

The Nuisance: John's Story

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

The shift started out all right. I even made it to the station in plenty of time to change into my uniform and make it to roll call with minutes to spare. That is until one of Chet Kelly's water bombs got me when I opened my locker. It'd been a year since the last one. In fact, the last water bomb was the day before somebody put the CPR dummy in Chet's car and he thought it was a dead body. I didn't do it! Chet thought I did, which was fine by me 'cause the water bombs and the other juvenile practical jokes stopped.

The CPR dummy in Chet's car was a funny gag. It really freaked him out to think somebody'd crawled into his car and died. He didn't drive the thing for a week afterwards. He bummed rides from Marco. Wish I knew who pulled it. I'd like to shake his hand, and maybe get some pointers.

Every time I had a good gag figured out and ready to set up, Chet got me with it first. Man, if I'd ever found a genie in a bottle, my first wish would've been to find out how Chet managed to get me with my own pranks. My second wish would've been to get Chet with one of his own pranks. Then I'd wish for unlimited wishes.

I had to dry off, so I was a few minutes late for roll call. Cap didn't say anything about my hair being wet. All he did was smirk at me. I thought I was gonna hear "wet look" jokes the entire shift. That, or "Get a haircut, Gage." Even Roy got into it, and he's supposed to be my friend.

Not that any of that really bothers me. Every bully in the town I grew up in had my number. Hell, I got the shit kicked out of me regularly just for existing. Then I figured that I could out-run them. That was why I became "Gage the Galloping Greyhound." Stupid name, I know. It was a high school paper for cryin' out loud!

When the engine went out to a trash fire that night, I tried to get Chet back by short-sheeting his bed. I figured that would do until I could come up with something more creative. Then Roy and I responded to a heart attack. I just knew we were gonna get back after the engine and I was gonna miss my own joke.

Roy and I got back from the follow-up to Rampart a little before 11. The engine had just pulled in and Cap and the guys were just getting out of their turnout gear as Roy parked the squad. I wanted to suggest that we all turn in, since we never knew how long we'd get to sleep. I played it cool, though. I went into the kitchen and got a snack and a glass of milk.

Chet was on the couch watching some cheesy horror movie when Cap decided it was time for lights out. Everybody made their way into the dorm and we set our turnout pants and boots up next to our bunks. Then we turned in.

"What's this?" Chet called as I was getting into my bunk. "Somebody short-sheeted my bed. Gage."

Man! How'd he figure it out? Roy was the only one who knew, 'cause he watched me do it.

Marco was laughing. "Not very original, John."

"Yeah, Gage. You know, that's your problem. You lack originality." Chet chuckled.

"Shut up, Chet." I growled, then put the pillow over my head.

"Hey, Cap, since Gage screwed up my bed, I think he should have to remake it."

"Kelly, just fix your bunk and get into it." Cap did his best to stay neutral, but I could hear that he was trying not to laugh. "Let's get some sleep."

"I told you it wouldn't work." Roy's voice brought my head out from under the pillow. He was smirking at me!

I grinned. "I didn't hear you come up with any better ideas."

"That's 'cause I'm staying out of it." Roy grinned back.

"Maybe I'll put the CPR dummy in his car again." I muttered. "Night, Roy."

"Night."

My stomach growling woke me up. I wanted to turn over and go back to sleep, but my stomach had other ideas. I crawled out of my bunk, put my turnout pants and boots on and crept out to the kitchen.

I thought the emergency light in the apparatus bay would be enough to get me across to the kitchen. And it would have, if Roy hadn't pulled the squad so far back. My right knee had an "up close and personal" encounter with the back bumper of the squad.

You know, if I were superstitious, I would've known that this shift was gonna be a bad one. First Chet's water bomb got me, then he spoiled my prank, then I whacked my knee on the squad. I didn't believe in omens and stuff like that. Well, maybe just a little.

I didn't even get into the kitchen to get my snack. I was still trying to decide if I'd broken something when the tones sounded and the lights in the station came on. "Station 51, unknown-type rescue. 2-0-1-7 Alamo Avenue. Cross street Warner. 2-0-1-7 Alamo Avenue. Time out 1:50."

"You okay?" Roy frowned at me.

I flexed my right leg. "Yeah, just whacked my knee. Why'd you pull the squad so far back?"

Roy didn't answer me. He just shook his head and walked around to the driver's door of the squad.

"Hey, John." Mike was passing me on his way to the cab of the engine. "Short sheeting a short guy's bed is a waste of time."

"Your dad tell you that, Mike?" I laughed when Mike grinned, then I got into the squad.

What a waste of time! The "unknown-type rescue" was a lady spaced-out on a barstool. She'd been like that for 6 hours and the bartender didn't bother to call anybody until he wanted to close. Bet he would've called us sooner if she'd died on him.

We didn't even get a chance to figure out if there was something seriously wrong with the woman 'cause her friend came in and took her out of the bar as soon as she came around. Hell, Vince was there. He could've handled it. All that lady needed was to sober up anyway.

There were better ways to handle the calls. The County just hadn't figured that out. Having more dispatchers, maybe even some with a little medical training would be a start. I guessed that made too much sense. We were dealing with a government agency after all.

"Well, what was it?" Mike called as I walked out of the bar and passed the engine.

"Ahhh, some spaced-out dame." The drug box was heavy, so I switched it from my right hand to my left hand.

"Have you got the MICU form?" Roy called from behind me.

I shook my head and turned back to him. "No. I don't have 'em." They were in the biophone the last time I'd seen 'em. "They should be there. In the biophone."

I walked around the front of the squad, watching Roy as he stopped, set the biophone on the hood and popped the latches. I didn't know I was in the street until I heard an engine. That was when I looked. Right into a pair of headlights heading right for me. I must've been a sight, standing there like an idiot with my eyes wide and my mouth hanging open.

Getting out of the car's way would've been the thing to do, but I couldn't move. I just stood there, staring for what seemed like forever. At the last second, I managed to turn. And something hit me. Hard! I felt the drug box fly out of my hand as my head and shoulder connected with the windshield.

Next thing I knew, I was airborne. That lasted about two seconds, then I was face down on wet concrete. I was surprised I didn't hurt. I guessed my body was still in shock at that point.

I might've blacked out for a second, 'cause the next thing I knew, I was on my back. All I wanted to do

was get up, get in the squad and go back to the station. A hand touched my back and that was when the pain started.

This pain was worse than any I'd ever felt in my entire life. I tried to get away from it, but it followed me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I thought I heard Roy's voice, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. I wouldn't have been able to answer him anyway.

I kept thinking the Department was gonna fire me for getting hurt again. It hurt like hell, but I tried to sit up anyway. If I could just get up and get to the squad, the Department would never know. Besides, I didn't want to go to Rampart. That meant needles and people poking and prodding me. There was nothing I hated more than being poked and prodded.

Something was holding me down. "Are you all right?" Roy was shouting at me. "Can you hear me?"

Of course I could hear him, shouting like that. I tried to tell him that, but nothing came out of my mouth.

"Where do you hurt?" Roy was right there, but his voice sounded like it was coming from miles away.

"My . . . hip . . . my back . . . my leg." Then the lights went out.

"Johnny, can you hear me?" That was Roy's voice.

I tried to open my eyes, but they were too heavy. "Wha?"

"The bad news is the drug box is in worse shape than you are. The good news is you won't have any needles until you get to Rampart." Roy was really worried. The bad jokes were my job.

I tried to smile. "Good." I knew Roy was already thinking this was his fault when I was the idiot that walked out in front of the speeding car.

I had a soft collar on, so I couldn't move my head, but I managed to get my eyes open. Chet was there, and he looked more scared than Roy was. And Cap and Marco. They looked pretty scared, too.

If I hadn't hurt so much, I probably would've been scared, too. As it was, I had a colony of bees attacking my right leg and another colony inside my head. The two sets of bees got really pissed when they rolled me onto the backboard. I knew I was gonna pass out even before it happened.

My turnout coat was gone when I came to. And I was freezing. "Cold."

"We'll have you bundled up in a minute." I recognized Roy's voice without opening my eyes. I heard a

blanket pack being opened and when I opened my eyes, Mike and Roy were wrapping it around the backboard. It didn't warm me up, though.

