

Intruder

By [I.M. Hurt](#)

John Gage sipped his coffee as he walked towards the barn. He rubbed his eyes and yawned in the early morning sunlight. *Man, I'm glad to finally have Smokey here. I really missed having him around.* The horse's neighing and grunting grew louder as Johnny drew closer. *He's usually not this vocal. I wonder what's got him riled?* He shrugged and took another sip from the mug as he entered the barn.

Johnny stopped as his eyes adjusted to the cool dimness. Weak sunlight streamed through the small windows situated on either side of the door. The odor of fresh hay and sawdust entered his nostrils. He set the mug on top of a sawhorse, then walked over to the closest stall. "Easy, Smokey, easy," Johnny said soothingly. He opened the stall door and walked inside.

The American Paint horse turned around and nuzzled Johnny.

Johnny scratched Smokey behind the ears and stroked his broad neck. "What's the matter, boy? You're so jumpy." *I wonder if there'll be a quake? He's never been this spooked before.* "I'll get you groomed and out in the pasture in a few minutes." He gave the horse an affectionate pat beneath his jaw, then looked around the stall. "All right, where did I put your halter?" He kissed Smokey on the bridge of his nose. "Stay here for a minute." Johnny left the stall, grabbed another sip of coffee, then walked towards the far end of the barn.

A worn saddle sat on a plank that was supported on each end by battered sawhorses. Various pieces of tack and assorted grooming implements hung on nails that protruded from the exposed studs. A pair of large buckets stood in the corner. Small bales of hay and straw bedding lined the perimeter of the storage area. Some of the straw spilled out of a bale and partially covered the floor. Bags of feed were neatly stacked in the opposite corner, beside the ladder that led up to the hay loft.

Johnny felt something soft beneath his foot, then heard a soft moan. "What the?" He looked down and saw a blue-jean clad leg sticking out of the straw. He quickly brushed away the remaining straw to reveal a disheveled-looking young man. *Now I know what upset Smokey.* Johnny wrinkled his nose as he bent over the man. *Wonder if he's sick?*

"Hey, are you okay?" Johnny shook the man's shoulder, then put two fingers on the man's neck. *Pulse is strong and regular.*

The man moaned and opened his eyes. He looked at Johnny curiously, then his eyes narrowed. He shoved Johnny aside and jumped up. One hand reached behind his back.

Johnny regained his balance, then held his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. "Take it easy," he said calmly. "I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm a paramedic. I can help you."

The man slugged Johnny in the jaw, propelling the paramedic backwards.

"Hey!" Johnny yelled as he deflected another punch. He connected with a succession of strikes to his opponent's face and abdomen. He saw the glint of light hitting metal, then felt a sharp, searing pain in the middle of his chest. Johnny gasped for breath and stared wide-eyed as his attacker raised the knife again. He raised his arm to ward off the blow. A new wave of agony passed through Johnny's arm and chest.

Johnny staggered backwards. He grasped his chest, then pulled his hand away. He glanced at the blood that stained his fingers, then locked eyes with his attacker. "Why?" he gasped as the man lunged at him again. Johnny swung wildly, missing as his attacker stepped out of reach.

The man lunged at Johnny a third time. He thrust the knife into the paramedic's right side, then pulled it out.

Johnny doubled over, gasping, as severe pain lanced through him. The ringing in his ears drowned out the vocalizations of the agitated horse. He peered at the man, then collapsed into a crumpled heap.

The man threw the bloody knife into the far corner of the barn. He reached beneath the pile of straw and pulled out a worn denim jacket and small backpack. He pulled Johnny's wallet out of the back pocket of the paramedic's jeans. He stuffed the money and credit card into his pocket and dropped the wallet onto the floor. The attacker stepped over Johnny, and ran outside.

###

"Come on, Samantha," Bill Welch called to his yellow Labrador Retriever as she sniffed around a tree in his yard. He held the unfastened leash in his hand. "Let's go."

The dog trotted over to Bill and walked a few paces in front of him down the driveway and onto the street. A short way down the road, Samantha stopped in front of a driveway and pricked up her ears. Her tail wagged furiously, and she barked happily as she trotted up the driveway.

Bill chuckled as he followed the dog. He strolled up the driveway and stopped short. *Smokey's out front?* He watched the horse lower its head as the two animals sniffed each other. Bill felt the hairs on his neck bristle. *No halter. Johnny always puts a halter on him, so I can bring him in at night. Johnny's truck is gone. Maybe he was running late?* He shook his head. *No, he wouldn't forget something that important.* He sighed. *Twenty-five years as a cop taught me to trust my instincts. Something's up.* "Johnny?" Bill called out as he walked over to the horse.

