

# Rumors

by Starr

"Come on, Roy, we're starving!" Marco Lopez was sitting forward in his seat at Station 51's dinner table, watching impatiently as Roy DeSoto fussed with the pots on the stove.

Chet Kelly's stomach growled loudly in agreement. "Anytime today would be good," he grouched.

Ignoring them both, Roy continued to stir and taste, then opened the door to the oven to check on its contents. A delicious aroma wafted out into the room, making everyone's mouth water.

"What's he making, anyway?" Mike Stoker asked, inhaling deeply.

"Beef bourguignonne?" John Gage asked hopefully, remembering the last big meal Roy had concocted, which much to everyone's surprise had been delicious.

"No," Roy said, not turning from his labors. "Better. It's Sauerbraten."

"Oh." Johnny's face fell a bit. "Well, I don't care if it's better, just as long as it's soon."

"Patience, my boy, patience." Roy was taking obvious glee in letting his friends wait for his newest endeavor.

Sighing, Johnny reached for another piece of bread.

Following Johnny's lead, Chet grabbed a piece for himself. "Hey, Johnny, Smitty can't make it to the Angels game tomorrow, so I have an extra ticket. Interested?"

Casting a longing look towards the stove, the paramedic shook his head. "Thanks, but I'm going down to San Diego with Jackie for the weekend."

A round of raised eyebrows and knowing looks went around the table. "Oh, really?" Chet said, leaning forward. "Do tell."

Giving him a sour look, Johnny said, "Nothing like that, Chester B. Her brother's coming into port for leave, and she's going to see him."

"He's the Marine, right?" Roy tossed over from his stove duty.

"Yeah. She hasn't seen him in almost a year."

"So, that explains what *she's* doing. Why are *you* going along?" Chet persisted, unwilling to accept that this was going to be a platonic weekend.

"Because her brother is going to give her a tour of his ship, and she asked if I wanted to come along." Seeing Chet's disbelieving expression, he insisted, "We're just friends!"

Chet snorted. "John Gage and a beautiful woman, going away for the weekend as just friends. Uh-huh."

"Yes," Johnny insisted.

Sensing he was starting to get under his friend's skin, Chet continued his digging. "And all the time you've spending with her these past few months, helping her 'get in shape' for the department physical, that was all there was to it?"

"Yes." Johnny's tone was getting aggravated.

Eyes twinkling, Chet couldn't resist one final dig. "Are you *sure* there isn't something going on, Pal? You can tell us."

Exasperated, Johnny said, "**Chet!**"

The timer on the oven buzzed. "Saved by the bell," Marco muttered.

The men watched with hungry eyes as Roy pulled the Sauerbraten out of the oven and slid it onto a plate. It had barely made it onto the table before the emergency tones sounded. A chorus of loud groans accompanied by rumbling stomachs sounded.

"Squad 51, choking victim, 95 Pratt Street. Nine five Pratt Street, cross street Donavan. Time out, 18:25."

Roy looked despairingly at the meal he'd spent so long preparing, then started for the truck bay. "The potatoes and vegetables are on the stove," he called as he went.

Pushing back from the table, Johnny glared at Chet, who was already shoveling a heaping helping onto his plate. "Make sure you save us some, would ya?" he shot over his shoulder as he disappeared out the door.

Waving the ladle after him, Chet grinned and yelled, "Don't we always?"

As the squad exited the station, Roy cast a quick look over at his partner, but didn't say anything. Johnny felt the look, though, and turned towards him. "What?"

"Oh, nothing." Roy focused on the road for a minute, then said, "Just friends, huh?"

"Yes, just friends!" Johnny shot him an exasperated look. "Why does everyone find that so hard to believe?"

His partner shrugged. "Well, she's pretty, for one thing."

"I can have pretty friends," Johnny shot back.

"And the two of you have a lot of common interests," Roy continued.

"Common interests are what strong friendships are made of," Johnny parried.

Roy gave him a sidelong glance, then smothered a grin. "She still won't date you, huh?"

"Not a chance," Johnny sighed in agreement.

Chuckling, his partner responded, "Hang in there, Pally. One of these days you'll wear her down."

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The incessant ringing of the phone drew Roy out of a deep sleep, and it was almost a full minute before he realized what the annoying sound was. With an unhappy grunt, he swung his arm over and fumbled on the

nightstand for the phone, knocking over almost everything else there before he finally located it. Bringing the receiver to his ear, he mumbled, "lo?"

"Hey, Roy!"

Trying to blink the last cobwebs of sleep from his brain, Roy struggled to place the voice. "Johnny?"

"Yeah! Hey, hope I didn't wake you!"

Glancing at the clock that was now staring up at him from the floor, Roy's brow knitted with worry. "It's three a.m. Are you okay?"

His partner's voice was momentarily lost in the background noise coming through the phone. Was that music? "Johnny?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Hey, man, I didn't realize it was so late, or I wouldn't have bothered you."

"It's okay. Is everything alright?" Roy sat up a little further in bed. He knew Johnny wouldn't call at such an ungodly hour without a good reason.

"Oh yeah, everything's great!" Roy could almost hear the smile on his friend's face. "I took your advice, and it worked!"

"My advice?" Roy glanced over at Joanne as she stirred, and lowered his voice. "What advice?"

More music blared from the receiver, then Johnny saying, "...and she said yes!"

Wide awake now, Roy was on the edge of the bed, getting a very nervous feeling inside. "Said yes? Who said yes? Yes to what?"

"Listen, I gotta go." The music blasted again. "...Marines throw a great bachelor party!"

"A *what?!!*" The tone of his voice stirred Joanne again, and she mumbled something incoherent.

"Just wish you were here, Pal! You'd really like these guys. See you when I get back!"

"No wait! Johnny! Johnny?" But the line was dead. He hung the receiver up and ran a hand through his tousled hair, his stomach in knots. "Bachelor party? God, Johnny, what did you go and do?"

