

Reticent

An Emergency! Story by [Sheryl Tovar and Alice Furey](#)

The A-shift crew of Station 51 stood in line for their morning inspection. Captain Stanley paced in front of them, clipboard in hand, detailing his list of duties. John Gage and Chet Kelly stood side by side, nudging each other when they thought the captain wasn't looking.

"Okay men, we have a lot of hose out there with our names on it...let's get busy," Stanley directed. As the men broke from the line, Hank put a hand up, halting Gage and Kelly in their tracks. "One more thing! John, you can help Chester B. in the latrine, Pal."

"Wha-?" John started. "Cap! What did I do?"

Hank raised a disapproving eyebrow at the young paramedic. "I guess you'd rather do it yourself? That's fine with me, John," Hank stated, slightly amused. "Anything else?"

"No, sir," John grumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Chet stood beside the captain with a gleeful look on his face. "So, that means I don't have latrine duty, Cap?"

"No Pal; I have bigger and better things in store for you," Hank revealed cheerfully. He put an arm across Chet's shoulders and steered him toward the back doors.

Chet smiled and wiggled his eyebrows as they passed the disgruntled, dark-haired paramedic.

Johnny rolled his eyes and stalked off in search of his partner.

<><><><><>

"Man! I don't believe it! It's just not fair!" Johnny complained to his partner, Roy.

"Well, maybe now you'll know when to keep your mouth shut - Junior!" Roy chided, with a grin. *I doubt it though.* He continued rearranging the contents of his locker, pausing for a moment to glance at his partner who sat morosely on the bench.

Johnny's attention wavered somewhere between Roy and the examination of his thumbnail. "It's not fair that Chet got out of it and I'm stuck doing it myself!"

"I wouldn't let it bother you; I have the feeling Chet didn't get out of much," Roy said as he returned to straightening his locker. "Johnny, why don't you get started checking the inventory in the squad? I'll be out in a minute."

"Yeah, okay." He sat there a moment longer, then sighed dramatically and got up. "I can tell it's gonna be one of those days."

Roy chuckled to himself. *If not... I'm sure you'll make it one of those days!*

<><><><><>

By the time Roy exited the locker room, John had finished testing the bio-phone and was in the middle of inventorying the drug box. "We should probably stop at Rampart and pick up some Ringer's."

"Are we out?" asked Roy, concerned.

"Nah, we're short though. We could use some MS too."

"Okay, we'll head over there as soon as we're finished."

The klaxons sounded. ***"Station 51, station 36, structure fire..."***

The paramedics hurriedly returned the equipment to the allotted compartments and got into their vehicle. Roy started the squad as Captain Stanley handed them the slip of paper with the address on it. Johnny jotted the run time on the paper as the rest of the crew hustled to the engine. Siren's blaring, both vehicle's pulled into the morning traffic.

<><><><><>

The squad and engine stopped in front of an old grocery market. Flames were visible through several windows, threatening to jump the narrow alley separating the market from the rest of the dilapidated, mostly vacant, storefronts on the block.

"Man, this could be a bad one!" Johnny commented as he put his turnout coat on.

"Yeah, this whole block could go up," agreed Roy, also pulling his coat on.

The two of them, headed immediately over to Captain Stanley, who was speaking with the captain of 36's and a police officer.

Hank turned to his paramedics. "They aren't sure if anyone is inside. The building was condemned, but Scotty here," Hank gestured to the police officer, "says that vagrants are known to stay there from time to time. You two better do a quick search." Hank looked at the flames rapidly consuming the building. "And I do mean quick!"

"You got it, Cap," Roy affirmed. "Come on, Johnny; let's move it." He tugged at John's elbow and they ran back to get their SCBA.

"Kelly! Lopez!" Stanley shouted. "Grab a line! Gage and DeSoto are going to do a quick sweep; I need you to cover them!"

Roy and Johnny entered the smoke filled building, barely able to see in front of them. Johnny tried unsuccessfully to shake the growing feeling of dread that he'd had since they had arrived at the scene.

"Stay close!" He heard Roy's muffled shout through his breathing apparatus. Johnny had no intention of straying. The two paramedics headed into the building and began to search, paying careful attention to office

and supply areas. The smoke intensified and flames could be seen spreading across the ceiling.

"We have to get out of here," yelled Roy. Johnny nodded and turned to follow. Just then, he heard a cry. He paused, looking in the direction of the sound.

"Johnny!" called Roy.

"I think I heard something." John yelled, pointing in the opposite direction.

Roy hesitated but then followed his partner. "We better hurry!" The two men quickly set off to recheck a supply area.

Another fast search proved futile. Roy and Johnny met up at the door.

"Let's get out of here," said Roy, motioning his partner ahead. Johnny nodded and they hurried to the exit. They were about fifty feet from it when a large explosion ripped through the other end of the structure. The force of the blast caused the ceiling to collapse, trapping the two paramedics.

<>>><>><>

Outside the structure, Captain Stanley called in a second alarm. As he was putting away his handy-talkie, Marco rushed up to him. "CAP! Roy and John are still in there."

Captain Stanley swore softly, then began to bark orders. "Dwyer! Cunningham! Gage and DeSoto are still inside!" Hank watched as the paramedic's from 36's dropped their hose line, fastened their masks and rushed inside the building. He pulled out his H.T. and radioed for an ambulance.

<>>><>><>

A very long ten minutes passed before Charlie Dwyer and his partner, Bob Cunningham, carried one of the unconscious paramedic's from the building.

Chet ran over to them immediately. "Where's DeSoto?"

"He's trapped under a beam. We're going to need some help extricating him!" shouted Cunningham.

Captain Stanley raced toward the area where the two paramedics prepared to set their victim.

"Cap, we couldn't get to DeSoto," Dwyer shouted. "We're going to need the porta-power. He's wedged under a pretty good sized beam."

Hank nodded and grabbed Chet by the arm. "Kelly, get the porta-power," he ordered. He then spoke into the HT. "This is engine 51, I have a man trapped inside..."

Another loud boom resonated from the building, cutting Stanley off in mid sentence.

A moment later, Chet jogged up with the needed equipment.

"Engine 51, the structure is too unstable to attempt a rescue at this time, stand by," a voice crackled through

the HT.

Chet looked at the captain, hoping that he had somehow misunderstood that last statement.

<><><><><>

Chet studied Johnny's battered face as Dwyer and the ambulance attendants carefully set him on the gurney. *Man, he looks pretty bad!* "Is there anything I can do?" Chet offered, not entirely removing his attention from the building.

Dwyer nodded and quickly adjusted the Oxygen mask on the injured man's face. "Grab that drug box over there."

Captain Stanley hovered near the paramedics, who were quickly loading up their equipment. "Charlie?" he asked.

Dwyer glanced at the captain. "Give us a minute here, Cap."

Finally, Charlie looked at Captain Stanley. "Looks like Johnny has a concussion, his vitals seem good, though." He pointed to John's arm, which was bent at a strange angle. "Looks like he'll be sporting a cast for awhile. We'll know more when we get him to Rampart."

Hank nodded, worry evident in his features. He watched as Dwyer climbed into the ambulance. "Charlie?"

"Yeah, Cap?" Dwyer paused to look at Hank.

"Keep us informed, pal."

Dwyer nodded, and Hank shut the ambulance doors. He thumped the back of the door with his hand and made his way back to the building as the ambulance pulled away.

<><><><><>

John Gage drifted back to consciousness, aware of someone tugging at his clothes. *Dana? Donna? Wait!* A sudden antiseptic smell invaded his nostrils. *That isn't the twins' perfume!* As his senses slowly returned, the dull pounding in his head intensified and his left arm throbbed also. *Damn! Rampart!* He opened his eyes, wincing as sharp lances of pain filled his head. He squeezed his eyes shut and groaned.

"Johnny?" Dr. Early asked. "Are you with us?"

Slowly, Johnny peeled open one eye.

"Good." Dr. Early smiled.

"Wha..happened?"

"You were in a building when an explosion occurred. The ceiling collapsed on you. Do you remember any of it?"

Johnny frowned, trying to think. He vaguely remembered Roy yelling at him...*Roy!*

"Roy?" He tried to sit up, but Dr. Early reached out, gently pushing him back. He flinched at the pain shooting through his head and was suddenly overcome with nausea. As soon as he'd emptied the contents of his stomach, he laid back, rubbing his eyes with his good hand.

