

# John Roderick Gage (Hero in Jagged Rock)

## Chapter 4

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**A/N:** There is no actual town of Jagged Rock in Arizona, (or anywhere else, as far as I can tell.) There are a couple of rock formations strewn about that carry the name Jagged Rock. One of them is not so helpfully located in the Antarctic. There *is* a pillar formation by that name in Arizona eleven miles north of Joseph City which is on Highway 40/the Historic Route 66. For this story's purposes, and in my alternate reality, the unincorporated town of Jagged Rock occupies the space Joseph City lays claim to in real life and is named for the nearby rock formation.

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Thursday, October 7

Six firemen gathered in the day room after roll call. They crowded and jostled to read what C-shift had left for them to find. Even typed, the bit of parody flowed down one page to a second. Both were taped to the wall next to a framed newspaper article and large glossy photo that now hung above the television set, beside the chalkboard.

*This is the road that the County built.*

*This is the hill*

*That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the mud,*

*That soaked the hill*

*That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the lad,*

*That slipped in the mud,*

*That soaked the hill*

*That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the dad,*

*That fell with the lad,*

*That slipped in the mud,*

*That soaked the hill*

*That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the captain with the white-striped hat,  
That leapt for the dad,  
That fell with the lad,  
That slipped in the mud,  
That soaked the hill  
That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the lineman all mud-splat,  
That clung to the captain with the white-striped hat,  
That leapt for the dad,  
That fell with the lad,  
That slipped in the mud,  
That soaked the hill  
That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the crew mate in need of a bath,  
That latched onto the lineman all mud-splat,  
That clung to the captain with the white-striped hat,  
That leapt for the dad,  
That fell with the lad,  
That slipped in the mud,  
That soaked the hill  
That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the fireman with the black mustache,  
That anchored the crew mate in need of a bath,  
That latched onto the lineman all mud-splat,  
That clung to the captain with the white-striped hat,  
That leapt for the dad,  
That fell with the lad,  
That slipped in the mud,  
That soaked the hill  
That lay under the road that the County built.*

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*This is the medic who rappelled down the path,  
That tied off the fireman with the black mustache,  
That anchored the crew mate in need of a bath,  
That latched onto the lineman all mud-splat,  
That clung to the captain with the white-striped hat,  
That leapt for the dad,  
That fell with the lad,  
That slipped in the mud,  
That soaked the hill  
That lay under the road that the County built.*

*This is the specialist who threw himself flat,  
To belay the medic who rappelled down the path,  
That tied off the fireman with the black mustache,  
That anchored the crew mate in need of a bath,  
That latched onto the lineman all mud-splat,  
That clung to the captain with the white-striped hat,  
That leapt for the dad,  
That fell with the lad,  
That slipped in the mud,  
That soaked the hill  
That lay under the road that the County built.*

Marco canted his head this way and that as he considered the news photo someone had gotten their hands on and had enlarged. "I still say we look *un poco* like a string of those linking plastic monkeys that came in a barrel my niece got for her birthday last year."

"It looks like a fine example of teamwork to me," a voice from the doorway announced.

A-shift turned as one in startled, swift-formed attention when Chief McConnike stepped into the room from the apparatus bay; one of them whipped sheets of paper from the wall and held them behind his back.

"At ease, men. I just dropped by to congratulate you on a rescue well-executed. That was quite the work-up in the Sunday newspaper. It's good to see the media get it right for once." The Chief's eyes narrowed. "What's that you've got there, Hank?"

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"McConnike's not so bad. I don't think I've ever heard him bust out laughing before. I don't know why Cap gets so freaked out every time he shows up," Chet said as he accepted the wet dish Mike handed him. He ducked his head in sudden concentration when Cap leaned in through the kitchen door.

"Keep it up, Kelly, and I'll give you a lesson on why it's best to respect the awesome power wielded by your superior officers," Hank warned before continuing on toward his office.

"Like he has any place to talk. It wasn't me that burned his beloved captain's hat way back in the olden days," Chet whispered to John who was standing at his elbow, reaching to re-wet the rag he was using to wipe the counters with.

"Kelly, there's a report lying on my desk that wants typing. You can get started on it after you're done polishing that dish," a disembodied voice rang from the apparatus bay.

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During a lull between runs, John flopped into the comfortable chair. "So you're finally going to take it home," he said to his partner before settling back into the chair's embrace. "You know, Roy, I think I'm going to miss our portrait hanging up there."

The tale of Roy's tea party had spread with the predicted velocity. Everyone in both the sheriff and fire departments had heard it, commented on and teased him about it. After a few weeks of making the rounds, the story seemed destined to become legend. Bracket threatened to include the 'procedure' as part of the paramedic training curriculum.

A month after the fabled run, there was a new addition to the day room.

The guys from all the shifts, along with some of the folks at Rampart had pitched in to pay for the commissioned sketch done by a local caricaturist. The gal had talent. The piece drew heavily on the classic Alice in Wonderland block print by Sir John Tenniel. Roy was wearing a top hat "in the style of 10/6"; next to him was perched, not a sleepy door mouse, but a teddy bear. The artist had managed to render a March Hare with more than a subtle resemblance to Johnny and the little girl at the end of the table was the spitting image of a stubborn Angel Hushons. A bottle labeled both "syrup of ipecac" and "drink me" was set amongst the chinaware on the table. The work of art was captioned *Angel in Wonderland*. Over the past few months, Roy had mentioned more than once that the picture was growing on him.

John's response each time had been a variation of "I agree. That is one fine looking rabbit."

It was now October, and C-shift had taken the gift down from where it had hung since spring in order to make room for the photo and clippings of A-shift's recent mudslide rescue.

