

The Nuisance: Stoker's Story

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

"It's a fight," Chet insisted as we sat in front of the bar waiting for Cap, John and Roy to come out. He and Marco had gone back and forth since Cap and the guys went into the bar five minutes before.

"Vince being here doesn't mean it's a fight, Chet," Marco argued. "It's an unknown response, so he decided to check it out."

I just sat behind the wheel of the engine and listened to them. Nothing wrong with being the quiet one. My dad used to say, "When you're talking, you're not listening." When I have something to say, I say it. The rest of the time I listen.

A lady in her fifties walked toward the engine, suddenly stopping in her tracks and doing a double take. Yeah, lady, it's a big, red fire engine. You're not hallucinating. Yet.

I smiled at her. She put her head down, opened the door and walked into the bar.

"We'd hear something if there was a fight," Marco added smugly.

The door of the bar opened and the lady came out, dragging a tottering redhead in her wake. They were jabbering at each other as they passed the engine and headed up the street. A minute later, John and Roy came out.

"Well, what was it?" I asked. I wanted to end the discussion between Marco and Chet. It was old two minutes in.

"Ah, some spaced out dame," John answered, walking toward the front of the squad with Roy.

"Have you got the MICU form?" I heard Roy ask.

"No, I haven't got it," John responded, shaking his head and putting his left hand to his chest. I've noticed that he does that a lot. Like we don't know who he's talking about when he says "I." Then again, maybe he doesn't realize he's doing it.

Roy stopped at the front of the squad and set the biophone down, opening it up to look for the form. I heard an engine rev and tires squeal as somebody took the corner behind us. Going too fast from the sound of it. That was when I saw that John had stepped into the street.

Then it was like the world switched to slow motion. The car tore past the engine and Vince's squad car. I saw John's eyes widen as the headlights zeroed in on him. His mouth dropped open and he tried to turn, but it was too late. The car caught him on his left side. The drug box flew out of his hand and his helmet and shoulder hit the windshield.

I managed to open the door just as the world sped up again. I couldn't move, though. I just sat there, hand on the door and one foot out, watching as John flew off the hood and skidded along the pavement. When he stopped, he turned onto his right side.

The car kept going for a few yards, then turned. The driver looked out, then peeled off.

"Johnny!" Roy yelled. He and John were closer than a lot of brothers. Including me and my own. "TRAUMA BOX!" The fear in his voice got me moving.

I jumped down from the engine and ran, nearly hitting Vince as he burst from the door of the bar. Marco was already behind John's left shoulder. I ran around and knelt by John's left leg.

". . . hell happened?" Cap's voice behind me. He sounded scared, too. Glad I wasn't the only one.

Training kicked in then. I ran my hands down John's left leg, checking for fractures. The left leg was okay. I didn't have to check the right leg. I could tell from the way his foot was laying that it was broken.

John was trying to sit up. The scary part was that he wasn't making a sound. At least not one I could hear. And I've got better than average hearing.

"Johnny? Are you all right?" Roy's voice was scaring me. "Can you hear me? Can you hear me?" He had his hand on John's chest, holding him down. John lifted his head a couple times. He must've been having a hard time keeping his eyes open, because he kept blinking. He looked confused, too. Like he didn't know what had just happened to him. His mouth opened and closed like he was trying to answer Roy.

I leaned over, trying to hear John. "Get back," Roy barked at me. I backed off.

"Engine 51, I have a Code I at this location. Respond an ambulance." It sounded like Cap, but I couldn't swear to it. It could'a been Vince for all I knew.

"Where do you hurt?" Roy asked. His voice was shaking. That wasn't Roy. I was the quiet one. Roy was the calm one.

"My . . ." John blinked again. "My hip . . . my back . . . my leg," his head dropped back. "Ah . . ." his eyes closed, then opened halfway.

"Somebody get a soft collar on him," Roy ordered, fear just on the edge of his voice now. It was still written all over his face.

"I'll get the backboard." I jumped up and headed to the squad. As stupid as it was, I was afraid this would be one of those times I'd prove just how ungraceful tall guys are. This tall guy in particular. My heart was pounding and my stomach was full of butterflies. I was sure I'd trip over my own feet and end up face down on the pavement.