"Can you guys make it okay, there?" The backboard lifted up and the bees started eating at my leg again.

"How you feeling?" Roy was standing over me.

"Ummm . . . trying to think of something funny, but I hurt too much." I must've been on a gurney because I felt it turn. The gurney moved and I must've blacked out because when I opened my eyes, I was inside the ambulance. "Roy?"

"Right here, Johnny. I'm gonna take your blood pressure. Okay?"

"Hurts." I hoped one word was enough. I couldn't manage more than that.

"You'll be at Rampart in a couple minutes." Pause. "110/80." Another pause. I knew he was checking my vitals, but I was too out of it. "I'm gonna check your pupils."

Roy pulled my right eye open, and the light went all the way through to the back of my head. If I hadn't had the collar on, I could've gotten away from it. The left eye wasn't any better. "Rampart, this is County 51. Do you read?"

I passed out before Rampart answered.

"You still with me, Johnny?" Roy's voice.

I tried to open my eyes to see where I was. "I . . . I . . ." I wasn't looking. I should've looked.

"I'm gonna take your b.p. again. Okay?" Roy pulled my left arm out from under the blanket.

I heard the siren and realized I was still in the ambulance. Something was wrong, but I couldn't figure out just what. Everything hurt. Even my hair. My heart felt like it was gonna beat itself out of my chest.

The gurney moved and got the bees started again.

"What happened, Roy?" That sounded like Dr. Early. I barely heard him over the buzzing in my head. Then I was moving. Fast. "John, can you hear me?" Dr. Early maybe? I wasn't sure. The movement stopped.

If I hadn't been so tired, I would've screamed when they moved me. And I thought I hurt before. I tried to focus on the light above me.

"Johnny? It's Dr. Early, can you hear me?"

Someone was groaning, and I realized it was me. I didn't even feel the I.V. go in, but I knew that would be the first thing they'd do. I did feel the blanket being pulled away. Then the light above me spun and went out.

I was freezing.

"Mike, you see this bruise?"

I could hear the blood pressure cuff being inflated.

"Johnny? Johnny? Can you hear me?" Dr. Early's voice.

"I . . . uh . . . I . . . I . . ." My mouth wasn't working.

"Johnny? Johnny, can you hear me?" The voice was close.

"I . . . I didn't . . ."

"B.p.'s down. 90/60. He's gonna go out on us." Sounded like Morton.

Hands on my left side brought me around again. I groaned.

"That hurt?"

I wanted to yell. "Yes! It hurt like hell! Stop!" The only thing that came out was another groan. Hands moved my left leg. That didn't hurt, but the hands on my stomach did. Another groan.

"Johnny!" Now Dr. Early was yelling at me.

I managed to open my eyes. The light was too bright and my eyes closed. "Uhhh . . . uhhh . . .Wha?"

"Does your right shoulder hurt?"

There was probably a good reason to ask that. I opened my eyes. The light was still there. Right shoulder? Pain? "No."

"How about the other one?"

The light was too bright. Left shoulder? "Yeah . . . ah . . . a little." Right leg. "My leg hurts."

Dr. Early said something about blunt trauma. He was talking too fast for me to understand all of it.

I heard the door behind me open, then wheels squeaking. When the door closed, I knew what was coming. They were gonna have to move me to get the films. And I was gonna hurt worse than I already did. I finally managed to yell. Once. Then the light above me went out.

When I came around this time, half of the bees had moved to my belly. The light was back on when I opened my eyes. "Wha?"

"Johnny, it's Joe Early. Do you know what happened to you?"

I told him I was hit by a car. Tried to, anyway. Even I couldn't understand what I said.

"Johnny?" He didn't understand me, either.

Roy knew. If he was here, he could tell Dr. Early what happened. "Roy?" If he wasn't here, had something happened to him, too?

"He's right here."

Was Roy hurt, too? "All . . . right?" The pain in my belly was getting worse. It was too big to be bees. Something was ripping me in half.

"I'm fine. You're the one on the exam bed." Roy's voice.

"Dr . . . driver?" Something was squeezing my chest and it was hard to get the word out.

"Don't worry about that, now." Roy didn't want me to worry about it, but I needed to know.

"Sorry." I should've been looking where I was going.

"It's gonna be okay."

I heard the door open again. I thought they needed more x-rays. I was too busy trying to breathe to care. Voices floated around me, but I couldn't understand what they said.

"Johnny, you've got a fractured tibia and fibula." Dr. Early's voice was next to me.

"Doc . . ." My face started to tingle. "My belly . . . is really start . . . startin' to hurt me a lot."

"BP's 90/60. He's diaphoretic."

"It's really be . . ." I was so cold. ". . . beginnin' to kill me." I was tired, too. It took all I had just to keep breathing. I tried to take deep breaths, but still wasn't getting any air into my lungs. The room did a slow spin, then went dark again.

The next thing I knew, the pain in my belly and my leg were gone. Well, not entirely gone. But they weren't killing me either. It felt like the room had stopped spinning, too. My eyes opened and I stared up at the ceiling.

"BP's 100/60."

"6 units of blood. We'll get him up to the OR right away. Tell the nurse to make the arrangements. All right, Mike?" Dr. Early was talking fast, but this time, I could understand every word.

Surgery. I closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them again, Roy was standing next to the bed. "Well . . . hang in there." He tried to smile.

I tried to grin. "Oh, yeah . . . both hands." My eyes closed, but somehow I managed to open them. "Sorry . . . my fault . . ."

Roy went from looking worried, to looking guilty. He started to say something, then I saw Morton "Roy, why don't you step outside, now?"

Roy wouldn't argue with Morton. If I'd had the strength, I would've argued.

"Hang in there, Johnny." Then he was gone. I'd always thought Roy was born worried. Then I found out about his dad's death and I understood why he worried so much.

"What've we got, Mike?" A man's voice I didn't recognize.

"30 year old firefighter hit by a car a little over an hour ago. He's got a fractured tibia and fibula . . ." My eyes closed and Morton's voice faded.

"John, it's Mike Morton. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah." I pulled my eyes open to find Morton leaning over me.

"John, you don't have any abrasions or contusions on your face, but I want to check for fractures." Morton paused. "If I touch anything that hurts, tell me."

Roy must've told him I landed on my face. "You'll be the second to know." I must've missed a party,

'cause I sounded drunk.

"Do you feel any loose teeth?" Morton asked when he'd finished checking my face.

"Unh-uh." I was starting to feel drunk, too.

"I'm gonna check, okay?" Morton's bedside manner had improved since the last time he'd treated me.

I almost laughed when he opened my mouth 'cause dinner had lots of garlic, onions and chili peppers. It was one of Marco's special recipes.

"Does your neck hurt, Johnny?" Morton was never that nice to me.

My neck? "No."

"Did it hurt after the accident?" The voice I didn't know.

"Mmmmm . . ." I had to think about that one. "I don't think so." I closed my eyes.

"We need to get him to the O.R." Morton paused. "Ortho can meet us there to clear his c-spine."

They moved me to a gurney, but it didn't hurt this time. Then the gurney started moving and I figured that keeping my eyes closed was a pretty good idea.

"What about bridges or plates?" The voice I didn't know again.

"Neither." Morton's voice.

"Hang in there, Johnny." Hey, that was Chet's voice!

I tried to ask Chet why he was still at the hospital, but my mouth wasn't working. Chet never called me Johnny. I was either Gage, John, Pigeon, or Stogie. I was hurt worse than I thought if the little troll was worried about me. Of course, I was hurt worse than I thought! I was on my way to surgery for cryin' out loud!

"How're you doing, Johnny?" Come to think of it, Morton never called me Johnny either.

"Mmmmm . . ." That was the best I could do. I was doin' just fine.

The gurney stopped, but everything was fuzzy around the edges when I opened my eyes. So I closed them again.

"Spine's clear. Let's get him prepped." Dr. Early's voice.

Hands moved me from the gurney to a hard, narrow table. Did I say it was cold, too? It was very cold.

"Mr. Gage, I'm going to put something in your I.V. that will help you relax." The voice I didn't know again.

I opened my eyes again, but all I could see were two bright lights over me. They were fuzzy around the edges, too. "M pretty . . . relaxed . . . already . . ." I blinked and the lights sharpened up a little.

