

Bells and whistles, smoke and mirrors

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First published on Fanfiction.net May 3, 2015

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/> Bells and whistles: Attractive additional features or trimmings [an allusion to the various bells and whistles of old fairground organs]. Smoke and mirrors: The obscuring or embellishing of the truth of a situation with misleading or irrelevant information. [with reference to illusion created by conjuring tricks]

“No, Marco, put it on channel 3. They’ve got a rerun of that hypnotist from the other night. Ab-so-lute-ly *hilarious*.” Chet pulled a chair from the dining room table and settled in front of the television set. “You guys’ll love this fella – he’s really good, and funny too. He had these folks in the audience clucking like chickens and dancing like Elvis.”

Johnny snorted, his expression somewhere between disbelief and an actual sneer. “If you’re gonna tell us everything that happened, what’s the point in watching? Hypnotism is all fake, anyway,”

“Hypnotism isn’t fake, John,” Mike said, his tone serious. “Hypnotists manage to help people remember the details of traumatic incidents, and the police wouldn’t resort to hypnotists if they couldn’t offer at least a bit of help, now would they?”

Johnny shrugged, tilted his head, and gave a grudging nod. “Well, okay, *some* hypnotists help – but not like the guys who you see on a television show.” He jabbed his thumb at the man on TV, dressed in a flamboyant red cape, which the hypnotist swirled to full dramatic effect with every gesture. “*That’s* just show biz, and I bet every one of those people who is ‘hypnotized’ is actually working for him.”

Chet waved him to silence. “Just shut up and enjoy the show, Gage.”

Johnny had opened his mouth to retort, when the station’s tones blared.

“Squad 51, unknown-type rescue. 1930 Riverside. 1-9-3-0 Riverside. Cross-street Blair. Time out, 1705.”

Johnny jotted down the address and smirked at Chet, pleased to escape from being forced to watch a program that didn’t interest him in the least. “See you later!”

Chet wrinkled his nose as the paramedics hurried to the squad. “Turn up the sound, Marco – some of the comments from the audience are almost as good as the hypnotist.”

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Roy tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as they heading to the call. “Man, I hate that term ‘unknown rescue’. You’d think people might have more of an idea of what the problem is when they call for help. Just a hint would make it a lot easier to know how to prepare... what equipment we might need, how many people might be involved, whether an ambulance is necessary...”

Johnny nodded. “Yeah, that’s always bugged me. I mean, we’ve had anything from that kid with a finger caught in a hole in the wall to a full-blown gas explosion. Kinda from one end of the scale to the other.”

Roy frowned. “You know, there’s something awfully familiar about that address. Like we mighta been there before?”

Johnny snapped his fingers. “You’re right – isn’t that close to the rec centre where C-shift had all those cases of food poisoning last month?” He shifted in his seat so he was facing his partner. “You remember how cheased off Bill and Jack were? They spent about three *hours* there doing triage to figure out which ones were the worst off, when Rampart had to divert them over to Harbour?”

“Oh, yeah,” Roy replied, a grim expression crossing his face. “Not something *I’d’ve* wanted to do, even for half an hour. Hey, it’s probably nothing like that. Maybe it’s pretty straightforward...”

“Man, I hope so. I really don’t want to spend the hour before dinner losing my appetite. Mike’s cooking his spaghetti tonight.”

Roy nodded, a grin crossing his face. “Yeah. I’ve been looking forward to that. Nobody cooks spaghetti like Mike. Cheer up, maybe we’ll get lucky. The last ‘unknown-type rescue’ we had was for that kid with his finger caught in the back of the antique chair.”

Johnny chuckled. “And his grandmother kept going on and on about how that chair was a certified and very valuable antique, and if we had to amputate his finger, to make sure not to get any blood on the upholstery.” He checked the side street of the intersection they were approaching. “Clear on the right,” he announced.

Roy laughed as he made a left turn onto Blair. “Man, the look on that kid’s face... It sure worked, though. She got him to drop the yo-yo and pull his hand right outta the mechanism.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about any wild animals this time... or do we?” Johnny’s eyes widened at the site of a circus van parked across three parking spaces next to the rec centre. He pointed. “The address is just around the corner. You don’t think they let an animal loose or something, do you?”

Roy shrugged. “I didn’t hear them dispatch for animal control.” He pulled over and gave a sigh of relief as he recognized the sheriff’s car. “At least Vince is here, so that’s something.”

They pulled to a stop next to Vince’s car, got out and started assembling the equipment they thought they might need. They waved at the officer as he approached their car.

“Hey, Vince. What do we have?” Johnny asked, his mind supplying several possibilities based on the setting.

“Hi, fellas. Looks like something to do with drugs – got a woman who’s sitting there, staring at nothing, but unresponsive, kind of like she’s in some kind of trance.”

“Great,” replied Johnny. “A trance. We get away from a hypnotist on TV, only to run into something like it on a run.”

Vince shrugged. “Well, I don’t know about that. She doesn’t look like she’s in distress or anything, but we can’t wake her up at all.” He shook his head. “Damnedest thing I’ve ever seen.”

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Roy clenched his jaw, and kept silent all the way back. He didn't think his partner would ever stop harping on the dangers of untrained people trying to show off. He backed the squad into its usual place in the apparatus bay, and parked it. "Stop! We're back, and I'm just about as hungry as you are. And I agree with you, so you don't have to try to convince me of anything."

Johnny slammed the door of the squad, and strode into the kitchen, inhaling deeply. A smile tugged at his lips. "Stoker, that smells fantastic..." He broke off; the kitchen was deserted, and he heard the men on the engine crew laughing from the lounge area. He nudged Roy, who had also stopped to take an appreciative sniff.

"Huh. They must still be watching that hypnotist. Let's hope he's more talented than that idiot from the circus."

Roy poured himself a cup of coffee and held up the pot to Johnny, who shook his head and poured a glass of milk. "C'mon, Johnny, that wasn't his fault. How was he to know that woman was narcoleptic?"

"Good thing she woke up on her own. I was surprised that the ammonia caplet didn't bring her around, though. It was weird that her eyes moved, but nothing else."

"We're lucky that her husband arrived and let us know what was really going on." Roy paused, holding his cup near his mouth but not taking a sip. "You know, we really should talk to Dr. Brackett about including something like that in the next training class. I know it's unusual, but it sure is easy to come to the wrong conclusion, and possibly do the wrong treatment."

Johnny nodded slowly. "That's a good idea." He rolled his eyes at another burst of laughter from the day room, and grabbed a handful of crackers.

"It's nearly time for dinner," Roy said, shaking his head.

"Think of it as an appetizer," Johnny quipped, leading the way to the day room. He started munching as they joined their crewmates.

"Watch this, watch this," Chet urged, pointing at the screen.

Marco shot him a look of exasperation. "Chet, we *are* watching."

On the television show, the volunteers from the studio audience were all seated on the stage, leaning over in various attitudes of sleep. A bell rang and the people on the left side of the stage sprang up from their seats, tucked their hands into their armpits, bent at the waist and strutted around, clucking like chickens. The members of the audience started laughing and applauding.

Marco snickered. "It's a good thing we're having spaghetti tonight, and not chicken – I'd be afraid we're eating one of *them*."

Chet mouthed the words as the emcee announced: “Cue the music!” At the sound of a whistle, the remaining seated audience members jumped up and began impersonating Elvis Presley as the strains of “Heartbreak Hotel” began playing.

After about a minute, during which the crew laughed as much as the audience, the hypnotist called out, “Very well done! You’ve won the dancing contest!”

At these words, all of the volunteers clasped their hands together in a gesture of victory, and took a bow.

“It’s time to have a seat at your victory press conference,” the Great Mesmerlin prompted, and all the participants sat down, some shaking their neighbours’ hands in a magnanimous fashion.

“Great game,” Mesmerlin said, his voice becoming soft yet intense, “but it’s time to take it easy. Three... your mind is relaxed.... Two.... Your eyelids are becoming heavier... and heavier... One, you are asleep.”

As one, the volunteers slumped in their chairs, asleep. A couple of assistants tiptoed among the participants, ensuring that they wouldn’t fall out of their chairs. At a nod from the last assistant, the Great Mesmerlin spoke.

“When I count to three, you will wake up, feeling refreshed. Three... it’s getting lighter and lighter... Two... you’re happy and ready to start the day... One... you’re awake!”

The participants lifted their heads and blinked. Some rubbed their eyes; others yawned.

“How about a hand for our lovely – and brave – volunteers?” The Great Mesmerlin swung his arm to the side in a flamboyant gesture to the audience participants, still blinking, who looked a bit bewildered at the sudden burst of applause.

“Wonderful!” enthused the host. “And let’s have some applause for.... The Great Mesmerlin!”

Marco got up to turn off the television set. “You were right, Chet. That guy was really amazing. I wonder how he manages to hypnotize all of those people at the same time.”

Johnny snorted, crumbs dribbling from the corners of his mouth. “You gotta be kidding, Marco. He’s fake. It’s all a setup. Those people weren’t hypnotized – they must be on his payroll or something. *I* could probably do that, with the right ‘volunteers’, too.”

Chet guffawed. “Ah, c’mon, Gage, you couldn’t hypnotize a golf ball, never mind people.” He smirked. “Unless you wanna put your money where your mouth is. Five’ll get you ten that you couldn’t hypnotize *me*. Whaddya say?”

Johnny rubbed the back of his knuckle under his nose. “Okay, you’re on,” Johnny snapped. He fumbled for his wallet, pulled out a five-dollar bill and slapped it on the table. “Let’s see the colour of your money, then,” he challenged.

Chet cleared his throat, taken aback. “Uh, it’ll have to wait until next shift. Rent’s due tomorrow...”

John quirked his eyebrow and shrugged. “Okay, at the beginning of next shift, then,” he agreed, snatching back his five-dollar bill.

Roy sighed. He was *not* looking forward to spending the rest of this shift, and his days off, listening to yet another one of Johnny’s elaborate schemes to pull one over on ‘The Phantom’.

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Chet straddled the chair he’d reversed at the table, and leaned his folded arms on the chair back. “All right, Gage,” he challenged. “Hypnotize me.”

A crooked grin crossed Johnny’s face. “Now, you’re sure about this, Chet?”

Chet rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Ya might as well pony up the five bucks. You’re not gonna be able to do it.”

Johnny’s grin was replaced by a scowl. “Oh, I’m not worried about *my* money.” He slapped a five-dollar bill on the table. “Marco, how about *you* hold on to the bet?” He nudged Chet. “Your money?”

Chet’s eyes twinkled and he pulled out two five-dollar bills and handed them to Marco. “Okay, Johnny, let’s see your magic.”

Johnny pulled out his stethoscope.

“What’re ya gonna do, check my heartbeat?” taunted Chet.

Johnny tilted his head to the side and huffed. “No, you idiot. I’ve gotta have somethin’ for you to focus on so you can relax into a trance, and I left my pocket watch in my other pants. Jeez!”

“Okay, okay,” Chet replied. “Let’s do it.”

Johnny swung the diaphragm of the stethoscope slowly in front of Chet’s face.

A muffled snicker caused Johnny to twist around. “Marco, this isn’t gonna work if you all keep interfering.”

Mike hid his smile behind his hand and gave a very unconvincing cough. “Yeah, Lopez. We wouldn’t wanna mess with the Great Johnny to, would we?”

“Oh, ha-ha,” Johnny retorted. “Look, I need you all to keep quiet for this, okay?”

Captain Stanley came into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. He took a sip, and his eyes fell on the group of men clustered around Chet. He looked from the stethoscope swinging from Johnny’s hand to

the false expression of innocence on Chet's face. He sighed. "Do I want to know what's going on here?" he asked, as Johnny placed the stethoscope on the table.

"Uh... probably not," Johnny mumbled.

Hank sighed again. "Is it, in any way, going to affect our efficiency or ability to do the job?"

The five crew members exchanged glances, and shook their heads. "No, sir," they answered in unison.

"See that it doesn't." Hank headed back to his office to finish reviewing some mandatory reading material from headquarters. *Oh, I hope I don't regret what they may or may not do...* he thought, bending to his unenviable task.

Marco, who'd followed the captain at a distance, heard the distinctive squeak of the office chair, and slipped back into the dining area. "Coast is clear, guys."

Johnny picked up the stethoscope again, settled into the chair opposite Chet, and started to swing it. He dropped his voice to a low, persuasive tone. "Okay, Chet. I want you to focus on the silver disk floating in front of you. Listen to the sound of my voice, and only to the sound of my voice.... Relax your mind.... The silver disk is the moon, shining in the night sky.... As you watch it, it's getting brighter and brighter, and the sky is getting darker and darker.... The moon is bright..."

The watching men gaped in surprise as Chet began to squint against the supposed brightness of the swinging 'moon'.

Johnny continued. "The moon is so bright that you gotta close your eyes.... It's night time, and you're tired, and the moon is soooo bright.... You need to sleep. Just relax.... Take deep breaths.... And go to sleep."

The other men observed, amazed, as Chet's eyes slowly closed and his head nodded down. He slumped against his forearms, his slow and even breathing making a slight whispering sound.

Roy raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I don't believe it," he said flatly.

Marco reached over to poke Chet, but he got no reaction from the sleeping man except a gentle snort and a twitch of the bushy moustache.

Johnny looked more astounded than anyone else. "Huh... it worked. Uh..." he looked at his partner. "Roy, what do I do now?"

Roy folded his arms across his chest and shook his head. "You are un-be-lieve-able. How the hell should I know what to do now? This was *your* stupid bet in the first place."

"But you're my partner," Johnny protested.

"Not in *this* little endeavour, I'm not. You're on your own. *You* figure it out."

“Now wait a minute...”

Mike cleared his throat. “Actually, I think the next step is a post-hypnotic suggestion, isn’t it? I mean, that’s what the Great Mesmerlin did. Where you tell him, oh, I don’t know, to dance like Elvis, or sing like a bird, or something along those lines.”

Johnny’s eyes lit up. “Yeah... thanks, Mike. Let me think a minute.”

Roy muttered, “*That* would be a first.”