Roy settled onto the couch with the newspaper. "You can come visit it at my house. Joanne has plans to display it in the front hall."

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Chet emerged from the office and with exaggerated drama, looked both ways for lurking superiors before slumping onto the couch. "This is the Captain in the white-striped hat, that tortured his lineman with typing and crap," he recited quietly to his crew mates who were watching the local news.

"Aw, poor Chester B., did he wear his two little fingers to the bone on the mean ol' typewriter's keys? That sure took you long enough."

"Shut up, Gage, you don't type any faster than I do."

"No, but *I* know when to keep my mouth shut, so I don't..." The tones interrupted John.

*Station 51, auto/pedestrian accident with injuries, 21824 North Avalon Boulevard, twenty-one, eight, twenty-four North Avalon Boulevard, time out: 1535.*

"Gage, since when did you ever know when to keep your mouth shut?" Chet called across the bay as he pulled his turnout coat on.

His answer came in the form of a slamming squad door.

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John jogged up to the front of the engine where his captain was conferring with Mike. Marco and Chet were disconnecting and dragging the inch-and-a-half to reload it. "Cap, did you see where the driver went off to? I'd like to check him out before I take off. He looked a bit shaken when I saw him last."

John followed his commander's irritated glance to the hand preventing him from turning completely to face his paramedic.

"May I help you?" Cap asked in a voice that caught each of his crew's attention as he allowed the agitated man to finish pulling him back.

"You sure as hell can. I'm Thad's father. I'd like to know where you're hiding the son-of-a-bitch driver that ran my son down."

Quick looks were exchanged, but a preemptive shake of a head served to stay the imminent advance of four men. Shrugging his arm free of the agitated grasp, their captain answered in an even voice. "Sir, the young man who was driving the car that your son *fell* in front of has been cleared of blame. There were several witnesses that reported seeing him trip into the street from the sidewalk. Thad himself admitted he and his friends were horsing around."

John filled the gap in the formation behind Captain Stanley when Marco stepped backward and slipped away unnoticed by the irate man now standing toe-to-toe with their commanding officer.

"He'd just been hit by a speeding car! Are you people going to let that driver walk away scot-free on the say-so of the faulty recall of a kid with a head injury?" Voice raised, the man's accusations must have carried, because the sheriff's head snapped up before Marco reached his side.

"All reports are that the driver wasn't speeding, and I don't have any reason to doubt your son's word on the matter. An officer is taking everyone's statement..."

Cap's sentence was shortened when a fist to his jaw served as a premature end mark. His head snapped to the side with the impact. John stepped to catch his shoulder, lending support as Hank caught his balance. Stoker was suddenly standing shield between his other shoulder and the sputtering father.

"My son is not a liar!" the man shouted as he struggled to escape Mike and Chet's restraining arms.

"Then you should take a moment and listen to him yourself, because he is honest enough to take responsibility for his actions." Hank brought the back of his hand up to swipe at the blood he could taste on his lip.

The deputy reached their side of the street to take hold of the fabric high on the still belligerent father's shirtfront. He spun the man to pin an arm behind his back even as he said in a terse voice, "I've got him, men." He turned to the leader of the watchful fire crew. "Do you want to swear out a complaint, Captain?"

The father and Hank's eyes met and each flicked a glance to the back of the ambulance that was pulling away from the curb to carry a paramedic and a son to Rampart. Hank ran the tip of his tongue over his molars testing each in turn. "No, this gentleman has someplace he needs to be, and I have a scene to wrap up."

"You can always press charges later when I get your statement." The officer paused to assess the captain's level of conviction on the matter. Comfortable with what he read in Captain Stanley's eyes, he continued. "Try not to take off before I can talk to you again. If you catch another run, I'll come to you at your station. Are you off shift in the morning?" He mostly wanted the man he still held firmly by a forearm to realize that his actions and loss of control could yet have serious repercussions. He was grateful to the captain standing before him for picking up on that, and then responding with a single nod. He towed the father off without reassurances that everything was "a-okay and there were no hard feelings." He appreciated it when folks, including fellow public servants, didn't mess with his process.

"Cap, I'm going to go look for the driver, if you're okay."

Hank heard the questions imbedded in that statement and answered the last first. "John, I'm fine - nothing broken, no loose teeth. You can check me out in a bit, but go see to the kid first. I saw him head this way after he talked to the deputy." Cap tilted his head to indicate the other side of the rig. "He was sitting on the curb when you first came up looking for him. I'll be over talking to the tow-truck driver if you need me."

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John looked up at his captain who had just hoisted himself to the cab of the engine. "You want to ride with me to Rampart, Cap, seeing as how I'm headed there anyway?"

Hank eyed his junior paramedic and worked his jaw in experiment. "I should be good, John. I'll see you and Roy back at the barn."

"Cap, if it was me with the bruising face, you know you'd make me have a doc look at it," John ventured.

"Well, pal, this must be one of those times where rank has its privileges. You said it looked fine and it feels okay. We'll go with that as a working diagnosis unless my lower jaw falls off in my sleep sometime tonight - in which case, I might reconsider. Until then, ice should do nicely." Cap sensed John's displeasure and added, "Really John, I don't *always* make you go in and you know it. If I did, the squad would never be in service."

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As predicted, Cap's jaw was still in place and sported a yellowing bruise when they all lined up for roll call Saturday morning after their single day off.

Throughout the morning, they each noted the garland of eight plastic monkeys gracing the front of the photo in the day room. The chain of linked figures had been roughly arranged to mirror the positions of the crew and their two victims during the mudslide rescue. The 'Roy' monkey actually dangled from a string tied to Mike's counterpart perched on the top edge of the frame. The single blue monkey was labeled "*The Weakest Link*".