"Take it easy, Johnny." Dr. Early took a penlight and tested John's pupils.

Johnny winced, and reached to shield his eyes, but a nurse grabbed his hand.

"Just a sec. Okay?" said Early as flicked the offending light at the other pupil.

"Roy okay?" John asked.

Early frowned and returned the penlight to his front pocket. "The last we heard...they were still searching the building for him." Joe paused, finding it very difficult to continue. He glanced at the clock on the wall. *Five thirty p.m. It's going on eight hours.* Now, let's finish up with you and then I'll check on the progress again."

John sank back onto the treatment table. *Still searching? That was pretty vague, Doc!* A surge of panic ran through him. *Man, I gotta go back...*

"Can you tell me your name?"

"Doc, I gotta get back there." John's voice was raspy, barely above a whisper. He struggled again to get up.

"Johnny! Lie down." Early firmly pushed the anxious man back onto the exam table. "You're in no condition to go anywhere. They have all the man-power they need out there."

"But..." Johnny attempted to protest, but Early shook his head adamantly.

"Come on now; lie back and let me finish here. I promise, I'll go see if there's any news."

Reluctantly, John settled down. *I can't believe this!*

When he was done the neurological exam, Early smiled, trying to ease his patient's anxiety. "Well, you have a concussion and broken radius and ulna. All in all, I'd say you got off lucky...again. We'll be sending you to orthopedics in a few minutes and I'm afraid you'll be enjoying our company for the night. If you're good, we'll let you go home tomorrow."

Dr. Early handed Johnny's chart to the nurse. "You take it easy, John. Someone will be in shortly to give you something for the pain. I'll go check and see if there's any news on Roy. But, try not to worry, too much. He's got everyone pulling for him. The last I heard, there were a lot of off duty fire department personal at the sight, also." He squeezed John's shoulder. "They'll find him."

He opened the door and left the room. John sank back onto the treatment table, covering his eyes with his hand. *This is my fault! If anything happens...it will be all my fault. How could I make a mistake like that?*

A few minutes later, as promised, a nurse came in and administered the pain medication. "This will help you feel better," she promised.

I'd settle for not feeling anything! He didn't acknowledge the nurse. It wasn't long before the medication took effect and he began to drift. Johnny only vaguely remembered having the cast put on his arm.

<><><><><>

He was standing next to Roy, in a hallway at Rampart. Waiting...silently, for news on the condition of his friend. How can he survive these injuries? Wait a minute! This is Drew. He can't...die. He'll be okay, somehow. He has a wife and a little girl he has to be okay. Please let him be okay! The door is opening and Brackett is coming out, Johnny glances toward Roy. Hey? Where'd Roy go, he was just here a minute ago? Looking past the grim doctor he sees the object of his concern. A sheet is being pulled up to cover his head. He strains to get a look...he has to be sure...this can't be real! Wait...that's...Roy!

"Roy!" Johnny called out. He was startled awake by his own voice. He looked around the room. *Rampart*. He was sweating, breathing heavily, a feeling of dread encasing him. He couldn't remember what he had just dreamt.

The door opened. Johnny looked up to see Captain Stanley approaching.

Johnny frowned. "R-Roy?" he whispered.

Cap shook his head. "Haven't heard much, John. I know that Joanne's in Dr. Brackett's office speaking with him, right now. I'm sure we'll hear something soon."

John looked confused for a moment. *They found him? Nobody told me?* He closed his eyes, rubbing his face. "A-Alive?" he managed to ask.

Hank studied John's expression. *Nobody told him!* "John, I'm sorry. No one told you, did they? They found Roy, alive, but in pretty bad shape. He's been here for about an hour." He glanced at his watch. "We don't have any details yet though."

Johnny only nodded. *At least they found him, alive!*

Hank gave the dark haired paramedic a sympathetic smile. "Why don't you get some rest. We'll come back later, okay?" His smile turned into a worried frown, as Johnny only nodded and grimaced. *I expected a fight!* He watched Johnny close his eyes, then quietly left the room.

John slowly drifted off to sleep to a mantra of guilt. *It's all my fault...It's all my fault...It's...*

<><><><><>

An exhausted Kelly Brackett ran a hand through his hair as he took the X-ray's out and examined them once again. He stretched, trying to work the kinks out of his back and then he went to the waiting room to find Joanne DeSoto.

Joanne stood up anxiously as Kel approached. Anxiety masked her face until she saw the doctor smile.

"The X-rays and CT scan look encouraging," Kel said. "We've repaired the damage to his kidney. There shouldn't be any permanent effects. We can't put a cast on that leg until we get the swelling down some. All in all, we're hopeful for a full recovery."

"Thank God!" Joanne melted back into her chair, tears of relief streaming down her face.

"We still need to keep a close eye on him. He's not out of the woods yet."

"Thank you, Doctor." Joanne took a deep breath and stood up. "Can I see him?"

"Sure, Joanne." Kel smiled, patting her arm. "After we get him settled in his room I'll have the nurse bring you in."

"Thanks again, Dr. Brackett."

Kelly Brackett smiled. "My pleasure, Joanne. Couldn't let anything happen to one of my best paramedics."

Joanne took a shaky breath and sat down again to wait for the nurse.

<><><><><>

His hand was snagged on something. Johnny tried to pull it loose, but couldn't. Slowly, he opened his eyes to see what he was caught on. Dixie McCall was standing beside his bed. She smiled down at him as she held his right wrist taking his pulse.

"Hi, Dix." His voice was hoarse.

"Hi yourself. You know, John Gage, when some people want a little break, they go to places called motels for vacations!" Her smile widened.

He grinned. "Bet I wouldn't get the same level of service at one of them." He shifted in his bed, trying to sit up comfortably. Dixie grabbed the remote control and raised the bed a few inches, causing him to grimace and close his eyes tightly.

"Johnny? You okay?"

"Yeah," he answered softly. "H-head hurts. How's Roy?"

Dixie nodded. "He had us scared for awhile, but he made it through surgery just fine.

"S-surgery?" Johnny asked, concerned.

She patted his arm. "I'm sorry, I thought you knew. They had to do some repairs on one of his kidneys. He also had a fractured tibia and fibula on his right leg, some fractured ribs and a concussion." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

John sighed, his expression showing his worry. "Kidneys? Dix?"

"Johnny, worrying is not going to do you or Roy any good. The specialist thinks he'll make a full recovery."

Johnny coughed, trying to clear his throat. "Could I see him?"

Dixie frowned. "I think it would be better if we waited until tomorrow, John. You need to get some rest and he'll be sleeping most of the night.

Tomorrow, okay?"

She patted John's arm again and left the room. Frustrated, he flopped back on his pillow. *I did this to Roy.* John massaged his temples, trying to relieve the headache that was building once again. He closed his eyes, willing sleep to give him a respite from the guilt that he felt.

<><><><><>

"Roy? Roy?"

Roy heard someone softly calling his name. *I know that voice!*

"Wake up, honey. Open your eyes."

Joanne? He attempted to say her name out loud, but only a gasp of air escaped his throat.

"Roy? Come on now; time to wake up!"

He slowly opened his eyes and found himself staring into the relieved face of his wife. "Wha..?"

She shook her head. "It's okay. Remember the fire? The explosion?"

Oh yeah, the fire. He winced as he tried to shift in his bed.

"You're gonna be fine, honey. Dr. Brackett told me that you're going to be good as new." Her voice cracked with emotion as she finished.

He stared at her for a moment, as his body came alive with feeling. He realized that his back was killing him. Roy tried to think. There was something he needed to ask...about someone... "Johnny?"

Joanne smiled. "He's doing just fine. Dixie said he has a concussion and a broken arm, but should be able to go home tomorrow." She fussed with his pillow and reached for a cup of ice, offering him a few chunks. He nodded gratefully and took the ice.

"You mister, are gonna be a guest here a little longer than that. We were so worried. I'm just so thankful you're okay!"

He smiled weakly. "I'm really tired."

She nodded and leaned down to kiss his forehead. Then, she took his hand in hers and sat down in the chair beside the bed. She kissed his hand. "Get some sleep. The kids are with Mrs. Johnson, and I'm not going anywhere."

