacturers boasted of breathable fabrics in the liners, anyone who actually bothered to put on a set of bunking clothes and do any work knew that firefighters were sealed up like fresh-cooked muffins in a plastic bag. It could be like running a marathon in the desert, and some tolerated it better than others. Finney loved it. Cordifis sweated nearly to death each time they had a working fire.

"This way," Cordifis said. "I got a door here."

Finney stepped through the half-open door and for the first time in more than five minutes he could actually see his partner. Wrapped in a cocoon of smoke, the two men had been communicating by touch and sound alone. Now Finney followed Cordifis's gaze and was startled to realize he was looking at stars. They were standing in a closed, rectangular well, the high, windowless walls of the warehouse behind them, a lower wall of red brick in front, the structures cobbled together by walls at either end.

From time to time pockets of filthy brown smoke from the roof dipped down into their canyon. A faint orange glow reflected off smoke in the sky, though it was hard for Finney to tell whether the glow came from behind or in front. Wherever it was, the fire was growing larger.

"This is where the goddamned band is," said Cordifis, looking at the smaller building across from them. "Nobody's going to let a bunch of punk-ass kids mess around with all that furniture back there. Hell, they'd be banging their girlfriends on the sofas. They're in here."

He was right, Finney thought. There were three doors; two of them looked impenetrable. Finney took his axe out of its scabbard and approached the third, knocking off the paint-splattered two-by-fours nailed across the edges. He ended up demolishing the entire door when he found it had been screwed to the frame.

Devoid of smoke, the space appeared to be an abandoned machine room with steel counters built into the walls, a dilapidated drill press on its side on the floor. Maybe the fire hadn't touched this side. It was possible the band members were unaware even that the building was on fire.

The room had two interior doors, both closed and locked, one of which looked as if it led farth into the building. Finney used his axe again.

The door opened onto a long passageway, a small ghost of smoke hovering near the ceiling at the far end. They worked their way down a row of doors, searching the rooms one by one. The rooms to the left were clear, the rooms to the right increasingly smoky. It was disconcerting to be this deep into a building without a hose line, even worse to realize the smoke was compartmentalized in a manner they didn't often see. Finney could tell it bothered Cordifis, too.

When Cordifis opened an unlocked door near the far end of the corridor, torrents of smoke poured out over their heads, the first really hot smoke they'd encountered. Visibility in the room was near zero and the smoke swirled in angry circles. Finney stepped inside and stumbled into a set of drums.

A pair of cymbals crashed to the floor. "You go right," Cordifis said from behind. "I'll go left."

"I don't like this," Finney said.

"Me neither, but we got to do it."

There were other ways to search a room, but this would do. Split up. Right. Left.

Finney could see maybe twelve to eighteen inches in front of his light, and expecting to touch somebody at any moment, he kicked some bedding on the floor—and then, as he advanced, a sleeping bag, a pile of clothing, a guitar case, some loose beer bottles. It was slow going, because even though they'd left the door open, the smoke wasn't clearing.

Finney found a low sofa, a table, a lamp. He couldn't tell until he had his facepiece up against it that the lamp was on, the bulb staring at him like an eyeball. The walls were made of rough brick, and pieces of mortar fell out when he brushed them with his gloves.

"Hey, take a look here," Cordifis said. "Down here at the end."

Finney quickly located Cordifis, who was studying the wall with his battle lantern. Finney took off his glove and held his bare palm close to the hot bricks.

"You know what I think?" Cordifis said.

"God, that's like a stove." Finney pulled his glove back on and heard a loud crunching sound. His feet began moving. "Let's get out of here."

As he turned, Finney heard a crack that sounded like a gunshot. He managed two running steps before something knocked his legs out from under him. It was as if he'd been tackled from behind on a football field.

The urgency of the situation became instantly clear to him. He sprawled on his stomach and

scrambled forward while debris continued to rain down on him. A particularly heavy projectile slammed into his helmet and knocked him flat. Before he could start crawling again, more debris fell and he was half-buried under the weight. The noise and confusion persisted for another twenty seconds and then died out like a spent avalanche.