When John cornered him, Chet admitted nothing.

John's indignation carried him out the back door to finish hanging the last of the hose from C-shift's early morning blaze.

When Chet turned around, he faced mixed looks of rolling eyes and mild annoyance from the balance of the engine crew.

"I'd just like to point out that it was Dr. Morton who told Gage he was out of shape a few years ago, and he's as skinny today as he was then."

"It will be your fault if he goes on another fitness kick," Marco warned. "Do you want to get him obsessing about it again? Are you *loco*?"

"...or just auditioning for the role of the *missing* link between these guys..." Mike reached to remove their simian counterparts, "... and the human race. I swear, Chet, sometimes..." Mike let his comment remain hanging, but he held Kelly's gaze for a moment to communicate his opinion of the joke.

Roy chose to hold his tongue all together and simply left to join John under the hose tower.

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Lunch was interrupted by the tones calling both rigs as part of an automatic second alarm to a working fire at a multi use warehouse north west of the station. Captain Jim Alan out of 116's was incident commander and sent the whole crew of 51 in, including Captain Stanley. Mike was free since Tom Marsh, 116's engineer was manning the pumps.

The men of 51's were to advance an interior two-and-half-inch to the suspected seat of the fire - the paint booth of the auto body shop occupying the west end of the warehouse.

The building was fully charged with a roiling black smoke banking down from the wood-framed building's twenty-four foot ceiling. Cap scouted ahead with a Wheat lamp and directed his five men as they manhandled the heavy, unwieldy hose in a crouching, bending formation. A blanket of heated smoke churned at what would be a standing man's eye level.

Hank agreed with Jim Alan's choice of attack leads. The high ceilings of a warehouse required the volume, reach, and penetration offered by the two-and-a-half-inch.

This advantage came at a cost: a fifty-foot section of the hose his men were lugging held 106 pounds of water compared to the 52 pounds contained by an equal length of inch-and-three-quarters. It took all five of his crew to muscle the chosen lead around corners and down the aisles of empty pallets and flammable product stored in the main section of the warehouse.

116's rookie, Scott Wharton was on the nozzle of an inch-and-a-half with that station's other lineman, Tim Blair backing him closely. They were advancing their line parallel to the attack lead as backup and protection.

Cap led the two crews deeper into the warehouse. The red-battered lamp afforded him several feet of visibility and he pointed out obstacles as both hose teams worked their way toward the west end of the building.

John was enjoying himself. It was rare for all six of them to be working fire suppression on the hoses together. After they'd wrestled the two-and-a-half into position, Cap had Marco aim the stream at the ceiling to cool the heated gases collected there. Chet was backing him and he pinned the hose by kneeling on it. Once the ceiling was cooled they were able to advance the line further to aim the stream at the seat of the fire, a partitioning wall separating the body shop from the rest of the building.

With the larger hose maneuvered into place for the time being, the static line didn't need as much tending, so John, Mike and Roy had a chance to take a moment to be impressed by the knockdown power of the more than a ton of water per minute presently at Cap's disposal.

All-in-all John sensed they were gaining the upper hand. This was part of what he loved about the fire fighting aspect of his job: that they could show up, enter the fray and literally wrest property and lives away from sure destruction. Every battle didn't go smoothly, but he got to feel the exhilaration of winning often enough to recognize and appreciate it when things did go well.

Cap motioned for Mike and John to spell the linemen on the nozzle. The effort required to overcome the increased nozzle reaction of a two-and-a-half, (all that water flowing *out* of a hose also forced the nozzle *back*) made for rapid fatigue of the nozzle team. This is what justified the added manpower currently dedicated to the larger-caliber hose's deployment. John moved in to place a knee on the hose and take Chet's place, while Mike took over the stream still aimed at the base of the wall in front of them. John leaned into Mike's crouching form to better brace him. Marco and Chet each moved aside to take a breather.

Wharton and Blair were barely visible through the still-thick blanket of smoke as they tended to the random flare-ups occurring in the stacks of empty pallets on either side of the aisle the team was currently set up in.

John turned instinctively at the metallic-sharp clang and sudden shift of the SCBA on his back. It was a split second after something cracked into the back of his helmet, throwing his chin to his chest, that he recognized the form of a rogue nozzle as it twisted away and danced back into the curtain of smoke.

"Mike, watch out!" he called even as he lost his balance and let go of Mike's shoulder to keep from pulling the engineer into his lap. John never went completely down because Marco moved to catch him as he fell to the side. Both Chet and Roy pounced on the trailing tail of the two-and-a-half, simultaneously moving to support Mike before he was forced backwards.

"Get control of that hose!" Cap barked as he turned a ducking shoulder to the threat of the flailing inch-and-a-half. It was Blair that managed to follow the snaking, bucking line and subdue its nozzle.

During the mutiny of the smaller-gauged hose taking place seven feet off to the right, the stream of the two-and-a-half never wavered as Mike continued to concentrate it on the red glow visible through the smoke. Cap tapped Roy out, freeing him to check on John, who Marco still supported as they crouched three feet to the left.

"Stoker! Kelly! You got this?" Cap used the raised voice necessary to be heard through his face mask. Two nods released him to sort crew and hose.

Blair, with Wharton behind him, was fanning a stack of boxes that had stubbornly presented them with flame twice before. Cap placed a hand on Blair's arm to get his attention. With a sideways tip of his head in the rookie's direction, Cap asked two silent questions. *Are you okay? Is he okay?*

A cocky nod and its partnered smile translated clearly through Blair's face mask.