Smokey's ears pricked forward, and his nostrils flared as Bill approached. The horse trembled and snorted.

Bill patted Smokey on the neck. "What are you doing out here?" He continued to pet the horse as he surveyed the immediate area. *Nothing looks out of place.* He looked at Smokey and Samantha. "Stay." Bill walked over to the side door of the house and tried it. *Unlocked. No sign of forced entry, either. Johnny always locks the door when he goes to work.*

Bill walked into the barn. He stopped just inside the door to let his eyes adjust. He spied Johnny's half-full coffee mug perched on the sawhorse. "Johnny?" He glanced into the stalls, then walked towards the back of the barn. "Johnny?" Bill stopped beside one of the hay bales. "Dear God."

Johnny lay face down on the floor, unconscious. Deep bruises on his jaw and cheek contrasted with the paleness of his skin. Blood was spattered across the floor and the hay bales. A small pool formed beneath his mid-section.

Bill felt a catch in his throat as he knelt beside Johnny's limp form. He placed two fingers against Johnny's neck and sighed in relief. He turned Johnny onto his back, grimacing at the sight of the paramedic's slashed, blood-soaked T-shirt. Bill heard Johnny's short, gasping breaths, and felt his cool, clammy skin. "Hang in there. I'm gonna call for help." Bill stood up, grabbed a halter and rushed out of the barn.

###

“Thanks for staying, Bob,” Hank Stanley scanned the assembled firefighters. “Hopefully Gage will get here soon. We have a busy day ahead of us.” He glanced at his watch, then frowned. “Roy, why don’t you give Johnny a call in case he forgot about us. Use the phone in my office.”

“Right, Cap.” Roy left the line-up and disappeared into Hank’s office.

“Headquarters,” continued Hank, “just sent us a packet of information about that new chemical plant on El Segundo. We have a layout, and information sheets about the various substances being manufactured there. One of our vendors is sending a representative with two different ladders we’ll be trialing.” He lifted a piece of paper on his clipboard. “The schedule for the next round of promotional exams has been announced. I’ll post it right after we’re finished.” Hank glanced at the faces of the men, then returned to the clipboard. “There’s also another paramedic meeting scheduled. It’s a week from Tuesday at St. Francis.” Hank looked up as Roy returned to roll call. “Well?”

Roy shook his head. “No answer, Cap. I tried twice and let it ring.”

Hank nodded and glanced at his watch. “Good. Johnny probably overslept again and got stuck in traffic.” He stood on his toes momentarily to peer over the squad. “Here are your assignments: Stoker, you’re the chef of the day; Marco, the latrine is yours; Chet, kitchen clean-up; DeSoto, you’ve got the dorm, and Carlson, you’ve got the day room unless Gage shows up.” He surveyed the assembled crew, “Let’s get to work, men.”

Vince Howard strolled into the station. “Hi, Hank, guys. Sorry if I interrupted.”

“You weren’t interrupting anything,” Hank shook hands with the police officer. “We were just finished. What can we do for you?”

“Actually, I came to...” Vince’s voice trailed off as the tones sounded.

“Squad 51. Possible heart attack. 1027 Figueroa Street. One-zero-two-seven Figueroa. Cross street, Merrimac. Time out: 8:21.”

“Hang on, Vince,” directed Hank. “Why don’t you wait in my office. I’ll be right in.”

Vince nodded and entered the office. He pulled a small notebook out of his breast pocket and thumbed through it.

“Have a seat,” Hank gestured to a chair opposite his desk. He walked behind his desk and sat down. “What brings you here?”

“I was actually looking for Johnny, but I noticed he’s not here. I had some good news to tell him, plus I need to ask him a few questions.”

“Good news?” Hank asked curiously.

Vince nodded. “We recovered his Land Rover about a half-hour ago. Johnny never reported it stolen, so I thought I’d stop by and ask him a few questions.”

“How do you know it was stolen?” asked Hank. “Maybe John ran out of gas?”

“It had been hot-wired.”

“Oh.” Hank nodded, concern evident on his face. “Where did you find it?”

“It was abandoned near an on-ramp to the 405,” replied Vince as he glanced at his notepad. “Ted Burgess saw it on his way back to the station, and checked it out.”

“And, you didn’t...find Johnny?” Trepidation was evident in Hank’s voice.

“No,” Vince shook his head. “Ted searched the area, but didn’t find anything.

