

Things That Go Bump...

by Nancy F. Thysell (the Nifty Lady)

It was one of those sultry summer days—the kind of day that made you want to turn on the sprinklers and lay under the spray. But the crew from Los Angeles County Fire Department Station 51 A-Shift wasn't so lucky. They were toned out to a structure fire in the middle of this hot afternoon. The fire went to three alarms. It was a three-story building in an older neighborhood that was crowded with row type businesses on the ground floor, living quarters above. Open windows had acted as chimneys, pulling drafts of outdoor air to oxygenate the beast within. The aging brick and wood substructure offered little resistance to the rapid spread of the flames. Los Angeles being Los Angeles the climate was in near drought conditions. Everything was tinderbox dry. For this incident, the main focus of the fire personnel was to contain the original fire. The second focus was to prevent it from spreading to the adjoining structures. The paramedics from 51 and 36 had been given the task of making a sweep of the neighboring buildings.

John Gage and Roy DeSoto, the Firefighter/Paramedics from Station 51, pulled their SCBAs on over their heavy turnout coats. Roy grunted as the 50-pound weight of the tank settled on his back. He adjusted his mask and replaced his helmet, tightening the chinstrap as he prepared to enter the building on the left. He watched his partner go through the same routine. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that Marco Lopez and Chet Kelly from their crew were following on their heels with a 2-1/2 inch hose. They would provide cover and watch for potential hot spots as he and Johnny made their search.

The firefighters stepped into the semi-darkness of the building. The business on the first floor was an electronics supply store. Rows of shelves filled with boxes upon boxes of small parts crowded the room. The smoke formed a gray haze in the room, obscuring their vision. Fortunately, the daytime light through the storefront window provided sufficient illumination. They moved to the second floor, checking each door as they made their way through the structure. The third floor was equally unoccupied.

Roy held the HT to his mouth and told his Captain that the building was clear and they were coming out.

"10-4, HT51," came the response. "Report to the triage area."

Roy acknowledged the call and motioned to his partner. They made their way quickly down the stairs and out into the heat of the day. Perspiration had formed all over their bodies, drenching their uniforms. At the triage area they thankfully shed their burden of tanks, turnout coats and helmets. The sudden change of the temperature was almost chilling as the outdoor air came in contact with their sweaty clothing. It was a short-lived respite. The daytime temperature and the fire merged into a stifling combination. Heat exhausted firemen either staggered by themselves or were assisted by their comrades over to the triage area. The four paramedics were kept busy administering oxygen and treating for heat exhaustion. Johnny glanced up and noted that it looked like the fire was finally being brought under control. He wiped the sweat from his brow, again. Just then, Jed Thurston, the fireman he was treating, was overcome by an unstoppable coughing fit. The oxygen canister was on empty.

"Hang on, Jed, I need to get you a fresh tank," he told the struggling fireman. He hurried over to Engine 51 to grab a spare tank from one of its compartments. He swung open the door and pulled out the fresh tank. As he began to close the door, a fire hose beneath his feet shifted. It was only a subtle movement, but it clipped Johnny's boot enough to cause him to momentarily lose his balance. He pitched forward and banged his forehead on the edge of the compartment door. *Ouch! Damn that smarts!* He held his hand to the tender spot and allowed himself a moment to recover from the sharp pain. He brought down his hand,

half expecting to see blood from an open wound. It was with relief that he found only sweat on his palm. Shaking off the bump as "one of those things" he made his way back to the triage area and hooked Jed up to fresh oxygen.

An hour later, the mop up was almost complete. Johnny and Roy began clearing the triage area. The paramedics from 36 had ridden in with the few firemen that had required further treatment. Johnny bent down to pick up a stray piece of discarded packaging. His head screamed at him, reminding him of his earlier encounter with the compartment door. He lifted his head slowly, eyes tightly shut. He shook his head in an effort to clear it. Cautiously he opened his eyes and looked around. *Well, my vision's okay. I must have bruised my forehead*, he thought as he resumed his chores. The pain subsided and was forgotten as he packed up the last of the equipment. He slid into the passenger seat and leaned his head against the rear window as Roy crawled in behind the steering wheel.

"Man, oh man, Roy. I am beat!" Johnny sighed wearily.

"You said it, Junior." He turned the key in the ignition. It wasn't even five o'clock. He wiped his hand across his eyes, then rubbed his sweaty hand on his trousers. "All I want right now is a cold shower."

"And a tall, cold glass of water," Johnny finished for him. Roy grinned at the younger man.

"You read my mind, Partner. Let's go!"

###

Roy emerged from the locker room feeling somewhat refreshed. Besides removing layers of soot and grime, the shower had cooled him off. His fresh uniform might last awhile before the heat got to him again. The engine was still out as he crossed the vehicle bay to the day room. Johnny was seated on the sofa with his head resting against the top, apparently sound asleep.

