

## Weighty Matters

### Chapter One

“This is portable 8 to I.C. Bring the ax and halligan tool. South side of the shed! Quick!” Timothy yelled through his walkie talkie. “I hear someone or something inside this shed. I repeat, I hear something inside the shed!”

“10-4,” came a reply over the walkie. “Tools on the way.”

“Forest City pumper to Oakland chief,” the walkie squawked, interrupting the conversation between Timothy and his chief.

“Oakland Chief. Go ahead Forest City.”

“Yeah, we’ve set up a water point at Bright Creek and are ready for your tankers. We’ve got water flowing at this time.”

“10-4, Forest City. Thanks. Tankers are on the way.”

The warm, mid-July Tennessee night sky was lit up with bright orange-red light, and the air smelled of burning wood and plastic. Screaming sirens announced vehicles coming and going from all directions. The Oakland Volunteer Fire Department fire engine pumped water from giant collapsible holding tanks called dump tanks that were set up next to the engine. There are no fire hydrants out in the country. Volunteer departments, like Oakland Volunteer Fire Department, depend upon trucks that carry thousands of gallons of water. The water is then

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put into dump tanks, which resemble large above-ground swimming pools, to be used to pump water on the fire. The fire tonight was a big fire, and two nearby volunteer fire departments were sending tankers full of water and extra manpower to help extinguish the blaze. An old wooden house was on fire, as were two outbuildings located near the house.

Timothy continued pushing against the door with all his might, not waiting for the requested tool. Every passing minute decreased the chances that whoever was in there would be alive. Wisps of smoke were drifting out of holes and cracks in the shed, so he knew it wasn't a good situation at all. But all of Timothy's pushing and grunting was to no avail. The shed door had an extra strong hasp and a large padlock.

"We're here!" Timothy shouted through the door, pausing from exhaustion. "If there's anybody in there, please stay down on the floor but back away from the door, so you won't get hurt when we start chopping! Try to breathe through your clothes if you can. Can you hear me?!"

At first, Timothy could only hear the sirens, men shouting, and his heart pounding from all the exertion. Placing his head nearer to the door he listened intently. There it was again, a small sound, almost like a child crying. "We're coming!" he shouted in encouragement again.

Tom, a fellow volunteer firefighter and the captain of the department, came around the corner of the building, carrying several heavy tools. Right behind him was Mary, another member of the company, carrying a heavy duffle bag.

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“Please hurry!” shouted Timothy, unnecessarily, because they were moving as quickly as possible, given the weight of their heavy fireproof clothing, called turnout gear.

Suddenly water started pouring from the skies above Timothy. But it wasn't rain. It was spray-over from a Vindicator nozzle that was squirting 250 gallons a minute from the other side of the shed. Timothy quickly pulled up the collar of his turnout gear to help keep the water from cascading down his jacket.

Mary, who was a First Responder, sat down on the ground about thirty feet from the building, and began pulling items from the duffle bag. It almost looked like she was setting up a doctor's office or a crude emergency room, with an oxygen bottle, respirator, and various bandages spread out on the ground. She wanted to be totally ready for any patient that might be rescued.

Tom took one look at the door and stout lock and made a decision that the halligan tool, the preferred instrument to break through most locks, would be a waste of time. He shouted, “Stand back in there! We're going to break down the door. I repeat, stand back!”

“What's the status in the shed?” the radio barked. “Give me an update.”

Timothy was a little annoyed that he had to answer. He would much rather be breaking the door down. But Tom was taking blows at the solid door right now. “We're breaking in,” Timothy yelled over the radio to his chief, trying to be heard over the sound of the heavy blows. “I heard a sound again a

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few minutes ago, but nothing since then.”

“Just so you know, we’ve got an incoming ambulance. They’ve been notified of our potential victim. I want a report just as soon as you have one. Let me know if you need me there. I’m still setting up our offensive team. We’re thinking there could be people trapped inside the house also. I’ll be over there as soon as I can. ”

“10-4, chief,” Timothy replied.

But Timothy wasn’t encouraged. The door seemed impenetrable. Tom was a 225 pound, 6 foot 2 inch man in his early 20’s and he was swinging that ax hard. But except for a few splintered pieces, the door was holding firm.

“What . . . is . . . this . . . door . . . made . . . of?” Tom asked, breathing hard, between swings. “Steel reinforced oak?”

“Let me give you a break,” Timothy implored. But it wasn’t until a few more swings that Tom was willing to give up the ax.