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As Roy buttoned up his shirt, he kept casting impatient glances at the locker room door, waiting for his partner to arrive. The phone call from two nights before kept replaying in his head. Trying to convince himself that his friend wouldn't have done something as impulsive and irresponsible as getting married on a drunken whim, he hadn't told anyone of the call, not even Joanne. But still, when he hadn't been able to reach Johnny as late as midnight last night, that nagging bit of worry kept coming back to gnaw at him.

Less than five minutes before line up, Johnny came flying into the locker room, his shirt already half unbuttoned.

"Cutting it a little close, aren't you?" Roy asked, studying his friend's face intently.

"Missed the alarm," Johnny responded as he kicked off his shoes.

"Ah." Roy couldn't keep his eyes from drifting to Johnny's left hand. It was still bare. A good sign. "Late night?"

"Yeah, we didn't get in until after one." He shrugged on his uniform shirt and started to button it.

"So, I guess you had a good time in San Diego," Roy asked, trying to sound casual.

His partner's face beamed. "Oh, man, it was great, Roy!" He tapped Smokey and closed up his locker. "I haven't had that good a time... well, in a long time." He started out for line up, Roy at his heels.

"And, uh, nothing unusual happened?" Roy persisted.

Johnny frowned. "Unusual? Well, the whole weekend was unusual, really." His eyebrow raised. "Oh, hey, the phone call!"

"Yeah, the phone call." Roy was trying to cling to his hope that all was well.

Cringing guiltily, Johnny said, "I amso sorry about that! We were just having such a good time, and I was thinking how great it would be if you were there, and, well, I guess I had a bit too much to drink. You ever try and keep up with a bunch of Marines?" He shook his head. "Anyway, I didn't have any idea what time it was when I called. Could you apologize to Joanne for me?"

"She never even woke up." They both quieted for line up, then headed for the coffee. "So, you got along real well with Jackie's brother, huh?"

"Yeah, Joe was a real nice guy. 'course, I owe him one for the hangover I ended up with after that party." Johnny took a large gulp of his coffee and sighed contentedly.

"Right, the party." Roy poured his own cup, but didn't touch it. "Good party, was it?"

"Yeah, from what I remember." Johnny grinned. "Did you know they make a drink with six different liquors? Tastes just like licorice."

"Sounds great." Tired of beating around the bush, Roy finally asked him straight out, "Was it a bachelor party?"

"Oh, yeah, I thought I said that," Johnny said. "Y'know, they throw a heck of a party on a minute's notice."

That sinking feeling was back. "A minute's notice, huh?"

"Who throws a good party?" Chet interrupted, pushing between the two paramedics to grab the coffee pot.

"Jackie's brother, Joe, and his buddies," Johnny answered after another long sip.

"Partied with the Marines, huh?" Chet asked, eyes twinkling. "Surprised you're still standing."

"Johnny, about that party..." Roy started, only to be interrupted by Marco.

"Who partied with Marines?" he asked, just coming in on the conversation.

"Johnny did," Chet answered. "So, did they try to get you to enlist?" he joked.

"No, but I do seem to remember the mention of tattoos at some point," Johnny said, grinning slightly. "And

no, I didn't."

"Johnny, about the bachelor party..." Roy attempted again.

"A bachelor party?!" Chet exclaimed. "Man, you *are* brave."

"What bachelor party?" Mike asked, coming into the kitchen.

"The one Gage went to down in San Diego," Marco told him.

Mike cocked his head at the paramedic. "You went away with Jackie and ended up at a bachelor party? How the heck did you manage that?"

"I've been trying to find that out myself," Roy muttered under his breath.

"What?" Johnny asked, not quite catching what he'd said.

His friend waved a hand and shook his head. "Nothing."

Chet was still fixated on the party. "So, tell us all about it," he prompted.

Grinning, Johnny leaned back against the counter. "Well, first of all --"

He was rudely interrupted by the tones sounding.

"Squad 51, pedestrian versus vehicle. The intersection of Balsam and Wildman. Time out, 08:20."

Sighing, Johnny placed his mug on the counter. "I'll tell you later," he said, heading for the truck bay.

Roy followed, muttering under his breath, "I don't think I'm going to make it that long."

Grabbing a donut, Chet flopped onto the couch next to Henry. "Man, I tell ya, only Gage could get away with going away with a knockout like Jackie and still get to go to a..." He trailed off, his eyes widening slightly as a thought occurred to him.

"What?" Mike asked, seeing the look on the Irishman's face.

"You don't think he and Jackie...?"

The three men looked at each other, then shook their heads in unison. "Nah!"

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Standing at the nurses' station at Rampart, Johnny was busily filling out paperwork, anxious to head back to the station for one of the donuts that he could only hope were still waiting for them. Roy had just returned from getting a few supplies they needed, and was leaning against the wall, watching his partner intently. Johnny shifted uncomfortably under the gaze, then stopped writing and looked up. "What?"

Roy was almost able to bring himself to ask the question that was on his lips, then he chickened out and shrugged. "Nothing."

"Well, then, stop staring at me like that. It's giving me the willies." He went back to his paperwork.

Dixie McCall arrived at the station, and smiled at the paramedics. "Morning, Roy, Johnny."

"Hey, Dixie," Roy responded.

"Morning, Dix," Johnny said, still writing.

As Dixie moved past the two, she stopped and sniffed, a puzzled look on her face. "What is that?"

"What's what?" Roy asked. Johnny remained uncomfortably silent.

Sniffing again, she said, "Lilacs. I could swear that was lilacs."

"You know, I've been smelling that all morning, and I couldn't put my finger on what it was," Roy exclaimed.

Clicking his pen shut, Johnny gathered up his papers hurriedly. "Well, I'm all set. Let's go, partner. See ya later, Dix." He tried to get past her, but didn't quite succeed.

"It's you!" she declared, snagging his arm and sniffing him more closely.

Squirming under their dual scrutiny, Johnny flushed brightly. "I, uh.... I'll meet you at the squad." With that, he made as graceful an exit as he could.

