

## [Little Smoke Eater](#)

By MJ Hajost

John Gage hobbled over the threshold, twisting slightly to pass Holly as she held the screen door for him, and swung on his crutches through the kitchen and into the living room. He hitched himself toward the sofa, pausing a moment to listen for the sound of his wife closing the door behind her. Reassured that she had, indeed, followed him into the house, he continued his slow prowling of the room. As he turned back toward the kitchen he saw her staring at him, and he hunched over his crutches and made a small face.

"You have your pain medication?"

Johnny nodded as he made his way to the Lazy Boy and lowered himself into it, pushing the lever on the side to raise the footrest and leaning back to settle more comfortably against the chair back. "Yeah," he answered, absently patting his shirt pocket, although that wasn't where the plastic vial was.

Holly cruised slowly into the room, setting down the bag that held his ruined uniform and other sundries. She studied Johnny as she sat on the edge of the sofa, taking in the fresh bruise developing along his left cheek, the white bandage that covered the thirteen stitches it had taken to close a jagged cut over his left eyebrow, the unruly hair straggling across his scalp, and, finally, the soft cast that encased his right foot. And, that didn't count the puffy, red eyes and hoarse voice that marked the smoke he'd inhaled, nor the sag to those same eyes that indicated the lack of sleep on the swing portion of the shift.

"How bad was it?" she asked at last.

Johnny tilted his head a little, trying to determine the level of interest--or was it sarcasm?--in her voice. "Bad. Three people died." He wasn't sure she really cared, but some perverse part of him wanted her to share his pain. "Two kids." He hesitated. "And, Tom Vernon." He swallowed. The images of the three charred bodies would haunt his dreams for a good long while.

"We need to talk." It seemed obvious to John that she hadn't even been listening to him as he'd answered. She spoke as if her question to him--and his reply--had been nothing more than the idle chitchat in which spouses engage at the end of the workday.

John's obstinacy clicked into high gear. An old argument was about to surface yet again, and he refused to give her the satisfaction of an opening with which to start it. He remained silent.

"Johnny, I want a divorce." Holly looked up as she said the words, unconsciously twisting her wedding ring around her finger. Johnny was sure she was unaware of the gesture.

Whoa--not quite the same old argument, is it? His breath came a little more rapidly, but he managed to keep his face immobile. "Your timing's pretty lousy," he said finally. "Tell me, is it me you hate, or the job?"

"Oh, Johnny, I don't hate you." She rolled her eyes in annoyance.

"Then, what? Why does the job bother you now?" Whatever it was had not developed overnight. It had been their unspoken battle for a couple of years now. "Holly, you knew what I was when you married me."

"You make it sound so cut and dried!" She shook her head. "You know it's not that simple."

"So explain it to me again." He folded his hands across his stomach, more to still the trembling than to be comfortable.

"Johnny, do you have any idea how hard it is to be married to you? To be frantic with worry every time you leave the house to go to work, wondering if you'll come back in one piece?" Her voice quavered. How could she make him understand? "I can't take the fear anymore. I hate every minute of it--the sleepless nights, the pounding of my heart every time the phone rings while you're at work, the sound of a siren going by. I hate how the deaths eat away at you. I hate--" She gestured weakly at him. "I hate the thought of seeing you in a hospital bed waking up from anesthesia not knowing where you are--seeing your face as the pain suddenly hits...and knowing there isn't a damn thing I can do for you. Not a damn thing I can do to convince myself to be happy that you are waking up." She paused and her voice dropped. "I especially hate the sight of you on crutches." She closed her eyes. "You can't tell me I haven't told you this before, Johnny."

"If it matters any," Johnny told her softly, swallowing, "having you there for me has always helped."

She sighed. "Johnny, I'm just not cut out to be a fireman's wife."

Johnny pressed his fingers to his mouth, eyes narrowing as he digested her words. A cough rattled up from his chest, and he bent double until the fit passed.

"How long were you in there after your tank ran dry?"

He lifted his head to see her glaring at him. "Would it matter if I even knew?" He couldn't keep a certain amount of bitterness from creeping into his voice. Still, he was sorry the moment the words left his lips.

Holly shook her head before he could apologize for them. "Not really, no, I suppose." She rose and went into the kitchen, coming back with a glass of water. "Where are the pills?" she demanded.

Johnny pulled the vial from his pants pocket and shook a capsule into his hand. Holly handed him the water and waited until he had swallowed the painkiller.

"You look awful," she told him as she took the glass from him and returned to the opposite side of the room. "You'd better get some sleep before Becca comes home and sees you looking like that. We'll talk later," she added firmly as he opened his mouth to protest.

Johnny wanted more than anything to go to her, embrace her, make all her fears go away. But, instead of doing as he wanted to, he simply climbed awkwardly up from the chair. "I don't want to keep making you unhappy, Holly," he whispered. "I won't fight the divorce, so long as I get to see Becca as much as possible."

Holly nodded wordlessly. Johnny swung across the room and turned around, rocking lightly on the crutches. "I can't afford much," he said.

Holly's head lifted, her mouth open in surprise. "What? I don't want anything, Johnny."

"...the house, I guess," he was saying.

"Johnny--"

He was shaking his head. "Becca needs this."

"Johnny."

He stopped talking and looked at her.

"I've already found an apartment. This--" she gestured to the house "--this was yours before we even met. I couldn't take it away from you."

He took a breath to argue and set off the nerves in his lungs again. This time, he nearly toppled from the crutches before the spasms eased. He leaned weakly against the wall and struggled to catch his breath again. "Holly..."

Her chin rose, daring him to say the wrong thing.

He made a face and shook his head. "Please, don't hate the Department, Holly. It's important to me that you don't hate those people." Without waiting for a reply, he swung around and made his way slowly down the hall to the bedroom.

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At some point that afternoon the phone rang, disturbing his sleep enough to make him shift on the bed. The movement set up a violent protest in his ankle and, in spite of the painkiller, drew forth a startled cry. Johnny sat up grabbing for his ankle, realized touching it wasn't going to help, and dropped back onto the pillow, panting softly for a few minutes until the pain subsided a bit. He closed his eyes again, drifting slowly through the haze, half-listening to Holly's quiet murmur as she spoke on the phone.

"He's here, but he's asleep, Roy....Yeah, he seemed exhausted....I don't think he'll have much trouble following Brackett's orders....No, he thinks it's a torn ligament. He has to go back in the morning for another x-ray. Brackett was talking surgery....Oh, that'd be great.... Yeah....I'll have him call you when he wakes up....All right....Give my love to Joanne."

Johnny heard the click of the receiver being replaced on the cradle. Drifted a little more. He was so tired he was dizzy, and the bed seemed to keep shifting under him. Just before he fell into a dreamless slumber he sensed a quiet presence, and felt a blanket drop over him. And, then, the darkness returned.