Still smiling, he closed his eyes.

<><><><><>

Joanne DeSoto awoke some time later, startled by the sudden activity going on around her. She jolted up in her chair. "Is everything okay?"

Dixie McCall touched her arm. "Everything's fine. Why don't we go get ourselves a cup of coffee?" Dixie guided her into the hallway. "They're just doing some routine checks."

Joanne nodded, slowly relaxing. "I must have fallen asleep. How's Johnny doing?"

Dixie smiled. "Well, you know Johnny. Just a little while ago, he was trying to charm me into letting him come up here to see his partner."

Joanne let out a small laugh. "Would it be okay...Can I see him? Just for a minute? I won't wake him," she assured.

"Sure, come on," Dixie smiled again and led her down the hall.

<><><><><>

Johnny stared at the ceiling. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get to sleep. *Why couldn't it have been me instead? If anything happens...what would Joanne do? The vivid memories of his friend Drew's death less than a month ago came flooding back to him. Pam is so lost and lonely without him! She probably always will be. How can I ever face Joanne? I can't do this...Not again. Please let him be okay!*

Johnny heard the door to his room open and closed his eyes. He heard soft footsteps walking toward his bed. He heard a sigh and realized it was Joanne. He kept his eyes shut, pretending to be asleep.

She stood there for several minutes, looking down at the dark-haired young man. For some reason, it made her feel better, just being able to see him and know that he was okay.

He felt her brush some hair back from his forehead and finally opened his eyes, staring up at her. He could tell that she'd been crying and a feeling of dread enveloped him. He saw in her eyes the same despair he had seen in Pam's. He blinked, afraid to even speak.

"Oh Johnny, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." She pulled her hand back.

"I-It's..." he coughed and tried to clear his throat. He tried to tell her it was okay, but he couldn't seem to get his voice to cooperate. He cleared his throat again and reached over to his tray for a glass of water. After taking a drink, he tried again. "H-How's R-Roy?"

She looked up at the ceiling and struggled to control her emotions. "Oh Johnny," her voice cracked.

Johnny struggled to sit up. "J-J-Joanne?"

She wiped her eyes and smiled wanly.

"R-R-oy?" he struggled to ask.

She gently pushed him back down. "He's still the same. Dr. Brackett thinks he'll be just fine though, so don't you worry." She hoped that soon, she could believe that statement herself. She straightened his covers. "I wasn't supposed to wake you. You better get back to sleep. I'll see you later, okay?" She bent over and placed

a kiss on Johnny's forehead and quickly made her way out of the room.

After a few frustrated moments, John made a decision. *I'm going up there to see him!*

He slowly stood up and reached for the robe hanging over the end of his bed. Ignoring the wave of dizziness that washed over him and the throbbing in his head. He somehow managed to get the IV bag off the pole with his good hand and he stuffed it into his robe pocket. Then he walked to the door and peered down the long hallway. *Coast looks clear.* He hurried toward the elevator, grabbing the wall once for balance as the world started to spin. He had just pushed the button when he heard a throat clear behind him.

"Ahhhem."

Damn! Dixie! He closed his eyes, partly out of frustration and partly to ward off the throbbing headache.

He turned around slowly to the intense glare of the head nurse of ER. She stood with her arms folded across her chest. He knew by her tenacious expression that any discussion was out of the question. He flashed her a small grin and headed back to his room, glancing behind once to confirm that she was still watching. *Oh brother!*

He climbed back into his bed, pulling the covers up under his chin and waited for the stern lecture he knew he would be getting at any moment.

Sure enough, a very short time later, he heard footsteps walk into his room and over to his bedside. He cracked open one eye to see Dixie, hands on her hips now, staring down at him. She didn't look pleased.

"John Gage! I'm surprised at you!" she reprimanded. "You, of all people, should know better than to go gallivanting around the hospital whenever you please!"

He shrugged, managing a weak smile and attempted to defend himself. "B-But..."

"No buts!" She cut him off. "Now if I catch you out of bed again, I just may have to put restraints on you," she threatened.

His mouth dropped open and he attempted again to protest. "D-D..."

"Don't you Dix - me, Johnny Gage!" Then she smiled and straightened his blanket. "Besides, you need to get some rest. You do want to get out of here in the morning, don't you?"

He sank back into his pillow and nodded his head, resigned. Then he yawned. He really did feel exhausted now.

"That's better," she told him. "Now get some sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

<><><><><>

Dr. Brackett glanced at the patient, then back to the chart. Frowning, he jotted something down on a chart and handed it to the nurse.

"What is it, Doc?" Joanne asked anxiously. She stood on the opposite side of the bed, across from Dr. Brackett.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about," he stated. "I was hoping his temperature would be...a little lower than this by now." _

"W-What does that mean?" Joanne asked, shakily.

"Well, it's probably nothing. Let's just hope he start to show some improvement soon." He gave her a sympathetic smile. "Try not to worry; he's getting the VIP treatment."

<><><><><>

Johnny nervously tapped his fingers on his tray, his untouched breakfast pushed aside. *Yuck! Who could eat that stuff?* He picked up the napkin and placed it over the bowl of oatmeal.

A pretty, blonde-haired nurse cheerfully entered his room. Surveying his breakfast tray, she gave him a stern but pleasant look. "I guess we didn't feel like eating much this morning?"

Johnny shook his head and looked away from the offending dish, barely noticing the pretty face.

"Well, that's okay," she said in a low voice, as she began to check his vitals. "I wouldn't want to eat that stuff either!" The nurse made a face at the oatmeal and winked at Johnny. He smiled weakly, but still didn't respond.

The nurse finished up her cursory exam and jotted in his chart. Then she picked up the breakfast tray. "I'll just get this out of here for you," she offered. "Dr. Early should be in shortly."

Johnny scrubbed his hands over his face. *Am I ever going to get out of here?* He sank back into his pillow, staring blankly at the ceiling. His thoughts took him away...

<><><><><>

Johnny, this is so hard! Sometimes I wish I could just... Pam looked around, locking her gaze upon the little girl, who was sprawled on the living room floor, crayons and coloring books scattered all around her. "Well, sometimes I don't think I can make it through the day." Her voice crackled with pent-up emotion.

"Have you been sleeping at all? You look pretty tired, Pam."

Pam shook her head and tears welled up in her eyes again. "The nights are the hardest part!" She laughed self-consciously and wiped her eyes. "It's so lonely with out him. I feel so...empty!" With that, Pam burst into tears.

Johnny pulled her into a hug, trying as best he could to comfort her. Tears were threatening to overcome him as well and he wished he could be anywhere else but there at that moment. He berated himself for feeling that way.

"Mama, please don't cry!" came a distressed little voice. They both looked down to a very confused and innocent little face. Pam laughed again, embarrassed for losing her composure and not wanting to upset the

little girl.

*"She really doesn't understand all of this," Pam said, reaching down and scooping her daughter into her arms.
"She doesn't know why everyone's so sad.
Pam hugged the child tightly. "I'm sorry, sweetie. Mommy will be okay.... "*

<><><><><>

"Johnny?"

Johnny startled awake. He looked up into the kindly features of Dr. Early.
"S-S..." He attempted to apologize, but nothing more came out.

"Johnny? Is something wrong?"

Johnny sat up and opened his mouth to tell him that his voice wasn't cooperating, but again, nothing came out. He gave the doctor a puzzled look and gestured toward his throat.

"Do you have a sore throat?"

Johnny shook his head. He attempted to clear his throat and answer the question, but again, he couldn't seem to find his voice.

Dr. Early frowned. "Let me take a look," he suggested. He pulled a tongue depressor from his pocket and proceeded to examine the paramedic's throat. "Hmmm...I don't see any swelling, everything looks fine. Take a sip of water." Dr. Early poured some water into a cup and handed it to him, watching the young man closely.

Johnny took a few sips and tried again to speak. Frustration and panic were evident on his face when the efforts failed.

"Just relax, John," Dr. Early instructed, smiling and patting Johnny on the shoulder. "Sit tight and I'll be back shortly."

Johnny looked away toward the window and nodded, sinking back onto the bed.

<><><><><>

Dr. Brackett stood in front of the screen in his office, intently studying the x-rays that Joe had brought to him. "Well, I don't see anything here," he commented, rubbing his chin and continuing to inspect the x-ray.

