

Sample Chapter

COMPANION TO THE ORDINARY HOURS

The Other Seat

A Guide for EMS Mentors Who Were Never Taught How

James Weber

• • •

What follows is the complete first chapter of *The Other Seat*. It opens on a Tuesday morning in the apparatus bay, with the conversation that made Sam a mentor — and no one asked whether he was ready.

Chapter 1

Nobody Trained You for This

Jeff caught me in the bay on a Tuesday morning, halfway through a coffee I'd been trying to finish for an hour. "New hire starting next week," he said. "I'm putting them with you." He said it the way he said everything — matter-of-fact, already moving on. Like he'd just told me we were getting a new stretcher. "Okay," I said. And that was it. That was the entire conversation about how I became a mentor. No training. No preparation. No one asking if I was ready or interested or had the faintest idea what I was supposed to do beyond the obvious. I'd been at Station 4 for three years. I didn't yell at people. I hadn't killed anyone. Apparently that was the job description. I'm being glib. But not by much. The actual qualification for becoming a mentor in most EMS systems is breathing and availability. We put more thought into who rides with the cardiac monitor than who rides with the new hire. I

finished my coffee and went back to restocking. But the thought sat with me for the rest of the shift. Next week there would be someone in the other seat who didn't know anything yet — not really, not the way you know things after you've done them a few hundred times — and I was supposed to turn them into someone who could do this job. Someone who could handle the three AM chest pain and the nursing home transfers and the calls that look routine until they aren't. Someone who would still be here in a year. I had no idea how to do that. What I had was a very clear memory of what it felt like when nobody did it for me.

I almost didn't make it at Station 4. Not something I talk about much. Three years in, I'm one of the steady ones — I know where everything is, I know how the shifts run, I know which supervisor you can be honest with and which one you can't. People see me at the kitchen table and I'm part of the furniture. It's easy to forget that there was a stretch, early on, where I almost walked away. I remember my first week the way you remember a fever dream — vivid in patches, blurry everywhere else. I remember standing in the bay not knowing where to put my bag. Someone pointed at a locker and said "that one's open," which was the most anyone said to me for the first two hours. I remember sitting at the kitchen table during lunch while three other crews talked about a call from the night before, laughing about something I didn't understand. I ate my

sandwich and looked at my phone because I didn't know how to enter a conversation I hadn't been invited into. I remember my first real call — a difficulty breathing, nothing complicated — and my hands shaking so badly while I set up the nebulizer that my partner did it for me without saying anything. I remember not knowing if that was kindness or judgment. I remember not asking. I remember driving home after that first shift and sitting in my car in the driveway for ten

minutes, not because I was processing anything profound but because I was exhausted in a way that had nothing to do with the calls. I'd spent twelve hours performing. Not performing medicine — performing normalcy. Trying to look like I belonged in a place where I felt like a trespasser. Nobody was cruel. I want to be clear about that. Nobody hazed me or ignored me or told me I didn't belong. It was subtler than that. I just wasn't connected to anyone. I moved through the building like a guest who'd been given a tour but not a key. I hovered near the supply closet at shift change because I didn't know where else to stand. I ate lunch at the edge of the table. I left the second my shift ended, keys already in hand, because there was no reason to stay.

I found out later that people had noticed. That the battalion chief had been watching me — watching all of us, apparently — trying to figure out who was settling in and who was drifting. At the time I had no idea anyone was paying attention. It felt like I was invisible. The person who changed that was Maria.