"Get it under control," I thought as I opened the compartment and pulled the backboard out. By the time I got back, Cap and the guys were in position to log roll John onto the backboard. I knelt and set the board down as they turned him onto his left side. John ground his teeth together, then groaned as they set him down.

Cap said something to John as Roy began checking his right arm. I checked the left arm.

Roy looked over at me. "No fractures on the right arm. Mike?"

"No fractures on the left arm," I answered.

Roy then turned to Chet, "Chet, can you help me get his turnout coat off?"

Chet blinked, "Yeah, sure." his voice was shaking. I always knew he liked John. Giving him grief was just the only way Chet could show it.

"I'll give you a hand, Roy," Cap volunteered.

I grabbed a splint from the trauma box to splint John's right leg. He groaned when I touched it. I hated the fact that I was hurting him. I had to force myself to lift his leg to position and secure the splint.

"Cold," John whispered when Roy pulled the turnout coat off.

"We'll have you bundled up in a minute," Roy promised. He tore open a yellow blanket pack and shook it out.

I took the right side of the blanket, wrapped it around the foot of the backboard and secured it. The ambulance pulled past us and I moved to the head of the splint so Roy could get the trauma box and the biophone. The drug box was history.

Being tall has always been tough for me. I knew if I tried to lift the backboard from a squat, I'd lose my balance and end up dropping John. So I stood and bent at the waist. All wrong, I knew, but I'd rather hurt myself than hurt John worse than he already was.

"Can you get it?" Cap asked me. He was doing it wrong just like I was, but he wasn't worried about himself. He was worried about me.

Vince took the right foot of the backboard before I could answer him. John didn't weigh much at all with five pairs of hands lifting him.

"Can you guys make it okay, there?" Roy asked, as we lifted the backboard up.

"Bring up the gurney." Cap looked around for the gurney as the attendants wheeled past behind him.

"I'm gonna put this stuff in," Roy announced.

We set John down on the gurney. I looked down at John. He was gritting his teeth and his eyes were squeezed tight. This was one of those times I wished I wasn't so introverted. I wanted to say something comforting. Tell John that he'd be all right. Even though I didn't believe that myself.

"Okay, Chet," Cap began. "You bring the squad in, Pal."

The attendants turned the gurney and the moment was gone.

Roy came back from the ambulance. "How you feeling?"

"Ummm...trying to think of something funny, but I hurt too much," John responded.

Busted up as he was, John could still pull something out of left field. Even *I* could have come up with something much more colorful than that. I bent over to retrieve what was left of the drug box. As I gathered up the scattered contents, the thought passed through my mind that it would probably be a lot easier to put back together than John.

"All right, well, take it easy. Hang in there." To a civilian that would've sounded like a pretty callous response. As scared as Roy was, he knew the best thing for John was to stay calm. Keeping people calm was what we were all trained to do.

I followed Chet and Marco back to the squad. Chet got into the driver's seat and Marco stood at the window. They talked quietly while I stowed the remains of the drug box. I tapped the compartment door, then walked back to the engine and got in.

"I have a lot on my mind tonight, so you're gonna have to get us home," I told the engine. Cap and Marco climbed up and I started her up. I knew she'd understand.

The engine didn't fail me. She never has and she never will. The whole way back to the station, I thought about how little I knew about John Gage. He was the most extroverted of the six of us. He talked enough to make up for my introverted nature. But whenever one of us talked about our childhood, me included, he got this intense, contemplative look on his face. He'd always change the subject when his turn came. I'd always wondered about that.

I knew his mom died when he was 15 because I overheard him talking about it to Roy. Being quiet has always helped me fade into the woodwork. People always forgot I was around. I didn't mind. Like I said, I like to listen.

So, there I was, changing my clothes when Roy asked John why he'd been so quiet all shift. John mentioned his mom's death in passing, then launched into a diatribe about Valentine's Day, Mother's Day and Father's Day being inventions of Hallmark to sell greeting cards. He sounded like Chet and

his government conspiracies.

