

CLIMBING THE LADDER:
THE TRANSITION FROM VOLUNTEER TO CAREER FIREFIGHTING
IN SMALL TOWN AMERICA

A CREATIVE PROJECT
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a career firefighter is a long process for most prospective emergency responders. It is common to apply to several departments before finally getting hired on or moving across the state or country to accept a job offer. Roughly 1.1 million firefighters serve in approximately 30,000 departments across the United States. Out of those, fewer than thirty percent are full-time career firefighters (Byrne, 2009). Many firefighters get their start at volunteer stations, specifically in rural settings around the country. Some volunteer firefighters make it a goal to fight fires full time and make a living while doing it.

Twenty-four-year-old Lt. Trevor Bolton of the Fire Department of Liberty Township (FDLT) in Clayton, Indiana, is one of six volunteer firefighters at the department who is trying to get hired full-time. He has submitted nearly fifty applications in the past two-and-a-half years, but has yet to receive an offer for a full-time position. Trevor is relying on saturating departments across the state with applications to get hired within the next few years. Some of the volunteers at FDLT are depending more on personal connections than years of experience and training to get hired. For example, one of the volunteers, twenty-four-year-old Logan Beam, was recently hired at the Zionsville Fire Department in Zionsville, Indiana, where his father is third in command.

Because training and skill requirements for firefighters have increased as the Occupational Health and Safety Administration has become more involved in the procedures surrounding emergency response throughout the United States, Trevor is getting as much experience as possible at FDLT before embarking on a journey at a new department. He is

reluctant to leave FDLT when the opportunity arises because he has formed a bond with the staff at the station, but he decided to continue submitting applications.

Employing many literary journalism techniques, this creative project has documented the process of becoming a career firefighter in small-town America. The story of young volunteers at FDLT climbing the ranks within the fire service will serve as a case study to further explore the topic of volunteer and career firefighting, while describing the skills and training requirements of today's firefighters. The researcher will use immersion journalism, including field observation, primary and secondary materials, and extensive in-depth interviews.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief history of firefighting in the United States

Volunteer firefighters have lead the way in emergency response for centuries throughout American history (Byrne, 2009). The first firefighting brigade in the United States, Union Fire Company, was started by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia in 1736 (Green, 2014). The first professional fire department was established in Cincinnati in 1853, when the first practical steam fire engine was invented, although there are records that several cities in Colonial America appointed fire wardens or volunteers to alert citizens to a fire by shaking a loud wooden rattle (Green, 2014). Today more than 70 percent of fire departments in the United States are run by volunteers, most who spend less than 5 percent of their time on runs dedicated to fighting fires, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA, 2016). They are considered to be omnipresent across the American landscape, and provide essential goods to the communities they serve in (Bono & Thompson, 1993).

NFPA (2015) estimates that 71 percent of career firefighters work in communities that protect more than 25,000 people or more, while 95 percent of volunteer firefighters work in departments that protect fewer than 25,000 people. Roughly 65 percent of volunteer firefighters have more than five years of service (NFPA, 2015).

Volunteer departments most often occupy less populated areas, such as rural and non-urban communities. These areas may not have the ability to employ full-time firefighters based on the lack of funds, but the communities' need for professional responders for emergencies remains prevalent (Byrne, 2009). The majority of runs are dedicated to medical emergencies,

with a small fraction classified as false alarms (NFPA, 2016). Firefighters respond to a wide variety of emergencies, including tornadoes, natural disasters, threats of terrorism, environmental hazards, and even water rescue (Byrne, 2009). Those who make up volunteer fire departments come from diverse backgrounds with different levels of education and talent, and many members of the volunteer fire service across the nation have full-time jobs elsewhere (Hewitt & Landreville, 2007).

In more recent decades, the National Fire Protection Association has put more rigorous training requirements in place to decrease the number of occupational deaths, injuries, and illnesses that occur on the job (Finger, 2016). In 2014 the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published statistics indicating that between 2010 and 2012 roughly 70,450 firefighters were injured in that three-year period (Finger, 2016). Today there are more than 300 NFPA codes and standards, all of which represent and reflect the changing needs of the industry. The codes and standards aim to “eliminate death, injury, property and economic loss due to fire, electrical, and related hazards.” (NFPA, 2017). Technologies regularly evolve and practical knowledge based on experience continually pushes the NFPA to adapt to these changes. The process of amending an existing code or standard, or publishing a new one entirely, is reliant on a strict development process that involves more than 9,000 volunteer committee members which hold a wide range of professional expertise within the fire service (NFPA, 2017).

Because improvements in fire safety have caused the number of building fires to decrease by 54 percent between 1980 and 2013, firefighters today respond to a much smaller number of fire calls (NFPA, 2016). Today fewer than 4 percent of fire department calls are in response to an actual fire (NFPA, 2016). However, the number of career firefighter positions nationwide has increased by more than 50 percent in that time (NFPA, 2016). While many assumptions highlight

increased emergency response tactics after 9/11, NFPA blames an increase in fire department funding on expanding staffs, overtime pay and retirement and health benefits (NFPA, 2016). NFPA (2015) estimates there are more than 29,727 fire departments nationwide. Of these, 2,651 departments were all career, 1,893 were mostly career, 5,421 were mostly volunteer and 19,762 were all volunteer. 13,500 of the departments provided EMS with basic life support, 4,617 departments provided EMS with advanced life support, and 11,610 departments did not provide EMS (NFPA, 2015). There were approximately 1,160,450 firefighters in the U.S. in 2015, according to estimates based on NFPA's 2015 National Fire Experience Survey. This is a 2.3 percent increase from 2014 (NFPA, 2015).

Career firefighters include full-time uniformed firefighters, regardless of assignments on duty. For the purpose of the 2015 National Fire Experience Survey, career firefighters include only firefighters in public fire departments that protect people, their residences, and public structures; they do not include firefighters working in private fire brigades, or for state or federal agencies (NFPA, 2015). Volunteer firefighters include any active part-time (call or volunteer) firefighters. "Active volunteers are defined as being involved in firefighting. 345,600 (30%) were career firefighters, while 814,850 (70%) were volunteers (NFPA, 2015)."

Of the 1,160,450 firefighters surveyed, the age group accounting for the largest share of firefighters was the 30-39 group, or 26.7 percent of all firefighters. About 24 percent of firefighters surveyed fell into the 40-49 age group and the next largest was the 20-29 age group (20.9%). Firefighters, age 50-59 accounted for a smaller share (17.2%). Only 3.3 percent of firefighters were of ages 16 to 19, and another 7.9 percent were age 60 and over (NFPA, 2015).

Since 1986, the number of career firefighters in the U.S. has increased by 49 percent. Although the number of career firefighters has increased overtime, the number of people

protected by career firefighters has remained relatively level as the population in the U.S. has increased (NFPA, 2015).

A brief history of the Fire Department of Liberty Township

Formerly known as the Hazelwood Volunteer Fire Department dating back to 1953, the Fire Department of Liberty Township (FDLT) was formed in January 2000 by a cooperative effort of Cartersburg, Clayton, and Belleville Volunteer Fire Departments. After nearly a decade of development, Hazelwood merged and became the Fire Department of Liberty Township in 2007. This combination department provides fire, rescue, and EMS protection to about 5,500 inhabitants in 35 square miles of a primarily rural area about thirty miles west of Indianapolis. Contracting with the Liberty Township Trustee and the Town of Clayton, FDLT is a non-profit organization in which a large source of revenue is collected through commercial and residence property tax.

On a typical day there are three or four volunteers on duty at FDLT, with a few more working on the weekends to fit in additional training sessions. Most of the runs are in response to non-emergent medical situations. However, some days, particularly when it's raining, five or six trauma runs in just a few hours can occur due to an increased number of traffic accidents in the area. Between 2013 and 2016, FDLT responded to an average of 642 EMS incidents per year. There is a minimum of least two respondents at the station per shift, but on the weekends as many as eight will show up to earn supplementary hours of training and experience.

Larry Bruner, former fire chief of FDLT when it was still the Hazelwood Volunteer Fire Department, expressed hope more than a decade ago that FDLT would eventually become a paid department within five to 10 years, but today the department remains largely volunteer-run with

the exception of a couple paid officer positions. In *Hazelwood Volunteer Fire Department: The First 50 Years* (2003), Bruner highlights the complexities of the volunteer department:

Within the next five to ten years, Hazelwood VFD will possibly become a paid department, which means that although most of the volunteers remain volunteer, there will be a number of paid members to ensure twenty-four-hour emergency medical support to the community. The difficulty will be paying for this twenty-four-hour support (63).

Today, FDLT is run by approximately fifty volunteers total, with some ten volunteers offering a portion of their time at the fire station on a weekly basis. A handful of the volunteers are paid part-time, some earning as much as \$10.50 per hour, and typically have another part-time or full-time job on the side. Some of the volunteers are firefighters at other stations in the region, including Amo Volunteer Fire Department, Monrovia Volunteer Fire Department, and Coatesville Volunteer Fire Department. The current fire chief, Jeff (Andy) Dixon, succeeds his mother, Bobbie Dixon, as the former fire chief who served in that position for just a few years.

FDLT operates on a budget of roughly \$300,000 to \$400,000 per year, which is barely enough to keep up with the station's apparatuses, utilities, and structural upkeep. As revenue continues to subtly decrease in recent years, the fire department faces the possibility of annexation within the next decade. Annexation, under its definition, usually implies that the territory and population being annexed is the smaller, more peripheral, and weaker of the two merging entities, discounting physical size. Annexation would allow the Plainfield Fire Territory to take over the region of Hendricks County covered by FDLT. This would only happen if local officials in Liberty Township voted to have the fire department eliminated, or if the county became involved and proposed an annexation. In that case they would be giving their tax dollars to Plainfield's fire stations, rather than the station protecting their own region.

Literary Journalism: Giving readers a new worldview

Literary journalism falls into several different definitions under the same interpretation of storytelling. Some have defined it as “a distinct genre quite different from traditional news reporting and other narrative works” (Aucoin, 2016, p. 116). Others have noted, “it’s a sophisticated form of nonfiction writing, possibly the highest form, that harnesses the power of facts to the techniques of fiction” (Vare, 2000, p. 18). In *Writing for Story*, Jon Franklin uses the term “nonfiction short story” for literary journalism because he said such works “represent the revival, in new form, of the old fiction short story” (Marsh, 2010, p. 295).

Literary journalism enables readers to gain insight about an unfamiliar world, ultimately giving them a more thorough understanding of the character(s) or topic at hand (Massé, 2002). By giving readers a window into an unfamiliar world, literary journalism differs from traditional news in that it focuses on the “subjective description and exposition of phenomena that resist abstraction by providing intensely experienced details of the real world.” (Aucoin, 2016, p. 116). The practice of literary journalism requires a level of commitment of the author, as well as the subject of interest, that surpasses the components of everyday traditional news. In-depth reporting techniques include extensive field observation, in-depth interviews, and detailed secondary or background research (Massé, 2002). Several noteworthy authors including Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and John McPhee, spent hundreds of hours researching the complexities of their stories and subjects of interest. Capote’s interviews and reporting while writing *In Cold Blood* accounted for more than 6,000 pages of typed notes during a five-year span (Massé, 2002).

In *Literary Journalism*, Mark Kramer notes that literary journalists immerse themselves in the subjects’ worlds and in background research (Sims, 1995, p. 22). This in-depth immersion

and exhaustive research allows literary journalists to comprehend their subjects on a deeper level, thus readers can “sift through the flood of information in a way that allows them to make sense of the world” (Aucoin, 2016, p. 116). While traditional news journalism attempts to answer what, who, when, why, and how something happened, literary journalism relies on the ability to craft dramatic scenes and use them as the “unit of construction” (Massé, 2002, p. 30). Crafting accurate and dramatic scenes within a narrative requires trust and access from the immediate source. This often involves extensive reporting that is both time consuming and all-inclusive within the scope of a topic. Large-scale reporting might include uncovering historical documents, public records, databases, and even personal correspondence (Massé, 2002, p. 29).