There was no big moment. No intervention. No conversation where she sat me down and said the thing I needed to hear. She just pulled up a chair. I was eating lunch alone — I don't remember the day, maybe three weeks in — and Maria walked through the kitchen, saw me at the edge of the table, and sat down. Not next to the other crews who were mid-conversation. Next to me. "You eat yet?" she said, even though I obviously had food in front of me. She didn't wait for an answer. She just started talking. Asked me where I'd gone to school. Asked me what I thought of the trucks. Mentioned that the coffee from the machine in the back was better than the pot in the kitchen, which was something nobody had told me. Small talk. Nothing that would show up in any training record or evaluation. But it was the first time in three weeks that

someone at that station had chosen to be near me. I didn't know it then, but that was the day the math started to change. Not all at once. There wasn't a single moment where I went from drifting to anchored. But Maria kept showing up. She'd find me in the bay and ask how a call went — not quizzing me, just

asking. She'd mention something she'd noticed on a run we'd both been on: "That family was tough. You handled the daughter well." Small things. Observations that told me someone was watching, and that what they saw wasn't a problem. After a bad call — a cardiac arrest at a house with kids' toys in the yard — I was restocking the truck and my hands weren't steady again. Maria walked past, paused, and leaned against the bumper. "Those ones are hard," she said. That was it. She didn't ask if I was okay. She didn't launch into a story about her worst call. She just named it and stood there, and somehow that was enough. I said, "Yeah," and she nodded, and we stood there for a minute not talking, and then she went back inside. The tightness in my chest loosened by about ten percent. Which doesn't sound like much until you realize nothing else had. Over the next few months, I found my footing. Not because of any single thing Maria did but because of the accumulation. A chair pulled up. A question asked. A moment of honesty after a hard call. A dozen lunches where I wasn't alone. None of it was formal. None of it was scheduled. It was just someone who noticed I was on the edge and kept, gently, pulling me toward the center. By the time I realized what had happened, it was already done. I was part of the place. The station was mine. I stayed. Not everyone did. There was a guy — Derek — who started the same week I did. Same training, same schedule, same everything. He was good. Competent, professional, showed up on time. But he never found his Maria. He rotated through different partners every shift, never settled into a rhythm, ate lunch alone

most days. He put in his notice about six weeks after I started feeling like I belonged. I remember watching him turn in his paperwork and thinking, That was almost me. If Maria hadn't sat down that day. If no one had pulled up a chair. I'd have been Derek. I'd have been a name on a turnover report that nobody read carefully enough. That was three years ago. Now Jeff was putting a new hire in my truck, and the only thing I was sure of was that I didn't want to be the reason they left.

The problem was, I didn't know how to do what Maria did. I knew the effect. I couldn't reverse-engineer the mechanics — the decisions she made in real time, whatever made her pull up a chair instead of walking past. It looked effortless. I was pretty sure it wouldn't be for me. My instincts were closer to a different model. There was a medic at our station — Travis — who was one of the most technically proficient providers I'd ever worked with. Sharp on assessments. Fast on interventions. His patient care reports read like textbook entries. Leadership loved pairing him with new hires. Put the new person with the best clinician —

what could go wrong?

Travis's version of mentoring was a twelve-hour performance review. Every call was a test. Every decision was evaluated in real time. He'd watch a new EMT start an assessment, and before they finished their second question he'd be correcting their technique, adjusting their positioning, pointing out what they missed. Not meanly. Not even inaccurately. He was usually right. But being right isn't the same thing as being helpful. A new hire worked with Travis for three weeks. I saw it happen. She came in sharp — good instincts, asked smart questions, clearly wanted to learn. By the end of week one, she'd stopped asking questions. By week two, she was hesitating before every decision, glancing at Travis to see if he approved before she committed to

anything. By week three, she could run a call that looked flawless on paper, and she was miserable. She lasted four months. When I pictured myself mentoring someone, my first impulse was to teach. To explain. To correct. To make sure they knew the right way to do everything, because that felt like the job. Passing on what you knew — wasn't that the whole point? Maria did something different. I just didn't have language for it yet.

The Friday before my new hire started, I found Maria in the kitchen after shift. Most people had cleared out. She was rinsing her coffee mug, unhurried, the way she did everything. "Jeff's giving me a new hire," I said. She turned off the water and looked at me. Not surprised. "Who?" "Don't know yet. Starts Monday." She dried her hands and leaned against the counter. "You nervous?" "Should I be?" Maria smiled a little. "I was. First time they gave me someone." She paused. "You're going to want to teach them everything. Don't." I waited for her to explain, but she didn't right away. She folded the towel and set it on the counter, thinking.