I knew there had to be a story there. I just hoped I'd get a chance to hear it some day. I'd even ask him if I had to.

I should've been thinking about the car that hit John. The driver was still out there when he should be rotting *under* a jail. If I closed my eyes, I'd be able to see the car and the driver as clearly as I had from the cab of the engine. I didn't want to do that, though. If I could see the car, I'd hear the horrible sound it made when it hit John. *That* would be with me for a long, long time. Instead, I crawled back into my bunk and tried not to toss and turn until morning.

The bay door motor kicked on about two hours after we got back to the station. I heard Cap's knees pop as he stood and stepped into his turnout pants. I wasn't gonna sleep either, so I got up, too. Marco got up as I was pulling my pants on.

The three of us walked out of the dorm and waited for Chet to back the squad in. When he stopped, we met him at the door to the kitchen.

"How's Johnny?" Marco voiced the question I wanted to ask.

"He had internal bleeding. They took him up to surgery about an hour ago," Chet informed. "Roy's gonna call Joanne when he's ready to leave." We followed him into the kitchen.

"I don't know about you guys, but I could use a cup of coffee," Cap announced, clapping his hands together and rubbing the palms. Something he probably didn't even realize he did. A lot.

"I'll make it." Marco went to the stove and picked up the pot.

I tried to fade into the stove.

Chet let out a tired sigh as he sat on the couch. "I cannot believe this night."

"None of us can, Pal." Cap pulled a chair over from the table. "Did you guys see anything that might help the cops find this creep?"

"I heard it." Chet shook his head. "But all I saw was the guy turn around and look at Johnny, then peel off."

Cap looked at me. Of course he would. I had a bird's eye view for the whole show. "What about you, Mike?"

"I'm not sure what I saw," I said quietly. "I mean, it was like it was all in slow motion." My chest suddenly tightened. I had to stop. I couldn't talk about it. Not right now. So, I did what I always do. Avoided eye contact with anybody.

"I was sitting next to Chet. I jumped out of the engine when I heard." Marco continued making the coffee. "What I want to know is what that guy's problem was?"

"Probably a drunk. We had a cop right there, but he was inside with me." Cap's voice sounded disgusted. The situation was pretty disgusting.

"Why the hell didn't Vince chase him?" Chet asked. He was angry. It took a lot for Chet to show his anger.

"Johnny was in trouble." When Roy wasn't around, Marco was the calm one. "He called it in while we were taking care of John."

"Fat lot of good that'll do," Chet said pessimistically.

"It was a pretty unique car. How many purple 280Zs could there be?" Marco asked hopefully.

"In California? Probably a thousand in Hollywood alone." I didn't think Chet meant to sound so sarcastic.

"It was dark blue," Cap stated. "The lights made it look purple."

"No, Cap, it was *purple*. Purple cars are very popular in the *barrio*," Marco informed. "The hood and the windshield are bound to be messed up. The cops'll probably find it in a repair shop in a couple of days."

A picture of the rear of the car appeared in my mind. License plate and all. "GTA!" It just came out. And kept coming. "And Marco's right, the car was purple. A purple, 1975 Datsun 280ZX. The driver was a white male, in his 20s, with sandy blond hair. And it had a vanity plate. GTA."

Cap blinked at me, then laughed, "That's great, Mike! See, Chet, they'll find the creep."

I had to find Vince and tell him this. Things happened so fast at the scene, we didn't even try to give him a statement. He didn't push it. He knew he could always find us. I went to the official business phone. I'd been carrying Vince's card for years. It was finally gonna get some use. "I'm gonna call Vince." I only had two hands, so the wallet and the handset of the phone proved to be a challenge.

"While you do that, I've got a mountain of paperwork to get through." Cap stood up. "Give me a shout when the coffee's ready."

"Will do, Cap," Marco promised.

The first number on the card was probably the station. I tried it anyway.

"LA County Sheriff's Office, West Los Angeles Station," a male voice answered.

"This is Firefighter/Specialist Mike Stoker. I need to speak to Vince Howard. It's urgent."

