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# CHAPTER 1: ~~CONCERNS~~

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**ACCOUNTABILITY**



"ONLY THOSE WHO DARE  
TO FAIL GREATLY CAN EVER  
ACHIEVE GREATLY."

— ROBERT F. KENNEDY

**May 22nd, 2014**

The village boardroom felt suffocating. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, a constant and annoying reminder of where I was and why. I shifted positions in the hard plastic chair, my uniform tightening around me as if it were a straightjacket. Maybe it was my nerves, or maybe it was the crushing weight of what was about to happen.

I looked up at the clock: 6:08 PM. Already eight minutes late. The dread was growing, and every passing second stretched into eternity. I could still barely believe why I was summoned.

At last, the doors behind me opened with an ominous creak. Five board members filed in; their faces were a mix of disappointment, anger, and – worst of all – pity. I straightened my back, squaring my shoulders. I might be on the chopping block, but I won't show weakness. Not now, not after everything.

"Chief Hill," the PFC (Police and Fire Commission) Chairman began, his voice gruff and distant, as though he'd rather

be anywhere else. "We've called this meeting to address some concerns brought to our attention."

As he spoke, my mind began to wander. How did I get here? How did it all come to this? It felt like yesterday I was accepting this job, all smiles and handshakes, eager to show the world what I was made of and prove I was chosen for the right reasons. But leadership isn't about the handshakes or the title. It's about accountability—taking responsibility for both success and failure. And on this day, I was being reminded of that truth in the hardest way possible.

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Ten short months ago, I was welcomed as the first full-time Fire Chief in Rothschild history. The village had decided they needed a full-time fire and EMS (Emergency Medical Services) chief to coordinate and administer the department of roughly thirty volunteers, part-time, and paid per-call staff. This was going to be a huge change, and no one had planned out effectively. There was an air of disconnect between the village administration and the fire department command staff. You could feel the tension when both parties were in the same room. One group appeared to distrust the other, and because of this, I believe, I was hired from the outside. So welcome Chief Marc Hill to the scene.

I walked into my new office – well, "closet" might be a better word. It was, in fact, a storage closet converted into an office.

Barely big enough for a desk and chair. But it was mine, and I was going to make the most of it.

I sat down in my battered, beaten industrial office chair. Its worn rusted edges hinted at the history I was about to confront. "Alright," I thought, a grin spreading across my face, "let's get this party started." I reached up and pulled out the first dusty binder from the shelf above me, eager to dive head-first into the department's guidelines and procedures.

I wish I had known then just how crazy and unbelievable this ride would turn out to be. If only I'd understood the importance of accountability from day one—not just for others, but for myself. If I had taken a moment to breathe, listen, and understand before charging ahead recklessly, things might have turned out different.

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"Chief Hill?" the chairman's voice brought me crashing back to reality. Right. The board meeting. The complaints and the mess I'd made.

I cleared my throat, trying to summon the courage to speak. "Yes. I'm aware there have been some... issues and complaints." Understatement of the year right there. Even the words tasted sour and reminded me of my failures.

The chairman sat back and raised an eyebrow, his expression showing a mix of disbelief and disappointment. "Issues?

That's putting it a bit lightly. We've received formal complaints from your entire command staff. They're using words like 'hostile work environment' and 'abuse of power.' Do you care to explain?"

"Nope, but I guess I'm going to have to," I thought.

I opened my mouth, ready to defend myself, to explain how I was just trying to drag this department into the 21st century. But as I looked around the room, at the faces of the board members who had put their trust in me, I felt the fight drain out of me. They weren't interested in excuses or explanations. They wanted accountability.

For the first time, I saw the damage I'd done outside the department. It wasn't just about updating the fire department or getting new equipment. It was about the people – the people I was supposed to lead and support. People I had let down in my rush to prove myself as a leader.

I thought back to some of my first big changes – updating the response protocols. It seemed simple on paper: more efficient and safer for everyone. But I didn't bother to teach it properly and didn't take the time to get buy-in from the team. I was so consumed and focused on the destination I forgot to bring my people along for the ride.

I remembered the look on the Assistant Chief's face when I shot down his concerns. His eyes, usually bright with enthusiasm, had dimmed, and his face barely contained his frustration. "With all due respect, Chief," he said, his lips twitching

slightly, "we've been doing it this way for 30 years."