When he heard the brittle clicking sound of a single brick falling against another single brick, he shook off some of the debris. The left shoulder strap of his breathing apparatus felt like it had clawed into his skin. He was pretty sure something in his shoulder was broken.

Using his good arm, he pushed himself to his knees and then his feet. "Captain? You all right?"

Finney looped the thumb of his left hand under his right chest strap in a makeshift sling, then began making his way to where he'd last seen Cordifis. The pain in his shoulder throbbed with his heartbeat. The temperature in the room had soared, and even with the battle lantern in his right hand he could see nothing but blackness.

"Bill! Bill? Are you all right?"

He took two steps and stumbled into a pile of debris, the jolt from the fall hitting his shoulder like a .38 slug. He moved the battle lantern across a large mound of bricks and mortar. Around the center of the pile dozens of individual bricks littered the floor helter-skelter.

Cordifis was gone.

Circling the mound, he discovered that the place where the brick wall had stood earlier was nothing but a wooden core now, a few bricks still embedded in the wall at knee level. As he moved backward, he nearly knocked himself out on a heavy beam, one end of which was jammed into the corner at the ceiling, the other anchored in the rubble behind him. "Bill? Bill?"

He searched the area around the rubble, and just as he was about to call out again, he found the toe of a rubber boot protruding from the pile.

4. TWENTY-EIGHT PACES

Working frantically with one arm, Finney began pulling bricks from the mound. He worked in the darkness because he couldn't hold his light and work at the same time. He cleared a layer almost a foot deep before he uncovered the top of a helmet, then part of a head. He clawed the material away from Cordifis's face mask, picked up his light, and shone it into the hole. Peering into his partner's facepiece, he realized his lens was fogged over, which meant Bill wasn't moving air.

More frantic than ever, Finney worked until he'd removed enough debris so that Cordifis's entire head and neck were free and he could hear the mask leaking air out the sides. Cordifis stirred. Finney reached down and adjusted the facepiece until the seal was tight; the lens cleared. Miraculously, Cordifis blinked.

"You all right?" Finney asked.

Cordifis mumbled, "Where am I?"

"Leary Way. We're looking for musicians."

"Christ on a crutch. I guess I was dreaming. What happened?"

"The wall collapsed on us."

"What wall?"

"The one that's still on top of you."

For the first time the captain grasped his situation.

Now his partner's chest and arms were free, but Finney couldn't pull the rest of the mound apart without moving the heavy beam that had Cordifis's lower body pinned. It was clear that Bill had made a run for it, though he hadn't gotten far. If Finney hadn't continued to scramble after he'd been knocked off his feet, he would have ended up directly under the end of the beam himself. It would have killed him. Both of them would have died here. Finney put his back against the beam and tried to dislodge it, but it was like trying to move a house, and the pain in his shoulder increased exponentially as he exerted himself. He stopped only when he heard Cordifis yelling, "God, don't move that. You're killing me."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. It feels like I'm all twisted around down here. Don't move it."

"Doesn't matter. It's a two-man job."

"Let me have your portable. I'll tell them where we are while you scout around."

While Cordifis made radio contact, Finney discovered a second massive wooden beam angled across the doorway flush with the door. Six by ten inches, the beam appeared to be supported at the far end by what was left of the collapsed wall. He tried to trace the beam with his lantern but detected nothing but smoke and dust. It crossed directly in front of the door, and it rocked precariously when he touched it. Should it fall, it would likely land on Bill, or at least on the pile under which Bill was trapped. And it *would* fall if anyone tried to open the door, which had become the trip-hammer in a deadly booby trap.

Quickly, Finney traced the perimeter walls a second time, searching for another exit. He didn't have the strength or the means to get the beam away from the door without compromising Cordifis, nor did he have the tools to lever Cordifis out from under the pile. It didn't much matter. Even if he freed himself, Cordifis weighed 265 pounds buck naked, and his protective equipment and clothing weighed an additional fifty. Finney was six feet, muscular, and in the best condition of his life. If he were uninjured, he just might *drag* Cordifis out of the building. But there was no way he could carry him. Not tonight. Not without help.

