

Welcome Back

[By A.F.](#)

John Gage whistled off tune as he entered the dayroom. He looked around, eagerly rubbing his hands. "Did you guys leave us anything for lunch?" he asked his crewmates, who were enjoying a few peaceful moments in the lull before the usually busy evenings.

"Soup's on the stove," Marco answered. "And there are sandwich fixings in the 'fridge."

"I'm starving," Johnny announced, as he removed the lid off the still hot pot of soup. "What a run. You would not believe it. This guy decides he's going to trim his leaves...with a chainsaw. He's lucky he didn't saw himself in half." He stopped his rant long enough to sniff the contents of the pot. "Hmmm. " He grabbed the small bowl offered to him from his partner, Roy DeSoto. Picking up a ladle, he spooned himself out a generous serving of thick ham and bean soup. "Smells great, Marco." He sat down at the table and began to shovel spoonfuls of the pungent soup into his mouth.

"Mail call." Captain Hank Stanley entered the kitchen area, carrying a stack of mail. "Hey, John, here's one for you. " The captain sniffed the pretty pink envelope. "Perfumed."

"Another of your female admirers, Gage?" Chet drawled.

"Jealous, Chet?" Johnny grinned as he took the envelope from his captain. He slid it open and withdrew a matching sheet of pink, lacey writing paper. With an eager smile, he began to read his letter. The change in his demeanor was instantaneous. His smile disappeared as all color drained from his face. He stared in disbelief at the words on the page, his mouth hanging slackly open, his breathing rates increasing alarmingly.

"Johnny?" Roy asked, nearly dropping his steaming bowl of soup onto the table. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Gage?" Cap questioned, alarmed by the pale countenance of his junior paramedic.

"No," Johnny moaned. He stood up quickly. "I got...I can't...I gotta get outta here." He fled quickly from the room, still clutching the pink, scented papers.

The others stared at each other wordlessly. Then Roy pushed back his chair and went to find his partner. He came back a few minutes later. "I can't find him," he announced.

"What do you mean you can't find him?" Hank queried. "He couldn't have just disappeared."

"I checked the locker room, the dorm, the bay," Roy replied.

"Man, did you see how spooked he was by that letter?" Chet inquired. "Wonder what was in it?"

“Look,” Cap commanded. “He can’t have disappeared that fast. And John would never leave the station like that...even if it were an emergency. And really urgent news doesn’t arrive in letters. Let’s all take a room and fan out. First one finds him sends him directly to my office.”

The men divvied up the rooms and went again to search for their missing co-worker. Ten minutes later they were still looking.

“He couldn’t have left,” Mike Stoker opined. “His car is still in the lot.”

“He has to be here.” Frustration was evident in the voice of the missing paramedic’s partner. Roy turned and headed back into the locker room. He rechecked all the shower stalls and was about to leave when a thumping sound drew his attention. He stopped for a minute and listened, sure he heard another banging sound and a muffled “ow.” He hurried over and threw open the door to Johnny’s locker, startling the occupant inside, who jumped and banged his head.

“Ow,” sniped Johnny. “What are you doing? Are you crazy? Shut the door!” He attempted to pull the door shut only to have Roy hold it steadfastly open.

“Are you crazy?” Roy snapped. “Do you know how worried we’d all been? You read that note, you turn white as a ghost and you disappear! We were getting ready to call the police and report some foul play. Get out of the locker.”

“Oh no.” Johnny shook his head emphatically. “No way. That’s what she wants. I’m staying right here thanks. Right here where it’s safe.” He hit his hand against the wall, gasping in pain. “Ow...splinter.”

Roy sighed. “You can’t live in your locker. And it doesn’t look real safe. So far you banged your head and got a splinter. So come out and tell me what’s in that letter.”

“It’s bad, Roy,” Johnny cried dramatically. “Really bad. The worst.”

“Did someone die?” Roy asked sympathetically.

“Not yet,” Johnny answered. “But that may happen. Anything may happen. She’s back.” He stared wildly at his partner. “She’s back. I got to get outta here. I have to ...move...leave. She’s going to find me and then I’m in for it. It’s been so quiet, but no, she’s back. And they’ll follow her, Roy. She never comes alone. She brings them. And it’s been so nice. Why? Why did she have to come back?”

“Johnny,” Roy responded firmly, desperate to stop the rant that he didn’t yet comprehend. He reached up and shook his partner. “Calm down. Look at you! You’re practically hyperventilating. Whose back? What are you talking about? Who’s going to find you?”