The voice laughed, but I wasn't joking! If they'd left me alone for a few minutes, I could've gone to sleep without anesthesia.

I felt something cold in my right arm and it got very hard to keep my eyes open. Voices floated around me and I was about to drift off when the pain in my belly came back. This time, it felt like whatever was chewing on my gut had finally managed to split me in half. I wouldn't have been surprised to find out that they had to pry me off the ceiling of the O.R. The voices turned into static. Just over the static, I heard a voice moaning.

The pain got worse instead of better, and the moaning and static went on forever. ". . . deep breaths . . ." The static started again after those two words.

I smelled something metallic and tried to take deep breaths like the voice told me to do. It felt like hours, but the pain finally backed off and the static turned into voices again.

"That's good. Deep, slow breaths." It was the voice from the treatment room.

"He's stabilizing." Morton's voice.

After a minute, the moaning stopped, too. The pain was still there, but I didn't care anymore.

"Good. That was too close." Dr. Early's voice. "John, can you hear me?"

I tried to answer him, but there was a mask over my face. My eyes wouldn't open, and when I tried to move my arms, I realized they were tied down.

Dr. Early must've known I could hear him anyway. "The G-suit was taking the pressure off your leg and abdomen. When we took it off, the pressure came back." He paused. "Dr. Logan is going to put you under, and Mike and I are going to take care of that abdominal bleeding." He paused again. "Dr. Tower will set your leg, and I'll see you when you wake up."

The cervical collar was gone and I managed to nod.

"Okay, Mr. Gage, I just want you to keep taking deep, slow breaths," the man from the treatment room told me. "And count backwards from 100."

The mask lifted a little, and I started counting. "100 . . . 99 . . . 98 . . ." What came next? "97 . . . 96 . . . 95 . . ." My mouth suddenly felt dry. I had to swallow. ". . . 95 . . . 94 . . ." That was as far as I got.

Then there was nothing.

". . . blood . . . all right . . . can't . . . get . . . suction . . ." Was I at the dentist, having a cavity filled? ". . . rupture . . . take . . . out . . ." That didn't sound like my dentist. I heard a heart monitor and a ventilator. I'd never heard those at my dentist's. It was the weirdest feeling. I knew the words were about me, but they weren't.

After a few minutes of blackness, I felt something cold and wet on my right leg. There was something in my throat. It didn't bother me at first, then it started to choke me. I tried to cough, but it wouldn't budge.

"How's it going? He's coming out of it." It was the voice from the treatment room. At least, I thought it was.

"The bone's set and I'm putting the finishing touches on the cast. Let him wake up." All I knew was that the voice didn't belong to Dr. Early, or Morton.

The thing in my throat was gone before I could decide whether or not I cared about who was talking. Whatever it was, it hadn't hurt as much going in as it had coming out. "Mmmmm . . ." I tried to tell the voices that my throat hurt. But my mouth wasn't working. I'll bet Chet bribed the doctors to wire my jaw shut. I was asleep before I could get really mad about it.

I dreamed I was flying. It was too dark to see anything, but I could feel the wind blowing in my face and moving across my body. And I was enjoying it until I landed. Whatever I landed on was soft, but the landing wasn't. The only thing I could feel was pain in my left side that wrapped all the way around to my back. I wanted to tell someone, but there wasn't anybody to tell.

"John, can you hear me?" Dr. Early's voice. He would stop the pain when I told him.

"Mmmmm . . ." My mouth still wasn't working.

"You're in the Recovery Room. The surgery went well and you're going to be just fine." Dr. Early must've thought I was telling him I could hear him.

The pain in my belly was worse than it had been in the treatment room when I told him about it the first time. It would kill me if Dr. Early didn't make it stop soon. "Hhhhh . . ."

"Mike's on his way up with Roy. He's anxious to see you," Dr. Early went on. He said something else, but the words started running together.

Roy! Roy would know, even if I couldn't tell him that I hurt. Roy would know what to do.

I waited and listened. I must've been concentrating so hard that I forgot about the pain. The next thing I knew, I was asleep.

Somebody tapped my shoulder. "C'mon, Gage. No sleeping on duty. That's reserved for ranks above Captain." Roy was whispering, but I couldn't figure out why.

I wanted to say, "Very funny," but my mouth still wasn't working. I tried to open my eyes so I could roll them at him, but they refused to open.

"Time's up, Mr. DeSoto."

Roy's boots squeaked as he walked away. The pain was gone, too, so I went back to sleep.

When I woke up the next time, I wasn't in the hospital. I was lying on the pavement. I was wrapped in a yellow blanket that was so tight my arms and legs were numb. My gut, on the other hand, felt like I'd been sawed in half. The blanket must've been the only thing holding me together.

"Roy?" It came out sounding like a frog's croak.

Boots squeaked behind my head and I looked up at Roy, standing over me. "*It's about time, Pally.*"

"*Get me out of this thing.*" More croaks.

"*What were you thinking about when you walked out into the street without looking?*" Roy rolled his eyes. "*What am I saying? If you'd been thinking, you wouldn't have walked out into the street.*"

"*Roy, please.*" The croaking wasn't doing me any good.

Marco looked down at me. "*Boy, John, I hope your insurance is paid up.*"

"*Insurance?*"

"*Yeah, Gage, you really did a number on that poor guy's car.*" Chet was standing over me, too.

"*I just bought this car a month ago! Now it's ruined!*" It was a man's voice, but all I could see were legs and tires.

"*Look, I'm sorry. I'll take care of the damage. Somebody just get me out of this blanket.*"

"It was a really nice car, too." I couldn't see Mike, but I could hear his voice.

"I said I was sorry. Please, somebody get this damn blanket off me. It's starting to hurt." I was pleading, but Roy, Marco and Chet just kept looking down at me. I looked around, hoping I could find somebody to help me.

I saw a woman standing next to the squad. That meant, this all had to be a dream. There weren't any women at the scene. Were there? I didn't remember.

Then I recognized the woman. I thought I'd forgotten what she looked like, but I hadn't. "Mama." She'd been dead 15 years. That meant I was either dead, too, or I was gonna die soon.

"Mom, please help me." I was begging and I didn't care about Chet, or anybody else hearing.

Cap knelt next to me and shook my shoulder. "Can you hear me, sir?" A woman's voice was coming out of Cap's mouth! I looked over at him. "Can you open your eyes for me?"

I looked over at the squad, but my mother was gone.

The antiseptic smell told me I was in the hospital after all. I tried to open my eyes, but my lids felt like they were taped shut. When I finally pulled them apart, I couldn't see anything but shapes.

"Do you know your name, sir?" It was the same voice I heard coming from Cap. That meant the other must've been a dream. Which was good. I didn't like the other option much.

"J . . . John . . . Gage."

"Do you know what year it is, Mr. Gage?"

"Ummmm . . . 76."

"That's right." A pause. "Do you know where you are?"

I closed my eyes. "Hos . . . hospital . . . Rampart."

"Call Dr. Early." Did she want me to call Dr. Early?

"How're his vitals?" Dr. Early's voice.

"Vitals are stable, doctor." Hmmm, nice voice. I would definitely have to remember to put a face

with it. And then get her phone number.

"John, it's Joe Early. Can you hear me?" I felt a hand on my shoulder.

My left side was on fire. "Hurts . . ." My mouth had finally started working. I opened my eyes again, but everything was still blurry and blinking didn't clear it up.

"We'll give you something for that," Dr. Early promised. "Then we'll move you to a room on the Orthopedic floor."

"Kay." I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

I heard boots squeaking and fought to pull my eyes open. Somebody was in the chair next to the bed. "Roy?" It hurt to talk.

"These stupid boots," Roy whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"S'okay." It really hurt to talk.

"Here, the nurse left some ice chips." Roy picked up a cup and I reached for it. Man, did that hurt! "I'll get it." Roy picked up the spoon and dipped it into the cup.

Roy held the spoon out and I felt pretty stupid having him feed me. The pain in my throat was worse, so I let him feed me. I melted the ice chips in my mouth, then swallowed them. I closed my eyes and my throat felt a little better.