"Officer Howard is away from the station," the man responded. "Lemme get your number."

"Just tell him Stoker at 51," I returned. "He'll know." I replaced the handset.

"Well?" Chet asked expectantly.

"He's not at the station," I muttered. Sheriff's Dispatch would know where he was. I picked up the handset and dialed the private number for our dispatcher from memory.

Sam Lanier answered. "LA County Dispatch."

"Sam, Mike Stoker from 51s," I began. "I'm trying to get hold of Vince Howard. He's with the Sheriff's Department."

"Hang on a sec," Sam returned. He came back on the line a minute later. "He's on patrol. Sheriff's Dispatch is gonna relay a message."

"Thanks, Sam. Ask Vince to call a-s-a-p," I requested.

"Will do," Sam promised. "Hey, who got hit?" he asked.

"John Gage. He's in surgery at Rampart," I answered.

"Let us know how he is," Sam requested. "You guys take it easy."

"Thanks, Sam," I returned, replacing the handset. "Vince is gonna call me."

"Me first." Chet stood and crossed to the stove. "That hospital coffee is the *worst*." I'm such a nice guy. I stepped back and let him have the pot first. Before I could pour a cup, Chet grabbed a second cup and filled it.

"You know what they say about two-fisted drinking," I muttered. I was about to pull a "Chet." We were all worried about John. We all needed to lighten up. Even for a few minutes.

"No, Mike. What do they say?" Chet asked.

I winked at Marco, who grinned. He knew exactly what I was up to. "I don't know, Chet. I was asking you."

"I like you better when you don't talk, Stoker," Chet returned, walking out of the kitchen with both cups of coffee.

Marco laughed out loud, "He falls for that one every time. And he calls Johnny a pigeon."

I grinned. "John is Chet's pigeon. Chet's my pigeon." I poured myself a cup of coffee, took a sip, then grinned at him. "It keeps him humble, Marco." I walked over to the table to wait for Vince.

Marco snickered. "You've got your work cut out for you, Mike."

Chet returned from his second trip to the Captain's office with coffee. We were all worried about John. But Chet was still shaken up. Guess it was the time he spent by himself at the hospital waiting for Roy. I was waiting for the phone to ring for one reason. Chet was waiting for another. I wanted Vince to call me back. Chet wanted Roy to call and tell us that John was gonna be okay.

Chet sat in the chair across from me and absently twirled his cup.

"Chet," I leaned forward, "If you want to talk, you know I'll listen."

Chet looked up at me, his face blank. "What're you babbling about now, Mike?" he asked blandly.

Chet was still Chet. "Forget it," I said, shaking my head.

The street door opened and Vince walked into the kitchen. "I heard you were looking for me." He removed his helmet and tucked it under his arm. "Here I am. Mind if I bum a cup of coffee?"

"Help yourself," Marco replied.

Vince set the helmet on the counter, poured himself a cup of coffee and walked over to the table. He sat down next to Marco. "How's John?" he asked.

Marco and I waited for Chet to answer. When he didn't, Marco spoke up. "He had internal bleeding, so they took him to surgery a couple of hours ago. We haven't heard anything."

Vince took a sip from his cup. "What's up?" he asked, lifting the cup to his lips for another sip. "You didn't bring me all the way out here to tell me John's in surgery."

"I saw the car and the driver," I began. "It was a 1975 purple Datsun 280ZX. The license plate number was GTA and the driver was a male, in his early twenties with sandy blond hair," I reported in my best just-the-facts voice.

Vince set his cup down and pulled a pad and pen from the pocket of his uniform, "You're sure it was a '75? What about the color? And the plate?"

"I'm positive about all three," I answered. "The guy had to be doing at least 40 when he rounded that corner. He should'a wiped out and hit the back of the engine."

Vince wrote for a minute, then looked at Chet and Marco. "What about you two? Can you confirm this?"

Cap walked into the kitchen. "Geez, they'll let anybody in here," he joked.

"Talk to Stoker, Hank." Vince replied, "He's the one that called me over here."

"Hey, I'm trying to tell Vince about the guy that ran Johnny down this morning," I interrupted the exchange.