To bring the work of literary journalism up to a certain degree of artistic standard, the writer must use several narrative techniques to bring the new world or subject to life for the reader. Giving readers a unique view of a character or way of life is dependent on crafting dramatic scenes, foreshadowing, and including extensive dialogue, characterization, flashbacks, and symbolism (Massé, 2002, p. 29). Unlike writers of fiction, literary journalists must achieve this artistic merit while bound by the limits of “facts, opinions, observations, and other information obtained through research,” (Massé, 2002, p. 29).

Clark (2012) states that one literary journalism technique, characterization, is achieved through a detailed arrangement that allows readers to see “flesh, blood, and spirit.” When writing nonfiction, it is important to pay attention to the contrast between a character’s internal and external value system. Interesting characters usually exhibit a higher level of contrast between those aspects (Clark, 2012). Rather than telling the readers what the character is like, writers of literary journalism should make it evident through his or her dialogue and actions (Clark, 2012). Spending an extensive amount of time with subjects makes this technique possible for writers by

allowing them to show the reader their subject's characteristics, rather than flatly stating them (Massé, 2002).

Within journalism, the acceptance of creative nonfiction is becoming more widespread as editors have begun welcoming more interesting and dramatic writing (Cheney, 2003). "People may want facts, but they want those facts presented interestingly" (Cheney, 2003). Giving readers facts and information without imbedding some type of emotional appeal robs them of the experience they could have as learners. Though it often reads like fiction, new journalism is not fiction. Literary journalism, or "new journalism" requires a more creative, and imaginative approach to reporting and writing (Cheney, 2003).

Volunteer firefighters achieving career firefighter status

Today's volunteer and career fire service is vastly different than it was decades or even several years ago. A need for increased specialized training is becoming paramount as firefighters seek to increase their skill set (Kraut, 2014). Mike Metro (2003), chief deputy for the Los Angeles County Fire Department, believes that today's fire service "needs to accept the responsibility of educating our future applicants so they will have a complete and accurate understanding of the commitment they will be making for the next 30 years" (Metro, 2003, p. 56). From budget cuts to ever increasing new technology and a decline in basic firefighting skills, the fire service is continuously facing challenges (Metro, 2003). He believes the time has come when all who fought fires during "The War Years," or when fire duty was at its peak, have already retired or are in the process of leaving departments.

Mike Metro (2003), chief deputy for the Los Angeles County Fire Department, has pondered the culture of the fire service as it attempts to embrace the revamped EMS mission:

I am afraid we, as a fire service, do this often: We give the impression to those seeking a career in the fire service that we fight fires every day, rescuing babies and gaining the accolades of a grateful public. We then hire these wide-eyed youths, who enter our profession with no clue as to the significance of our EMS mission. We send them to fire stations where they anxiously await those fires we have all shown them, that Hollywood has shown them, but those fires are long in coming, separated by the countless EMS runs that we handle day in and day out (57).

The competition for full-time paid firefighting positions is slowly increasing due to the advanced training requirements in place for today's firefighters (NFPA, 2016). The Indianapolis Fire Department (IFD) chose 39 firefighters out of a pool of 1,800 applicants for the department's 81st recruiting class in February 2016. According to IFD, the average age of the firefighters in the 81st recruiting class is 29. Most fire departments require that applicants are under the age of 35 when applying for full-time firefighting positions (NFPA, 2016). According to Haigh (2015, p. 47), "most firefighter candidates do not understand the new firefighting selection process and criteria, including how to shine among the rest of the applicants as a contender." While it is considered to be one of the most rewarding jobs, it is also one of the most challenging to acquire (Haigh, 2015).

Obtaining a high school diploma is the first step to be considered for a firefighting position (Moore, 2006). However, obtaining a bachelor's degree in fire science is one way to quickly advance in the career (Moore, 2006). Because the fire service now responds to a variety of emergency medical calls, most firefighters are certified as paramedics, making it even more challenging to acquire a full-time position (Moore, 2006). Dragging a 165-pound dummy up to 125 feet is just one of the standard strength and agility tests for firefighter assessments (Moore, 2006).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, firefighters had a median pay of \$48,030 per year in 2016. Salaries are becoming more competitive in the field, particularly among flourishing communities that have the resources to provide fire departments with hefty salaries. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) indicates the projected job growth for firefighters will grow by 5 percent over the next decade, and states “competition for jobs will likely be strong.”

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Approach

The creative project researched the process of becoming a career firefighter, as well as the norms and behaviors of those who take part in that process as current volunteer firefighters. One main character, Lt. Trevor Bolton, is the main focus throughout the nonfiction narrative, with several other minor characters included in the story providing dialogue, description, and exposition from experts and other FDLT volunteers. The story chronicles Trevor's life as a volunteer firefighter and include the steps he has taken to become a career firefighter up until the moment he is accepted into paramedic school, and ultimately given an offer for a full-time firefighting position. The researcher and main subject met while studying at Danville Community High School in 2009, which enabled a discussion about the subject's struggle with being hired to a paid fire department.

The original narrative, which included shorter scenes and minimal background research, was written during a graduate level journalism course (J614) in the fall semester of 2016. The scenes outlined in the original version of the narrative have been adjusted and extended as a result of further extensive reporting and the collection of secondary research. Three main chapters in the body of the project outline the process Trevor has been involved with while trying to achieve career firefighting status as a rookie volunteer. Chronologically, with the use of digression, these chapters begin with Trevor's first days at the FDLT firehouse and end with an offer to attend paramedic school, as well as the opportunity to work full-time at a nearby fire department.

The required training, expertise, and skillmanship of today's firefighters is described within the narrative, while also touching on the characters' overall dedication to the fire service and its rigorous hiring processes. The researcher utilized ethnographic techniques and avoided judgments or opinions on the subject of volunteer and career firefighting in the United States.

Technique

Exposition, description, characterization, and dramatization are the primary literary journalism techniques that were used in the research project. The inclusion of sensory and status details allows readers to become immersed into the scenes within the narrative. Exposition was achieved through the collection of secondary research including facts and data surrounding the volunteer and career sectors of the fire service. More specifically, exposition surrounding the Fire Department of Liberty Township was touched on through information collected during interviews and external examination of the department. Characterization was achieved through the insertion of dialogue and description of the main character, Lt. Trevor Bolton. Other supporting characters help propel the narrative, as well as the inclusion of complication, points of insight, and a structured resolution. Several scenes within the narrative were the result of direct field observation reporting by the author, as well as unstructured scenes and summary narrative. Eyewitness accounts also helped drive several scenes within the narrative.

Reporting Methods

This research project utilized several reporting techniques to give readers a richer understanding of the challenges firefighters face when climbing the ranks of employment within the fire service. A majority of the interviews were conducted in-person at the FDLT fire station in Clayton, Indiana. Most of the interviews were recorded, but some were documented through taking notes and paying attention to sensory details on the scene of an EMS incident. However, several other avenues for interviewing were utilized including e-mail and by telephone.

Interviews that resulted in material used for the body of the narrative were mainly conducted with Trevor and several volunteers he works with on a regular basis at the firehouse. Cheney (2001) states that using a tape recorder while interviewing is important because it enables the researcher to catch details of the conversation that might be missed while scribbling quickly in a notebook. A tape recorder was almost always present during structured interviews and it was also utilized during certain moments of field observation to catch comments from the researcher's observations, as well as the dialogue occurring between the volunteer firefighters.

Maintaining eye contact, which is something Chaney (2001) points out as crucial to the interview, was helpful in gaining the subject's trust and reassuring him the researcher was interested in what he was saying about the topic. Chaney (2001) states that it is helpful to simply ask "why" during interviews, and this was helpful when trying to understand how Trevor was feeling about certain things including the hiring process and his feelings towards the fire department he currently works for.

Field observation by the author largely makes up the main body of the narrative, and was done over a ten-month period between August 2016 and May 2017. The researcher gained permission from the fire department the main character works for to go on ride alongs and watch

the volunteers work while they were tending to various emergencies. The researcher also gained permission to attend two of the Firefighter I and II courses that were taught in house at FDLT. Most of the field observation and immersion occurred once per week over the course of ten months. However, sometimes field observation occurred at the group of volunteers' favorite places to hang out and spend time outside of the firehouse. This immersion reporting allowed the researcher to become fully involved in the everyday lives of volunteer firefighters, giving readers a unique and magnified perspective of the focus of the narrative.

The re-creation of scenes was achieved through field observation and extensive interviews with key eye witnesses. There are some scenarios within the narrative that were not witnessed by the researcher herself. These particular scenarios were discussed and documented in vivid detail with key players and witnesses which were involved.

Secondary research supports field observations and include documented materials, books, magazine and scholarly journal articles, and historical data. For example, one element of the secondary research supports what training requirements are in place for today's volunteer and career firefighters.

Structure

Dramatic scene building comprises a majority of the material gathered for the body of the narrative. By utilizing a primarily chronological structure with digression to tell the story, readers can relate to Trevor's character in that he is an example of a timeless tale, "The Little Engine That Could." From start to finish, Trevor is unrelenting in his efforts to become a full-time, paid firefighter. The structure of this story was built largely on the re-creation of dramatic scenes and the characterization of Trevor, as well as the supporting characters. A key guideline

for structuring a work of literary journalism is highlighted by Investigative Editor Brad Reagan at the Wall Street Journal: “Scenes drive the action” (Reagan, 2000, p. 53). By giving readers a unique perspective from Trevor’s world as a volunteer firefighter who is trying to achieve career status, they will have the ability to relate to his character and triumphs.

In some sections of the narrative the researcher chooses to insert herself as a character to propel the story. Specifically, two conversations between the focal character and the researcher are included within the narrative. These conversations show the type of relationship the researcher had with the focal character and is an example of the researcher taking a mobile stance.

The prologue of the narrative gives readers a quick look inside the morning Trevor has before he goes into an interview for a full-time firefighting position. From there, the story builds up Trevor’s rapport as an achieving firefighting rookie and includes scenes which propel the idea that he deserves and has what it takes to be a career firefighter. The story ebbs and flows as Trevor gets into a rut after not being hired to a department, despite turning in nearly fifty applications. A point of insight is drawn when Trevor seemingly accepts that his fate is to go through with paramedic school for the time being, but the conclusion brings everything full circle when Trevor is ultimately offered the job he is applying for in the prologue of the narrative.

Several points of insight occur throughout the story, including Trevor choosing to take a demotion at the firehouse and realizing his interest for the time being might be in trauma rather than firefighting. The authenticity of Trevor’s drive and character is shown through the opinions of his fire chief and other volunteers at the station. His leadership is projected through dialogue among the volunteers at the station and his sincerity toward his mentorship of them.

CHAPTER 4

BODY OF PROJECT

Prologue: The Chair - March 2017

Just be yourself and have a good attitude. Trevor tries to remind himself of this every time he prepares for an interview. He goes through the same routine each time. After dozens of interviews, his preparation is like clockwork. His phone's alarm goes off shortly after sunlight emerges above the horizon outside the window of his small bedroom. After hitting the snooze button a couple times, he lies there and waits nine more minutes for the next alarm to go off.

He finally pushes his tired body from his queen size bed and kicks dirty clothes out of the way from underneath his feet. Two piles of clothes, one dirty and one clean, form walls for the path he walks through to get around the room. He stumbles to the window and watches as the sun continues to slowly rise in the distance. Hues of gold paint the stumps of leftover corn from the last season's crop next door to his two-story apartment building, looming over the earth like the stress of the day's event looms over his mind. Kneading his palms into his eyes and yawning loudly, he looks away from the beaming rays and lets out a sigh.

He makes it to the bathroom and turns on the shower, cranking the faucet to the hottest temperature possible. Steam fills the small bathroom, which is not much larger than lavatories found in campers or in the back of commercial airplanes. He reaches for the damp towel he used after bathing the night before and the water droplets scattered among his body disappear within a few pats. He steps over the tub and reaches for his contact lens case. He stretches his eyelids open with one free hand, while the other drops a contact lens onto the bright blue and green iris on his eyeball. Now for the second one. Without his contact lenses, he risks getting lost on the

way from his bedroom to the front door because his vision is so lousy. He shaves some of the stubble off his face and combs over his freshly cut hair that stands no more than an inch off his scalp.

