Note: This story refers to the episode "Rip-Off." I'd like to thank everyone who beta read for me, especially Pat for all her help and positive feedback :-)

Innocent

By Tig

"Man, I can't believe this, Roy! We could be arrested anytime, you know," Johnny said to his partner. His elbow rested on the open window of the squad as it headed towards the station.

"Yeah, I know, but hopefully it won't come to that," Roy said in a calm, reassuring voice.

"Well, it will if they don't find that money soon, or find another suspect. I mean, for all we know the old man could be making all this up. There may never have been any money at all. Or maybe he did something with it before he got sick and doesn't remember. I don't know, man. I have a bad feeling about this." Johnny was on the verge of panicking. He tapped his fingers nervously on the side mirror. "I remember once when I was in the eighth grade. I was accused of taking this kid's transistor radio. I had nothing to do with it, but no way to prove my innocence. I was an outcast for a long time after that! No one believed me! Finally, the radio showed up and I was cleared. That was something I never wanted to have to go through again.... and yet here we are, waiting to be thrown to the lions for something we had nothing to do with!"

"Try to relax, will ya?" Roy said, hoping to get his partner to calm down a bit. "Getting all worked up isn't going to help matters."

"Relax? I won't relax until this is resolved. Roy, our whole lives could be screwed because of this, and there's nothing we can do about it. I don't know about you, but I sure as heck don't want to wait around like a sitting duck."

Johnny was clearly agitated and Roy didn't blame him. The thought of going to jail and losing their jobs for a crime they didn't commit was a bit unnerving. Roy decided the only way they were going to get through the next couple of days was to stay busy and keep their minds off of it. "It" being the fact that they had been accused of stealing $500.00 from a heart attack victim they had helped a couple of days ago.

Roy backed the squad carefully into the bay. Just as he and Johnny got out and headed toward the kitchen, the tones sounded.

"Station 51, structure fire, 12150 Wellington, 1-2-1-5-0 Wellington, cross street Vermont, time out 18:10"

"Station 51, KMG365," Captain Stanley acknowledged the call. He handed Roy a piece of paper and made his way to the engine. Johnny and Roy got back in the squad and put their helmets on, clearing their minds for the job ahead of them.

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"I can tell this is going to be a bad one, Roy," Johnny commented as he stared at the fully involved apartment complex. "Listen to those screams." Johnny swallowed hard as Roy parked the squad, then he quickly got out and donned his turnout coat, tank, and air mask.

"DeSoto, Gage, go to the second floor. Lopez, Kelly, take an inch and a half and cover them," Captain

Stanley ordered. The men quickly entered the building. Roy led the way with Johnny close behind. Marco and Chet were right behind them carrying the hose.

Although this section of the building was not yet ablaze, the smoke was thick, making it difficult to see. When the firefighters reached the top of the stairs, they found the hallway of apartment doors branching off to the right and left.

"You take that side," Roy said, his voice muffled through his mask

"Okay," Johnny replied. He made his way down the left side, opening doors and checking for residents. Roy did the same on the other side. Most of the occupants had made their way out by this time.

Chet and Marco remained in the center, hosing down both sides of the hall. Johnny marked a large "X" on the last door when an explosion rocked the left side of the building. The blast threw him against the wall. The force of the impact knocked the helmet from his head. The blast also knocked Chet and Marco off their feet.

Chet got up quickly, calling to Johnny, "You okay?" He watched Johnny slowly stand, then brace himself against the wall. *He didn't answer me.* "Johnny? I asked if you're okay," Chet repeated. He walked over to the other man, stopping to pick up his helmet. "Hey, man, you're bleeding! Let's get you out of here." Chet extended his arm. Instead of taking his hand, John backed away and shook his head. *He's squinting. I wonder if he's having trouble seeing?* "Come on, Gage! The building's gonna go!" Chet coaxed.

Johnny shook his head and continued backing away from Chet. He could see the stairwell ahead of him, but would have to get around Chet to get to it. He pushed himself away from the wall and walked towards Chet. Johnny shoved Chet back with all he had, causing the fireman to fall down. "What the?" Chet said as Johnny disappeared down the stairs.

"Marco, go get Roy! Something's wrong with Johnny. He hit his head!" Chet called, struggling back to his feet. "I'm going after him!"

Marco, who had just turned on the hose after getting back to his feet, slapped the nozzle off again and retrieved Roy.

"This side is clear!" Roy said. "What happened to Johnny?"

"He got knocked pretty hard during that explosion. Chet tried to help him, but he backed away. He knocked Chet down and took off!" Marco pointed to the stairs.

