

## PROLOGUE

# ON THE JOB

You could feel the tension in the cab. The shrill pitch of the siren was rising and falling to encourage traffic ahead of us to quickly move out of the way. Strobe flashes bounced off every surface of the truck. I looked over at Jason, who sat next to me in the cab of the fire engine. We have the seats directly behind the driver and officer, so we see everything backwards. Fully geared up, Jason was busy checking his air pack for any last-minute adjustments. No one knew what to expect.

Five minutes before, we had been sitting in the dayroom listening to the battalion chief tell us what was happening around the department. Then, the weather quickly changed from slightly overcast to a torrential downpour. Before anyone could say anything about the weather situation, we heard what sounded like a train approaching the firehouse. As if in competition with the fury of the rain, alarm tones immediately went out to all the stations to lock down the bay doors and move everyone to an interior room away from windows.

I hadn't entirely put it together yet, but as instructed, I moved with the crowd into the locker room. There were jokes and laughter as we jostled for our own space in the small room. Unsure whether this was just a drill, many of us snapped open our cell phones. Then I heard someone say, "Strange, we've never had a tornado here in our history. Are you sure that's what's happening?"

A tornado? *He's joking!* I thought. I wanted to get to a window and see for myself. But before I could, alert tones went off again.

"Tornado on the ground in the area of Main and Jackson. Repeating..."

"Main and Jackson? That's just five blocks away," someone commented.

I still couldn't believe my ears. A tornado? Here? We had been training for years on terrorism, structure fires, and storms of all sorts, but I never expected a tornado. My mind raced. *What should I prepare for?* Before I could answer my own question, the alert tones went off again. This time, they were the tones specific to our station—the ones calling us to duty when those in our community needed us.

"Engine 4, Rescue 2, Respond to a tornado touchdown in the area of Main and Jackson. Time: 12:16."

We all moved quickly to the fire engine. In fact, I hadn't seen anyone move that fast in a long time. Within seconds we were dressed in our bunker gear, scrambling into our seats, and on our way. My adrenalin was pumping so fast I felt like my heart was going to jump straight out of my chest.

I looked back over at Jason. I could tell that his nerves were getting to him, too.

Lieutenant Parker opened the window between the front and back of the fire engine. He yelled to be heard over the whine of the siren and the noise of the engine, giving us our instructions: "Be prepared for anything! Benjamin, you take the lead on patients! McCall, you check for structural stability!"

Again, alert tones were sounding.

"Engine 1, Engine 2, Truck 1, Battalion 1. Respond to a tornado touchdown at the Crossroads Mall. Time: 12:18. Reports coming in of partial roof collapse, cars turned over, and debris through windows."

More alert tones.

"Engine 3, Rescue 1, Truck 2, Battalion 2. Respond to the airport. Commercial aircraft on the runway with flameout and 200 souls on board. Reports of small aircraft strewn across runways and taxiways.

Terminal reports partial roof removal, overturned cars, and broken windows."

The department was splitting in all directions, news that only made me more apprehensive. We had traveled only about one block and were already slowing down. I knew we couldn't be on scene already, so I craned my neck around to look out the front windshield. All I could see was a view that looked like it was straight out of a war scene in an old movie. Dust in the air, debris everywhere. I yanked off my seat belt, turned around, and knelt on my seat to get a better view. It really looked like a bomb had gone off. There were small fires in cars. Buildings that had been standing proudly just minutes ago were now reduced to piles of rubble.

If this was the beginning of the storm's destructive path, I wondered how far this level of devastation stretched. What would those fire engines responding to areas three to four miles away find?

Without turning to see if we were paying attention, the lieutenant continued, "This is as far as we go. We walk the rest of the way."

Jason and I hopped down from the fire truck as we heard the air brake engage. I snatched the medical kit from the compartment as he grabbed some tools and a fire extinguisher. Then I heard on the truck radio, "Engine 4 on scene at Main and Belmont. Engine 4 will be Belmont Command. We have heavy damage to multiple structures, minor car fires. Beginning search and rescue. Belmont Command will be changing to Tactical Channel 2."

I changed the portable radio I was carrying to TAC 2. Then, "Belmont Command, Rescue 2," a voice crackled.

"This is Belmont Command," Lieutenant Parker answered.