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A bounce on the bed jolted him once more from his slumber, and Johnny's awakening was no less painful--or agitated--than before. His eyes flew open, then immediately squeezed shut in a futile attempt to block the pain shivering up his leg from his ankle. The bed continued to bounce, and with the dull ache behind his eyes to add to the discomfort in the lower half of his body, it was all John could do to refrain from letting loose the volley of curses that rose to mind.

Instead, "Becca!" he croaked, "please...."

The little girl stopped the bouncing and patted his face. "Wake up, Daddy!"

His eyes slid open just enough for him to take in the four-year-old's beaming face leering inches from his own. "Hi, sweetheart," he whispered, reaching up with one hand and caressing her cheek before dropping it to massage his forehead.

"Did you have a nice nap?"

Johnny grinned in spite of himself as the little girl nestled comfortably against his side, her hands smoothing the blanket which still covered him.

"It was lovely," he assured her.

"Did you get an owie at work, Daddy?"

Johnny flinched as her fingers touched the tender area around his stitches. "Yes, and it hurts when you touch it."

"Do you want me to kiss it?"

Johnny's eyes opened a little wider and he winked at Becca. "Maybe later, Hon, okay?" He sat up slowly, readjusting carefully to the vertical, and glanced at the clock. Four o'clock already? He'd slept most of the day away.

"You smell like smoke, Daddy."

"Hm?" He returned his attention to his daughter.

"You smell like smoke," she repeated. Her little face crinkled in disgust.

Johnny reached out and grabbed her playfully, pulling her close and tickling her stomach. "Oh, yeah? Well, the big smoke-eater is gonna eat the little smoke-eater!" He pretended to nibble on her ears as she shrieked in delight. After a minute, he sat back up, laughing. "Okay, you little monster, scoot so Daddy can take a shower. So he doesn't smell like smoke anymore," he added, kissing her cheek. He deposited her onto the floor and she obediently trotted out the door. As she ran down the hall he could hear her calling to her mother.

Brief anguish pierced through him as he recalled the morning conversation. He took a deep breath and let it out again, shoved aside the blanket, and clambered from the bed.

You know I'd do almost anything for you, Hol. But...I can't quit my job. And I can't expect you to pretend that you're okay with what I do, either.

He hobbled into the bathroom and paused to stare at his reflection in the mirror.

Guess you've lost that old Gage charm, huh?

The reflection only gazed back sadly.

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"You can't be in that much pain, Junior." Roy smiled at his passenger. Johnny had been far too quiet on the ride to the hospital and, now, as they returned, he seemed just as preoccupied.

Brackett had decided that Johnny's sprain was not as severe as he'd originally thought. If Gage kept off the foot for several more days and wore the removable cast, he would be able to forego surgery. Roy had thought the news would please his partner, but as he drove him back home, he realized that Gage had barely spoken three consecutive words all morning.

"How about stopping somewhere for coffee?" he suggested.

Some of the tension went out of John's body at the proposal. "Sure," he replied, still quiet but with more life in his voice than Roy had heard from him yet today.

He drove to a small restaurant and found a parking space close to the entrance. Johnny manhandled himself from the car, still awkward on the crutches but able to swing himself inside without much trouble.

The pair waited until their coffee and rolls had arrived and the waitress had departed before they spoke again.

"Johnny, what's wrong?" Roy frowned at his friend over the edge of his cup.

Johnny looked up, a hint of a smile playing across his lips but not reaching as high as his eyes, and shrugged. His fingers idly tapped the surface of his coffee cup. "Aw, just another no-win argument with Holly." He sighed softly and lifted his cup to his lips.

"Yeah, Joanne and I have had a few of those. They blow over soon enough."

Johnny shook his head, his eyes still focused on the cinnamon roll in front of him. "I don't think so, Roy." He pulled at the warm bread, gently shredding it into little pieces that he left lying on the plate. He looked up again. "She wants a divorce."

Roy felt as if the all the breath had been sucked from his body. It was a long minute before he found his voice. Then, "Johnny, I'm really sorry." His mind reeled. "Is there anything I can do?"

Gage shrugged, cocking his head slightly. "Not unless you can make her start liking my job," he replied, the weak smile attempting a comeback. His eyes darted to Roy and then down again.

"Is there.....do you think counseling might help?" There had to be something they could do. After all those years of chasing girls, Johnny had finally found himself in Holly. He had calmed down, eased into a more focused approach to his work and his life, and for the past six years he had been whole. To see those painstakingly woven threads being so unceremoniously unraveled shook Roy.

John shrugged almost distractedly. "We've been going for months now," he said, doubt edging his voice. "Doesn't seem to have made much difference...." He looked up at his friend and made a face. "She's never been real hyped about the idea."

They sat in miserable silence a minute. Roy silently nibbled on his Danish, his appetite vanished.

"God knows I love her, Roy," Johnny went on, "but I can't give up doing what I do...."

"Is that what she's asking from you?" Roy's voice was calm.

Johnny's mouth twisted again. "She wouldn't do that." He gazed at the other. "She just doesn't want to live with it, anymore."

You'd better tell Joanne how much you appreciate her when you get home, DeSoto, Roy told himself.

"You know, Roy," Johnny was saying, "I don't ever think about what I do. Not ever. I just do it." He sighed. "I guess I never thought about how scary it is."

Roy nodded. "If we did, we wouldn't be doing it, would we?"

They refused the refill the waitress offered when she passed by a while later. Johnny seemed a little more at ease when they rose, Roy noticed. Then, again, it had always helped Gage to talk out his problems. This one, however, wouldn't be solved by a phone call or a good night's sleep.

Roy dropped Johnny back at his house and made his way home to his own wife, stopping at the florist on the way.

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"Sweetheart, Daddy has to go to work now." Gage struggled to disengage himself from his daughter's chokehold.

"No, Daddy, stay!"

"How can the big smoke eater do his job if the little smoke eater won't let go of him?" He hugged her again, but she refused to let go.

"Don't eat smoke today, Daddy."

"Becca, let go of Daddy." Holly barely glanced back at the couple on the floor behind her.

The little girl looked mournfully at her mother, pushed out her lower lip in a pout, and finally released her father.

Johnny gave a grateful look to Holly's back and kissed Becca. "I'll see you tomorrow. Be good for Mama. I love you." He rose from his squat and grabbed his keys from the counter. A quick look at the clock told him he was already late. He turned to his wife, stopped at her stare, and made a small grimace. "Guess I'll see you in the morning," he muttered.

The only reply he received was a short nod.

Yeah, I love you, too, he thought sourly, returning the nod and slipping out the door. He climbed into his new Wrangler and shoved the keys irritably into the ignition. Backing out of the driveway, he pulled on his sunglasses and reflected discontentedly on the bright fall sunshine. Figures. As good as it felt to be behind the wheel for the first time in over a week, he couldn't even enjoy the drive.