Roy exchanged a bemused look with Dixie before following his partner. "Hey, Johnny, wait up." He couldn't help but sniff as he stopped next to him. Definitely lilacs.

Not giving his partner a chance to get in a dig, Johnny said quickly, "It was the only soap Jackie had at her place, so don't start with me."

That caught Roy up short. "Jackie's place?"

"Yeah, we got in late last night, and I was still a little hung over, so I crashed at her place, and then this morning she realized all she had in her bathroom was those little scented soaps that everyone keeps laying around but never uses, and since it was either that or dish soap..." He raised his hand to his nose, sniffed, and scowled. "I knew I should've used the dish soap."

"So, you crashed at Jackie's place?" Roy said, hopeful at the phrasing of the statement.

Johnny gave him a puzzled and somewhat exasperated look. "Why do you keep repeating everything I say? What's gotten into you today?"

"Just answer me one thing," Roy begged. "Who was the bachelor party for?"

The puzzled look grew. "One of Joe's buddies, Lyle. Didn't I already say that?"

Almost laughing with relief, Roy shook his head. "No, you didn't. So... that means that you and Jackie..." He smiled.

"That me and Jackie what?" Johnny demanded. Then a light went off. "Roy, did you think that we...?"

"Well, no, not exactly.... Okay, so the thought crossed my mind," his partner confessed. "But you have to admit, the bachelor party, and the phone call, and... well, I guess I jumped to a conclusion."



up, and, well, you have been known to be a little impulsive at times."

"Me? Impulsive?" Johnny grinned.

"Yes, you." Exiting the squad, something occurred to him. "So, what did you mean then when you called and said she said yes?"

Johnny's brow furrowed, most of the evening in question a faint blur in his memory. "I said that?" Then it came back to him. "Oh! Right! I asked Jackie about a date, and she finally said yes."

As they entered the kitchen, Roy asked, "How on earth did you manage that?"

"Oh, I just laid some of the old Gage charm on her, and she didn't have a chance." He grinned impishly. "Well, that, at the fact that she hadn't slept in about twenty four hours. But she hasn't said a word about regretting her decision since we came back, so I guess it's still on." He grabbed for the donut box, saw nothing but crumbs, and sighed. "Come on, let's go to the store and get some food."

"Well, like I said once before, partner, the two of you make a good couple. I always knew you'd end up together." With that, the two of them were gone.

Left behind were the other members of the shift, sitting around the table, the current hand of poker at a standstill as they all sat staring at each other in disbelief.

"Did I just hear what I think I heard?" Chet asked, stunned.

"No, we must've misunderstood," Mike said slowly, replaying the conversation in his head.

"John and Jackie? *Married??*"

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Walking down the hallway at Rampart, Dixie and Doctor Bracket were discussing the new rotation schedule they'd been trying with the nursing staff when they came upon a small coffee klatch of candy strippers. The moment they girls saw them, they scattered like the wind, suddenly very intent on being someplace else. Kelly Bracket observed the phenomenon with mild amusement. "What was that all about?"

"I wish I knew," Dixie replied. "It's been going on all day."

Smiling, he said, "Well, if they're planning a surprise birthday party for me, tell them they're about two months early." With that, he headed down towards the cafeteria.

Determined to get to the bottom of what was going on, Dixie tracked down the one person she knew would be on top of everything going on within the candy strippers' circle: Danielle. An excellent worker, and absolutely wonderful with the children on the pediatrics ward, she was also the worst busybody Dixie had ever met in her life. If something was happening anywhere in the hospital, Danielle was sure to know about it, just as sure as she was to be telling everybody who would listen what she'd heard or seen.

She finally tracked the girl down in orthopedics, where she was chewing the ear of an elderly gentleman who was having his arm plastered. The fact that the man was stone cold deaf made no difference to her, she just continued to chatter happily away. Dixie interrupted her politely and brought her out into the hall.

"Danielle, do you have any idea what's going on?"



"Going on, Miss McCall?" the girl responded quizzically.

"Around the hospital. What is it that has everyone's tongue going a mile a minute?"

"Oh.... that." Danielle lowered her eyes and licked her lips nervously. "Just... something about one of the paramedics getting married."

"Really?" Dixie was surprised, but slightly relieved. She'd envisioned much worse possibilities. "Well, that's not so bad. Which one?"

Danielle tried unsuccessfully to summon up a sudden illness to get her out of answering the question, but to no avail. "Um, John Gage."

Dixie's eyebrows nearly flew off of her face, they shot up so fast. "*What?!!*"

Taking a deep breath, the candy striper said in a rush, "I know, I was just so surprised when I heard about it, because, you know, he's always such a flirt when he comes in, and, like, not the type of guy who would just run off and get married, but I guess he's a real gentleman because he didn't *have* to do it, not these days, anyway, and there's lots of guys who wouldn't, but he did, and --"

"Hold it!" Dixie waved a hand, cutting the girl off in mid-tirade. "John Gage is *not* married," she said firmly.

Ponytail bobbing, the candy striper nodded rapidly. "Yes, he is! Just this weekend."

"He was just here this morning, Danielle. I *talked* to him. He would've *said* something."

"He *did*," the girl told her. "He stood right in the emergency room entrance and told his partner that he'd been having this fling with this girl and keeping it really quiet, I don't know why, I thought maybe because she was married, but then he couldn't've married her if she was, could he? But he said it, just as sure as I'm standing here, he said he'd run off and gotten married this weekend." She stared at the head nurse with earnest eyes, fully believing every word she'd said.

Dixie's first thought was to wonder how the girl could possibly say so much without stopping to take a breath. Her second thought went back to the faint scent of lilacs, which she dismissed immediately. There were a dozen reasons Johnny might have been flower scented this morning, but strangely she couldn't come up with a single one. "Danielle, did *you* hear him say all of this?"