"We are unable to reach your location. We have multiple patients with moderate injuries who can be treated on scene. Recommend you send patients to our location as a treatment and transportation area. We are at Belmont and Graham."

"Understood, set up treatment and transportation at Belmont and Graham."

I had heard that disaster rescues of this nature turned into organized chaos. It looked like that would be the case for us that day as Rescue 2 could not reach our location and had to improvise.

## The Scene

As I looked up the hill ahead of me, trees stood at odd angles without any leaves. Branches were broken, twisted, and mangled. Insulation hung from limbs along with clothing, furniture, and even a large television set. Where there were fences, debris was pushed into the chain link, and in some places it looked like someone had tried to push something through without caring that the item was too big to fit in such a tiny opening.

Jason and I walked up the street. People were just now beginning to appear. We were in a residential area of town. It was a Thursday afternoon, and I hoped most people were still at work.

The first house we came to was standing straight and tall. Some of its windows were broken, but otherwise it looked all right. We banged on the door. Nobody answered. We looked in every window we could. Since we didn't see or hear anything, we sprayed an X on the door, noting the date, time, and our call sign, and continued on.

Next, we came to a quaint little red house that turned out to be a daycare center for a local church. Not a single window was spared on the side where we stood. We banged on the door. A lady in her late 50s opened the door, pushing aside broken glass underfoot.

"Oh," she screamed. "Thank heaven! We have about 20 babies here. They're okay, but scared. We moved everyone to the bathroom. Please. Please. Come with me."

She hustled down a narrow, darkened hallway looking back over her shoulder at us as if to urge us to move faster. We radioed a short report and raced after her.

It felt like it took an eternity to travel the short hallway. The second door on the right was open just a crack with a little light glowing

around the frame. The lady pushed the door open, and we could hear muted crying and singing.

As we reached the door ourselves, I peered around it and nearly did a double take. Jason leaned around me to take a look for himself. There were two young ladies in the bathtub with about 10 infants sitting on them and between them. They were singing lullabies to the kids to keep them calm. A single small candle in the sink lit up the room. One lady's face was ashen, and she appeared visibly shaken. But she kept singing to calm the infants. I don't think I'll ever forget that image.

"Ladies, we're with the fire department. How can we help?" I asked as I looked around the tiny bathroom. I don't think we could have squeezed another living being into that room. It measured five by eight feet, with the bathtub against the outside wall. With Jason and me, the two women in the bathtub, 10 infants, the lady who had brought us into the room, and all the bath fixtures, it was a tight fit, to say the least.

"Oh, young man, can you take these babies to a safe place?" asked one of the women in the bathtub.

"How many children do you have here? Are there any injuries? We can stay here until additional help arrives, but I need to know if anyone is hurt."

She looked up at me with pleading eyes and said, "They're okay. We can stay a little longer if we must. How're the others?"

"Others?" Jason replied.

"Yes, there are three more women and about 10 kids. Last time I saw them, they were in the toddler room."

I looked at the woman who brought us to this point as she opened her mouth and gasped. "I was so worried about the babies I nearly forgot about them...they're so quiet and all."

She pushed past us before I could even respond, dashed down the hallway, and disappeared around the corner.

## More Victims

Jason took off after her while I hung back to radio in a report and ask for backup. Still talking, I started off in pursuit of Jason and nearly ran into him as I rounded the corner. Our guide was frantically yanking on the doorknob and trying to gain entry without success. Jason attempted to move her aside, but she didn't budge.

Finally he nearly shouted, "Excuse me, ma'am, let me try!"

Startled, she moved aside. To make it easier for us to work, I pulled the woman behind me. Not only was she out of the way, she was also out of view of the doorway.

Jason put his shoulder against the door, turned the handle and shoved. It didn't move. Since Jason is 6'2", 220 pounds, I was surprised. Even if the door was out of plumb, it should have budged. He put his face to the door and said, "If you can hear me, stand away from the door!"

He tried the door handle one more time to see if it would open on its own. Nothing. Jason lifted his Halligan to just above the latch, placed the fork into the jamb, and pulled backwards. The door gave a little. He placed the fork a little further in and pulled again. The door gave a little more. Enough that we could now see into the room.