"Be sure to switch places in a minute!" Cap was sometimes amazed at the nuances of communication firemen were able to express during the raging havoc of a fire. Even conversing through two face shields at near shouts, he was certain Blair caught his intent and would have the rookie out front and "back in the saddle" in short order.

A quick check-in with Mike and Chet assured their captain that they were doing fine on the attack lead. Marco had joined them, so that situation was well in hand. A searching sweep of the area that Mike was concentrating on revealed there was very little red left to attack.

After having taken the few minutes required to assure the hose teams had themselves reset, Hank was able to turn his attention to his fallen paramedic. The fallen paramedic who, he noticed during his crouching approach, hadn't *stayed* fallen but was presently giving his partner a hard time as Roy refused to be shrugged off.

"Gage, you settle!" Hank commanded in a tone that lent itself well to being heard, face mask and fire-scene-chaos notwithstanding.

Roy, a master at fire-scene-nuansical communication, conveyed relieved thanks to his captain for his partner's subsequent settling.

"Will he be okay to walk out, or should I call for a stokes?"

Johnny started to *unsettle* but grudgingly quieted back to the sitting position Roy was trying examining him in when two firm grips on his shoulders insisted he do so.

"I can take him out, Cap! I think his air tank and helmet took the brunt of it!" Roy's raised voice held none of the anxiety Hank was listening for.

"Okay! See you on the outside. We won't be much longer!" Hank turned his gaze on his junior paramedic and though he spared John a mask-shielded smile he gave the shoulder he still held a gentle shake to reinforce his command. "Behave!"

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John and Roy were lending a hand at the rehab area when the rest of 51s and the two linemen from 116's emerged from the building towing both hoses in their wake. Pulling his mask off, Cap's roving eyes located his paramedics before he pulled Scott Wharton off to the side of the fire scene. Captain Alan rounded the corner of the building, noted his rookie and Blair's positions and continued to check in with the other companies, HT pressed to an ear. After declaring the fire under control, he made a bee-line to Scott Wharton and Captain Stanley's side.

While Hank foresaw some intense drills in young Wharton's immediate future, he could easily recall a few rookie-lessons that had been learned during active fires at higher costs than those exacted today. He left captain and lineman reviewing a few salient bullet points of nozzle safety. After checking in with his engine crew, he moved to join his paramedics.

As his captain neared, John lifted his helmet and pointed to the brand new scuff above the rear brim. "You were right, Cap. Firemen should always wear their protective gear, I see that now."

Cap recognized his junior paramedic's effort to forestall the inevitable line of questioning, and was unimpressed with his counterfeit sass. "Stow it, Gage. Is he alright, Roy? Do you two need to make a trip to Rampart?"

"No, I think he actually came away unscathed. His air tank might need to be condemned; there's a pretty hefty ding in it just under the valve. Other than that and the added notch in his helmet he was pretty lucky."

"Glad to hear it. See, Gage I *don't* make you go in every time you scare the daylights out of me. Why don't you two call yourselves in as available and then go help the guys get the equipment squared away? I'll be over here for a bit."

Once they were placed 'available at scene', the paramedics didn't remain there much longer than the time it took to make the call. Roy waved to their captain as he and John trotted to the squad.

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Driving back to the station after a set of closely placed but pretty routine medical runs, Roy recognized the signs that his partner was deep in the throes of processing. Johnny's silent gaze aimed outside the passenger window was the tip off. Under normal circumstances, Johnny's silent *anything* was a portent of things best not left to percolate overly long.

"Wanna talk about it, Junior?" was Roy's opening salvo.

John turned his head to face forward, but his response seemed to stall sometime after he opened his mouth but before actual words were formed.

Roy signaled an impromptu left into a small parking lot, pulled the squad into a random parking space and turned the engine off. He shifted slightly to face the brooding silence oozing from the passenger side and waited.

After several seconds, his quiet patience was rewarded.

"Roy, do you think I'm a weak link?"

Roy sighed, having expected something along these lines, including the genuinely worried inflection present in his partner's voice.

"No, Johnny, I do not. Chet doesn't either, if that's what's got you stewing. He just couldn't resist the linked-monkeys tie-in with the hard time Dr. Morton gave you when you pulled a shoulder muscle a couple of years ago. And if you're referring to Marco catching you back at that fire this morning, you've done exactly the same for him - more than once. Hell, you've pulled, carried, pried and dug every one of our backsides out of tight spots too many times to count. No one keeps track, John; no one needs to." Roy was watching Johnny's face to make sure he was making his point successfully. Satisfied, he backed the squad and maneuvered her to turn back onto West Carson.

"McConnike wasn't just talking about that one rescue when he dropped by the other day. A-shift works well as a team because every one of us pulls more than his own weight, even the ones that never put on an ounce no matter what they eat."

At the mention of eating, John's stomach pitched its request for sustenance. John threw Roy a "what-can-I-say" look of half-chagrin.

"We both missed lunch. 'How 'bout we get something to tide us over until supper?" Roy suggested.

"Now you're talking. Let's swing on over to Omega Burger. I like their chili fries and I hear they've got a new gal working the drive through."

Roy rolled his eyes at his insatiable, incorrigible partner and then changed lanes. "You said Bracket thinks Thad Swanson is going to be alright, what else did he say?"

"He's got a long road ahead of him, what with that fractured pelvis and all. They don't expect him to have any lasting effects from his head injury," John answered before launching into a sharing of his opinion that Thad's father should be grateful that his teenage son would eventually be fine, that he should be a hell-of-a-lot *more* than grateful that Cap hadn't simply decked him and that he wasn't going to get slapped with assault charges. John voiced how much he'd wanted to take a swing at the man himself. He made the unlikely segue from retributational violence to vacation plans and settled into an animated, still mostly one-sided discussion of the wonders awaiting him during his upcoming extended days off.