"Well, no, ma'am," the girl admitted, but she quickly added, "but I heard it from Louise, who heard it from Jennifer, who heard it right from Rachel, and *she* heard him say it."

Dixie chewed over that a moment, her thought of going to the source of this rumor dashed by the fact that the girl had left the hospital two hours earlier, and wouldn't be back for three days. "Did Rachel happen to say who it is that Johnny was supposed to have married?"

Scrunching her face up in thought, Danielle put a finger to her mouth. "Let's see, I think it was Jessica... no, that's not it... Jasmine.... no that's not right either..." Her face lit up suddenly as it came to her. "Jackie! That was it!"

"Jackie?" Remembering how Johnny had come to visit Jackie Sinclair in the hospital every day she was there after they'd been thrown into the river together the previous winter, Dixie frowned slightly. Was it possible...?



they'd found out, Johnny said, "Sorry, I just didn't think it was that big a deal."

"Not that big a deal?" Mike chimed in. "Are you kidding?"

"No, not really." Johnny looked at the faces around him and found them all filled with surprise and a touch of hurt. He was baffled. "Okay, maybe I should've said something, I guess. I just didn't want to go telling everyone in case things didn't work out."

"Now John," Hank chimed in, "that's not the kind of attitude you should be taking."

"It's not?"

"You should try to keep a positive attitude about it," Hank told him. As one of only two married men in the station, he felt it important that he impart as much marital wisdom as possible to the young paramedic. He had a feeling he was going to need every bit he could get. "The two of you can make this work, but you have to want it to."

Now thoroughly confused, Johnny nodded. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, Cap." He again looked to his partner, hoping for a bit of sanity from him, but none was forthcoming. Instead, he was saved by the tones sounding.

"Station 51, Station 27, structure fire. 9977 Williamsville Blvd. Nine nine seven seven Williamsville Blvd. Cross street Hawthorne. Time out 16:42."

Everyone scrambled for the truck bay, thus ending the most confusing conversation Johnny had ever had up to that point. If only he knew what was still to come....

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"There, how's that?"

Johnny blinked his eyes rapidly, glad that they had finally stopped tearing. "Better, thanks." He wiped at the saline running down his soot covered cheeks. "I was beginning to think that crud was never going to come out of my eyes."

Doctor Morton pulled out a penlight and took another look. "You were lucky," he commented. "No nicks, no scratches... No permanent damage, from what I can tell." He returned the light to his pocket. "But if they give you any trouble, you should go see an ophthalmologist."

"I will, thanks, Doc."

Roy nodded to Morton as he left the room, then handed his partner a wad of paper towels.

"Thanks." He hopped off the table, scubbing at his face as they exited the exam room, where he nearly collided with Dixie, who was on her way in.

"Oh, Johnny, good, I was just coming to see you," she said.

"Hey, Dix. What's up?" He found a part of the towels that was still semi-clean and went back to work on his chin.

"Well, I was just wondering...." She hesitated uncomfortably. "I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding, but I wanted to get it cleared up as soon as possible."

"Get what cleared up?" the paramedic asked, puzzled.

"About you and Jackie."

His hands froze in their cleaning duties, and his expression became confused. "You know about that, too?"

Having convinced herself that the rumor was just that, Dixie was taken off guard with his answer. "You mean, it's true?"

Harrumphing in disbelief, Johnny shook his head. "You'd think it was on the ten o'clock news or something." He brushed past her and headed for the squad, starting to feel a bit annoyed at the seemingly constant intrusion into her personal life.

Still in shock, Dixie turned to Roy. "Did *you* know about it?"

Believing, as Johnny did, that the topic was a date, Roy shook his head. "I just found out about it this morning myself."

"And, you're not just a little surprised about it?" she asked disbelievingly.

"A little, I guess. But you know Johnny, he's a pretty persistent guy when it comes to women."

"So it would seem," Dixie commented, half under her breath. "And it doesn't bother you that he didn't tell you about it? I mean, you two are best friends."

Now it was Roy's turn to look puzzled. "Yeah, well, he doesn't tell me *everything*." He shifted uncomfortably, then gave a small half-grin. "Well, I'd better get going. See ya later, Dix." He turned and made his exit. Heading towards the ambulance doors, he saw Johnny talking to one of the nurses he'd been pursuing for the better part of a month. It didn't appear as though the conversation was going well. As if to bring home that observation, the nurse suddenly slapped Johnny across the face and stalked away. Roy stopped dead in his tracks. He'd seen Johnny turned down, put down, and snubbed, but he'd never once seen him slapped.

Johnny turned and walked slowly back towards his partner, a hand to his reddening cheek, his expression one of total shock.

"What happened?" Roy asked.

"I don't know," Johnny replied slowly. "All I did was ask her if she'd made up her mind about my dinner offer."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Maybe she didn't like the way you asked," Roy offered, turning for the exit.

Following, Johnny cast a look over his shoulder, hand still to cheek. "I guess not."

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The rest of the shift at 51 was hectic, with either the engine, or the squad, or both being out on runs, so that the men were never all at the station at the same time. This suited Johnny just fine. He'd had more than

enough advice and strange conversations for the day. As C shift started to arrive, the engine was still out on a run, but the squad was nestled in its berth.

Del Marten of 27 sauntered into the kitchen and headed straight for where he knew Johnny kept a bag of chocolate chip cookies, in one of the upper cabinets behind the paper plates. "Hey, guys."

"Hey, Del," Roy called out from the couch.

"Pulling in some more overtime?" Johnny asked his friend, scowling at him when he saw the bag of cookies in his hand.

"Gotta pay for that cruise somehow," he replied, grinning. "You'd better start doing the same, buddy, if you plan on coming along. Unless you suddenly became independently wealthy and forgot to let us in on it."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Johnny sighed. "I'm working on it." He checked his watch and got up. "But right now, I'm outta here."

Stuffing another cookie in his mouth, Del teased, "Hot date?"

"Yeah," Johnny said, grinning. "With a long, hot shower."