Roy was sitting in the chair when I opened my eyes. I looked around and recognized a hospital room. I didn't have a clue why I was there. "Wha' happen'd?"

"We were leaving a run and you were hit by a car."

"You're okay?" He'd said "you," but Roy wouldn't tell me if he'd been hurt, too.

"It took ten years off my life, but, other than that, I'm fine."

"Sorry."

"The important thing is you're gonna be okay. How're you doing?"

That was a tough question. I had to think about it. "Hmmm . . . a little tired."

"Just a little, huh?" Roy wasn't too mad at me 'cause he was smiling.

I grinned. "A lot."

"You're not in any pain, though? I can call the nurse." He reached toward the rail of the bed. I vaguely remembered somebody telling me something about the rail. I just couldn't remember what.

For the first time, my belly didn't hurt. "Nope. No pain." My eyes closed. Roy'd just told me what happened, but I couldn't remember all of it. Something about a car. "A car, huh?"

"A car."

I was tired, but I didn't want to fall asleep on Roy. I pulled my eyes open. Had Roy said I was hit by a car? "Car?"

"Don't worry about that now, Johnny." I knew Roy was worrying about it plenty. More than enough for the both of us. If I hadn't been so tired, I would've told him not to. "Hey, what do you want from your house? I can stop and pick some stuff up on my way back this afternoon."

"Mmmmm." My eyes closed and I had to pull them open again. "Pajamas . . . books." When they closed this time, I couldn't open them. "Magazines."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of your mail and everything."

I mumbled something that I hoped sounded like "Thanks." I couldn't stay awake any longer.

When I woke up, Roy was gone. I hoped he'd gone home to get some sleep. For a second, I wondered how long I'd been asleep. Then I had other things to worry about. One second, I was burning up. Then freezing cold. Then my stomach cramped and my mouth watered. That meant one thing. I was gonna throw up.

I fumbled at the rail of the bed, looking for the call button that someone had told me would be there. I swallowed several times, hoping it would just go away. It didn't.

Oh, man, it hurt! When it finally stopped, I was pretty sure I'd thrown up everything I'd ever eaten in my life. My left side was on fire again. That wasn't so bad. I was getting used to it. I must've found the call button. The bad part was that the nurse who got to see the whole show was really cute.

"Sorry." It took a lot to embarrass me. Heck, Roy thought nothing embarrassed me. I puked my guts out in front of a cute girl. I was embarrassed. Who wouldn't be?

"Nothing to be sorry for." She had a nice voice, too. "Just take it easy, Mr. Gage. I'm going to get you cleaned up a little. Let me do all the work, okay?"

"You've seen me puke." I was croaking again. "Call me Johnny."

"It happens to the best of us, Johnny." She smiled. "I'm Kate. You probably don't remember me from earlier this morning."

"Sorry." I closed my eyes and heard water running. I opened them when Kate's footsteps came back to the bed.

"Johnny, I've got some water to rinse your mouth out." Kate helped me sit up and I rinsed my mouth. Then she laid me down and I closed my eyes again. After that show, I probably didn't stand a chance with her anyway.

"This should make you feel a little better." She lifted my head and put a cool cloth behind my neck. Her hands were warm and soft.

I opened my eyes again when she put another cool cloth on my forehead. "Sorry 'bout that."

"As I said, it happens to the best of us." Kate had a really great smile. "I'm going to check your dressing, okay?"

"Kay." I was already half-asleep.

I didn't know how long I slept, but when I woke up, my side was killing me. I tried to go back to sleep, but it hurt too much. I heard footsteps and opened my eyes. Cap was half-way across the room. "Cap." I didn't think. I just tried to sit up and made my side hurt worse.

"Take it easy, Pal." Cap put his hand on my left shoulder. "You know I don't stand on formality."

I closed my eyes and tried breathing exercises, but they didn't work. "Sorry." My voice sounded pretty pathetic, so I tried to smile. Maybe then Cap would think I was okay.

"Nothing to be sorry for, Pal." Cap pulled the chair over and sat down. It was a lot easier looking over at him, instead of having to keep looking up.

"My fault. Wasn't paying . . . attention." I figured he was there to yell at me. So I let him know I deserved it. That way he'd just go on and get it over with.

"Who told you that?" Cap sounded pissed. But not at me. "Has somebody else been in to see you?"

"Talkin' to Roy. Didn't see . . . the car."

"John, you were barely in the street and he was going the wrong way." Cap wasn't there to yell at me after all. "He was probably drunk. And the driver knew that. Why do you think he took off?"

"He did?" I didn't see anything after I landed face first on the pavement.

"Like a bat out of hell. Mike gave a description to Vince and he even got the license plate number. It's a personalized plate. They'll be able to track it down." There was something Cap wasn't telling me.

Maybe I was just having a hard time believing that Mike Stoker actually talked to Vince. "Mike." I did a pretty good imitation of a parrot that time.

Cap liked it, 'cause he grinned at me. "You should've seen him, Johnny. I don't think Mike Stoker's talked that much in his entire life. But he talked Vince's ear off at 6 o'clock this morning." Cap patted my left knee. "You just concentrate on getting better."

"Kay." Then I spoiled it by groaning. "Hurts . . . 'M tryin' . . . to think . . . of something . . . funny . . . not working."

"Well, that's 'cause you want to laugh and that hurts." Cap was a really smart guy. "Try thinking about something nice. Like your favorite place to hike. Or that new nurse in Pediatrics."

"Yeah. That might..." My left side didn't want me to forget it was there. I tried to find a more comfortable position in the bed. "That might work." I wasn't interested in that nurse in Pediatrics, though. And I thought Kate might actually be interested in me.

"Are you questioning my judgment, Gage?" Cap's voice sounded hard, but he was smiling.

"No, sir." I grinned.

"Chet, Marco and Mike are planning on stopping by later today. If you don't feel up to it, I can call and tell them." Cap paused and winked. "Hell, I'll order them if you want me to."

"No. Thanks, but . . . company might . . . help." I was lying there thinking about it. That was why it hurt so much.

"Rest'll help, too." Cap stood up. "Go to sleep. That's an order."

"Yes, sir. Thanks, Cap." I managed to keep my eyes open until Cap walked out of the room. Then I tried to figure out if Kate was interested in me. Until I fell asleep again.

I kind of drifted in and out after Cap left. I wasn't asleep, but I wasn't awake either. I heard bits and pieces of conversations in the hall outside my room. A student nurse did the vitals checks. That was disappointing. Not that she wasn't cute. She was. She was just a little young for me.

My side didn't bother me too much if I stayed completely still. That was something I was never very good at. So, every time I tried to get comfortable, my side hurt worse. I knew Mike, Marco and Chet

were coming by, and I didn't want to sleep through their visit. So I just did my best to ignore it.

It must've been around noon by then, because an orderly brought a lunch tray in. He set the tray on the table next to the bed, then left. I was trying to figure out how to get the table to roll my way when Kate walked in the room.

Kate shook her head and rolled the table closer to the bed. "Sorry about that, Johnny." She pulled something from the pocket of her uniform. "Janet said you felt a little warm earlier. I'm going to take your temperature before you eat, okay?"

I shrugged. "Sure." Janet must've been the student nurse. I didn't remember even talking to her.

Kate stuck the thermometer in my mouth. "I'll help you sit up when that's done."

"Kay." I dislodged the thermometer. "Ooops. Sorry."

Kate laughed. "No more talking," she said sternly, wiping the thermometer down and shaking down the mercury. "Or else." I liked that. She let the threat hang there. Then she winked. I liked that even better.

"No more talking," I promised. I probably didn't look very charming with a thermometer sticking out of my mouth. But I tried.

Kate kept an eye on her watch and pulled the thermometer out after four minutes. She held it up to the light and read it. "100.7. How're you feeling?"

I shrugged. "My left side hurts, but I feel okay, I guess."

"You're almost due for your pain medication. Do you want me to get that for you after you eat?"

"No, it's not that bad. Some of the guys I work with are stopping by. I don't wanna miss 'em." I regretted telling her that when she gave me this funny look. "Forget I told you that. Nobody's coming by."

Kate smiled. "I firmly believe that visitors do more good than harm." She helped me sit up, then rolled the tray over. "Just don't let them stay too long. You need rest."