"I don't either," Joe concurred. "Of course, this was how he presented. We could run another skull series?"

"You're the expert, Joe. I'd say it's your call," yielded Kel.

Dr. Early sighed. "I'd hate to think we missed something. I'll call in an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist also." He headed off to order more tests for John Gage.

<><><><><>

Hank Stanley walked into room 242. He looked at the young man who was blankly staring out the window.
"Johnny?"

John turned his head to look at Stanley.

The captain walked over to the bed. "I came to see Roy. I thought you'd be home by now. Imagine my surprise when I heard you were still here."

John stared at him, not responding. Surprised, Stanley sat in a chair.

"So how are you? Why aren't you released?"

Johnny shrugged.

Hank smiled. "What's wrong, John? Cat got your tongue?"

John nodded.

Hank stopped smiling. "Okay, Gage. Very funny. Now really, what's wrong?"

John pointed to his throat and shook his head.

Hank frowned. "You can't talk?"

John nodded.

"Why not?" Hank asked.

Johnny shrugged, frustration written on his face.

Hank stood quietly regarding the younger man, concerned.

Just then the door opened and Dr. Early walked in, followed by Nurse McCall. They both smiled at Hank before they turned their attention to Johnny. Dr. Early smiled. "Well, Johnny. The good news is that the x-rays look good. No signs of swelling or any damage that would cause this."

Hank jumped in. "Then what is wrong?"

Dr. Early looked at them both. "We really don't know yet." He looked at Johnny. "I've called an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist. He'll need to perform some more tests. I want to rule out everything we can. This could simply be from the amount of smoke you took in yesterday."

Resigned, Johnny nodded.

Hank shook his head, still confused. "I don't understand. What could be causing this?"

Dr. Early sighed. "Why don't we finish the tests first, before we start guessing. All right? Don't worry, John. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Dixie smiled. "You'll be talking the ears off of the new nurses in no time at all."

Johnny nodded, averting their eyes. Joe and Dixie exchanged a worried glance. Dr. Early continued. "I want to start the tests right away. Okay?" He waited until John nodded his ascent, then he and Dixie started to leave. Johnny reached out, grabbing his arm. The doctor turned back. "Yes?"

Johnny frantically looked around, pantomiming writing. Dixie handed him a pencil and a small notebook. Johnny scrawled a word and handed it to Dr. Early.

"Roy?" Dr. Early read. He smiled at Johnny. "They'll be moving him to a regular room any time now."

John smiled his thanks, sinking his head onto the pillows. He held the notebook out to Dixie.

"You keep it." She smiled. "I think it'll come in handy...for a little while."

The medical personnel smiled at John and Hank, turning to leave the room.

Hank looked at Johnny. "You okay, pal? Anything I could do?"

Johnny shook his head and closed his eyes. Hank stood up, taking the hint. "I'll come back later." He patted the younger man on the shoulder and left the room.

<><><><><>

Pam stared down at John. Joanne stood beside her. Both were crying. "Why Johnny? Why? It's all your fault!" In the dream, he heard himself, pleading for forgiveness. But the two women shook their heads. "You must pay for this!" Pam grabbed Johnny, holding him down. Suddenly, he found himself strapped to a gurney. Joanne leaned down opening his mouth as Pam pulled out large pair of scissors from behind her back. She leaned in closer, opening the scissors...the blades loomed menacingly in front of his face...

<><><><><>

Johnny bolted upright in bed, panting heavily. He looked around the room. *It's only a dream*, he thought wildly. *Just a dream*. He opened his mouth to speak, falling back onto his pillows when he realized that, unfortunately, the loss of his voice was a reality. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed the world away.

<><><><><>

Hank Stanley tapped lightly and then opened the door to the small lounge outside of the Intensive Care Unit. Joanne DeSoto sat in a chair, talking to someone on the phone. She smiled at Hank and held her finger up. He walked over to the coffeepot and poured himself a cup.

"Sorry, Hank. That was Chris," Joanne explained as she put the receiver down.

"Oh, I understand completely," he said with a smile. "How are the kids holding up?"

"There doing fine; they don't really know all of the details," she answered.

"How are you doing?" he asked, studying the dark circles and puffiness of her eyes.

She let out a sigh. "I'm doing much better today! Yesterday was a different story, though."

Hank looked concerned. "He's doing much better today, right?"

"Yes! Have you seen him yet?"

"I looked in on him for a minute. He was asleep. I didn't want to wake him." Hank gazed into his coffee cup, swirling the contents and then took a sip. "Is there anything I can get for you? Or do for you?"

Joanne thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so," she said gratefully. "How's Johnny doing? I thought he'd have been up to see Roy by now."

"I know for a fact that he'd like to be here, but they still haven't released him. They're running some more tests...Something about his voice?"

"His voice?" Joanne asked, puzzled.

Hank chuckled softly for a moment at the thought of a silent John Gage. "They aren't sure what the problem is, but he seems to have a case of laryngitis." Hank shrugged, amusement sparkling in his eyes.

Joanne smiled back, knowing what was running through the captain's mind. "Now Hank, I'd expect Chet to find this amusing, but you?"

He chuckled again. "I know, I know, I just can't help thinking what a peaceful and quiet place the station would be!"

"Now, you know you'd miss his...his enthusiasm...after awhile," she said trying to sound stern, but failing.

Hank laughed. "You're right, I would," he admitted. "But, a small break would be nice! Now, if only Kelly could catch it!"

"Hank you're terrible!" Joanne laughed for the first time since she'd arrived at the hospital.

<><><><><>

"Well, John," Dr. Early glanced over the chart once more, then took his glasses off and slid them into his pocket. "Your throat culture looks fine and your vocal chords didn't look swollen, according to Dr. Samuels. There is an outside chance you may have picked up a virus, but other than that...we really don't have any explanation for your laryngitis. Our best bet is that this is a result of smoke inhalation."

Johnny simply nodded and shrugged his shoulders, not meeting the gaze of the physician. He slumped further down in the bed.

Joe Early stood carefully watching the paramedic. He was a little surprised by John's demeanor. *Doesn't seem to care.*

John picked up a pen and scribbled something on the notepad Dix had given him. He held the note out to Joe.

Home?

Dr. Early read the note and looked at his patient. "I'm sorry, John. I'd really like to keep you one more night. Just for observation. I'd like to repeat some of the tests, also do a viral throat swab. If we still can't find anything, you're tentatively free to go tomorrow."

Johnny frowned and looked out the window. Dr. Early watched him. After a few seconds, John scribbled another note and held it out to Early.

Without looking at the note, Dr. Early smiled. "Roy's doing much better."

Johnny looked up at him this time with a slight smile. "A-am..."

Dr. Early put a hand up to stop him. "Now Johnny, if you want to get your voice back, you're going to have to keep quiet. Rest your vocal chords."

Johnny looked a little unhappy at that advice, but nodded. *Easy for you to say Doc.* He scribbled another short note and thrust it at for Early. The doctor read it, then shook his head.

"I'm sorry, John. I think it would be better if you didn't see Roy today." Johnny opened his mouth to protest, squeaking angrily. Early shook his head and smiled. "Look, I know you don't like it, but I can't have you traipsing around the hospital...infecting everyone. Just in case."

Johnny folded his arms and glowered at the bedspread. Early sighed.

"We'll see about tomorrow, Johnny...okay?"

The young man nodded, still unhappy.

Early smiled. "Good. Now, take it easy. And no trying to talk!"

<><><><><>

Roy drifted slowly back to consciousness. He opened his eyes and looked into the smiling face of his wife.

"Hey, sleepyhead!" she teased. "You're finally awake."

He smiled back, attempting to shift in the bed. A sharp stab of pain shot across his back and he moaned.

Frowning, Joanne reached out to restrain him and watched as he relaxed. "Better?"

He nodded. "Water?"

She quickly filled a cup with ice water, placed a straw in the glass and handed it to him. He drank greedily, then lay back on the pillows.

"The kids?"

"They're okay. Frannie is watching them."

"Johnny?"

Joanne paused. "He's good. He's getting out of here tomorrow, I think."

Roy frowned. *Is she hiding something?* His wife's tone had taken on a distinctly evasive edge. He looked at her silently.