"Have fun."

Johnny pointed at the rapidly emptying bag in Del's hands. "I expect that replaced, y'know."

Del saluted him with a cookie and grinned.

Rolling his eyes, Johnny followed Roy to the locker room, where they shucked their uniforms for their street clothes. "What time is Jackie coming over?" Roy asked.

"Around eight," Johnny replied, adjusting his belt buckle. "They tented her apartment building this afternoon, they're spraying in the morning, and she can't go back for twenty-four hours."

"And these bugs were how big?"

Johnny held out his hand and extended his forefinger about four inches from his thumb. "Mutant beetles. Stowed away in a shipment of wicker furniture one of her neighbors got from the Orient."

Roy tried to picture a bug that size and shuddered. "I think I'd just move."

"If the fumigation doesn't work, she just may have to."

They parted company in the parking lot, just as the engine was pulling back into the station. Chet saw Del doing inventory on the squad, waved hello, then had a thought and went over to talk to him. "Say, Del, you and Johnny are pretty tight, right?"

Del shrugged slightly. "Yeah, so?"

Chet tugged at the corner of his mustache. "Let me ask you something..."

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The Dodgers and Yankees were tied three-three in the bottom of the ninth when the phone rang. Johnny

looked at it in disbelief.

Sitting cross-legged on the couch, hunched forward intently, Jackie said, "Let it ring."

He considered doing just that, then cursed and snatched it up. "Hello?" he snapped. "Del? Look, Pal, can't this wait? Yeah, the ball game..." He broke off and yelled at the tv as the Dodgers racked up an error. "Oh man, what are you doing?!"

"Losing," Jackie smirked. As a transplanted New Yorker, she couldn't help but root for her old home team.

He shot her a look, then his attention was drawn back to what Del was saying. "What? Say that again, I didn't hear you. Mmhmm. Yeah, so? *What???*" His eyes went wide and he nearly dropped the phone. "They *what??*?"

Jackie shushed him, intent on the game, then caught the expression on his face. "What? What's wrong?"

This time he shushed her. "No, I have no idea. No, I never... Del, you know me better than that. Yeah, okay, thanks. No, no, I'll take care of it. Yeah. Thanks for the heads-up. Take it easy, Pal." He hung up and shook his head in amazement. "I just don't believe it."

Getting concerned, Jackie turned the tv off. "What?"

"This is just too unreal," he muttered, still stunned by Del's revelation.

"*What???*" she asked again, getting less concerned and more annoyed.

"Well..." He looked at her, unsure how this was going to be received. "It seems that there's been some kind of huge misunderstanding down at the station."

"About what? she prodded.

"About, well.... About us, actually." He tried a grin, but it was unsure. "Seems everyone thinks you and I are married."

She looked at him a moment, not sure she'd heard him right. "You and me? Married?" She giggled, then laughed. "*Married?*"

Caught between being relieved that she wasn't mad and being a little hurt that she found the thought so amusing, Johnny said, "At least now a lot of the conversations I had today make a little more sense."

Between giggles, Jackie managed to ask, "How on Earth did they ever..." She trailed off, putting it together faster than he had. "Did you happen to mention Lyle's bachelor party?"

He nodded.

"Did you happen to mention *Lyle?*"

He groaned. "Oh man, I can't believe this!"

"Oh Johnny!" She burst into a fresh round of giggles.

"I'm glad you're finding this so amusing." He finished off his beer and headed to the kitchen for a refill.







She pursed her lips and pretended to give it thought. "Okay, you win. Chinese or pizza?"

"Who's buying?" he asked with a smirk.

"I am."

"Chinese."

She wrinkled her nose. "If you order sushi, I'm divorcing you."

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Johnny had never had such a fun night bowling as he did that evening, even though his scores were the lowest they'd ever been, but that was because he was just laughing too hard at the way everyone was treating him and Jackie. The "happy couple" had put on a good act, complete with hand holding and whispered nothings to each other -- the only problem had been that the whispers had been each of them trying their best to make the other crack up. Johnny had won that contest by telling her a joke that made her blush furiously. She'd found a way to get even later on, however, by nonchalantly slipping an ice cube from her soda down the back of his shirt.

After bowling, they'd stopped at Finnegan's Pub for a quick drink, which had turned to quite a few drinks, as each of the guys had insisted on toasting them, the toasts getting more sappy and incoherent as the night wore on. Finally, Jackie had begged off "just one more round" and they'd made a hasty exit.

Now, getting back to Johnny's apartment, Jackie was suffering from a serious case of the giggles, which had started the second they'd gotten into his Land Rover outside the bar.

"My God, did you see Chet's face when you asked Roy if Joanne still had that baby name book?" she managed to get out between gasps.

Eyes twinkling that he'd really gotten one over on the Phantom this time, Johnny said, "I thought he was going to fall off his chair." He tossed his keys on the kitchen table, then caught her around the waist and gave her a twirl. "And you, my dear, were brilliant tonight. I couldn't ask for a better partner in crime."

She giggled harder. "My pleasure. It was kind of fun, although I was starting to feel a little guilty by the third round of toasts."

"Yeah, me too," Johnny agreed. "I'll let them off the hook in a day or so." He twirled her again, caught her waist, and dipped her, surprisingly all without dropping her.

She clutched at his arm, caught between being dizzy and nauseous. "Johnny, stop! My head is spinning!"

He hauled her back up, and for just a moment they were face to face, staring at each other, cheeks flushed from the alcohol and laughter. The moment hung there, and both of them felt the electricity that was in the air, like a static charge that needed to be released. Then it was gone, and Jackie extricated herself from his grasp. "Um, I think I'm gonna get ready for bed. It's late."

"Yeah, me too." Johnny wandered down to his bedroom while Jackie went into the bathroom to change, and flopped on his bed, arm over his eyes. "Oh, man..."