His dark mood remained with him as he pulled into 51's back lot, and on into the locker room. It didn't improve any when he discovered his spare socks had been turned into puppets, complete with miniature firehats. Even after a ten-day absence he was still fair game for pranks. The last straw was Chet's crack about suffering with Gage's cooking when Cap assigned kitchen detail to the paramedic. Even Roy was surprised at the vehemence with which Gage retorted to that one.

"We need supplies," he said quickly, stepping between his partner and Chet. "Come on, let's head over to Rampart before we get a run."

Johnny subsided darkly, storming from the squad room and slamming into the truck.

Might as well dive right in, Roy decided. "All right, out with it," he commanded as they pulled out of the station and turned toward the hospital.

When he received no reply, he turned to look at his partner. At the sight of Johnny's face, he pulled the squad over to the side of the road. "Johnny?" he said, turning off the engine and shifting in his seat to put a hand on the other's arm.

Gage, elbow on the open window beside him and jaw tightly clenched, struggled visibly with the tears that threatened to spill from distraught eyes.

Roy put a hand on Johnny's arm. "Johnny? What is it?" Now he was becoming frightened. "Is it Becca?"

That elicited a reaction, at least. Johnny shook his head slightly and dropped his arm, his mouth twitching. "No, it's not Becca," he whispered. He took a breath. "Sorry."

"Can I do anything?"

At last, Johnny looked at his partner, his eyebrows lifting slightly before he shook his head again. "Just a bad start to my day, that's all," he said, his eyes flitting away.

Roy's eyes narrowed slightly. "Holly?" he asked.

Johnny let out a long, slow breath. "She's going in to file for divorce today." He wiped angrily at the moisture on his face.

Roy gaped at him. "I thought...I thought you were in counseling...."

Gage shrugged, shaking his head slightly. "She stopped going."

The radio squawked its three little beeps of attention. "Squad 51, man down, 1423 Sycamore, 1-4-2-3 Sycamore, cross street Central. Time out 8:28."

"Squad 51, 10-4." Johnny's voice was toneless as he responded to the summons. He mechanically jotted down the information.

"You all right?" Roy hadn't started the engine yet.

Johnny gave him a weak smile. "I'm all right," he sighed. "I'm not happy, but I'm all right." He reached behind him and pulled his helmet on, tightening the chin strap. "Let's go."

Roy started the truck after a split second's hesitation, gave his partner a last worried glance, and pulled out into traffic. Yeah, sure, Junior.

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"So, what's with Gage this morning?" Chet Kelly drifted to Roy's side as the paramedic poured himself a cup of coffee.

Roy looked steadily at the Irishman. "Why don't you ask him yourself?" he suggested mildly.

"What? No way, man. He just about took my head off once today." Chet shook his head mournfully. "I figured he's your partner, he'd tell you and you'd tell me."

"Well, your figuring skills aren't what they used to be, Chet."

"Aw, come on, Roy."

"Kelly, don't you have some chores you should be doing?" Captain Stanley stood in the squad room doorway, hands shoved into his pockets, rocking on his heels.

Chet sighed. "Right, Cap." He set down his cup and departed, muttering.

Roy smiled and settled into a chair at the table, sliding a section of the newspaper over and pretending to scan the stories.

Stanley walked into the kitchen and poured himself some coffee. Dropping down next to Roy, he eyed the senior paramedic seriously. "Is this thing with Gage anything I oughta know about?"

Roy shook his head. "It's not my place, Cap."

The Cap nodded, his expression unchanging. "Is it going to be a problem today?"

"He'll be fine, Cap." He hoped his confident face was firmly plastered in position, because he sincerely doubted anything of the sort was true today.

Johnny sauntered in just then, a faintly distracted expression on his face.

"You lose somethin', pal?" Cap smiled at him.

"Huh?" John's frown deepened. "Oh, no, Cap. Roy, have you seen my car keys?"

Stanley smothered his snicker and rose, patting Gage's shoulder as he passed him on his way out of the squad room.

"Have you checked your car?" Roy suggested.

Johnny's face fell. "Aw, man...." He dashed through the far door and into the parking lot, returning almost immediately.

Silently, Roy held out the spare key he carried for just such emergencies. Johnny took it sheepishly, a small "Thanks" conveying more than just that small gratitude.

"Anytime, Junior."

It was the least he could do.

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Roy stopped hauling at the fragments of concrete, plaster, and fallen beams and took a breath. A quick glance at his watch showed him that they'd been at this warehouse fire for almost an hour now. By the time they finished knocking down the fire, repacked the hose, and reloaded all of their equipment, it would be nearly six o'clock. It was a good bet they wouldn't get dinner for another couple of hours at least. He tried to ignore his rumbling stomach and went back to work.

"HT 51, this is Engine 51." The squawk of the portable radio startled him out of his reverie.

Roy lifted the handie-talkie to his mouth and depressed the transmit key. "This is HT 51. Go ahead."

"Roy, where's Gage?"

Roy frowned at the odd question and glanced up to where his partner was helping Marco Lopez rake over debris on the other side of the vast room. "He's right here, Cap," he answered, his voice puzzled.

"Get him out here. Now. Engine 51 out."

"10-4, Engine 51," Roy said slowly, lowering the antenna and replacing the HT in the pocket of his turnout.

The request was obviously not rescue-related, and to his knowledge, Gage had been behaving admirably, albeit quietly, ever since he'd retrieved his keys from the locked Wrangler. He certainly hadn't risen to Chet's bait at lunch, and Kelly had finally given up trying to get a rise out of him. Cap had actually seemed amused by John's unwillingness to engage in battle with the Phantom. So, he couldn't possibly be in trouble. He was even still wearing his helmet. Roy's smile remained at bay, though. Cap had sounded concerned...almost scared.

He climbed over the heavy hoses, skirting the fallen debris that was all that remained of this ancient warehouse. Hose crews continued to dampen the embers while the partnering crews raked through the sludge to be sure the fire was, indeed, out. He reached Johnny and tapped him on the shoulder, jerking his hand toward the exit.

"Cap wants you," he shouted over the din.

Gage drew his eyebrows together in a confused frown, looked at the door and then back at his partner, finally shrugging and turning to follow Roy from the building. Roy's expression told a curious Marco that he didn't know what was up, either.

The first thing Gage did when he stepped out of the structure was to remove his helmet and swipe a grimy hand through his sweat-soaked hair. His hand fell slowly to his side when he saw Hank Stanley striding quickly to where the two paramedics had emerged. Something was very wrong....

At Stanley's side was Battalion Chief McConnikee.

His mouth hanging slightly open, Gage looked from one to the other.

"John, you need to go with the Chief," said Cap, his expression as close to frightened as either man had ever seen.