The smell of chicken broth hit me before I could answer her. My stomach did several flips. "Oh . . ."
Then it got ugly.

There wasn't anything to throw up this time. When it finally stopped, I felt like my temperature had gone up two or three degrees. I hoped that was just because I was leaning against Kate. She smelled way better than the soup, too.

"We've gotta stop meeting like this." I was croaking again.

"I know. I'm getting a complex," Kate joked. She brushed the hair off my forehead. "You okay, now?"

I managed to nod and she helped me lay back against the pillow. I should've told her no. Damn!

"It wasn't you." I didn't know if she even heard me. "It was the soup."

"Hospital food." Kate laughed. "Gets 'em every time." I closed my eyes as she lifted my head and put a cool cloth on the back of my neck. She laid a second cloth on my forehead. "I'll go get your pain medication."

I managed to grab her hand. "No, I'm okay." I opened my eyes. "At least until after my friends come. That stuff knocks me out."

Kate wasn't buying it. Heck, her judgment was probably better than mine. She bit her lip for a second, then nodded. "Okay, but if you change your mind . . ." She looked over at the tray. "Feel up to trying something else?"

I shook my head. "I'm not hungry." That alone should've worried me. I was always hungry.

"I'll call Dr. Morton about that fever." Kate picked up the tray.

"Thanks, Kate," I called after her as she walked into the hall.

I closed my eyes and tried to think about something nice, like Cap suggested.

"John, can you hear me?" Morton's voice. I must've dozed off.

I opened my eyes. "Hey, Doc."

"Nurse Hamilton tells me you've started running a temp," Morton began. "Let's just check that."

"Nurse who?" I asked as he stuck the thermometer in my mouth. I knew then I was gonna live. Morton wasn't being nice to me anymore.

"Nurse Hamilton." Morton repeated.

"'Ou mea' Kate." I managed not to dislodge the thermometer that time.

Morton rolled his eyes. "Yes, Kate." He narrowed his eyes. "Just keep quiet and let me take your temperature.

"'Ou are!" I couldn't resist. I felt like crap, and Morton always had rubbed me the wrong way.

Morton surprised me by smiling. "Sorry, John. It's been a long shift." He checked his watch, then pulled the thermometer out and held it up to the light. "101." He rubbed his stethoscope with the palm of his hand, blew on it, then put it against my chest. "It sounds like you might have a start on a case of pneumonia. We'll need a chest x-ray to be sure. I'll send Nurse . . . I mean, Kate in to get blood and urine samples. We'll run some tests and change your antibiotic." He paused, "I'll also send respiratory therapy in with a spirometer. You'll need to use that at least once an hour to get the stuff moving. That and the antibiotic and you should be feeling better tomorrow."

Morton lost me after pneumonia. "Ahhh . . . thanks, Doc."

"I'll check in on you before I take off later." He squeezed my shoulder, then left.

Okay, so Morton wasn't so bad. Like a lot of doctors, his first reaction to the paramedic program was that it was a bad idea. Dr. Brackett was the same way. I guessed I just had a harder time forgiving Morton because he was an intern when Roy and I started. Aside from going to medical school, he didn't have any more hands-on experience than we had.

But, boy, did he act like he did. For the first year or so, Morton second guessed everything we did.

Kate walked into the room and I decided to forget about Morton. "I've got to get a blood sample, John."

She didn't mention the urine sample and I wasn't about to remind her. Then I remembered the Foley. I didn't even want to think about that. Man, I hate needles! "Can you take it from here?" I held my right arm out. "That's my best vein."

"I.V." Kate smiled. "Don't worry, I'm very good at this. You won't feel a thing," she promised, wrapping the rubber strap above my elbow. She uncapped the sample container and swabbed my arm.

I really, really hate needles. Just thinking about it made my arm tense up.

"Okay, we're gonna have to try something else," Kate said after a minute. She reached into her pocket and pulled out another packet. "This will numb the skin. Just close your eyes, take a deep breath and it'll be over with."

I leaned my head back, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I felt a pinch on my arm and then Kate pulled off the strap. I let the breath out. "Wow, what was that?"

Kate capped the sample container, then picked up the wrapper from the table. "What, this?" She winked. "Another alcohol swab." She winked again and tossed the packets and swabs in the trash.

Chet was right! I was every bit as gullible as he'd always said I was. Damn!

Kate stopped in the door. "Somebody will be in to take you to x-ray, but try to get some rest until then,

okay?"

"I will," I promised. I leaned back into the pillow and closed my eyes.

I was half-asleep when I heard a gurney being wheeled into the room. I opened my eyes and an orderly was rolling the gurney next to the bed.

"You ordered the Express to x-ray?" The orderly grinned.

"Actually, it was Dr. Morton's idea." I grinned back.

The orderly pulled a slip from the pocket of his shirt. "Well, what'd you know? Dr. Morton." He laughed, then put the slip back. "I see you've got a busted leg. Don't worry, I'll make it a smooth trip."

I was trying to figure out how he was gonna get me onto the gurney by himself when Kate and the student nurse came in.

"Ready, Reggie?" Kate asked.

"Yep." Reggie the orderly responded.

"How about you, Johnny?" Kate asked.

"As I'll ever be." I was wearing a hospital gown. And that was all I had on. I'm not a prude, but I'm not an exhibitionist either.

Reggie locked the wheels of the gurney, then pulled the blanket and sheet aside. "All right, Mr. Gage, just let us do all the work."

"Not a problem." I was gonna worry about the gown.

Kate pulled the I.V. bag from the stand and held it in her teeth. She grabbed the sheet under me and I wondered why.

"Janet, can you get his feet?" Reggie got between the gurney and the table. "On three." He pulled the pillow out and set it aside. "One, two . . ."

I heard Reggie say "three," then they lifted me. I was getting used to the constant throb in my side. Moving made it feel like somebody was stabbing me. I stopped worrying about the gown and started worrying about my left side. I thought I felt the stitches ripping.

"Are you okay, John?" Kate's voice asked.

I took a deep breath, then opened my eyes. The I.V. bag was hanging over my head. "Yeah, I think so." My hand went to my left side, which was dry. The ripping stitches must've been just my imagination.

Kate raised her right eyebrow. "Have you changed your mind about that pain medication?"

"Not yet."

Kate shook her head, then she and Reggie shook out the blanket. "Take it easy, Reggie. Mr. Gage had abdominal surgery this morning. Dr. Early and Dr. Morton will fry you if you mess up their work."

Reggie laughed. "Dang! I guess that means no wheelies in the hall."

"No donuts, either." The student nurse laughed.

"Women. Always tellin' you what to do, huh, Mr. Gage?" Reggie laughed.

Kate was watching me with that raised eyebrow, so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

"Well, let's get this show on the road." Reggie pushed the gurney to the door and out into the hall.

I closed my eyes instead of watching the ceiling tiles and light fixtures go by. That wasn't a good idea. My stomach did a flip, but it was too late to open my eyes. When the elevator car moved, I must've started looking a little green.

Reggie put a hand on my shoulder. "You okay, Mr. Gage?"

I swallowed. "Think so."

The car stopped and the doors opened. Reggie rolled me out of the elevator into the hall, then stopped. "Lemme see if I can sit you up a little." He helped me sit up, then held me up and fiddled with the gurney. When it was up, he set me back. "Better?"

I took a deep breath and my stomach settled down. "Yeah, thanks."

Reggie wheeled the gurney down the hall, turned at another hall and parked it against a wall. "I'm gonna check on the wait." He locked the wheels, then walked down the hall. He came back from the desk a few minutes later. "It's gonna be a few minutes. They'll call upstairs when you're done."

I nodded. "Guess I'll try and get some sleep. Thanks."

"No problem, man." Reggie grinned, then walked behind me. I guessed back to the elevator.

I'd just closed my eyes to try and sleep when I felt somebody tug on the blanket. I opened my eyes and there was a kid in a wheelchair next to the gurney.

"Hey, mister, you've got a broken leg." The kid looked like he was about 8 or 9.

I looked at the cast on my right leg like I'd never seen it before. "Whoa! Where'd that come from?" I grinned and the kid grinned back.

"You knew that." The kid laughed.