“Shush.” Johnny leaned over to the slumbering fireman. “Okay, Chet, when you hear the sound of..”

“A bell?” supplied Marco.

“Or a whistle,” added Mike.

Johnny grinned. “Chet, when you hear the sound of a bell or a whistle, you’ll feel the urge to dance...”

“Like at a nightclub,” Marco whispered, with a snicker.

“...To dance like you’re at a club, and you’re showing your moves,” echoed Johnny. “Three... it’s getting brighter.... Two, your eyelids are opening.... One, you’re awake!” he proclaimed, touching Chet lightly on the forehead, for good measure.’

Chet batted Johnny’s hand away. “What are ya shouting for? And just *when* did you plan on hypnotizing me – or have you given up?”

“But I *did* hypnotize you.”

Chet rolled his eyes. “Okay, yeah, sure ya did. Am I supposed to cluck like a chicken when you say a magic word or something?” He leaned back. “Okay, let’s see it.”

Johnny pushed himself away from the table, and strode over to the kitchen timer. “In one minute, we’ll see whether you’re hypnotized or not.” He tapped his foot, waiting for the timer to go off.

“So... when the bell goes, what are you expecting?” Chet asked, his face the picture of innocent sincerity.

“You’ll see,” Johnny replied. He looked at his watch, then at the timer.

Roy shook his head, reached for the coffee pot, and poured a cup. He leaned against the counter, and sipped. *Whatever happens, this is gonna be a weird day.*

The timer rang shrilly. All eyes focused on Chet.

Nothing happened.

Johnny stared at the ringing timer, picked it up and shook it, then put it down again. The bell took on a sickly tone, but kept sounding.

Chet chuckled. “Wow. I’m really impressed, Gage.” He stood up and stretched. “A word of advice – don’t give up your day job.”

Captain Stanley strode into the room. His nostrils flared and he jabbed a finger at the timer. “Turn... that... off.. NOW!”

Johnny slapped the off button. “Sorry, Cap.”

Hank glowered. “Now, if you gentlemen don’t mind, it’s time for roll call. There are a couple of announcements...”

The station’s tones interrupted him.

“Great,” he muttered, heading to the apparatus bay to fill out the call sheet, followed closely by Roy.

“Squad 51. Possible heart attack. 106 Gilmore. 1-0-6 Gilmore. Cross-street Lawrence. Time out, 0809.”

Johnny snatched his stethoscope and paused, his mouth agape.

Chet, his eyes closed, was humming softly and swaying from side to side – dancing in a very poor version of “The Hustle.”

Marco and Mike burst out laughing. “Nice one, Chet!”

Chet immediately stopped dancing, opened his eyes, and looked at the two in bewilderment. “What’s so funny?” he demanded.

Marco doubled over, laughing even harder.

“Johnny!” Roy shouted from the bay. “Let’s get a move on!”

“But... I...” Johnny shook his head, looking almost as bewildered as Chet, and ran to the squad. He pulled open the passenger door and slid into the squad. “Roy, you’re not gonna believe it...” he began.

Roy exhaled, frustrated. “Right now, all I wanna believe is that we’re gonna get to this call in enough time to do our *job*.”

Johnny nodded, properly contrite, and focused on the task as he took the call slip from Captain Stanley and began plotting their fastest route.

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Captain Stanley looked up from the table, where he’d spread the dreaded leaflets. “Run go okay?” he asked Roy.

“Yeah... I was just some bad indigestion, but we transported anyway as a precaution. Mind you, anyone who has a couple of beers and a chili dog for breakfast is sure to benefit from one of Morton’s lectures on nutrition – not that the *patient* will enjoy the lecture.”

Hank chuckled. “You’re probably right about that.” His gaze returned to the leaflets, and he scowled.

Roy gestured at the colourful paper scattered on the table. “What *is* all this?”

Hank snorted. “This... *stuff*... is Headquarters’ latest exercise in idiocy, sent to torment me.”

Roy picked one up, read the title and looked at the picture, then dropped it back on the table as if it were contaminated. “They’re kidding, right?”

A sigh of combined exasperation and gloom escaped from Hank. “Oh, I wish I could say they were. When I saw them in my mail slot, I was convinced that someone was playing a really nasty practical joke... so I called HQ this morning, and got the bad news.”

“*The Rescuers?*” Roy said, aghast, looking at the costume sketches and trying not to picture himself dressed as a mouse. “Of all the possible ways to... what, ‘Educate the youth’, this has got to be one of the dumbest things I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m with you, Roy. I think it must be the brainchild of some society matron with small grandchildren. At any rate, according to the ‘great minds’ this scheme would work best if we used ‘real, live firefighters.’”

“Aw, Cap.” Roy grimaced at the leaflets. “I’m all for educating the public about safety, but these costumes would only work if our target audience was a bunch of three-year-olds. Believe me, my kids outgrew this kind of nonsense when they were still in diapers.”

Hank’s lips twisted in a wry grin. “So you don’t think this will appeal...” he picked up a brochure and quoted “...to all ages, young and old?” He tossed the leaflet back onto the pile in disgust. “Well, since it looks like we’re gonna be stuck with this task, *I’m* gonna see if we can make a few modifications.”

“Starting with the costumes?” Roy suggested, his tone a touch too eager.

Hank nodded. “Followed closely by this so-called ‘script’. I mean, look at this drivel! Hell, even *I* could write a better script on one of my *worst* days.” He sighed. “Can you get everyone in here? Maybe together we can undo this departmental sabotage.”

“Sort of sharing the load, you mean?”

Hank snorted. “More like sharing the pain, really.”

Roy chuckled, and went to fetch the rest of the crew.

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“No... way.” Marco threw the pamphlet back onto the table. “How could I possibly hold up my head after dressing like *that*? This character looks like a Las Vegas pimp!”

Among the snickers that followed Marco’s comment, the tones sounded.

~~*~*~* **BELLS** *~*~*~*~*

“Station 51, people trapped. St. Bartholomew’s Church. 7423 Saunderson. 7-4-2-3 Saunderson. Cross-street Newton. Time out, 1137.”

Once again, as soon as the tones sounded, Chet’s eyes closed, and he began swaying and dancing to music only he could hear.

“Kelly! What the hell are you doing?” Hank snapped.

Chet’s eyes sprang open; his face wore the same bewildered expression as before. “What?” he asked in puzzlement.

“Get going. We’ve got a run.” Hank strode to the apparatus bay, shaking his head. “This is one helluva day,” he muttered.

Chet grabbed Johnny’s arm as they hurried after the captain. “What did I do?”

Mike whispered over his shoulder to Marco as they headed through the door, “Looked kinda like ‘The Locomotion’ to me.” They snickered until they caught the fiery look Hank cast in their direction.

Johnny just shrugged, a look of disbelief bordering on anxiety on his face, and hurried to the squad.

Chet tugged at Marco’s sleeve as they bounded into the back seats of the engine. “What did I do that pissed Cap off?” he asked, his tone indignant.

Marco cocked his head to the side, as the engine pulled out of the station. “Good trick, Chet. You’ve really got Johnny convinced.”

“Convinced of *what*?” Chet asked in exasperation.

Marco’s jaw dropped. He leaned over toward his partner. “Don’t you remember?”

“Look, Marco, this is really startin’ to get on my nerves. What, *exactly*, am I supposed to have done?”

Marco looked dumbfounded. “You really don’t remember?”

“Re-mem-ber *what*?” Chet demanded, spitting out each syllable.

“*Caramba!*” Marco whispered. “It really *did* work.”

Chet scowled. “*What* worked?”

“Johnny’s hypnotism. Well... it *sorta* worked.”

Chet’s eyes blazed. “Whaddya mean, it *sorta* worked?”

“It’s kinda hard to explain.”

“Don’t be evasive, Marco. What the *hell* is going on?”

Hank swivelled in his seat, his jaw set and his expression sterner than they’d seen in a long, long time. His voice dropped to a very soft, very dangerous tone. “Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it at the station. We have a job to do right now. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, sir!” they both replied, gulping.

“Good. Now focus on the job, all right?”

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Roy and Johnny exchanged puzzled glances as they drove to the church. “How do you get trapped in a church?” Johnny mused.

Roy’s expression was bewildered. “Maybe part of the structure collapsed?”

“Possibly a sinkhole? Basement collapse?”

“I don’t know, Johnny. I don’t think we can really guess – ‘people trapped’ is kinda vague, after all.”

Johnny slumped against the door, frustrated. “Yeah, you’re right. No matter what we think it’s gonna be, it’ll end up being somethin’ else.” He consulted the map. “Okay, next right, then three blocks, then a left.” He drummed his fingers on the back of the map book. “I wonder who’s trapped, where, and how long it’s been.”

Roy sighed, bit back an exasperated comment, and followed his partner’s driving directions. “We’ll find out when we get there.”

“I wonder if it’s a kid...”

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The priest at St. Bartholomew’s hurried over to the arriving firefighters. “Thank God you’ve arrived! The structure holding up Big Paul has collapsed, and some workers are trapped underneath. God only knows how they’re doing. Big Paul is extremely heavy, and I’m sure he broke all the wooden supports when he fell.”

Hank held up his hands. “Slow down, sir, and tell us how many are trapped and where.”

The priest gulped, nodded, and took a deep breath. “Okay.” He pointed up at the side of the bell tower, where a crane canted crazily into a tall, broken scaffold, swaying and doing more damage to the structure with each gust of wind. “Our bell tower was struck by three bolts of lightning during that crazy storm a couple of days ago, and some of our parishioners who are involved in construction work volunteered to take a look at things, and let us know how much damage there was.” He sighed. “Looks like there was a lot more damage than we anticipated.”

“Where are they trapped? How many?” Hank repeated. He was puzzled, as he couldn’t see anyone near the collapsed scaffolding.

“OH! No, no – they’re trapped *inside* the bell tower. Big Paul fell and broke the supports in the bell chamber.” The priest led the way to a small door on the opposite side of the tower from the scaffolding. He tugged the door open, then coughed as a cloud of dust rolled through the opening. “Hey! Where are you?” he shouted as he led the way up a series of stairways that wound around the edges of the bell tower.

“Zat you, Father Francis?” came a weak voice from high above. “We’re on the floor... just underneath Big Paul... well, what’s *left* of Big Paul.”

“Just stay where you are – we’re coming up to help!” the priest called.

“Z’not like we’re goin’ anywhere!” shouted a different voice. “Sorry, Father, but we’ll need a miracle to save Big Paul.”

The priest paused at the next landing to take a breather. “Look, I’m worried about you guys, not Big Paul! Is anyone hurt?”

“Hang on,” came the first voice. “Roll call, gentlemen! Alphabetical order... and if you can let these folks know ... where you are, it would be helpful!”

“Yes, ma’am!” replied a third voice, with a wheezy chuckle. “I guess I’m first then. I’m Dave, and I’m sorta caught between a chunk of the upper bell floor and the wall down here. No injuries, just trapped – and dusty!”

Hank looked up... and up, and started counting flights of stairs.

“Pete, you’re up! Where are ya, and are ya hurt?” the first voice called.

“Yeah. I’m Pete, and I’m near the stairwell on the upper bell floor. I’ll survive, but I’ve got a leg through the floor, and I can’t pull myself up. Got a couple of bumps and bruises, but nothing major.”

“Sam? Your turn,” commanded the first voice.

“Jeezus, woman, give me a minute!” an irate voice announced. “Uh, sorry about that, Father. Yeah, I’m Sam, and I’m right near Jennifer here – who needs help more than any of us, by the way. I’ve got some mashed up fingers, and a broken arm. Shoulder’s not great, either.” He coughed loudly. “Your turn, boss-lady!”

“It ain’t a contest!” the first voice shouted in irritation. “Yeah, I’m Jennifer, and I’m trapped... under one of these goddammed broken support beams ... on the lower bell floor. Sorry, Father! Didn’t mean to cuss there... but I’ve been in better shape!”

Hank’s ears caught the edge to her voice – an edge he recognized as a leader trivializing personal injuries to ensure that others were taken care of first. He turned to the priest. “What about Big Paul? Is he injured?”

The priest frowned in confusion, then his expression cleared. “Oh! No, no – Big Paul is the church bell! Historic, to be sure, but not nearly as important as these people’s health.”

“Look, how sturdy is that bell floor?” Hank asked, as they continued up the stairs.

“Well, it’s still holding, despite having a thousand-pound bell fall on it, and it looks intact from here.”

Hank pulled out his HT. “Engine 51, Squad 51 from HT 51. We’ll need a couple of fifty-foot ropes, block and tackle, a pike and a Stokes.” He had finally reached the seventeenth landing, and paused to catch his breath. *Good thing we don’t have to climb this many stairs all the time!* He examined the underside of the bell floor; it appeared as solid as the priest had said. *At least that’s one thing these folks have in their favour.* He pushed open the door to the lower bell floor and started sizing things up.

“Hi, folks. I’m Captain Stanley from the Fire Department. Can you tell me what happened?”

Pete’s voice sounded from directly above, and Hank pivoted to see a foot and part of a leg protruding through the narrow space between the stairwell and the edge of the floor. *No wonder you can’t pull yourself out. We’re gonna have to saw part of the floor away to get you loose.*

“We were just setting things up to reinforce the cross-beam for Big Paul, when all hell – sorry, Father – broke loose. I guess the lightning strikes weakened the part where the cross-beam was attached to the wall, and when the wind blew the crane into the scaffolding, it just gave. Uh... up here on the upper bell floor, we’ve got some damage as well. There’s a small room with wooden walls... or at least, there *was* a small room, but the walls have all sorta folded in on each other, and that’s where Dave is, at the other side of the floor from me.”

Hank keyed his HT again. “HT 51 to Engine 51. Bring up the K12, as well.”

Mike replied, “10-4, Cap. K12, ropes, pike, block and tackle are on the way up.”