Reaching into the closet, he pulls out a dark gray suit he picked up from the dry cleaner the day before. With the hanger still on, he lays it on the wrinkled bed sheets as he pulls on different pieces of underclothes. He carefully puts the suit on, making sure not to wrinkle the jacket or pants. He stands in front of the mirror and checks the front and back for any flubs in the suit's material. Although he is tall, measuring above six feet, his skinny stature is buried within the ensemble. His pant legs flare out above his shiny, black shoes, and the suit's middle slightly bellows out from his torso.

He grabs the handheld two-way radio that sits on his nightstand and puts his phone in his pocket. He takes his keys from the same nightstand and heads out the front door. With each step he gets closer. Closer to a career. Closer to achieving his dream.

"Closer to another rejection," says the little voice in his head that prepares him for the worst. He climbs in his truck and heads for the Plainfield Fire Department headquarters, about a twenty-minute drive from his apartment.

A few dozen prospective firefighters, mostly men and a few women, pile into the waiting room of the Plainfield Fire Department headquarters. Ranging from ages 18 to 36, a whole spectrum of profiles and personalities make up the pool of applicants applying for the job that starts at a substantial salary of roughly \$42,000. From no experience to more than a decade of experience in firefighting, the applicants depict people from all walks of life. Some choose to make small talk amongst each other, but most sit in silence and mentally prepare for the

interview. Trevor is one of the first to be called into the interview room as names are shouted out alphabetically.

“Here we go,” he mumbles to himself as he puts his weight on his hands resting on his knees and stands up. His eyesight shifts from the blue and gray carpet on the floor and he looks towards the room in which his fate awaits.

“I don’t really get nervous until I’m sitting in the chair,” Trevor explains. “I try not to think about it too much.” The chair, which is usually situated in the middle of the room where interviews take place, confronts a panel of five to seven experienced firefighters sitting before him. The chair has become a symbol for him. It not only steals his confidence right from under him momentarily, but it represents the wall between all his hard work and what he longs for. His experience, the answers he gives to various questions, and his attitude towards firefighting act as cumpers when he is perched on the seemingly menacing chair.

The next fifteen minutes are some of the slowest and longest moments of his life. He is asked a series of questions, all weighty in nature.

Why do you want to become a firefighter?

Why do you feel your past experience prepares you to be a part of the Plainfield Fire Territory?

What is the mission statement of the Plainfield Fire Territory?

Trevor answers each question as they come, some more easily than others, until the wrath of the chair constrains him.

What are the seven core values of the Plainfield Fire Territory?

Shit, shit, shit!

Trevor thought about it for a minute. After a few moments he gave into the realization

that he had no idea what the seven core values were. He just starts guessing. Within a few minutes, the interview is finished and he is cursing each step on the way back to his truck. He climbs into his 2003 Dodge Ram and slams his palm on the steering wheel. He reaches for his cigarettes and pulls one out to light it.

“Well shit, there goes another one,” he thinks to himself.

Chapter 1: Rookie of the Year

Trevor was four years old when his parents discovered his fascination with fire. They will never forget the day he hauled in the garden hose from outside to put out an imaginary fire consuming their first starter apartment in Danville, Indiana. “Fire! Fire! Fire!” his munchkin voice shouted as he rushed in and sprayed the walls and furniture with the rubber hose slung over his tiny shoulder. Trevor remembers watching a group of firefighters put out the neighbor’s house a few days before this act of childish tomfoolery. His mom says five-year-old Trevor refused to take off the yellow and black junior firefighter outfit she bought for him for weeks at a time. He wore it to family gatherings, church, and seemingly everywhere in between.

As he reached middle and high school, his interest in firefighting was replaced by other hobbies. When he wasn’t at the skate park or working at Butler’s Garden Center, he was driving around with friends doing stuff teenage boys do. Black Cat firecrackers and bottle rocket stems that went off in the backseat of his 1999 Ford Escort often littered the floor mats. Empty Bud Light beer cans and the occasional fifth of Jim Beam could be found in his trunk. By the time he graduated high school, he had been to the emergency room nearly a dozen times for skateboarding related injuries alone.

His friends from high school say they never knew what they were getting into when Trevor picked them up to go for a drive. Sometimes they drove out to a section of Glenn Flint Lake in Greencastle, Indiana, where they would swing on a rope and drop down about twenty feet into brown, murky water occupying a small gully. He particularly enjoyed bringing his friends to an old, rusty one-lane bridge that was built over Big Walnut Creek just west of Greencastle. Some of the teenagers in the group were brave enough to jump over the bridge into

the water. Trevor tenaciously encouraged those who weren't until they mustered up the courage to take the leap.

When the roads were iced over in the winter Trevor would coax his friends to get in the back seat of his Escort so they could go "drifting." After speeding up the car enough to hear the girls in the backseat squeal with trepidation, he pulled up hard on the emergency brake and jerked the wheel to the left. Round and round they whirled on massive patches of ice scattered along the parking lot of the high school until the gas tank was nearly empty.

When Trevor was a sophomore in high school he was notorious for hanging out in the field across the street from his parents' house where an official "Girl Scouts of the USA" meeting grounds structure was built. A small fire pit and a few benches occupied the backyard of the small, white house that was adorned with an official green Girl Scouts logo in the apex of its roof. The backyard was used by Trevor and his friends for smoking cigarettes and occasionally drinking a few beers. Danville was a small town and after nine at night the streets became dark and quiet, so any teenagers roaming around would be immediately stopped and questioned by police officers driving around at night. One of his best friends from high school, Clarissa McClure, recalls a time when Trevor started a fire in the backyard of the "Girl Scouts of the USA" house:

"We were probably about sixteen or seventeen years old, but one night he must have been bored or something because I remember he started a fire out there just to kind of see what would happen next. Well, it didn't take but five minutes for a few cops to show up and ask him what the hell he was doing back there and why he thought it would be okay to start a fire where he was also trespassing. He was really casual with them, until they made him call his parents to pick him up. He kept telling them, 'My parents

live right across the street, just go knock on the door and go get them.’ The cops refused and made him wait for my dad to come pick us both up so he could drop him off ten feet across the street. It’s definitely one of my favorite ‘Trevor stories.’”

As high school graduation approached in the spring of 2011, Trevor dithered between attending a trade school to be an automotive technician and signing up for the military. But in the back of his mind, he said, was an urge to do what he was always passionate about; put out fires.

Trevor put in his first application for FDLT when he was eighteen and began training for the Firefighter I and II certification. He was hired on to the department as a part-time volunteer about one year after submitting the application. The list of job functions and demands of a firefighter/EMT for FDLT was extensive:

1. Participate in training (involving firefighting and rescue procedures)
2. Carrying and using heavy tools and appliances
3. Single-handedly, carry, layout, and connect fire hoses as well as direct streams of water onto a fire
4. Using and wearing a self-contained breathing apparatus (approx. 35 lbs.)
5. Entering hazardous environments wearing protective equipment (approx. 45 lbs.)
6. Removing victims from hazardous environments
7. Raising and climbing ground ladders up to 36 feet
8. Performing salvage operations at fire scenes
9. Extinguishing fire with hose line or handheld extinguishers
10. Exposure to infectious patients by air or blood borne pathogens
11. Carrying and loading patients into stretchers and into ambulances

12. Frequently carry objects weighing more than 50 lbs
13. Ascend and descend ladders and stairs
14. Maintain equilibrium to prevent falling from precarious situations
15. Access small spaces and be able to move on hands and knees for prolonged periods of time
16. Mobility in hands and fingers to perform a variety of intricate tasks
17. Bending at waist to pick up objects or a person
18. Extending the arms or hands in any direction
19. Communicate effectively
20. Perceiving the nature of distinct sounds by ear
21. Feel attributes of objects or materials
22. Visually perceive the physical environment with major physical functions being:
 - Acuity, far, clarity of vision at 20 feet or more
 - Acuity, near, clarity of vision at 20 feet or less
 - Depth perceptions, judging space and distance relationships
 - Peripheral vision, focusing eyes on fixed points and being able to see right, left, up and down
 - Color vision, identifying and distinguishing colors

Trevor eventually signed up for fire science courses at the local Ivy Tech campus around the same time to boost his chances of landing a full-time job, but was in no hurry to finish his degree as he started knocking out several emergency response certifications. He began making his home at Station 31 and commuted from his parents' house in Danville during his rookie years. He eventually moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Clayton in 2015 to be closer to the

station when he was promoted to lieutenant. With rent costing him right around \$500 per month, Trevor soon realized he could live on his own and put a little bit away to save up in case work was sporadic in the landscaping off-season.

Twenty-four-year-old Trevor has freckles sprinkled on his nose and cheeks like a grown-up Opie Taylor from the Andy Griffith Show. He is tall and thin with long, freckled arms. A farmer's tan from his full-time landscaping job during the week adorns the top of both his biceps. His black rubber steel-toed boots look clunky and awkward, but they match the black bulky fireproof bunker pants he has on. They are being held up with gray suspenders.

He takes a long drag from the Marlboro Special Blend cigarette he is holding between his lengthy index finger and thumb and exhales slowly. A steady stream of smoke lingers for several seconds before dissipating between the wooden beams that line the ceiling of Station 31. He watches the crew as they argue back and forth about what they will be doing for the rest of the afternoon at the station. His index finger forms a circle when he brings the cigarette up to his mouth, barely touching the light brown two-day stubble in the shape of a boomerang over his top lip. He pulls his hand back down to his pants and lets his cigarette hang halfway out of his mouth. His bright white teeth can be seen when he doubles over laughing, but are rarely visible unless he dissolves into laughter.

He is usually quiet.

Logan sees Trevor light up another cigarette from the other side of the station and runs over to rip the cigarette from Trevor's fingers.

“It hasn’t been four hours yet,” Logan warns Trevor. “I’ll give them back when it’s been four hours. You’ve been doing good lately.”

After a ten-minute argument that turned physical halfway through, Logan gives up and surrenders the nearly empty pack to Trevor. He relights his cigarette and rolls his eyes as he listens to a rookie volunteer firefighter pipe up about not getting hired on at FDLT or any other paid departments in the region.

“The stack of rejection letters I have gotten is about this fucking tall and you don’t see me bitching,” Trevor snaps back at him, gesturing to a stack about eight inches high. He gives the rookie a sardonic smile and continues his short monologue. “You gotta show the initiative first. Shit, dude, you’re at the bottom of the totem pole.”

The rookie, Cole Zeunik, is nineteen and refers to Trevor as a “salty dog.” Trevor calls Cole a “t-shirt wearer.” They banter back and forth with inappropriate name calling until Trevor puts out his cigarette and asks the crew if they want to grab some lunch at a small bar and grill down the road from the station.

Clayton is a small town. Home to about 600 people, this rural whistle stop is one of several small communities in Liberty Township. Nestled about thirty miles west of Indianapolis, the township distances itself from big city life. These communities, including Hazelwood and Cartersburg among others, are the types of places people talk about leaving but seldom do.

Clayton isn’t desolate, but the antique store and library are rarely bustling with more than a handful of people at a time. One bank, a small food mart, the Clayton Cafe, the post office, and the fire station are the staple establishments occupying East Kentucky Street, the main one-lane

road running through the center of town. Heading into Clayton from the north, State Road 39 turns briefly into Iowa Street. Just past the PNC Bank, Iowa Street approaches East Kentucky Street and continues for about four blocks until it returns back to State Road 39. Outsiders are advised not to blink as they pass through town or they might miss it.

Diagonally opposite from Clayton Cafe on East Kentucky Street, the firefighters at the Fire Department of Liberty Township often patronize the small restaurant. FDLT could be mistaken for an auto repair shop if there wasn't a sign distinguishing it from the other structures along the road. The large off-white building has three garage doors serving as the main entrances and exits of the building, which are usually open in nice weather to let the breeze in.