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Jackie was sitting in the waiting room at Rampart, flipping through a magazine that she was sure had been

outdated when she was still in high school. After two years in LA, she still hadn't found herself a regular doctor, so she'd come back to see Doctor Brackett for her six month post-surgery checkup. Who better to make sure everything was still where it was supposed to be than the man who had stitched it all back together in the first place?

She gave up on the magazine and stretched her arms over her head, wondering if her back was going to survive much longer in the hard plastic chair without developing a permanent ache. She checked her watch and sighed.

"I just can't believe it."

"I know, me either. He's such a nice guy, too. One minute he's on the market, and the next he's suddenly tied down with a wife. Go figure."

Jackie's ears pricked up at the conversation. She wasn't one to eavesdrop, but the two nurses were standing only a few feet away, and it was impossible not to hear what they were saying. Besides, it sounded a lot more interesting than the five year old magazine had been.

"I heard they eloped."

"No! Really?"

"Mmhhh. Didn't tell anyone, not even his best friend."

'Now why does this sound too damn familiar?' Jackie thought suspiciously. 'I may be getting paranoid, but...'

"Big mistake. He's going to regret it."

"Yeah, quickie marriages like that never last. Once the honeymoon's over, he's going to wish he hadn't done it."

'How on earth did anyone here find out.... Duh. Firemen are worse gossips than anyone I know. Jeez, I wonder who else has gotten wind of this?'

"But he's too nice a guy to just leave her. Bet he stays with her even if he doesn't want to."

'Gage, if you only knew the fan club you have here!'

"Well, I don't know about that. Did you hear he asked Sandra for a date yesterday?"

"No!"

"Yes!"

'Uh-oh, sounds like you blew it, Gage,' Jackie thought with a grin. She wondered how the paramedic was going to react when he found out that his joke had left the boundaries of the station and was now gossip-fodder at Rampart.

"What did she do?"

'Bet she belted him one.'

"She slapped him, of course, and told him she never wanted to talk to him again."

Jackie could barely stifle a laugh. 'Serves him right! That's no way for a married man to act!'

"I would've never expected that from Johnny. I always thought he was one of the good guys."

"He is, or, he was. It's got to be that woman."

Jackie frowned. 'Hey now, wait a second!'

"No, you can't blame her."

'Damn straight.'

"Well, she's gotta be some kind of fireman groupie or something. I mean, they *all* know her!"

"Frankie from 42 said she was a dispatcher."

Jackie groaned inwardly. 'Oh, God, how many people know about this?!'

The voices got fainter as the nurses moved down the hall. Jackie hesitated, then got up and followed, stooping at a water fountain near where they stopped.

"Well, I have an idea about that."

'Okay, what did I miss?'

"What?"

"Well... what if they *had* to get married?"

"You mean, she's *pregnant*?"

Jackie choked on a mouthful of water and sputtered, coughing violently.

One of the nurses turned to her, concerned. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

Jackie waved her off, still coughing, making an "ok" sign.

Not entirely reassured, the nurse watched her for a minute to make sure she wasn't going to keel over, then went back to her conversation. "What makes you think that?"

'Yeah, what the hell makes you think that!'

"Well, I saw her name on Doctor Brackett's call sheet for this afternoon. Strange coincidence? I think not."

'Oh, for cryin' out loud...!'

"What's her name, anyway? I have to get a look at the woman who finally bagged John Gage."

"Jackie something. Um... Sylvester, no.... Sinclair, that's it! Jackie Sinclair."

'Okay, where's the nearest hole so I can crawl into it?' Jackie had just started to make a fast exit when bad

timing reared its ugly head and Dixie appeared.

"Jackie, hi! How nice to see you."

Her attempt at a smile came out as more of a grimace as she felt the two nurses' heads whip around in her direction. "Um, hi, Dixie."

"Listen, Doctor Brackett is running late on his appointments, he had a few emergencies that tied him up. Would it be okay if we rescheduled your appointment?"

Not sure if she wanted to laugh or cry, Jackie shook her head quickly. "No, that would be fine. It would be great, actually. I'm, um, not feeling so hot right about now."

Dixie's brow furrowed in concern. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah. I just... had a little trouble digesting something." She offered a smile to the nurse. "I'll call and make a new appointment, okay?"

"Sure." Dixie still look unconvinced, but returned the smile. "Oh, and congratulations."

"I..." Jackie sighed. "Thanks, Dixie." She beat a hasty retreat from the waiting room, knowing that the eyes of the two nurses were following her every move.

After she was gone, the two exchanged a knowing look. "Morning sickness."

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Johnny came home from work bursting with good humor, ready to tell Jackie about just how great the day had gone in baiting the guys, having decided to string the whole joke out till the end of the week. He found her curled up on the couch, a glass of wine in her hand, and a bottle that was a quarter empty on the table next to her. "Jackie, you okay?"

"Yeah." She sighed. "No, not really."

He sat on the couch next to her, the paramedic in him taking over by habit. "You feeling sick?" He placed a hand to her forehead. "Temperature? Upset stomach?"

"No, no, nothing like that." She took a large sip of wine.

He glanced at the bottle and frowned. "Where'd you get the wine?"

"Oh, it was a gift." She reached over and picked up a small box, handing it to him. "And so was this." She added another. "And this. And this."

Confused, he looked at the boxes, then at her. "Gifts?"

"*Wedding* gifts." She slugged back more of the wine.

"Wedding...." His brow furrowed deeply. "From *who*?"

She smiled sardonically at him. "From the gang at work."

"At... work? At *your* work?"

"Yes, at my work. Seems they threw together a little impromptu shower for us."

Still looking tremendously confused, he shook his head. "But... how did they...?"

She smiled again, but the humor was thin. "Oh, it seems there's quite a little grapevine between the different stations, dispatch, Rampart..."

His eyes widened. "Rampart?!"

"Oh, didn't you know? Seems word our our elopement has spread there, too. And God knows where else. And that's not the best part."

He ran a hand through his hair and blew out a breath, almost afraid to ask. "It's not?"