Hank’s eyes fell on the wreckage of the lower bell floor. *Oh boy... this is gonna take some work.*

Big Paul had cracked jaggedly and lay sideways on a heap of broken wood that had once been some kind of closet, judging by the piles of cleaning materials and other debris that littered the floor around the bell. Hank saw a man with blood dripping down his misshapen left arm, leaning down near a heap of clothing on the other side of the bell. “Sir, I need you to step back, if you can!” Hank called, making his way over to the broken crossbeam. He pulled a number of pieces of broken wood from the path, and reached for the man. “Sam?” he asked.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” breathed the priest from right behind Hank.

Hank didn’t blame him; he’d seen a lot of building collapses, but this was a new one for him. The walls of this structure looked sound, as did the floors. It was the odd arched buttresses that had once supported the bell structure, but which were now a twisted, broken mess of splintered wood, wires and bat droppings that made him pause.

Captain Stanley whirled, and bit back the curse that nearly made it to his lips. “Father, we need you to stay back. My men are coming up with some equipment, but we need you to keep back so you don’t get hurt, too.”

“But...”

“Look, my men are trained for this sort of work, and we’re gonna have to work pretty fast here,” Hank explained, grabbing the priest’s arm and steering him toward the safety of the stairs. “You can help direct my men up to the next level.”

The priest nodded, his eyes wide and his expression shocked. “I... I had no *idea* that... that it was... so bad.”

It *was* bad. Now that he was actually on the floor of the bell tower, he could see that what he thought was a heap of clothing was actually Jennifer, lying at an angle that made Hank’s back *ache* just thinking about it.

Oh, I wish he hadn’t seen that... he’ll have nightmares for a while. Not that we won’t... Hank thought. He reached again for Sam’s good hand. “We’ll take it from here, sir,” he said. “We need to get you over to the stairs, so we can help get her out of here.”

Now that he had an unimpeded view of things, Hank’s strategy to extricate the woman changed completely. They didn’t have time to rig a block and tackle... but since, miraculously, the bell had missed all four of the victims, that was one less thing to worry about. He heard the sound of his men’s feet on the stairs, and breathed a sigh of relief. The sooner they started, the sooner they’d get these people, especially this woman, to the hospital. He was no rescue man, but he knew enough that her injuries were the worst of the lot. What truly puzzled him was that she was the calmest of the four.

“Jennifer, I’m just gonna get Sam over there so they can treat him, and we’ll be right back to help you, okay?”

She gave a slow nod and a weary chuckle. “Hey, it’s not like I’m goin’ anywhere.... You got paramedics with your crew?”

“Sure do, and they’ll be right here.”

“Tell them... Sam’s got a telescope fracture of at least two... of the fingers on his left hand... Also, a suspected shoulder dislocation... can’t be sure, ‘cause I couldn’t really... examine it. I’ve cleared myself head, neck and spinal... but there’s some paresthesia with the left arm... probably because I’m lying on a nerve bundle or something.” She leaned over to her right and gasped. “Mnnngh... okay... ohhh-kay... not gonna do *that* move again. Tell your boys...” she grimaced and licked her lips. “Hmmm... uhmmm... Where... where was I?... Oh yeah... I’ve got ... a severely angulated... tib-fib... fracture with... the foot rotated... 90 degrees.... off normal... and I... I can’t feel it.” She closed her eyes and took several shallow breaths. “And I’m in shock,” she added, as an afterthought.

“You hang in there, Jennifer, and they’ll be right here.” Hank strode over to the staircase and nodded at his men. “Okay. Lopez, Kelly, take the saw up one more floor, and see what you can do to get Dave and Pete out from where they’re trapped. Gage, DeSoto, apparently, Jennifer knows a thing or two about medicine – she said to tell you both that Sam has telescope fractures on some fingers of his hand, as well as a probable dislocated shoulder...” he began.

Sam interrupted. “Look, it’s painful, but it’s *nothing* compared to Jennifer. She’s trapped under that goddamned – sorry, Father – beam and I couldn’t even *begin* to budge it. And her leg...”

Roy steered Sam to a chair near the stairs, and helped him sit down. “Can you cradle that arm with your other hand? It will make your shoulder a lot more comfortable until we get a chance to splint it properly.”

Sam nodded. “Go help Jennifer.”

“She said to tell you she’s got a tib-fib fracture, and looks like her foot is badly dislocated. Guys, she’s in shock, but she doesn’t appear to be in a lot of pain.”

“Crap,” Johnny said softly, and darted over to Jennifer.

“I think two or three of us can move that beam enough to slide her out,” Hank said. “We gotta be careful with that leg, though.”

Johnny pulled aside enough of the debris so that he could kneel next to Jennifer. “Hey, Jennifer. I’m Johnny, and I’m a paramedic.”

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she gave him a ghost of a grin. “So you’re... the infamous... Johnny Gage. Dixie... has a lot of... good things to say... about you.”

“How do you know Dixie?” Johnny asked, palpating her arms to check for injuries.

“Hey, can you... move some of this stuff... from under my left shoulder? Somethin’s pressing... on a nerve... my fingers are tingling.”

“Sure.” Johnny shifted some of the bell ropes, and Jennifer gasped, then relaxed a fraction.

“Thanks... oh crap. Mnngh Well, I got feeling... in my left hand again,” she said through her clenched teeth. “Whoa... that’s gonna be nothin’... compared to when... you relocate ... that ankle.” A wry chuckle forced itself from her. “No traction on *that* leg... I’m afraid.” Jennifer’s eyes closed again, and she sagged back against the debris.

“Where does it hurt?” Johnny asked, frowning at her vital signs. He jotted them down, and handed his notebook to Roy.

“Rampart, this is Squad 51.”

“Go ahead, 51,” replied Joe Early.

“Rampart , we have four victims of a structure collapse. At this time, we are dealing with one patient, but will have more when we stabilize. Details on first patient: Female, age approximately 25 years old. She has an open tib-fib fracture, with a fully dislocated ankle, rotated at 90 degrees external from the norm. She is currently trapped under a crossbeam, so it is not yet possible to reduce the ankle dislocation. Vital signs: pulse is 110 and thready, respiration is 20 and shallow, blood pressure is 100 over 70.”

“Jennifer, where does it hurt?” Johnny repeated

“Mmm. Uh... I can sort of feel... a dull throbbing below the knee... but I can’t feel the foot at all... Everything else is just... kinda ... I don’t know... achy, I guess.” She started, as the K-12 could be heard on the upper floor, cutting through the wood. “Oh, good... guess that’s Pete... taken care of...” Her words slurred and her head lolled over.

“Jennifer?” Johnny demanded. At her lack of response, he scowled and took another set of vital signs. “Roy, she’s out. Respiration is down to 14, still shallow. Pulse is... about 120 now. Stand by for BP.” He focused on the dial, then put the bell of the stethoscope back as the sounds of the saw above ceased. He listened, shook his head, and reinflated the cuff. “Couldn’t hear it there. Give me a sec.... Okay. BP is 88 over 56.”

Roy repeated the new vital signs to Rampart.

“Squad 51, as soon as you can, start an IV with Ringer’s, wide open. Are there any head injuries?”

“That’s negative, Rampart.”

“Administer 10 mg MS, IV. Will you be able to relocate the ankle?”

“Yeah, once we get her out from under that beam. Stand by, Rampart.” Roy added the medication to the notebook. “Johnny, IV with Ringer’s, wide open, and 10 mg MS IV.” He swivelled as Marco and Chet brought Pete and Dave down the stairs to the lower bell floor. “Are you guys hurt at all?” he asked.

“Nothing that a bandaid and an aspirin or two won’t cure,” Pete said. “Got a few scratches on my leg, but nothing that needs any emergency medical attention. You guys focus on these two.”

Roy nodded. “Chet, can you and Marco splint Sam’s arm? As soon as we get Jennifer free and in the Stokes, we’ll be able to do a workup on you, Sam.”

“Take care of Jennifer, first.” Sam leaned back, still cradling his injured arm.

Marco pulled a splint from the trauma box. “We’ll get some baseline vital signs, Roy.”

“Thanks.”

Hank and Mike finished clearing as much of the debris from underneath Jennifer as they could. “Okay, Jennifer,” Hank said. “In a couple of minutes, we’re gonna lift the beam off your leg, then slide you out.”

“Should... be fun...” she mumbled. “That morphine... oughta help... when you relocate the ankle.” She gave a weak laugh. “I’ll try... not to scream... too loud.”

Johnny gave her a lopsided grin. “Scream as loud as you want – you’re entitled, and it’s gonna hurt, so you might as well.”

She gazed at him, her eyes reflecting the effect of the painkillers Johnny had administered. “10 mg?” she asked.

“Affirmative. Hey, are you a medic, or something?”

Jennifer took a few breaths, trying to focus. “Current paramedic class... at Rampart. Then, the fire academy... if I pass the tests.”

“Hey,” he chided in a gentle tone, watching the others prepare to lift the beam. “It’s usually the other way around – fire academy first, *then* paramedic program.”

“Not if you’re... a woman.”

“Well, glory be – I guess you *are* a woman! Funny, seems to me like you’re a paramedic student who really knows the stuff. Heck, you managed to give us a proper triage report for a multiple casualty incident, despite being injured yourself; you know your anatomy and physiology, and you know the appropriate drugs and dosages.”

She smiled. “Thanks. Are we ready... for the screaming... now?”

“Just about.” Johnny beckoned Chet over. “Jennifer, this is Chet Kelly. Once we’ve pulled you out from under that beam, he’s gonna hold your hand while we relocate your ankle. Feel free to squeeze hard enough to break a finger or two,” he joked.

“Hey!” Chet mock-protested. He grabbed the IV bag, and held it up out of the way.

Sam cleared his throat. “Seems I’m the one to have fingers broken today, and that’s enough for any crew, right? Hang in there, Jenny.”

She growled. “*Don’t* call me ‘Jenny’ I may be... as stubborn as a mule... but there’s no need... to get insulting.”

“Are we ready, Cap?” Johnny asked, standing up and positioning himself so that he could drag Jennifer backward when the others raised the beam.

Roy gingerly supported her foot and lower leg. He nodded to the others.

“Marco?” Hank called.

Marco finished tying off the sling on Sam’s arm. “Better?” he asked.

“Much better. Thanks.”

Marco skirted the others, and took up the end position on the beam. “Ready when you are, Cap.”

“Okay, we’ll lift on three. No Olympic records here, fellas – we just have to lift smoothly and quickly, just enough to be able to pull her out. We’re gonna try to pivot it around, so watch out for Roy.”

“Thanks,” the paramedic muttered. “I’ll let you know when we’re clear.”

“One... two... three!” Hank urged. The three men lifted the beam up, Johnny dragged Jennifer back slightly, and Roy held Jennifer’s leg as steady as possible while dodging the pivoting crossbeam.

“That’s got it,” Roy said, easing Jennifer’s leg away from the beam. He reached for some sterile gauze and placed it on the open wound, then bandaged it lightly in place, then loosened her boot to check for pedal pulses. *Nothing. Let’s hope we get something when we... when I realign this ankle.*

“Hmmm... for protection... no pressure... owwww!” Jennifer’s eyes opened wide as the nerves in her leg sent her hundreds of signals all at once, now that the weight had been lifted. She clenched Chet’s hand tightly. “Do...do it now... before I ... before I... puke.”

“Johnny?” Roy said. “You hold her leg while I realign the ankle.” He leaned over. “Sorry, Jennifer, this is really gonna hurt.”

“Know that.... Get it done...” she gasped.

“On three,” Roy supported the ball of her foot with one hand, and the heel with the other. “One...two...three!” He focused on exerting the same amount of pulling and pushing, to keep her foot aligned as he felt the bone edges grate on each other.

Jennifer gasped, and screamed as the compressed vessels and nerves were bombarded with the sudden return of pulse and sensation. “Jeee-zzzuzzz!” She clenched Chet’s hand even harder, and mumbled, “Sorry, Father.”

Father Francis shook his head. “Look, everyone, I *was* an army chaplain, so stop apologizing when you swear. It’s not something we approve of, but dammit, I sure understand the circumstances.”

Jennifer made a sound that was a combination of laughter and sobs, then gasped deeply and became limp.

Hank narrowed his eyes as he scanned the area. “Marco, get Roy a long splint. Mike, get the Stokes set up. Chet, Father Francis, can you get Pete and Dave downstairs? And check if they need any treatment. Johnny, I’ll handle the communications with Rampart.”

“Thanks, Cap. Getting another set of vitals.”

Chet said, “After you, Father. Then you, Pete and Dave, and I’ll follow you down with some of the equipment.”

Dave spoke up. “Hey, I can carry *something*. I got off without even a scratch, so I oughta help.”

The lineman chuckled. “Okay, if you can pick up those ropes, that would be a great help. But let me know if it gets too heavy, and we can leave them on one of the other landings. Every bit further down the stairs is a little bit less we’ll have to climb back up, and we’d really appreciate it.” He picked up the K-12, and the pike pole.

Pete picked up one of the fifty-foot ropes. “Not too heavy, if you’re used to it.”

Cap had to grin to himself. *Atta boy, Chet – it keeps them focused on helping, and it really would be nice not to have to climb all these stairs to retrieve all the equipment we brought.* He turned back to the task at hand.

“Rampart, this is Squad 51. We have extricated the first victim. The ankle has been relocated, and the patient has lost consciousness. Stand by for vital signs.”

“Standing by, 51. Do you have anything on the other victims at this time?”

“Rampart, be advised that two of the victims have sustained minimal injuries and will not need transport. There is a second victim, approximately 30 years old, with telescoped fracture of at least two fingers. Probable dislocated shoulder, and superficial trauma to the extremity. No vital signs at this time, but patient is in pain. The arm and hand have been immobilized.”

Johnny pulled the stethoscope from his ears. “Cap: pulse is 110, respiration is 12, BP is 90 over 50.” He peered over and saw Roy tying off the last bandage on the leg splint. “Leg is immobilized, but we are not able to apply traction due to the ankle injury.”

Hank passed on the information to Rampart. “Roy, they want a set of vitals on Sam.”

Roy nodded, and went over to Sam. “Thanks for being so, er, patient. I’m going to check out your injuries, and take your pulse and respiration. Where does it hurt?”

Sam sighed. “The fingers, mostly, but the shoulder’s pretty damned sore, too.” He looked over as the others lifted Jennifer into the Stokes. “How’s she doing, really?” he asked.

