

Prom Queen

Icabu

Squad 51 arrived at the burning single-family home seconds before Engine 51. Paramedics Roy DeSoto and John Gage shouldered into their turnout coats as they rallied around Captain Hank Stanley for their assignment.

“LA, Engine 51. We have a fully involved two-story frame house. Continue first alarm assignment. Engine 51 out two hours.” Captain Hank Stanley advised into the mic.

“Chet! Marco! Grab an inch and a half and hit the east end. Roy, John, grab another inch and a half around back. Watch for spot fires.” Hank commanded.

Everyone ran to the hose bed of the engine to grab their lines. Mike Stoker had the feeder line run from the hydrant already, charged to the clamp, making the final connection to the engine. As Mike went to release the clamp, the guys made their line connections to the engine and ran to the burning home. Mike watched the hose crews carefully, charging their lines the moment the guys were ready.

A chair flying out of a second story window on the west end of the house caught Captain Stanley’s attention. A man yelling for help immediately followed. “HT51, this is Engine 51.”

“HT51,” Roy answered.

“We have a victim on the west end, second story window. I need you two back here.” Hank collapsed the antenna on the handy-talkie, dropping the radio into his turnout pocket and ran to get the ladder off the engine.

“10-4, Cap,” squawked Hank’s pocket.

Johnny and Roy ran to the front of the house where Hank and Mike had just leaned a ladder to the window. Hank Stanley anchored the ladder as Johnny climbed towards the frantic man.

Smoke billowed out of the broken window as Johnny wiped away the remaining glass from the window frame with gloved hands. “Everything is going to be okay. We’ll get you down.” Johnny noticed that the man’s hands and forearms were burned. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No,” the man coughed out. He looked down at his hands and arms as if just noticing his injury.

“Let me help you down, so we can take care those,” Johnny indicated the man’s reddened hands and arms. “Here, lean over my shoulder,” Johnny instructed.

“No!” the man cried between coughs, giving Johnny a wild-eyed look. His mouth was moving, as if speaking, but all that came out was more coughing. He appeared disoriented; taking a step away from the window, then back, nearly turning in circles.

“We have to get you out of here now,” Johnny insisted. He put one leg through the window and grabbed the man’s shoulders, steering him to the ladder. The man twisted and turned in Johnny’s grasp. “Calm down, man. It’ll be okay. I’m right here, I won’t let you fall.” Coughing spasms shook the man’s body, until he collapsed into Johnny’s grasp. Johnny struggled with the now unconscious man, getting him across his shoulders as quickly as possible.

The man started to come around, and Johnny felt him tense across his shoulders, so he clamped his hands down hard on the ladder rails. “Hey, calm down. We’re almost down now. Everything is all right,” Johnny assured him. The man swung his feet from Johnny’s shoulders, pushed on Johnny’s head, and tried to climb over the paramedic. “Roy!” Johnny gasped, as he tried to get his head out from between the ladder rungs.

Roy climbed the ladder and grabbed the man’s legs and pulled him onto Johnny’s back. The frantic man, screaming hoarsely, threw his arms around Johnny’s neck to stop his backwards movement. “Roy!” Johnny had to gasp again; his head was now free from the ladder, but his airway was quickly being closed off. The man’s thrashing toppled him and Johnny off the left side of the ladder. Hank quickly threw all his weight on the opposite side of the ladder to keep it from tilting and throwing Roy off as well. Johnny grabbed a rung with both hands, the frantic victim still around his neck. Roy quickly climbed up and leaned over to pry the man’s arms from around Johnny’s neck, trying not to irritate the man’s burns any more than necessary. Several firefighters from 60s were there to help lower the man to the ground; it took all of them to hold him there while Johnny dropped the remaining five feet to the ground, gasping grateful gulps of air. Roy climbed down and ran to the squad to get a backboard.

“My baby, she’s still in there!” the man cried, having calmed down enough to be understood. “Oh, God, please get her out. She’s only six months old!”

Johnny knelt down next to the man. “Where is she?” he asked, his voice a little raspy.

“Bedroom...” the man pointed to the west end of the house as another coughing spasm shook him.

Johnny stood, gave an anxious glance at Hank.

“Make it quick, Pal.” *14s ventilating the roof should buy enough time.* Hank eyed the smoky burning building warily as Johnny retrieved his SCBA and climbed the ladder.

Johnny entered a long hallway extending the length of the west end of the house. The smoke was extremely dense, despite the broken window and a ventilation hole now in the roof. He dropped to his hands and knees to regain some visibility and started down the hallway. Right side door, bathroom; clear. Right side door again, linen closet; clear. The heat radiating off the floor worried him. *This feels like it could flash over any time!*

A window-shattering blast shook the first floor of the house as dense smoke and heat flashed into an explosive fireball. Upstairs, Johnny stood to enter a door on the left side of the hallway when

the downstairs blast carried him towards the door. He tucked his shoulder as he impacted the old wooden door; pain flashed through his shoulder and head, and then everything went dark.