"Yo, Johnny. Wake up!" he called as he crossed to the kitchen cabinets for a glass.

"Humf, what? I'm awake," Johnny responded sleepily.

"You gonna take a shower or wait until Kelly gets back?" Roy asked as he filled the glass with ice from the freezer. Johnny slowly got to his feet and stretched.

"Shower...if I can find the energy. Maybe I'll just get in with my clothes on," Johnny chuckled at the thought. He yawned mightily. "Geez, I am *really* beat!"

"Well, you'd better hurry. The engine's gonna be back soon and they're gonna want to hit the showers, too."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I'm going."

###

Johnny held his head under the pressurized stream of water. The spray felt comforting against his aching body. His head continued to bother him some. As soon as he had dressed in a clean uniform, he grabbed a couple of aspirin from his locker and washed them down with a handful of water.

Moments later, Gage heard the sound of Big Red being backed into her space. The weary engine crew lumbered into the locker room, covered from head to foot with soot and grime.

"Oh, good, at least you're not hogging the shower!" Chet grouched as he slumped on one of the benches and began to undress.

"It's all yours, Chester B." Johnny offered magnanimously. Chet rolled his eyes at the skinny paramedic as he skirted the bench to leave the room.

"I hope you left some hot water!" Chet yelled at the retreating figure. Johnny just chuckled. Hot water was the furthest thing from his mind. He entered the kitchen and assisted Roy in preparing a meal of cold cuts and salad for their dinner.

Later when the crew sat around the table, the iced tea was the first thing that disappeared. The stifling heat didn't do much for anyone's appetite, but they ate anyway. Experience had taught the men that food was a necessity and they ate when they could.

Johnny found he didn't have much of an appetite as he pushed the salad around his plate with his fork. He managed to get half a sandwich eaten before giving up. Given the heat, no one else even noticed his lack of appetite. Any other day, the entire crew would have been on his case because Gage was always hungry.

As it was, the entire crew was feeling the effects from the afternoon fire and heat. They were all unusually tired. It had taken its toll on all of them. If they were lucky, they'd be blessed with a slow night. Johnny was going to rest in the dorm after dinner but the squad got toned out on an emergency before he even had the chance.

By the time Roy backed the squad into the bay it was almost 10 p.m. The setting sun had done little for easing the nighttime temperature. The two paramedics wearily exited the cab of the small rescue truck and headed for the day room.

"All I want now is something cold to drink!" Johnny moaned as they stepped into the room.

"Shhhhh!" Kelly warned. His favorite movie, "Terror at the Library" was on the tube and he sat alone in the nearly darkened room.

"Well, excuse me!" Johnny growled. "Where's everybody else?"

"Dorm," Chet responded without taking his eyes off the TV. After annoying Chet for a few moments with clattering ice into glasses, Roy and Johnny drained a couple of tall glasses of tea. They both refilled their glasses and made their way to the dorm.

"Night, Chet," Roy called as they exited the room.

"Night, Guys!" Chet replied, relieved now that he would be alone to watch his movie undisturbed.

###

The dorm was dark and somewhat cooler than the rest of the building. The snores of the remaining engine crew were apparent as Roy and Johnny made their way to their bunks. They set out their turn out gear in readiness for a call and prepared for bed. Johnny grabbed a couple more aspirins from his locker and drained his glass. The ice clinked against the bottom of the glass as Johnny set it down by the sink. He looked at himself in the mirror above the sink. He pulled the hair away from his forehead. A black and blue area about the size of a fifty-cent piece was apparent at his hairline. Gage winced as he touched the spot

gingerly, then splashed water on his face and reached for the glass. He momentarily found it difficult to grasp its smooth surface. He found that puzzling, but dismissed it as he lifted the glass, filled it with water and carried it back into the dorm, where he placed it on the stand by his bed.

###

The klaxons sounded and the dorm lights came on at 3 a.m. The men rose, pulled on their turnout gear and hurried to the vehicle bay. It only took a moment for Roy to realize that it was only for the engine crew. He returned to his bunk, crawled out of his gear and quickly fell back into a sound sleep.

But Johnny had already climbed into the squad. Neither the engineer, Mike Stoker, nor Chet Kelly were aware of Johnny getting into the squad. Maybe they were just too tired to even notice. Captain Stanley had acknowledged the dispatch from the microphone in the dorm and turned out the lights as he made his way to the passenger seat of the engine. The bay doors remained open a minute after the big rig pulled away from the station.

Johnny brought his head up with a jerk. A sensation of panic set in as he watched the engine leaving the station. He was in his turnout gear and his helmet was securely on his head. They must have gotten a call. Without a second thought, he slid behind the wheel and turned the ignition on. He followed the big rig into the darkness of the night, totally unaware of where he was going.