“Well, we’ve done about as much as we can for her here. At the hospital, they’ll be able to do surgery on her leg to fix up the fractures and repair any tissue damage. Do you think you’re gonna be able to walk down all those flights of stairs?”

Sam nodded. “I’m a construction worker. Those stairs are easy, compared to climbing the side of a scaffold, or trying to get into a crane. Nothing wrong with my legs, just my arm.”

“On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the worst pain you’ve ever experienced, and one being no pain at all, where would you say you are at the moment?”

Sam considered it. “Well, this is nothing like as painful when I had the broken ribs, so I guess it’s about a six.”

Roy picked up the biophone. “Rampart, this is Squad 51. I have vitals on our second victim. Pulse is 92, respiration is 16 and blood pressure is 110 over 80. Patient is fully conscious, and in considerable pain – about a six on the pain scale.”

Joe replied, “10-4, 51. Start an IV with D5W, and administer 5 mg of MS, IV.”

“D5W and 5 mg MS, IV. 10-4 Rampart. We’ll be bringing him in the same ambulance as our other victim.”

“No morphine,” Sam said. “Nothing narcotic, okay?”

Roy looked at him, baffled. “Are you sure?”

Sam gave a rueful chuckle. “Absolutely. I don’t mind anything else – hell, I *know* they’ll have to do surgery on this hand, at least, but nothing that’s addictive... if you get my drift.” He looked around, and dropped his voice to a whisper. “It took me *months* to get clean, and I’m not goin’ *that* way again.”

Roy gave a slow nod, his expression as neutral as he could make it. “Okay.” He keyed the mike on the biophone. “Uh, Rampart, this is Squad 51. Patient two has refused the morphine or any other addictive painkiller.”

Joe gave Dixie a glance, nodded, and replied, “Understood, 51. Monitor vitals closely, and transport as soon as possible.”

“10-4, Rampart.” Roy shrugged, and inclined his head toward his partner. “You guys go ahead with her, and I’ll bring him down after. Same ambulance.” As Johnny looked his way and nodded, Roy mouthed, ‘No painkillers, on patient’s request. Former addict.’

Johnny nodded. “Okay. I guess we’d better both ride in, in that case.”

Hank finished securing the last strap on the Stokes. “Let’s get her down first, then you follow with Sam, Roy.”

“Okay, Cap. I’ll bring the biophone.”

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Johnny signed off on the restock, at the nurses’ station. “Man, that Jennifer sure is one tough cookie.”

Dixie arched her eyebrow as she handed over the supplies. “In case you hadn’t noticed, Johnny, that bit of gold on her finger is pretty significant.”

“What?” He laughed. “No, nothing like that, though she does seem kinda interesting. I mean she might just make it as a paramedic.”

“So very glad to hear that, as she’s top of the class so far. One determined lady, that,” Dixie agreed. “Thing is, this injury is sure gonna mess things up for her.” She shook her head. “Shame it was during voluntary activities for the church. No... she’ll be okay for her theory, but she’ll have to come back for her field work once she’s able to walk again.”

Johnny grimaced. “That could take months.” He rubbed his index finger across his lip, lost in thought. “You know... assuming her fiancé is okay with things, I wouldn’t mind helping her. Did you know she wants to get into the fire department after her paramedic training?”

Dixie nodded. “As I said, one determined lady. She’ll make it, too – assuming some other service doesn’t grab her first. I hear the Coast Guard is interested in branching out, and there’s any number of rural departments that are looking for highly-trained personnel.”

“Hmm. Guess we’ll have to see what we can do to keep our place in line, then.” He picked up the HT as Roy came out of the treatment room. “See you later, Dix.”

“Take care, and be careful.”

“I’m always careful, Dix.”

“Hah!” she snorted.

Roy joined his partner. “Did Marco bring the squad?”

“Yep, and then the engine got a call, so they swung by here to pick him up. How’s Sam?”

Roy exhaled forcefully. “He’s pretty brave, sticking it out without pain meds. You should have seen the x-rays.” He winced. “The middle phalanges on three fingers slid over the distal phalanges.”

“Ugh – that musta been *killin*g him. You know, he and Jennifer were probably the best medicine for each other. Each was focusing on the other so much that they managed to delay the shock long enough until we were able to help them.”

“Yeah. Did you get extra splints?”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “Uh, I *was* there for the call, partner. I know how what we used.” He pulled out the HT. “LA, Squad 51 available from Rampart, and returning to quarters.”

“Squad 51, LA.”

~~*~*~* **WHISTLES** *~*~*~*~*

Johnny clasped his hands together and rubbed the palms against each other. “I’m so hungry I’d even eat something that *Chet* cooked,” he said, striding toward the kitchen. “What’s to eat?” he asked.

Four pairs of eyes swivelled his way. “Well, that’s a good question, Johnny, since you’re supposed to be cooking it.”

“W-what? I thought...” Johnny looked at Roy in a panic. A barely-contained snicker sounded behind him, followed by a burst of laughter. “Oh, ha, ha,” he groused, heading to the refrigerator to pour himself a glass of milk.

Marco slid from his comfortable position on the couch, and opened the cupboard. “Well, we have a choice – I can make up some tacos, or we could go with soup and salad. What’s your preference, fellas?”

“Tacos!” was the universal vote.

Marco snorted. “Well, I thought I’d ask anyway. You know, I do a really good lentil soup, but I have to admit, it’s not as good at the tacos. Besides, tacos don’t require constant stirring, and the way today is going...”

“Don’t say it!” Mike interjected. “You’ll jinx us.”

Marco nodded. “Good point. I’ll just get them started...”

The tones interrupted him. “Station 51, unknown-type rescue at the park. 2275 Sunnyvale. 2-2-7-5 Sunnyvale, cross-street Sylvester. Time out 1240.”

Chet's eyes closed, he started humming and swaying and thrusting his hips from side to side on every other beat of his music.

“CHET!”

At the communal shout, the lineman's eyes snapped open, and he ceased dancing. He sighed. “Which one *this* time?”

“The bump,” Marco replied, tossing the lettuce he'd just been shredding into the sink of cold water. *Well, if it's a short call, the lettuce should still be all right by the time we get back...*

Johnny flinched at the look on the Captain's face as he handed over the run slip with the address.

“Fix it, Gage,” Captain Stanley muttered out of the corner of his mouth, as he hurried to the engine.

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Roy sighed as they approached the site. ‘Unknown-type rescue’ could be anything from a toe caught in a faucet to a plane that had crashed in a tree. In this case, it seemed to be halfway between the two extremes.

A crowd of elderly people, all of them equipped with binoculars and broad-brimmed hats, was clustered around the base of a large sequoia tree, looking up into the spreading canopy of branches. Some of them were pointing, while others were looking around. A frail-looking woman suddenly jumped up and down in excitement, and trained her binoculars to a branch at the edge of the canopy. The others followed suit, most of them pursing their lips.

What in the hell are they doing? Roy wondered, as he opened the door to the squad. He examined the area, then gave a double take at one of the largest branches. A broken home-made rope and wood ladder swung in the gentle breeze. *I guess we can start with ladders...*

Johnny grabbed the biophone and trauma kit from the squad, and stopped alongside his partner, following the direction of Roy's gaze. His left eyebrow quirked, and a look of puzzlement found its way to his face. “Roy,” he whispered, inclining his head toward the group of elderly folk. “Are they... whistling at the tree?”

Roy nodded slowly. “Yes. That's what it looks like.” He gestured to the ladder. “I'm not sure if we'll need the trauma box yet, but I guess we'd better see what's going on.”

A couple of the elderly people let their binoculars slide down to rest against their chests, and started flapping their arms like birds. Their whistling became more frenzied, and repetitive.

“You didn't go and hypnotize those poor people, did you, Junior?”

Johnny scowled. “Aw, c'mon, Roy. Give me a break.”

The men from the engine gathered behind the two paramedics.

“Huh.” Hank took in the scene. More of the group were chattering with excitement, and their whistling became louder. Although the volume was increasing, they could hear a plaintive voice coming from the tree.

“It’s *my* sighting! And can someone give me a hand at getting out of this tree?”

Hank shook off the spell of the whistling, flapping senior citizens, and planted his fists into his waist. “Marco, get the ladder. Johnny, check and see if that b... er, woman has any injuries. *Lord help me, I nearly called her a ‘birdbrain’.* *That wouldn’t go over too well.*”

As they began moving toward the group, one of the women performed a complicated series of whistles and trills that had the others applauding and cheering.

“I win,” she announced in triumph, clasping her hands above her head in a victory salute.

“You did *not!*” proclaimed the petulant voice from the branches overhead. “*I spotted him first!*”

“Hah! You may have spotted him first, dearie, but *your* mating call wouldn’t attract a love-sick pre-pubescent teeny-bopper with a truckload of aphrodisiacs!”

“WHAT?!” roared the voice from above. The branches of the tree shook suddenly and a stocking-clad leg could now be seen inching its way toward the trunk of the tree. “You just wait until I get down there to straighten you out, you wretch!” The tone changed from anger to frustration. “Oh, dammit, the ladder is broken.”

Another woman called up to her, “That’s okay, Nancy, we called the fire department a few minutes ago, when the first couple of rungs fell out.” She looked around, spied the approaching men, and grinned. “They’re here, and my, my, don’t they look *handsome!*”

Most of the women turned around and eyed the six men with great interest.

“Ohh, my! Honey, you can give me artificial respiration *any* time,” purred a woman whose white hair was offset with scarlet lipstick and long false eyelashes. She winked suggestively at Johnny, whose blush was nearly as deep a red as her lipstick.

“Ma’am, can you please step back?” Johnny asked, trying not to show how flustered he felt.

“All right, sweetie, but don’t go too far,” she said with a giggle.

Marco placed the ladder against the trunk, the end resting against the lowest branch. He grinned at Johnny’s discomposure, and whispered, “Here you go, *sweetie.*” He batted his eyelashes, his grin deepening along with Johnny’s blush.

“Thanks *awfully*,” Johnny shot back, his voice also a whisper, as Marco set himself and supported the ladder. *Man, I’m gonna hear about this one for a while...* He started up the steps and called, “Ma’am, I’m from the fire department. Are you hurt at all?”

“Ohh... well, not *really* hurt. Just a couple of scrapes, but can you help me down? *Janice* and I need to have a... a *discussion* about making false claims.”

“Okay, just stay where you are, and I’ll be right there. Don’t move. You can have your discussion when we get you down.”

“All right, but please call me Nancy – ‘ma’am’ makes me sound so... old.”

A crooked grin appeared on Johnny’s face. *Atta girl!* “O kay, Nancy, it’s a deal... I’m Johnny, and we’ll have you out of there in a jiffy.”

There was a sudden rustling in the branches above, and a number of small twigs fell through the branches.

“Oh, no!” cried Nancy. “Don’t leave!”

Johnny’s grin faded. “Nancy, I’m not goin’ anywhere until we get you out of here.”

“Not *you*,” she replied, her tone taking on a note of desperation. “This fine fellow up in the tree – I know he’s relatively common, but not around this time of year. After all, it’s not every day you see a Black-headed Grosbeak with such fine plumage.” Nancy pulled up her leg, shifting her position in the tree, and more twigs cascaded to the ground.

“Head’s up, Marco!” Johnny called... too late, as Marco gave a strangled grunt from below. Johnny leaned over. “You okay, Marco?”

Chet stepped in, and took over footing the ladder for Marco, who was blinking furiously, and trying to hang on to the ladder while dealing with the twigs which had fallen just past the edge of his helmet and into his eyes.

“ROY!” Chet called. “Take care of Marco!” He placed his hands, one at a time, over Marco’s. “Go sit down, man.”

Marco grunted his thanks, and started to brush at his eyes, now streaming with tears from the sudden invasion of twigs and branches. Roy seized his wrists, and pulled his hands away.

“Don’t do that, Marco. I’ll take care of it, and check out your eyes.” Roy called over his shoulder, “Mike, get the eyewash solution and some gauze!” He walked Marco over to a boulder in the ornamental area, and sat him down. “I know it stings, but you can’t rub your eyes or you might damage them. Let me take care of it.”

“Man, its *itchy!*”

“I know, but if you rub the eyes, you could scratch them. Pretend it’s ash or soot, if that helps, and we’re just washing your eyes out at any brush fire we’ve ever done.”

Marco signed, but relaxed. *Don’t rub... just like a brush fire, except I can’t blink the dust away.* “Roy, it feels like there’s something caught under the left eyelid.”

“Don’t touch it, Marco,” Roy replied, exchanging a worried glance with Mike as he handed over the eyewash solution. “I’m gonna have to pull your eyelid out a bit and to the side. One twig has a couple of broken parts, and if I move it too quickly, or if you rub it, you could scratch your lens. I think once we get this outta here, and wash out your eyes, it should be okay.”

“You sure?” Marco asked. *Crap. What a stupid, rookie mistake!*

“Just hold still, Marco. I’m gonna move your eyelid now. Close your eyes, and keep ‘em closed until I tell you to open them. Let me do all the work.” Roy picked as much of the twig away from Marco’s face as he could, then reached for his tweezers. He pulled the lower eyelid out with his fingers, and removed the fragmented part of the bark away with the tweezers. He smiled and nodded to Mike. “Nice gentle wash, Mike.” He held up a piece of gauze, to catch any other debris. “Okay, go – top to bottom, nice and slow.”

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Johnny popped his head and shoulders through the cluster of branches and looked into the strikingly beautiful face of a svelte woman with a thick braid of white hair and sparkling blue eyes.

“Oh, Adele was right, you *are* quite good-looking. Would it be best if I follow you down, or go down between your arms...” She blushed crimson. “Uh, I didn’t mean that *quite* the way that sounded. I meant, would it be safer to *descend the ladder* individually?”

Johnny chuckled in spite of himself. “You sound like you have some, er, experience with ladders.”

She gave a laugh much heartier than expected from a woman of her age. “Well, my second husband... or was it my third? Anyway, *one* of my husbands was a firefighter, and, er, well.... We climbed a lot of trees while we were together.”