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Roy glanced up from the victim after the blast, eyeing the west end of the building where Johnny was headed to rescue the baby. *No involvement showing yet*, he sighed to himself. He saw Hank help Chet and Marco up from their knees, directing their spray pattern; then forced his attention back to his patient, securing the IV with extra tape.

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Johnny was dazed for only a couple of seconds. “Damn...” he said, shaking his head to clear it. He looked around before getting up; he was now lying just inside a room, instead of the hall. He twisted around to look behind him and saw the door was no longer on its hinges; looking down, he saw it beneath him. *Better hurry, the heat and smoke are really building up in here!* He shook his head again and peered into the smoky room. The outline of a crib appeared ghostly against the far wall. Johnny pushed himself up, a twinge of pain shooting through his left shoulder, and rushed to the crib. He found a limp and virtually lifeless baby girl, still in her little pink one-piece pajamas. He pulled off his right glove to palpate a brachial pulse. He didn’t realize he’d held his breath until he let it out when he felt a weak pulse. Johnny then placed his hand on her tiny chest, but detected no movement. He immediately scooped her up, took a deep breath, removed his mask, and puffed two quick breaths in the baby’s nose and mouth. He continued breathing for the infant girl, snagged a pink plaid blanket from between the crib rails to cover her as he broke the glass from her window with his helmet. As he cradled her in the crook of his left arm, his injured left shoulder jabbed him with sharp fingers of pain. Johnny quickly cleared the remaining glass from the window with the sleeve of his turnout coat.

Johnny leaned out the window into the relatively fresh air, continuing to breathe for the baby. Chet and Marco were still down on the east end of the building. “Hey! Guys! Hey, anyone, over here!” His raspy voice didn’t carry over the raging fire below him. He could feel the heat building in the room behind him. Stealing a quick glance behind him, he swallowed hard at the closeness of the encroaching fire. *We’re going to have to jump for it, little lady.* He quickly and carefully, shrugged out of his SCBA, not disrupting his respiration effort on the baby; impulsively setting the discarded air tank up right against the wall below the window. Johnny tucked the pink plaid blanket snugly around the baby, hugging her close against his body. *Quit stalling and get it over with.* He closed his eyes for the briefest of moments, trying to find the resolve to jump to safety. What he saw when he opened his eyes made a smile spread across his face.

Mike Stoker stood at the bottom of the window. “Johnny,” he yelled, and positioned himself to catch the precious bundle. From his station at the engine, Mike had seen movement at the far west second floor window; a cold chill ran down his back, putting his feet in motion before he had time to even think about it.

Johnny let the baby girl slip from his hands. Mike skillfully caught the baby, swinging down to one knee to avoid jarring the her too much.

“Mike,” Johnny yelled hoarsely. “Respiratory arrest!”

Mike unbundled the baby's head and immediately started breathing for the baby girl, taking a second to make sure her chest rose with his puffs of air, then jogged for the squad.

Johnny hesitated a moment as he stepped up on the windowsill. A rumble behind him overwhelmed his fear of jumping; he took flight, the flash blast at his back. When his feet contacted the ground, he attempted a standard tuck-and-roll maneuver, but the blast knocked him off balance, creating a painful drop-and-flop result.

Chet and Marco came running with their hose when the second flash blast caught their attention - in time to see Johnny drop to the ground with a twisting roll, turnout coat smoldering. After thoroughly dousing the paramedic, they turned the hose to the window that Johnny had just vacated; flames were now shooting out of it.

Captain Stanley jogged over to his downed paramedic. "Gage, what have you done now..." he mumbled to himself.

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Roy started a MS injection into the IV of the burn patient as the second flash blast rocked the house. As soon as he finished the injection, Roy stood and surveyed the scene with a worried eye; alarm set in as he saw Chet and Marco hosing flames at the west end of the building. He caught a glimpse of what looked like Johnny standing near Chet and Marco, and then Mike blocked his view carrying and breathing for the rescued baby. Roy took the baby from Mike and returned to the equipment, not seeing Johnny crumple to the ground.

Roy puffed two more breaths into the baby. Finally, her chest heaved and she coughed a breath on her own, followed by more coughing and gagging. Roy turned her over, the palm of his hand cradling her heaving chest as she spit up her smoky congestion. He quickly cleared her mouth and gave her high flow oxygen, the infant mask dwarfing her tiny, pale face.

Squad 36 screeched to a stop next to 51s. The two occupants hurried to where Roy knelt between the two fire victims. Bob Anderson immediately joined Roy with the infant; Jim Clarke knelt next to the father.

"What ya got, Roy?" Bob asked, eyeing the pale infant closely.

Roy glanced up. "Smoke inhalation. Just got her breathing on her own." Roy nodded in the direction of the bio phone. "Can you get on the horn with Rampart for me?"

"Sure thing, Roy," Bob replied.