Marco looked back in surprise to see the squad pulling out of the driveway. But then he surmised that they must have gotten a call, too, since the squad normally took the lead when they responded together. And from where he sat, Marco couldn't hear the dispatcher over the roar of Big Red's sirens. The squad trailed behind the engine for nearly a mile and then made a left turn at a major intersection. Chet watched with mild interest as he saw the squad disappear from sight. The engine being sent in one direction and the squad in another was so common that neither Chet nor Marco thought anything was unusual about seeing the squad head another way. Both men instead turned their attention to preparing themselves to face another fire.

###

It was nearly 5 a.m. when the engine crew returned to the station. No one thought it out of the ordinary that the squad was still out as they climbed down from the big rig. They were tired and dirty and if they were lucky, maybe they'd get a couple of hours of sleep before the wake up tones. Too tired to even shower, the men wearily made their way back into the dorm, each man intent on collapsing into his own bunk. So intent and tired that no one noticed that Roy was the lone person in the station.

###

The morning wake up tones sounded and aroused the men from their brief slumber. Roy sat up in his bunk and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He looked over at Johnny's bunk, expecting to have to coax his partner awake. He was surprised to see it empty but surmised that Johnny had awakened earlier and figured that he was in the day room. He heard Mike announce he was going to make coffee and smiled as he slipped into his turnout pants and headed to the locker room. He could use a good cup of coffee.

He greeted Marco and Chet warmly. He could see how tired they were as they prepared to shower but he had to smile to himself--it was the first time in a very long time that the paramedics had gotten to sleep through the night. But his good mood was short lived as Mike busted through the locker room door from the vehicle bay. His stricken appearance stopped Roy cold.

"Roy?"

"What?"

"Where's the squad?" Mike asked hoarsely.

Roy's jaw dropped. He pushed past Mike and they ran into the vehicle bay, followed by Chet and Marco. He pulled up short as he rounded the rear of the engine. The squad was missing and so was Johnny!

"Oh, no!" was all he could get out.

"I'll go get Cap," Mike offered and disappeared back into the dorm. Roy walked forward, numb with disbelief. He couldn't imagine what would make Johnny do such a thing. Then a horrible thought occurred to him that someone had come into the station and had forced Johnny to drive the squad someplace. Worry and fear began to gnaw at his gut. Captain Stanley rushed into the truck bay, followed by Mike.

"What's going on here?" Stanley demanded. Roy gave him a bewildered look.

"I don't know, Cap," the paramedic admitted, honestly.

"Any idea how long he's been gone?"

Roy shook his head. "We didn't get a call all night."

"Sure you did, Roy. Remember, right after we got sent out at three?" Marco supplied.

Both Roy and Hank stared at the Latino firefighter.

"What are you talking about?" they asked simultaneously.

"I saw you guys pull out a few minutes after we did last night," Marco explained.

"Yeah, and I saw you guys turn down Colorado Boulevard. I just figured you had a run," Chet added with a shrug of his shoulders. Marco nodded in confirmation.

"Cap, we never got toned out last night!" Roy whispered in disbelief. The truth began to sink in as Roy realized, "Oh, man. That means Johnny's been missing for over four hours!"

"I'll go call this in," Hank muttered under his breath. *How do I explain this one?* Hank walked wearily to his office to call headquarters.

"Hey, don't worry, Roy," Chet consoled, putting a hand on the paramedic's shoulder. "How far can a guy get in a bright red, fire rescue truck?"

Roy rolled his eyes at the mustachioed fireman. "It's been four hours Chet. What do you think?"

"Well, I guess...yeah...I think I know what you mean." As far as any of them knew, Johnny could be only a couple of miles away or as far as San Diego.

"What if he was forced by someone?" Marco tentatively suggested voicing Roy's fears.

Hank rejoined his crew a few minutes later. He spread his hands in a gesture of futility.

"Well, does anyone have any ideas? John wasn't injured, was he, Pal?" the Captain inquired as Johnny seemed to have a penchant for injuries. Roy shook his head.

"Not that I'm aware of, Cap. But then, you know Johnny. Part of me is hoping that that's what this is."

"Why?"

"Because the alternative is that someone forced Johnny out of here in the squad," Roy replied solemnly. Roy noticed Stanley stiffen at that scenario. That possibility hadn't occurred to the Captain and that thought was disturbing.

"Well, look there isn't anything we can do until B-Shift takes over. Headquarters will notify us if Johnny calls in...or they find him. Until then, let's make ourselves useful around here. It'll make the time pass. Mike, get some breakfast going and make lots of coffee. Chet and Marco, as soon as you finish dressing, get that hose we used last night hung. Roy...uh, start on the dorm, I guess. I don't know. Let's all just keep busy, okay?"

His men nodded in silent agreement and dispersed to fulfill their assignments. Each man curious as to what had happened to the wayward paramedic.