Johnny’s blush deepened. “Uh... yeah... well, if you feel comfortable coming down after me... I mean *descending the ladder* after me, I’d be able to support you if you slipped.”

“Honey, I’ve climbed hundreds, maybe *thousands* of trees, and I’ve never slipped or fallen. Not *once*.”

“I’ll... uh... take your word for it.” He coughed. “Do you need me to help you turn around and get on the ladder?”

She laughed and scrambled over toward him. More branches and twigs slid down, but Chet had his eyes focused on the ladder straight ahead of him, rather than looking up as Marco had done, and the debris

bounced off his helmet. *Oh, Gage, the Phantom is enjoying all this extra ammunition! Keep digging yourself into a hole, my friend.*

Johnny leaned over and called, “Chet – we’re comin’ down now!” He started down the ladder, amazed at Nancy’s agility as she quickly followed him.

As Nancy got near the ground she leaned over and whispered something at Chet that caused his face to turn as red as a ripe tomato. “No, Ma’am!” he exclaimed.

Nancy let out a gale of laughter, then winked at her friends. “Bagged another one!”

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“And you’re sure you’re okay, Marco?” Hank asked, as they packed everything up after the ‘rescue’.

“Yeah. Once Roy got that bit of bark out, and Mike washed out the eyes, it was fine. Lots faster than cleaning soot out of the eyes, but I won’t make that kind of stupid mistake again.”

Hank nodded. “I know, Pal. I know.” He looked over at Chet, who was still blushing and avoiding eye contact with the ‘victim’. “Do you know what’s going on there?” he asked.

Marco chuckled. “Well, when she got to his level, she whispered, ‘You can look up my skirt if you really wanna.’”

Hank laughed. “Does Johnny know what she said?”

“Not from me, he doesn’t. Cap, I’m not gonna rat out my line partner... unless he does something *really* obnoxious.”

“10-4, Pal. Let’s head back to the barn. I’m starving, and your tacos will fill the bill nicely.”

~~*~*~* **SMOKE** *~*~*~*~*

After a lunch, made remarkable not only by Marco’s excellent tacos but also by the lack of runs for either the engine or the squad for over an hour, they settled down with the dreaded brochures. Hank couldn’t remember whose idea it was to start building a house of cards with the brochures, but he turned a blind eye to it while inwardly agreeing that this was a much better use for the ridiculous things. He was pondering whether or not to gather the pamphlets and stuff them out of sight, when the tones sounded, followed by the now familiar shout of “CHET!”

“Station 51, Engine 45, Squad 36 in place of Squad 45, Battalion 14. Second alarm response on working structure fire, 2651 East 21st Street. 2-6-5-1 East 21st Street. Cross-street, Terrace. Time out, 1403.”

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The engine rolled up to the fireground, and Hank’s expression sobered. *Holy Mother of God!*

The structure involved was an apartment building, and it was fully involved. By the time they arrived, the other units from the second alarm response were in place. Judging by the distribution of manpower covering flames visible in four separate locations, he was pretty sure there was a good possibility it would escalate to a third alarm.

The residents were huddled behind a police barricade, in small groups. From his vantage point in the cab of the engine, Hank could see three separate triage areas set up where paramedics were treating injured residents and some firefighters. “Wait here, fellas, and I’ll see where our assignment is.”

As their captain went to check in with the battalion chief, Marco turned to Chet. “So, whadya think? Did Johnny hear what Nancy said to you?”

Chet blushed again. “I think he would’ve said something by now if he had. And you don’t need to let anyone else know, okay?”

Behind the wheel, Mike gave an enigmatic smile. *The amount of ammunition I’m gathering, to be used when you least expect it, gentlemen...*

Hank trotted back, referring to a page of notes. “Okay. We’re going to be backing up Engine 45. Mike, you can lay the line from the hydrant just over on Wyandotte. Chet, Marco, take in an inch-and-a-half. We’re working the east side, on the third floor. Roy, Johnny, check with triage. If they don’t need you there, you’ll take another inch-and-a-half. According to the chief, all the people in the apartment building are accounted for, so we don’t have to search for anyone.”

“That’s one good thing, at least,” Roy muttered. “I’ll park the squad over here so that we can get supplies if needed. Do we have enough spare air tanks with the engine, Mike?”

“We’ve got four extra full tanks, so we’re good for a while.”

Hank clasped his hands together. “All right, boys, let’s do battle with the beast!”

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Today, the beast was winning. Despite their best efforts, the stubborn fire refused to be controlled. Chet and Marco kept their senses alert for signs of imminent danger as they fought a losing battle against the fire.

Chet was advancing the line when he suddenly stopped and tilted his head to the side. *I just heard something... like coughing?* “Did you hear that?”

Marco listened for a moment, and slowly shook his head. “I don’t hear anything but the fire.” He looked up and his eyes widened. “We’d better get ready to run – those walls are startin’ to smoke at the top.”

Chet heard the small noise again. “Hey! Is there anyone there?” he called.

“Chet...” Marco warned, casting a nervous glance at the encroaching flames. “We’ve got maybe three or four minutes, that’s all.”

“I know. Look, I thought I heard something. I just wanna check it out. It came from behind us. If we wedge the hose, can you manage the nozzle alone while I check out that room? I’d hate to think we missed someone. It’ll take me two minutes, tops.”

As Marco paused, considering, Chet played the winning card. “It could be a *kid*, Marco.”

“I know, I know. Look, pull that chunk of wall over, and we can brace the hose.” Marco dropped to one knee, tucking his arms to his sides as they positioned the debris to anchor the hose. “I’ll cover you. Make it one minute, if you can, Chet. This place ain’t gonna hold.”

Chet pushed his way into the smoke-filled room. “Hello? Anyone here?” he shouted

He heard coughing, and whirled at the sound of a weak voice. “Over here! Please help!”

He couldn’t see a thing in the thick, dark-gray smoke rolling through the room. He dropped to his knees and began crawling toward the source of the sound. “Keep calling, so I can get to you!” He swung his arm from side to side ahead of him, shifting small bits of concrete from the crumbling wall. He cast an uneasy look at the ceiling, then sighed in relief; for the moment, anyway, the ceiling looked solid.

“I’m inna bafroom!” the tiny voice called. “Inna tub!”

Man, I’m glad that ceiling is holding. Sounds like a little kid... smart to get into the bathtub. Ah, great – it’s a tile floor... much easier to tell it’s the bathroom... or should I say ‘bafroom’? “I’m nearly there. Keep calling.”

“Right over here. Is it safe to get outta the tub?”

Chet swung his arm to the left, and muffled a curse as he made contact with the very solid tub. He rose from his knees and peered in.

A little girl was hunched over in two inches of water, her tiny body covered with a wet towel. He felt himself smiling in relief. “Hey, darlin’. My name’s Chet, and I’m gonna get you out of here. You’re really smart to have that towel, you know,” he crooned, picking her up and cradling her in his arms.

“I’m Grace, and I’m really, really glad you found me. I’m scared, but I remembered that Daddy said a tub with a bit of water was a very, very good place to be in a fire. I on’y came back to get Wadjama Collet. That’s the stuffed bunny Mommy gave me when I was a baby. Can we please get out of here?” She clutched the tattered stuffed toy to her chest, covering it with the towel.

Chet chuckled, amazed that she’d been able to speak that quickly. “I want to get outside, too. Are you hurt anywhere, Grace?”

She shook her head. “Nope!”

“Can you crawl?” he asked, placing her gently on the floor.

She glared at him. “Course I can crawl – I’m nearly four, after all!”

“Okay. I’m gonna be like a horsie over you, to protect you from anything that might fall, so you go ahead and go this way, Honey.” He gave her a gentle nudge toward the door, and arched his body over hers as they both crawled forward. “I’ll try to keep up with you, honest.”

“You gotta pocket?” she asked, holding up the stuffed toy.

He took the toy, and tucked it into his turnouts. “He can ride here, with me.”

“*She!* Wadjama is a *girl*,” she corrected, a tiny scowl on her face.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be safe in my coat. But we gotta get going, Honey.”

“Okay.” Grace coughed, and started crawling. “Stay on the floor, and crawl to the door. Keep a straight line, leave the smoke behind,” she recited. “Get outside, but do not hide.”

Chet smiled. “Atta girl! Those are great ideas.”

Grace paused, coughed, and looked up at Chet. “My Daddy is a fireman, and he taught me that a long time ago, when I was little,” she said, a note of fierce pride in her voice.

Chet motioned for her to continue. “Your Daddy is a very smart man, Darlin’. Keep going – we’re almost at the door to the hall.” He raised his voice and shouted, “Marco! I’ve got a little girl here. She’s okay except for smoke inhalation.”

“Okay. Follow my voice, and we can follow the hose outta here,” Marco called back. He shut off the nozzle, and hoisted the charged line to his shoulder. “Better hurry, Chet, we’ve only got about a minute until that other room goes.”

Chet traced his way back through the room, very glad he’d taken the time on the way in to sweep all the debris to one side. The litter formed a barricade that made it easy to find the way back to the main corridor of the apartment building.

After Grace had crossed into the hallway, Chet scuttled after her, picked her up in his arms, and tapped Marco’s shoulder. “Take us out, amigo!”

Marco thumbed his handie-talkie as they retraced the way out, following the hose. “Engine 51, from HT 51. We’re bringing out a little girl with smoke inhalation. No other victims, and no other injuries.”

“HT 51, this is Engine 51. 10-4.” Hank grinned, and thumped Mike Stoker on the back. “Some days, we win.”

Mike nodded. “*Most* days,” he murmured.

Hank looked at the entrance, willing his linemen to make a hasty appearance, and spoke into the radio. "Engine 51 to Squad 51."

"Squad 51. We heard, Captain, and we're on the way back," Roy replied, his voice muffled by his face mask.

Marco shouldered aside debris as they hurried down the stairs. "Watch your step, there's a lot more junk here than when we first went in."

"We'll be careful, right, Grace," Chet murmured.

She nodded. A wave of coughing overcame her and she clutched Chet tightly, gasping for air.

"Hang on there, darlin', we'll get some oxygen on you once we get out," Chet crooned, hastening his pace.

A series of triple blasts on an air horn pierced through the crackling of the fire. Their eyes darted up; the ominous rolling of flames across the ceiling spurred them to even greater speed.

They pushed through the last double door before the main entrance, and ran toward the exit.

"Move it, boys!" Captain Stanley hollered. "The whole place is going down!"

He and Mike had been hauling back the hose as soon as Marco had contacted them. Despite the smoke, Hank knew his men were still at least thirty feet from the exit – and he'd just seen the roof of the adjacent wing of the apartment building collapse into a raging fireball. He dropped the hose and clenched his fists, his anxiety winning for the moment, then he gestured them to precede him as they burst through the exit doors. "RUN!" he shouted, following them away from the doomed structure. They sprinted to the engine, panting for air, and heard a booming thunderclap of sound as the supporting walls of the central section were forced outward by the pressure from two collapsing floors.

Heaving for air, Chet shifted the little girl in his arms and cracked a grin as Grace reached up and patted the side of his mask. "Thanks. You're as brave as my Daddy."

Hank clapped Marco's shoulder and quipped, "Don't you think... you're cuttin' that... a bit fine?"

Marco nodded, pulled off his mask, and gulped in fresh air. "A lot... closer than... I like... Cap."

Mike held up an oxygen mask, his eyes questioning. Marco shook his head. "'m okay... just outta... breath from... running." He turned to watch as the section of the apartment building they'd just left folded in on itself. "Whew...Just... gimme... a couple... minutes."

Roy reached for Grace, but she buried her face against Chet's chest and wouldn't let go. Her body trembled as another bout of coughing left her gasping for air.

Chet stroked her hair and tried to slow down his breathing enough to reassure her. “It’s okay.... Roy’s pretty brave... too. He’ll take care... of you for... your Daddy.”

Grace released her death grip on Chet. “Well... okay.” She patted his mask again. “Thank you.” She gave Roy a dubious glance, but allowed him to take her from Chet’s arms without struggling.

Roy’s eyes twinkled as he shifted Grace in his arms. “So, I hear your Daddy is a brave fireman?”

Grace nodded, her face solemn, and she coughed again.

“Do you hurt anywhere, Grace?” Roy asked, as he started the oxygen flowing through a nasal cannula.

She shook her head, a look of firm determination on her head, then nodded once. “My chest hurts when I cough a lot, but nothing else hurts. Does that count?”

Roy smiled. “I’m gonna give you something to help with that. This plastic tube has oxygen in it, and it will help you to breathe easier, and to stop coughing.”

Grace closed her eyes, her lips twisted as her face took on an expression of concentration. “Nasal canyon, 2 to 5 letters a minute.”

Roy’s lips twitched, as he hid his smile at her unique pronunciation of ‘cannula’ and ‘litres’. “That’s pretty good. Did your Daddy teach you that?”

Her head bobbed up and down, her eyes shining. “Yes he did. Daddy’s a parry-me-duck, like you.” She swung her finger and pointed at Chet, who had just managed to catch his breath after the harrowing exit. “But he started out as a fireman, and he fights fires sometimes too, because that’s neater.”

Johnny cleared his throat, trying to cover his snicker with a cough, and pulled out the biophone. “I’ll get in touch with Rampart, Mr. Chief Parry-Me-Duck.”

Roy chose to ignore his partner, and held the cannula in front of Grace. “Now this goes in your nose, and it’s gonna tickle a bit – kind of like when you have to sneeze, but it will help your breathing.”

Grace gave him a sceptical look, her head tilted to the side. “Are you sure?”

Roy gave a firm nod, his best ‘relax-the-patient’ smile on his face. “I’m sure.”

She reached for the tubing and touched it to her lips, then coughed in surprise. “It *does* tickle! Kinda like wiggly worms – but I don’t eat those any more. Now Daddy and I use ‘em for fishin’!”

Johnny turned aside to set up the relay; his shoulders shook as he fought to suppress his laughter at her delightful comments.

Roy took the cannula back. “Okay, Grace, I’m gonna hook the tubing over your ears and put these two prongs in your nose.” As he gently inserted the cannula she wrinkled her nose and giggled.