"Roy, really, he's fine. He had a concussion; they kept him for observation. But he woke up with laryngitis. It could be from the smoke, but they're running some more tests."

Roy nodded, relieved. Just then, the door opened and the nurse came in to check his vitals.

<><><><><>

Dr. Brackett smiled as he studied Roy's chart. He looked up and addressed both Roy and Joanne. "Well, your temp is down and vitals are all good. Keep this up, and we'll have to send you home soon!"

Roy smiled. "I'm ready!"

Brackett laughed. "Not that soon, though. However, I will make arrangements to have you moved out of ICU down to a regular room first thing tomorrow." He snapped the chart shut.

"Thanks, Doc!"

"No problem, Roy. I'll be back later." Brackett started to walk to the door when Roy's voice stopped him.

"Doc? How's Johnny? I expected him up here already."

Brackett frowned and walked back to the bed. Roy paled. "Doc?"

Brackett looked up. "Sorry, Roy. I didn't mean to alarm you. Dr. Early asked John not to come visit you today. He seems to have a case of laryngitis. We've been running some tests to figure out why. We thought it would be better to isolate him from you until we could rule out a viral infection. Your immune system doesn't need that exposure right now!"

Roy nodded. "Is that what he has? A virus?"

Brackett sighed and looked down for a second. Then he glanced at Roy and Joanne. "To tell you the truth, we haven't found any physical reason yet for his condition."

Husband and wife exchanged a glance. "I don't understand," Joanne began.

Brackett shrugged. "We've done every test we can come up with, CBC, Chem7, a strep culture. Everything so far checks out. We don't really know yet why he can't talk. And honestly, I don't think it's viral."

"What else could it be?" Joanne asked, looking from Roy to Dr. Brackett.

Dr. Brackett just shrugged, not really answering the question.

<><><><><>

Dr. Early tossed the tongue depressor into the wastebasket. "Well, John, all your tests have come back clean, so we're gonna kick you out of here. We need that bed for sick people."

Johnny smiled, relieved to be going home. He opened his mouth and tried again to speak. "Mmm..." Frustrated, he punched at the bed, then searched for the notebook that was quickly becoming his best friend. Early sighed as he watched the man scribble a note. He read the words. *My voice?*

"I really don't know why you lost your voice. But, we're hoping it's only temporary. It may simply be due to the smoke."

Johnny frowned and slumped down onto the bed.

Dr. Early regarded the young man in front of him. "I've written some discharge instructions and I want you to follow them!" *Not that you probably will!* "Then, you'll need to come back and see me in three days. Hopefully, everything will have cleared up by then."

Johnny scribbled another note. *If not?*

Dr. Early shook his head. "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, okay?"

He patted the young man on the shoulder and turned to leave. "Oh, a nurse will be in with your paperwork shortly. Then, you can go see Roy."

"Th..." Johnny attempted to thank the doctor.

"Johnny!" Joe turned and pointed a finger at the paramedic, giving him a look of reproach. *I knew you couldn't keep quiet for 5 minutes!*

John shrugged again and smiled weakly. *This may take some getting used to?*

<><><><><>

Johnny hurriedly dressed. He wanted out of this hospital. Mike Stoker had stopped by with some extra clothes and the two of them were going to stop and see Roy before Mike drove him home. *Man, am I glad Stoker is here and not Chester B.!* He remembered the time Roy and Chet shared a hospital room. Roy had just gotten his tonsils out and wasn't able to speak. Chet took the opportunity to ramble on and on, with a non-stop, one-sided dialogue. *Poor Roy! Geez, I shoulda just told Chet to put a cork in it!*

"Ready?" Mike asked as Johnny exited the restroom dressed in the clothes he had brought.

"Y-Y..." Johnny started, then frowned and decided on a nod.

"I heard they're moving Roy out of ICU later today," Mike informed him.

John smiled and started for the door.

<><><><><>

"Come in and sit down, Captain," Joe Early said, gesturing toward a chair.

"Sure, thanks," Hank Stanley replied a little nervously as he took a seat.

Dr. Early sat on the edge of the desk, while Dr. Brackett sat behind his desk, leaning back in his chair.

"We wanted to speak with you about John Gage," Dr. Early began.

"Is there something wrong? I thought he was going home today?" Hank tone of voice expressed concern.

"Yes, he is going home." Joe acknowledged. "We can't find anything wrong with him."

"But...he still can't talk?" The captain sat forward in his chair, studying each doctor. The medical personnel exchanged a glance.

"That's why we asked you here," Dr. Brackett spoke up. "We can't find any physical reasons for his condition."

"We think it could be psychological...a condition brought on by stress, possibly," Dr. Early stated.

Captain Stanley let out a breath. "Well, he was hurt in that fire..."

"Yes, we realize that. Also, being a paramedic can be a very stressful job, but he's always handled that well," Dr. Early noted. "We were wondering if you could think of anything...anything else, that could be causing any added stress for Johnny? A personal situation perhaps?"

Hank thought for a moment and ran his fingers through his hair. "Ummm...not really. Not anything he's mentioned to me anyway. I wish I could be of more help."

"That's fine, captain. We're just a little stumped here. We're digging around for all possibilities," Dr. Brackett explained.

"Have you spoken with Roy?" Hank asked. "If anyone would know, Roy would."

"No, we haven't yet. We will, though," Dr. Early assured as he stood up. "If you think of anything, don't hesitate to call us."

Hank nodded thoughtfully, also standing. "Do you have any idea when he'll be able to come back to work?"

"I've scheduled a follow-up exam in three days. Obviously, we can't release him for duty until his voice is back. We'll have to wait and see how he's coming along by then."

"Boy!" Hank remarked, letting out a deep sigh. "To think, yesterday I was joking about how nice it would be to have a little peace and quiet around the station. I never thought..." He slowly shook his head, disbelief and guilt crossing his features.

Both doctors looked at each other and chuckled.

"No comment!" Kel Brackett declared with amusement.

"I'm taking the fifth also!" Joe Early quipped as he leaned over to shake the captain's hand. "Hopefully this

will all work itself out in a few days."

"Is he still here?" Hank asked.

"He was discharged a little while ago, I think he probably went up to visit Roy." Joe surmised.

"Maybe seeing Roy will do him some good!" Hank said, hopefully. The two doctors smiled.

After Stanley left, Joe looked at Kel. "I'm at a loss on this one."

Kelly Brackett frowned. "I know what you mean, Joe." He looked up at his colleague. "You know, we may not be the best type of doctors to handle this problem."

Joe nodded. "If he's still not talking in three days, I'll recommend a psych consult."

Brackett sighed. "Well, let's hope that whatever is silencing our young friend runs its course by then."

<><><><><>

Johnny pushed open the door to Roy's room and entered. His friend's eyes were closed. Twinges of guilt stabbed John as he stared at the monitors and tubes that were attached to Roy. *Oh man, Roy! You look bad... I'm so sorry! If we had left when you said...*

Roy opened his eyes and smiled. "Hey, partner! I'm glad to see ya. How are you doing?" He studied Johnny's face as the younger man nodded.

Roy sighed. "Still can't talk?" Johnny shook his head. He pointed to the equipment surrounding Roy.

Roy grinned. "It all comes off today. I'm waiting for them to take me to a regular room. Got to eat breakfast today... well, drink it is more like it...that liquid broth stuff. But it's a start."

Johnny smiled, his partner looked terrible, but at least he sounded pretty good. He sunk into the chair by the bed.

Roy looked at him. "Wish I were going home."

John nodded, unsmiling.

Roy frowned. "You okay? How's the arm?"

Johnny shrugged, waving his cast slightly in the air. Then he nodded again.

"Must be tough on you. Not being able to talk." Roy paused, waiting for a response. When one didn't come, he continued. "Is your throat sore?"

Johnny shook his head. Roy studied his friend. "Any idea why you can't talk?"

Johnny shrugged.

The door opened and a nurse walked into the room followed by two orderlies. "Mr. DeSoto, we're going to

move you now."

Johnny stood up and waved as he walked to the door. Roy waved back, and turned his attention to the nurse and the orderlies. But his mind was still on his partner.

<><><><><>

Mike Stoker popped the lid on his trunk and Johnny grabbed the bag with his good hand. He mouthed the words "Thank you" to Mike.