###

Johnny awoke with a start and stared through the windshield of the squad. His head was pounding unmercifully. He sat up and realized that he was dressed in his turnout gear. He was aware that he was in the squad, but he didn't have a clue where he was. He looked at his wristwatch. 7 a.m. He turned the key in the ignition. The engine "clicked" but didn't turn over. He reached for the mic but found it was silent. *The batteries must be dead. When did that happen? Where the hell are we?* He pulled his helmet off his head. He winced as it brushed his hairline. *Man! That is one hell of a headache!*

"Roy?" he called, uncertainly. When he didn't get a response he looked out the window, trying to get a handle on where he might be. The area looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't make out any landmarks. It was typical Southern California beach terrain. Gage grabbed the door handle and pushed the door open. He brought himself unsteadily to his feet on the sandy terrain.

He squinted his eyes against the morning sun and it was already hotter than it should be. Johnny turned awkwardly around to take in the 360-degree circumference of his location. The most he could surmise was that he was near the ocean, the squad's battery was dead, up to its hub caps in the sand, had a flat tire, and that he was totally alone. He struggled through the sandy soil to the passenger side, opened the compartment and extricated the biophone. He placed it on the hood of the squad and set up the antenna.

"Rampart. This is Rescue 51. How do you read?"

Only silence greeted him. He tried several more times without success. He pulled out the handi-talkie and tried to contact the department.

"Dispatch. This is Squad 51." *Damn!* "Dispatch this is Squad 51. Do you read?" No response. *Damn, I must be in a dead zone.* He threw the HT dejectedly into the cab of the squad. He replaced the biophone in its compartment, locking the door when he finished. He sat on the rear bumper of the squad, sweating. His turnout gear suddenly seemed unnecessary and hot. He pulled off his boots and tossed them to the side. *There! That feels better.* Johnny smiled a little as he wiggled his toes in the sand. Sweat trickled down his

back and he pulled his arms out of the sleeves, allowing the coat to slide down. He sighed with relief. Underneath the turnout coat he only wore his T-shirt. He stared down at his heavy turnout pants. He was still very hot. Wearing these would only make him hotter. He pulled the suspenders away from his shoulders, let the pants drop to his ankles and then pulled his feet out of the legs. He chuckled as he saw what he was left wearing--a colorful pair of blue boxers. *Maybe they'd pass for shorts.* Gage ran his fingers through his unruly dark hair and then glanced around, trying to decide what to do.

Johnny rested his hands on his knees a moment, wishing his head would stop pounding. Something deep within him told him that he needed to find help. He looked up at the sun, then to the left and then to the right. He rose to his feet. He felt incredibly lighter now that he didn't have to carry the weight of his turnout gear. He turned to his left and began walking towards the sound of the crashing surf. He figured that it probably meant a beach nearby and perhaps a lifeguard. *Man, Roy's never gonna believe this. I sure hope he's okay.* A frown crossed the paramedic's face as he thought about what the Captain would say. *Oh well, I'll deal with that later.*

Gage wandered to the slope and headed down to the sparse beach below. He stepped into the incoming tide. The water felt chilly on his feet at first but as he made his way along, he began to acclimate to its temperature. The beach was deserted. Maybe it was too early. He continued on his trek, hoping to find someone to help him. *I wonder if anyone has even missed me.* He wasn't sure why. Surely someone would have missed the squad. Why couldn't he remember how he had gotten here?

He tired, so he sat down at the tide's edge and watched the water roll in, kissing his toes and then running back out to sea. It was almost hypnotic—trance-like--and Johnny became lost in thought.

###

Some time later, a seagull screamed above his head and Johnny started. Looking up and around he tried to figure out why he was sitting in the surf. He couldn't remember driving to the beach. He had no hows or whys. It was all very confusing. He stood up and brushed the sand from his seat. His head protested. He rubbed his temples carefully and wished for some aspirin. He turned and headed north on the beach hoping to find something familiar.

###

Roy, now dressed in his street clothes, paced the distance from the kitchen counters to the television set of the day room for the umpteenth time that morning. The room was crowded with off-duty fire department personnel who had converged on the station as word spread about their missing comrade. Conversations in general were subdued as the men waited for information.

"Give it a rest would ya, Roy," Chet finally complained. Roy looked up absently.

"What?"

"Find a place and settle!" Marco pleaded nervously. "All this pacing it's driving us nuts!"

"Sorry." Roy took a chair at the table that had recently been vacated and began to drum his fingers on the tabletop.

"Uh, Roy," Mike glared across the table at the worried paramedic. Roy looked up and gave the engineer a confused look.

"What, Mike?"

"Stop the drumming, please."

"Sorry. I guess I just don't know what to do with myself." He spread his hands out in a placating gesture. Mike nodded.

"It's okay, Roy. We all understand. We're all worried about him."

Roy studied his hands as if he had never seen them before. This waiting was so unbearable. If only they could be doing something. The phone in the Captain's office rang and the men heard Captain Stanley answer it before the second ring. Silence filled the room as all eyes were riveted on the open door.

Hank came through the door a few minutes later and stood with his hands on his hips and surveyed the group of men before him.