FDLT volunteers and visitors park in a gravel lot behind the building and enter through one of the large garage doors where they are greeted by a wooden picnic table in a sizable room with high ceilings. The sturdy beige picnic table is a staple at the firehouse. From smoking cigarettes to carving "Station 31" in block letters into the hardwood, the firefighters sit at the picnic table to pass the time. The table sits in the southeast corner of the building, while Engine 105, an ambulance, a support truck, and a grass fire truck comprise the firehouse contents. Behind the picnic table is a set of stairs that leads to the living quarters.

About the size of a two-bedroom apartment, the living quarters include a kitchen, one bedroom full of several twin-sized beds, and a living room full of brown leather recliners with threadbare headrests. South Park plays on the TV in the living room more often than any other show and the laughter of firefighters can be heard down the hallway. They are yelling a chant from one of the South Park episodes:

Social Justice, 1-2-3!

Woo Woo!

I wanna be PC!

Woo Woo!

It's just the way to be for me... And you!

Woo Woo!

Your hateful slurs are through!

Woo Woo!

I call woo woo on you!

Woo Woo!

We'll fight until you're PC black and blue!

Woo Woo!

We are language police! Fighting bigotry! Hurtful words can suck our turds! 'Cause it's PC for me... And you!

Woo Woo!

The gear is kept in front of the middle garage door of the building and behind Engine 105. Organized into two rows on a large wire shelving unit and labeled by last name, the sets of gear weigh at least fifty pounds each. Rubber steel-toed boots sit inside the legs of trousers and occupy either the bottom shelf or the floor of the garage. Some of the red and black fire hats hanging on the top shelf look slightly used, while others are contorted, melted around the rim, and show signs of fire damage. Some of the jackets are black and some are tan, but they are all adorned with reflective stripes around the waist, wrists, chest, and bicep. Most are hung on hooks and have the owner's name patched across the top of the back, but others are resting on pairs of boots and remain nameless.

The Fire Department of Liberty Township was formed in January 2000 by a cooperative effort of Cartersburg, Clayton, and Belleville Volunteer Fire Departments, and in 2007 Hazelwood Volunteer Fire Department joined that merger became part of FDLT. A service-learning project outlines the history of the Hazelwood Volunteer Fire Department and was published by nonfiction writing students at Indiana Wesleyan University in 2003. From the formation of the department in 1953 to the last few years leading up to the department's merger with FDLT, the book outlines the process of forming and maintaining a rural volunteer fire department. Larry Bruner, previous chief of HVFD, writes a letter at the end of the book to his community that summarizes what he has learned in his small town volunteer firefighting experience:

I know that the community around Hazelwood will continue to grow more rapidly than it has in the last fifty years, and I hope the department at Hazelwood will always carry the volunteer spirit of helping others before self. Many people never realize the time and effort it takes to train an effective fire force, and the business meetings and administrative details required to operate a department such as ours. The documentation and records required by the state of Indiana to operate as successful a department as ours is greater than many people think. The fundraisers and grant writing required to equip an effective department such as Hazelwood is equal to that of a small business. Will tomorrow's firefighters have the spirit to make the ultimate sacrifice? To train and prepare for the worst situation, then execute those plans with no reservation towards self? It has been said that no greater love can a man have than to lay down his life for another. We constantly train to place safety first while reality tells us we could lose our lives at any moment. A true volunteer is someone who handles an emergency situation without reservation of his or her life while having concern only for others. We can only hope that tomorrow's firefighters will carry this high standard. Time never stands still; for as far as we have come, we have a much greater distance to travel. I hope and pray that tomorrow's firefighters of Hazelwood Fire Department will always carry the torch of our ancestors. Be the best at whatever they do - do it right, with honesty and integrity. Be a volunteer (Bruner, 2003).

August 2016

Trevor never knows what the day will be like at the station when he gets up in the morning. Sometimes a bout of chaos makes the twelve-hour shifts fly by, like when seven or eight calls come in one after the other when the roads ice over in the winter.

There are some days the station doesn't receive any calls at all, which is when Trevor prefers to make the most of the free time he has with the rookies. "Come on, Cole," Trevor instructs while waving at the rookie. "Get on the truck. We are gonna go do something." Cole hesitates for a moment, but then quickly gets his gear on and hops in the passenger seat of Engine 105. "Where are we going?" he asks Trevor as they pull out of the garage of the station. "You will see," he says flatly.

Trevor doesn't talk as they approach their destination that is seemingly in the middle of nowhere on a newly paved road. He gets out of the truck and walks over to a green fire hydrant sticking out among a large, unkempt field of grass and weeds. "Hook up the hose to the hydrant and then put it back on the truck," Trevor instructs Cole. Without question, Cole gets out of the truck and begins taking the hose off the truck to attach it to the hydrant. Trevor walks away and watches Cole complete the task from a short distance. "Practice makes perfect," Trevor mumbles while lighting a cigarette.

After about twenty minutes, Cole rolls up the hose and gets ready to put it back on the truck. Trevor casually chuckles as he watches Cole and asks, "Want to see what my favorite thing to do is?" After jogging back to the truck, Trevor hops on and situates himself behind the pump control panel. With the click of one button, a giant stream of water ejects from the deck gun resting on the top of the truck and bursts into the air like confetti. More than 2,000 gallons of water discharges from the deck gun per minute, and the water pressure can be lethal to anyone

standing in front of it. A cluster of rainbows shines through the misting water as Trevor and Cole get soaked in their gear under a blue, cloudless sky. Water from the deck gun descends to the ground near the curb of the black, slick road, and several arcs of color cascade through it as it rushes into a nearby drain. Trevor's smile can barely be seen through the dense mist and Cole's laughter is faintly heard from the other side of the truck. He is just about done putting the hose away when Trevor turns off the deck gun and tells Cole it's time to go back to the station.

Trevor hesitates when he is asked to recall which runs have been the most traumatic since his start at FDLT. He avoids the details when he goes over them. His eyes turn away when he talks about the bad ones and he quickly tries to change the subject, or make a joke, and it's evident he doesn't like talking about them. He has seen things he can't erase from his memory. He has woken up in the middle of the night, soaking in sweat, hallucinating a partially decomposed man hanging from his ceiling. He has seen men with half of their faces blown off after committing suicide. He has seen a nineteen-year-old man whose skull was smashed between his windshield and the back of a box truck. The young man's father was alive and conscious when Trevor arrived to that particular scene, sitting next to the corpse of his son.

"I knew I had to get that man away from his son. After I knew he was alive and conscious, my gut told me to just get him away from his son's dead body," Trevor said. "You sort of get tunnel vision in those situations and do what you feel is the right thing to do."

After asking him for weeks to tell me about some of the worst calls he has responded to, he finally agrees.

“Okay, you want to talk about it?” he asks. “Here. I’ll write them down. It won’t take me long.”

He takes out a clean sheet of lined memo paper and numbers each line, one through eight. He has the eight calls written down within two minutes and slides the lined paper to me. It reads:

1. 400 S. - Tractor into water - 1 fatality
2. I-70/SR 39 - Car into pond - Double fatality
3. I-70/Exit 59 - Semi vs. truck - 1 fatality
4. 600 S. - Suicide - 1 DOA (Dead on arrival)
5. SR 39 - Suicide - 1 DOA
6. Greencastle Road - Double Fatality
7. Cartersburg Road - Double Fatality
8. I-70/Exit 61 - 4 DOA

The first fatality on the list, tractor into water, is one of the most disturbing calls he has encountered since his time at FDLT. Called to an area of a farm that dropped off into a pond, Trevor remembers how prepared he felt to approach the victim of the accident after being a part of the department for four months at the time. According to the caller, it sounded as if the man mowing the property had fallen into a pond, causing his tractor to roll on top of him, ultimately crushing his body between the large farming equipment and the earth below. The tractor grew larger as Trevor and a few other volunteers walked closer to it on the farm. After a few moments, the tractor was in plain view, and Trevor’s eyes met the man’s body lying a few inches under the water.

“I couldn’t tell you to this day what his face looked like, but I can tell you every other detail about that day because I think my mind just blocks it out,” Trevor said about that particular run. “Most firefighters generally see their first death as a cardiac arrest, or some health-related issue. When you see a man’s torso crushed like that, it’s a different ball game.”

The man was in his early fifties. As he rested two inches under the murky pond water’s surface, his sunglasses were still covering his eyes when the crew arrived. A Ford symbol was patched in the middle of his baseball cap that was still attached to his head. To this day, Trevor said he can vividly see the deep rivets in the mud around the man’s hands where it was obvious he tried to escape the weight of the heavy tractor.

“Seeing the mud was the worst part because I knew he had been lying there, just struggling to get out,” he said.

October 2016

For an unusually warm mid-autumn day, temperatures peak into the upper seventies around noon on the Saturday before Halloween at Station 31. A breeze blows a few stray leaves through the open garage doors of the firehouse - a reminder that winter is right around the corner. The siren has only blared throughout the firehouse once this morning. A paramedic transferred an elderly woman to the hospital by ambulance for a diabetic problem. The firehouse alert system is not terribly loud, but the beeping sound resonates and will turn any smile into a solemn expression.

The siren goes off for the second time just past 3 p.m. Trevor, two firefighter veterans, and one rookie trainee jump up from the large wooden picnic table that sits in the southeast corner of the building. They hurry around the building like frazzled actors in a silent movie.

Back and forth they scuttle from the rack of gear to the fire engine. As they climb aboard Engine 105, they hear over the radio that the fire is inside a structure a few miles away from the station. The building is already fully engulfed. They hear that about nine other departments in the area have been called to the scene by dispatch.

Nineteen-year-old rookie, Nolan Zeunik, loads his hat, jacket, boots, and bunker pants into the back of the truck. He will dress for the fire while three others board. He is the youngest volunteer at the department and started going on runs in the beginning of summer. Trevor tells him in a demanding tone to “stick with him” when they get to the scene.

Tom Horvath, a man in his late 30s who has been with the department for a few years, plops in the driver’s seat and quickly asks if everyone is ready to go. Trevor gives Tom the first set of directions to get to the burning building as they pull out of the firehouse. Brian Baker, a twenty-year firefighter, sits in the back of the rig with Nolan.

Nolan wants to be sure all of his gear is on correctly. He is trying to remember what he has learned about firefighting in the classes he took over the summer. He checks his oxygen tank and shakes his head as if he can’t believe it’s finally happening. This will be his first fire, but the rest of the guys are too preoccupied to ask him if he is ready. Brian’s face is composed. He has worked dozens of fires over the years and is ready to take on the next one. He stares out the window of the truck as it barrels down country roads approaching 90 miles per hour. With each turn they grip black handles lining the inside of the truck until their knuckles turn white.

Trevor sees the smoke when the truck is still a couple miles away from the fire. The corners of his mouth crinkle as they climb up his cheeks. His wide smile beams from his face and he turns his head to Brian and Nolan in the back. He lets out a nervous chuckle under his

breath and yanks on the chain above him. The truck roars to tell other cars on the road to get out of the way.

A couple of the guys yell “Holy shit!” in unison. The large dark object could be mistaken for a mountain in the distance, but they know what it is. A huge mushroom cloud of smoke rests on the flat, yellow and orange horizon. Nolan’s eyes widen and stay locked on the smoke until a cluster of trees blocks it from his view.

Tom continues driving north and approaches the intersection where State Road 39 ends. An SUV is almost blocking the truck’s entrance as it takes a ninety-degree turn. Barely fitting between a stop sign and the SUV, the truck gets past without damaging anything in its path. Trevor continues pulling on the chain above his left arm and the truck vibrates as it lets out an ear-splitting blare. Tom’s eyes express relief as he straightens the truck out and continues driving east.

Within five minutes of leaving the firehouse the volunteers arrive to the scene. Tom maneuvers the engine around a dozen other vehicles and trucks to get as close to the fire as possible. As chief of operations, he is in charge of communicating with other departments on the scene about which trucks will be used for water. Trevor tells Nolan once more to follow him as they walk up to the one-story structure with red aluminum siding that looks similar to a small pole barn. Most people would describe it as a large garage.