“I have a moustache now, just like Daddy.”

Johnny turned and gave her a grin. “Looks good, sweetie.” He bent back to the biophone. “Rampart, this is squad 51. Rampart, this is squad five-one.”

“Go ahead, 51,” replied Dixie McCall.

“Rampart, we have a female, aged 5...” he began.

“Jeez!” Grace said. “I’m three yearz and eight munz!” she corrected, a slight frown on her face.

Roy chuckled at the look of surprised consternation on his partner’s face. *This girl is remarkable – she can put Johnny in his place with one word!*

Johnny rolled his eyes and said, “Er, Rampart... correction. We have a female aged 3 *yearz* and 8 *munz*, suffering from smoke inhalation. We have her on O2; stand by for vitals.”

“10-4, 51. Do you have parental consent?”

Johnny sighed. “Not at this time, Rampart.”

Roy jotted down the vital signs, then asked as calmly as he could, “Honey, where’s your Mommy?”

Grace pointed toward the main entrance. “She was there... isn’t she here any more?” Her lower lip quivered, and tears gathered in her eyes. “Mommy! Mommy? Where are you?” Her voice broke, and she stirred restlessly. “I have to find her! MOMMY!”

A woman from behind the barricades yelled, “Is that Gracie? Her mother was taken out in the second ambulance, unconscious.” She struggled against the officer trying to keep her back, kicked him in the shins and thrust the heel of her hand under his jaw, dropping him in his tracks, then ducked around the barricade and rushed over.

“Oh, Gracie, it’s okay. Sweetie, your Mommy is gonna be all right,” she soothed, stroking the little girl’s hand.

“Uh, ma’am,” Johnny said, holding his hands up in a warding-off gesture, “Who are you, and do you know where Grace’s parents are?”

“I’m Nancy, their neighbour – my little girl is best friends with Gracie, here, and she stays over all the time. Our girls are just like family, and...”

“Ma’am, *please*,” Johnny replied. “We need to find her parents right away, in order to have permission to administer medication to help her.”

Nancy nodded. “Oh, yes. Like I was telling *that* cop, who wouldn’t let me through earlier, her mother Linda went to the hospital in the second ambulance. Poor thing got conked on the head by one of those

beams near the entrance when she was trying to get back in the building to get her little girl. Can't say as I blame her – I'd've done the same thing if it was my Lucinda in there." She turned to wave at her own daughter in the crowd, holding tightly to another neighbour's hand.

"Ma'am," Roy asked, "Do you know where we can get hold of her father?"

"Sure. Use your radio there to call up Station 16 – he's a paramedic there. Bob Bellingham. I'm pretty sure he's on shift today."

Johnny's jaw dropped open in surprise. *Bob's got a daughter? Hell, Bob's married? I never knew....* A quick look at his partner's face confirmed that he, too, was unaware of Bellingham's family.

"Uh, thanks, ma'am," Roy replied. "We'll take care of getting in touch with him. Now could you please go back there, away from the fire? We really appreciate your help, but I think your daughter would be happier if you were with her right now."

"Oh, sure," Nancy agreed. "I suppose I should apologize to that cop, too. I guess he was only doing his job." She patted Grace. "They'll take real good care of you, baby. I'll see you soon, okay? And don't worry about your Mama – she's getting the best care, too. Love ya, Peanut."

Grace turned away, her lip still quivering. "I want my Mommy. Or my Daddy." Tears trickled from her eyes.

Chet pulled off his gloves, mask and helmet, and wiped his brow. He unfastened his turnouts, and spotted the precious cargo he'd been carrying. He pulled out the soggy bunny, and squeezed as much water from it as he could. He dropped to his knee next to the little girl, and held out the toy. "Don't forget Wadjama," he said in a gentle voice.

Grace gave him a teary smile as she clutched the toy. "Thanks."

Chet stroked her cheek with his index finger. "You're welcome. Now you be good for my friends here. I gotta get back to fire."

"Okay," she agreed, hugging the toy. "I'll tell my Daddy how cool you are."

Chet's eyes crinkled in a smile. "And I'll tell him what a brave girl he has. See you later!"

He stood up, swayed a moment, and trudged toward his equipment, oblivious to the expressions of combined amusement and admiration on the paramedics' faces.

Johnny turned back to the biophone. *Man, who knew Chet would be so good with kids? Of course, he's like a kid himself, so I guess it stands to reason...*

"Rampart, this is Squad 51. Uh... our patient's mother has apparently been transported to your location, unconscious. Linda Bellingham."

Joe cast a quizzical glance at Dixie, who nodded. “She’s just arrived. She’s still unconscious, but her vitals are improving and her awareness level seems better. We haven’t been able to get hold of Bob yet. He and Craig are on a run out to Catalina with one of the fireboats, and there’s some interference with their transmitter. We’ve been trying to raise them since they brought Linda in about twenty minutes ago, but no luck so far. Even LA is having a problem with their communications.”

“Hmm.” Joe rubbed the palm of his left hand, then hit the transmitter. “Squad 51, we have the girl’s mother here. She’s still unconscious, but improving. We have not yet been able to reach her father. What are her vital signs?” He turned to Dixie. “I don’t have any problem acting ‘in loco parentis’, but still keep trying to get in touch with Bob, would you?”

She nodded. “I would have, anyway.”

“Rampart, vital signs: BP is 110 over 80, pulse 100, respirations are 22. She’s still coughing a bit, but the oxygen is certainly helping.”

“10-4, 51. Keep her on the oxygen, and transport as soon as possible. I’ll let you know when we get hold of her father.”

“10-4, Rampart.”

The base station radio crackled, hissed and popped with static, rendering the communication impossible. “Rampart.....Squad 16.....with probable.....and fracture....”

Joe thumped the counter in frustration. “Squad 16, this is Rampart. We did not, repeat, did not receive your transmission. You’re breaking up.”

The radio crackled and popped again, this time with an added squeal that made everyone in the vicinity cringe.

Dammit. I know they’re trying to get through, and it sounds like they’ve got a bad one, too. “Dixie, keep trying, and check with the fire department.”

She rolled her eyes, tilted her head, and looked at him through her long lashes. “That’s part of the plan, Joe. Now, why don’t you go check on Linda Bellingham, and let me get back to running things, hmmm?”

Joe’s expression was sheepish. “Uh... I know you just said that’s what you were doing. Really. I *do* listen.”

She gave him a gentle shove toward the door of the radio room. “Sure you do. I’ll just wait for your mouth to catch up to your ears, shall I? Besides, if Linda’s finally conscious, then you’ll have your consent for Grace, won’t you?”

“Can’t fault your reasoning, Dix.”

“And you never will.”

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Bob Bellingham ground his teeth in a rare display of frustration. He stared at the biophone and shook his head, then dropped the handset back into place. “No matter what setting, we’re still not getting’ through, Craig. I *thought* I had contact there for a minute, but then we lost it. And with that comm tower outta commission from the storm yesterday, we can’t use the coast guard, either. The explosion on this damned boat took out the ship to shore radio.”

Craig pushed his glasses up his nose, and regarded his fuming partner. “Bellingham, calm down. We’ll get him packaged for transport, and if we can’t raise anyone from the shore, we’ll be able to communicate once we get in the helicopter. He’ll have a better angle from up in the sky than we have from down here.” He tossed a strip of webbing to his partner. “I’ve got his head immobilized and once we’ve got him secured, we can get him back to shore in the fireboat.” He wrinkled his nose at the smell coming from his partner’s clothes, soiled from his fall into the boat’s bilge when they’d pulled their patient from the sinking vessel. *I may be wet, but at least I’m not covered in bilge water.*

Bob secured the patient’s legs to the backboard, and waved to the men in the fireboat. “We’re ready for the stokes, now!” he called, annoyed that even the HT wasn’t working properly. *Man, I’ll be glad to get to shore and outta these reeking clothes!*

On the ride back to shore, the paramedics discussed the probable treatment the doctor would recommend when they were finally able to establish communications.

“He’s certainly going to need some kind of painkiller. I expect they’ll go with MS or meperidine, as he doesn’t have a head injury.”

“And Ringer’s for sure,” Bob added. “Maybe even D5W?”

Bob pulled out the handie-talkie. “Squad 16 to Copter 10.”

“Copter 10. Go.”

“We’re about three minutes from shore. As soon as we’re in the air, we’ll need to establish communications to Rampart. We have not been able to contact via the biophone, so we may need to hover for a minute or two in order to establish IV lines.”

“10-4, Squad 16. We’re not able to make any contact from the shore, either. We’re good for fuel to hover.”

Bob heaved a sigh of relief. “Well, at least *something*’s going right today.” He sniffed at his shirt, then leaned over to sniff at Craig’s uniform. “Yup, it’s all me, I think.”

“All you, I *know*,” Craig muttered. “What possessed you to fall into the bilge, anyway?”

“Hey, it’s not like I had a choice! Someone had to free his leg.”

“And you couldn’t just reach over? You had to fall in?”

Bob sniffed, and threw one of Craig’s favourite sayings back at him. “The situation warranted it.”

The man immobilized on the stretcher broke into laughter. “Whatever it was, I wanna thank you both. Man, I appreciate the save, ya know. O’course, that boat’s a write-off now, but I’m glad all I got outta it was a busted leg, some bruises and a few minor burns.” He grimaced in pain. “That leg’s a bugger, though.”

Craig nodded. “We’ll get you fixed up once we’re in the helicopter.”

“I appreciate that.”

Craig asked, “Did you want to go, or meet me there?”

Bob chuckled. “Do you think the helicopter guys really want this aroma stinking things up? Naw, I’ll bring in the squad.” He gave a cheesy grin. “Besides, now I can get a chili dog on the way.”

Craig sighed, remembering the last time they’d had a run to Catalina and how long it had taken to get the mustard stains out of the squad’s upholstery. “No mustard!” he shouted.

Bob pulled out the HT again. “HT 16 to LA.” He scowled at the resulting static. “Man, it’s *still* not workin’. I guess we’re gonna have to wait until we get to the helicopter.”

The driver of the boat grunted. “Yeah, this sorta thing happened last year, too, after a big wind storm messed up some of the transmission towers near the shore. You’d’ve thought they’d have learned to fix things like that, but I guess we’re so far from the city that it don’t matter. Last year, it took three *days* to fix the towers.”

“Well, at least we can get the IV ready…” Craig began, then broke off as Bob held up two IV bags and tubing, already set up.

“Ringer’s and D5W. That way, you won’t have to waste any time.” He pointed at the syringe. “For the MS.”

Craig shook his head, a rare grin appearing. “Some days you really amaze me, Bob.”

“Amaze my wife, too,” Bob replied with a suggestive wink.

“Too much information!”

After they’d loaded the stokes on the helicopter, Bob handed the biophone up to Craig. “Good luck with that P.O.S.,” he quipped. “It oughta work once you’re airborne.” He passed over the drug box and a handie-talkie. “I’ll pack the trauma kit; you shouldn’t need it up there, and it’ll only take up space. I’ll

see you at Rampart, and mind you don't go runnin' off with that new nurse while you're waitin' for me to get back."

"Huh. I thought you were happily married, and weren't looking anymore," Craig replied.

"Hey, I'm married, not *dead*. Besides, Linda knows she's the only one for me, and she doesn't mind my looking, 'long as I don't touch."

Craig shook his head. "I'm already taken."

"Shouldn't stop ya from lookin', though." Bob stepped toward the fireboat, and helped remove the rest of the equipment they'd used. He started repacking the squad as the helicopter took off. For a moment, Bob toyed with the idea of rearranging the trauma box, just to see what Craig's reaction would be. *Naw, that's not a good idea. We might need to react on auto-pilot for the next case, and that's no time to be messing around with things.*

He put everything back in its place; perhaps not with as much precision as his partner would use, but they'd argued *that* one out a long time ago, when they'd first been partnered up. Despite his easy-going demeanour, Bob was adamant about how he liked things set up, and he and Craig had had a vehement... discussion... about the setup, with a lot of shouting back and forth. By the time their captain had attempted to intervene, they both started laughing, realizing that when all was said and done, it was a simple matter of dividing the trauma box in half, with a right-handed set-up and a left-handed setup, to accommodate each of them. They'd also rearranged the drug box in a similar fashion, and things had worked out with maximum efficiency, which pleased them both. *Besides, I can mess with his locker later. Maybe I'll leave my uniform shirt in the bottom of his locker...naw, it would be better to do something next shift, when there are four other guys to blame... well, three, I guess. He'd know it wasn't Captain Steele.*

He headed toward the door of the squad, surprised to see the helicopter coming back to the jetty. He reached for the other handie-talkie, on the passenger seat, just as it burst to life.

"Squad 16 from HT 16."

Bellingham frowned, alarmed at the sudden stress in Craig's voice, and keyed the mike.

"HT 16, this is Squad 16. What's the matter, Craig?" he asked, scenarios about the patient coming unbidden to his mind.

"Stay at the jetty. We're coming back to pick you up."

"What's the matter? Did you need more equipment or something?"

Craig inhaled sharply. *He doesn't know yet! I guess he hasn't tried the radio.* "Just stay there. We'll be back in a minute."

Bob frowned at such uncharacteristic behaviour from his partner. *Something's wrong, and he's not telling me over the radio. It must be bad.* He fretted until the copter landed and Craig jumped out and ran toward him.

“Okay, Craig, what the hell is going on?” he demanded, no trace of his typical joviality in his manner.

Craig seized his arm and pulled him toward the helicopter. “Linda and Grace,” he panted. “A fire...”

“Wh-what?” Bob gasped, clutching his partner’s arm. “A-are they...” He couldn’t finish the unbearable thought.

“No – no. Linda’s at Rampart, and Grace is on her way there. There was a fire at your apartment building.” He tugged his partner into the helicopter, and thrust the biophone handset at him. “Linda’s stable but unconscious, and they need consent to treat Grace.”