"Oh, no, you're gonna love this." She swirled the remainder of the wine in her glass, then swallowed it. "You're gonna be a daddy."

The expression on his face almost made the day from hell she'd had worth it. His jaw dropped clear to his lap, and she could swear he turned three shades paler just from the words. "I...*what*??? But... but we didn't... I... We..."

She chuckled and patted his knee. "Relax, Romeo. That's just the latest rumor going around. I didn't say it was true." Her expression turned more serious. "But with the speed this whole thing is spreading, I wouldn't be surprised if I got a baby shower before the week was out."

The color came back to his face, but it was still pinched. "Jackie, I'm so sorry! I had no idea this was going to get so out of control. And I swear, I have absolutely no idea where anyone would get the idea you were... Y'know. That was never part of what was going on with the guys." "I know it wasn't, but I guess it's an easy enough jump from getting married on the spur of the moment." Jackie closed her eyes and rubbed her temples tiredly. "I never imagined my life as a soap opera before."

"I'm really, really sorry," he said again earnestly

She smiled. "Hey, it's not your fault. I was a more than willing participant in the whole gag, remember? I thought it was good, harmless fun." She paused. "But it's not anymore, Johnny. It's not fun, and it's not harmless. It's getting way out of hand. I just want to get the whole thing cleared up. Okay?"

He reached for the phone. "I'll call Dixie right now and get this squared away. Then, I'll..." He stopped, unsure of just how to start tracking down where the rumor had expanded to. "I'll call every station in the county if I have to. But I swear, after tonight, there'll be no more misunderstandings. Tomorrow, we both go back to being single, and, um..."

"Not pregnant," she finished for him, amused that even saying it seemed to make him uncomfortable.

"Right, that." He smiled hesitantly.

Unable to resist one last poke at him, she said, "Good thing for you Joe's ship sailed already."

"Why?"

Barely able to fight down a smirk, she said, "What do you think he'd do if he heard you got his sister pregnant?" Picking up the phone, she held it out to him. "Better start dialing."

The look on his face as he took it sent her into gales of laughter.

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Several hours later, Johnny and Jackie made it back to his apartment after a burger run for a late dinner. It hadn't taken much to convince Dixie that the whole rumor was exactly that -- she'd had her doubts from the beginning. She'd promised to take care of clearing things up at Rampart. The calls to the various stations had been a tougher sell. It seemed that everyone was willing to believe that the two of them had eloped, but no one wanted to believe that they hadn't. After several strongly worded conversations, Johnny was confident that he'd managed to get in touch with everyone involved with the rumor. Everyone, that is, except the guys from his own station. Neither Mike, Marco, or Chet answered their phones. Johnny figured he'd try them again after they ate, and if he still couldn't get them, he'd just handle it in the morning.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, Jackie started dividing up the food. "I'm so glad we got that taken care of. At least I'll be able to sleep tonight."

"I'll bet there are gonna be a few other people who can't sleep, thinking about how stupid they were," Johnny said, reaching for his soda. As he picked it up, the bottom of the cup collapsed and the entire thing dumped onto the table and onto the both of them. Jackie jumped back with a small cry, but couldn't avoid getting the worst of it squarely in her lap. Johnny didn't fair much better.

Dripping soda, Jackie looked down at herself, then at him, then to the mess on the floor. A single giggle escaped her, then another, then she let loose with gales of uncontrollable laughter. Johnny looked at her as though she'd lost her mind. "You find this funny?"

She tried to speak, but couldn't stop laughing. Finally, she managed to get out, "After everything that's happened today, this is just about the only way the day could end. It's actually pretty funny." She put a hand to her side as she started to get a stitch from laughing too much.

He handed her a roll of paper towels, then looked the mess over and grinned. "Yeah, I guess it is." Gesturing to her soaked clothes, he added, "Especially since most of it landed on you." He ducked as she tossed a wad of dripping paper towels at him.

"Funny guy." She ripped a few more towels off the roll and blotted at her jeans. "I guess I'll go change..." She broke off with a groan. "I only brought enough clothes for two days. I don't have anything clean to change into."

"Well, I could take your stuff down to the laundry room and wash it for you," Johnny offered.

"You?" She asked incredulously. "Wash?"

"I have been known to do it on occasion," he replied, crossing his arms.

"Okay, smart guy, so what am I supposed to wear while you're doing that?" she asked, hands on hips.

He eyed the wad of towels in her hand carefully before answering. "There's a robe somewhere in my closet. Or a pair of sweats. They'd be big, but they'd do until your clothes were done."

She weighed her options. Wet, sticky jeans, or a nice dry pair of sweats and the chance to watch Gage do something domestic. The choice was easy. "Okay, I'll take the sweats."

He dug them out of the closet for her, and she went into the bathroom to change. Coming out, she nearly

tripped over the way-too-long bottoms. Her five-foot-three frame was a far cry from Johnny's six-foot one.

Johnny tried his very best not to laugh, but a chuckle still found its way out. She glared at him, but he could see the twinkle in her eyes that said she was ready to start laughing herself. "You look... cute," he said, holding his hands out for her clothes.

Hiking up the sleeves so she could use her hands, she tried rolling the pants legs up, but they wouldn't stay. With a sigh, she looked down at herself. "I look ridiculous."

"Well, nobody's gonna see you, so don't worry about it. I'll go throw this into the washer."

Pulling the sleeves up again, she asked, "What about you? Aren't you going to change?"

He nodded. "When I get back. *I* have clothes I can change into."

She stuck her tongue out at him as he made a quick exit, then attempted to go clean up the mess in the kitchen, but she kept getting tripped up over the sweats. After nearly landing on her butt for the third time, she decided there had to be something better for her to wear in Johnny's closet and wandered down to his bedroom. "Okay, you said there was a robe in here..." she muttered as she pulled the closet door open. She rummaged quickly through its contents, stopping briefly when she saw the ugliest pair of patch-work jeans she'd ever seen in her life. She screwed up her nose in distaste. "Gage, we've gotta have a *long* talk about your fashion sense."