"Hey, Roy, is he the father?" Jim called, indicating the victim beside him. The man was strapped to a backboard, both arms bandaged. Lactated Ringers dripped through an IV in his external jugular, and his mouth and nose covered with a mask delivering high flow oxygen.

"Yeah," Roy answered without looking up from his tiny patient. He sighed relief as the distant wail of a siren increased in volume; the ambulance just turned the corner down the street.

“Looks like your daughter’s going to be okay,” Jim told the father, but noticed a worried look in the man’s eyes. Jim craned to see the little victim better, then leaned directly over the man’s face. “No burns, she looks perfect. She’s just inhaled a little smoke - so don’t worry. She’s in the best hands possible.” The father visibly relaxed and Jim lightly checked him over as the ambulance backed up to the curb. He moistened the burn bandages and checked the EJ IV site on the right side of the man’s neck, no bruising or swelling detected under the securing tape. *Roy does good work.*

“You get that, Roy?” Bob asked as he put the bio phone handset in its cradle.

“Yeah. Thanks, Bob. She’s almost ready for transport.”

Bob looked around at the scattered firefighters, “Where’s Johnny, Roy?”

Roy jerked his head up and quickly looked around. “Um, I don’t really know, Bob. I thought I saw him standing over by Chet and Marco a little while ago.” A nagging feeling that Roy had kept at bay by the immediate needs of the victims now pulled his mouth into a frown.

“Jim,” Bob tapped his partner’s shoulder. When Jim looked up at him, he pointed to a group of firefighters by the far west end of the house. “You better see what’s going on.” Jim grabbed their drug box and jogged towards the knot of firemen.

Roy and Bob loaded the father into the ambulance, his daughter on the stretcher right next to him. “I’ve got these two, Roy. Looks like Jim may need your help,” Bob said, glancing down at the growing gathering of firefighters. Roy followed Bob’s gaze. “Johnny... Thanks, Bob.” Roy latched the ambulance doors and gave them two sharp whacks, sending the ambulance on its way. *On my way, Johnny.*

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Cold fire hose water roused Johnny from a dazed blackness. *Baby... where’s the baby...* Johnny’s disoriented mind collected a recent memory to carry into the returning consciousness, choosing to lose track of present happenings. *Got to find the baby...* He staggered to his feet, one leg refused to cooperate and he felt grass on the side of his face again. More pain began to register in his clearing mind, more recent memories returned to their proper timeline. Johnny closed his eyes momentarily to let his mind sort things out.

“John? Gage? Do you hear me?” Hank asked, leaning over and seeing Johnny’s eyes closed. The paramedic’s eyes flew open, but Hank could see confusion lurking behind them. “Just lay still, Pal. I’ll get someone over here to check you out.” Hank stood, taking out his handy-talkie. “LA, Engine 51. We have a Code I at our location, request a second ambulance.”

“10-4, Engine 51,” Sam Lanier responded in his usual monotones.

Captain Williamson, with 60s, joined Hank, along with a couple of his men. Jake Thomas knelt down beside Johnny, talking to him quietly. Hank looked towards the squads, relieved to see Jim from 36s coming this way. Hank knelt down again, placing a steadying hand on Johnny’s shoulder, but catching Jake’s eyes.

Jake nodded quickly at Captain Stanley's questioning eyes. "He's oriented to place and time, Cap." Hank nodded his thanks to Jake and both men moved out of the way to let Jim work with Johnny.

Chet and Marco retired their hose and joined their Captain; 14s was handling the mop up duties inside the house. "How is he, Cap?"

"Don't really know yet. Doesn't look too bad, though. Do you guys know what happened?"

Chet smirked. "Yeah, Cap. He jumped out the window up there," Chet indicated the broken out second story window.

Hank frowned. The flash blasts kept him busy directing the hose crews, he felt a twinge of guilt for not having help available for his paramedic crew. *It all happens so fast.*

Jim looked up at the group of concerned firefighters gathered around their injured comrade. "I need O2 and an ankle splint. We should put him on a backboard." Several volunteers ran to the squads to gather the needed equipment.

Roy met the firefighter 'gofers' halfway to where Johnny lay. He pulled Chet out of the group. "What's up?"

"Jim wants some equipment; O2, splint, and backboard," Chet shrugged and trotted off to do his bidding.

Roy turned and quickened his pace. *Backboard? I sure hope that's a precaution.*

"Hey, Pal," Roy said, squatting down by Johnny. Johnny still lay on his right side in the grass; his left arm secured across his chest, c-collar around his neck, and his right shoe was off with his pant leg cut to the knee.

"Roy... the baby..." Johnny rasped.

Roy bent down so he could look Johnny eye-to-eye. "She's going to be fine. She's breathing on her own. You just relax, okay?"

"Yeah, right..." Johnny managed a classic crooked grin for his partner.

The equipment arrived and Roy took the O2 and placed the mask over Johnny's nose and mouth. "Time to be quiet now, Johnny."

Johnny started a retort, but a glare from Roy changed his mind.