Breathing heavily, Cordifis said, "I talked to Smith."

"He say who he was sending?"

"Everybody he's got."

"Tell them not to come through this door."

Finney was in a locked room, had one good arm, limited air, a light, a Buck knife on his belt, and a service axe in a scabbard. For a few seconds he found himself incapable of productive thought. Death wasn't the enemy. He knew that. Panic was the enemy.

They were both running out of compressed air. Any minute one or both of their five-minute warning bells would begin ringing.

Crossing to the wall opposite the doorway and placing his back against it, Finney swung the service axe one-handed down between his legs, using the pick-head side of the axe. He swung again, again. The concussion of each blow spewed pain through his shoulder. He broke one brick into pieces, chipping out the mortar around it. Then a second brick, a third.

Fortunately, this wall did not have the same solid planking at its core as the wall that had collapsed.

Even so, his five-minute alarm bell began ringing as he pulled out the broken bricks. On the other side of the bricks he encountered a layer of plaster and lathe and then an empty space about four inches deep, the back side of newer wallboard beyond that. When he punched that with his fist, he broke through to another room.

Using his axe, he chewed away at the edges of his escape hole until the opening was large enough for a man with a bottle on his back. Then he went back to Cordifis, reaching behind his back to muffle his own ringing bell so they could hear each other.

"I'm going for help. If they get here before I come back, don't let them through that door." As he

spoke, the ringing bell behind his waist stopped and Finney found himself sucking on the rubber facepiece. It felt as if somebody were clamping his nostrils and mouth at the same time. His bottle was dry, and he might as well have had a plastic bag over his head. He loosened the chin strap, tipped his helmet back, and lifted the facepiece off his chin.

He'd forgotten how abrasive and gritty and putrid a lung full of hot smoke tasted. He knew instinctively to get some of the better air near the floor.

"You okay, John?"

"Are you kidding?" Finney gasped. "I love this stuff."

"Plug into my bottle. I don't need all this air."

"There's no time. Listen, Bill. I've got a hole. I'm going out to find help. I'll leave my PASS device outside that wall so when help comes, they'll hear it and know you're in here."

"Here. You take the radio."

"Quit offering me stuff. I'll be back with help in a few minutes. Breathe slow, old man." Finney stooped down, their faces glowing in the gray-yellow soup formed by the light of Finney's battery lantern. It was important that he make eye contact before leaving.

Cordifis chuckled. "Have fun, kiddo." Bill hadn't called him kiddo in years. "And don't go have a brain fart and forget where I am."

"I won't."

After Finney had squirmed through the small opening on the floor, he found the next room was as smoky as the one he'd left. He reached back and pulled his MSA backpack into the room, along with the PASS device, which was designed to let out a high-decibel screech when it ceased moving. Jiggling the device shut off the noise, but it would resume after twenty-four seconds of no movement.

Which way? He tried to recall all the changes of direction they'd put themselves through. Keeping low, he ran his gloved hand along the wall and moved left through a doorway, where he found a room that was hotter than anything they'd encountered so far. He crouched on hands and knees until he found a layer of semi-breathable air, his mouth inches off the floor. He made his way around the wall, around tables, around counters and machines.

Minutes later he felt a gush of air waft into the building. Before he could think about it, an orange-yellow glow lit up the room.

The incoming air brought oxygen with it. The oxygen mixed with the hot gases at the ceiling, and the room flashed over, fire roaring above his head. Now, even if he knew which direction to take, he wasn't sure he could get out. At head height, the temperature would be somewhere around two hundred degrees.

Because he'd been low, the initial ignition hadn't scorched him, but now the heat was so intense that all he could do was curl up and shield his head, the movement exposing a small sliver of skin.

between his gloves and his sleeves; he could feel the skin beginning to bubble. He was being burned but the fact that his wrists didn't hurt scared him. He felt only a strange dullness and an incredible need to close his eyes and sleep. He'd never felt this much heat in his life.

He realized at some point that he had assumed the classic fetal position. He was dying. Or as good as dead. It had all been so quick. So this was how it was going to end, he thought. Here on the floor of this dirty building where it was too hot to move.