Unable to find the robe, she opted instead for one of his shirts, which came down almost to her knees. She folded the sweats and put them on his bed, then went out and finished cleaning the kitchen. As she dumped the soggy and cold burgers and fries into the garbage, there was a knock at the door. She looked at it in a small panic, then her gaze fell to Johnny's keys on the counter and grinned. As she went to open the door, she said, "Johnny, I swear, you'd forget your head if it wasn't..." She broke off when the face on the other side of the door wasn't Johnny's, but Chet's. And Marco's. And Mike's.

The four of them stared at each other in shocked silence for a moment before Jackie remembered what she was wearing and her eyes widened. "Oh! I, um..." She did a quick about-face and bolted for the bedroom. Just before she closed the door, she heard Johnny's voice coming from out in the hallway.

There was a knock on the bedroom door about ten minutes later. "Jackie?"

Still mortified, she sighed. "Yeah, come in."

The door pushed open hesitantly, and Johnny poked his head in. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Embarrassed as hell, but that never killed anyone." 'Although I was wishing it would a few minutes ago. How can I ever face those guys again? A shirt! I answered the door in nothing but a shirt!' "They still here?"

"They still here?"

"No, no, they're gone." He came into the room. "They, ah, came to bring us a wedding present."

She put her face in her hands with a groan. "Oh, God..."

"It's okay, I cleared everything up with them."

"Good." 'Except I'm sure they had a hard time believing you with me running around dressed like this.'

He seemed to read her mind. "I, ah, see you changed since I left."

Tugging self-consciously at the shirt, she shrugged. "I kept tripping over the sweats, and I couldn't find the robe."

"Yeah, well..." He rubbed his chin, trying hard not to stare. "Well, the robe probably wouldn't have looked half as good on you as the shirt does."

She smiled shyly, and they shared an awkward moment of silence. Finally, she realized she was sitting on his bed wearing next to nothing, and quickly got up. "I, um, think maybe I'll put the sweats back on."

Having realized the same thing quite a bit sooner, he nodded quickly, half-relieved, half-disappointed. "Good idea."

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Back in her own apartment the following night, Jackie dumped out her suitcase on the bed and started sorting out the clothes for the wash. Her across-the-hall neighbor and friend, Meagan, sat on the edge of the bed, a bowl of the ice cream she had brought over for dessert in her hand. "So, did you have fun?" she asked, eyes gleaming.

"I wouldn't exactly call it *fun*," Jackie answered. "It was... different."

"Oh, come on!" Meagan exclaimed in disbelief. "Two nights at his place, and *nothing* happened? Either you two are dead, or very, very confused."

"Meagan, I told you a dozen times, Johnny is a friend. That's it." 'If only it was as easy as it sounded,' she thought.

Her friend pulled out Johnny's shirt from the pile of dirty laundry and raised her eyebrows questioningly. "Just friends, huh?"

Jackie snatched the shirt back as nonchalantly as she could. "I said I'd wash it for him. I had to put it on while he was washing my.... Oh, never mind!" Blushing furiously, she wadded the shirt up and threw it in the hamper, along with the jeans and top that Johnny had had washed for her. They were now an interesting pseudo-tie-dye, as bleach had somehow found its way into the washer. Johnny had been overly apologetic, offering to replace them, but she decided she kind of liked the new look, and had declined.

"Uh-huh." Meagan smiled smugly around a mouthful of pistachio.

"So, how was *your* sleep over?" Jackie asked, trying to deflect the conversation.

Grimacing, Meagan rolled her eyes. "After two days back with my parents, if I ever had any doubts about moving out on my own being the right decision, they're history now!"

"How much lasagna did she send back with you this time?" Jackie asked with a smirk. It had become an on-going joke between them that Meagan's mother's answer to everything was food. Little wonder the girl had lost ten pounds since moving out.

"About five pounds of it," Meagan sighed. "Take half?"

"Deal." Jackie took her own bowl of ice cream from her nightstand and took a huge mouthful, grimacing as the cold stabbed her right between the eyes.



Something at the bottom of the suitcase caught Meagan's eye, and she reached in to withdraw it. Eyes first going wide, then squinting suspiciously, she twirled the circle of gold on her finger. "Ahem. What's this?"

Nearly choking as the ice cream went down the wrong way, Jackie reached for the ring, but Meagan snatched her hand back, keeping it out of reach. "It's nothing. Give it to me."

"Doesn't look like nothing to me." Meagan held the ring up, stuck on her index finger, and fixed her friend with a hard stare. "Looks like a wedding ring."

"It is. Well, it's *not*," she corrected quickly, "not really. It was a joke. A prank Johnny was pulling on some of the guys he works with. It's just a cheap dime store thing. Now, give it to me."

Meagan considered egging her on a little more, then changed her mind and tossed the ring over to her. "Come on, the movie's starting in a minute." She got up, bringing her ice cream with her. "Then you can tell me all about this 'prank'."

"I'll be right there." Jackie's hand closed over the ring as she walked over to the waste basket. "So long, Mrs. Gage." Her hand opened, but she hesitated before throwing it away. Staring at the cheap band of gold, she grinned, then walked over to her jewelry box and placed it inside. Closing the lid, she shook her head and laughed at the silliness of keeping the momento, but she left it there nonetheless, and went out to join Meagan in front of the tv.

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Sitting in front of the tv, Johnny flipped around the dial restlessly. 'News, golf... oh yeah, now there's a fun spectator sport... Movie of the Week... Jackie wanted to see that...'

"Hey, Jackie, that movie..." He trailed off as he realized that he was alone in the apartment. Shaking his head at himself, he flipped around the rest of the channels, then ended up back at the movie. Settling in with a large dish of pistachio ice cream, he cast a wistful look at the far end of the couch -- the empty end -- and muttered softly, "Goodnight, Mrs. Gage, wherever you are."

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