Bob stared at the receiver in his trembling hand. He closed his eyes, fearing the worst, and slowly brought the handset to his ear. “Ra...ra...” He swallowed, exhaled forcefully, cleared his throat and tried again. “Rampart, this is Bob Bellingham, Grace’s father. Please... do whatever you need to... to take care of my b-baby... and my w-wife.”

Joe Early’s calm voice responded, “We will, Bob, and we’ll fill you in on everything when you get here. I can tell you that Grace inhaled a fair bit of smoke, but she’s been on oxygen, and she’s responding very well. I would like to get her rehydrated...”

“D5W,” Bob replied automatically, his tone a soft monotone.

“That’s right,” Joe confirmed. “Linda is still unconscious. She tried to get back into the building when she realized where Grace had gone, and part of the wall collapsed on her. She has no fractures, but she does have a head injury and is suffering from smoke inhalation. Her level of consciousness is improving steadily, and we expect her to be conscious very soon.”

“G-good,” Bob whispered, the handset sliding from his hand as he leaned back against the seat. *They’re alive!* He expelled his breath in a forceful whoosh, and looked around. “We... we’re airborne,” he said, his confusion evident in the bewildered glance he cast at Craig.

“We’ll be there in about fifteen more minutes, Bob. I know this won’t be easy for you, but just sit back and try to relax. *No hyperventilating – we don’t need you to become a patient, too.*”

A world of unstated understanding passed between them; despite the seemingly harsh words, Bob knew that Craig was telling him that he’d be there in whatever way Bob needed. His feeble attempt at a smile couldn’t mask his fear and his feeling of helplessness. *This is gonna be the longest fifteen minutes of my life!* He wasn’t even aware of Craig updating Rampart on their patient’s condition. All he could focus on was the thrum of the helicopter as it brought him closer to the two most important people in his life. He started suddenly when he realized the patient was patting his leg.

“Hey, it sounds like you’re havin’ a worse day’n me,” he slurred, the medication making his voice dopey.

“I’ve had better,” Bob replied. “How’re ya feelin’?”

“Flyin’ high now,” he warbled, eliciting a chuckle from Bob.

“Sounds good, ‘Rocky’.”

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At the emergency entrance to Rampart, Bob froze outside the sliding doors. Even though he’d gone through those doors hundreds of times, he’d *never* gone through as a patient’s next-of-kin before; despite his training and his complete trust in the staff, he balked. *What if this is the last time I ever see my girls? I... I can’t face that.* He pressed his forearm against the wall, closed his eyes and leaned his head against his fist. Ragged, shallow gasps escaped him as his mind tortured him with the faces of his wife and daughter superimposed on a parade of every burn victim he’d ever treated.

Kelly Brackett met them at the entrance, and locked eyes with Brice. He jerked his head toward Bob, mouthed the words ‘See to him,’ and ushered the patient into the ER.

Craig hesitated, then reached up to squeeze his partner’s shoulder. “Bob! They’ll be okay. Imagining the worst possible scenario is *not* going to help anyone, least of all *you*. Breathe!” He hauled the taller man toward the entrance, and through the doors. “In through the nose and out through the mouth. In through the nose, out through the mouth,” he muttered in a low chant.

Dixie nodded as they reached the nurses’ station, stepped out, and latched onto Bob’s elbow. “Treatment One, Craig,” she said, with a slight tilt of her head. She steered Bellingham in the other direction.

Craig nodded his thanks, grateful for her exquisite timing. He strode toward the treatment room, to continue his patient’s care until he’d had a chance to brief Dr. Brackett.

“Dix?” Bob croaked, his face ashen and his hands trembling. He cleared his throat, took a couple of quick breaths, and tried again. “C-can I see them?” he whispered, his voice husky.

Dixie patted his arm. “We’re on the way. We’ll see Grace first. Linda’s up in x-ray at the moment, but she’s starting to come around.”

“She – uh – she...” Bellingham gulped, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing.

Dixie laid a gentle finger to his lips. “Hush now. Linda was unconscious for a while, but Dr. Early feels it’s related to the concussion. He ordered a full skull series, as a precaution, but her reflexes are perfectly normal. Now she’s also got some first and second degree burns, and she suffered some smoke inhalation before they could get her freed. There are some superficial cuts and bruises, but she’s going to be all right.”

Bob inhaled through his nose and blew out through his mouth. *Good advice, partner!* Some colour returned to his cheeks. “Thanks. All I could think...” he broke off, his expression becoming troubled.

“Now you stop that, Bob. I know you were imagining all sorts of awful things, but in the meantime, there’s an awfully cute and bright little girl who really wants her Daddy right now.”

A goofy grin found its way onto his face. “Lead the way, milady. And thanks for taking such good care of them.”

“Hey, they’re family too,” she purred, pushing open the door to the treatment room. “Grace, I’ve got someone here who wants to see you.”

The little girl’s face lit up as she turned her head toward the door. “DADDY!” She reached out, and Bob covered the distance from the door to the stretcher in record time, then he pulled her into a big hug.

“Oh, my amazing Grace,” he murmured, holding her close to his chest. He kissed her forehead, and looked into her shining eyes.

“I did just like you taught me about what to do in case of fire, and I wasn’t scared at all.... Well, okay, maybe a bit.” She wrinkled her nose. “PEE-YOOOO! You smell all sweaty and salty and fishy, Daddy. And you’re wet. Did you go swimming?”

Bob stroked her hair over and over, giving her a goofy grin. “Yes, I did... sorta. Your Uncle Craig and I had to save a sailor on a boat that got hit by lightning.”

Her eyes widened. “Wow! Was there a fire, too?” she asked eagerly.

He nodded. “Not too bad a fire, though. But it was all the way out at Catalina, or we’d’ve been back sooner. Now tell me, Sweet Pea, how are *you* feelin’?”

She cleared her throat, a solemn look coming over her face. “The patient was suppering from some smoke in-hell-ay-shun...” She bit her lip, her eyes wide. “Sorry, Daddy, I *know* that’s a swear, but it’s what that other parry-me-duck said.”

Bob’s grin twitched as he fought to match the serious look on his daughter’s face. “And is the patient still suppering, or is she feelin’ better now?”

Grace gave a small cough, and flashed her dimples. “Not suppering any more, but I wanna see Mommy now.”

“Me too,” Bob whispered as if sharing a secret. “I’ll check with Mommy’s doctor and see how things are. Now, do you think you’ll be okay without me for a few minutes?”

She nodded. “I’m kinda sleepy, anyway. Do you think Mommy will mind if I take a nap?”

Bob kissed her forehead again. "I think that Mommy would be really pleased if you took a nap right now. You go ahead and sleep, baby. You're safe here," he murmured, stroking her cheek with a gentle finger as her eyes fluttered closed. He began to croon softly, "Baby's good to me, you know, she's happy as can be, you know..." he began, and his smile widened when Grace replied in a sleepy voice.

"She said so..."

He continued. "I'm in love with her..."

"... and I feel fine..." Grace's eyes stayed closed, and her breathing settled into the slower, deep respirations of sleep.

"Sleep well, my little Beatle-maniac," Bob whispered. He turned and shrugged his shoulders at the looks of astonishment on the faces of Dixie and Kel. "What?" he said, keeping his voice soft so that he wouldn't wake his daughter. "I'm a Dad – lullabies go with the territory."

Kel steered him out of the room, shaking his head. "Animal, you sure have a lot of layers."

Dixie smiled at Bob. "I'll make sure that we have a candy-striper sit with her, in case she wakes up and needs anything."

"Thanks, Dix." He turned back to the doctor, no levity in his expression as he asked, "How's Linda... really?"

Kel flashed him a grin. "She's conscious now and asking for *you*. We told her Grace was doing just fine, and she perked right up. The skull series didn't show any sign of fractures or swelling of the brain, but we're keeping her for a couple of days of observation. She *was* unconscious for over an hour, after all, and it won't hurt to be extra careful with those burns for the first couple of days."

Bob sighed. "Not to mention that we probably don't *have* an apartment any more, anyway." He looked back at the treatment room door and shrugged. "The important things are safe, and we'll just hafta deal with the rest as it comes."

"Well, if it helps, we're certainly keeping Grace overnight. We'll discontinue the oxygen in an hour or two, if her lungs are tolerating things well, but she's only got a few minor burns and scrapes. They did a great job with getting her out."

"Who *did* get them out, anyway? I have a few thanks to give out."

"Gage and DeSoto from 51's treated her, but Chet Kelly and Marco Lopez got her out. Seems her Daddy taught her a lot of important things about fire safety."

Bob chuckled. "She's decided, with all the wisdom of a three-year-old, that she wants to be a fireman when she grows up."

Kel pushed open the door to the next treatment room. “Chet says she was reciting safety rules all the way out.”

Bob beamed. “That’s my girl!”

“That’s *our* girl,” came a tired voice from the stretcher. Linda propped herself up and stretched her left hand toward her husband.

Bob clasped her hand, careful to avoid the bandages on her forearms. He leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss. “I hear you’re pretty brave too, trying to run into a burning building to save our baby.”

Linda bit her lip. “I shouldn’t have let her go back for Wadjama. We were *just* about to go look at the new house.” Her lower lip began to quiver, and she lay back down on the stretcher. “Looks like we’ll be moving in sooner than we expected – only without our stuff.” A tear trickled down her cheek, and Bob brushed it away with his thumb.

“Honey, the only stuff that really matters is right here in this hospital. The three of us, together. We’ll make it.”

“But I... I let our baby... I let her get *hurt!*” Linda gulped.

He arched an eyebrow. “Haven’t we discussed this before? About trying to take blame when there isn’t any to hand around.”

She poked him. “Trust *you* to toss my words at me when I can’t properly defend myself.”

“That’s because there isn’t any blame. Honestly, sometimes, shit just happens.”

“That’s a swear,” she replied automatically, then gave a weak laugh. “You *cheated!*”

“I never claimed not to cheat.”

She sighed. “Have you... have you been home yet?” she whispered.

He gave her hand a light squeeze and shook his head. “Hush. I came right here first. I had to see that my girls were all right. And remember, *most* of our stuff is in your parents’ garage, anyway.”

Linda’s jaw dropped open, and she rolled her eyes. “We’re bloody lucky, then – we haven’t really lost much at all.”

He wagged his moustache at her. “Even if we did, I’d still feel the same way. All the *important* stuff is right here.”

“And that’s why we’ve been living out of boxes for the past couple of weeks. How could I forget *that?*”

“Uh, maybe you had a couple of other things on your mind?” he suggested with a wink.

Linda batted his arm, then wrinkled her nose. “Honey, you smell like a rancid fishing boat.”

“You always say the sweetest things.” He laughed. “Grace asked if I’d been swimming. I guess she links salt water and the beach only to swimming. Once you’re all healed up, we’ll have to go to your parents’ cottage and show her how to swim in a lake for a change.”

Linda quirked an eyebrow at him. “You’re ducking things. You’re not gonna tell me about that rescue, are ya?”

He shook his head. “Not now. Maybe later, in a couple of weeks, when it’s not quite so... fresh. Right now, lover, I just wanna look at you, and thank my lucky stars.”

“Grace...”

“Is sleeping comfortably. That lullaby works every time.”

She reached up and traced the outside of his lips with her finger. “Who else but *my* man would use Beatles songs as lullabies?”

“You can’t argue with success,” he pointed out.

Kel cleared his throat. “I hate to interrupt, but it’s high time we got this lady to a room, and let her have a lullaby, too.” He sniffed the air, and grimaced. “And, for the sake of everyone’s sanity, Bob, you really *do* need to get into some clean clothes.”

Linda patted his face. “Go on. Go back to work. We’ll be just fine, and *you* need to keep busy.”

“But...” he began.

“*Robert*, you do *not* need to watch us sleep. Get your butt in gear, and get back on the job.”

Kel was surprised at the strength of will in Linda’s tone, but not as surprised as he was at the paramedic’s reaction. *Holy mackerel – he’s actually cringing!*

“You got it, boss,” Bob said with a grin as he leaned over to give his wife a sloppy kiss, avoiding the bandaged areas of her face.

“That’s better. Now give me at *least* a seven as you go,” she commanded, giving him a poke in the chest.

Bellingham waggled his eyebrows at her, then hiked up his pants and swaggered to the door as Linda leaned over to examine his retreating posterior.

“Finest ass in the state, and it’s all *mine*,” she murmured in satisfaction, drawing a snort of laughter from Kel.

“Time you were sleeping, Beauty,” Bob replied, waving as he left the room. He grinned as Linda settled back on the stretcher and closed her eyes, a smile playing on her lips.

Kel took in the look of adoration on Bob’s face as he ushered him out of the room, and he shook his head. “Like I said, Animal, you’ve got layers.”

“Now, you keep that to yourself. I wouldn’t want it getting’ around that I’m a respectable, responsible family man – I *do* have a reputation to maintain, after all.”

“Hah!” replied Dixie as she strode toward them. “Your secret is safe with us – who’d believe us, anyway, you big fraud?” She stood on tiptoes, pulled the paramedic’s head down, and planted a kiss on his cheek. “*That’s* from your daughter, by the way. We promised she’d get to see your wife, and she said to tell you she’s okay.” She laughed. “Actually, what she said was – and I quote – ‘I’ll bet Mommy told him to get his ass – I mean butt – back to the station.’” She held up her hands at Bob’s look of consternation. “Hey, don’t shoot me. I’m just the messenger.”

Bob gave a hearty belly-laugh, and relaxed for the first time since he’d heard the heart-stopping news. He nodded as Craig joined them. “How’s our patient doin’?”

Craig’s expression was guarded. “Oh, he’ll be fine. Tib-fib fracture, but that much was pretty evident. No vascular compromise, so that’s good. And no apparent complications, so far.” He cleared his throat. “How’s Linda...?” His face softened into an expression Dixie had never seen as he added, “... and Amazing Grace?”

Bob’s goofy grin answered the questions. “They’re gonna be just fine. They’ll be outta the hospital soon, and home in a few days... if there still is a home, that is.” He shrugged. “But *they’re* all right, and that’s what really counts.”

“Uh...” Craig cleared his throat. “About that... Now don’t get upset... but I contacted the Fireman’s Benevolent Fund on your behalf...” he broke off.