“10-4, Rampart,” Jim acknowledged the instructions from Dr. Early. He turned back to his patient. “Johnny. We’re going to put you on the board now. Let us do all the work; you just relax. Okay?”

Johnny nodded, then felt several pairs of hands roll him onto the backboard. Although he tried not to, a groan escaped as his shoulder protested the change of position. He winced painfully as Roy and Jim splint his ankle. *I’m definitely not jumping out of windows anymore.*

“Okay, guys. Let’s get him out of here,” Hank said, as the second ambulance arrived.

Roy and Jim loaded Johnny on the gurney. As they hefted Johnny into the ambulance, Jim gave Roy a quick look. “Go ahead, Jim. I’ll follow in the squad. I think he’s going to be okay.”

“Okay, Roy. Meet you at Rampart. I’ll take good care of him.”

“I know you will, Jim. Johnny, don’t give Jim any trouble.” Johnny mumbled something that Roy couldn’t make out. Roy shut the ambulance doors, giving them a strong double pat. The driver took the cue and the ambulance roared off.

Roy stopped by Captain Stanley. “There’s something about him and baby girls.” Roy said, shaking his head.

“I think the operative word there is ‘girl’,” Hank snorted. Then more seriously, “I got real worried after the first floor flashed.”

“I know what you mean. He wasn’t in there but, what... three minutes. Sometimes, that seems like an eternity.”

Hank put his hand on Roy’s shoulder. “Pal, in this business, that IS an eternity.” He nodded to the squad. “Get going. We’re just about done here.”

Roy gave his Captain a grateful look. “Thanks.”

Roy was putting the equipment back in the squad when Chet Kelly came up to him.

“How’s Johnny?” Roy noted the concern in Chet’s voice. He turned to face his crewmate.

“He’ll be okay. Bruised shoulder and sprained ankle, I think. Nothing serious.”

“Man, that’s great. I never saw anyone fly out of a window like that. I swear he’s part cat.”

Chet handed Roy Johnny’s blackened and wet turnout coat. Roy placed it on the seat beside him and then sped off to Rampart - to make sure what he had just told Chet wasn’t a lie.

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Johnny Gage adjusted his position in the hospital bed, letting the ice packs slip off his ankle. *Damn things freeze me to death!* Everything was sore now, but there was a smile on his face. Things had turned out pretty well, this time.

Hank Stanley stood amidst his crew. “I just want to tell you guys that I’m proud of the job you did out there today. The house was lost, but the father and daughter are going to be fine.”

“Glad to hear they’re both going to be okay,” Roy said.

“I think we should give Mike the Golden Glove award,” Chet quipped.

“More like the golden sneaker award,” Marco amended. “I’ve never seen him move that fast.”

“Hey, guys,” Mike defended himself. “Johnny doesn’t toss girls away too often, I had to catch her.” There was a round of laughter.

“Well, guys...” Hank started, but was interrupted as Dr. Brackett entered the room.

The guys fell silent, glancing between Johnny and the doctor.

Kel Brackett put his hands out in a placating gesture. “I’m not here to spoil the party, guys.” He walked over by Johnny’s bed. Johnny sank down into the bed, expecting to be poked and prodded some more. Kel grabbed the TV remote and selected a specific channel. “A buddy of mine at Channel 26 told me you guys were going to be on the six o’clock news. They had a crew at the fire this afternoon.”

Hank nodded his head; he had given a brief statement to the press as they were finishing up at the scene.

Chet perked up. “I hope they got my good side,” he said, primping his hair.

Marco gave him a shove. “Of course they did, Chet, they were behind us.”

Chet gave him a glare as the room erupted in laughter again.

The room was quiet again as the weatherman finished and the anchorman started talking about the house fire that afternoon. “These images are quite graphic, viewer discretion is advised. Please note that no one was seriously injured in this incident, not the baby girl, her father, or any of the firefighters.”

As the images filled up the TV screen, all eyes were glued to it. The guys started their own dialogue to the story, drowning out the scene reporter. No one noticed Dixie McCall step in the room to watch the TV, as well as the guys. The first scenes were of flames engulfing the east end of the house, Chet and Marco battling the blaze valiantly.

Chet stood and gave a pitiable imitation of a posing body builder.

“Come on Chet, sit down. I can’t see,” Marco implored, and then pulled Chet back into his chair.

The room sobered as the TV showed the baby’s father at the window. The guys were amazed at how fast Hank and Mike got the ladder to the window, and Johnny and Roy were there to get him. It was literally within the blink of an eye, well, maybe a couple of blinks. They watched as TV Johnny wrestled with the victim at the top of the ladder, finally slinging the victim in a fireman’s carry, then the wrestling match half way down the ladder.

“He was a fighter, huh, Johnny?” Marco asked.

“Yeah. Guess he didn’t want to leave his daughter, but I didn’t know that then.” Johnny answered, as the TV showed him toppling off the ladder with the victim hanging from his neck.