Brian walks by himself toward the fire with a large black metal hook in one hand. He will use it to tear off the garage siding to get closer to the flames. Red and orange flames appear on the side of the garage closest to the owner’s red brick house. Thick black smoke emerges from the flames. It seems to be never ending. Billowing smoke fills the air and eventually dissipates

hundreds of feet above into the blue sky. The air smells like a toxic mix of smoldering metals and chemicals.

Nearly a dozen fire trucks are lined up on the opposite side of the road. A handful of neighbors are huddled under a tree talking amongst themselves.

“Do you have any idea what happened?” a woman asks someone standing next to her. “I hope no one is hurt,” she says before getting an answer.

Suddenly there is an explosion. It sounds like a wall has collapsed inside the garage.

A black pickup truck engulfed in flames sits in front of the garage. A couple firefighters are focused on putting out the flames near the engine compartment, but they need to conserve water for the garage because there isn't a fire hydrant in the area. One by one trucks unload their water into the drop tank resting on the ground that looks like a giant plastic baby pool and spans ten feet long by ten feet wide. The water is then transferred into Danville Fire Department's Engine 192 to be discharged into several hoses spraying all sides of the burning structure.

Nolan drags his feet as he walks away from the fire without Trevor after about forty minutes. He is using his large metal hook as a walking stick. He eventually fall to his knees in front of a tree. His oxygen tank is low. It beeps loudly to let him know he doesn't have much time to change it out for a fresh tank. After a few moments, he pulls off his face mask and takes some deep breaths. His hands grip his knees, and he closes his eyes. He just needs a minute, he says, and then he will go back in.

“I feel like I can't breathe,” he says.

He chugs a couple bottles of water, one right after the other. He empties one over his head and down the back of his jacket. Trevor finally emerges from the fire and Tom hands him a few water bottles that are soon emptied. Sweat drips down his bright red face after collecting on

the top of his head. Trevor and Nolan get their oxygen tanks refilled with Tom's help. Trevor is ready to go back in, but Nolan is still on his knees in front of the truck.

Trevor remembers what his first fire was like, but after five years of practice he is out of touch and doesn't feel sympathy for the rookie. The rest of the guys give Nolan a look that says, "Now you know what it's like." Before leaving the rookie behind and walking back into the fire, Trevor mutters under his breath, "You don't see the rest of us sitting on the truck."

Around 5 p.m. the fire is dying down and the smoke coming off the structure is becoming a lighter gray. Firefighters are starting to move into the inside of the structure to get to the root. An antique car inside the structure can be seen from the road, along with a few other tractors and farming equipment as firefighters continue tearing off the siding.

"Half-a-million dollars worth of refurbished antique tractors in mint condition," Brandon Richardson of the Plainfield Fire Department says.

"They were in perfect condition. There are probably about eight or nine of them inside, along with a couple cars." He shakes his head and inaudibly looks at the ground.

According to Richardson, the eighty-five-year-old owner of the tractors and cars was working on a fuel tank in the garage when it exploded. He was taken by ambulance to the hospital for some third-degree burns, but was in stable condition. Gas tanks were heard exploding one by one inside the tractors and cars inside the garage as nearly thirty firefighters tried to put it out. Some family members, including a few children and several seniors, are sitting on the front porch of the adjacent house. They are shaking their heads. Every now and then someone puts their hand over their mouth in disbelief. Some are trying to comfort one another.

After working the fire for about thirty more minutes, the FDLT crew walks back toward the truck. The fire is pretty much out and they have been released by the other departments. They

board the fire engine after picking up about twenty empty water bottles surrounding the truck. Nolan looks exhausted as the truck drifts down country roads headed toward the station. The breeze from the open window blows through his sweat soaked hair and he stares out the window. Trevor, Tom, and Brian make a few jokes back and forth, but are mostly silent during the ten-minute drive. They don't seem to want to talk about the fire right now. They want to talk about the food from Taco Bell that Brian's girlfriend left them at the station.

Chapter 2: Breaking Point

October 2016

Trevor holds a pen in his right hand and rests his freckled left arm on the large wooden desk sitting in front of him. He is distanced from the other volunteers in a small office in the back of Station 31 of the Fire Department of Liberty Township (FDLT) in Clayton, Indiana. He stares down at three applications he partially finished earlier this week for full-time firefighting positions at departments in Hendricks County. He studies the questions on one application carefully, though each packet of stapled papers varies with few minute details. An e-mail with the subject line, “Thank you for submitting an application to the Carmel Fire Department,” sits unopened in his inbox. A few more “thank you” e-mail messages from other departments in the region are listed below the unopened one.

Some of the departments he applies for want to know why he wants to fight fires. Some simply ask for the details of his training and experience. With nearly five years of fire and EMS experience under his belt, his resume doesn’t vastly differ from other firefighters just starting out. He is trained in hazardous materials and has several certifications including search and rescue awareness, active shooter response, and technical awareness.

Compared to the other officers and chiefs above him at FDLT, Trevor says he is “not even close” to obtaining the number of certifications they have received. In the beginning of the summer he started teaching a Firefighter I & II course that local volunteers take from surrounding departments to get the most basic mandatory training for the job. Trevor took the test five times before he received a passing score a few years back. Jeremy Schultz, a twenty-three-year-old volunteer at FDLT who passed the exam when the course came to an end in mid-fall, said the book work was significantly more difficult than physical aspects of the training.

“I’m not that smart, but I’ve got drive,” Trevor asserts while flipping through the pages of the application stuck between his hand and the desk. He answers each question on the application with precise penmanship, creating a perfect space between each letter and word and leaving no room for mistakes. The black ink words pop off the paper like an invitation for anyone who walks by to read them.

An application for the Danville Fire Department, a small municipality department located about ten miles north of Clayton, is halfway finished as he reaches the section outlining his references. Trevor says the application is close to the fiftieth one he has filled out and turned in since he turned twenty-one and became eligible for career firefighting positions.

A stack of rejection letters from various departments around the state sits on an end table at his one-bedroom apartment about four blocks from the station. He says he isn’t worried about the rejection he has become familiar with, but he continues to apply and wait. And apply and wait. He often waits for up to a year to hear from some departments. A few interviews every now and then keeps him on his toes and his only dark gray suit stays hanging in his closet, free of dust and wrinkles.

After applying to dozens of departments and being rejected each time, Trevor has learned a few things from the hiring process, as well as his time as a lieutenant for FDLT.

“You can’t let your ego get the best of you,” he explains. “It isn’t always about your rank or how experienced you are. It’s often about how you treat the people below you.”

According to Trevor, you can tell who the good officers are by how they treat the members of their team.

“Good officers won’t say a single word until everything has calmed down. A shitty officer will be screaming orders at everyone and micromanaging the whole ordeal.”

As he finishes up the last section of the application, he sighs like a kid who just finished doing his chores. He shoves the pile of applications over to the side of the desk and revisits them a few more times throughout the day. He asks a few other volunteer firefighters at the station if they would be willing to write him a recommendation letter, but this time it isn't for a firefighting position. He is applying to the sixteen-month long St. Vincent Health EMS & Paramedic Program in Indianapolis. Becoming a paramedic, Trevor says, will significantly increase his chances of getting hired to a department because most rookies spend their first few years working medical calls on an ambulance.

"I told myself I would keep going until I catch a break, but it seems like the only thing that will land me a job is busting my ass and putting in time," he says as he props his boots on the desk in front of him and crosses his arms.

"If I become a paramedic, I will be sealing my fate for the next six to eight years on the back of an ambulance, but maybe that's the only way it will happen. Maybe that's the only way I will get to be on the firetruck."

If he is accepted and decides to pursue it, the sixteen-month long training program will limit his time at the fire station, as well as the prospect of continuing to saturate fire departments around the state with applications.

Trevor's friend Logan, a twenty-two-year-old volunteer firefighter at FDLT, is waiting to hear about a job he applied for at the Zionsville Fire Department where his father is ranked third in command as deputy chief. Trevor also applied to one of the fifteen firefighting positions Zionsville is looking to fill as they expand their staffing among all three stations. They say they both have a chance, but aren't holding their breath. Logan could try to put in a good word for Trevor through his father, but he says it wouldn't make much of a difference. If they can make it

through the top fifteen of forty-five applicants in the interviewing process, they will get the job and sign a contract for the next three years of service.

If Trevor could choose to be hired anywhere, he would be working with the Wayne Township Fire Department (WTFD) in Indianapolis. Protecting more than 36 square miles on the west central side of Indianapolis, WTFD responded to more than 13,000 EMS incidents in 2016.

“I just want to fight fires,” Trevor says while browsing on the department’s website. “Those guys come back from a run, sleep for five minutes, and then they are back at it. It’s damn near exhausting, but it’s one of the most active departments in Indianapolis.”

To work for IFD would be a dream according to Trevor, but the hiring process is rigorous and demanding. Approximately 2,000 potential IFD recruits show up to the written test each hiring process, which occurs every one to two years. While Trevor has five years of experience with fighting fires and EMS incidents, IFD does not require its applicants to have any prior experience. It only requires its applicants to be at least 21 years old to apply and not reach age 36 by the date of appointment. Applicants must have a high School diploma or GED, a valid driver’s license, no felony convictions that have not been expunged by a court, and they must be a United States citizen or be able to legally work in the United States. Ultimately, they also must be willing to relocate or reside in Marion County or an adjacent county. New in 2017, if an applicant has completed twenty years of military service with honorable discharge and will not exceed forty years and six months of age at the time of appointment to IFD, he or she is eligible to apply for a position as a firefighter.

The written test, which is typically given on a weekend, takes four to five hours to complete and covers areas such as basic math, reading comprehension, memorization, and problem solving. An oral interview is also given and takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. Applicants sit before a board of three people who ask them questions and grade the given responses. The physical part of the hiring process involves a CPAT (Candidates Physical Ability Test). The CPAT exam is known for being strenuous. It is a timed physical test that is either pass or fail, and applicants are advised to attend at least one of the two open practice sessions held. If the candidates pass the CPAT, they are required to go on to the next phase of the hiring process which involves an aerial ladder climb. If a candidate is successful in those phases of the hiring process, he or she might be given a conditional offer of employment, which does not commit to any time frame. Medical and psychological exams are also phases in the hiring process and are not limited to a psychological exam, hearing, vision, treadmill, blood, and urine samples.

Trevor has never completed an application to IFD, but he has considered doing it several times, if for nothing else but experience. The average age of firefighters who are hired at IFD is twenty-nine.

November 2016

Trevor opens the door to his small one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of the two-story building and immediately apologizes for the mess. Two pieces of furniture occupy the first room of the living space; one small desk and one small recliner sit two feet apart from one another near the doorway to the kitchenette. A collection of diversely colored lighters is grouped on the small desk in the corner, stacked like a pile of candy to pick from.

Clothes are scattered around the floor of his bedroom, leaving only a few spots where the worn, tan carpet can be seen. His laundry basket is full to the brim, and shirt sleeves are creeping over the edge of the plastic onto the floor. The closet is slightly organized, starting on the left with neon green shirts for his landscaping job and ending on the right with various FDLT clothing including t-shirts, hoodies, and sweatpants. The middle of the closet is mostly comprised of button down flannel shirts. Clothes are also scattered on the linoleum floor of the tiny bathroom that attaches to the bedroom. Spots of toothpaste and loose hairs sprinkle the sink and the cabinet is in total disarray. He says his refrigerator is more often barren than not. Today, two slices of yellow processed cheese and a Lunchable occupy the middle shelf.

“Now do you see why I don’t bring anyone here?” Trevor jokingly asks. He sleeps at his apartment when he isn’t sleeping at the firehouse, which is most nights out of the week. Between working at the firehouse forty hours each week, teaching the Firefighter I & II course, and picking up as many shifts as he can at his landscaping and irrigation jobs to save up rent money for the off season, Trevor doesn’t have time to keep up with house chores. A broom stands in the corner of the kitchen next to the refrigerator, but cobwebs attaching the bristles to the floor indicate how often it’s used. He says “he frankly doesn’t give a damn what the inside of his apartment looks like” because he has let just a handful of people inside since he signed the lease a couple years ago.

