

Throwing Ladders

"It is a family, a tight-knit group," Chief of the Superior Fire Department Steven Panger repeats as we sit in his office. An old telephone hangs on the wall behind his left shoulder. Even more daunting is the large, original Superior Fire Department fire bell for emergencies. "We are brothers and sisters, together for twenty-four hours. Forty-eight hours off for a group, then back together again, eight in the morning to the next eight in the morning. It is a family."

"This includes eating together?" I ask.

"For sure."

Chief Panger stands and I follow him out of his office, going along the U-shape of Station 1. Entering the holding bay, the fire red vehicles stand at attention. The rescue boat sits on its lift, a mechanic working on it. To our right, the rescue vehicle is a glossy red with silver steps.

"The Rescue 1 is very versatile, much like our firefighters. Seventy-one percent of our calls are medical, but we do everything. Boat and fire, of course, but who do they call when a cat is in a tree or someone has fallen?" Chief Panger asks. "Rescue 1 is used for hazmat and water rescues, but it usually comes after."

Walking further, two doors are already open. The boat is a long platform, and Engine 1 sits in front of me. A beauty to behold, I am almost scared to touch it. Gear is stationed at every door, ready for the firefighter to step into the boots and pull up the rest of it, which ranges from 80 to 100 pounds. A Reserve firetruck is pulled out, another large rig. The white ladder is flying in the air, and the new firefighter on his third shift is on top.

"How far up is he?" I ask, panic surges, but this is just another day for the four men around me. The firefighter on the ladder looks higher against the cloudless blue sky of midday during training time. Another firefighter climbs up the ladder too.

"Forty feet," Chief Panger says. "This is Captain Tribbey." Chief Panger works the usual forty hour week, Captain Joe Tribbey is in charge of Platoon #3, while Driver Mike Hoyt watches as the young Caleb is up for the first time. On a switch for the day, Dan is just a loan as Caleb finds his bearings.

"We are making history today," Joe says proudly, and Mike nods in agreement. "No other station is doing this. Like to help me, Sophia?" History today is shooting water off a ladder, which happens in large cities when high buildings burn. While it is necessary in Duluth with the hill and tall buildings, for the city across the harbor, most buildings only went up a few stories.

We cross the grass and go to the yellow fire hydrant near the street. A long, yellow, rubber hose of rubber and heavier duty has been laid out, connected to the Reserve Engine 1, and a white, heavy duty cloth hose goes up the white ladder to Caleb.

Taking a wrench to both sides, he relieves the pressure before attaching the wrench to the top. "Now," Joe points, "take these boy's parts, they will click in."

Immediately he hands it off to me, and I almost drop to the ground. The rubber hose isn't heavy, but the nozzle of the "boy parts," which is just the steel end with the grooves, is incredibly heavy in my hands. I slide into place in fear of messing something up, but it clicks easily. Joe points to the wrench on top of the yellow hydrant and tells me to get cracking. I grip the wrench and pull, finding it hard. I try again, throwing my back into it, as the captain watches in amusement. After a few more turns of the wrench, water shoots out and into the hose, filling

the yellow hose into a rounded tube that flies into the Reserve Engine. The rest of the water collects on the ground and on my green boots.

"We should get you proper boots," he says as we follow the bloated hose back to the engine.

I change into Mike's boots and watch as Caleb turns on the nozzle. Water bombards the driveway of the fire station on Tower Ave, even hitting a few cars with a free carwash. However, the water pressure isn't at full strength. Dan has returned to the ground, only to be sent up again for a third time with a different nozzle. When the right nozzle is with Caleb, Dan is safely standing on the ground beside me.

"How long have you been a firefighter?" I ask, watching Caleb like he might fall at any moment. Chief Panger has stressed training many times over, and I know Caleb is in safe hands. Joe and Mike watch him intently.

"Twelve years."

"Dan and twelve years," I say. "My dad is named Dan and was a firefighter for twelve years." Most firefighters in Superior stay on for thirty years, like a young and superior firefighter as Dan plans to do. Some go onto different cities, with many choosing a new home in the suburbs around the Twin Cities, but all remain close as the tight-knit family never releases. There is a bond. "Were you scared to go up there?"

"At first, but what kind of firefighter would I be if I'm scared of heights. Others can be scared, but that's not my job." Dan reaches out and I still. "Don't move," he warns as his gloved fingers run through my hair, pinching slightly. "A spider. Gone now."

I almost screech at the spider that is no longer there. "Add that to the list of things firefighters can do." Chief Panger is right; firefighters are versatile.

"I used to be scared of spiders too."

Joe calls me over and hands me a hose that connects to the rig. The rig is leaking, which happens when it is filled to capacity, spilling its contents to the ground. Joe hands the water hose to me, telling me to spray, and like a child in Christmas excitement, I do. My hands jerk back as the hose fights me, and I grip tighter. I aim it away from the rest of the crew, catching a few cars on the drive by.

"Stronger grip," Joe advises, showing me how to hold the hose, widening my feet.