The scene switched to Johnny going back into the burning house. “See there, out that first story window? See the smoke change a little bit? Here it comes,” Hank narrated. As if on cue, the flash blast shook the building. TV Chet and Marco were knocked to their knees, hose still trained on the fire.

“Wow. That looks pretty awesome when you see the whole thing.” Chet mused.

“It’s pretty awesome when you’re right above it, too,” Johnny added with a wince of pain, remembered and real.

The TV scene focused on the far west second story window, which had Johnny leaning out of it, holding the baby. The room was deathly quiet again. Dixie’s hand went to her mouth in anxious anticipation as the scene played on the TV screen.

Cheers and clapping filled the room when the TV Mike Stoker sprinted in and caught the baby from Johnny. There was silence again as they watched Johnny leave the window nearly the same instant as the second flash blast.

“Ouch!” Johnny exclaimed, as he watched his TV self land awkwardly, roll to a stop, face down, with coat smoldering.

Brackett looked down at Johnny, suppressing a smile and shaking his head. *Only Johnny!*

“Smooth, Gage. Real smooth,” Chet teased. Johnny shot a glare at him.

“I don’t remember that,” Johnny mumbled, as his TV-self jumped up after being hosed off, and then fell to the ground again.

“You looked pretty much out of it,” Marco added sympathetically.

The TV showed an ambulance pulling away, and then switched over to the reporter talking about the brave firefighters risking their lives for others.

Hank stood again, glancing at his watch; their two hours out was over fifteen minutes ago now. “Well, guys...” he started again, as a full screen image of his face appeared on the TV.

“Sshhh! Quiet, Cap’s on TV,” Johnny announced.

All eyes returned to the TV screen.

“We were just doing our jobs. That’s how it goes sometimes. Excuse me, I have to finish up here,” TV Hank said.

“Is that all you said?” Chet asked. “What about us being such heroic firefighters, braving the flames of death...”

“Chet, shut up!” the rest of Station 51 said in unison.

“Time to go guys, we have a station to man. Roy, John’s replacement should be there by the time we get back.” Hank herded the firemen out the door, each giving Johnny a get-well tap on his good foot on the way out.

Roy stopped by Johnny’s bed. “I’ll be there in a minute, Cap.”

Dixie and Dr. Brackett left together, shaking their heads, muttering about crazy firefighters.

Johnny leaned back, stretching his tired muscles. “Sorry to stick you with a replacement. Do you know who it is?”

“Dwyer’s coming back in to finish your shift,” Roy shrugged. “Look, I’ll be here in the morning to pick you up, okay?”

“Dwyer’s a good guy.” Johnny’s eyelids started to slip closed. “I’ll be ready in the morning, can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Behave in here tonight and don’t go jumping out of any windows, either.” Roy wagged his finger at Johnny, as he would one of his kids.

“Okay, *Dad*. I think I’m going to sleep now.”

Roy shook his head, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

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It was three in the morning and Johnny tossed and turned in the hospital bed. There was something nagging at him that he just had to resolve. He swung his feet over the edge of the bed, slowly and gently, then stood up. His bandaged right ankle protested, but not enough to stop him. *Can’t roam around in this stupid gown, my work pants should be here somewhere.* Johnny

slipped into his cut and dirty pants, careful of his sprained ankle, slightly hindered by his bruised shoulder.

Johnny slowly opened his door and cautiously peered up and down the hall. *All clear.* He limped to the elevator, slipped in, and selected Pediatrics, one floor up. The elevator deposited him on a similar looking hallway. He limped to the duty desk. *Have to ask for directions, hope they let me see her.*

“May I help you?” a soft voice came from behind him.

“Um, yes,” Johnny said, spinning around. He caught himself on the desk to keep from falling. *That wasn't a smart move!*

“Are you all right? Hey, aren't you a firefighter from the news?” Amy Miller asked, putting an arm out to help steady him. Amy, recently out of nursing school, had not yet been introduced to the ‘Gage Charm’.

Johnny lit up his best grin. “Well, yeah. “I'm John. Johnny Gage,” he extended his right hand.

“Nice to meet you, Johnny Gage. I'm Amy Miller.” She took his proffered hand briefly.

“I wanted to see the baby girl. The last time I saw her, she wasn't breathing.” He lost his grin as he remembered their shared peril. “I had to drop her out of a window. I really need to know how she is doing.”

The compassion on the young nurse's face gave Johnny a glint of hope. “It's way past visiting hours. Plus, you aren't family.” She looked up and down the hallway, not unlike Johnny did downstairs. “But I think exceptions can be made for heroes. It's time for me to take another set of vitals on her anyway.” Amy looked up and down the hallway again, it was contagious; Johnny found himself peering for unseen dangers too. “Nurse Blevins should still be on rounds now,” Amy cautioned.

Johnny gave her a quizzical look. “Who's Nurse Blevins?”

Amy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “She's my supervisor and a walking rule book.”