"Yeah, I did." I looked down and saw that the kid's right leg was in a splint. "Looks like you're gonna be in a cast, too."

"Yeah. How'd you know that?"

"I'm a paramedic. What happened?"

The kid looked down at his leg and frowned. "I tried to jump my bike and BAM! I'm probably gonna miss baseball try outs now."

"That's rough." I could relate. I was gonna be stuck in my house for 6 weeks.

"How'd you break your leg?"

A woman's voice behind me cut off my answer. "Michael! Leave the man alone." The woman walked around behind the chair. "I'm sorry."

She pushed Michael and the chair off down the hall before I got a chance to tell her I didn't mind the company. I closed my eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but that was hard to do with people walking past me and doors opening and closing up and down the hall. I kept opening my eyes, hoping it was my turn in x-ray.

Michael's mother wheeled him past me and he waved. I waved back. He had a pack of films on his lap, so they must've been heading back to the E.R.

The E.R. or the ICU must've been really busy that day. Two different techs rolled portable machines past me half a dozen times while I waited in the hall. Somebody left a wheelchair on the wall across from my gurney and I was just about to hijack it when a third tech and an orderly came for me.

Neither one was as friendly as Reggie. The orderly checked the i.d. bracelet on my wrist, then unlocked the gurney wheels and rolled it backwards toward the elevator. I closed my eyes as he swung the gurney around. Big mistake. If I'd kept my eyes open, I could've told him he was gonna hit the door frame when he tried to go through.

My right leg hadn't bothered me at all until then. Of course, the right side of the gurney hit the door

frame.

"Sorry, sir," the orderly muttered. After the fact.

"Just take it easy, will ya?" Hey, I did this for a living, too! I could criticize.

The gurney stopped next to the x-ray table. Without any warning, the orderly dropped the head of the gurney. And my head and shoulders went down with a thump.

The fun was just beginning. I saw stars when they moved me from the gurney to the table. I guessed the orderly wasn't too happy about me criticizing him. When I could open my eyes again, the orderly was gone. I didn't know who was luckier - him, or me. Probably me. I wasn't in any condition to try and kick ass. Hell, I'd never kicked anybody's ass, anyway. It was usually the other way around.

"All right, Mr. Gage, we've got to get some chest films." I wanted to ask the x-ray tech where he was when the orderly was trying to put me in a coma. My mouth had already gotten me in enough trouble, so I kept it shut. Contrary to popular belief, I did know when to shut up.

The tech put a film under me, then stepped behind a screen. "Deep breath and hold it."

I'd had so many chest x-rays, I knew the routine. I could recite it in my sleep. Taking a deep breath wasn't easy, but I finally managed it on the third try. When the machine stopped humming, I let the breath out. Then the tech came back and turned me onto my right side. From then on, I had to really concentrate.

Deep breath. Hum. Exhale. Left side. Deep breath. Hum. Exhale.

The next thing I knew, I was back in the hall and an orderly was shaking my shoulder. He wasn't Reggie and he wasn't the x-ray orderly. He wasn't an orderly I knew, either. My side hurt. My leg hurt. Everything hurt. Somebody must've run me over with the gurney before they put me back on it.

"You okay, Mr. Gage?"

"Unh-uh. Where's Reggie?"

The orderly shrugged, then unlocked the wheels of the gurney and pushed it to the elevator. It was a fast trip back to the orthopedics floor. I closed my eyes and decided to throw up on this guy if he ran me into any door frames.

I was never so happy to see a hospital room in my life! I'd decided that nobody but Reggie was moving me the rest of the time I was there. It wasn't much, but I was gonna start throwing my weight around if I had to.

"My God, Bob, what'd you do?" Kate sounded mad. Good.

"Nothin'. I just picked him up in x-ray."

I opened one eye and started to tell Kate that Bob thought the gurney was a Formula One car at Indy. Then I was gonna tell her about that orderly in x-ray. All I managed to do was groan.

Kate sighed. "Let's get you back to bed, John."

I tried to pass out again. That must've been what happened after the last x-ray. It didn't happen. Moving back to the bed hurt worse than the two moves I could remember.

"John, I'll be right back with your pain medication." Kate's voice.

I finally opened both eyes. "No, thanks. I'm all right." Kate had never played poker with me, so I hoped she wouldn't know I was bluffing. "It'll knock me out."

I got the raised eyebrow again. "And you'll miss your friends," Kate repeated. "You don't want to let the pain get ahead of the medication."

I remembered the spirometer Morton had sent up. I picked it up. "I've got to use this every hour." I blew into it. And saw stars again.

The spirometer was back on the table when the stars went away. Kate's eyebrow, however, was still raised. I hadn't noticed it before, but she was a redhead. Which meant I was probably gonna lose if I fought fair. So I cheated. Just a little.

I had a pretty high pain tolerance when I ran the 440 back in high school. I did it by thinking about the girl I was trying to impress when I joined the track team in the first place.

Instead of thinking about my side and my leg, I concentrated on all the things I hadn't noticed about Kate. Red hair. Green eyes. Cute nose. Just a hint of freckles across the bridge.

"I was just a little sore from moving around." It worked! My voice sounded normal. Well, a little hoarse.

Kate bit her lip. That was cute, too. "All right, you can refuse pain medication." She smiled. "Even though I think that's crazy."

I grinned. "Now that I'm settled again, it'll get better. If it doesn't, I'll call."

Kate smiled. "I will be back with something for that fever." She gently lifted my shoulders and fluffed the pillow. "And you're taking it. Got it?"

"Got it." I grinned again.

Hours later, I realized that I was every bit as stupid as Chet said I was. If I'd taken the pain meds when I was supposed to, I would've been awake by the time the guys got to the hospital. Instead, I didn't take them and I was miserable.

Using the spirometer hadn't helped my side any. The muscles in my abdomen were spasming, even when I laid still. My eyes burned, my throat hurt and my stomach did a flip every time my side acted up. I couldn't even doze off. All I could do was lie there, waiting for Mike, Marco and Chet. The minute they left, I was getting that shot and going to La-la land for the rest of the day.

I didn't know what time it was because my watch was probably in the drawer of the table next to the bed. I couldn't reach the table because that would hurt my side. All I could tell was that it was getting pretty late in the afternoon. Maybe the guys had changed their minds about coming to visit.

I was about to press the call button when Mike walked in. Chet and Marco came in behind him, and Chet pushed the door closed. The pain shot would have to wait.

"Hey, Johnny, how ya' doin'?" Marco asked.

"Hey, guys. How's it goin'?" My throat hurt, so I was croaking again.

"We should be asking you that. How're you feeling?" Man, Chet wasn't himself. He passed up a chance to remind me that he didn't want to have to break in a new pigeon.

"Pretty good." I tried to sit up a little, which hurt my side. "Just havin' a hard time finding a comfortable position."

"We brought you a plant." Mike pulled his arm out from behind his back and set a plant in a red planter on the table next to the bed.

"Thanks, Mike." I looked at the planter and realized it was a fire truck. I wondered where Mike had found it. When I looked back, Chet was glaring at Mike. "That's really nice, guys." I hoped that was enough to get Mike off the hook.

"No big deal, Gage." Chet was calling me Gage, so he was almost himself again.

"Yeah, John, is there anything we can do?" Marco asked.

"Break me outta here." I knew they wouldn't, but I wanted them to think everything was okay. Especially Chet.

"No can do, buddy." Marco grinned. "We can go by your house and bring by some clothes, or books."

"Roy's gonna do that. At least I think he is. He was here this morning, but it's kinda fuzzy." They didn't need to know that wasn't the only thing that was fuzzy.

When the door opened, I thought it was Morton. He hadn't been back, yet. I wasn't up to butting heads with him if he was in bad mood, so I was relieved to see Charlie Dwyer.

"Yo, Johnny, how ya doin'?" Charlie walked in and closed the door.

"Better than I was this morning." Well, I wasn't bleeding to death anymore. At least not that I knew.

"Man, you've got some luck," Charlie began, "I heard the idiot didn't even slow down."

