

**AND
LET THERE
BE A HERO**

**You've Never Met a Detective
Like Kalen Gatt – There's Never Been One**

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OPENING:

“My mind swirls like a powerful whirlpool in a dark sea. There are sounds . . . distant . . . so distant. Pain. God, how I hurt! I can’t move. Why can’t I move? Casket. I’m dead! No. There’s too much pain . . . every bone, every muscle, every fiber of my being throbs! Death is unfeeling – life is where all pain is. I’m alive. But where the hell am I?”

“My eyelids feel like they are glued shut. If I could just . . . open . . . them.” A slit appears in the right eye and then the left; vague, fuzzy. “I see light . . . white light. Aaahhg!” My whole body screams with pain.

“Go toward the light!” I read that somewhere. It was an author’s advice to a dying character. But I’m not dying. I’m in a room. Everything’s white. Bandages. Why am I bound like a mummy? Smoke. Fire. Explosion. Carol! Where’s my wife?” I try to scream, “Carrollll!” But nothing comes from my throat, only my mind. “God, my throat hurts.”

An alarm sounds and a nurse rushes into the room. She checks the monitors and then my pulse through the bandages.

“Try to be calm,” she says. “You were in a terrible accident.”

“It was no accident!” I want to scream. Memories splash through my mind like raging river rapids.

“You are in the burn unit at Dayton Municipal Hospital. You have been through quite an ordeal. How is the pain?”

“Turrbuh,” I manage to murmur through my restricted throat and the tight bandages. “Hurr so baa.”

“I’ll increase your pain medication and ring for the doctor. You’re in luck. Doctor Vesperhaden is on call.” She increases the amount of Demerol in the drip system and quickly leaves the room to page the doctor.

Within minutes a doctor rushes in and introduces himself as Dr. Lester Vesperhaden.

“Are you in a lot of pain?”

“Turrbuh.”

“Tilly!” The doctor calls to Nurse Michele Tilden, “I want morphine sulfate injected immediately.”

“How much shall I administer and for how long?”

“Give him the maximum dosage now and we’ll reassess his condition in a few hours.”

Tilly uses the key hanging around her neck by a broad green ribbon to unlock the top drawer of the metal cabinet to the right of my bed. I cannot turn my head to see what she is doing but I have always prided myself in detecting and interpreting sounds. I hear the key click, a drawer open, and a plastic container being pried open.

I do not see her extract a syringe and a bottle labeled MS. She fills the syringe and injects the elixir into the I.V. tube attached to my right arm.

“Unnnh,” I grunt.

“Did you feel that?” Tilly looks surprised.

“Guuhhh,” I try to say “Good.” She cannot see my face glowing beneath the bandages. It feels like cool water washing over my entire body immediately; replacing the pulsating pains. Within minutes, I am totally devoid of all the unbearable throbbing. Amazing!

Dr. Vesperhaden smiles, “Ah, the morphine is working I see. We shall give you as much as possible as often as we can to keep the pain at bay. However, you are going to have many instances of extreme discomfort. There are times we simply must know exactly where you hurt and the severity of the pain in order to treat you properly. You have severe burns over 95% of your body plus sixteen broken bones. It is a miracle that you survived such an ordeal. You are faced with about a year of treatment and one to two years of rehabilitation, but you are alive.”

“My wiii?”

“I’m so sorry. Your wife did not make it. You were the only survi-

vor. Forgive me for being so blunt but it is imperative that you know what you are dealing with and exactly what is facing you.”

I close my eyes tightly.

“The bones will heal over time. You will be in traction for a few weeks and then we can gradually start the intensive physical therapy sessions. This should lead to full usage of all of your limbs. But, unfortunately, there is very little of your body that was not charred, which eliminates normal skin grafting for your burns. We shall remove the bandages in a couple of days and begin a spray-on skin cell procedure. You landed on the lawn from the explosion and the ground was still damp from the sprinkling system. That kept a small portion of your face from experiencing third degree burns. It did not help the rest of your torso because of your clothes burning so intensely. First and second degree burns react well to spray-on skin cell treatment and we shall use that on the right side of your face.