"No problem. Your Rover's out back. Marco and Chet moved it for you." Mike shut the trunk lid. "Do you need anything? Want me to come up?"

Johnny shook his head. He set his bag down and pantomimed yawning.

Mike handed him his keys. "Okay. If you're sure?"

John nodded. He offered his hand to Stoker, who shook it.

"Take it easy, Johnny. Just...relax. I bet your voice will be back tomorrow."

Again, Gage nodded. Then he picked up his bag and set off for his apartment, not glancing back. Mike stood by his car and watched until his co-worker was out of sight. He shook his head and climbed back into the driver's seat. He hoped his friend regained his voice soon! A silent John Gage was very unnerving.

<>>

<><><><><>

Johnny tossed his bag on the bedroom floor and walked back out to the living room. He sat down on the floor and began sorting through his album collection.

He couldn't get the thoughts of Drew and Pam out of his head. He was thankful Roy was going to be all right, but couldn't help thinking how close he'd come to losing another friend. *If I die, no one would be left behind. But Roy...if anything happened to him...what would his family do? Ahhh...here it is!*

Johnny cranked the volume on his stereo and relaxed on the couch, closing his eyes. He had a faint headache, probably tension. He tried to clear his mind and focus on the music of The Doors; it enhanced his dark mood. *What's the point of it all? Someone can give everything, be smart, courageous, willing to risk their lives for others...and end up dead, in the blink of an eye.*

<><><><><>

"All settled in?" Dixie asked, peering around the door.

"Yeah, come on in Dix." Roy smiled, motioning toward the chair next to his bed. "Have a seat."

"Don't mind if I do!" she returned. "I just wanted to see how you were doing before I head home."

"Well, I've seen better days," Roy admitted, with a nod. "I guess I must be doing better than I was a couple

of days ago, though."

"You could say that! Don't you EVER do that to us again, Roy DeSoto!" Dixie gently admonished as she took the seat.

Roy raised his eyebrows, giving her a suspicious look. "You sound just like Joanne."

"Where is Joanne, by the way?"

"I finally talked her in to going home and getting some sleep," he answered, yawning himself.

Dixie took the yawn as a hint and looked at her watch. "Well, I better let you get some rest."

"Sorry," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Oh, Dix?"

"Yes?" she replied and sat forward, ready to get up.

"I was kind of curious...what's going on with Johnny?"

Her expression turned serious for a moment and she stood up. "We haven't quite figured that out yet."

Roy nodded thoughtfully. "Dr. Brackett said they couldn't find anything wrong...physically, I mean."

"That's right. All the tests came back negative."

Roy rubbed his eyes again and attempted to sit up a little straighter. "Uhhh...do you...do you think it could be psychological?"

Dixie shrugged and patted his arm. "Anything's possible, Roy. We're hoping it will clear up in a few days. You know Johnny; he always has to keep us on our toes!"

Roy smiled, but his eyes still mirrored his concern. Dixie paused. "Roy, was anything bothering Johnny lately?"

Roy thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No...I don't think so...you know, just normal 'Johnny' things."

Dixie nodded. "Just a thought..."

She left the room. Roy watched her depart, then sat alone trying to think of the last few days, and whether he was missing something...something important.

<>><>><>><>>

Captain Stanley hung up the phone. "No answer. Where could he be?"

"Well, I stopped over there last night and knocked on the door," Mike Stoker informed the captain. "I could hear loud music...The Beatles...*White Album*", I think...but he didn't answer the door. He's home; he just doesn't want to talk to anyone. Well, you know what I mean." He added, remembering the reason Gage wasn't at work.

"The Beatles? *White Album*? What the heck is that?" Marco asked, looking at Stoker like he'd lost his mind.

"It's an album...by The Beatles," Mike answered with a grin.

"That isn't good," Hank surmised with a frown.

"What? The Beatles or the *White Album*?" Mike asked, grinning even more.

Chet, Hank and Marco each shot the engineer looks of disbelief.

"Mike? Is that you?" Chet asked, walking over to Stoker and pretending to inspect him closely.

Mike rolled his eyes and went over to pour himself a cup of coffee. "Too bad YOU didn't lose your voice, Kelly."

"I'm hurt!" Chet threw Mike a mock frown.

Hank decided to ignore his crew's bantering. "I spoke with Roy awhile ago. He hasn't seen or heard from John either...well, seen him anyway. " He stood up and washed his coffee cup. "I think Roy's a little worried about John." He put his mug on the drain board to dry. "Frankly, I'm getting a little concerned myself."

"Come on, Cap." Chet stretched. "Gage will be yacking it up in no time. We should enjoy the break."

"You know, Chet," Mike said hotly. "This isn't a joke..."

"Fellas, fellas...enough!" Stanley sighed. The men quieted down. Hank continued. "What's surprising is that Gage hasn't gone back to see Roy...that's a little out of character for John."

"Well, maybe it's 'cause he can't say anything," Marco volunteered.

"Maybe." Hank sat back down. "But I think I'll try calling him again. He can't talk, but he can listen!"

<><><><><>

Johnny stared out of his window. The rest of the apartment was dark; he had kept all the curtains closed. The phone began to ring - again. *Damn it! They tell me NOT to talk and then they call every five minutes.* He pulled the plug from the wall. *Why won't they leave me alone!*

He got up and walked into the kitchen. Today was his appointment with Dr. Early. He opened the refrigerator and surveyed the meager contents. He took out a carton of Chinese food, opened it, and sniffed the contents. He grimaced at the foul odor wafting from the container and tossed it in the trash. He slammed the door shut and made his way back to the couch, pausing only to turn on the stereo. "*Big Brother and the Holding Company*". *Man, how did Janis keep from losing HER voice with that guttural wail?* He plopped back on the couch and threw his right arm over his eyes. No use keeping the appointment with Early since he still couldn't talk.

<><><><><>

Roy slowly climbed back into bed. Joanne helped him with the covers. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah." He took a deep breath. "Well, walking is getting easier. Guess that's good." Joanne smiled as the door opened and Dr. Brackett entered, followed by Dr. Early.

"You're doing so well, we may just have to send you home soon!" Brackett smiled.

"That's wonderful!" Joanne beamed.

Roy grinned. "Sounds good to me, Doc."

Dr. Brackett checked Roy's incision. "It's healing nicely. You were really lucky! How are you getting along with the walker?"

Roy nodded. "Okay, I guess. It's kinda nice to be able to move around some."

Brackett and Early exchanged a glance. "Roy, have you heard from or seen Johnny?" Early asked, hesitantly.

Roy shook his head, frowning. "No...not since the day he was released. Is he okay? It's really strange...that he hasn't even stopped by."

It was Early's turn to frown. "Well, that's the trouble. We don't know how he is. He didn't show up for his appointment today and he isn't answering his phone."

"Yeah," Roy nodded. "We've been trying to call him for the past two days."

"It's not like Johnny to miss an appointment." Joanne glanced at Roy. "You don't think he's sick, do you?"

Roy shook his head and looked to the doctors. Brackett spoke up, "We've reviewed all his tests again. I'm certain he doesn't have a physical problem. But, we really need him to come in." Brackett paused. "Roy, could you come up with anything that may be bothering Johnny? Some stress he may be under? Sometimes stress can manifest itself in physical symptoms."

Joanne looked up. "You mean his laryngitis could be ..psycho...??"

"Psychosomatic." Early finished. "Yes. That's a possibility."

Roy shook his head. "Well, I've been thinking about it and the only thing that makes sense to me...is that, with Johnny being Johnny, he's somehow convinced himself that our injuries were his fault."

Brackett nodded. "That occurred to us as well. Also the fact that nobody was able to get to you for so long. I'm sure it crossed his mind that you may not be found at all."

Joanne shook her head. "Why would he blame himself for that?"

Roy shrugged. "We were on our way out of that building when Johnny thought he heard a noise. We went back, but couldn't find anything. On our way out, the explosion occurred. He probably thinks he made some kind of error in judgement or some other mistake?"

Kel nodded. "So, in Johnny's mind, you would have gotten out if it weren't for him."

Roy nodded, frowning. "As ludicrous as it sounds, that is the way his mind works..."

Joanne glanced up. "But then, what can you do for him?"

Early shook his head. "I have to admit, if it is psychosomatic, well, that's out of our field. I'd refer him to someone better trained to help him."