Johnny felt his heart quicken, a sick dread welling up in the pit of his stomach. "What's wrong?" John's voice caught in his throat and he swallowed.

McConnikee put a hand on Gage's arm. "Your daughter's missing," he said gently.

Roy watched Johnny's face drain of all color. His helmet clattered to the ground from suddenly nerveless fingers as he swung his shocked features toward Stanley, his soundless lips forming the word "Missing...?"

"Come with me," ordered McConnikee. "I'll drive you home."

Johnny didn't even look back as he raced the Chief to the car.

Roy turned stunned eyes on the Cap. "Cap...?"

Stanley shook his head, numb. "I don't know, Roy. McConnikee didn't give me any details." He gazed after the departing Fire Department car and swallowed.

"I...I guess I'd better go back inside," Roy said softly. He turned and made his way blindly back into the smoldering warehouse.

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"What happened?" Johnny finally managed to ask. His voice trembled.

McConnikee shook his head. "All I know is that a Detective Chavez contacted headquarters after being unable to reach you at the station." His own voice quivered slightly, full of a compassion Gage didn't notice. "The only thing they would tell me was that your daughter has disappeared." He stopped as Johnny visibly flinched at the words. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "Your wife," he went on after a moment, "is waiting for you."

By now Johnny was shaking so badly that the buckles on his turnout rattled. He put a hand to his mouth as if to hold back the contents of his stomach. "Becca...."

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"Holly?" Johnny flew through the front door, coming to a sudden halt seeing at the number of police officers milling about his living room, his wife in the center, fear and anger dominating her features. He tried to force down his own panic as he approached, certain that his own face must match hers in distress. "Holly?" he said again, more softly this time.

"Johnny...." She stopped just short of rushing into his arms.

Johnny put an arm around her anyway. "What happened?"

Some of the police in the room chose that moment to depart discreetly, and the couple were left with two plainclothes policemen, a teenage girl, and a man and a woman. Johnny noticed the girl for the first time.

"Eileen?" He looked at the couple and recognized her parents, acknowledging them weakly. "Steve, Renee...."

"Mr. Gage, I'm so sorry," the girl sobbed. Her mother had her arm around the girl's shoulders, and the father had one hand on the mother's.

Johnny was becoming more and more bewildered. Shooting a glance through the windows that faced the back yard, he could see several uniformed policemen purposefully swarming the area surrounding his house. He looked back at the detectives helplessly.

"Mr. Gage, I'm Officer Chavez," said one of the cops. "This is Officer Miller. Why don't you sit down and let me explain what happened."

Johnny remained standing. "Just tell me," he said, his jaw tight.

The policeman took a breath. "Well, evidently your baby-sitter--" he gestured to the teenager "--was in the yard with your daughter. She heard the phone ring and left the child while she came in to answer it."

Johnny glanced mutely at Eileen, who stared at him miserably.

"When she returned, the child was gone."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gage," Eileen repeated, tears flowing freely down her face. "I was only inside for a few minutes....I thought Becca would be fine. She was playing in the sandbox. I never thought she'd go anywhere...."

"Oh, God," moaned Holly. She shrugged off Johnny's arm and his bewilderment increased.

"We've put out a description, and a picture," continued Chavez, "and we're canvassing the area for anything that might help."

Johnny drew in a shaky breath, his gaze darting from the policemen to his wife and, finally, to the tearful sitter. "Eileen," he began, "it's okay." He reached for her and squeezed her hand. "It's all right...." He looked at Holly, who had pulled away from him to sit down on the sofa. "I guess," he said to Chavez, "I guess I should help in the search...."

Chavez looked uncomfortable.

"What?"

"Mr. Gage, we're not sure yet that she's just wandered away. She might have been taken."

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Johnny dropped slowly onto the couch next to Holly, his fingers twitching idly between his knees as he listened to Chavez talk. He still wore his turnout clothes, and the acrid odor of smoke permeated the room.

"What?" he said dumbly.

"According to your sitter--" he glanced at Eileen "--as she went back out into the yard, she heard the sound of a car in front of the house. She thought it was your wife returning. She noticed the child was missing--"

"Becca." The name was whispered, his voice hopelessly weak.

Chavez stopped. "I beg your pardon?"

"Her name is Becca. Not 'the child'." Johnny spoke more surely, glaring at the officer.

Chavez blinked. Finally, "She noticed Becca was missing," he went on, "and thought she'd run out front to her mother. When she went around the house, there was no car. And no Becca."

This can't be happening.... Johnny reached blindly for Holly's hand with his left, his right hand going to his mouth again, then dropping to his lap. He looked out into the back yard again and, after a moment, at Holly. She refused to meet his gaze. He squeezed her hand as Chavez spoke again.

"Eileen searched a few minutes more, then called the police."

"What time was this?" How long had she been gone? Maybe someone has seen her....

"Shortly after ten o'clock."

"Ten this morning?" Johnny jumped back to his feet.

"Mr. Gage--"

"What the hell have you been doing all this time?" He whirled to face Holly. "How come no one called me?"

"Mr. Gage, no one was sure just what had happened--"

Johnny cut off Chavez's attempt at explanation. "She's four years old! What does it take to start a search for a missing four-year-old?" His fear all channeled itself into fury, and it required a self-control he was rapidly losing to keep from lunging at someone, anyone.

"Mr. Gage, before we can institute a search, we have to exhaust all other possibilities."

"What other possibilities are there? She's four years old!"

Officer Miller stepped forward. "Mr. Gage," he said calmly, "we have started a search--we started it when we were able to ascertain that your daughter was actually missing."

McConnikee managed to grab John's arm before his fist connected with Miller's jaw. "Easy, now, easy," he said. "Arguing isn't finding her, John."

Johnny subsided angrily, taking a deep breath and running both hands through his hair. He turned back to Holly.

She sat stonily, silent tears trickling down her face. Johnny sat next to her again and lifted his arm across her shoulders, his other hand reaching across to take hers. He felt her tense under his touch, but he resolutely kept his arm in place.

"What do we do now?" McConnikee finally asked, his voice calm and soothing.

Chavez nodded and glanced appreciatively at McConnikee. He took a breath. "We'll want to put a tap on your phone."

Johnny looked at him sharply.

"If she's been kidnapped," Chavez said gently, "they might call..."

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Eileen and her parents had left. The girl had finally calmed down, but McConnikee, watching her leave, suspected it would be some time before she recovered from the fright, if she ever did. Gage had tried to be encouraging, thought the Chief, but who knows how much it had helped.

Across the room, Johnny shivered underneath his heavy turnouts before the patio doors, watching the hills behind his house where searchers continued to scour the landscape. The sun had dipped below the horizon now and the close chill of the fall night was descending. She's probably not even wearing a jacket....