"Well, they've found the squad," he stated simply. He could hear the men exhale with relief.

"Where?" Roy demanded.

"San Diego County near a deserted stretch of the Torrey Pines State Beach."

Hank could have sworn he heard every man's jaw drop open.

"And Johnny?" Roy asked, fearfully.

Hank shook his head before continuing. "They found all his turnout gear, discarded at the rear of the squad. The squad was found with a flat tire, no gas and a dead battery. And apparently, nothing is missing from the squad."

"Nothing but Johnny!" Roy added tersely. "Now what?"

"San Diego's Search and Rescue is in charge of forming the search teams."

"Can we join them?" Marco asked before Roy could.

Stanley nodded. "Yes. I've been given all the information we need. Let's try to carpool as much as possible. I'll meet with the drivers in 10 minutes to give you directions. Okay, men, let's get organized!"

The groups of men began forming carpools and were ready when Hank gathered the drivers together and handed out directions to the location in San Diego County. In minutes, the caravan was on the 405 headed south to I-5 with Mike Stoker's station wagon in the lead. Each carload was anxious to join the search.

###

Johnny realized that he was thirsty. The crashing of the surf only enhanced his thirst. He had been walking for what seemed like hours without seeing any signs of life. The current stretch of beach had become rocky and uninviting and his bare feet seemed to locate every loose stone. Johnny hoped that he would find someone before long. The sun beat down on him unrelentingly. He climbed to the top of a small rise and smiled with relief as a public beach opened before him. A dozen or more sunbathers lounged beneath the sun around and about the lifeguard tower. Johnny knew he was grateful for the lifeguard but he was having

trouble remembering why. He staggered down the slope and out to the water's edge. His energy was failing him as he struggled to walk through the surf. A strong wave crashed into his side, knocked him to the ground then the receding tide pulled him into the water. Gage cried out as he weakly struggled to fight against the pull of the tide.

Jeff Burton, the eighteen-year-old lifeguard at Tower 16, heard the cry and scanned the water quickly for the location. Spying the man struggling in the surf, he grabbed his buoy, leapt from the stand and hit the sand running. In moments he reached Johnny's side, expertly placed him in a rescue hold and brought him to the safety of the shore.

He eased his victim into a sitting position on the beach as the man began to cough up the seawater he had swallowed. Jeff could tell that the man seemed to be in distress. He took a beach towel that a bystander offered and wrapped it around the man's shoulders.

"Are you able to walk, sir?" he asked gently.

Sir? Why did that make me feel old? Johnny tried to smile but coughed instead and then nodded. Jeff helped him to his feet and led him over to the lifeguard tower, where he deposited the older man at the base of the tower. He asked another bystander to watch him as he ran up the ramp to the tower and the telephone. He dialed the prescribed number and reported the near drowning, requesting an ambulance. A moment later he knelt again beside the injured man. Someone had placed a beach towel on the sand for him to lie on, a rolled towel had been placed beneath his head, and a third beach towel covered his torso.

"Thank you, folks, but if you don't mind, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you all to step back. Please. Thank you." The crowd of bystanders moved slightly back, fascinated by the nearly tragic scene.

###

Roy stared out the passenger window of Stoker's station wagon impatiently. It would take nearly 2 hours to reach the S&R command post. Worry etched his features as he contemplated the possibilities. Chet would occasionally make an attempt at levity to ease the tension in the car but no one seemed in the mood, so he finally resigned himself to the silence of his fellow passengers. Each man seemed consumed with his own worries about the situation.

###

The ambulance arrived with sirens blaring. Johnny awoke with a start. He coughed as he tried to reconcile himself to where he was. A young lifeguard held a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Just take it easy, Mister. The ambulance is here."

"What happened?" Johnny managed to ask, choking on his words. His chest ached and his head still pounded.

"You nearly drowned, sir."

"Drowned?" Now Johnny felt really confused. He couldn't remember. "What? How?"

"You're okay now, sir. Just try to take it easy. On my count. One, two, three." On three Johnny felt the three pairs of hands lift and move him from the sand onto the stretcher. His head protested loudly inside his skull. Expert hands quickly covered him with a blanket and strapped him down. His head bobbed as the

two attendants hurried him to the awaiting ambulance. His mind tried to determine what was wrong with this scenario but he couldn't find the missing piece of the puzzle. He closed his eyes and drifted off as the ambulance began its trek to the hospital.

As the ambulance made its urgent journey, it crossed an over pass that intersected with the I-5 Freeway, just as a caravan of off-duty firemen rushing to join the search passed beneath the same point. Roy glanced up at the sound of the siren and caught a glimpse of the emergency vehicle. Marco noticed it too and said a silent prayer for whomever the vehicle was transporting.