"Okay!" Roy said as he ran down after his partner. *That doesn't sound good.*

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Johnny made his way outside. *I have to get away from here.* He shed the cumbersome SCBA and turnout coat, throwing them to the ground. He looked blearily to the left and right, and then ran.

Stanley looked up as John's back disappeared around a corner. He looked back toward the building when he heard Chet and Roy shouting John's name.

"Cap! Did you see which way he went?" Roy asked.

"What's going on, Roy? Gage just ran away like he had ants in his pants!" Stanley said, pointing north.

"He hit his head in that explosion, Cap. I'm going after him," Roy said as he shed his own gear.

Stanley nodded, a look of concern etched on his face. "I'll advise dispatch." He quickly picked up the H.T. "LA, this is Engine 51. We have a Code I-- firefighter with a head wound. He has fled on foot, and was last seen on the corner of 214th and Oak."

"Ten-four, 51."

Chet returned to the building to help Marco.

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Three blocks from the scene, Johnny finally slowed. Winded, he stopped to catch his breath. The change in momentum brought on a wave of dizziness. He leaned heavily against a building for support.

Roy spotted him and ran to catch up. Afraid of spooking his partner, he approached cautiously. He saw Johnny sway, struggling to remain on his feet. Unable to wait any longer, Roy hurried to Johnny's side.

"Johnny, let me help you," Roy said as he grabbed John's elbow.

Johnny rubbed his eyes with his free hand. He couldn't get them to focus. He looked at the person in front of him, seeing only a blue shirt and badge. *I'll never go with them!* "NO! I won't let you take me!" Johnny yelled, tearing away from his would-be captor. In his flight, he knocked down an elderly man who was walking on the sidewalk. When Roy stopped to assist the man, he lost Johnny. With no idea of what direction in which to resume the search, he returned to the scene to advise Stanley. And get help.

"Cap!" Roy called, "I lost him near the corner of 214th and Redwood. He's disoriented, and still bleeding. I need help tracking him down. I'm gonna call the hospital and let them know what's happened." He pulled the biophone from the squad, quickly opening the box.

Stanley frowned, "I'll update dispatch." He quickly picked up the H.T. "LA, this is Engine 51. Our Code I is still at large. He was last seen about 5 minutes ago near the corner of 214th and Redwood. Request an APB and assistance from the Sheriff's Office."

"Ten-four, 51."

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I have to keep moving... just keep running. I won't let them take me. I have to get away. John found himself at a narrow alley way between two buildings. His blurred vision continued to give him trouble. He stopped and rubbed his eyes in a vain attempt to focus, then walked into the alley. About halfway through, he stopped, glancing in both directions. *Not another soul here....* He leaned heavily against the side of the building. His shaking legs refused to support him any longer, and he slid to the ground. *I'm so tired.* He closed his eyes.

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An hour later, the fire was contained and the crew of Station 51 was released to join the search for their missing crewman. Stanley had designated a rendezvous time of one hour at the last place Gage was seen. Roy, Cap, Chet, and Mike resumed the search on foot, joining the L.A. Sheriff's effort. Marco followed in the squad. With darkness approaching, finding the wayward paramedic was their only concern.

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Roy and Chet met up about thirty minutes later. "Any luck?" Chet asked.

"Nothing. You?" Disappointment etched Roy's voice.

"Not a sign. He could be anywhere."

"Let's try to think like Johnny. He's got to be hurting and he's afraid of something. He couldn't have run too far," Roy stated.

"That means he's hiding somewhere." Chet glanced around, studying the area they had been searching in. "I passed an alley a couple blocks back, why don't we look in there," Chet pointed in the direction of the alley.

"Okay," Roy sighed. "Johnny could run out of time if we don't find him soon."

Roy and Chet entered the narrow alley, unaware that a police officer had entered from the other side. As they neared the center, Chet spotted Johnny lying on the ground.

"There he is!" Chet yelled.

"Shhh!" Roy warned, "We don't want to spook him. Approach slowly."

The police officer heard Chet call out and ran toward them. He was the first to reach Johnny. He bent down and attempted to wake him up.

Johnny groggily sat up. *Damn, I still can't see straight.* A blurry shape with a badge loomed above him.

"Are you John Gage?" the officer asked.

Johnny shook his head. "No! I'm innocent! I didn't do anything!"

With surprising agility, John was on his feet, knocking the officer to the ground. He turned at the sound of footsteps approaching. Two more blurry shapes closed in on him. John was a natural runner, and Roy and Chet were surprised at his quickness as they took up the chase.