This is a nightmare, Johnny told himself. Surely he'd wake up soon, shaky and sweaty but in his own bed, and Becca would be curled up between him and Holly. He would climb from bed and carry her back to her own room, and then sit and watch her for a while as she slept....

"Gage?"

He turned. Chief McConnikee stood behind him.

"I spoke with Hank Stanley," McConnikee began, "and DeSoto's on his way. Hank's already put the word out to the Department, and the police have been bombarded with offers of help from the off-duty shifts." He put a hand on Johnny's shoulder. "We'll find her, son."

"Thanks, Chief," Johnny nodded, getting the words out on the second try.

McConnikee dropped his hand and looked outside. "Listen, there isn't anything else I can do here, so I'm going to get out of the way." He returned his gaze to the still stunned paramedic. "You be sure to let me know if there's anything I can do."

"I will," promised Johnny. "I appreciate your help tonight, Chief."

"I'll see myself out."

The phone rang as the door closed on the Chief. Johnny stiffened, terrified eyes falling onto Chavez's calm face at the dining room table. It was the third time the phone had rung since the tracer had been put on. The first had been a test ring, the second a wrong number. Chavez nodded slowly and, as if in a dream, Johnny lifted the receiver.

There was a hesitation on the other end at Johnny's choked "Hello." Gage's fingers tightened around the plastic when the reply was not immediate.

"Johnny?" The voice on the other end sounded uncertain.

Johnny closed his eyes and fought down the nausea. "Dutch?"

"God, you sound like hell." His friend Dutch Masters' voice was strained and full of sympathy. "Do you want any of us to come over?"

"Uh...Dutch, no." Johnny struggled to regain control. "They...uhm...they don't want people all over the place here." He swallowed.

"All right, man, I understand. Listen, I'm gonna hit the streets then." There was a second of silence from him. "Johnny, we'll find the little smoke-eater, okay?"

Gage's reply was a half-swallowed "...kay."

He dropped the phone back onto the cradle and glanced at Chavez.

"You're going to get a lot of those phone calls, Mr. Gage," said the detective gently. "They're the kind you want to get."

Johnny nodded dully and turned back to the windows. Little smoke-eater. Dutch had christened her with that moniker. Where are you?

Holly appeared at his side and stared with him into the darkness. Johnny reached up once more and put his arm around her.

"It's all my fault," she whispered.

Johnny's reply was to wrap both arms around her and hug her tightly, burying his face in her hair. He again felt her body tense beneath his arms. "Holly," he whispered fiercely, "it isn't your fault! It isn't anybody's fault!"

"Oh, God, Johnny, what if we never see her again?" Her agonized wail was muffled by his coat. "I keep getting this image of her, alone and scared--"

Johnny raised his hands to her head and tilted it up, staring intently into her eyes. "Don't, Holly! Don't do this!" He pressed her head to his chest. "We'll find her. We'll find her," he repeated.

Holly cried into the pungent leather of his coat, heaving sobs that shook her entire body. Johnny closed his eyes and gripped her more firmly.

It was all Holly could do to avoid gagging on the smoky stench.

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"Has either of them eaten anything?" Roy asked.

Chavez glanced through the dining room doorway to where the Gages still stood near the patio doors. Johnny's arms no longer wrapped around his wife, who stood a few feet away from him, her arms folded across her chest as if she were trying to ward off an unwelcome advance. He had finally shed his turnouts and they lay carelessly across the back of the sofa, the neat creases in his uniform an anomaly against the haggardness of his face.

Except for a brief greeting, neither had spoken since Roy's arrival a half hour ago.

Chavez turned back to the red-headed paramedic. "I doubt it. I doubt either of them will be able to stomach any food for a while," he added sympathetically.

Roy nodded. "I guess," he said thoughtfully. Still, maybe he could entice them into at least having something to drink. He went into the kitchen and rummaged in the cabinets for two coffee mugs. Then, he realized that there was no coffee made. With a sigh he remembered that he was not at the station, where the scent of coffee was almost as pervading as the smell of fire that lingered in their clothes.

He set about making a fresh pot, taking refuge in the normalcy of the task, finding the coffee grounds and measuring cup easily enough. The coffee maker puzzled him, though. He stared at it in bafflement.

"The water goes in the top there."

Roy turned at the husky, weary voice.

Johnny looked almost amused, but the expression faded hastily. "Here." He stepped into the room and quickly had the coffee brewing.

"Joanne wants one of those things," Roy murmured, pointing at the Mr. Coffee.

"It's handy," agreed John.

For a minute Roy listened to the water hiss and rumble through the coffee maker. The very quietness of his partner disturbed Roy, though he knew that, if Gage wanted to talk he would. Roy would be there to listen.

Johnny didn't seem to notice the silence. "It's been one hell of a day, partner," he said after a while, his gaze directed to his socks.

Roy didn't know what he could say. Everything that came to mind sounded so trite. "I think," he said at last, "most of the off-duty firefighters in the county are out looking."

Johnny nodded distractedly. "Yeah," he whispered gruffly, clearing his throat, "McConnikee told me. Dutch is out there...." He looked up, his eyes brimming and filled with dread. "What are we gonna do if she..." He stopped. Suddenly, a fist lashed out, pounding into the edge of the cabinet next to the sink. Blood poured from the gash the blow opened up.

Roy jumped the three feet to Johnny's side and grabbed the hand, pulling it over the sink and turning on the tap. "First aid kit in the bathroom?"

"Yeah," Johnny said disgustedly.

"Just hold that there a minute," Roy instructed unnecessarily, turning and heading for the bathroom, relieved at having something mundane to occupy his mind.

"What happened?" demanded Chavez, his forehead creased in a worried frown.

"Just a little frustration venting," Roy replied, continuing down the hall.

"About time," muttered Miller. Chavez nodded agreement.

Holly remained mute at the window.

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The night wore on. The phone rang two more times, and Roy was stunned at the terror both calls induced in his friends. There was an almost irresistible urge to rush home and check on his own children. He did go out onto the patio after the second call in an effort to calm himself down.

"It gets to you, doesn't it?"

"How can you do this?" Roy turned to face Chavez as he followed Roy outside. "How do you survive?"

Chavez shrugged. "I'm not personally involved."

Roy measured him for a moment. "How many cases like this have you worked on?"

Chavez's eyes narrowed. "Too many, if you ask me."

Roy nodded. "How many of them ended happily?"

Chavez regarded him carefully. "You sure you want to know?" he asked softly.

Roy held his breath, then slowly shook his head. "No, you're right, I think I'd rather not know."

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Johnny slipped the sweater over his head and slid his arms into the sleeves. Dressed in jeans, and now the pullover, he was warmer at any rate. He tossed his blue uniform shirt, stained where the blood from his cut hand had splashed, into the corner and set his badge and pins on the dresser. His eye caught the framed photo that sat at the edge, a photo he had taken of Holly and Becca the year before--both laughing delightedly. He stared at it a moment, a lump rising in his throat.