And what did I say? Oh, nothing too bad: "Well, just because you've been doing it that way for 30 years doesn't mean you've been doing it right. Maybe it's high time to teach an old dog new tricks." Wow, real smooth, Marc. Real smooth.

From there, it was a snowball rolling downhill, growing bigger and more destructive. Every change I pushed through, every suggestion I ignored, every time I pulled rank instead of listening – it all led to this moment. This meeting of reckoning.

I looked the board members in the eye and swallowed my pride. "I screwed things up," I said, the words feeling like total defeat. "I came in here thinking I knew everything, I could just force change, and everyone would fall in line. I was totally wrong."

The room fell silent. You could've heard a pin drop – or in this case, the sound of my career falling to the floor. The silence stretched on as the board looked at each other.

The chairman leaned forward, studying me. His expression, which had been hard and unforgiving, softened just a bit. "Well," he said after what felt like forever, "at least you can admit it. That's a start."

A start. Not an end. Maybe there was hope yet. I took a deep breath. I might have fallen, but I wasn't out yet.

"We want you to talk to all your command staff individually.

Get them on the same page," his tone leaving no room for argument. "We'll meet again next month to see how things are coming along," he added.

As I left the boardroom, my head was spinning and my future was uncertain, I realized something. This moment of failure, of humiliation – this was where my real education in leadership began. Sometimes we get caught up in the details, the tunnel vision, and lose sight of the real problem. As they say, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, and I had the best. But a leader isn't defined by how they handle success. They're defined by how they handle failure—and how they hold themselves accountable when things go wrong.

The PFC gave me a stack of letters, the concerns, that were raised about me. They were eye-opening to say the least. Every member of my command staff had written how I had mismanaged and was seen as a toxic leader. Each letter was a mirror, reflecting the mistakes I had made and the trust I had broken. They were humbling to read. Those letters taught me that being accountable isn't just admitting you're wrong. It's about taking ownership of the impact your decisions have on others.

## **What Accountability Means**

If you ever get called into a meeting like this one, and I hope you never do, take a step back and breathe. Maybe two breaths if necessary. Reflect on what you did and what has happened. You have two choices: defend yourself, or take



responsibility. It's tempting to defend and to justify your actions. But real leadership requires accountability. It requires owning your mistakes, reflecting on your actions, and committing to do better. They are the uncomfortable truths you've overlooked or ignored. Clues and signs something is wrong, and a red flag has been raised. Take a moment to pause and reflect on the problems or what the issues might be and why you took the action you did.

I didn't understand this at the time until the end of the meeting. I walked in confident and even a bit arrogant, believing in my choices and stance. But as I sat there, faced with disappointment in the room, I felt my confidence waver. I thought the resistance, the struggles, and the obstacles I faced were just things to be swept aside in the name of my righteous progress. But they weren't. They should've been stoplights on the road, but I chose to run those red lights. And just like running real stoplights, it wasn't long before there was a crash. If I had valued accountability from the start—I could have avoided much of the damage. But as the saying goes, better late than never.

Hindsight is powerful—it gives us the chance to reflect and see the outcomes of our decisions. Sometimes those outcomes are positive; other times, they're far from it. Obviously, if you get a meeting like this, things didn't work out the way you'd planned. Accountability is uncomfortable, but it's also powerful. It's not about being perfect. It's about being real, being honest, and taking responsibility for the choices you make. When you do that, you earn the respect of those you

lead. You build a foundation for success—not just for yourself, but for your entire team.

I initially titled this chapter: Concerns. It wasn't until after the twelfth edit that I thought to myself, "Why concerns? Why am I still trying to defend my actions?" This story is the culmination of my accountability as a leader. The hard truth when I was brought to the carpet to answer for my actions. It had nothing to do with the concerns of the board or of my staff. It was about my leadership failures and the humbling experience when I was forced to be held to account for all of my actions.

As they say in order to lead you must first be able to lead yourself. So I start this book with accountability. Be accountable to yourself and earn the respect of your team by showing them how important it is. That's where true leadership begins.

### **Lessons Learned:**

1. Failures are opportunities for growth and improvement.
2. Be accountable for what you have done and what you have failed to do.
3. Sometimes the end is a new the beginning.