Let Burn
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I’ll never forget walking into Station 11 on the first day of my demoted status. Just being back in a blue shirt was embarrassing enough, a blatant reminder of my lack of rank. I put my gear on the truck and started my checkout. I knew the guys at Station 11, having worked there years before as a firefighter. They were a rowdy bunch who loved to play practical jokes and sit around the kitchen telling stories of their hunting adventures. I had always felt out of place there; the fact that I had gone from a district chief candidate to a probationary engineer made it even more uncomfortable, and I heard their whispers as I was unloading my gear.

As I finished my truck checkout, a couple of them came out into the bay, advising me that the mops and brooms were in the side closet. They found it hilarious that I was now forced to clean the station as one of them.

I kept to myself. I stayed in one of the back offices, reading most of the day. My new district chief soon informed me that as a probationary
engineer, I would be forced to take a “street test” for Station 11’s territory. Each new probationary engineer is required to take a test to ensure they know the location of each street, hydrant, and major building in their area. It was humiliating to be made to take it again, since I had already passed that hurdle when I had originally been promoted to engineer. It was simply another means of embarrassing me and highlighting my status as driver. So I started studying the streets within the area, my frustration growing with each shift.

The guys would make jibes at me whenever they could. When I received phone calls, they would not simply say “Smith, Line 1” (Smith being my maiden name). They would always say “Engineer Smith” to remind me of my lowly status. On weekends, they would check out their trucks and then settle into the kitchen for a long breakfast. Saturdays were designated as “station cleanup.” Since I didn’t enjoy huge breakfasts and had no desire to sit around discussing departmental gossip with them, I would complete my checkout and get started on my share of the cleanup.

One Saturday, a week or so into my demotion, I started morning cleanup as they enjoyed their breakfast and chatter. I swept and mopped, cleaning up the puddles of black grease that seem to perpetually drip from the trucks. I knocked down cobwebs and straightened equipment. There was little left to do so I hid out in the back office, reading as usual. I figured the other two engineers would take care of the few chores left within the bay.

But after a while, I was called over the loudspeaker. “Engineer Smith, report to the bay for cleanup.” I was furious. I had already done the majority of the chores and wanted to be left alone. But the other engineers reminded me that chores were done “as a crew,” and that we would all work together until they were completed. The fact that they had been sitting on their asses the entire time I worked made no difference to them. This was simply an opportunity for them to order me to perform cleanup. I appealed to the lieutenant, who merely shrugged and advised me to “just keep your head down.”

As the shifts wore on, I became more embittered. It was infuriating to have guys on the department with half my seniority now ordering me around and getting pleasure from my humiliation. And the harassment wasn’t limited to my station personnel.
One afternoon, I was sitting in the darkened living room of the station. It had been a busy shift and I was tired and sweaty. I felt worn out and even thought about going home sick, something I rarely did. Each shift was a reminder of my lowly status. I had lost all camaraderie with the guys on the department. It felt as if they all looked upon me with ridicule and condescension. My job was no longer a source of pride and enjoyment; it was a daily reminder of my failures.

The phone rang and my name was called over the intercom: “Engineer Smith, line 1.” I picked up the phone and was met by an angry voice at the other end.

“You were a lousy lieutenant and you got what you deserved.”

I sat there, thinking that if this was one of my friends, it was a lousy joke. But it was no joke. Someone—an older male from what I could tell by the voice on the phone—was actually calling me anonymously to ridicule me over the phone. I slammed the phone down, unable to believe that somewhere, someone on the department was hateful enough to make a crank call. I sat there, stunned, unable to believe it yet unable to get the voice out of my head. I reported it to the lieutenant and SIS was notified, but nothing was done. What could be done for such a juvenile act?

Along with my frustration, I had become incredibly paranoid on duty. What if I wrecked the truck? What if I gave a wrong dose of meds to a patient? I had lost faith in my own abilities and was scared of making another mistake. I no longer trusted my own judgment. I thought I had been doing my duty when I confronted District 2. What if I could no longer trust my intuition? In an emergency, if you couldn’t trust your gut, you were in big trouble. I couldn’t sleep at night on duty. It was like my nerves were constantly coiled and my actions under a microscope.

I knew my case was still the hot gossip around the department. I caught wind of stories people were spreading describing my actions on scene. One of the guys even confronted me one day in the kitchen about the incident, demanding me to justify my actions in front of everyone. I had worked with Pat before and knew he could be a bullying asshole. I had seen him harass other guys on the department, goading them until they stormed out of the room in frustration. I tried to explain what had actually happened on scene,
but he just waived his hand in front of my face, dismissing my explanation and laughing as the other guys stood uncomfortably by.

I finally realized my explanations were useless. He and everyone else would believe what they wanted to believe about the incident. By this point the incident had been gossip fodder among the department for several weeks. Everyone had made up their minds as to who was at fault. To them, my demotion was simply confirmation of my guilt.