"We should both be out looking for her."

Johnny set the photo down without turning around.

"Don't you want to help find her?"

"I'm scared to find her, Holly."

"I'm scared, too, Johnny! I'm terrified!"

"I know you are--"

She cut him off. "You've got a funny way of showing it!"

Johnny spun around, his face a furious mixture of emotions. His mouth opened to argue, and then he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Face drawn and pale, eyes red and exhausted, nose raw. Holly's face, when he glanced at her, was the same.

"Holly, let's not do this to each other," he pleaded.

"Oh, God, I want my baby!" Holly sank to her knees, grabbing onto the edge of the bed. Johnny took a step toward her, but she waved him off, burying her head in the bedspread as sobs tore loose from her body.

John's hands fell to his sides helplessly. Oh, God, Hol, we both do....

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Roy finally convinced Holly to take the sedative her doctor had sent over, and she now lay asleep in their bedroom. Johnny stood in the doorway watching her, absently toying with the ends of the blanket someone had thrown over his shoulders.

"Johnny?" His partner's quiet voice came from behind.

Johnny did not turn.

"You really should try to get some sleep yourself, Johnny." He had almost called him "Junior," at the last second avoiding the affectionate nickname.

"Can't..." Gage swallowed, his eyes closing briefly, then snapping open fearfully. "Can't," he repeated, shaking his head.

"Well, come and sit down, at least," Roy insisted.

"She must be so scared...." Johnny didn't bother to turn.

Roy finally reached out and gently steered Gage into the living room. Johnny collapsed onto the sofa, hunching forward in his seat. His red-rimmed eyes peered from a face that had aged years in a matter of hours.

Roy dropped a hand on John's shoulder, a small gesture of support, but he had no words, no advice, no comfort to offer other than the human contact.

Johnny dropped his head into his hands.

Roy squatted in front of him. "Johnny, why don't you try to sleep? You're walking around here like a zombie. You're gonna hurt yourself."

"She was at her lawyer's office," Gage whispered, closing his eyes and massaging them tiredly.

"I know," Roy said.

"She thinks it was her fault." John's voice was beginning to fade. He swallowed to ease the dryness and slowly let out his breath.

"Get some rest, John."

"I can't," he repeated.

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He jerked upright on the sofa. "Wha--?"

"Easy there, pal." Roy's voice caught his attention and he turned his head. "It's all right."

Johnny blinked confusedly. "...time is it?" he mumbled, raking fingers distractedly through his hair.

"It's almost twelve-thirty," Roy told him. Gage had slept exactly three minutes.

Johnny stood up restlessly and made his way down the hall to the bedroom. Holly was lying on the bed, her eyes open and staring emptily at the ceiling. Johnny lowered himself to her side, stretching out beside her. Without a word, she turned and pressed herself against his chest. Johnny enfolded her and held her while she cried, and after a while, they both slept.

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Johnny sat up slowly and looked around, wondering what it was that had startled him. He lifted his arm to look at his watch and saw that it was only one o'clock. Holly stirred at his side but her eyes remained closed. Johnny watched her a minute, then pulled his numb arm out from under her and slid carefully from the bed.

As he entered the living room, he caught Chavez looking in his direction and his heart froze. He watched stupidly as Chavez walked across the room and stopped in front of him.

"Mr. Gage...." Chavez seemed to be having difficulty with the words. "Mr. Gage, there was an auto accident tonight at Woodland and Old Mill Road, involving a stolen car. There were two fatalities.... We think one of them might be your daughter."

"Oh, God...." Johnny began to breathe rapidly. "No...."

Roy had moved to John's side and placed his hand protectively on his friend's arm.

"We'll need you to make a positive identification."

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The ride to Rampart's morgue was conducted mostly in silence. Johnny, white-faced, stared unseeing out the window in the back seat of the patrol car that had brought the news. Beside him, Roy sat in a similar state of shock. Chavez rode beside the driver, a young patrolman not oblivious to the pain he was bringing to the man behind him.

There had been two people in the single-vehicle accident, Chavez had told them--one adult male, one young female child. Both had, evidently, been unrestrained. Johnny's face had been enough to prevent him from giving additional details, and they had ridden the rest of the way with only the police radio making any noise.

At the hospital, Johnny sat for several minutes without moving when the car stopped. At last, he reached up and took Chavez's offered hand and climbed out, swaying slightly as his feet touched the pavement. Roy steadied his other arm, and together he and Chavez led Johnny into the hospital.

"I can't do this," Johnny whispered as they reached the entrance to the morgue, halting abruptly at the door. "Roy--" He turned panic-stricken eyes to his friend.

"Take your time, Johnny," Roy told him gently.

Johnny shut his eyes and swallowed hard. At last he inclined his head and opened his eyes. His fingers clamped onto Roy's arm as they stepped through the outer door.

Garish fluorescent lighting brightened the room in an almost macabre fashion, glinting coolly off the steel cabinets lined the walls on both sides. To the rear a glass door led into another, darkened, room. A large, uncluttered desk sat in the far corner, a large, casted chair behind it. The rest of the room was bare. A white-coated attendant was waiting for them.

Chavez glanced at Gage, nodded to the attendant, and the man opened one of the cabinets and slid out the drawer. A tiny, sheet-draped figure rested on its surface.

Johnny's breath was now coming in shaky gasps, and sweat glistened on his face. Roy found himself shaking as well. Please, dear God.... he thought.

Chavez nodded again. The attendant pulled back the sheet and Johnny stepped forward.

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He gasped. "It's not her."

Johnny felt Roy catch his arm as his knees buckled...felt himself yanked awkwardly back to his feet as the attendant grabbed him from the other side and led him to the chair. Johnny was vaguely aware of someone handing him a tumbler of water. His trembling fingers couldn't grip it, and the water slipped to the floor.

He felt sick. That was not his daughter on that slab. It was someone else's grief.

The relief made him want to vomit.

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Johnny hadn't expected to see any one while he was at the hospital, so the sight of Dixie McCall as they exited the morgue caught him unawares. He was totally unprepared to cope with questions or sympathy.

She looked at him with heartfelt compassion, reaching for his hand wordlessly.

"It wasn't her, Dix," he said, his voice quaking.

Dixie managed admirably to conceal her shock at the paramedic's ashen, exhausted features. She tugged him toward her in a strong embrace. "It'll be all right, Johnny. You'll see," she whispered. Finally pulling away, she turned to Chavez. "You have a phone call, Detective." She pointed toward the office in the rear of the morgue. "We could transfer it down, if you like."

Chavez glanced over his shoulder and suppressed a shudder. "I'll take it upstairs, if it's all the same to you."

Dixie smiled briefly. "Of course." She led the way up the stairs and into the emergency department, pointing to the phone on the desk at the nurses' station. Her eyes followed Chavez as he went to the desk, then turned to Johnny. "Would you feel better if you could be out helping with the search?" she asked gently.