Roy relaxed into the driver's seat and allowed the familiar cadence to fill the cab of the squad.

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Filling the bottomless pit that masqueraded as Johnny's stomach required not only a large order of chili fries but also a cheeseburger and a shake to wash it all down. Roy contented himself with a hamburger and Coke.

Back on the road, John sighed in momentary appetite appeasement. They traveled in companionable silence until John suddenly sat up straighter. "Pull over here, Roy."

He was opening the squad's door before Roy could manage to bring the rig to a complete stop. Roy parked around the corner and out of traffic on Anchor Avenue, called in a still alarm and hustled to join his partner back on 123rd.

John was leaning against a low, decorative wall trying to comfort the sobbing child he held in his arms. To Roy's experienced eyes, he judged her to be near his daughter's age, maybe a bit younger which would put her at perhaps five years old. Roy scanned the street and sidewalk for clues as to who the child might belong to, but the only pedestrians on their side of the street were a group of four boys a few houses down the block.

"Roy, it looked like those kids were following her, maybe you should go see what's up." John didn't come out and say it, but Roy could tell from John's tone of voice that he was more than a little suspicious that the boys were at the root of his charge's distress.

"Good idea Johnny, I'll be back in a minute."

Roy approached the group of boys who looked to range in ages from a few years older than the little girl upward to maybe twelve or thirteen. They stood shuffling and casting glances behind them in a way that made Roy wonder if they were going to bolt. The oldest boy stepped forward when the paramedic stopped a few feet away.

"Do you know what's got that little girl so upset, son?" Roy tried to keep his voice neutral while he gave the boy a chance to explain.

"Yeah, she's our little sister. I'm Shad Ore. Ron..." the speaker-for-the-group turned to throw a withering gaze at one of his brothers, "has been teasing her by telling her she can't come with us because she hasn't turned into a boy yet, but that when she finally does, she can always come along." The boy turned fully toward his little brother and Roy reached to restrain the lad before blows were exchanged.

Ron, who stood with his head bowed, mumbled, "It was Dick Heskins who had to come along and tell her we were lying and that we only wanted to get rid of her and that she was stuck being a girl forever." The boy lifted sorrowful eyes which Roy thought held true remorse. "Then she laid into him like the Tasmanian Devil, shouting that her big brothers would never lie to her. She used words I can't repeat. She's too little to really have hurt him, but now she won't come home. She says we lied." The boy hung his head again.

"Well, son, you did. You fellas stay right here. We're going to need your help in a minute to fix this." With that, Roy walked the quarter-block back to where his partner had a lap full of snot-sniffing, hiccupping tomboy. John was clearly smitten.

"Those are her brothers..."

"Yeah, I gathered as much. She's feeling better now, but I think our new worry is that little Daphne here is planning some pretty bloody vengeance on her brothers."

Roy took a peek at a skinned knee. "I hear the other kid looks worse."

"Daphne, hi, I'm Roy. I also hear your brothers said some stuff that got you upset. Brothers can be a pain sometimes, huh?"

His answer came in the form of a small shuddering nod.

"But you know they love you, right?"

This caused a messy little face to turn into John's shoulder and scrub back and forth in disagreement. The girl peeked over at the brothers in question. "They lied. They told me I was going to get to be a boy, and now I can't." The little girl dissolved into soul-wracking sobs. "I'm going to tie them up and poke their fingers with bamboo-boo sticks and, and drip water on their heads until they go crazy. Then I'm going to, to...THEY DON'T WANT ME!" she ended in a pathetic wail.

"Now, honey, I know that's how you feel, but look at them standing over there. They would have skedaddled by now if they didn't care. They look kinda sorry if you ask me." Roy looked over at the four, who actually did look devastated at their little sister's hurt. They had edged closer and were now twenty feet away.

With a final, sad hiccup, Daphne took another peep over John's shoulder. Roy took his note book out of his shirt pocket. "If you give me your parents' names and phone number, I can call them and they can punish your brothers really good for teasing you and making you cry and all." Roy paused with his pen poised to take down information he had already gathered from the boys only minutes ago.

"No, *don't!*" came a fierce demand from the tiny girl as she slid down from John's lap. Daphne stomped her foot, and faced them with her hands on her hips. "Don't you dare turn me into a tattler! You'll get Shaddie in trouble. He's 'sposed to control us hooligans!"

Roy stepped away trying to hide a smile as John boosted Daphne up on the wall to make a more thorough inventory of her scrapes. He joined the boys who had advanced to within ten feet of their sister, and spoke quietly. "You're going to need to apologize, but first, my partner and I need you to rescue us from your sister's wrath at the mere suggestion that she rat you out. You know, guys, she isn't always going to be the pain-in-the-butt tag-along that she is now, but I have a feeling that she is always going to be a handful. She'll need her big brothers to watch out for her." Roy followed behind the two oldest as they sidled up to their sister. John lifted Daphne down from the wall.

"We're sorry, Daffy," Shad knelt to one knee, "wanna come over here and have a talk?"

"Don' call me Daffy!"

"Okay little duck, but come'er, *please?*" He held an arm out in invitation which was instantly filled with kid sister.

"Hey, Daffy, we're headed on over to dig for night crawlers in Old Man Calloway's compost pile. We're gonna start a worm farm. You wanna come along?" Ron offered from where he stood next to them.