Bob gave a slow nod, an expression of gratitude on his face as he patted his partner’s shoulder. “Thanks, partner. We’re better off than most, since most of our things are at Linda’s folks’ place.”

Craig’s expression of confusion was swiftly replaced by a look of comprehension. “Of course. The move at the end of the month. Still...”

“Still, it was a mighty fine thing to do. We appreciate it, Craigy.”

Brice grimaced. “Animal, you *know* I don’t like that.”

“I know – that’s precisely why I do it! And ya gotta admit, ‘Craigy’ sounds better than ‘Bricey’. Is the squad here?”

Craig nodded. “One of the linemen from 110 brought it for us.”

Bob pulled out his HT. “Squad 16 available from Rampart Hospital, 10-8 to quarters.”

“10-4, Squad 16.”

Craig’s eyebrows rose. “Are you sure you’re okay to go back to work?” he asked, a note of doubt in his voice.

Bob flashed his trademark goofy grin and stroked his bushy moustache. “Abso-positively. *Both* of my girls told me to get back on the job, so I’m outnumbered – no choice. I probably should change, though – Linda said I smelled like seaweed. Well... actually, she said I smelled like a rancid fishing boat.”

Craig wrinkled his nose and nodded agreement. “At the least, and probably a lot more than that.”

“I wanna call 51’s when we get back. Got a lot of thanks to give those guys.”

Craig initialled the supply form with his customary precision, his mask of utter professionalism back on his face. He handed it back to Dixie.

She handed over the box of supplies. “You don’t fool me, Craig-y,” she whispered. “But I won’t let on to anyone that there’s a human being inside there.”

Craig stiffened, looked around, then flashed her a smile and a quick wink. “Appreciate that, Miss McCall.”

“I wanna thank you too, Craig,” Bob replied as they walked back to their squad. “It takes a lot to throw me for a loop, and you managed to work through all that while caring for our patient.” He sniffed his armpit as he opened the door to the squad, and wrinkled his nose. “Wow, I *do* smell pretty bad,” he conceded, as he settled into the passenger seat.

“Truly a memorable occasion,” Craig murmured. “Bob finally admits he stinks. I’ll notify Guinness.” He chuckled, put the squad into gear, and headed back to Station 16.

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After Squad 51 had returned from their fourth run that afternoon, Roy had had just about enough of the new routine the crew had unconsciously adapted. For the past several hours, every time the tones sounded, Chet went into a trance, danced until someone shouted his name, then couldn’t remember what happened. Whichever man was closest to Captain Stanley had the unenviable task of diverting his attention away from Chet. So far, it had been working, but how long could they keep it up? *And what happens if we get a call at night, when we’re supposed to be sleeping? Johnny, if you can’t fix this, I may seriously consider hurting you...* He put the vehicle in park, turned off the engine, and glared at his partner. “So. Do you have a way to ‘unhypnotize’ Chet, or do we now include waking Chet every time we get a call as part of our daily routine?”

Johnny drummed his fingers on the dashboard. “I’m workin’ on it,” he mumbled. “I guess I have to rehypnotize him, and try another post-hypnotic suggestion.”

“At this point, I’d say you go for it, which lets you know how desperate we are,” Roy muttered.

The tones went off again, and Roy groaned.

“Engine 51, trash fire, 451 East Sepulveda Boulevard. 4-5-1 East Sepulveda Boulevard. Cross-street Marbella Avenue. Time out, 1555.”

“GAGE!” Captain Stanley yelled as the engine crew hurried to the apparatus bay. “Chet, quit that,” he sighed.

Johnny shrank back in his seat as much as he could. “Yeah, Cap?” he asked as the captain scrawled down the address and acknowledged the call.

“You will fix this when we get back, or so help me, you’ll be on latrine duty for the rest of the year,” Hank growled.

“Yes, sir,” Johnny replied, chagrined.

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Thankfully, there had been no runs for over an hour after the engine crew returned from the trash fire. After he’d washed the dinner dishes, Johnny beckoned Chet over. “Hey, Chet. I’m gonna have to try to hypnotize you again...”

“Oh, because it worked so well the *last* time?” Chet snapped in an acid tone.

“Look, I’m sorry – I didn’t know it was gonna backfire like that.”

“You know what they say about amateurs...” Chet’s eyes snapped closed as the tones went off again.

“Squad 51, man with chest pain. 2015 Brentview. 2-0-1-5 Brentview. Cross-Street, Lasalle. Time out, 1846.

Johnny scowled as Chet began dancing the funky chicken. “Maybe I should just leave him...”

“GAGE!”

“Oh, all right. Wakie-wakie, CHET!” he shouted on his way to the squad.

Once again, Chet snapped out of his trance. He sighed and asked, “Which one *this* time?”

Marco shook his head. “The ‘Funky Chicken’. You know, you really need dancing lessons – your moves are *terrible*.” He got up from the table, and headed outside for some fresh air.

Mike sat down next to Chet, quirked his eyebrow, and said in a low voice, “Just how long are you gonna keep this up?”

Chet looked at him, feigning innocence. “What are you talking about, Mike? Keep *what* up?”

Mike planted his elbow on the table, and rested his chin in his upturned palm. “Chet, I *know* you’re faking it. You were right that Johnny probably couldn’t hypnotize a golf ball. My cousin, on the other hand, is a hypnotherapist by day, and a stage magician by night. He’s taught me a few tricks of the trade, including how to select appropriate ‘subjects’ for his stage act.”

Chet’s grin was rueful. “Was I *that* obvious?”

“To the trained eye, yes. To the untrained eye....” Mike shrugged. “Nice acting, though – terrible dancing, but that actually helps the illusion along, so that was well done.”

“I guess I’m busted. Any idea on how to resolve it without ending up with latrine duty for the rest of my life?”

Mike’s grin was devilish. “Well, I suppose I *could* just happen to drop one of Allan’s business cards where John can find it.”

“That will be great, thanks.” Chet extended his hand and shook Mike’s hand, then pulled back in surprise at the coin that had mysteriously appeared in his palm. “How did you do that?”

“If I told you, I’d have to kill you. Magician’s Oath. ‘The secret of an illusion should never be revealed – unless to a student of magic who also takes this Oath’,” Mike replied.

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Oh mighty illusionist.” He gave the engineer a speculative glance. “How much longer do I get to play?”

“Let me think. It’s Tuesday, right? Allan’s got a show tonight at ten, so it will have to be between eight and nine. Just make sure you give as good a performance when he comes by, okay?”

Chet smirked. “You’ve got a deal. They’ll give me an Oscar for this performance.” He touched his fingers to his chest and intoned, “Ask not for whom the bell tolls – it tolls for thee, Gage... my favourite pigeon.”

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Roy slammed the door to the squad and strode into the day room. He scowled all the way to the coffee pot, poured himself a cup, and drank deeply.

“Anythin’ interesting?” Marco asked.

“Oh, just wonderful. Man with ‘chest pain’. Stupid ass!” Roy finished his cup and poured another.

Marco stared, then looked at Johnny as the younger paramedic entered the kitchen, his lips pressed together to keep from laughing out loud.

“It’s not funny, John,” Roy stated in a flat tone, without turning to glimpse his partner.

“Well, yes, it *is* funny. Finally, a good excuse *not* to have chest hair!”

Roy cast him a look of disgust, scratched absently at his own chest, then shook his head and slumped down at the table over his coffee mug. “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“But I don’t mind talkin’ about it,” Johnny said with a grin. “You see, the ‘chest pain’ involved a zipper... and some chest hair...”

They all winced; it seemed that, at one time or another, they'd had the dubious honour of succumbing to the teeth of doom.

Hank looked at his younger paramedic. "Isn't it about time you *fixed* something?" he said, with a glance over at Chet.

Johnny gulped, and nodded. "Okay, Chet. Time to de-hypnotize you."

Chet lifted his finger as if to protest, but was interrupted by the station's tones.

~~*~*~* MIRRORS *~*~*~*~*

"Station 51, Station 16, Truck 127. Multiple vehicle accident with injuries. Intersection of North Lakewood Boulevard and East Wardlow Road. North Lakewood and East Wardlow. Time out, 1915.

"CHET!"

Hank sighed and headed to the engine. *I'm sure I've had weirder days, but I doubt it.*

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Johnny's jaw dropped as they approached the scene. "I see it, but I don't..."

"Believe it," Roy supplied. "Well, this is one for the books."

Johnny reached for the mike. "Uh, Cap... we have a bit of a ... situation here."

"Would you care to elaborate on that?" came their captain's acid response.

"Uh... it's an MVA all right... there are three..." he was interrupted by the sound of grinding metal and tinkling glass, "... correction, four vehicles involved. Cap, there's a truck at the intersection with mirrors, and it's flashing light into the eyes of drivers in both directions." He winced as another vehicle crashed into the conga line of damaged vehicles.

"LA, this is Station 51, Respond police to our location. Station 16, approach from East Wardlow. We'll need all the salvage covers you've got." Hank turned to his engineer. "Mike, park it crossways – we've got to stop anyone else from approaching. Chet, Marco, take all our salvage covers and get those mirrors covered."

"You got it, Cap!" they acknowledged.

Hank picked up the HT. "HT 51 to Squad 51. Let me know if you need any help with the victims. Right now, we gotta get those mirrors covered before anyone else gets involved."

"Squad 51," Johnny acknowledged. He scooped up the biophone and the drugbox; Roy took the trauma box and a prybar.

Johnny pointed. "Look, you start from the two last cars, I'll assess the guy in the mirror truck, and then the driver of the ice cream truck. We can meet somewhere in the middle, to contact Rampart."

"Works for me," Roy acknowledged, grabbing the spare HT. "Call me if you need me."

"Likewise," Johnny said as he hurried to the first of the smashed vehicles.

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"Nice of that guy to give us so much ice cream," Johnny said as they backed into the station.

"Yeah. Smart of Mike to think of rigging the splint box with the leftover dry ice from that other truck. How many vehicles were involved by the time we were done?"

Johnny groaned. "I think there were eleven, altogether. But at least nobody was seriously injured, and I *still* don't believe that. I guess it was the fact that they all hit at such crazy angles."

"Well, I've had enough of this day. *And* we still have to finish writing up the logbook, to boot."

"Hey, at least we have lots of ice cream for dessert."

Roy wagged his finger. "Uh-uh. No dessert for you until you un hypnotize Chet."

Johnny folded his arms on the dashboard and leaned his forehead against his crossed wrists. "You had to go and ruin the mood, didn't you?"

Roy looked smug. "What are partners for, if not to keep everything grounded?" He looked at his notes for the day, then started to laugh. "This day really *has* been about bells and whistles, smoke and mirrors."

Johnny sighed, got out of the squad and stretched, then made his way to the day room.

"Okay, Chet, let's get this going..." he began, then stopped short. Roy, right behind him, bumped into him.

"What?" he asked, then looked at the scene before him.

Chet was seated at the table, his eyes closed, as the Great Mesmerlin whispered softly to him.

"One... you're at peace, and no longer feel the compulsion to dance... Two... your eyelids are getting lighter and lighter.... Three, you are awake!" he pronounced.

Chet blinked, then reached up to rub at his eyes. "Did it work?" he asked, his voice wary.

"I guess we'll have to wait and see," Mesmerlin replied. "And now, gentlemen, I really must be going. I hope you all have a magical night!"

“I’ll walk you out,” Mike offered quickly, before anyone else could. He managed to keep a straight face until they were at his cousin’s vehicle. Then he lost it, and leaned on the roof of Allen’s car, laughter wracking his thin frame. “Oh, you were brilliant. Well done!”

“Hah – I could never hold a candle to you when it came to the deception part... I guess that’s why I’m so overly flamboyant when I’m on stage. Have you actually *seen* the ridiculous getup I have to wear?” Mesmerlin asked, cringing in embarrassment.

Mike took a deep breath. “Hey, we were watching the rebroadcast of your appearance on that variety show the other night. That’s what actually started this whole farce in the first place.”

“Well, I’m glad that our mentor never had to see that... I really do prefer the hypnotherapy, but it doesn’t pay nearly as well as my ‘guest’ appearances do. Still, I guess we’ve all got a bit of showmanship in us, or we’d never have become illusionists in the first place.”

Mike extended his hand to his cousin, glancing back at the station. Sure enough, Chet was watching and nodding. “Heh – got any firecrackers in your pockets?”

Allan gave him a sly grin. “I’m *insulted* that you think I’d show up for a gig without one of the very basic pieces of ammunition.”

“How about a little ‘flash’ for Chet? He’s unknowingly given me one of the funniest shifts of my life, and you could ‘disappear’ your car for him.”

“It’s a deal. Tell Auntie Vi that we’ll do our usual show for the kidlets next month. After all, what would a birthday party be without a duelling magical act?” Allan asked. “Hey, is he still watching?”

Mike nodded. “Go for it.” He stepped back, gave a whimsical nonsensical gesture meant to look like magic to the uninitiated, clapped his hands sharply and stretched out his arms to their fullest extent.

Allan, aka the Great Mesmerlin tossed a handful of firecrackers on the ground, and ‘disappeared’ in the resulting bright flash of light.

Mike turned and walked back to the station, whistling “Do you believe in magic” just loudly enough to bring a smile to Chet’s face.

FIN

Author’s notes: I blatantly stole from real life for one of the rescues – my own. Nearly thirteen years ago, while I was a volunteer Medical First Responder, I was involved in a near-fatal bicycle accident which pretty much destroyed my right leg, leaving me in a wheelchair for seven months. A friend, who was riding with me, ended up crashing into me after I’d wiped out, and it was because I was able to focus on his injuries instead of my own that I was able to delay the shock until they reduced the ankle

dislocation in the hospital. It's truly amazing how adrenaline will help you get through something like that – not to mention the help and support of family and friends. After being on a waiting list for some five years, I've been back in physiotherapy for the ankle for the past two months, and as I've been pushing for more strength and flexibility, I've been reliving that accident over and over in all its glorious details – and by far the worst part was when they relocated the ankle (which will forever be my frame of reference for 'ten out of ten' on the pain scale).