“New York.” Johnny snapped his fingers. “I can go there. It’s big. I can hide. They have their own firemen show with firemen to torture. She can bug Tommy Gavin and then she won’t have time for me. Why? Why after all this time is she coming back for me? It’s been nice, right Roy?”

“Right,” Roy responded, still puzzled. “Whose Tommy Gavin?”

“No,” Johnny sighed, his fingers clutching his hair desperately. “Who am I kidding? It’s me they want. It’s always me.” He tried to exit his locker but tripped over the bottom ledge, landing with a rib smashing blow against the benches in front of the lockers. “Ooooh,” he moaned as he fought to catch his breath.

“Johnny,” Roy grabbed at his partner and helped him into a sitting position. “Let me check you out.”

“It’s starting,” Johnny moaned again. “See, that’s three injuries and I just got that letter thirty minutes ago....one for every ten minutes. At this rate, I’ll be dead before the shift ends.”

“Calm down,” Roy soothed. “Look, let me see the letter.” He reached down and pried the pink paper out of Johnny’s hands. “Dear Johnny,” he read. “I’ve missed you so much! You’ll be glad to know that I’ve returned with an even better new home for us. I can’t wait to start to play with you again! Love, Tig.” Roy shook his head in wonder. “Who’s Tig and what does she want to play?”

“Tig is the queen bee,” Johnny answered. “The dominatrix of pain and owies. Don’t you get it? Don’t you even remember?”

“No!” Roy answered, as puzzled as ever. “Is this an ex-girlfriend? Dominatrix? I never heard you talk about this...I think I’d remember that!”

“Think back, Roy. Okay...first we had some injuries...nothing that bad. But then THEY came along. And then it was all owies all the time.” Johnny rubbed his forehead. “I can’t do it again, Roy. I can’t. And you can’t. Don’t you remember? I get hurt. You worry, you sigh, you drink endless cups of coffee. You don’t see your kids, your wife. I can’t date. Can’t camp...well, I camp, but then I get ticks and rocky mountain fever, or malaria from some errant South American mosquito that just happened to be passing by a California state park. Or a wolf attacks. Or...who knows? Even a werewolf.”

Roy shook his head in wonder and reached up to touch his partner’s forehead. Johnny jerked away.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking for fever,” Roy answered. “Either you’re delirious, or you hit your head hard enough that I should ride you to Rampart.”

“Rampart!” Johnny cried. “No that’s the first place they’ll look. Oh it’s useless.” He leaned his arms onto his knees and dropped his head into his hands. “I’m dead.”

Roy sighed. “Look, Johnny, you are obviously upset. But, come on. Whatever this is, it can’t be that bad.”

“Really,” Johnny peered at Roy through his fingers. He dragged his head up and began to tick off events on his hands. “Make Johnny bleed. Make Johnny puke. Trap him...surprise him...none of this rings a bell?”

“Well, it sounds like any shift with you,” Roy joked.

“Ha ha,” John deadpanned. “Laugh now. I wonder what’s next. Run Johnny over with a train, throw Johnny off a building. Make Johnny psychotic.”

“Come on,” Roy laughed. “That one’s not even a CHALLENGE.”

Johnny glared at him. Roy sobered up and said, “Look, you need to calm down. The only one injuring you is you...with this crazy idea you have in your head.”

“Crazy? CRAZY?” Johnny stood up and started to pace. “I’m crazy am I? You watch. Wait till you’re drinking the bad coffee in the doctor’s lounge by the vat. Then we’ll see whose crazy....wait...where you going?” He called after Roy’s retreating back.

“I’m going to get some good coffee,” Roy answered. “And I think I’ll call my wife. So that if we end up at Rampart before the end of the shift, I’ll have had the chance to talk to her before I sit endlessly by your bedside, waiting for you to recover from whatever illness these women put you through.”

“You remember!” John stated.

“Of course,” Roy answered. “You think I can forget the ulcer I got from that coffee. Or how my kids thought I died when I was gone so long? You think you’re the only one to suffer. Not even close pal.”

“What can I do?” Johnny whined.

Roy grinned. “Embrace it, pal. These women love you...to death....and back...and to death again.” He turned around with a giggle and walked away whistling the theme song to Welcome Back Kotter.

“Yeah,” Johnny grumbled. “Welcome back...welcome back.”