Insulation was everywhere. The ceiling had fallen in. The air was thick with dust, and although we could see fairly well, it was like looking through a dense fog. Mounds of drywall were randomly scattered under the insulation, and all the windows were blown out. Pictures and posters were torn from the walls, yet a few decorations dangled precariously by what seemed like a thread. Jason yelled into the room, "Fire department, anyone in here?"

Our guide was frantic to see inside. For a second, I thought she might climb right over me to get a look.

We listened intently for a response. My heart thumped loudly as I awaited an answer. I felt a trickle of sweat slide down the middle of my back. I had trained for this type of situation, but never really thought about how I would feel the first time I experienced it face to face. With

the windows broken out throughout the building, all we could hear was the wind, rain, and sirens. Not a sound came from the room—until finally, what looked like a hand appeared from a debris pile in the far corner of the room and we heard a faint, "Over here."

Jason and I pushed in unison against the blocked door. No luck. Jason squeezed the Halligan through the small opening and slowly swept debris from behind the door. We pushed again, and made a little headway. Frantically, our guide pushed in behind us. I understood her urgency, but safety was our first priority.

As I moved her back a little, I said, "Ma'am, please let us go to them and hand them to you in the doorway. It'll be safer for you and the kids."

"Okay, okay, I'm just so concerned."

As Jason continued to push open the door inch by inch, I reflected on how amazing it was to see these women caring so diligently for the kids. They understood the magnitude of the danger they were in, yet had been singing to the children to keep them calm. I knew that took a lot of nerve—to stay composed in the midst of such chaos.

"It'll be all right," I assured her.

I looked back to my partner. Jason had pushed through the small opening and was beginning to methodically dig through the debris. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw what looked like the edge of a mattress. Then a shoe. Again, cautioning our guide to stay outside the room, I barreled through the doorway. My breathing mask got hooked on the doorknob, and I was jerked backwards. *Calm down*, I told myself and sheepishly unhooked it. I waded through the mess and helped Jason with his task. Soon, the mattress was cleared enough to lift it off of whatever was below.

I picked up a corner, and Jason did the same with the opposing corner. We heaved the mattress toward the wall. A huge plume of dirt and dust rained down on us, blocking our view. Even through my goggles, I could feel grit in my eyes. Holding my breath, I waited for the air to clear. A woman, covered with dust and dirt, and with a bloody cut above her left eye, sat up and coughed. She was surrounded by four pairs of shiny eyes peering out from small dirt-covered faces. Not one

of them was crying, but you could see the leftover streaks from tears shed at some point during their treacherous experience. They were all small. The oldest couldn't have been more than five, and the youngest looked to be about three. I noticed a few cuts and abrasions, but everyone was breathing. The bleeding, I knew, could be controlled with small bandages. Thankfully, no one appeared to be seriously injured.

In a hoarse voice, the woman said, "We're okay, but Ginger was on the other side...over there."

She waved her hand to the far side of the room where there was another pile of debris about three feet tall. Insulation, drywall, and a rocking chair lay on top of a second king size mattress. However, we had to get these kids out of the way before we could do anything for the others.

After a quick triage, I helped the woman to her feet. Jason remained with the children as I shuffled a path through the muck and handed the woman off to our escort outside the door. They hugged and laughed and carried on like they hadn't seen each other in years. I can't even imagine what they were thinking while the daycare building caved in around them.

Leaving them at the door, I trudged back to the four children. I wanted to carry two and have Jason do the same, but there were still a multitude of obstacles in the way, and I didn't want to fall. It seemed like an eternity while we carried the children to safety. I thought about splitting up and having Jason start on the pile where the other victims might be, but safety won out.

Jason and I worked to unbury what we suspected were the other kids and Ginger. The further we dug, the more debris there seemed to be. Finally we got down to the level of the mattress. As we lifted it, we heard cheering. We threw the mattress in the area recently vacated by the last set of kids. When we looked back, a dusty blanket was being pulled down, exposing a large wooden table. Under the table were six smiling kids and two grown women.

"See, we told you the firefighters would be here soon!" said one of them. "Now, listen to me. Miss Jenny and I want you to follow your

fire drill and go to the meeting place. And if the firefighters tell you to do something, do it."

She handed each of us a child who, in turn, we handed off to one of the other ladies. It was like a bucket brigade, except we were handing off children in place of water. Then, we helped Ginger and Jenny to their feet.