When a sprinkle of water comes on us from the high Caleb, we turn off and put down our own. A new wave of carwashes for unexpected drivers returns as the wind carries the mist.

"Joe," Mike waves him over to the fire hydrant. "Bring Carl too."

I glance back at my tour guide.

"Caleb, Carl, Kevin, whatever," Joe jokes. "He's new. We'll learn his name eventually."

The new guy and I trail the captain and driver, and the men take turns bouncing on the grass beside the fire hydrant. Caleb calls it a trampoline, as the ground shifts and flows underneath him. A break in the hydrant underground from the frozen northern Wisconsin winter caused the grass to swell, leaving a socket of just water, like a trampoline or waterbed. Joe hesitantly steps onto the grass, careful as brown water oozes out, covering his boots.

"Another thing to get fixed," Joe says, ready to take it to the chief.

The hoses are laid out as half of them will need to be dried, the thick cloth ones, while the rubber ones are easy to use again. Lying in a straight line, Joe hands me his fireman jacket,

and a part of me grows in excitement. While I do not want to wear the heavy gear, the jacket is a whole new world of hot and heavy.

“Boy parts first,” Joe refers to the rings on the hose. “That goes in because it can be damaged.” Once I have the hang of it, Joe continues, “Race time.”

Before I even know it, Mike has his done and Caleb is half way through. I am too busy trying to keep it in a straight line with my back hurting and sweat dripping down my shoulders. The heavy cloth hose is in a perfect roll at my feet, and I stomp on the top, almost knocking myself over.

“Perhaps the next one will be easier,” Joe smiles.

I doubt it, and I am right. Instead of rolling the hose into a ball, the hose is picked up the “boy parts” hitting my butt and gripping the next bit of the hose while hauling it onto my aching shoulder. My arms do not have this kind of strength. While it takes five times to get it all on my shoulders, which almost collapses my body, Joe has to help me every time. My right hand goes to my middle thigh, measuring it out, and then with both arms, I lift it to my shoulder. Walking back into the garage of the station with the heavy hose, Joe advises to throw it on the ground.

“I just put it up there,” I say.

Joe chuckles. “Yeah.”

I throw the hose to the ground.

“Throwing ladders time,” Mike laughs, obviously enjoying himself, and suddenly I am concerned again of actually throwing ladders. But he means to place one against a building by yourself, which I thankfully have no want or need to do.

Caleb holds the twenty-four feet ladder in his hands as he measures. While firefighters work in teams, usually with a family dynamic, a firefighter needs to know how to do this by himself. Mike is the master, since he is driver of the rigs and ladder thrower, but he keeps his mouth firmly shut about this.

The captain stands to my right, watching Caleb’s knot. “When a ladder goes up, a metal ladder against a house, what should you be careful of?” he tests me.

I panic at the pop quiz. “Heat... no, um, electricity.”

Joe nods his approval, and relief floods through me. Perhaps my earlier problems with the hoses can be made up for. He joins his younger firefighter.

“Most firefighters use stairs going in, but throw up a few ladders in case they need to get out,” Mike says, watching Caleb’s form. “If it’s too steep, when jumping out, I will just face plant.”

“Face plant? You dive out of a window like a penguin?”

He laughs. “Well, dive out, but you hook your arm around so your feet hit the ground.” Upon seeing my distorted face, Mike hollered. “It’s impressive when seen. I don’t do it much nowadays. I throw ladders. I drive. Next step is captain.”

“Have you done all the jobs?”

“For sure,” Mike beams. “I work my way up the ladder, understanding all.”

“Did you know you always wanted to be a firefighter?”

“No, like most of these guys. I was in the Navy, but one day I got into a rig and I just knew.” His smile is contagious as I continue to wear his boots and the jacket of his captain. “I would call my wife from Egypt or Saudi Arabia, but at that time, she was just a girl. It was funny because every time I called, she had always broken up with her boyfriend. I wore her down for

thirteen years. Her mother used to say she should date me, high school sweethearts.” Shaking his head, Mike goes over and helps Caleb, telling him to hold the ladder between his legs when lowering.

Joe stands beside me. “So what year are you?”

“Sophomore, so I have a bit more time left.”

“And this is a class project?”

I nod. “Writing three-oh-one. I’m a writing major and German minor.”

“My son is in Germany, been there for three months, works in a hospital.” Joe sounds incredibly proud. “Three boys and two girls. They know Joe’s boys, and the chief’s kids.”

Caleb brings down the ladder, rung by rung, and we head back inside. I take off Joe’s jacket and hand it back to him, which he goes and prepares it for the inevitable fire call. My back is sore, and I am sweaty. I pull off Joe’s boots, throwing on my now dry boots.

Walking to the exit, I take one last look at wall of all firefighters to come through the department, not just Station 1. The faces of men and women shine through the clear glass, and my face reflects back. With three stations and nine platoons, many people have come and gone. Passing through the doors on my way out, I came and went.

“You’re welcome back,” Joe calls. “We’re here to help.”