"I can't feel much of anything, Dix," answered Johnny, shaking his head slowly.

Chavez replaced the phone and hurried back to Johnny and Roy. "They've found a child trapped in a storm sewer. She's answering," he went on before Johnny could speak, "to the name Becca."

This time Johnny did toss the little that was in his stomach.

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They could see the lights of several rescue vehicles from two blocks away. After nearly half an hour in the car, Johnny was out the door before the squad had even come to a stop. In the back seat, Roy waited impatiently for the driver to let him out, and then he was on Johnny's heels. It would be too much if they had been wrong about the child....

In seconds Johnny reached the perimeter of the rescue site, dragged back from dropping into the open sewer by two pairs of strong hands.

"Whoa, Johnny, easy, easy." Mike Stoker stepped in front of him and held him back. Chet Kelly kept steady hands on Gage's shoulders from behind. "We don't need two victims, okay?"

"Is it--?" He couldn't quite form the words.

Mike shook his head slightly. "We think so, John, but we're not sure. We can hear her, but we can't see her."

Johnny gazed fearfully at the open hole behind Stoker. "Who's in there with her?"

Again Stoker's head moved. "No one yet, John. We can't get down--there's a fall blocking the shaft." His calm voice helped to quiet the frantic paramedic as Roy finally caught up.

"Okay," Johnny breathed, "okay. Just let me talk to her, okay?"

Mike nodded and led the two men the twenty feet to where two crews were shifting equipment into place around a narrow opening at the side of the street.

How the hell did a child get down there?

Hank Stanley glanced up from his handie-talkie as he saw Stoker approaching, breaking off in mid-sentence when he saw Johnny and Roy at his side. "Uh...right," he continued at last, his eyes still on Gage, "just make sure the flood gates stay closed. I don't know how long this is gonna take. 51, out." He shoved the aerial back into place and slung the portable back into his pocket as he stepped forward. "John."

Johnny swallowed. "Cap....where is she?"

Stanley gestured toward the opening where three firefighters knelt on the ground staring into the hole, and led the way over. Seeing Johnny, the men scooted back from the opening to allow him access.

Cap squatted down next to the opening, and Johnny followed suit. "About twenty feet down, near as we can tell. We think she might be in another access pipe." He steadied his flashlight against one wall of the narrow shaft, pointing with his free hand. "But there was some sort of collapse here, looks like it's pretty old." Johnny could see the tumble of bricks and other debris that blocked a portion of the tunnel. "It's gonna take some time to clear it. The problem is that we don't want any of it to drop on her if she's on a ledge and not inside a pipe." He glanced apologetically at the paramedic.

"Has she been talking to you?" Johnny tried to peer beyond the blockage.

"Yeah, for a while. She stopped answering about ten minutes ago," he added quietly.

Johnny knelt and placed one hand next to the opening, leaning carefully over it. "Becca!" he shouted hoarsely.

There was no sound from below.

"Becca!" he yelled again. Please.... "Becca, honey, can you hear me?"

His only answer was continued silence.

Johnny's mouth had gone dry. "Honey, if you can hear me, you need to answer, all right?" He waited. "Hey, little smoke-eater, talk to me, okay?" The last came out cracked as his voice gave way. He dropped his head and closed his eyes. "Becca..." he whispered into the abyss.

It was an eternity before the answer came back.

"Daddy!"

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John struggled against the waves of dizziness that kept washing over him. He felt a hand and blinked slowly.

"Here, you'd better sit down." Mike Stoker lowered him carefully to the ground in front of a nearby hydrant and scrutinized his face. "When was the last time you ate?"

Johnny fought to connect the words with ideas and finally gave up. He simply shook his head in reply.

Stoker muttered something about being right back and jumped up. Johnny propped his elbows on his upraised knees and dropped his head wearily onto his hands, raking fingers through his hair. It was almost three o'clock now. The sounds from Becca had stopped, and the new worry ate at him like an acid.

Captain Stanley had adamantly refused to allow him to help in the excavation. "Don't be ridiculous. You don't have the energy to stand, much less dig. You just sit over there and let us do the work, pal." His voice softened. "We won't let anything happen to her, John."

Stoker returned and dropped to John's side once more, holding out a candy bar. He shrugged ruefully. "It's all I could find."

Johnny smiled--faintly--and slowly unwrapped the sweet. He took a small bite, then another, then stopped. He hadn't eaten since lunchtime the day before, and as hungry as he was, he knew that this wasn't going to stay down. He handed the candy bar back to Stoker.

"Thanks, Mike," he muttered, making a face at Stoker's surprise. "I think if I ate any more," he explained, "it'd just come right back up." Already what he'd eaten was making him feel a little queasy.

Stoker pulled the wrapper back around the candy and stuck it in Gage's jacket pocket. "In case you change your mind." He followed Johnny's gaze to the excavation site. "Rough night, huh?"

"What's happening?" John asked.

"She probably fell asleep, John," Stoker told him calmly. "It won't be much longer."

"I need to go down, Mike."

"Cap knows that. You're first on the list, okay?" If you're still on your feet by then.

Johnny's gaze wandered to the cab of Squad 16, where Holly sat huddled, alone. "How's Holly?" he whispered.

Stoker looked at the squad, then back at John. "She's a little zoned," he replied.

John nodded. The tranquilizer was only just beginning to wear off, and she still wasn't very coherent. Just coherent enough, he recalled dejectedly, to be furious that he had left the house without telling her where he was going. The trip to the morgue would remain his private hell. When this is all over, John thought bitterly, I'm gonna be making the payment on some shrink's new Mercedes.

"Not all of 'em can handle it, Johnny." Mike rose. "I'll be back in a bit. You get some rest if you can. I'll wake you up as soon as we're through." He strode away without looking back.

Gage tried, but he couldn't stop the tears.

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"How's it going?"

Roy turned. Dutch Masters stood beside him, gazing worriedly at the open hole. DeSoto shrugged.

"Shouldn't be too much longer," he said, sipping coffee from the styrofoam cup he'd managed to get hold of.

"Is it Becca?" Dutch asked after a moment.

"Can't be sure," Roy sighed. "We can't see her, and she stopped talking a while ago."

Dutch scanned the crowd. "How're Johnny and Holly holding up?" He didn't see either one of them.

"I think they're tired of having people hold their hands," Roy told him. "They're both just trying to get some space."

Dutch nodded and hunched further into his jacket. "Guess I won't bother 'em, then."

Roy nodded. Wise move, Dutch. "Just keep the prayers coming, Dutch."

Dutch's smile was fleeting. "Already got everyone I know on it."

Roy nodded again. He'd heard that from more than a few people tonight. Wonder what Gage would think of so many people praying to a God he's not sure he even believes in?