"Settle down, Mike." Cap's voice was gentle. "We're all wound a little bit too tight," he added.

"Okay, Chet, can you give me a description of the car, or the driver?" Vince asked. Back to business. Good.

Chet shook his head. "All I saw was the car stopped for a second, then peeling off." He dropped his eyes to the table. "I was looking for Gage."

"What about you, Marco?" Vince asked.

"I saw the car coming around the corner. That's about it," Marco offered.

Vince finally turned back to me. "Let's go through it from beginning to end," he paused. "Where were you when the car came around the corner?"

"In the driver's seat of the engine," I answered.

"When did you climb down from the engine?" Vince asked next.

I was embarrassed to admit that part. "Right after the car drove away." I felt my face blush. "I couldn't move."

Vince nodded. I hoped that meant he understood. "Did John look before stepping out into the street?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?" I stood and leaned toward Vince. I'd pushed back so hard, the chair fell over. "The car wasn't even there when he stepped off the curb. He was barely in the street." I was shouting and I couldn't stop. "The street's one way for the last block, so he would've checked the wrong direction anyway."

Cap stopped me from going any further. "Cool off, Mike," he said gently.

Marco picked up the chair and helped me into it. "Vince is just doin' his job, man."

I looked over at Chet and saw disappointment. I'll bet a month's pay he was rooting for me to slug Vince. Doing his job or not, if Vince tried to blame this on Johnny, Chet would get his wish.

"Mike, I know what happened. I've got to convince the D.A. there's a case when we catch this guy," Vince paused and closed his notebook. "I'm gonna be honest with you, guys. When we track the owner of the car down, he's gonna tell us one of two things." He held up his index finger. "He loaned the car to a friend." He held his middle finger up next to the index finger. "Or the car was missing and he was just about to report it stolen."

"So this is all just a big fat waste of time," Chet muttered under his breath.

"Mike can put the owner behind the wheel. It's a start." Vince's brows knitted together. "Unless he did loan the car to a friend. Then, we're back to Square One." Vince put the pen and notebook back into his pocket.

"Sorry about a minute ago, Vince," I said. "It was a bad scene."

"No problem, Mike." Vince smiled. "I was there."

I nodded silently. Vince stood and picked up his helmet. "I'll get this on the wire. If the car's still out, it'll be pulled over. If not, Detectives'll have a talk with the driver. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks, Vince." Marco stood and walked to the stove. The coffee pot was dry. "Of course," he muttered.

"I'll walk you out, Vince. Then I've got to get back to paperwork." Cap stood and followed Vince into the vehicle bay.

We'd gone through four pots of coffee by the time the sun started to come up. Chet had made three trips into the Cap's office. I'd sure like to know what that was about.

My doctor once asked me how many cups of coffee I drink a day. He went through the roof when I told him I didn't measure by the cup, I measure by the pot. I figured I was on my second pot for today.

Chet and I were at the table in the kitchen when Cap walked in from the office. Marco was fixing chili and eggs on the stove. Johnny's favorite. Yep, things were entirely too serious around here.

"Smells good, Marco." Cap's knees creaked as he sat down.

The phone rang "I've got it." I've never seen Chet move that fast without a fire chasing him. "Station 51, Fireman Kelly. It's about time, DeSoto." He grinned. "How's Gage?" Another pause. "Uh-uh. Uh-uh. That's not a surprise." He nodded. "Okay. Yeah, I'll tell him. Yeah, see you Monday." He replaced the handset and sat down.

I knew Chet was up to something when he didn't say anything. "Well?" Cap asked. "How's John?"

"Oh, sorry, Cap," Chet returned. He didn't sound sorry to me. "Roy says he came out of the anesthesia okay. They just moved him from Recovery. Gage's still out of it, so Roy's gonna head home for a couple hours sleep."

"That's a relief." Cap's whole body relaxed. No wonder his joints were creaking. The "wound too tight" comment wasn't about me. It was about him. "Did Roy say how long Johnny'd be out?"

"Dr. Early says six weeks with his leg," Chet responded. "He'll be in the hospital about two weeks, 'cause of the surgery."