How this works is: we take a sample of your skin tissue and mix it with enzymes that will extract basal and stem cells. We then spray this solution onto the affected areas and new skin will actually grow. Again, this only works for those areas that are the least damaged. For third degree burns, since you have no unblemished areas we could use for natural grafting, we are forced to use artificial means. Unlike spray-on cells where you are virtually growing your own skin; we artificially produce membranes by chemically treating fibroblasts found in all humans. The chemicals we add to the fibroblasts induce them to overproduce collagen. This is the protein that gives skin its strength and elasticity. It takes six to eight weeks for the collagen to intersperse with cells and produce the skin-like material. Although it is much less painful than normal grafting, the thicknesses and colors may vary, which makes for very blotchy areas. However, most patients prefer splotches to intense scars. In your case, scarring is inevitable, but perhaps we can reduce it somewhat. Time will tell.

“Once all of the grafting is completed and healed to scars, we shall then wrap you in Cica-Care gel sheets. These are self-adhesive silicone

that will soften the tissue and flatten some of the scarring. You will wear the sheets for about a month.”

Although I heard every word the doctor said, I never once open my eyes or move a muscle. I am trying to mentally come to terms with the death of my wife . . . and how I will manage raising my two small children.

“Well, I think you’ve heard enough for now. I’m sure you will have many questions later. We’ll talk much more as time goes on. Again, my name is Dr. Lester Vesperhaden, but that is too much for you to try to say. I will not feel it is disrespectful at all if you just call me Les. In fact, I would prefer it. We shall be seeing a lot of each other in the coming months. I am your doctor of record, which simply means that anything concerning your care and treatment must come through me. I’m to be notified immediately day or night. I was fortunate that you chose to gain consciousness during my normal duty hours rather than the wee hours of morning.

“That’s enough for now. I shall leave instructions that you can have morphine at least twice more during the next twenty-four hours as needed. Just let the nurses know when the pain becomes intolerable. I’ll check with you again in a few hours.”

The doctor leaves and I open my eyes. There is so much to think about and absorb. I want to see my wife and kids. “Carol, oh God! She’s gone. I’ll never see her again. But there are my babies. How long will it be before I can see my beautiful daughter and cantankerous son? Wish I knew how they are holding up? I’m sure their grandmas are taking good care of them but I’ve got to get out of here. The doctor seems to have a set plan. I need to recuperate as quickly as possible and get home to my family. He said two to three years before I would heal enough to return to work — no way.

I can’t help but wonder . . . “Why am I getting such individual treatment? It’s the media, of course. I was the only survivor of a horrendous arson and murdering spree. The media are salivating for an interview and will want to know my progress. Whether welcomed or unwelcomed, the good doctor has been thrust into the center ring of the

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media circus. And after all, moving up through the ranks so quickly, I have been looked upon as kind of a hero. Hero, hah! I'm just a cop who does his job."

The job, before the terrible accident, had been mostly cases that others did not want to handle and that will not change, I'm sure. But I will be a homicide detective again; a scarred and ugly one, no doubt. But wailing like a wounded beaver, I shall gnaw the trees of criminal injustice and use the fallen timber to dam the flow of vice, and make clubs to smash the misdeeds of menacing mice. Hey, I must remember that — work it into one of my short stories . . . or a poem. My hands . . . will I be able to write again? God, I hope so. I love to write. And I love to teach. Teach? Why did I think that? I'm not a teacher. Oh, yeah — Shakespeare. I teach Shakespeare at the Community Center. Will I be so scarred and ugly that students will not want to be around me?

Why am I thinking all of this senseless crap? I have one primary goal — to get on my feet and back to my kids. That's it. Everything else is secondary.