###

Dr. Terrence Lovejoy of the small Rancho Santa Fe Community Hospital waited anxiously for the arrival of the ambulance. As a new resident, Dr. Lovejoy still got an adrenaline rush whenever an emergency was due in. He relished the excitement of the ER and only wished that their little hospital would see a bit more action. The ambulance attendant had radioed that they would be arriving within ten minutes with a near drowning victim. An adult male. It had only taken Dr. Lovejoy a few minutes to ready the treatment room. He busied himself by cleaning his wire-rimmed glasses for the second time. He checked his image again in the mirror. The young doctor was thirty-two and wore his sandy blonde hair a little longer than the administration would like, not to mention his longer than average sideburns. He straightened the knot of his wide tie and decided that his white lab coat gave him an air of authority. A moment later he heard the ambulance arrive and he rushed to meet the attendants and his patient.

Nurse Karen MacIntyre hurried to join him in the treatment room. The dark haired man groaned as he was moved to the exam table. The ambulance attendants quickly departed and left the doctor and his nurse to their work. As they began to take Johnny's vitals the doctor introduced himself.

"Hello, sir. My name is Dr. Lovejoy. My nurse is Miss MacIntyre. Do you know where you are?"

Johnny nodded stiffly. "Hospital?"

"Good. And do you know who you are?"

Johnny gave the unfamiliar doctor an odd look. "Uh, yeah. It's...it's...Johnny."

"That's good, Johnny. Do you remember your last name?"

Johnny furrowed his brows, trying to think and finally had to shake his head.

"No...no, I don't," he finally admitted.

"That's okay for now. You have a rather nasty bruise on your forehead. I'm afraid you may have a concussion. That may be interfering with your memory. I'm going to order some x-rays to see what's going on inside that head of yours and check to see how much water got into your lungs. Also, we'll be drawing blood. For the most part, your vitals are good but the concussion has me concerned. Do you have any questions?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure," Johnny winced as the doctor flicked the penlight in his eyes. He suddenly felt nauseous, groaned and rolled to his side. The doctor and nurse were quick to assist him as he vomitted. Johnny moaned as they eased him back onto the table. His mouth tasted of salt and bile and almost gagged him. Miss MacIntyre gave him a sip of water. That helped a bit.

"Karen," Dr. Lovejoy directed, "call admissions and let's get Johnny a room. I think he'll be much more comfortable."

"Of course, Doctor," the young woman complied and left the treatment room.

"Johnny, I'm going to admit you now. As soon as we can move you to a room, we will. I'll be by to see you there when I get the results of your tests. Okay?"

"Kay," Johnny mumbled. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open. He wanted to ask the doctor something but the words kept getting jumbled up inside his head. He was vaguely aware that the nurse had returned. He heard the doctor dictate orders to her for the x-rays and blood tests and then leave.

Karen gathered her supplies and carried them over to the exam table. Johnny looked at her through blurry eyes. She smiled down at him.

"This is gonna sting a bit," she warned. He tensed as he felt her apply the tourniquet and then he felt the cool swab right before the stick. He jerked involuntarily.

"Sorry. But this won't take long," Karen tried to reassure. Moments later she was done and removed the tourniquet. "There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Johnny made a face. Needles were ALWAYS bad. Karen only chuckled.

"Okay, now. Now, we need to get you down to x-ray." She brought over a wheel chair and helped Johnny move from the table and into the chair. He leaned his forearm on the arm of the chair and held his head as the nurse drove him down the hall to their x-ray department. There the technician took over.

Johnny was really glad to see Nurse MacIntyre when his ordeal in x-ray was over.

"Miss me?" she teased. Johnny rewarded her with one of his infamous grins.

"And how! I hate having x-rays done. They put you into such uncomfortable positions when you're not feeling that great to begin with."

"I know. But at least that part's over now. I'm taking you to your room. The cafeteria is sending up a lunch for you. Dr. Lovejoy has you on a liquid diet for now, so don't complain to the orderly who delivers it," Karen warned.

"Okay. I won't. Thanks, uh, Miss Mac...?"

"MacIntyre. But you can call me Karen, if you'd like," Karen offered as she pushed the wheel chair down the hall. There were only two floors in the small hospital. Johnny was surprised to realize that he was on the same floor as the ER, just in a different wing. The nurse helped him settle into the bed and then left him alone. It was a four-bed ward but he was the only patient in the room. Karen had put him next to the window but the parking lot wasn't much of a view. Johnny sighed heavily. This memory block was really beginning to bug him. If he could just grasp one detail, everything else would make sense. He lay back and closed his eyes. He was sound asleep when the orderly delivered his lunch and left it on the bedside table.

###

The command post was set up to the side of the abandoned squad. Crime scene tape surrounded the

disabled vehicle. Roy was surprised at the lack of activity as Mike steered the station wagon into the area. As the car rolled to a stop, Roy was opening the door. He hurried over to the command post quickly, followed by his shift mates and the other groups of off-duty firemen.

Lt. Andrew Jacobs looked up from his makeshift desk at the approaching men.