So, Johnny didn’t call to tell you he’d be late?” asked Vince.

Hank shook his head and sighed. “No. Roy called his house a few minutes ago, but didn’t get any answer.”

Vince nodded. His radio interrupted his next statement.

“137-David.”

Vince keyed his microphone. “137-David.”

“Assist with an investigation. 1445 Mountain View Lane. Cross-street, Rocky Canyon.”

“137-David, 10-4.” Vince stood up. “They’re playing my song, Hank. Thanks for the help.”

“That’s Johnny’s address.” Hank stood up and shook Vince’s hand.

“Good,” Vince nodded. “Maybe we’ll have some answers.”

Hank rubbed his nose. “Listen, Vince, tell Johnny to take his time getting in here. Carlson volunteered to stay.” Hank opened the door and ushered the officer out. He sighed and drummed his fingers on the door edge. “Hey, Vince!”

The officer paused.

“Let me know what happens, okay?”

Vince nodded and smiled. “I’ll call you later, Hank.”

###

“Come on, Johnny,” urged paramedic Rick Antilles as he hung another bag of Lactated Ringer’s on the pole. He primed the attached tubing with the clear fluid, and closed the clamp. “Get that blood pressure of yours up. You’re gonna feel a poke.” Rick deftly started a second I.V. in Johnny’s arm. “You wouldn’t want DeSoto to think I fell asleep during one of his training lectures, would you?”

Rick put the earpieces of the stethoscope in place, then inflated the cuff. He quickly pulled the stethoscope from his ears, put his fingers in the crook of Johnny’s arm, then inflated the cuff again. *Crap, it’s still dropping.* He sighed in disgust and placed his fingers on Johnny’s pale, cool neck.

Rick glanced at the portable heart monitor. *Pulse is up to 128.* He looked at Malcolm, the ambulance attendant, then placed his hand on Johnny’s abdomen. *Respirations are 36.* He leaned over and peered through the plastic face mask that fed Johnny oxygen. *He’s really chugging. Even his nostrils are flaring.* “Malcolm, get the resuscitator. We’re gonna need to ventilate him.” He glanced out of the window. “We’re almost there, Johnny,” muttered Rick. “Hang on.” *Please, don’t arrest on me. I’d hate to have to face Roy if we lost you.* He picked up the receiver of the biophone. *Man, I hope whoever did this is happy.* “Rampart,

this is Squad 8. We have an update on our victim.”

“Go ahead, 8,” replied Dr. Morton.

“Rampart, we have started the second I.V. with wide open Ringer’s, and are now manually ventilating the victim. Pulse is 128, and B.P. is 70 palp.”

“Squad 8, does the victim have equal breath sounds?”

“Stand by, Rampart,” replied Rick. He dropped the receiver and quickly listened to Johnny’s lungs. He picked up the receiver. “Negative, Rampart, breath sounds are diminished on the right.”

“10-4, Squad 8,” replied Dr. Morton. “What is your E.T.A?”

Rick glanced out of the window. “Rampart, our E.T.A is five minutes.”

“10-4, Squad 8.” Morton paused. “Do you have any I.D. on the victim?”

Rick looked at Johnny and rubbed his face. “Affirmative, Rampart. The victim is...” he bit his lip. “John Gage.”

“Repeat that, 8?” asked Dr. Morton, surprise evident in his voice.

“Rampart,” Rick answered, “the victim is John Gage.”

“That’s...what I thought you said,” sighed Dr. Morton. “10-4, Squad 8. We’ll be waiting.”

###

Bob Carlson picked two boxes of I.V. tubing off of the shelf, and set them on top of the I.V. fluids he balanced in the crook of his arm. He looked up as Roy entered the storeroom. “Any luck?”

Roy shook his head disappointedly. “No. Cap also told me that Johnny’s truck was stolen this morning. I guess Vince came by to ask a few questions.” He shrugged. “I’m sure we’ll see Johnny a little later.” He grabbed the tubing and one of the bags from Bob. “Is this it?”

“Yeah,” replied Bob as he led the way out of the storeroom. He quickly completed the requisition, and left it on the desk. “Let’s go.”

Dixie emerged from room two as the two paramedics passed.

“We left the requisition on the counter,” informed Roy.

“Thanks,” Dixie smiled as she fell into step with the men. She stopped just inside the entrance. “See you later.”

Roy and Bob walked out of the department and paused as the doors of an ambulance opened. They watched as Malcolm jumped out, grabbed the bottom of the stretcher, and pulled it out of the rig.