Brackett nodded. "First, we need to get him in here."

Joanne sighed. "I can stop by there when I leave the hospital."

Joe smiled. "That won't be necessary, Joanne. We've already dispatched the big guns. Dixie is going to stop by after her shift."

"Joanne," Roy said, "do you have my keys? Maybe we should give Dix Johnny's key. Just in case."

"That's a good idea." Brackett waited until Joanne handed him the key, then he and Early took their leave. "We'll let you know when we hear from her, Roy."

Roy smiled ruefully. "Only Johnny." Joanne nodded.

<><><><><>

A steady knocking woke Johnny from a restless sleep. He came to consciousness, with a pounding headache. He groaned and rolled over, pulling a pillow over his head, trying to ignore the pounding on the door and in his temples.

The sounds of a key turning in the lock caused him to leap off the couch. He ran to the door and yanked it open, startling Dixie McCall. She took in the disheveled look of the young man. Dark stubble covered his face. His eyes were bloodshot; his hair was sticking up in different directions. "May I come in?" she asked.

Reluctantly, he stepped aside. She entered the apartment. It was dark and as disheveled as he was. Plus, the room smelled musty. *He really needs to open a window!* She stood there awkwardly as Johnny sank back onto the couch, his arms folded as he stared at her defiantly.

"Dr. Early missed you today."

She studied him. He ran a hand through his hair and leaned his head back against the couch. "Johnny? We're all worried about you. How about you go shower and get dressed and I'll drive you back to Rampart?"

Johnny shook his head and stared up at the ceiling. Dixie slowly approached him and sat down next to him. "What's wrong?" She waited, but got no response.

"Johnny, you know what happened to Roy...it wasn't your fault. You were only doing your job." She attempted to convince her obviously distraught young friend.

"You have no control over situations like that."

Control! I have absolutely no control over anything! My life, my job, my voice!

He nodded his understanding, hoping that would satisfy the nurse. *I am not going to Rampart. I don't want to talk to...to see anyone! Leave me alone, Dix!*

"Come on Johnny," she said, pulling gently on his arm. "Let's go show everyone that you're still on the face of the earth."

Johnny shot her an irritated look and shook his head no again.

"Johnny," she said, standing up and placing her hands on her hips. "You ARE going to keep that appointment, now come on!"

The disheartened paramedic jumped up. *That's enough!* He walked over to a small table and angrily swept his arm across it knocking the contents to the ground. Then he picked up a ceramic Dalmation wearing a fireman's helmet. He looked at it for a moment and angrily slammed it down onto the table.

Dixie jumped up and grabbed his arm. "Don't!" She held on as he tried to pull away. "JOHNNY! STOP IT!"

He pulled away from her and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. Then slowly, he looked up at the nurse, his eye's revealing abject despair.

"Oh, Johnny," she said quietly and pulled him into a hug. "It's going to be okay."

He allowed her to lead him to the sofa, sinking back down onto the cushions, he stared up at the ceiling.

Dixie walked into the kitchen and returned with a glass of water. She held it out to him until he finally took it. Then, she sat next to him quietly while he tried to regain control.

Finally, she turned his face toward her. "Johnny. You have to let us help you."

Johnny shook his head, turning away.

"Why not?" she asked angrily. "You can't just stay in this dark apartment for the rest of your life."

He shrugged, not looking up.

"John Gage!" She said frostily. "I never thought I'd say this, but you are acting like a ...a coward!"

"I...I ca..." He strained to get the words out. Dixie looked around, finally spotting the little notebook on the floor. She handed it and a pen to Johnny. He frantically scribbled.

I don't care. I can't talk so it won't do any good to go to that appt.

"Johnny, why don't you let us try to help you? Joe and Kel think maybe you need to talk with someone," she explained.

He looked up sharply and shook his head. ***No way. I'm not talking to a shrink.*** He wrote on the paper.

"Johnny," she said, trying not to show her frustration. "Sometimes people need to talk to someone...someone who is trained to help in situations like this. Sometimes you need to let others help."

He scribbled something on the paper again. ***I can't talk to anyone because I CAN'T TALK!***

Dixie rolled her eyes. "Okay, smarty-pants," she gently teased. "For me...will you at least get cleaned up and go

see Joe? Please?"

He looked at her uncertainly for a moment and then letting out a loud sigh, he nodded. *Okay, okay!*

"Do you want me to drive you?" she asked.

Johnny rolled his eyes and shook his head. *No mom, I'm a big boy! Have my license and everything!*

"Well...okay," the nurse said hesitantly, casting a wary eye over the paramedic. "You PROMISED though! If you don't show up...I'll send...Mike Morton over here! Along with Chet Kelly!" She winked at him.

He smirked at her. "No thanks," he mouthed.

<><><><><>

"Well Johnny," Joe Early sighed. "I know you don't want to hear this but...I really think you should see Dr. Karr."

Johnny shook his head stubbornly.

"What about one of the doctors down at headquarters?" Dr. Early suggested.

Johnny once again shook his head, not wanting to look up at the doctor.

"You know, John, I could have your captain order you," Dr. Brackett threatened, crossing his arms.

Johnny's head shot up and he looked a bit panicked, for a moment.

The doctor continued. "I'm tempted to...if it's the only way to get you to cooperate."

Johnny sighed and stared blankly at the wall. *I don't believe this! He felt so out of control. I have no say - in anything!*

Dr. Early studied the mix of emotions that washed over the young paramedic's face. "Why don't we give him another 3 days, Kel?" he proposed. "If the problem hasn't resolved itself by then...we'll really have no other choice, Johnny."

Grudgingly, Johnny nodded his head as he walked to the door, giving the doctors a small wave.

"See you back in three days!" affirmed Dr. Early.

Johnny nodded again and almost bumped into Captain Stanley as he walked into the hallway.

"Hey! Slow down there, Pal." Hank smiled and put an arm around the younger man.

Johnny mouthed, *sorry*.

"How about we go look in on that partner of yours?" Captain Stanley offered, giving Johnny a friendly pat on the shoulder.

A flash of uncertainty crossed the paramedic's features.
"He's been really worried about you John," informed the captain.

Johnny nodded remorsefully and allowed the captain to lead him down the hall.

<><><><><>

Roy shifted in his bed. He had just picked up the remote to the TV, when he heard a soft knock on his door.
"Come in."

The door opened slightly and Captain Stanley peered in. "Brought you a visitor," he said smiling as he ushered John through the door.

"Johnny!" Roy grinned, genuinely thankful to see his partner.

John hesitated at first, but then smiled back. He really was happy to see Roy. He made his way over and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Hank Stanley stood at the door for a minute, watching his two paramedics. *If Roy can't get through to him...* He didn't want to think of the alternative. "Well, I have to get going. You two take care." With a smile, he exited the room.

"Johnny, you doing okay?" Roy asked, running a concerned eye over his partner.
Dark circles under your eyes, not sleeping too well these days?

John took a deep breath and nodded. He glanced quickly at his friend and forced a smile before looking away.

Okay. No beating around the bush. "Johnny, you know...my being here, getting trapped in that building...you're not...blaming yourself for any of that are you? I mean, you do know that none of this is your fault." He studied the younger man, searching for a clue to his demeanor.

Johnny shrugged and nodded, noncommittally.

"I'm serious, John." Roy's stern tone of voice, spoke volumes.

John? Man, he must be spooked. Johnny looked up at his partner, smiling in an attempt to reassure the other man.

Roy however, still was not convinced. "You know...it's our job to search for victims. If we even think we hear... or see one...we have to check it out. We've both been mistaken in situations like that before, Johnny. It's better to be sure... than to take a chance on leaving someone behind."

I know, I know. Johnny reached into his pocket and pulled out his pad of paper and pen. ***I'm okay, Roy. Stop worrying. I'm really glad you're going to be okay.***

Roy read the note and looked up at him doubtfully. "Well partner, I could use a ride home in a couple days, if you can manage." He paused and then added with a wink, "I think you owe me a few rides home."

John grinned and raised an eyebrow. ***Just a few?*** He added to the bottom of the paper.

Roy studied the note for a long moment and then sighed dramatically. "Johnny?"
He waited for his partner response. "How come you don't write this neatly when you fill out the log book?"