"He's gonna go nuts," Marco said. "Man, his right leg's broken. He won't even be able to drive."

Cap snorted. "That's what you think. He'll have my wife and Joanne and Beth chauffeuring him all over town." Cap snorted again. "What a rough life."

Not if I had anything to say about it. Then again, when *I* talk, Beth doesn't always listen.

Marco laughed. "I get your point, Cap," he said. "But is it worth getting hit by a car?" He stood and went over to the stove to start Station pot 6.

"Probably not." Cap stood. "I'd better call Battalion. It's not gonna be easy finding somebody willing to work in this nuthouse for six weeks."

Marco laughed. "Good luck."

Chet went to the couch, sat down and leaned his head back. I needed more coffee. I stood and went to the stove.

"How's that coffee coming?" I walked over to the stove and peered over Marco's shoulder.

"Keep your shorts on, Mike," Chet teased. "You're just a ball-o-fire tonight."

"When you're hot, you're hot, Chet," I returned dryly. "Oh, you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"He got you, Chet." Marco laughed.

"Watch it, Stoker. The Phantom might want a new pigeon with Gage out of commission," Chet warned, waggling his eyebrows at me. The twinkle that should've been in his eyes wasn't there. Heck, none of us was what you'd call bright eyed and bushy tailed.

I probably should've let Chet have the last word. Marco was staring down at the coffee pot like he'd found a new life form growing in it. But, just like Chet, I couldn't help myself.

Besides, his threat didn't exactly have me shaking in my shoes. What Chet didn't know was that a few of the pranks he'd blamed John for had been executed by yours truly. That was fine by me. I always rooted for the underdog. And when it came to practical jokes, Johnny was definitely the underdog. "Do your worst." I wagged my eyebrows back at him. "Just be prepared to suffer the consequences."

"Only in your dreams, Mikey." Chet knew I hated that nickname. It's the reason I didn't get along with my brothers. They still called me Mikey.

"Better than yours, Chester." Maybe I should fire the first shot, so to speak. That old station wagon of his could use a good cleaning. A couple gallons of foam would make it look like new inside.

"Coffee's ready." Marco must've been tired of our male posturing.

Chet, Marco and I got to Rampart at around 3:00 in the afternoon. Cap called Marco to let us know he wouldn't be coming with us. He'd stopped to see John on his way home this morning. Which was funny, since Rampart was on the other side of town from his house. He did give us John's room number and reminded us not to stay too long. After all, John was still recovering from abdominal surgery this morning.

I pulled the plant I'd bought for him from the floor of the backseat, then followed Chet and Marco across the parking lot. Chet and Marco got a lot of mileage out of that plant on the trip over, but I didn't care. In my family, you never visited somebody in the hospital empty handed.

Chet and Marco let up on me and the plant once we were in the elevator. "We know the room number, Marco. We don't need to stop by the nurse's station."

"What if he's down in x-ray or something?" Marco argued. "We can't just hang out in his room."

"What if he's not supposed to have visitors?" Chet countered. "Then we've wasted a trip over here."

"I didn't think of that," Marco allowed. "Still . . ."

"Still nothing," Chet cut him off. "We're not staying long."

When the doors opened, they both shut up. Silently, I wished they'd rib me about the plant again. I was much more comfortable with their teasing than with the eerie quiet that came over them when the elevator doors opened. When they didn't move, I led the way out of the car right before the doors closed.

"What's the room number again?" I asked.

"Ah, 220," Marco responded, examining a sign on the wall. "That way." He pointed to the right.

Chet and Marco still weren't moving, so I led the way down the hall. At that point, I didn't care if the two of them stayed in the hall. I'd come here to see John. Even if it was just to drop off the plant.

The door to John's room was open. I walked in, with Chet and Marco bringing up the rear. John was lying flat on his back, his casted right leg propped on a pillow.

"Hey, Johnny, how ya' doin'?" Marco was the first to speak.

John's face was pale and drawn. He managed a weak smile. "Hey, guys," he rasped. "How's it goin'?"

"We should be asking you that," Chet responded. "How're you feeling?"