Rick Antilles jumped out, holding a resuscitator mask over the victim’s face, and clenching I.V. bags between his teeth. His hold on the mask slipped as they raised the stretcher.

“Oh, God,” muttered Bob, as the victim’s face became visible. He glanced at Roy, who stared, transfixed

by Johnny's bruised, pale face. He watched Rick quickly replace the resuscitator mask.

"What happened?" Roy asked softly.

Rick looked up quickly. He felt his stomach flip. "Somebody knifed him," Rick mumbled through the I.V. bags. He pushed the stretcher through the doors into the Emergency Room.

"I'll put these in the squad," said Bob as he took the supplies from Roy, "and meet you inside."

"Thanks," Roy shook himself and walked through the doors into the Emergency Room. He followed the stretcher down the corridor towards the treatment room.

Dixie held up her hand when she saw him approach. "Later, Roy. Let us do our job." She smiled sympathetically, then entered the treatment room.

Roy nodded and stopped near Room Two. Roy stared, transfixed by the sight of the nurses and orderlies entering and leaving the room.

"Hey, Roy."

Roy found Sam Lippa, a short, swarthy man, standing beside him. "Hi, Sam." What happened to Johnny?" he asked in disbelief. "Rick said somebody *knifed* him?"

"Yeah," sighed Sam. "His neighbor found him when was walking his dog. He noticed Johnny's horse roaming around the front yard." He looked up as Bob joined them. "He found Johnny in the barn. The cops think it was a robbery, since the only thing left in Johnny's wallet was his driver's license and a few photos." Sam scratched his head, a worried expression on his face. "I don't know how long Johnny was laying there before his neighbor found him. He lost a lot of blood."

"He wasn't breathing, either." Roy chewed his lower lip.

"Johnny's a fighter," offered Bob. "He's been through stuff just as bad, if not worse."

"Listen," said Sam as he tapped Roy's arm. "I'm gonna give Rick a hand, and see if I can find anything out for you."

"Thanks, Sam," replied Roy. "I appreciate it." He watched Sam disappear into the treatment room.

Bob's H.T. beeped three times. "Squad 51, what is your status?"

Bob groaned as he lifted the handie talkie up. "Squad 51, available," he sighed.

"Squad 51, stand by for a response."

Bob raised his eyebrows at Roy as the tones sounded.

"Squad 51, with Engine 51. Man trapped. 2245 Avalon Boulevard. Two-two-four-five Avalon. Cross-street, East 223rd. Time out, 9:00."

"Squad, 51, 10-4." Bob put his arm on Roy's back and gently propelled him towards the entrance. "Come on, Roy. There's nothing we can do for Johnny, now."

"I know," Roy said flatly as he scratched the side of his face.

Bob glanced back at the treatment room. “They’ll take good care of him. They always have before.” He sighed. “You okay to drive?”

“Yeah,” replied Roy as he took one last look at the commotion. An x-ray machine was being pushed into the room as a nurse rushed out carrying tubes of blood. He shook his head and followed Bob outside.

###

“Roy,” Lieutenant Crockett half rose from his seat in the cafeteria. He gestured to the chair at the opposite end of the table, then sat down. “How are you doing? Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thanks,” Roy said as he sat in the hard plastic chair. He shrugged and half-smiled. “I’ll be better once Johnny comes out of surgery.” He glanced at his watch. “According to Dix, it should be any time now.” He looked at the Lieutenant. “You wanted to ask me some questions?”

Lieutenant Crockett nodded and took his notebook from a pocket in his sportcoat. “Does he have any enemies, anyone who might want to hurt him?”

Roy shook his head. “No, not that I know of. Johnny hasn’t mentioned anything.” He furrowed his brow. “Sam said this looked like a robbery.”

“That’s our main theory. But, until I talk to Johnny, I have to check every angle.” Lieutenant Crockett sipped a cup of coffee. “There’ve been reports of break-ins in his neighborhood. We suspected there was a transient or two, stealing just enough stuff to fence for drug money. I have a feeling that Johnny surprised him.” He leaned back in his chair. “Have either of you been threatened, or had any run-ins with family members of your victims?”

Roy shook his head. “No. Nobody’s threatened us. I haven’t seen any strange mail at Johnny’s house when Jo and I’ve been over, either.”

A tired-looking Dr. Brackett walked into the cafeteria, holding a cup of coffee. He spotted Roy and Lieutenant Crockett and walked over to their table. “Hi, Guys. Dix said you’d be here.” He sighed and rubbed his face. “I wanted to give you an update on Johnny.”