"Don't call me Daffy, Byron *Reginald!*" The girl turned in fury on her second-oldest brother with fists clenched. Threat delivered, she relaxed before asking sweetly, "Can I go fishing too?"

"Fishing season doesn't open for months, dum..." Ron cut his insult short at the warning looks he received from the three older males in the group. "Yeah, uh, sure. You can bait my hook. But we can't go for awhile, okay?"

This statement sealed Daphne's joy, as her big brother stood and settled her on his shoulders. She was all smiles as she leaned out to give John a hug. She whispered something in his ear. He whispered something back. It was a long conversation.

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"Shake a leg, Junior," Roy urged as John neared the squad. "We need to get back to the station so I can finish getting dinner ready and in the oven." Roy cast an assessing look at the threat the clouds held. "'Looks like the weatherman was right about our break from the rain ending tonight.'" He pushed off from where he'd been leaning against a side panel and opened the driver's side door. "What were you two conspiring about back there? She proposed to you, didn't she? Can I be your best man?" Roy paused his teasing as they both climbed into the rig.

"Nah, she just told me she had to go help her brothers, but invited me on their fishing trip *tomorrow*." John reached for the squad's microphone, and announced, "LA, this is squad 51, available," before replacing it in its cradle. "She also told me she wanted to be a firefighter when she grows up, but that's supposed to be a secret." John flopped back against the bench seat in dismay. "Aw, man. She's going to come after me when she finds out she can't join the fire department because she's a girl. Roy, I never promised her she could."

Roy started to chuckle at how worried Johnny sounded, but he almost aspirated when his partner unconsciously crossed his arms to tuck his fingertips protectively into his armpits. "Relax, Johnny. By the time she's old enough, the department probably *will* be allowing women to join." \*

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"...I'm just saying, not a lot of the old Route 66 will be around to drive much longer, what with Interstate 40 slowly replacing it section-by-section." John was talking over his shoulder to Roy as they stepped out of the squad.

"'Slowly' being the operative word there. Hell, Gage, at the rate that highway's going in, you'll have at least a decade of vacation time to waste haunting cheesy roadside attractions before they finally finish." Chet joined them from across the apparatus floor. The three made their way past the county map and radio podium to the kitchen.\*\*

"Roy, we went ahead and put the lasagna in the oven a few minutes ago, 350 degrees, right?" Marco turned from where he was buttering the loaf of French bread.

"Hey, Johnny, didn't you mention you'll be going through Needles on your pilgrimage east?" Chet asked as he spread the evening newspaper out on the table, funny page showing. "You'll have to say 'Hi' to Spike, Snoopy's brother." At John's blank look Chet expounded, "*You* know, skinny beagle, handlebar mustache, fedora hat...lives in a cactus... he sometimes goes into town for a drink all by his lonesome. No one should have to drink alone, not even a solitary cartoon character. Come to think of it, you two would have a lot in common."

John for once declined to take the bait and started to set the table, moving the funnies aside.

"Actually, he must live about fifty miles *south* of Needles since his home is a saguaro cactus. The only ones in California are in the Whipple Mountains," Mike piped in with a bit of trivia as he reached for the section containing the cross word puzzle.

"You were *that* kid in school weren't you, Mikey? The irritating, *smart* kid who always ruined the curve for the rest of the class."

John lost his brief resolve. "At least it looks like he outgrew 'irritating', which is more than some of us can claim. And don't call him 'Mikey'," John added with a grin as he beat Stoker to the requisite response.

---

With high hopes for a half hour or so of no runs, they all sat down to eat.

"Thanks for getting dinner going, Marco," Roy said, reaching for another piece of garlic bread.

"De nada. We were beginning to wonder if you two were ever going to make it back to the station this side of midnight. By the way, guys, Chet and I are going to watch Monday night football at my place, anyone want to join us? Can Karen make it, Chet?"

"Nah, she's got parent/teacher conferences. At least I'll get to see her tomorrow. We're going to catch a matinee and then go check out a new restaurant she's been wanting to try down on Long Beach. How 'bout it, guys, anyone else up for Monday night football?"

"I'm picking up a half-shift tomorrow night over at Station 36, so I'd best be available Monday to pull my weight with homework/bedtime enforcement. Joanne does it enough on her own without having to do it four nights in a row. Maybe next time."

Cap was shaking his head as he too reached for the bread. "Sorry, Karen isn't the only one with parent/teacher conferences that night."

"I'm in," Mike answered. "It can be our warm-up for the LA/Chicago game on the 17th. Chet, I can't believe the seats you managed to get us."

"Well, I'm sorry I'm going to have to miss both games, but I'll be camping north of Needles Monday night and still driving home Sunday afternoon. They should both be great games; even with all their injuries, the Rams are looking pretty good."

"Gage, tell me again what is so compelling about visiting all those touristy attractions, 'cuz I'm not seeing the draw."

"Well, besides some pretty awesome climbing around Flagstaff, there are the trading posts, cliff dwellings, a meteor crater and the south rim of the Grand Canyon. Did you know they call Flagstaff "The City of Seven Wonders"? The Grand Canyon's only one of them. And the hotel I'm staying at is supposed to be haunted by a bride and groom murdered on their honeymoon back in the 1930s. And right on Route 66, there's the Grand Canyon Caverns. Did you know they're over two hundred feet deep and..."

The phone rang and interrupted John's enthusiastic descriptions. He slid his chair and tipped it *way* back, stretching to reach the handset rather than get up to answer it. After listening for several moments, he answered, "Sure, he's right here... sorry about your photo albums - here, I'll let you speak to him." John waggled the phone in Cap's direction. "It's for you, Cap," John gave his captain a cryptic look that carried warning but not alarm and stood to give him some room in front of the phone.