"The clinical stuff will come," she said. "They'll learn the truck. They'll learn the protocols. They'll mess up an IV and you'll show them again and eventually they'll get it. That part takes care of itself, mostly." "So what's the part that doesn't?" "Do you remember your first month here?" "Yeah." "What do you remember about it?" I started to say something about the calls — the difficulty breathing, the cardiac arrest with the kids' toys. But that wasn't what I remembered. What I remembered was the loneliness. The supply closet. The edge of the kitchen table. My phone screen as a shield against a room I didn't know how to enter. "I remember feeling like I didn't belong here." "Right." Maria nodded. "Not because anyone told you that. Because nobody told

you the opposite." She crossed her arms, not defensively — just settling in. "That's the part that doesn't take care of itself. You can teach someone every skill in the book and they'll still leave if they feel like a stranger. And you can fumble half the teaching and they'll stay if they feel like they're yours." "How do I make someone feel like they're mine?" "You don't make them. You show them." She was quiet for a second. "You remember what I did? When you first got here?" "You sat down at lunch." "That's it. That's what you remember?" "That's what mattered." Maria was quiet for a moment, and something crossed her face — not quite surprise, something softer. Like hearing a thing she'd suspected but never confirmed. "It's not complicated, Sam. It's just not automatic. You have to decide to notice. When they're standing in the bay looking lost, you walk over. When they're quiet after a hard call, you say something — not something smart, just something. When they eat lunch alone, you sit down." "That sounds too simple."

"It is simple. It's just not easy. Because you'll be tired. And you'll have your own stuff going on. And some days you'll walk right past them and not even realize you did it." She picked up her bag. "The hard part isn't knowing what to do. The hard part is remembering to do it when it's Tuesday and you're exhausted and they're not your problem." She headed for the door, then stopped. "One more thing. They're going to watch everything you do. Not the calls — they'll watch those too, but that's not what I mean. They're going to watch how you carry yourself. Whether you complain. Whether you're honest about hard days. Whether you treat the job like it matters or like it's something you're enduring." She looked back at me. "You're going to be their model for what it looks like to belong here. So make sure you're showing them

something worth copying." Then she left. And I stood in the empty kitchen thinking about Monday.

That weekend I kept turning it over. Maria had made it sound straightforward — notice them, show up, sit down. And maybe for her it was. She had an instinct for it, a gravity that pulled people in without effort. I didn't have that. I was steady, sure. I knew the job. But I wasn't the person people naturally gravitated toward. I was the person who'd gravitated toward Maria and gotten lucky. Could I learn it? Could you teach yourself to be the kind of person who pulls up a chair? Or was it something you either had or you didn't — some innate quality that made Maria Maria and made the rest of us something less? I didn't have an answer. I still don't. But what I decided that weekend was that it didn't matter. I didn't have to be Maria. I just had to be someone who remembered what it felt like to hover by the supply closet — and who refused to let someone else stand

there alone. That was enough to start with. Monday was two days away. Someone whose name I didn't know yet was going to climb into the other seat of my truck. They were going to be scared and pretend they weren't. They were going to look around the station trying to figure out if this was a place they could stay.

I was going to be the first person who showed them the answer. I wasn't ready. I wasn't trained. I was going to make mistakes — plenty of them, some of which I'd carry for a long time. But I was going to pay attention. And I was going to sit down.

Field Notes: Before You Start

Your first year. Not the calls — the dead air between them. Who made you feel like you were supposed to be there? What did they actually do? Was it a big thing or a small one? The last new hire at your station — did anyone do that for them? Are you sure? If someone had asked you on your third day whether you were staying in this career, what would you have said?



The story continues with Sam's first shift as a mentor, the Travis problem, and everything Maria did without being asked to.

Get the full book

emsmentorship.com

Available now on Amazon

Companion to *The Ordinary Hours*