“Please, sit down.” Lieutenant Crockett gestured to the chair beside him. “How is he?”

Brackett sat beside the Lieutenant, then sipped his coffee. “Well, it was touch and go for a while, but we were able to stabilize him. The next twenty-four hours will be critical. If he does okay, Johnny should make a full recovery. We repaired a pretty significant liver laceration, which accounted for most of the blood loss.” Brackett twitched his mouth, then sipped his coffee. “Thankfully, the knife didn’t nick Johnny’s bowel. We also had to repair some damage to the blood vessels in his lung. So far, there’s no sign of further bleeding, but we’re going to have to watch him very closely.” Brackett shook his head as he sipped his coffee. “It was a good thing Johnny’s neighbor found him when he did. I don’t think he would’ve survived had he been there much longer.” Brackett turned to Lieutenant Crockett. “Did you find the weapon?”

Lieutenant Crockett nodded. “It looked like a hunting knife. When do you think Johnny will be awake enough to interview?”

Brackett twitched his mouth. “I plan to keep him pretty heavily sedated and on the respirator overnight, to reduce the stress on his wounds. We’ll check him again in the morning, and if everything looks okay, we’ll wake him up and take the tube out.” Brackett removed his blue scrub hat and ran his hand through his dark hair.

“Thanks, Doc.” Lieutenant Crockett stood and buttoned his suit jacket. “I’ll be in touch, Roy.” The detective strolled through the cafeteria. He greeted Bob Carlson, and pointed towards Roy’s table.

Bob nodded and headed over. “How’s Johnny?”

Roy smiled up at Bob. “Doctor Brackett said he should be okay. I’ll fill you in later.” He leaned back in his chair, relieved. “When can we see him?”

Brackett drained the last of his coffee. “Come on, guys. I’ll take you up. But I only want you staying for a couple of minutes. That partner of yours needs his rest.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Roy stood up. The two paramedics followed Dr. Brackett out of the cafeteria.

###

Roy glanced over at his passenger. “You okay?” he asked as he steered his truck around a gentle curve.

Johnny smiled wanly. “I’m fine. It’s good to be going home.” He unconsciously rubbed the fading bruises on his jaw and looked out of the window. “Man, I was startin’ to climb the walls. I can’t believe I spent ten whole days in that place. I don’t even remember the first three.”

“Well,” Roy said cautiously, “you were pretty bad off when Rick and Sam brought you in. Considering they had to take you back to surgery to tie off that bleeder, you’re doing remarkably well. Brackett’s amazed at how quickly you’ve recovered.” He stopped at a traffic light.

Johnny shook his head disgustedly and set his jaw. “It’s my own damn fault, too.”

“Don’t tell me you’re still kicking yourself over this?” Roy sighed as he turned onto Johnny’s street.

“It was a *stupid* thing to do,” Johnny said flatly. He rested his chin on his palm. “I should’ve just called the cops when I found him. But nooo. I had to see if the guy was okay.” He sighed. “Chet’s right, I *am* the perfect pigeon.”

“Come on, Johnny,” Roy said patiently. “You weren’t being stupid. A lot of people would’ve done what you did.”

“Oh, who?” asked Johnny. “If you found some stranger sleeping in your garage, would you check him for a pulse first?”

Roy blushed. “No.” He hesitated for a moment. “I probably would’ve called the cops. But Johnny,” he said gently as he glanced at John, “I didn’t find somebody in my garage, *you* found somebody in your barn. Your first instinct was to see if you could help the guy.” He slowed the truck as it neared Johnny’s driveway. “Not many people would’ve done that.” Roy parked the truck behind his Porsche and cut the engine. He faced Johnny. “You’re not *stupid* for trying to help another person.”

“If I’m not stupid, then what am I?” Johnny asked softly.

“You’ve got a big heart, Johnny.” Roy opened his door, smiling as Joanne and the kids approached the truck. “Sometimes you let it guide your actions instead of using your head. This time, it backfired. The next time, it may work out just fine. But, there’s one thing I do know.”

“What’s that?” Johnny picked up a plastic bag that held his few belongings, and opened his door.

“I’d be really upset if you ever changed.” Roy hopped out of the truck and closed his door.

“Uncle Johnny!” piped a little girl’s voice. “You’re all better!”

Johnny smiled softly, then flashed a crooked grin at Roy’s daughter. “Hey, Squirt!” He got out of the truck, knelt down and hugged her. “You know, now that you’re here, I think I’m gonna be okay.” He took the girl’s hand in his, then walked up the driveway.

Author’s note: Thanks to Tig for the advice!