While Cap held the phone to his ear, John mouthed "*wife*" and pointing to the ceiling added "*leaking roof.*" He moved between the backs of Roy and Marco's chairs and the stove to open the rear kitchen door. The sound of the driving rain made any comment or weather announcement on John's part completely unnecessary.

The men turned their attention to their captain instead. Though he was listening intently, he had yet to enter the phone conversation. Finally, with a shoulder-shrugging sigh, their fearless leader said, "Well, hon, at least you got the boxes moved before they all got wet..." He paused with a wince. "I know, and I'm really sorry those are the ones that got ruined... I guess... Just put a tub under it for now and we'll deal with it in the morning. I love you." This seemed to be a conversation ender, because he hung up the phone and took his seat again.

"Well, I've got a date with a roof and a hammer tomorrow. Rosie is fit to be tied. There's a drip right above our bed and some boxes in the attic got wet. Important boxes. Wet boxes whose wetting I may never hear the end of."

Marco stood to start clearing the dishes. "Cap, when should I come over to help? I'm free most of tomorrow."

Hank held up his hands to halt the other four offers getting set to be launched. "Not you, Roy... you'll need to try for a nap before you're on shift at 36. Same goes for you, Chet. You'll need your beauty rest for your date with Karen. John, you'll be half way to hiking nirvana before I get a chance to check out the damage and make a trip to the hardware store.

Cap considered for a moment. "So, how about this for a plan: Marco, and Mike, if you're free - you two can meet me at my house at... let's make it 10:30 or 11:00. That'll give me a chance to size up the roof and gather supplies, and Marco, you'll be able to catch early mass if you want."

---

"Damn it, Henry, I should just leave you out here to drown," John growled as he squirmed further under the Rover to snag the dog by his collar. He backed out through the pooling rain, dragging the reluctant beast and matching him groan for moan.

"Henry, come on!" *grunt* "Since when are you afraid of a little..." *doggy-moan/human growl* "...rain? You big doofus." *whimper/arghh* "It's not like you're going to melt...you...big...wuss." John cleared the under-carriage and towed the eighty pounds of low-slung animal through puddles and still-falling rain to the back bay doors where all five of his highly entertained crew mates waited with towels and amused grins. Cap and Roy had pulled a pair of lawn chairs out of storage to enjoy the show.

"This is the crew mate in need of a bath, that captured the hound all mud-splat," Chet chanted as he tossed a towel that landed in a drape over John's head.

"Very funny guys. Here, Marco you take him," Johnny said, still half-growling. The dripping dog-wrangler dried his face off. "I'm going to go get cleaned up. The next guy who lets this dog out for his evening constitutional better remember to let him back in." Not one of the laughing men bothered with a rebuttal. "Cap, I really think we should invest in a dog door," John said over his shoulder as he squished his way towards the locker room.

---

John joined the rest of the crew in the day room, still toweling his hair. "Nice, Chet. Like I needed to get any wetter."

"The phantom can't help it if it took you all shift to discover your celebratory vacation send off. He just sets 'em: the rest is serendipitous timing and fate. Besides, he knows you'll miss all the excitement around here while you're gone."

"Whatever, Chet. You just go on pretending you're not jealous while you're hanging miles of hose and I am getting some prime climbing in."

"I just don't get you, Gage. You go out of your way to waste vacation days doing something you get paid to do at work."

"Chet, you know rappelling down the side of a building or even over a cliff is not the same as climbing rock. If you weren't such an *irritating* person, I might have asked if you wanted to come along."

"Too late, Johnny-my-boy, I've got big plans, like I told you all at dinner. Hey, Karen's got an older sister; I think she's only 36 or so. Maybe she'd go on a pity-date with you after you get back and shake the desert sand out of your shorts."

"Well, on that note, gentlemen, I'm going to hit the sack," Cap called to interrupt the seemingly endless stream of barbs flying back and forth. He rose from the couch in a stretch. "The rest of you can stay up to greet the next alarm, but I've got a leaky roof and a wet, disgruntled wife to deal with in the morning."

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Mike turned from closing his locker and tossed something in gentle underhand to John. "Here are some road tunes I recorded for you. I put several versions of Bobby Troup's *Get Your Kicks on Route 66* on there. You'll have to let me know whose rendition you like best: Troup's, Nat King Cole's, Chuck Berry's or The Rolling Stones'."

"Thanks, Mike," John said as he juggled the tape that bounced softly against his chest. He tucked the cassette into a front shirt pocket before he joined the flow of A-shift as they all headed to the back lot.

Out of habit, every eye scanned the level of cloud-threat, trying to judge the day's weather.

"John, you drive safe. You and Roy had a busy night. Stop for a nap if you need to."

"Actually, Cap, I think I'll head home for a bit. My schedule's flexible enough to fit in a few hours sleep before I head out. 'Sorry I can't help with your roof. Hopefully the rain will hold off while you are working on it."

"No problem, pal. You have a good time. With Mike and Marco's help, it shouldn't take long to set it right."

"I still don't know, Gage. That road goes through a lot of flat desert. The girls will be able to see you coming from a mile away."

"Chet, not everyone has to sneak up on a girl to get her to talk to him. And besides, like I tried to tell you last night, this trip is about catching up with an old friend, driving parts of that road while it's still there and getting in some top notch bouldering and really excellent crags... things you obviously are unable to appreciate."

"Johnny Gage, off work, on vacation and not on the prowl? I'm just not buying' it."

"Chet, why don't you go play in the freeway while I go and explore the highway, *my way*?" John shot over his shoulder before climbing into the Rover.