“I’ve never seen the inside of his apartment and I don’t really know anyone here who has,” Jeremy Schultz, one of the young FDLT volunteers, remarked at the firehouse. “I heard that!” Trevor yelled from behind the engine.

A recliner sitting next to the kitchen’s entryway is accompanied by a halfway full ashtray on an end table. Sometimes Trevor kicks his shoes across the room before plummeting into the

big cushy chair and lighting up a cigarette to wind down. Other times he stumbles into the shower first to wash off the funk of the long day.

After taking a quick shower, he throws on an oversized blue flannel shirt and jeans. He quickly heads out the door to meet up with Logan and a couple other FDLT volunteers at a small bar in Danville to celebrate the ending of another workweek. Logan, on the other hand, is celebrating his new position at the Zionsville Fire Department. He signed a contract for three years and starts working at the end of December, but insists he will try to spend some of his days off working at Station 31. Trevor has not heard about the status of his application in Zionsville, but is hoping to hear back before the beginning of the new year. Trevor's interview with Zionsville is at the end of December and in the coming months he will be making a decision about paramedic school.

"He's going to be making a hell of a lot more working there than I am making working here," Trevor says about Logan landing the full-time gig.

He promised himself he isn't giving up until he is thirty-seven years old. After that, he says, the chances of being hired to a paid department will diminish significantly.

"My method is saturation," he said. "I just have to put in as many applications as I can and hope for the best."

Logan has a bucket of cold beers waiting for Trevor at the bar and hands him one as they approach each other. They clink their bottles together and take a big swig. They split a couple more buckets between them and a few other guys before playing one game of cutthroat on the pool table. After a couple hours, they head home and set their alarms for another shift at FDLT in the morning.

January 2017

Looking back as it came to a close, 2016 was a rough year for Trevor. After being promoted to lieutenant, he was expected to be present at the firehouse more often. He was expected to do most of the paperwork for all the runs the crew went on. He was expected to be a leader, but he was also expected to learn. Out of the 681 EMS incidents the department had in 2016, Trevor was present at 488. This won him the 2016 Activity Award at the department's annual banquet ceremony. He knows the number is precise because he keeps track of every run he goes on in a twelve-month calendar that hangs on his wall. The highlighted days within each month indicate which days he works. The big black tally marks within each box represent the number of runs he was a part of on that particular day. He usually adds the last names of the volunteers who accompanied him those days, and at the very bottom of each page is a running tally for the entire month.

January - 31

February - 28

March - 43

April - 39

May - 41

June - 51

July - 40

August - 49

September - 50

October - 42

November - 40

December - 34

The most runs Trevor went on in a single month in 2016 is 51, with the least being 28. Each month tells a different story of his dedication to the department. Even on his twenty-fourth birthday, Trevor was working. Thanksgiving? Working. Christmas and Christmas Eve? You guessed it, he was working.

Trevor is coming up on his fifth anniversary with FDLT.

“I got something to tell you,” he said as soon as I answered the phone that Saturday morning. “I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing, but it happened, and I’m not really sure how I feel about it yet.”

“Go ahead,” I told him. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Well, I just gave up my position as lieutenant.”

“Well, why did you do that?”

“I’ll give you the full story later.”

Trevor called a few days later and explained what was going on. He felt like nothing was good enough. He wanted his crew to be his crew again. He had thought about stepping down for months, and finally took the plunge.

“I was sick of dealing with everyone’s hissy fits, including my own,” he explained. “You overwork yourself to death and it gets hard, especially when you’re making \$10.50 an hour.”

Andy, the fire chief, didn’t beg him to stay. He knew the work was wearing on him. He knew the pressure was building and he didn’t want to turn Trevor away from the fire service completely. He knew one of his best rookies just wanted to get away from the paperwork. He

wanted to get back to doing what he does best; fighting fires and going on runs. An email that Andy sent Trevor the day he gave up his spot as lieutenant read:

Trevor,

I will start with the small and work to the big. The fire class was not substandard. To be honest, I felt like I had to slow you down a bit from being too hard on them. You did a great job with the class and while most didn't make it, the ones that did are good firemen. That's the point. The others didn't belong and never wanted it. You should have had more help and I am sorry for that. 2016 was a difficult year for me all the way around. None of my problems were because of you. In fact, you probably made my life a lot easier to process all my other problems. The fire and runs.... I knew you would make mistakes and I told you we would talk about them all. I know I'm not the teddy bear of the group and could have talked about them differently with you. I should have pointed out the good stuff you did more. That is a part of the job I have to improve on. I am by nature a problem solver, so when you stepped down in the midst of a shit storm I have to react quickly. I understand why you did what you did, but I had to react. Yes, I did make jokes, but part of that is the firehouse and me dealing with you stepping down personally. I am sorry for that. You did a good job and still have the ability to do great stuff. I believe this about you: you want to be here and you want to be involved. The door is not locked and no one is forcing you to stay. Based on those facts, you still care and care deeply, you are just trying to hide it. Me and Brent used to argue, disagree, and talk behind each other's backs. All we did was create bad mojo, but when we both pulled our heads out of our asses we became unstoppable as a team and had a huge following. You and Logan are the same thing. You just have to figure out how to work as a team. Hang in there and know I think highly of you and you do a great job 98% of the time. I will work on doing a better job of telling you this.

Jeff Dixon, Fire Chief
Fire Department of Liberty Township

Over the next few days Trevor moved some of his things out of the small office that sits in the back corner of the firehouse. The name tag that read with black bold letters, Lt. Bolton, was removed from the small file box that hangs next to the door. The white sticky label was replaced by Logan's name within days of the transition. It now reads, "Lt. Beam."

"They still call me lieutenant," Trevor said about a few of the rookies a few weeks after he gave up the position. "I still feel like their lieutenant, and I'm not going to stop teaching them things like a lieutenant would."

February 2017

Trevor is the only volunteer at the firehouse when a call for a sick person comes over the radio. “You coming with?” he asks me. We jump into the ambulance, or “the bus” as Trevor tends to call it more often than not. Luckily the woman is only a few blocks away from the firehouse and is suspected of having diabetic issues. When we arrive to the house Trevor hops out of the bus and grabs a medical bag from the back. He is greeted by a young man at the door who tells Trevor he is the victim’s son.

“She’s in here,” he points Trevor to the living room in the small, one-story house.

Trevor walks through the hallway to the living room and asks the man what her name is.

“It’s my mom, her name is Judy, and I think she is low on sugar or something,” he tells Trevor.

Trevor shouts her name a few times until he sees her eyes flutter open.

“Judy! Can you hear me? What have you eaten today Judy?”

She mumbles something Trevor can’t understand.

“Just open your mouth for me and swallow if you can. I’m going to give you some sugar,” he tells her. He opens a bottle of Insta-Glucose and squirts some into her partially closed mouth. Some of it runs down the side of her cheek and Trevor is careful to wipe it up before it reaches her shirt. After a few moments Trevor checks Judy’s blood sugar levels for the second time, which are getting better as each second passes. Judy is more awake than she was when Trevor first arrived and is continually apologizing.

“It’s okay Judy, we are going to get you feeling better,” Trevor reassures her. He is documenting her medical history, as well as the medications she is currently prescribed to according to her son. He asks her son several questions about her medical history, but he is

rambling about nearly a dozen medical problems she has dealt with in the past and isn't positive what her current state of health is.

In the midst of taking Judy's vitals and recording her medical history, two paramedics from the Danville Fire Department walk into the house to mutually assist the situation. The first paramedic tries to wriggle into an open space on the couch next to Judy to start taking her vitals. Trevor hands his clipboard over to the paramedic to show him what he has gathered so far.

"Well shoot, you already got it, didn't you?" he asks Trevor. Trevor silently nods his head and returns his attention to Judy.

"How are you feeling now Judy? Do you want to go to the hospital?" he asks again. She nods her head. The two paramedics from Danville go outside to fetch the gurney from the back of their ambulance and bring it back to lift her onto it. She is still apologizing for being an inconvenience. Trevor is still telling her it's okay and that she will be feeling better soon. The crew from Danville gets a few more pieces of information from Trevor that gathered from her son while he was on the scene before their arrival and they are off.

"Just another day in paradise," Trevor comments as he carries the medical bag back to the ambulance. "I don't mind runs like that, but when you get a forty-year-old man calling because he hasn't pooped in a few days, it gets a little old, but I'm sure you can imagine."

March 2017

An abandoned house on the north side of Clayton, about half a mile from the center of town, sits on a rugged patch of land and serves as a new training grounds for the volunteers at FDLT. An old rusty trampoline with ripped netting occupies the backyard, along with two barns full of rubbish that appear to be barely standing. A fire pit made out of a black plastic barrel is

wedged a couple feet into the ground just north of the rundown, two-story dwelling, that surprisingly once served as a family's home.

The sun beams down, bringing with it a glimpse of spring that has otherwise been absent this year. Five members of FDLT pull up to the house in the engine, ambulance, and support truck. As they climb out they ask Trevor what he has planned for them.

"They like when I come up with the scenarios," he says. "I always try to make it as realistic as I can, so we can be prepared if, or when, the real thing happens."

Trevor asks the rookie, Cole, if he wanted it to be easy or hard. "Well, the more realistic you make it, the more prepared I'll be in the future, so go for it," Cole responds.

Today they are working on RIT (Rapid Intervention Team) training. The goal when entering a structure fire is to make sure everyone inside gets out safely. Sometimes the ones who get stuck are fire fighters, which can be especially difficult with nearly 200 pounds of gear to lug around while inside. Today, Mike Simkins, a volunteer who has been with FDLT for several years, is that fire fighter.

"Mike, I want you to get down into the crawl space and get back there as far as you can and lay down," Trevor instructs. "I'm going to set some things on top of you to make it harder for them, but you just need to lie there and let them do the work." Mike is a bigger guy. His body mass and gear combined roughly weigh about 350 pounds.

Logan, Cole, and Pete rush into the house while dragging a rope that is knotted every few inches to help them get back out after saving Mike in the scenario.

"Mayday! Mayday!" Mike shouts over the radio to let them know the situation he is in has become life threatening.

"I fell through!"

Trevor takes a few steps back from the scene and watches as the trainees run through the house trying to locate Mike. The bright yellow rope attaches to each volunteer and can be traced back to the entrance of the house to help them get back to the starting point when they are ready. They immediately run to the crawl space area of the house and open the decrepit, slatted wooden door covering the stairs. It looks barely safe enough to walk over. One by one they wriggle onto the stairs which lead them to the floor of the crawlspace.

For a few moments they shout at each other and argue about what first step to take to get Mike out of the space unscathed. Trevor listens to the back and forth squabble and a smile creeps on his face.

“Well, that’s one way to do it,” he says under laughter.

He patiently watches and listens on the radio from a distance on the other side of the room. He lets the team make several mistakes as they figure out how to get Mike out of the crawlspace in a timely fashion.

The team is out of sight for several minutes as they try to work together in the furthest part of the crawlspace. Logan, acting as the team’s leader, instructs Cole to lift up the top half of Mike’s body while he and Pete work on getting the bottom half up the stairs.

“Don’t drop him, whatever you do, don’t drop him Cole!” Logan shouts through the radio.

“I won’t, I won’t. I think I got him for now,” Cole responds through muffles of static.

“On three, we are going to lift him up and back to get him on the stairs,” Logan instructs.

The three agree in unison.

“One...two...three!”

They move Mike a couple inches onto the first step of the stairs, but it isn't enough to lift him up through the opening of the crawlspace.

"Okay, let's try that again," Logan says.

"One...two...three!" They shout as they lift Mike up a couple more steps.

"Ouch, my back, my back!" Mike yells through the radio. His air pack is digging into his back as he lies stretched out on the stairs. Trevor takes a step forward near the crawlspace to check on Mike, but goes back to his place in the corner to watch the team work. After a few more tries, the top half of Mike's body is lying on the floor of the room and his legs are parallel to the staircase.