No contest. He'd be surprised to know so many people cared.

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He jumped at the shout, coming awake and to his feet in the same instant. The commotion came from the sewer shaft, where the rescuers were busy securing a ladder across the opening. That meant they were ready to lower someone. Johnny was already halfway there before either Roy or Stoker could even stand up from where they'd been kneeling.

Hank Stanley had risen, too, as John stumbled over. He debated briefly the wisdom of allowing this exhausted man into the pit, reflecting that Gage would knock flat anyone who tried to get in his way.

"Okay, John, let's get her up."

Johnny shrugged out of his jacket and Roy buckled the harness around Johnny's waist and set the line. The two men exchanged a quick look, and Johnny nodded. Seconds later he was on his way down the hole.

\*\*\*\*

He felt the world spin and dip as he dropped into the brightly lit shaft, and had to swallow hard to stave off violent nausea. His daughter's face rose before him and everything else faded from importance.

He passed the site of the collapse, easing around the jagged edges of broken concrete that jutted into the narrow space into which he descended.

Just a few feet more....

His heart hammered mercilessly in his ears.

There it is.... Looks like a drainage pipe of some sort.

The opening was in the side of the shaft about two-thirds the way down. It was very small--no more than a couple of feet in diameter. Three feet in, the pipe took a sharp turn to the right.

"Okay!" he shouted up the shaft, having to repeat himself as his voice gave out once more.

The descent stopped, he struggled to stop himself from swaying, the dizzying motion momentarily repelled by the adrenaline which had sustained him all night. He blinked hard once or twice as he raised a flashlight and flipped it on. He peered into the opening in front of him.

"Becca?" he called, gripping the edge of the pipe with his free hand and leaning inside. The child was not in sight. His throat tightened and his heart plummeted.

"Becca?" he said again. "Honey, it's Daddy."

He squinted up the shaft. "Roy? Gimme some slack...I can't see her!"

The rope dropped a little. Johnny propped the flashlight in the pipe and grasped the opening as best he could, levering his head and shoulders into it as far as he could.

I'll never fit into this pipe, he thought desperately.

"Becca...little smoke-eater..." The words stuck in his throat. He tried again. "Becca, this big smoke-eater can't fit into the pipe. You have to come here, sweetheart."

"I'm stuck..."

Johnny choked back a sob and dropped his head onto his forearm, taking a couple of rapid breaths before he spoke again. "Honey, can you move at all?"

"Daddy...." It was a mournful, tired whimper. "I'm scared....It's dark in here...."

Johnny reached painstakingly underneath himself and carefully unhitched the rope from the harness. Setting it carefully aside, he slid forward into the pipe, ignoring the pain as his shoulders scraped against the narrow sides.

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"What the--" Roy dropped to the ground and leaned over the opening. "Johnny!" he shouted.

"Roy?" Captain Stanley frowned.

Roy looked up worriedly. "The rope's gone slack."

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Johnny poked his head around the corner of the juncture. Three feet away lay the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. "Becca...." he whispered.

She was indeed stuck in the pipe. He could see only her disheveled and grimy face and, just below, the small animal she clutched to her chest. There wasn't room for her to move and retain her hold on the calico cat. Evidently, she had opted for the cat and imprisonment.

Johnny almost wanted to laugh. "Becca, sweetheart, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I wanted the kitty, Daddy," she told him, her dark eyes glistening in the light from his lamp.

"I'm sure you did, hon." His voice was almost gone, and it was becoming a chore to speak. "Can you give him to me? Then maybe you can crawl over here and we can get out, okay?"

"Can I keep him, Daddy?" She seemed reluctant to release her hold.

Johnny closed his eyes and swallowed against the soreness in his throat. "If Mama says yes, you can."

The little girl relaxed her fingers. The cat, its freedom assured, darted forward. Johnny managed to grab it before it could get by, ignoring the scratching claws and tucking it firmly under his arm.

"Okay, hon, now you need to come this way, okay?"

Becca started to move, then screeched. "I'm stuck!"

"Becca, take it easy. Just move slow, okay?"

"Daddy!"

Her voice echoed in the tiny chamber and pierced her father's heart. "Becca!" Not now! I'm too damn close to lose her now! He softened his voice. "Listen, little smoke-eater, you have to do this. I can't reach you. You can do this, hon. Mama's waiting for you up there, Uncle Roy, Dutch...a lot of people. Please, hon...."

Becca slowly eased herself forward, imperceptibly at first, then with growing facility. Johnny backed carefully away as she approached, maintaining his grip on the cat and keeping his daughter in sight, until he was at the opening of the pipe. He retied the rope on his harness with one hand as he watched Becca make her way around the corner and toward him.

He dimly heard the voices from above shouting down to him.

Then she was in his arms, caught in a grip that caused her to screech. He refused to loosen it.

"Take us up!" he called out hoarsely.

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Several pairs of hands grabbed them as they reached the top of the shaft, hauling them forth with a sureness borne of long practice and setting them onto the pavement a safe distance from the edge of the opening.

Johnny sagged to his knees, Becca still gripped firmly in his embrace, and looked around. Holly was suddenly at his side. Becca squirmed from his arms and into her mother's with a shriek of delight.

The reunion at streetside was short-lived. The paramedics from 16s quickly whisked the family into the waiting ambulance and off to Rampart.

The crew of Station 51 paused before they left, gathered in a huddled circle, while Marco Lopez uttered a short prayer of thanks.

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Their daughter was back, scuffed and scraped and very hungry, but safe and sound. She was mildly hypothermic as well, hence Brackett's insistence that she spend the night in the hospital.

Becca had told them something about a "nice lady" with the puppy who gave her a ride in her car. Then, at some later point, Becca told them how she had followed the cat into the pipe. What happened in between was a mystery. It was a rather inarticulate story, and Johnny doubted they'd ever find out exactly what had taken place. Chavez would be by in the morning to talk to Becca some more.

Holly sat on the edge of Becca's hospital bed, watching the sleeping child, Johnny standing just behind her. Both were on the verge of collapse as the sun made its appearance, but neither was quite ready to give up the sight of the child.

"I told her she could keep the cat as long as you agreed," he said, the words barely audible.

Holly nodded slowly. "Johnny...."

He waited.

"They were great.... I never realized...." She faltered. "They were just as scared as we were...."

He touched her gently and she didn't flinch. "It's a scary job."

She turned tear-filled eyes to his. "How do you do it?"

Johnny caressed her face lightly. "You just remember the good ones, and try to forget the bad...."

She leaned against him. "Day after day, Johnny....and you've never complained...."

His heart leapt. He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the top of her head. "Get some sleep," he suggested. He reached over further and kissed Becca. "Good night, little smoke-eater." He walked to the door.

"Johnny?"

He turned.

"Stay a while?"

He didn't need a second invitation.