Johnny frowned and shivered involuntarily. *Walking rulebook!* “I don't want to get you into trouble.”

Amy's face lightened. “Oh, I don't intend to.” She looked at Johnny's cut and dirty work pants, and made a face. *Don't need to take any unnecessary chances.* “Let's get you a pair of scrub pants first, though. You can change in the men's room down here.” She went and got the pants for him.

“Thanks,” he limped to the men's room.

“Can you get that okay?” she asked with genuine concern.

“Yeah. It’s not as bad as it looks. Just stiff and sore,” Johnny grinned a bit shyly.

“Much better,” she said as he made his way back to the desk. She got a plastic bag for his old pants and set them on a shelf behind the desk. “Wait here a minute.”

Amy turned the corner and saw Nurse Blevins leave one room and enter the third to the last room. *Not much time.* She grabbed a wheelchair returned to the duty desk.

“What’s that for,” Johnny asked, eyeing the wheelchair.

“You. We’re a little short on time.” Amy helped Johnny into the wheelchair, and then set off down the hall at a trot.

“Hey!” Johnny yelled as they sped toward a closed ward door. He extended his right arm to catch the blow of the door, closing his eyes at the same time. At the last possible second, Amy deftly swung the wheelchair around and backed into the dark wardroom. Johnny clutched at the right armrest of the wheelchair to keep from sliding out onto the floor at the sudden change of direction.

Amy tucked the wheelchair and passenger behind the curtain around an empty crib. “Over by the window,” she nodded to the only occupied crib in the room. She held her hand out to help Johnny out of the wheelchair.

Cautiously, Johnny accepted her assistance. Once standing on his own two feet, Johnny shot an irritable glare at Amy. “Where did you get your license for that thing?”

Amy shrugged and walked over to the crib with Johnny. “Kmart, of course,” she muttered. She felt Johnny’s glare, but didn’t look up in order to hide the grin on her face.

Johnny’s eyes were glued to the beautiful little girl sleeping in the hospital crib. He quietly leaned on the crib rail, watching her little chest rise and fall in rhythmic sleep breathing. It was one of the most beautiful sights he had seen in a long time. “What’s her name?” Johnny asked Amy in a whisper.

“Laura.”

“Well, little Laura, you sure are a sight for sore eyes.” Johnny took in every little blond curl and her rosy cheeks – gone was the pallor of earlier. Laura’s eyelids flitted in dream slumber, completely at rest; the ends of her little mouth twitched in a dream grin – completely melting Johnny’s heart. He placed one of his fingers against her soft hand. His eyes glistened as her little fingers grasped and held onto his finger.

Amy watched Johnny closely. She wiped at some moisture in her own eyes. “Would you like to hold her while I get her vitals?”

Johnny released the angelic grip from his finger. “Yeah. I’d like that,” he whispered.

Amy pulled a chair up for him, helped him ease into it. He made himself as comfortable as possible while Amy carefully lifted Laura from her crib. She eased the baby girl into Johnny’s cradling arms.

Johnny grinned. “She didn’t even wake up.” His smile faded. “She’s okay, isn’t she?”

“She’s fine, Johnny. She’s a baby that had a very intense day. It’s normal for her to sleep a lot after something like this. It’s good for her.” That brought back Johnny’s grin.

When Amy finished with the vitals, Johnny settled back in the chair, cradling little Laura. *I knew I was in trouble the moment I saw you, little girl. ‘No emotional involvement’ be damned!*

“Young lady,” he whispered to the sleeping Laura, “you’re gonna break some hearts.” He placed a feather-light kiss on her forehead. “You’re a shoo-in for Prom Queen.”

Amy finished with Laura’s chart, she had to wipe her eyes again as she listened to Firefighter Johnny Gage coo over little Laura. She also listened for any approaching footsteps since rounds would be over soon. She couldn’t resist this little reunion, healing was about people after all.

“Time’s up, Johnny,” Amy whispered as she gathered Laura from his arms. “You firefighters aren’t so tough.” Amy gently placed Laura back in her crib.

“Don’t you tell anyone that, it would ruin our reputation,” Johnny whispered back as Amy helped him out of the chair.

She grinned up at him, remembering the news coverage. “No one would believe me anyway.”

Johnny paused for one more peek at the peacefully sleeping Laura before settling into the wheelchair, knuckles clinched white on the armrest already. Johnny was surprised - the short ride to the elevator was quick, but uneventful.

“You gonna be okay now?” Amy asked as they reached the elevator.

“I’m okay now, Amy, really. I just needed to see her. She was so lifeless when I found her. I didn’t want to drop her...”

“That other firefighter caught her,” Amy reassured him.

Johnny looked up at Amy. “Yeah, he did.” *Thank you, Mike!*

“You get to your room, now. You need rest too. I have to get back.”

Johnny started to get out of the wheelchair, but Amy pressed him down again. “What?” he asked, turning around carefully. He saw the biggest, brutish nurse he had ever seen bearing down on them. Johnny eased back around and slunk down into the chair as far as possible.