As he began to drift off, he remembered that Bill was depending on him. Bill was going to die because he was taking a nap. The thought woke him up.

Using both arms, he rolled himself over and began crawling on his stomach, feeling the painful heat once again as it singed his wrists and neck. He tried to remember if he'd repositioned the Nomex hood after removing his mask. He couldn't recall; he wondered if they'd be able to save his ears.

He crawled until he found a wall, followed it to the right, praying he would find a door, any door. He was going to die, at least he was going to die moving. Nobody was going to say he'd given up, that he'd stopped trying.

He continued to crawl, taking shallow, painful gasps, barely able to suck any breathable air off the floor. The wall stretched on, seemingly without end.

He wasn't sure how much time had elapsed. All he knew was that somehow he was standing now, walking. It wasn't as hot as it had been. Or maybe he was simply too numb now to feel the pain. Dizzy and disoriented, he had somehow groped his way out of the back room. He remembered stepping over his own screeching PASS device once again and knew that with great effort he had been counting his footsteps as he worked his way toward what he hoped was an exit.

At twenty-eight paces from the PASS device, two firefighters in full gear hove into view, flashlights wagging in front of them.

He couldn't tell if the firefighters were real or a figment of his delirium. And then as he moved forward, seemingly in slow motion, something heavy and metallic fell in the corridor just behind him. The earth seemed to shake.

Before he could turn around to see what it was, the shorter firefighter spoke. They were real. "Christ, what was that? You see Ladder One anywhere in here?"

The taller man stepped close and shone his light on Finney's naked face. "This is Ladder One right here," he said. "Look at his helmet. Where's your mask, buddy?"

"Bill's back there behind me," Finney heard himself saying. "He needs help."

"Bill who?"

Finney tried to recall the captain's last name, but he couldn't dredge it up through the fog in his brain. It scared him. In five minutes he'd turned into a moron. He knelt to get out of the hottest smoke, straining to align his thoughts so he could describe Bill's predicament. When his voice came,

sounded thick and slurred, even to him, his words tumbling out as if they had spurs on. As he explained how to locate Bill and said he would take them back to Bill himself, he felt as though he were talking in his sleep, uncertain whether he was actually speaking the words or merely thinking them.

“We’ll get him. You just go that way. You’ll find a doorway down there.”

The shorter firefighter spoke into his remote microphone. “Leary Command from Division 1. We’ve found Ladder One. We’re sending the first member out. We’ll be bringing out the other member in a few minutes.”

“Leary Command, okay. Do you need help?”

Finney didn’t hear the rest of the transmission. He was walking upright in the smoke now, sensing clean air just footsteps away. He could almost taste the paper cup of cool Gatorade he knew was waiting for him. What a nightmare this whole thing had turned into. For some minutes there he actually thought he and Bill weren’t going to make it.

5. HOSPITAL LINEN LIKE BOARDS

The lights pierced his eyes like lasers, and his eyeballs felt as if they'd been sandpapered with #0 grit. The bedsheets might as well have been made out of boards. He knew his ears and neck and wrists had been daubed with something, and he could tell he'd been given medication, though he hadn't asked what. In fact, he hadn't spoken. Not for some time now. He didn't know why. It wasn't until his brother, Tony, a captain at Station 17, showed up that he felt any inclination to use his voice.

"You're going to be okay," Tony whispered, the way some people did in sickrooms. "Just take it easy. Right now your only job is to rest up and heal."

Finney's throat was dry and raw. "How's Bill?"

"They're going to put you into a decompression chamber to help get the carbon monoxide out of your blood. Fact is, they're still a little worried over whether you're going to make it. But you'll bounce back. Just do what the doctors say and stay relaxed."

"Bill. Where is he?"

"I'm not sure."

"He okay?"

"You don't need to worry about him."

"Was his leg broken?"

"I don't know. You just lie back and don't think about anything but getting some rest."

"Was I burned?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Bad?"

"Not too bad."

"My ears?"

"Your ears'll be okay."

"I don't feel any pain."

"Don't worry. You will."

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