He's too fast. We'll never catch him. Roy stopped, putting his hand out to stop Chet, "Johnny!"

"Johnny!" the voice was familiar, "Johnny, slow down, we want to help you!"

John stopped and listened to the voice. *They don't want to help me, they're gonna put me in jail!* A wave of dizziness suddenly overcame him. He clutched a light pole to steady himself. He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing them, trying to get the world to come into focus. *My head hurts.*

Roy and Chet saw Johnny stop. "Maybe we're getting through to him," Chet said in a hopeful voice.

The firefighters approached slowly. Distracted, Johnny had not looked up, and didn't know how close they were until he brought his hands down from his face. *Oh, no! Blue shirts – badges! Cops!!*

"STOP!" he screamed, backing away.

Roy and Chet stopped in their tracks.

"You can't arrest me! I...." Johnny's voice suddenly faltered.

Roy took a step closer to his partner.

Johnny took a step back... nearing the busy street.

"We're not going to arrest you, Johnny. We just want to look at that bump on your head," Roy said calmly

As Johnny shook his head and inched closer to the street, Chet moved slowly away from Roy.

Roy eyed Johnny anxiously. *His breathing is really labored. I bet his vision's affected, too.* He shot Chet a furtive glance. *That's it, Chet. Get behind him...*

John shook his head. "Stay away from me!" he screamed. "I'm not going to jail!"

"Johnny, it's me, Roy! You're not going to jail. I just want to look at your head. You hit your head at the fire, remember?" Roy stated calmly.

Johnny stopped moving. "Fire?" he asked, suddenly confused.

Roy took a breath. "Yes, we were at a fire. There was an explosion. You hit your head."

Johnny rubbed his head, feeling the matted blood. "I hit my head?" His eyes drifted closed and he leaned heavily on the pole. "Roy?" he whispered.

"Yeah, Junior, I'm here."

"I need help," Johnny whispered, then collapsed to the ground.

"Chet, call an ambulance. And find the squad!" Roy ordered.

Just as the words left Roy's mouth, Marco drove up in the squad. "The police called in your location," Marco explained.

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Twenty minutes later, John had been transported and was now on an exam table in the ER at Rampart General Hospital. Roy stood just inside the door of the exam room, anxiously watching his partner.

"Joe, he's waking up," Dr. Morton said. "BP is 100 over 60, pulse 90."

"Johnny? Can you hear me?" Doctor Early asked.

Johnny opened his eyes, but said nothing.

"Johnny, do you know where you are?"

Nothing.

"Joe," Dr. Morton said, "BP is now 140 over 80, pulse 130, respiration 28. He hears you. He's getting agitated."

"Johnny, can you tell me what day it is?" Dr. Early asked.

They're trying to trick me. I can't tell them anything. They'll use it against me. I have to remain silent.

"It's okay, Johnny. I'll bet you have a pretty good headache going there." Dr. Early leaned closer to John to look at his head. Johnny flinched defensively. "Nobody's going to hurt you, Johnny. Just take it easy."

John picked his head up and looked at the IV attached to his arm. He ran his free hand over the tube. *I've got to get this thing off. It hurts.* A blurry image dressed in white was talking to him, trying to confuse him. *How far away is the door?*

"Johnny," Dr. Early continued, "Can you understand what I'm saying? Do you know where you are?"

My head is killing me. If I close my eyes maybe they'll leave me alone. John closed his eyes without saying a word.

The two doctors exchanged worried glances. "Let's get a full skull series," Dr. Early ordered.

Dixie frowned when she entered the exam room. She felt a lump form in her throat at the sight of John Gage lying unconscious on the table. *Dear Lord, please watch over him.* She checked his IV and without thinking, pushed a stay lock of hair out of his face.

The portable x-ray was wheeled into the room. "Let's step outside," Dr. Early said. Roy, Dr. Morton, and Dixie all left the room.

Seeing his chance, Johnny sat up and pulled the IV from his arm.

The X-ray tech looked at him, startled. "What are you doing? You need to leave that alone!"

Johnny rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the technician as the man moved toward the door to call for help. Johnny jumped up, knocked him aside, and then bolted from the room.

Roy saw the door of the exam room open and looked up. *It's too soon for that x-ray tech to be done!* He watched as Johnny ran down the corridor.

"Stop him!" Roy called to a nearby orderly.

Johnny ran into the busy lobby. *The way out is to the left...* He took off toward the double door ambulance entrance.