If I were so damn lucky, I would've walked away. "Oh, yeah, I'm real lucky." I worked with Charlie at 10s, and he didn't have any tact then. Hell, I probably would've said the same thing. Still, it pissed me off. I'd had enough injuries. It was somebody else's turn. "I only bounced once when I hit the concrete. Guess that is pretty lucky." I felt bad for Mike, Marco and Chet the minute I said that. "Sorry, guys. I didn't mean that."

Charlie grinned. "So, you bounced *more* than once?"

For some stupid reason, that made me laugh. Laughing after abdominal surgery is bad.

"Johnny?" Chet's voice sounded worried.

Something big was chewing me in half again. "Shit, shit, shit, shit." Muscles spasms. It was muscle spasms. I waited for them to pass, but the pain got worse instead of better.

"I'll go get a nurse." Marco's voice was worried too.

"No. 'M okay." The problem with that was that I didn't sound okay.

"You never could bluff, Johnny." Mike didn't buy it either. "Go get a nurse."

"Yeah, Johnny, you should've said something." My eyes were closed, but I recognized Charlie's voice. "There aren't any cute nurses in here. We all know what a baby you are."

I opened my eyes. "Asshole. It's your fault, Charlie."

"My fault? How do you figure that, Gage?" Charlie laughed.

"I was fine until you made me laugh." I groaned and closed my eyes again. The pain wasn't getting any better and that was starting to worry me.

"You'll feel better in a minute, Johnny." Kate's voice. "You need to rest. I'm sorry to do this, but your friends will have to leave now."

I opened my eyes. "Just a few more minutes. Please." I tried to come up with a good reason for them to stay. "I work with these guys. And they were there when I got hit." That did it. Kate was biting her lip again. I was starting to feel whatever she'd given me, too. "Jus' long enough so they know 'm okay." My tongue suddenly felt thick. "I'll fall asleep . . . whether they're here, or not." There were two Kates. Not a bad thing. "Promise."

Both Kates smiled. "A few minutes. Then you rest." Kate in stereo. Definitely not a bad thing. They smoothed the blanket, then went to the door and opened it.

I blinked and Mike, Charlie, Chet and Marco filed back in. That was good. I couldn't take two Chet Kellys. One was bad enough. The pain in my side was gone and I felt like I was floating.

"Sorry, Gage." Charlie's voice sounded funny.

"No problem, Charlie." Mine sounded funny, too. Maybe it was my ears that were funny.

"Yeah, who knew Charlie would pick today to perfect his delivery?" Definitely my ears, 'cause Marco's voice sounded funny.

I was really struggling to keep my eyes open. "Sorry, guys. I'm fading here."

"Get some rest. We'll stop by after shift change on Tuesday." Mike, maybe. There was an echo.

"Kay. Thanks." My eyes closed and I pulled them open again.

"C'mon." Definitely Mike.

"Take it easy, John." Had to be Marco

"See ya, Gage." That was Chet.

Mike was the only one left in the room when I pulled my eyes open again. "If you need anything, just call us."

Cap said that Mike got the license of the car and talked to Vince. "Hey, Mike. Thanks."

I didn't know if he heard me. I'd already floated away.

It was dark and somebody was screaming his head off. I was screaming my head off. The door opened just as I managed to stop myself.

"Are you all right, Mr. Gage?" A woman's voice came from the shape in the door.

"GET OUT!" I didn't know why I yelled at whoever it was.

I leaned back into the pillow and tried to make my heart stop hammering its way out of my chest. It sounded like I had a whistle caught in my throat, but I couldn't worry about that until I slowed my heart down.

My eyes were closed so I didn't know somebody else was in the room until a hand touched my arm, which I yanked away.

"Johnny, you're safe. You're at Rampart Hospital." Kate's voice. "You had a bad dream, but you're okay." I recognized the "patient" tone of voice. I'd used it myself thousands of times. "You need to calm down. Take deep, slow breaths. Can you do that for me?"

Maybe if I slowed down my breathing, my heart would slow down, too. I took the deepest breath I could and held it. A few more and the whistling stopped. I felt Kate's fingers on the inside of my wrist. I didn't know why, but I was afraid to open my eyes.

"Yes, Miss Hamilton?" It was the same voice as the one I'd yelled at.

"Would you track down Dr. Early or Dr. Morton and let them know we need a different script for Mr. Gage's pain?"

"Yes, Miss Hamilton."

Kate let go of my wrist. "I'm going to take your temp now, Johnny." She put the thermometer in my mouth.

I was hot, then cold. I opened my eyes, but they burned and the light from the hall hurt. I closed them as the thermometer came out. Kate didn't repeat the reading. I guessed that meant it was pretty high.

The dream came back in bits and pieces. Headlights heading right at me. Feeling my boots stuck to the ground. The car hitting me, then flying through the air and knowing that when I hit the ground, I'd die.

"Shhh." Kate smoothed the hair from my forehead. "It was just a bad dream, Johnny. You're safe here. Go back to sleep."

That was the last thing I wanted to do! If I did, I'd have the same dream again and again. "Wha' timizzit?" My tongue felt thick.

"7 o'clock." Kate smoothed the covers. "Would you like me to sit with you until you go back to sleep?"

"M okay." I wanted her to stay, but I didn't. It was gonna be a long night. I closed my eyes and slowed

my breathing, pretending to go back to sleep.

After a minute, I heard Kate walk to the door, then pull it shut. That was when I opened my eyes. The only light was a small sliver along the wall through a gap in the door. My eyes still burned, but the room was relatively dark, so they didn't hurt, too.

Man, it was really hard to think. For some reason, I kept thinking about my cousin, Howard. He was 7 years older than I was, so of course I wanted to tag along every place he went. He used to scare me with stories about the snakes and gators in the swamps where we lived. They were all over the place and, according to Howard, they could get into houses through the floorboards. I was already afraid of snakes. By the time Howard was through with me, I was deathly afraid of them. Being bitten by one didn't help.

We had a rescue once where there was a cobra loose. I didn't know that until Roy got venom in his eyes, though. I saw the damn thing slither under a bed. I didn't know how, but I managed to keep it together until we got back to the station. Then I hid in my locker until I stopped shaking.

What was the other one? Howard had stories about a kid-eating monster that scared me more than his stories about the snakes and gators. The *jacare*. That was it. I was deathly afraid of the *jacare*, too. That one waited under kids' beds and ate 'em in the middle of the night. I was in my 20s before I found out that *jacare* was the Portuguese word for alligator. Yes, I was gullible before Chet Kelly ever met me.

The guys probably thought I was pretty weird 'cause I didn't talk about growing up the way they did. The stuff about Howard yanking my chain was pretty funny. They'd get a laugh out of it. But stories like that didn't make me all starry-eyed and nostalgic either. It was a long time ago. Where I'd been didn't matter.

I grew up on a reservation, watching my parents struggle to scrape by. I watched my mother wither away and die. I watched my father come home day after day from a job that never gave him anything but sore muscles, a bad back and perpetual sunburn. After Mom died, Dad stayed on the rez because of me. He wanted me to fulfill my mom's dream that I would become a leader of the Seminole Nation, like my grandfather and uncles.

If he'd asked me what I wanted, we would've moved. My dad was white, so he was an outsider. I was a mixed-breed. They didn't treat me much better. When my mom died, they tried to throw us off the rez. My uncles didn't let them.

Dad and I had a huge fight when I told him I was leaving. My plan of going to California made it worse. He was mad because I was giving up my mother's dream. I was mad because I was almost 21 years old and he had no right to tell me what to do. If there'd been any future for me on the rez, I would've stayed. It was years before we spoke to each other. We still hadn't seen each other in over 10 years.

I didn't come directly to California, though. I worked my way across the country. No great memories

there. I cleaned out stables in Alabama, worked on a farm in Mississippi and another one in Louisiana. I managed to get hired by a rodeo in Louisiana. That got me across to Arizona. Then the ticket sales dropped and they had to let me go. I washed dishes again until I'd saved enough for a bus ticket to Los Angeles. I was almost 23 by then.

There were a few things I wasn't proud of. I let the rodeo stick me in a war bonnet and war paint for a bunch of shows. Hey, I had dark hair, brown eyes and wasn't shy riding around without a shirt on. And the owner of the rodeo didn't do it 'cause I was half Indian. I left that off the application I fled out. No, I wasn't proud of that, either.