Very funny, mouthed the dark-haired man and he snatched the notepad away from his partner.

<><><><><>

Jefferson Airplane! Johnny carefully slipped the album from its cover and placed it on the turntable. He was about to turn up the volume and resume his spot on the couch when he heard a knock at the door. *Man!*

He opened the door and was slightly surprised to see Mike Stoker.

"Hiya Johnny, how are you?" Stoker asked, pushing past his crewmate and entering the apartment.

Johnny, caught off guard, couldn't help but be amused. *What the heck does Stoker want?*

"Ahh...Jefferson Airplane. In a cheerful mood again I see," Mike commented as he stood in the middle of the living room and surveyed the darkened, disarrayed apartment. "Nice place ya got here, John."

Johnny rolled his eyes, knowing full well that the place was trashed.

Mike turned to look at John. "Cleaning lady been on vacation?"

Johnny snorted and headed for the kitchen, coming back a few seconds later with two beers.

"Thanks," Mike said, as he was handed a beer. His eyes darted around the apartment. "Well, being that your cleaning lady is outta town, why don't we pick some of this up?"

Stoker wants to help me clean? John looked puzzled but with a shrug he nodded his acceptance and they set about straightening up the place.

In less than an hour, the room looked totally different. John was amazed at the transformation. Mike Stoker had uncharacteristically babbled on the entire time.

"You know John," Mike began after they had finished. He sat down on the couch, opening a second beer. "They say that most firefighters, as well as police officers are control freaks."

Oh great, Mike... trivia! John chuckled.

"I'm serious! If you think about it, it make's sense!"

Johnny thought for a moment. *You know, you're probably right there, Mikey.* He took a swig of beer.

"When a disaster happens...or some event, or event's that the person feels they had no control over...they can lose it."

Johnny nodded solemnly; he knew all too well the truth to those words.

"The fact is," Mike continued. "They really never had control to begin with."

Nobody ever does. They may feel like they do...but in reality, only God does."

Mike paused, studying his co-worker's reaction. Johnny looked unconvinced. Mike continued. "I worked out of Station 16 when I started. Nice place. Nice bunch of guys. We had this one guy there who worked Rescue. His name was Doug McConnell, but we all called him Mick. Big guy, booming laugh. Mick loved a good joke. He was sort of like Chet, only funny."

Johnny grinned.

Mike laughed, then went on. "One day we got called to a warehouse fire...bad one. Chemical fire. Three buildings were involved. Mick and his partner, a guy named Russ, were doing a sweep of the place. Anyway, something happened inside...similar to what happened to you and Roy, I think. Russ called Mick to go check out another wing and Mick went. There was an explosion." Mike paused, lost in the memory.

Johnny stared at Mike, waiting for him to continue. Mike glanced at his friend.

"Russ and Mick were badly injured. Mick broke his back. He was paralyzed from the waist down. Russ broke a leg and I think he had a concussion." Mike shook his head. "Neither one ever returned to fire fighting. Mick couldn't...and Russ never forgave himself. He got it into his head that somehow Mick's injury was his fault. He was never ...quite right after that."

Johnny looked down, studying his shoes. Mike watched him. "See, Johnny. Mick never blamed Russ. He knew it was just part of the job. But Russ...well, he couldn't let it go." He paused. "We all know the risks we take. Lord knows it isn't easy. But, we take them...because it's what we do." Mike put his hand on John's shoulder, speaking softly. "You need to let it go, buddy. Let it go now, before it eats you up."

Mike dropped his hand and sat quietly beside Johnny. The younger man's head was down and he lifted a finger to his eye, surreptitiously wiping away a tear. The two men sat silently for a long while.

"You know Johnny," Mike said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I've always believed that when it's your time to go, you're going to go. Whether you're in a car, walking down the street or...in a burning building." He shrugged and glanced up at John. "It's just not in our hands."

<><><><><>

Two days later, John walked into Roy's hospital room, grinning. He pointed to Roy's bag.

"Yeah, I'm ready." Roy was about to reach across the bed for his bag, but John grabbed it first. Dixie entered the room with a wheelchair.

"Your chariot awaits! Hi, Johnny."

John smiled at her. She frowned. "Still not talking?"

He stopped smiling, shaking his head. Dixie sighed. "Are you going to see Dr. Karr like a good boy, or do we have to tie you to his chair?"

Johnny nodded, rolling his eyes. Dixie smiled. "Good. It's too quiet around here."

Roy grinned, as he maneuvered himself into the wheelchair. "I don't know. I think I could get used to this silence," he teased, laughing when Johnny threw a mock glare at him. "Come on, Harpo. Take me home."

<><><><><>

A short while later, John pulled his Rover up in front of the DeSoto house. He pulled the crutches out of the back and ran around the side of the car to help Roy out. Chris DeSoto was playing ball in front of the house with a friend.

"Mom! They're here." He ran to greet his father, followed by his little sister. Joanne stood on the porch, smiling. Roy hugged his kids and the small group headed to the house. Chris returned to his ball game.

Johnny and Joanne hovered around Roy until he sank into his recliner. "I'm okay. Really. Hey, Johnny, did you grab my bag?" he asked as he set the crutches next to his chair.

Johnny shook his head and pointed to the door. He turned around and headed back to his car to grab the bag. He opened the front door just as Chris ran into the street to retrieve his ball. Johnny looked up the street and saw a car speeding around the corner. His heart leaped into his throat as he ran off the porch.

"CHRIS! Watch out!"

The startled boy stopped in his tracks as the car whizzed by. Johnny ran over to him. "Are you all right! You have to be careful. That car almost hit you."

Roy and Joanne appeared at the door in time to hear the last of this exchange.

"What happened?" Joanne asked, concerned.

Johnny looked at her, visibly shaken. "Chris's ball rolled into the street. Man, he scared me to death. I thought that car was going to run him..." He broke off as Joanne and Roy exchanged big smiles. "What's so funny?" he demanded.

"Nothing!" Roy said. "It's just...good to hear you talking again!"

"Huh?" Johnny stopped, puzzled. Then, the realization hit him. "I can talk!" he said excitedly. "My voice...it's back! It's BACK!"

Roy grinned. Joanne hugged Johnny. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Man!" Johnny exclaimed exuberantly. "I thought I'd never hear myself talk again! You don't know what it's like to want to say something but nothing comes out! It was so...so...frustrating! I mean there I was, with all this stuff I wanted to say and nothing would come out!" He watched as his partner rolled his eyes and turned back to go inside. "Roy! Wait, I'm not finished!" He smiled at Joanne and followed Roy into the house. "I know, I know...I'm never finished! Right? I know that's what you were going to say, but ya know what? I don't even care cause I'm just so happy right now that nothing could make me mad!"

<><><><><>

An hour later, Johnny sat silently on the couch, scowling at the floor.

Roy reclined in his chair, seemingly enthralled in a public television show about some book that Johnny found too boring to even attempt to pay attention.

Joanne came into the room with a glass of water and the medication her husband was scheduled to take. She glanced at her husband's partner. "Johnny? What's wrong?"

Roy quickly turned his attention toward John and noticed the apprehensive features. "Johnny? You okay?"

Johnny looked up at them and smiled, uncertainly.

"What's wrong?" Roy asked, growing concerned.

Johnny rolled his eyes and suddenly seemed to look a bit embarrassed. "Nothing. You'll think it's silly."

Roy chuckled, relieved to still hear his partner's voice. "Probably, but that's never stopped you before."

"Come on, Johnny," Joanne prodded. "You can tell us."

"Well, okay," he grinned sheepishly and cleared his throat. "It's just that...all this time, I had so many things I wanted to say and now..." He hesitated, looking from Roy to Joanne.

"He can't think of anything," Roy finished with a knowing nod to his wife.

John nodded sheepishly.

Roy smirked at his partner, shaking his head ever so slightly as he enjoyed the last few moments of quiet. He knew that all too soon, Johnny would be ranting on and on about some inconsequential topic and annoying him to no end. Secretly, he wouldn't miss it for the world, but that still didn't mean he couldn't enjoy this moment!

THE END

The authors wish to thank Pat Embury once again for her wonderful beta reading efforts and medical advice... any medical mistakes are our fault, not hers! Also, thanks to Linda for her patience...and to Janis for submitting the idea that inspired this story! Hope you all enjoyed!