“Be still and be quiet. I can handle her,” Amy whispered down at Johnny.

No problem there. Just keep her away from me!

“Miss Miller. What do you think you are doing?” thundered Nurse Blevins.

“Ma’am, this gentleman got off on the wrong floor. I’m just getting him back on the elevator.”

Nurse Blevins leaned around Amy to get a better look at the ‘gentleman’ and noticed Johnny’s bandaged right foot and ankle. “Humph. Better see that he gets back where he belongs, Nurse. Can’t have injured people lurking in the hallways at this hour.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Amy punched the down button and hustled the wheelchair into the elevator as quickly as possible. Johnny reached out and pressed the button for the next floor down.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Johnny pulled himself out of the wheelchair and hopped away from it. He leaned against the elevator wall, carefully keeping his left arm still to ease his now throbbing shoulder. *Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.*

“Johnny, please sit back down. You shouldn’t be up.” Amy gestured towards the wheelchair.

“Oh, no. No way am I getting back in that thing. I’m fine.” Johnny inched further away from the wheelchair and its maniacal driver.

The doors opened and Johnny limped out while Amy held the elevator doors. “Thanks, Amy. Really.”

Amy pushed the wheelchair out into the hall and parked it next to the elevator. She caught up to Johnny and took his right elbow. “Nurse Blevins told me to make sure you get where you belong. She’s my super, I have to do what she says. Which room?”

“Third door on the left,” he motioned down the hall.

Amy helped Johnny swing his legs into the bed and pulled the blanket over him. “There. You think you can get some rest now?”

“Yeah. Amy, I know you bent a lot of rules to let me see Laura. I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I saw what you did to get her out of that burning house. She’s lucky to be alive – you both are.”

Johnny snorted and rubbed his bruised shoulder. “Just cut my escape a little too close this time,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

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At the nurse’s station Millie and her friend Karen returned to the duty desk after a short coffee break.

“Time to start rounds again,” Karen stated, reaching for the stack of charts.

Millie raced around the front of the desk to reach the charts first. “I’ll take that one,” she said with a wide grin. “I’ve finally decided on which restaurant I want to go to this weekend.”

Karen gave her friend a wink. “Do you think he’ll be up to all that?”

Millie gave Karen an exaggerated wink in reply. “Oh, I’ll take good care of him.” She headed off to the third door up from the elevator, on the left.

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Amy tucked the blanket carefully around Johnny’s shoulder, jumping slightly as the door swung open.

Millie took in the young nurse hovering over Johnny, and immediately jumped to the obvious, albeit unfounded, conclusions. “John Gage,” she grated through clinched teeth, “you are...I can’t believe...I never want to see you again!” She turned and stomped out of the room, leaving an icy breeze in her wake.

Johnny had rose to one elbow to attempt an explanation, but never got in a word. He plopped his head back on the pillow. “Great...” he whispered, closing his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Johnny,” Amy said as she shut off the light above the bed.

“Don’t worry about it. I guess I’ll be getting plenty of rest this weekend now.”

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Karen looked up from the desk to see Millie storming towards her. Millie slammed the chart on the desk in anger and growled, “Men!” then stomped off to the ladies room.

Karen looked up again - in time to see a young nurse leave Johnny’s room and disappear in the elevator. She rolled her eyes. “Gage...” she whispered with icy hostility.

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Amy settled in back at her duty desk to do some paperwork. She turned to get another form and saw the plastic bag containing Johnny’s work pants. She picked it up and set it next to her purse under the desk. She would have to make sure those got back to their rightful owner. She returned to her paperwork with a smile on her face.

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“The swelling really hasn’t gone down any, if anything, it’s worse.” Dr. Early stood up from examining Johnny’s ankle. “Dix, wrap it again and get a cane.”

“A cane?” Johnny whined.

Joe Early gave his patient a warning look. “Yes, a cane. I want you to use it and come back in a couple of days to let me check that ankle again. Now, how’s that shoulder?”

“It’s fine, Doc,” Johnny said petulantly.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Lift your arm straight out as far as you can.” Joe demonstrated, lifting his right arm out straight at the shoulder.

Smirking, Johnny easily lifted his right arm out straight too.

Joe rolled his eyes and sighed. “The injured one, Johnny. I don’t need any comedians this early in the morning.”

Johnny concentrated on raising his left arm, reaching a painful wall short of the desired height, but a respectable effort nonetheless.

“That’s good, Johnny. Now, look up here.” Joe indicated a point over his left shoulder and checked Johnny’s pupils. “Any dizziness or nausea?”

“Nope,” Johnny blinked after the bright light.

“How about headaches?”

Johnny squinted his eyes. “A little, nothing to speak of really.”

Joe Early stepped back from his patient, crossed his arms. “Okay, you don’t need to be taking up space here, but I want to see you on Friday. If the swelling is down then, I’ll see about releasing you for duty.”

