

Prologue

"Has anyone seen the boy's parents? We need to talk to the parents," said the distraught chief.

Andy Sly removed his helmet and coughed into the opening. His lungs burned. That was expected. He had removed his inhalation connection when he knew he shouldn't. But, he needed to yell. He had yelled as loud as he could. His voice didn't carry as far as he wanted it to so he yelled even louder. He had to find the boy. He wasn't even certain he was home, but he had been told he was. He was not leaving the house without the boy.

Smoke had begun to engulf his view of the doorways. He coughed after each scream. *"Brandon! Are you here? Brandon. Call out so I can find you!"* Andy dropped to his knees and put his oxygen mask back on. He crawled across the floor. He could still feel the heat that was growing with intensity behind him. He didn't have much more time. He had to find the boy and get out.

The bathroom was the clearest of rooms. The window was open. Maybe the boy had climbed out the window, Andy thought. He would have been warned by radio if that were true. He wasn't giving up. He crawled his way to the next room dragging his heavy boots behind him. There was a crash somewhere behind him but he didn't stop to turn around. He continued forward. The room was filled with smoke. Flames had traveled from an adjacent room setting the shared wall ablaze. Then they spread to the top level of the bunk beds. Flames were now bouncing fiercely between the bed and ceiling weakening its structure.

Andy called out again. "Brandon!" He scanned the room through his shield. Posters of baseball players peeling from the wall. Trophies and video game controllers would soon be completely melted. He had to get out. Now!

Quickly, Andy ripped the closet door from its hinges. No matter how many times he told classrooms of children never to hide if there was a fire there was always that one kid who wasn't listening. His heart sank when all he saw was a row of clothes on hangers that would soon be ash. He fell to his knees again and his eyes caught a glimpse of something under the bed. He scurried to the weakening bed frame.

"It's alright. I'm here to help. We gotta get you outta here," he told the boy.

Andy pulled the boy by the hand and dragged him from under the bed. In all his years of being a firefighter, Andy's adrenaline had never been so high. He scooped the limp boy into his arms and darted out the bedroom door just as the bed collapsed behind them.

"I just left the boy with the EMTs and heard them say the mother was reached at work and is on her way. The father hasn't been located," Andy finally responded to the Chief Dixon. His eyes were burning. They stung for all sorts of reasons.

"You should get checked out. You know the drill," Chief Dixon said as he threw his thumb over his shoulder pointing back at one of the ambulances on the scene. "We're mighty glad you're safe Sly and want to keep it that way."

Sirens had been silenced upon arrival, but red streaks of light still invaded the neighborhood along with billows of smoke. Onlookers had been ordered back to their houses; still a few lingered.

“Excuse me, sir. I live next door. Can you please tell me if the boy is alright?” A sweet woman in her apron appeared from nowhere.

Andy coughed in his helmet again and placed two fingers on his throat. It was too painful to speak to this woman who had panic in her eyes. He could tell she had been baking. There was butter smeared on her apron. He looked past the flour in her hair to the smoke swirling from the glassless windows of the house he just escaped. He didn't have the strength to do this right now.

“You really should be inside, ma'am,” Andy managed to say and kept walking.

Water was still being sprayed over the house. The firefighters had managed to salvage half the house. Andy thought they should have just let it burn to the ground. All that was of value perished.

Andy Sly sat on the edge of the second ambulance while the one carrying Brandon sped off. He felt bad not taking a moment to talk with the neighbor as he watched her now walk aimlessly in search for answers. She went back to her front yard and wore a path in her lawn. She then came back to the driveway of what was left of 456 Gilmore Street. She approached another firefighter. He was gentler than Andy was. He placed a hand on her shoulder and spoke to her. She covered her mouth with her hand as she turned and resumed wearing out her grass. What had he told her? Andy wondered. No sense in worrying about that now.

Andy couldn't wait to take a shower. He knew he would be fine. He didn't need to get checked out. But, protocol was protocol. He wanted Chief's job one day. He wasn't about to get written up on a technicality. He sat and waited for an available EMT for what felt like an eternity. He leaned back and let the weight of his uniform pull him down onto his back and he closed his eyes.

The voices of two police officers that were standing near the ambulance caught Sly's attention. But he remained still.

One officer spoke into his radio. “Do we have a location on Christopher Wilcox of 456 Gilmore?”

“Affirmative. He was last seen at Dolton's Bar on McCracken. He was there at lunch. No one can confirm when he left. Current location is unknown,” another officer's voice cracked over the speaker.

“We'll speak with Mrs. Wilcox when she gets here. She's pulling in. Keep looking,” the officer close to Andy responded.

Andy did not attempt to sit up and look at Mrs. Wilcox. He could imagine her appearance. Dressed in a nice skirt, maybe pleated slacks. Her hair pulled back, sleek in front. Her heels rushing along the concrete would be silenced from all the commotion. Her face creased with tension and fear. The make-up she had applied early that morning when life was perfect would soon be running down her cheeks. Her so-called normal life no longer existed. She would want to talk to Andy since he was the one who found her son. Then he would watch her jump back in her car without looking back at the charred wooden frame of half her house and race to the hospital. He hoped this day wouldn't haunt her. Or himself for that matter. He didn't move. Maybe he wasn't cut out for Chief after all.