Dr. Morton reached him first, but was surprised when Johnny pushed him back, knocking him into the wall. *I'll never call Gage soft again...*

The doors swished open as Johnny approached, and he stepped outside. He took a deep breath. *Freedom.* He saw the squad parked nearby. *God, I'm so dizzy. I can rest there.* He took one more shaky step before collapsing on the pavement.

Roy saw him fall. "Johnny!" he called as he ran to him.

"Orderly! Gurney!" Early ordered.

"No, let me go," Johnny weakly protested. Roy held him tightly as he continued to fight against him.

"Let's get him back inside. He needs to be retrained," Early stated flatly.

Roy assisted in putting the soft cuff restraints around Johnny's wrists and ankles, and tied them to the stretcher. They wheeled the gurney back to the treatment room. Roy watched as Johnny pulled against the restraints, but noticed he had little strength left.

"Let's give him Haldol 5 milligrams to sedate him," Dr. Early said.

Johnny moaned and closed his eyes.

"Johnny? Stay with us, Johnny," Early urged.

Johnny slowly opened his eyes, giving Early an unfocused stare.

"Do you know where you are, Johnny?"

Johnny blinked slowly. "Have I been arrested?" he slurred.

"No, Johnny, you haven't been arrested. No one is going to arrest you. Do you know who I am?" Early asked.

"Tired," Johnny said, not answering the question.

Joe Early looked at Dr. Morton. "I don't like it," he said. "This may be more serious than it looks. I'm concerned he may be bleeding into his brain. Let's continue the skull series, get CBC with diff, SMA-7 and 12, serum osmolarity, tox screen, and call Radiology to arrange an angiogram."

"Johnny, I'm going to start another IV on you," Dixie explained. "Let's keep it in this time, okay?"

He didn't respond. "Johnny? Do you understand?" Dixie repeated.

You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be held against you. You have the right to have an attorney present. Do you understand these rights?

I said do you understand?

Do you understand?

"Johnny? Can you understand what I'm saying?"

Do you understand?

Remain silent.

Remain silent.

"Joe, he's out again," Dixie reported.

Dr. Morton leaned over Johnny and did a sternal rub. The pressure of Morton's curled up fist rubbing hard against his breastbone elicited a moan.

Oh my God, they're torturing me.

"Johnny, open your eyes."

Dr. Brackett entered treatment room three to find a group of worried colleagues. He frowned at seeing his friend in restraints. "How is he?" he asked.

"Not good, I'm afraid," came Dr. Early's reply. "We're waiting on test results now."

Dr. Brackett turned to Roy, "Marco needs to see you. He's in the lobby."

"Okay, thanks Doc," Roy answered, giving his partner another worried glance before leaving the room. He walked out the door, and for a second forgot which way the lobby was. He saw Marco making his way toward him.

"How's Johnny?" Marco asked.

"No change, Marco. Brackett said you were looking for me." Roy rubbed his eyes wearily. The stress was taking a toll on him.

Marco sighed. "Cap called. He needs us both back at the station. He's got a replacement for Gage but needs you and the squad back in service as soon as we can get away from here."

Roy turned and looked back to the room where his partner was. He hated leaving before the test results were in. Johnny didn't have anyone else. He turned back to Marco and nodded solemnly.

"Hey! DeSoto!"

Roy turned at the sound of his name. Lt. Crockett, an investigator for the LAPD, was walking toward him, extending his hand.

Roy shook the proffered hand. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant.?"

"I was here on another case, but I wanted to let you know I'm investigating the Harrison case. I'm hoping to have some news for you soon. Where's your partner?"

Roy threw a glance to the exam room. "He was injured. They have him in treatment 3."

"Oh, sorry to hear that, DeSoto. Let me know how he's doing. I'll catch up with you later."

Roy turned back to Marco. "Let me go tell Johnny I'm leaving. I'll be right back."

Marco nodded and watched as Roy went back into the Treatment room. Lt. Crockett suddenly reappeared. "I forgot to tell DeSoto something," he told Marco.

"He's in there," Marco pointed.

Crockett entered the treatment room and saw Roy. "DeSoto, there's something I forgot to mention..."

Upon hearing Crockett's voice, a docile John Gage suddenly began pulling against his restraints.

Breathing hard, he began yelling, "NO! Don't let him take me! Untie me! I need to go!" Almost hysterical, he continued to thrash.

Brackett looked at Roy. "Get him out of here," he barked.

The Lieutenant didn't need to be told twice. He was taken aback by Johnny's behavior and hastened to

leave the room.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked Roy.