Timothy had been studying the door carefully while Tom was swinging. *What if I hit it to the right?* he had been thinking. Tom had been trying to break the door closer to the hinge side. Taking aim and swinging broadly, Timothy slashed at the door. The jarring in his body caused by the impact was unexpected. How had Tom been able to stand that jarring for so long? Timothy was reminded again that it often looks easier to do something when someone else is doing it.

But being a volunteer firefighter often required one to push himself to the limits. Timothy slung the ax back and took another swipe at the door. After

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four or five grueling hits, a large split opened up. Grey-black smoke poured through the crack.

“You’re breaking through!” encouraged Tom. “I can take over now if you want me to!”

But Timothy wasn’t ready to give up. His adrenalin was flowing and he kept hitting. The door finally splintered enough to see inside. He paused a short time to catch his breath and survey the situation inside.

There was a bright glow from the other side of the shed. It looked like everything over there was on fire.

“There! It’s a dog!” shouted Tom, pointing to an object that seemed trapped next to a barrel to the left of the door.

Seeing that the dog was clear of the door, Timothy began savagely chopping again. He loved dogs and wanted to rescue this one. Besides, there could also be a child in there somewhere. He still hadn’t decided if that sound he had heard could have been made by a dog, or a small child. After five or six more hits, there was a large enough space for a firefighter to squeeze through.

Tom had taken this interval to report to the chief and put on his SCBA mask, which would allow him to safely breathe inside the smoky, deadly environment of the shed. A hoseman came around the side of the building. He also had on an SCBA unit. Now the team could go in even though there was no backup team with water, as usually required. Since the dog was only about five feet inside the door, the rescue should not be difficult. The chief, who had joined the crew behind the shed, gave the two men the

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thumbs-up sign.

First the hoseman hit the fire on the opposite wall and ceiling with a stream of water, putting out most of the danger that would occur from fire. Now the enemy was primarily the deadly smoke that filled the structure.

It only took about a minute to get to the dog, scoop it up, and carry it to safety. After talking with the chief, Mary was given permission to look over the animal and make an assessment of its injuries. The dog's pulse was slow and its breathing was irregular, but thankfully there were no injuries or burns. Mary placed a non-rebreather mask near the dog's nostrils and administered oxygen. "I've never done this for dogs before," she said to Timothy who was resting nearby, "but I suppose it will work the same way."

Meanwhile, the firefighters had entered the structure and done an extensive search to see if there were any people trapped in the building. Thankfully, there was no one in that building, or any other buildings that were burning. The chief reported to the ambulance that "the patient" was only a dog.

Suddenly a loud "pop" sounded through the night. The firefighters instinctively moved closer to cover the dog from any flying debris. Another "pop" was followed by still louder ones. The volunteers moved away from the structure, taking the dog with them.

"Sounds like they must have stored bullets and shotgun shells in the shed," Tom shouted over the noise. "Good thing we got the dog out when we did."

The chief listened carefully. "Yes, it's good the dog is out. But if I had to make a guess, I would

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say those are knots, not bullets.”

“Knots?” asked Timothy, sitting on the ground, trying to recover from the exertion of chopping with the ax. Timothy had only been on the volunteer fire department for a few months, and hadn’t been fully trained yet. However, given the needs in rural settings, he was still allowed to attend all fires and do whatever he was able to do, even though he wasn’t completely certified as a “firefighter.”

“Yes,” the chief replied. “They often build sheds out of pine boards that have knots on them. When the knots get really hot, they come exploding out of their confines like they were shot from a rifle. I read about a man down in Georgia who got hurt badly from one that hit his face.”

It started “raining” again, as hoses from several directions were pointed to the shed, trying to extinguish the flames before more items in the shed, perhaps much more deadly than pine knots, exploded.

The chief reassigned Timothy to help provide backup for one of the hosemen. The backup man stands behind the person actually holding the nozzle and spraying water on the fire. The line was temporarily shut down, and the exhausted backup man moved aside and let Timothy take his place. Timothy braced himself, and stood right behind the hoseman who immediately reopened the valve. The backpressure was enormous, but thanks to the little bit of training he did have, Timothy knew how to help transfer most of the pressure to his legs, rather than his back and arms.

In about thirty minutes, the fire was nothing

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but a smoldering mass of wet black embers and smoke. About half the house and most of the shed had been saved. Hopefully, it would be enough for the fire inspector to locate the cause of the fire.

“Close them down,” the chief called over the radio. “Let’s shut down all lines and see what we’ve got.”