“Great. I’m sure this thing will be okay by Friday,” Johnny indicated his freshly wrapped ankle. *Wouldn’t be in trouble if I wasn’t running around half the night,* Johnny chided himself. *But it was worth it.*

Joe eyed the paramedic suspiciously. “Well, we’ll see...” He made a few notes in the chart, then pulled the door open to find Roy standing in the doorway.

“All done, Doc?” Roy asked.

“He’s all yours, Roy.” Joe gave Roy a consoling glance before going down the hall to his next patient.

Roy entered the room to find Johnny pacing the room with a cane, Dixie judging his caning technique. “Looking pretty good there, Johnny.” He tossed a paper bag on the bed. “There are the clothes from your locker.”

“Great. Thanks. I’ll be right back.” Johnny grabbed the bag off the bed and hobbled to the bathroom to change.

“I’d better get back to the desk,” Dixie said, passing Roy. She stopped when she noticed the puzzled look on Roy’s face. “Roy?”

“Uh, Dix, since when are patients given scrub pants to wear?”

Dixie held up her hands, surrendering. “They aren’t. I didn’t ask and probably don’t want to know.” She opened the door, then turned back. “Roy...if you find out, let me know.”

“I’ll do that, Dix. See ya later,” Roy answered as Dixie disappeared into the hall. Roy leaned against the bed, waiting on his partner.

The door to Johnny’s room cracked open far enough for the head of a young lady to peer through. Upon seeing Roy, the young eyes widened. “I’m sorry, I must have the wrong room.” The head disappeared and the door slipped closed.

Roy opened the door a second later and peered up and down the hall. *I’m sure you have the right room, young lady. Johnny, what have you been up to?* Roy saw her down the hall studying another door, then glancing back to Johnny’s door. Roy motioned her to come back. “Who are you looking for?” he asked as she made her way back.

“Johnny Gage. The firefighter that rescued the baby,” Amy Miller said shyly.

*I thought so!* “This is his room, Miss. He’s changing his clothes now, he’s been released.”

“Oh. That’s great.” She held out a plastic bag to Roy. “Could you give this to Johnny for me? I have to run to class. It’s his pants.”

Roy took the bag, a confused look on his face. *Do I really want to know?*

“Thanks. Gotta run.” Amy started down the hall, then turned. “Oh, tell him that Amy wishes him well.” With that, she continued down the hall to the elevator, disappearing behind its doors.

Roy returned to the room to find Johnny emerging from the bathroom dressed in his street clothes, with the exception of his right shoe. Roy tossed the plastic bag on the bed. “Amy returned your pants,” he said suspiciously.

“Oh, great. I forgot all about them.” Johnny opened the bag and slipped his shoe inside with the work pants. “You about ready... Roy?” Johnny looked up to find Roy staring, hands on hips, between Johnny and the bag.

“Huh? These are my work pants...” Johnny started.

“You’re absolutely incorrigible, Johnny,” Roy chastised.

Johnny set the bag on the bed; disbelief and hurt etched on his face. “Roy, I couldn’t go around in that gown, these were all I had. I just had to see Laura...”

“I thought her name was Amy.”

“What? Roy, no! I didn’t go see Amy, the nurse. I went to see Laura, the baby from the fire. Amy was on duty and let me in to see Laura, but not in these.” Johnny shook the bag at Roy, whose condescending look was replaced with one of understanding and a hint of apology. “She got the scrub pants for me, even kept Nurse Blevins away from me.” Johnny shivered at the thought of Nurse Blevins. *Walking rulebook!* He leaned heavily on the edge of the bed and looked up at his partner. “Laura is okay. She’s breathing fine – sleeping like a baby.” A crooked grin crept across Johnny’s face.

Roy looked down, shuffling his feet. “Sorry... I just thought... She did have your pants...”

Johnny laughed at his partner’s assumptions. *You’re not the first one to go there*, he thought as he remembered Millie coldly stomping out of the room earlier. “I guess that was a bit odd...”

Roy laughed now. “Yes, it was. Hey, I saw the baby’s father this morning. He’s doing okay, too. Second degree burns. He saw the news report and apologized for knocking you off the ladder. He also sent his thanks for getting his daughter out.”

“Glad to hear he’s going to be okay. Have they located the mother? Those burns he has are going to take some time to heal, he won’t be able to take care of Laura.”

Roy looked down at his shoes again. “He said it’s just him and Laura.” Roy made eye contact with Johnny. “His wife died a couple of months ago, auto accident – drunk driver. I think he mentioned his wife’s sister coming to get the baby tomorrow.”

Johnny shook his head. *So senseless!* He pulled himself off the bed with the assistance of the cane and made for the door. “Man, that’s rough. I knew Laura was special the moment I saw her.”

Roy pulled the door open for them. “Let’s go home, Junior.”

Johnny sighed and caned his way out the door. “Right on, Pally.”

*Many, many thanks to the most patient and thorough beta readers ever – Pat, Mel, and Valerie.*