"He's got a head injury. He thinks he's going to be arrested. Seeing you just set him off again, I guess."

Roy could hear Johnny still screaming. "I better go see if they need me in there," he told Crockett as he hastily made his way back to Johnny.

"We just gave him another 10 mg of Haldol," Dixie told Roy as he watched his partner with concern.

Johnny continued shaking his head. "Let me go," he murmured. "I need to get away. I... I need...." His voice faltered for a moment as he looked at the restraining cuffs around his wrists. "Get these things off me."

"Johnny, just relax now. Try and get some sleep," Dixie soothed.

Johnny turned his head toward the voice. *I know her. She can help me.* "Dixie?"

"That's right, Johnny. Go to sleep, okay?" Dixie brushed a wayward hair on the paramedic's face. *He looks so young.*

No longer able to fight the medication, Johnny gave in, falling into a dreamless slumber.

Roy turned to Dr. Early. "I have to get back to the station."

"We'll call you as soon as we get the test results in."

The room was quiet when Carol walked in. "Dr. Brackett, you're needed in Treatment 1, and we need Dr. Morton at the base station."

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Dixie and Dr. Early were getting a new set of vitals when Carol walked in again, test results in hand. Early took them eagerly and began to study them. "Looks good," he told Dixie. "No indication of bleeding. Let's get him in a room. I want to keep him sedated for the next 24 hours, with neuro checks every two hours."

Dixie nodded, relief evident in her face. "I'll go call Roy and let him know." She looked at John's sleeping form. *You sure know how to scare us, don't you?*

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Roy finished his shift and had gone back at the hospital to check on his partner, and friend. He was informed that Johnny had slept for the past 12 hours. Each time he was woken he remained disoriented, so he was kept in the restraints. Roy sat next to Johnny's bed, hoping he would wake up.

Dr. Early walked in. "Hey Roy, came to check on our patient this morning?"

"Yeah, how is he Doc?"

"He's looking good. We're cutting back on the sedative, so he should start waking up soon. We'll see how he does and hopefully we'll be able to take the restraints off."

Roy sighed. "He sure gave us a workout yesterday."

"That he did. Say, Roy, have you heard anything from Lt. Crockett?"

"Oh yeah. We're off the hook. It turned out to be the housekeeper who stole the money. I can't wait to tell Johnny."

"He'll be relieved, that's for sure. Let's see if we can wake him up and you can tell him right now."

"That'd be great."

Early turned to Johnny, who was sleeping soundly. "Johnny," he said while gently shaking him.

Johnny moaned and kept his eyes closed. "Hmm?"

"Johnny, wake up, you have a visitor," Dr. Early continued.

Johnny slowly opened his eyes. "Oh, my head," he started, then realized he was unable to raise his hands. "Huh? What's this?" he asked sleepily.

"Sorry about that, Johnny. It was the only way we could keep you in the bed. Do you know where you are?"

Johnny blinked and looked around. "Why am I in the hospital?"

Early and Roy both smiled. "You were hurt in that fire yesterday," Roy supplied.

"Johnny, do you remember anything that happened?" Early asked while checking his pupil reaction.

Johnny flinched. "My head hurts. I don't remember. Think we can take these off?" Johnny asked, indicating the restraints on his arms and legs.

"Only if you promise to stay in that bed," Early answered.

"With this headache, what else would I do?" Johnny asked.

"Johnny, you ran through half of LA yesterday. I didn't think we'd ever catch you."

"Oh, come on, Roy, I did not." Then he reflected as Early loosened the restraints. "Did I?"

"You sure did! You thought we we trying to arrest you."

"Arrest me? Why would I think that?"

"Because of the Harrison case, remember?"

Johnny took a deep breath, "Oh yeah, *that*. I could have done without remembering that."

"Well you don't have to worry about it anymore. We're off the hook." Roy smiled.

Johnny looked at him with questioning eyes, waiting for him to continue. "It was the housekeeper."

"The one who called us in?"

"Yep. Seems she has a gambling problem. Crockett said they caught her spending the money."

"Oh, that's a relief. Glad we don't have to worry about that anymore!"

"Well, congratulations fellas. I'm going to finish my rounds," Early announced.

"Bye, Doc," Roy and Johnny said.

"Well, Junior, I'm gonna head home. I'll be back later to check on you."

"Okay, Roy. Thanks." Johnny stretched and settled back under the covers, still sleepy.

Roy watched as he drifted back off to sleep. *Sleep tight my friend.*