Hell, the older I got, the more I wondered why I'd done it in the first place. I wouldn't do the same thing for any amount of money now.

Growing up in two different worlds and not "fitting in" in either world really screws a kid up. I was never ashamed of my heritage. I was always proud of my grandfather and my uncles. It wasn't who I was, though. I was still trying to figure that out.

Something moved across my left foot. When I looked down, I saw the covers move. I tried to tell myself that I was imagining it 'cause I'd been thinking about Howard and his stupid stories. The covers moved again and I decided to get out of that bed!

I didn't get far. My right leg weighed a ton and moving it off the pillow hurt. The door opened and light from the hall nearly blinded me.

"What's wrong, John?" Kate was across the room and by the bed when I tried opening my eyes again.

The light hurt, but I didn't want to close my eyes. "Snake . . . in the bed . . ." I wasn't whistling again, but it was sure getting hard to breathe.

Kate pulled back the sheet and blanket. The foot of the bed was empty. Well, empty except for my left foot. "It's the fever, John." She put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me back into the pillow. "Just lie back and try to relax."

I was embarrassed. Again. "Was I . . . sc . . . screaming . . . again?"

Kate smiled. "No. Dr. Early prescribed something new for the fever. I was coming in to give it to you." She pulled the covers back up. "I think you'll sleep better, too."

I was suddenly very tired. "Sorry."

"It's okay, John." Kate picked up my left hand and placed a small plastic cup in it. "I didn't think you'd want a suppository, so I brought the liquid."

"Yeah, thanks." I tried to grin. I must've managed to pull it off 'cause she smiled.

My hand was shaking so bad, Kate had to guide the cup to my mouth. She held the cup there while I swallowed the vilest tasting stuff since Chet went on that health food kick. Another reason to dislike Morton.

"Water?" I knew the answer, but it didn't hurt to try. I was pretty sure Kate wouldn't slap me when she said "No."

"Sorry. I know, it tastes awful." I closed my eyes as Kate's footsteps went to the sink.

"You don't have to stay." I told her as she laid a cool cloth on my forehead.

"I'm making sure you're really asleep before I leave again." Kate laughed. "My shift is almost over, but I'll be back tomorrow. It's only a 12-hour shift, instead of 16." She turned the cloth over. "Close your eyes and go to sleep, John. When you wake up, you'll feel much better."

I remembered my mom saying that and I smiled. "My mom used to say that." I was mumbling. "You don't do the `we', Kate. Like `How are we today?'"

Kate laughed. "It's annoying. Stop talking and go to sleep."

"My mom used to say that, too."

Kate's laugh was the last sound I heard for the rest of the night.

Kate had been right. I felt a lot better when I woke up. Maybe that was because I'd slept like a baby until almost noon on Sunday. I didn't even wake up during the vitals checks. I still had to use the spirometer, which hurt my side a little. But not nearly as bad as it hurt on Saturday. I'd just finished with the spirometer when Kate came in.

"Hey." I smiled, then missed the table and dropped the spirometer on the floor.

"Afternoon." Kate knelt, picked it up and set it on the table. "How're you feeling?"

I grinned. "Much better."

Kate raised an eyebrow and shook down a thermometer. "Let's see." She stuck the thermometer in my mouth and looked down at her watch.

I did my best to look charming, in spite of the damned thermometer. I knew it could've been worse, but I hated it anyway.

Kate pulled the thermometer out and held it up to the light. "99.8. You're almost there." She stuck the thermometer in her pocket.

"About last night," I began. Unfortunately, I remembered waking up yelling my head off. "I didn't wake up the whole floor, did I?"

"Nope, just the desk. And we were supposed to be awake anyway." Kate winked. "The walls are thick and most of the doors on the floor were closed."

I grinned. "Good."

"Lunch should be coming around in a few minutes. How's your stomach feeling?"

I hadn't realized it, but I was actually hungry. Starving. "Any chance of you sneaking me a burger and fries from the cafeteria?"

Kate raised her right eyebrow again. Which was really sexy. "You do remember yesterday morning? And yesterday afternoon?"

"Yeah, but I'm starving." I grinned.

Kate laughed. "No."

"I'll save it for our first date, then."

Just then, the door opened and the student nurse stuck her head in. "Miss Hamilton?"

"I'll check on you later," Kate promised. She winked, then followed the student nurse out into the hall.

I dozed off sometime between the time Kate left and the time somebody brought the lunch tray in. When I woke up, the tray was in front of me. The soup didn't smell great, but it didn't turn my stomach, either. I stuck my finger in to taste it and it was cold.

"Sorry, John, I got tied up with a new admit," Kate said as she walked in.

"That's okay." I picked up the spoon and got the I.V. line tied up in the rail.

"Need a hand?"

I switched the spoon to my left hand. "I've got it. Thanks." I'm not crazy about soup. I hate cold soup. So, I just pushed the soup around with the spoon.

"What's the matter, John?"

"I was asleep when they brought the tray in. And, well, the soup is okay, but it's cold and it smells

funny." I was still trying to get that burger and fries.

"What about the jello?" Kate pulled the wrap from the cup.

"It's green." I didn't really care about that. I was just enjoying the attention.

"John, if you don't eat, you won't be able to get rid of the I.V." Kate had a point. A good one. Damn!

I put the spoon down, picked up the cup of soup and took a sip. It was terrible. I put the cup down and looked at Kate.

Kate smiled at me. "Okay. Okay. Do you like orange jello?"

I didn't know what I'd done. I didn't care. Whatever it was, it had worked.

"It's my favorite." I smiled.

"I'll take this." Kate picked up the tray. "And I'll bring you a fresh tray with orange jello, instead of green."

"Thanks, Kate." I took advantage of the fact that I didn't have that thermometer sticking out of my mouth.

Roy stepped into the door and knocked on the frame. "You up for a visitor, John?" Sometimes Roy had really lousy timing.

I probably would've asked Kate for her phone number. I'd have to do it later. I laughed. Forgot that hurt my side. "Come on in, Roy."

Kate headed for the door. "Hi, Roy."

Hey, wait a second! That sounded just a little bit too friendly. There was something going on there.

Roy smiled and blushed! "He's not giving you too much trouble, is he?"

"I've got a whip and a chair at the desk, just in case." Kate laughed, then walked into the hall.

I grinned as Roy walked over to the bed. I was gonna give him grief about Kate, but he got me first.

"Since when did you become a picky eater?" He was carrying a gym bag, which he set on the empty bed. Then he sat down in the chair.

I waggled my eyebrows. I wasn't gonna give him any grief about Kate. "Well, I gotta spend two weeks in here. At least it'll be pleasant."

Roy grinned. "Yes, it will." He got up, opened the gym bag and pulled out a stack of books and magazines. "As promised." He set them on the table in front of me. "Those ought'a keep you busy for a while."

I definitely wasn't gonna give him any grief about Kate. "Thanks."

Roy closed the bag, set it on the floor, then sat down. "You know, Johnny, what happened wasn't your fault."

"Oh, I know that."

I'd meant to make him feel better. Instead, his mouth dropped open and he started turning red. And he wasn't blushing again. "But, yesterday, you said . . ."

"Settle down, Roy. Cap was here yesterday morning. He told me it wasn't my fault." I grinned. Hey, it wasn't like it was the first time I'd done that to him. He should've been used to it.

"Oh . . . that's good." He looked over at the table between the beds.

The plant. I laughed again, in spite of my side. That plant was in worse shape than I was! "Mike, Marco and Chet brought that yesterday. I think it looked better then. But I'm not sure."

"The planter's nice." Roy wasn't gonna remind me that I have a black thumb.

"For a ladder truck."

"Yeah, for a ladder truck," Roy agreed.

I suddenly realized that coming to California was the smartest thing I'd ever done. I had a good life and I was glad I was gonna get to stick around for a while. My life wasn't perfect, but I had figured out who I was. I had good friends. Not just Roy, but Cap, Marco and Mike, too. Even Chester B. Kelly. I'd even fulfilled my mother's dream because I made a difference in the world. And that was what really mattered.

"So, have you gotten Kate's phone number, yet?" Roy was smirking at me. I couldn't have that.

"Why? Do you want it, too?" I grinned. When Roy blushed, I laughed until both sides were killing me.