"Is there anyone else?" I asked.

"Just the babies," Jenny told us. "They're in the bathroom. Safest place to put them."

"They were okay," I replied. "Can you two walk out?"

"Sure, if we can get over this stuff," Ginger said as she swept her hand through the air, gesturing at all the devastation.

We helped them get to the door. When we got to the hallway, not a child was in sight.

"Hey, where'd everyone go?" Jason asked.

"They're out at our designated emergency meeting place, the mailbox," Ginger responded.

We followed the ladies out, and on our way, checked to make sure the rest of the building was empty.

"Belmont Command, Engine 4 portable."

"Engine 4 portable, go ahead."

"We are up the hill at the second building. We need assistance. Have at least ten children, ten infants, and five adults who were trapped in a structure. We need additional personnel to transport the children to the treatment area."

"Command copies, need personnel to transport children to treatment."

I looked over to Jason and the ladies at the mailbox. He was talking quietly to the workers, who had children surrounding them, clinging to their waists as if trying to climb up trees. As for the babies, there they were, neatly lying in a row on a blanket someone had provided for them.

"Help is on the way," I told the assembled group. "Let's see what we have here while we wait."

Jason began handing me one child at a time to examine as he continued to do what he could to calm everyone down. In short order we had thoroughly examined each of the kids. Through all the turmoil, there were only a few minor cuts, which we covered with bandages. As we finished with the last child, it began to rain again. Fortunately, the crew from Engine 6 was available to help get everyone to a safer location.

As I painted the X on the wall to indicate primary search completed, the radio crackled to life.

“Belmont Command, Engine 6. Have met up with Engine 4 crew and will be taking a group to the church on corner of Main and Breeze set up as the evac area. Paramedic advises only minor injuries. Can handle treatment at this location and release to families.”

I looked up ahead to a church down the street. It was like watching the town’s annual parade, which always included some of us firefighters walking in full gear. This time, though, each firefighter had a baby in each arm. Jason had a single file line of kids behind him, each holding the hand of the child behind, just as they had been taught. The ladies helped each other along, holding umbrellas over the heads of the line of children and firefighters.

When we arrived at the church, we were met by an emergency medical services (EMS) unit, police officers, and the media. Fortunately for us, we were able to hand over everyone to EMS and return to our search and rescue duties.

The rest of the afternoon we spent searching for victims, stabilizing areas where we could, and putting out small fires. All in all, we were very lucky that the storm passed through when it did. As I had hoped, many of the homes were empty because people were at work. Although there was a large amount of destruction, there was only one serious injury, which had been caused by a beam hitting an elderly gentleman in the head. Over 30 homes had been destroyed, and many more residences and small businesses had been damaged.

Lieutenant Parker did a great job managing the chaos. I vowed that whenever I had the opportunity to lead, I would follow his calming example. He was prepared for the worst disaster and had equipped us

to be our most effective. He said to Jason and me, “Great job, guys. You performed well today.”

Little did he know how much that meant to us.

When we returned to quarters at about 5:30 p.m., we were wiped out. Dinner never tasted so good, nor was my chair ever so comfortable. As I ate, I hoped that we wouldn’t get a call that night.

## The Next Morning

*Where am I?* I wondered as I groggily opened my eyes. I felt like I had been squeezed through a grinder. Even the bones in my fingers were sore. Then it all flooded back to me. The tornado. The rescue and exhaustion that followed it. The pride I had felt for my lieutenant and my team. I slowly flexed each major muscle to see if I was going to be able to get out of bed without groaning. My mind reflected on the scenes from the day before.

*Why did things come together so well?* I wondered. *Was it purely our training, the skills of my lieutenant, or some other factors I didn’t even know about yet?*

As I ate breakfast, I thought about what the weeks ahead held for me and my future as a first responder. I had passed the promotional exam and would be attending orientation soon. I was excited, but also extremely nervous about what the new leadership position would bring. *Could I be as great as the lieutenant?*

Meanwhile, I knew I had a job to do...to be the best firefighter and paramedic I could be. I was looking forward to the new challenge, knowing I could make a difference in the quality of service I provided. I rolled out of bed and hit the floor running. I had work to do before the oncoming shift came in.