"You the men from LA county?"

Before Roy could respond, Hank moved forward. "Yes. I'm Captain Stanley. You must be Lt. Jacobs. We spoke on the phone, I believe."

"Yes, we did. I'm glad you could be here. We have a lot of ground to cover. I already have seven teams deployed." Lt. Jacobs began pointing to the map, indicating by marker pins where each team was searching.

Hank nodded, feeling a bit overwhelmed at the area they needed to cover. The men were divided into two man teams and given their search assignments. Roy waited impatiently for his assignment as the teams were formed and set out. Finally it was down to Roy, Mike and the Captain.

"Okay, Lt., What about us?" Hank asked. Jacobs reached behind the desk and pulled out a stack of telephone directories.

"We need to start checking with the local hospitals and clinics. Any place your man might show up as a John Doe. The phone company just finished installing a bank of phones for us to use. We also need to monitor the search teams. So, we'll put two of you on phone detail and the other on the radio."

Roy had to push down a feeling of frustration at being stuck at the command post. He wanted to be out there looking, physically. Johnny could be hurt.

"Mike, you take the radio. Roy and I'll take the phones," Hank commanded. Both men nodded and moved to their assigned posts. Roy picked up a phone book and turned to the hospital section of the yellow pages, selected a hospital listing and began to punch in the numbers. Hank sat down beside him and began a similar routine. There were lots of numbers to be contacted. Roy resigned himself to the task at hand. At least he was doing something.

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Johnny awoke with a start. A quick look around the room reminded him of where he was. He checked out his lunch with idle curiosity--chicken broth, apple juice, and tea. Not very appetizing. He opened the juice container and downed it quickly. The broth was cold and very salty but he drank it anyway. Then he drank the tea to kill the taste of the broth. He pushed the tray away from the bed. He found the call button and pushed it.

Karen appeared a few minutes later.

"What can I do for you?" she said with a smile in her voice.

"Some ice water would be nice," Johnny informed with a crooked smile.

"I'll see what I can do. I see you found your lunch."

Johnny made a face.

"Yeah, if you can call it that."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you. I'll just get this out of your way and be back in a few minutes with that ice water."

"Thanks, Karen." Johnny settled back into the bed and closed his eyes. *I need to get home. Gotta talk to Roy. Roy? Who's Roy? He furrowed his brow. Should I know who that is?*

Karen had just begun to fill a pitcher of ice with water when the telephone rang. She set the pitcher down and retrieved the handset.

"Nurse MacIntyre, Station One," she responded.

"Hey, Karen," Lucille Johnson, the receptionist asked, "I've got the county Search and Rescue on the line. They're checking for a missing person. You wanna take this call?"

"Sure. Put it through." Karen waited as the line was transferred. "Hello? This is Nurse MacIntyre. How may I help you?"

"Yes, Miss MacIntyre. My name is Roy DeSoto. I'm a volunteer with the San Diego Search and Rescue team. We're checking with the local hospitals for a missing person."

"Go on."

"He's about twenty-seven years old. 6'1". 175 pounds. Black Hair. Brown Eyes. His name is John Gage."

"Hmmm, that sounds like our near drowning," Karen replied thoughtfully.

"What!?" Roy practically shouted.

"I said, that sounds like the man Dr. Lovejoy admitted. He said his name was Johnny but that's all he could remember."

"Can you give me directions?" Roy asked excitedly. Both Hank and Mike stopped to listen as Roy scribbled down the information. "Thank you, Miss, uh, MacIntyre. I'll be there as soon as possible."

Roy hung up the phone with a grin on his face. "It sure sounds like Johnny! I'm going to go check it out!"

Hank turned to Stoker. "Mike, you go with him. I'll stay here and man the phones and watch the radio. Call me as soon as you know something for sure."

"You've got it, Cap. Let's go. Mike!" Roy nearly tripped over his chair getting up. The two firemen hurried to Mike's station wagon and took off.

###

Mike steered the car into the parking lot of the Rancho Santa Fe Community Hospital and pulled into the first available space. Both men bolted from the car and rushed into the building. The receptionist directed them to the Nurse's station where they would locate Miss MacIntyre.

She smiled as the two men hurried down the hall towards her desk.

"Are you Mr. DeSoto?" she asked, offering her right hand.

"Yes, I am. This is Mike Stoker. Where's Johnny?" Roy responded as he shook her hand. She could see how concerned they both were.

"Follow me. Don't be surprised if he doesn't recognize you. He has a concussion and has had trouble remembering things," she explained as she led them to Johnny's room. They walked into the four-bed ward. Johnny was asleep in his bed. A wave relief flooded over Roy as looked upon his partner.

"That's Johnny. His name is John Gage," he informed the nurse. He turned to Mike. "Go call the Cap, would ya, Mike? I'll stay here with Johnny."

"Sure thing, Roy. Uh, Miss MacIntyre, where would I find a payphone?" the quiet engineer asked the young nurse.