I was shocked. Any other time, Chet would've made a joke. Like, "Better than things are for you." Or something like that. Chet was really rattled. More than I'd thought.

"Pretty good." John shifted, then groaned and clutched his left side. "Just havin' a hard time finding a comfortable position."

John could never bluff, but I didn't call him on it. "We brought you a plant." I set the plant on the table next to the phone. Marco's conscience would make him pitch in. I'd crowbar Chet's wallet open to collect his share later.

John's face brightened a little. "Thanks, Mike." He turned his head and looked over at the plant, missing the glare Chet aimed my way. After a minute, John turned back to us. "That's really nice, guys."

"No big deal, Gage." Chet stopped glaring.

"Yeah, John," Marco began. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Break me outta here," John rasped, groaning and shifting again.

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

"Roy's gonna do that," John said, then frowned. "At least I think he is. He was here this morning, but it's kinda fuzzy."

The door opened and the four of us froze. It had to be a nurse coming in to bust us. Instead of a nurse, it was Charlie Dwyer.

"Yo, Johnny, how ya doin'?" Charlie walked in, closing the door behind him.

John groaned and shifted again. "Better than I was this morning." He didn't sound very confident about that.

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

"Oh, yeah, I'm real lucky." I wondered if I was the only one to hear the sarcasm in his voice. "I only bounced once when I hit the concrete. Guess that is pretty lucky." He closed his eyes, then opened them again. "Sorry, guys. I didn't mean that."

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

Cops weren't the only ones with a warped sense of humor. I knew a lot of firemen that could make seasoned cops shake their heads in wonder. Did I say we laughed at the comment? Including John.

We didn't laugh long. John's pale face suddenly went even paler. He groaned and clutched his side.

"Johnny?" Chet took a hesitant step toward the bed.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit," John muttered.

"I'll go get a nurse," Marco offered, heading for the door.

"No," John barked. "I'm okay."

"You never could bluff, Johnny." I turned to Marco, who had stopped in the door. "Go get a nurse."

"Yeah, Johnny, you should've said something," Charlie scolded. "There aren't any cute nurses in here. We all know what a baby you are."

"Asshole," John said, teeth ground together. "It's your fault, Charlie."

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

"I was fine until you made me laugh." John groaned and closed his eyes.

Marco arrived with a nurse, who promptly shooed all four of us into the hall.

"That was a boneheaded thing to do, Charlie," Chet muttered as the door closed behind us.

"Get a grip, Chester," Charlie shot back. "How was I s'posed to know he'd laugh? He never laughs at my jokes."

"That's true, Chet." I didn't like where this was headed. "Look, when the nurse comes out, we'll go back in, tell Johnny good-bye and let him get some rest."

"Yeah," Marco agreed. "Cap told us not to stay too long, anyway."

"If she'll let us back in," Chet said pessimistically.

The door opened and the nurse stepped out. "Not too long," she cautioned. "John needs to rest."

"Yes, ma'am," I responded, then led the way back into John's room. He was still pale, but he looked a little better.

"Sorry, Gage," Charlie began. He obviously didn't need Chet's help to feel guilty.

"No problem, Charlie." John's voice was quiet.

"Yeah, who knew Charlie would pick today to perfect his delivery?" Marco grinned.

John smiled faintly. His eyes drifted shut, then snapped open. "Sorry, guys." His words were a little slurred. "I'm fading here."

"Get some rest," I advised. "We'll stop by after shift change on Tuesday."

"Kay. Thanks." John was struggling to keep his eyes open.

"C'mon," I ordered, motioning Chet, Marco and Charlie toward the door.

"Take it easy, John," Marco said, then went to the door.

"See ya, Gage," Chet called over his shoulder, following Marco into the hall.

Charlie patted John's left knee, then followed the other two.

"If you need anything, just call us." I turned and walked to the door.

"Hey, Mike," John called. "Thanks."

I turned back. "For what?"

He didn't answer me. He'd settled back into the pillows and gone to sleep.

I smiled. "That's what friends do, Johnny." Then I turned and walked into the hall, quietly pulling the door closed behind me.