"We are almost there, just one more," Logan encourages Cole and Pete. They all grunt in unison and pull the rest of Mike's body out of the crawlspace and eventually out the front door of the home. After Mike is considered to be "rescued," the crew begins removing their gear to get fresh air and cool down.

"Well, how was that?" Trevor asks the crew.

"Well, you tell us," Logan says while trying to catch his breath.

"Could have been better, could have been worse," Trevor responds. "Let's do another one, but this time I want to hide."

Chapter 3: The Offer

April 2017

Trevor received the news in April 2017. He was accepted into the St. Vincent Paramedic Program and would be starting classes this August. After receiving a rejection letter from the Plainfield Fire Department in the beginning of April, he decided to go through with the program and quit “wasting his time on filling out more applications for fire departments that weren’t interested in hiring him.” He would be taking his skills as an EMT and crossing the bridge into an entirely new level of healthcare training. As a paramedic, Trevor would become the highest trained pre-hospital healthcare professional and understand advanced patient assessment, trauma management, pharmacology and cardiology. The training also involves advanced skills in intubation, cardiac monitoring, defibrillation, intravenous therapy, drug administration and specialized rescue techniques. The program is approximately 1,100 hours and takes an average of 12 to 15 months to complete. It includes an ambulance internship, as well as didactic instruction and hands-on clinical experiences in the hospital.

Course content for the program includes, but is not limited to:

- Roles and responsibilities of the EMT-P
- Anatomy and physiology
- Medical terminology
- Cardiovascular pathophysiology
- Cardiac arrhythmias
- Pharmacology
- Central Nervous System
- Pathophysiology

- Trauma Management
- OB/GYN
- Pediatrics
- Medical emergencies
- Psychiatric emergencies
- Hospital clinical experiences include, but are not limited to:
 - Emergency Department
 - Labor and Delivery
 - Newborn Intensive Care
 - Respiratory Therapy and Intensive Care

Kim Richardson, FDLT volunteer and full-time paramedic, told Trevor the paramedic program would be a piece of cake for him.

“I have no doubt in my mind that Trevor will be able to do it,” she said “I have seen him come such a long way since he first started here. The first time I watched him pull out of the bay for a run he turned the wrong way. It’s funny now looking back on it, but at the time I wanted to scream at him.”

“Hey! I wasn’t going the wrong way, I was just taking a different way to get there,” Trevor said.

“He just has to quit smoking first!” Kim yelled back at him.

“Seriously, he needs to quit smoking,” she said again under her breath.

May 2017

Trevor is working about forty hours at the firehouse each week while trying to get in as many hours as possible between his other two jobs to save up for paramedic school. In total, the program will cost him just under \$10,000, and payments are split up into semesters, ringing in at approximately \$2,900 per semester that he plans on paying up front to avoid taking out any loans. To save money on gas getting to and from the classes three days per week, he invested in a 2014 Ford Focus.

“There’s no way in hell I’m getting rid of my truck,” he told some of the volunteers at the firehouse. “I just needed a gas saver. This shit gets thirty miles to the gallon!”

In order to start classes at St. Vincent, he has to rack up 96 hours of time on an ambulance. Each Sunday for ten weeks during the summer he gets up at 5 a.m., or “the ass crack of dawn,” in his words, and drives to a station in Pike Township in Indianapolis to sit and watch paramedics work on an ambulance at Medic 61.

“Man, the worst part is not being able to do anything. You just sit there and watch time pass and it’s so damn boring,” Trevor said to Jeremy while they sat on the picnic table at Station 31.

“I just want to be able to actually do something. We just get a bunch of nursing home calls.”

During the last week of May, Trevor received an email that was forwarded to one of his educators in the program by one of the volunteers at FDLT, William Ott, who has worked closely with the EMS educator in the past:

Wendell Howard,

This past Sunday I had the opportunity of having Medic Candidate Trevor Bolton ride out with my partner and I at Medic 61. I have known Trevor for just over a year now, and I

am working with him at the Fire Department of Liberty Township (Trevor was my house officer and training officer). I had the opportunity of working EMS scenes with Trevor and found him in control and highly skilled with patient care and treatment. He is highly respected among his peers and the officers for his EMS and fire knowledge, as well as skills. I deeply feel that Trevor will perform well and become a Medic that St. Vincent's EMS, his own department, and his community will be proud for him having served them.

William Ott
St. Vincent EMT, Pike Township

"This can't be real," Trevor announces after showing everyone at the firehouse the email.

"Damn! And to think he hated you!" Danielle taunts Trevor.

"Obviously hell froze over," Trevor replies.

"That's awesome!" Logan shouts from the other side of the garage.

Because some rookies at the firehouse, including Cole and Logan, were landing full-time gigs at departments in Hendricks County and other surrounding counties, Trevor was ready to start paramedic school and escape the familiar bubble he was getting so used to.

"Cole is really good at interviewing, and his dedication shows when he talks about firefighting," Danielle, FDLT volunteer, said about the rookie landing a full-time gig at the Plainfield Fire Department after having less than two years of training under his belt. Andy, the fire chief at FDLT, also works full time at the Plainfield Fire Department as a lieutenant.

"He also had Andy's help with getting that job, but we all know Cole worked really hard for that," Danielle said. "I think Trevor freezes when he is being interviewed. It happens to everyone, but you just have to get around that."

Kim Richardson agrees that Trevor needs to work on his interviewing skills.

"He just needs to relax and not get so worked up, which I know that's what he does when he gets in there. He will get better at it as time goes on."

June 2017

Trevor's phone rang on the morning of Thursday, June 1, and everything that he was working towards that summer changed.

"Trevor, I'm about to tell you something, but just please don't fuck it up," Andy instructs him over the phone.

"Okay. What are you talking about Andy?" Trevor asked.

"Well, you're going to get a phone call later, but seriously, don't screw this up. Don't make me look like an ass, and don't screw it up," Andy said.

"You wanna give me a hint or something?" Trevor asked.

"Nope. That's all I'm going to tell you."

Trevor hung up the phone and walked back into the garage of the firehouse where Mike Simkins was sitting on the picnic table. He waited for the mysterious phone call he would soon receive. A couple hours later his phone rang and the assistant chief for the Plainfield Fire Department, Brent Anderson, pops up on the screen.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Trevor thinks to himself.

"Hey Brent, this is an interesting surprise," Trevor says to Brent when he answers.

"I want to offer you a job, are you still interested?" Brent asks Trevor.

"Are you stoned? Of course I want the job. You guys already sent me the rejection letter over a month ago," Trevor replies to Brent.

"Well, two guys didn't make it through the initial screenings, so we had a meeting and Andy brought your name up. He said you're the guy we want," he told Trevor.

Brent tells Trevor there are a few things to do before it is set in stone, but if he passes a medical screening and everything with PERF (Public Employees' Retirement Fund) goes

through, then the job is his. The eight-hour test will go over Trevor's health and vision, as well as his eligibility for a pension and retirement benefits.

"The only thing I'm worried about at this point is smoking," Trevor tells me over the phone after finding out about the job offer. "There is absolutely no smoking allowed at this job, and I'm not saying I'm not willing to give it up, but I hope it doesn't hurt my medical evaluation. I'm not going to be the one that says I lost a full-time job because I refused to quit smoking cigarettes. That's just not happening."

Trevor decided to withdraw from the paramedic program. If he waits to go through with paramedic school in the future, the Plainfield Fire Department will reimburse him for the cost of the program, as well as pay him overtime for the classes.

"I'm not saying I'm definitely not going to go through with it someday," he said. "It's just not going to happen right now. Besides, I'm afraid if I do that, then I won't get to ride on the engine anymore."

Trevor called his parents and told them he had some good news for them, but wanted to tell them in person. He drove to the house he grew up in on Mulberry Street in Danville, and his mom met him at the door.

"She was so happy when I finally told her," he recalled. "She said she was going to tell everyone in the family and that we were going to have to party to celebrate. My dad doesn't get too excited about things, but he I could tell he was proud of me."

He met his dad at his favorite spot to drink after work, "the club" and said he looked happy to hear the news.

Trevor called me with the news a couple hours after he got the call:

Well I can officially not feel like a fuck up when I go to Christmas because I can actually tell people I have a full-time job as a firefighter now. I used to get all bummed out, but it

still feels so surreal right now. Once I get through PERF I'll be really excited because that could still make or break me. I'm still going to apply for IFD, just like other people I'm in the same boat with. I finally got my fucking break, though, and I'm so glad the nightmare seems like it's almost over. I was really losing hope there towards the end...I was going to quit applying for jobs while I was in medic school because I was tired of getting rejection letters. And I guess this means you have a good ending for your story.

The newly hired firefighters start a two-month recruit class on July 10. For six days a week they will learn about Plainfield's training standards and requirements. From there, he will start working at the firehouse on a regular schedule. He will be working for 24 hours, and then have 48 hours off, like most career firefighters. Trevor will be going through the recruit class with one of his favorite FDLT rookies, Cole.

“Cole doesn't know it yet, and I'm trying really hard to keep it a secret from him,”

Trevor said. “The look on his face when I come through the doors of that recruit class on the first day will be well worth the wait.”

Summary/Implications for Future Research

Gaining the trust from the focal character in nonfiction narrative storytelling is one of the largest and most difficult bridges to cross in the process of gathering information to tell the story at hand. Kramer and Call (2007) write that journalists must gain access to sources that will provide the necessary insights to the story, or else they will end up “utterly frustrated.” The researcher was an acquaintance of Trevor before any type of research began, so an initial bond was already formed to act as a gateway to the process of diving into other aspects of the main character’s life. Because the topic was dealing with Trevor’s failures and triumphs as an aspiring full-time firefighter, it was difficult for him to flatly admit during interviews that things in his life were not going the way he wanted them to. The researcher assured that the story was in no way a “sabotage” to his life or where he was in the process of becoming a career firefighter. The researcher affirmed that the facts gathered during observation would be solely used to tell his story as an aspiring career firefighter.

In the beginning, some of the answers to questions the researcher asked were given sarcastically in nature, so some of the interviews were dissected by the researcher with that in mind. A rapport was eventually built with Trevor and the researcher was able to identify when he was being serious and when he was just shrugging things off as a joke, or because he didn’t feel like getting into those aspects of the topic for that time being. The researcher kept in mind that saving those difficult questions for another time would be beneficial in the end, and acting as if you are in a hurry to get the information might cause backtracking with the trust that has been built. If the researcher gives themselves enough time to absorb all the information they need for the story, it should come through building trust with the subjects and the perseverance of getting answers to necessary questions.

When interviewing the main subject, Trevor, about recalling some of the most monumental or traumatic runs he has experienced, the researcher had to continually ask him to go into more detail about past events. At times Trevor would avoid the question completely and make a joke, requiring the researcher to be patient. Other times Trevor would say he couldn't remember all the details, or that he didn't want to go into the details at that moment in time. It became evident to the researcher a couple months into the project that part of Trevor's nature was being quiet and reserved. Because it was also obvious he wasn't comfortable with talking about his feelings, most of the characterization of Trevor had to become evident through his demeanor and dialogue with others. Being patient with the subjects of a research project is vital when reporting on a long-term basis for a particular story. The researcher learned that the subject might not open up completely in the beginning, and it might take more time than anticipated to get valuable information from them.

Having conversations about Trevor's character with people at the firehouse who were familiar with his sarcasm and down to earth attitude was helpful in dissecting who he is and which status details about him the researcher should include in the narrative. This immersion reporting allowed the researcher to gain the trust of Trevor, as well as the supporting characters in his story. Because the supporting characters perceived the researcher's dedication to the story after participating in field observation for ten months, they were more willing to talk about the relationships they had with Trevor and where his place was at the firehouse. Kramer and Call (2007) write that dialogue is not only fun to read, but it shows the characters in their natural states of being.