"Come with me, Mr. Stoker. You can use the phone from the Nurse's station. Mr. DeSoto, I've paged Dr. Lovejoy. He'll be here shortly."

"Thank you. Thank you so much!" Karen and Mike left the room and Roy made his way next to John's bed. He gently touched Johnny's shoulder, shaking it lightly. Johnny's eyes fluttered open and it took a moment for him to focus on the person standing next to him.

"What? Go away. I'm sleeping here!" he grouched.

"Hey! Is that any way to treat your partner after all I've been through!"

"Roy?" Johnny blinked his eyes and strained to get his partner in focus. "Itis you! Man, are you a sight for sore eyes!" A huge grin formed on Johnny's face as he reached out for his best friend. Roy grabbed his partner in a bear hug.

"I'm sure glad we found you. They've been searching for you all day."

"Who? Who's been searching for me?"

"Half the fire department and San Diego's search and rescue."

"No way! Where am I?"

"Rancho Santa Fe Community Hospital, San Diego County," Roy informed him. Johnny had a puzzled look on his face.

"How'd I get here?"

"You mean the hospital?"

"No, I remember that. I mean, how'd I wind up in San Diego?"

Roy shook his head. "We don't know. Chet and Marco said you took off after the engine at three this morning. That was the last anyone saw you. Then the squad was found abandoned near the State Park and

you were gone. We didn't know what had happened to you."

"Wow! I don't remember any of that. I must have hit my head harder than I thought."

"When? When did you hit your head?" Roy demanded to know.

"Oh, yesterday. I bumped it on one of the compartment doors. I didn't think it was any big deal."

"Well, obviously it was. How are you doing now?"

"Not bad, all things considered," Dr. Lovejoy stated as he entered the room. Roy turned to greet the doctor and take his extended hand.

"Roy DeSoto. I'm Johnny's partner with the LA Country Fire Department," the paramedic explained as he introduced himself.

"So, Doc, when can I go home?" Johnny asked eagerly.

"Well, I would like to keep you overnight for observation. You did take in a fair amount of salt water. And there's your concussion."

"Salt water?" Roy asked, uncertain.

"He nearly drowned. That's how he wound up here," Dr. Lovejoy explained.

"Drowned? Johnny! What happened?"

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure. That part's still a bit fuzzy," Gage admitted. He heard someone else enter the room, looked up and saw Stoker. A broad smile formed.

"Mike! You're here, too?"

"Yeah, Johnny. We're all here. I just called the Cap. As soon as all the teams are back in, he'll be here with Marco and Chet," the lanky engineer informed his friend with a smile. Johnny grinned back at him.

"I'm feeling a thousand times better now!"

"Well, don't get too comfy, you're the one who's going to have to explain to Tangee what happened to the squad."

Johnny blanched at the mechanic's name. "What? She's not here too, is she?"

Roy chuckled as he shook his head. "No, not yet, but knowing Tangee, she'll probably ride down with the tow truck."

"Roy! You've got to get me outta here before she gets here. She's gonna kill me!" Johnny panicked and grabbed Roy's arm.

"Sorry, partner. You're on your own with that!"

"Oh no!" Johnny groaned miserably. "She's never gonna believe that I don't know what happened! Hey,

Doc, any chance I can stay here a few weeks?"

Dr. Lovejoy smiled. "Sorry, my friend, but I think you'll be going home tomorrow."

Johnny looked over at Roy in exasperation. "Figures. The way my luck's been running."

"Well, Junior. Maybe it won't be so bad. I mean after all, it could have been Charlie."

"Oh, yeah, that's some consolation. I just can't win," Gage grouched.

"Come off it, Gage," Mike ordered, pointing his finger forcibly at Johnny. "You've got to be one of the luckiest people I know. You've survived more than your share of life threatening emergencies. Plus, the only thing wrong with the squad is a dead battery and a flat tire. I don't think Tangee or Charlie could give you too much grief over that. Count your blessings, man!"

Both Johnny and Roy were taken aback at Mike's tirade. Johnny stared at the usually quiet engineer.

"Who are you? And what have you done with Mike Stoker?" Johnny quipped. Mike's mouth broke into a smile and he chuckled.

"I'll never tell," Mike responded secretively. The three firemen laughed. Dr. Lovejoy wasn't quite sure what was going on but assumed it was an inside joke.

"Well, gentlemen, I have sick patients to check on. Don't tire Johnny out. He'll need to get some rest if he's going home tomorrow," the doctor instructed as he turned to leave.

"Thanks, Doc," Johnny called.

"Yeah, thanks for everything," Roy added. Dr. Lovejoy smiled and left the trio to visit quietly. They seemed like a close knit group. He had no idea what lay ahead when the rest of Fifty-one's A-shift arrived to check on the wayward paramedic. And no doubt, he would remember this patient for years to come.

END

In response to Tigger's Story Starter #2