Field observation was helpful in gaining trust from the subjects because it proved the researcher's dedication to learning about the entire scope of the fire service, rather than Trevor's

journey by itself. The researcher participated in several training exercises with volunteers at the Fire Department of Liberty Township, including washing and replacing hoses on the engine and washing the outside of the firetruck and ambulance. Participating in different forms of training, whether it was physically strenuous or not, was helpful in providing the researcher with firsthand knowledge of the experience of being a volunteer firefighter. Field observation overall provided the researcher with a landscape for writing creatively. Scene-by-scene construction was achieved because the researcher spent so much time as a fly on the wall at the firehouse, taking in the sensory and status details of the event, rather than simply providing a chronicle of events in a certain order.

An important aspect of writing literary journalism is the access the researcher has to the main source or subject of the story. The researcher of this project suggests that any future researchers live in closer proximity to the firehouse in case something critical to the story happens and the researcher needs to be present for first hand field observation. The researcher of this project lived about an hour drive from the location of the firehouse, which was not convenient for instances when something dramatic was going on to observe or record. For example, it would have been more convenient for the researcher to be involved in one of the snow storms in February 2017 rather than attempting to capture the drama of the event from interviewing and second hand storytelling. If present at the scene, the researcher would have been able to capture moments of despair and triumph, as well as witness an entire crew try to save dozens of cars and people that were stranded on the interstate due to the snow storm. Because the firefighters in this narrative tended to avoid talking about anything stressful that went on at the firehouse, it was difficult to catch an authentic essence of the scene that night.

Something the researcher struggled with toward the end was not getting too close to the subjects of the story. In Kramer and Call (2007), the author advises to “Live as they do,” but also to “Remember, you are not one of them.” This advice is important to remember when you are doing ethnographic research because it’s so easy to get pulled into the subjects’ lives through fellowship and mutual respect for one another. Because a certain level of trust was built, the subjects of the story began asking the researcher to spend time with them outside of the firehouse and areas for field observation. Remaining empathetic to the story, but not intervening in a way that might be inappropriate, is important when embracing the researcher’s role as a journalist (Kramer and Call, 2007). Trying to channel the empathy and passion the researcher has for the story can be difficult, but it’s important to remain objective and make decisions as a researcher that won’t impact the objective of telling the narrative in an honest and compelling way.

Something future researchers should be aware of is the foreign world they are entering when attempting to understand the subculture of volunteer firefighters. Inside jokes, lingo, and methods of communication are completely foreign to anyone outside of the subculture’s familiar bubble of existence. Understanding patterns of communication and which questions are okay and inappropriate to ask will allow the researcher to talk more deeply with the subjects of the topic at hand. For example, asking one of the volunteers about the most difficult day of his or her life as a firefighter probably wouldn’t be appropriate after just a few days on the job. Some of the volunteers in the narrative have seen things that have changed them psychologically. Bringing up traumatic memories should be dealt with sensitively and after a rapport of trust has been built.

Although time was abundant to complete this narrative from beginning to end, it is important for a researcher to write as much as he or she can about the topic, whether or not those notes will make it into the final story. If the researcher isn’t revisiting the events they were

present for by writing them down or looking over his or her notes, they might lose a sense of what happened, or how to go about writing about it. Some of the days dragged on while reporting the daily events of the firehouse, but every minute of reporting could have been accounted for by the researcher, whether dramatic events were happening or not. Some days at the firehouse were uneventful, but it was important for the researcher to remember that those mundane routines don't have to be boring to the reader of the narrative if they are given a unique perspective by the writer.

Aside from interviewing and field observation, the collection of secondary research from scholarly journal articles and firefighting statistics was also a driving force of the project, and also helped in preparing the researcher for interviews with subjects. It was helpful for the researcher to know what type of salaries the volunteer firefighters in the area were competing for and how many of those opportunities were available. It also helped understanding that a majority of volunteer firefighters have two or three other jobs that help them provide their family with an income.

Finally, the researcher should always have an open mind to the scene he or she might be walking into. Judgements about cultural differences should be left at the door, especially when attempting to document the culture and life experiences of a subgroup of people. Anything can happen, especially when dealing with emergency responders and traumatic situations. The researcher of this project volunteered to be put in dangerous situations, including going 100 miles per hour down an interstate in the back of an ambulance. The researcher was aware that going on ride alongs could potentially be dangerous, especially knowing the ambulance's drivers were usually rookies and inexperienced at the job. If it seems like the danger might not be worth the story, the researcher should stand back and rely on the second-hand retelling of those stories.

Outside Evaluation #1

I. Brief discussion of the evaluator's credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)

a) This evaluator began his career as a volunteer firefighter in 1983, much like the project, our fire department was all volunteer serving a community of approximately 3,000 people in a rural area of Vigo County Indiana. I served as a Lieutenant and then Captain and was then elected by its membership to the role of Fire Chief in 1991 where I remained until my retirement at the end of 2016. During this time our agency became a combination fire department with 3 full time staff and underwent a significant change to our funding mechanism and our administrative change allow the position of the fire chief to no longer be elected but appointed, but I remained throughout as a volunteer. Our call volume drastically increased due to our agency becoming an emergency medical provider much like the paper's department, that demand, continued to grow and thus in 2014 became a paramedic ambulance service provider for our community as well as two others, the first agency in Vigo County to do such.

b) My education started out as the Firefighter I/II like all others and many basic certifications were achieved similar to the featured volunteer, but then eventually became focused on management and leadership as by responsibilities grew just as did the department I achieved the level of Advanced Emergency Medical Technician and maintained that throughout my time as a volunteer firefighter, this certification was in recognition that emergency medical services was the predominate role of ours and the nation's fire service.

c) My other career which remains today is that of a Deputy Sheriff for the Vigo County Sheriff's Office. I have served as a Deputy Sheriff since 1987 and now serve as a Major of Operations. I feel as if I ran parallel careers during this time and never really felt like I wanted to transition to the role of a career firefighter but always felt it was one of my responsibilities as a fire chief to ensure our department provided our volunteers the necessary training, leadership, experience and support should they choose to become career firefighters and I am proud to say that our agency had good success in having many of our volunteers move to the career ranks.

II. Relationship to the student and subject matter

a) There is no prior relationship to the student for this project. The subject matter relationship is one of 33 years of service in the volunteer and combination fire service.

III. Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

a) I felt that this topic was a great subject for someone to evaluate. As the paper points out the ranks of the career service continue to grow and my experience was that career departments, over the course of time, have turned to recruit those in the volunteer fire service more and more so this topic was of interest to me to see if my experience was supported in this paper which appeared to have been. I felt the change in the recruitment process was due to the improvements of the skill, knowledge and professionalism of the "volunteer" fire service. The paper definitely demonstrates that this volunteer and his department had the necessary skill set and experience that warranted his ability to be hired by a career department. For those agencies, like the department in this paper, now provide this high level of skill and education of the volunteers in large part due to the

facts pointed out in this paper that reference the mandatory training required for all firefighters regardless of status.

b) Members of these organizations, like this agency, are being noticed by the career departments and thus they are hiring those members. The facts presented in this paper point out that the difference between a career and volunteer department's education, skill, and delivery of service are becoming fewer and thus the ability for those volunteers mentioned in this paper are going to have more successful experiences in this transition.

IV. Evaluation of the student's approach

a) The approach of the student was excellent as the student pointed out the culture of the fire service is unique. The student's reference to the "firehouse culture" was well done as the fire service is difficult to infiltrate as the "brotherhood" of the fire service is ever present and those from outside the brotherhood are often not accepted, the student picked up on this and did a good job in recognizing the difficulty in being able to get those members to talk honestly and opening. The student's approach to gain the trust was vital in order to gather the necessary research of this matter from the firefighters.

V. Evaluation of the body of the project (quality, depth of treatment, coverage)

a) The overall body of the project was good both in depth and coverage. I thought the student did excellent job in providing the overview of the fire service today utilizing the statistics from the NFPA and other sources which is sometimes difficult to gather. I thought the comparison of the growth of the career fire service versus the volunteer service provided a good foundation of the paper's overall topic which help set the stage for why this topic is relevant.

VI. Evaluation of the student's work as contributing to the field (body of knowledge)

a) The student's work was very good. I appreciated the efforts that this student went through to both gather the statistical facts of the fire service which are again difficult to gather and understand especially for someone not familiar with the service, but more importantly the time the student spent in trying to truly see inside fire service culture and what are the goals and frustrations of our volunteer firefighters who desire to move to the career ranks. I would offer some ideas of topics that could be explored in future work on this topic to provide additional value to the field.

b) When describing the current status of the nation's fire service a well-respected career fire chief once said the "nation's fire service is an emergency medical service provider that occasionally has a fire." The student illustrated this in this paper with both statistics about the type of call volume as well as the firefighter being featured talked about this on several occasions and by his decision to go to paramedic school and then that he would be "riding an ambulance" for several years before he got back to an engine. I think that further research on how this shift from "fighting fires" to providing other services such as emergency medical services, has impacted the preparation of volunteers to enter the career fire service and how this shift has impacted the very nature of fire department management at all levels of their recruitment. I believe that the student's comments that this volunteer would increase his chances to become a career firefighter by having a paramedic license is very accurate and could have been explored further. My experience supports his comment completely. It would be interesting to have asked the career departments interviewed what they are looking for in an applicant and compare it to the featured volunteer as well as his perspective to what a career department wants versus

what the student could gather from a career department administrator.

c) I think another topic that may be explored would be the impact of financial limitations being placed on fire departments today at all levels and its impact on this transition from volunteer to career. Have career departments begun to hire volunteers because it's less expensive to hire them and train them versus training them from the ground up? Or how have the financial limitations of the volunteer fire service affected their ability to training volunteers and thus provide them more training, skills and abilities to make them more attractive to the career service? This too may provide more info to the field.

Outside Evaluation #2

I. Brief discussion of the evaluator's credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)

a) I have taught undergraduate journalism courses for four years and hold a bachelor's degree in English and writing as well as a master's degree in Christian leadership. I am finishing a master's degree in journalism and plan to pursue a Ph.D. in journalism. For 18 years, I have worked as a professional editor and writer and currently advise two online news publications.

b) My husband is a volunteer firefighter, so I am quite familiar with the role the VFD plays in a community as well as the training required.

II. Relationship to the student and subject matter

a) I met Alicia last summer when we briefly worked together at *The Chronicle-Tribune* in Marion. We have stayed in touch via social media. My writing experience and knowledge of the VFD process (as mentioned above) give me unique insight into this project.

III. Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

a) Many people are unaware of the goings-on in a fire station. The stresses our firefighters face daily are compounded by personal situations and professional aspirations. Giving readers a look into the life of a volunteer firefighter working hard to pursue a full-time position provides a glimpse into what the men and women protecting our communities experience. From a journalist's perspective, this is both a needed and unique undertaking.

IV. Evaluation of the student's approach

a) Spending time with the main subjects over several months provided multiple opportunities to observe and interview. This allowed the student to gain perspective from various angles that gives the reader a more complete picture of the subject's intentions and personality. Careful use of data enhances the information and offers foundational information necessary to allow full understanding of the narrative.

V. Evaluation of the body of the project

a) Quality - This piece is well organized and researched. The student balances observation with interviews and proves she has researched the topic by utilizing relevant data.

b) Depth of treatment - While this piece is not an all-inclusive picture of the subject's life, the elements described give the reader enough information to make educated conclusions about the subject's character. The story is well researched and told as completely as it could be as a piece of narrative journalism.

c) Coverage - The student put herself in harm's way to get this story. She made herself available to observe the subject in action, and that willingness to do whatever it took to get the story paid off. Her descriptions take the reader to the locations described, enabling the reader to be involved and to care about the subjects in the story.

VI. Evaluation of the student's work as contributing to the field (body of knowledge)

a) SPJ has recently published how-to articles and editorials on the lost art of narrative journalism. Creative nonfiction is an invaluable tool to the journalist who knows how to use it. The student has combined journalistic technique with creative nonfiction and elements of fiction story telling. By utilizing data and observation, she creates a narrative that transports the reader to the scenes described and makes the character more than just names on a page. This is an excellent work of both enterprise reporting and narrative journalism.

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