"Roy, I'll try calling you at work Thursday night to let you know how climbing went," he called before pulling the door closed.

---

John stopped in Needles for a late lunch, to get gas and to flirt. He'd planned on buying a post card but instead he got a fellow patron to snap a Polaroid of him and two very comely waitresses under the "Hungry Bear" sign outside the restaurant. Flapping the photo to dry it, he wrote on the back: *No 'Spike' sightings, but plenty of other interesting attractions and the terrain's not so flat from where I'm standing.*

He sweet-talked the pretty blond out of an envelope and a thirteen cent stamp, slipped the inscribed photo inside and addressed it to Chet at the station. After tipping the gals handsomely and stashing the Land camera back in with his "for-more-serious-photography" Cannon SLR camera, he was on his way again.

John spent the balance of Sunday setting up camp north of Needles, scoping out a few trails, snapping what he hoped were frame-worthy photographs and wondering if Cap got his leaky roof fixed.

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Monday was spent exploring further north. In desert canyons and among the Joshua trees he lost himself enough to forget to wonder about who was winning the Rams/49ers game.

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On Tuesday, somewhere near Ash Fork, Arizona John became firmly set in the opinion that Bobby Troup really did *own* his most famous of songs. By Wednesday afternoon, he was checking into the Weatherford Hotel in Flagstaff, where he met up with Steve Poole. Steve and he had gone through paramedic training together and had become climbing buddies before Steve had moved to Gallup, New Mexico to be near his wife's aging parents. He was now an engineer with the fire department there.

What followed were two days of climbing bliss that John felt he could barely do justice to when he tried describing them to Roy Thursday night.

"Man, Roy, the cracks at Paradise Forks were world class, and the bouldering at Priest Draw was every bit as challenging as Steve promised. It's been perfect climbing weather." John paused to let Roy get a word in.

"Yeah, well that's good; at least that half-shift was a quiet one. Oh, a small change of plans: I'm going to spend an extra day in Flagstaff to meet up with some climbers Steve introduced me to at LePetite Verdon this morning." John listened for a moment.

"Yeah, it's pretty popular because it's just ten minutes outside of Flagstaff. The locals call it 'The Pit'. Steve and I did several pitches, and there are a couple more I'd like to try."

"No, he has to get back to work Saturday morning."

"Yes, I trust these climbers, but they're not guys. They're a couple of local gals, and I'm telling you Roy, not only can they *climb*, but they're a lot more fun to watch during a belay than you or Steve - no offense."

In the background John heard the tones, and his muscles tensed ready to propel him to a squad parked roughly 481 miles away.

*Squad 51, Engine 49...*

"Go, I'll talk to you when I get home on Sunday."

*...Auto-auto accident with injuries...*

"Yes, I'll be safe. You be careful too."

*...twenty-sev.*

The phone's dial tone cut off the address before Sam Lanier's voice could tell him where the squad was heading. He sighed thinking he hadn't gotten a chance to ask Roy who he was working with that shift.

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"John, damnit, I'm not going to let you waste an entire day of your vacation ferrying me home. We've already wasted most of the morning trying to get the damn thing started. I'll take the bus, and pick my truck up whenever it's fixed. It's 185 miles, *one way*." Steve turned and gave the rear wheel of his pickup a hardy clout with the heel of his boot.

"Shut up and listen to me. I'm already staying an extra 'bonus' day in Flagstaff, and I'll be back here in plenty of time to see what the booming town of Flagstaff has to offer in the way of Friday night entertainment."

"You were going to check out the South Rim today."

"I'll just do my sightseeing out your way. I expect the Grand Canyon will still be waiting some other time."

"I think I bruised my Achilles tendon."

"It's my vacation."

"There's not much to see out my way, and we won't have time to see it, or do any climbing, or even feed you properly."

"No offense to your wife's cooking, but I'd rather stop and sample what the 'Main Street of America' has to offer..." John paused to throw a look of mock-disgust at his friend's overly dramatic look of shock. "... in the way of cuisine. Get your mind out of the gutter," he said before continuing his argument. "And anyway, it'll just mean more of the 'Mother Road' for me.

"The 'Will Rogers' Highway'," Steve offered with a smile but was still shaking his head in refusal.

John held his hands up in near-surrender, before brightening. "Hey, I'll get to add Winona and Gallup to my growing list of 'kicking '66 towns', and we'll have to stop in Winslow so I can have you take a picture of me '*Standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona*,'" John sang in a key Steve hadn't ever heard before. Still, John's enthusiasm was irresistible.

He added the next line of the song correcting the pitch somewhat. "*Such a fine sight to see.*"

"*It's a girl, my Lord, in a flat-bed Ford, slowin' down to take a look at me.*"

\*\*\* They finished together - in leaning support, trying to catch their laugh-stolen breaths. "Chad" (if one could trust the label on the back of the mechanic's overalls) peered over his glasses and unamused at their antics.

"I guess he's heard the song before," John squeaked out as he managing a staggering retreat to the side of the Rover.

"Get in, you goof, before a cop stops and makes us take a sobriety test."

"Chad's probably just sore that Flagstaff didn't get an Eagle's hit song," John theorized before obeying by climbing into the driver's seat.

"I'm paying for gas and lunch," Steve informed his friend as he opened the passenger door.

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The trip was uneventful. They captured John's 'Winslow photo', and stopped for lunch in the tiny town of Jagged Rock, a blip on the map named for the pillar formation ten miles to the north.

John perked up at Steve's description of the rock. "Have you ever climbed it?"

"Sure, a couple of times but stop drooling over rocks; we don't have time to have a go at them right now. Drool over the pretty bartender instead."

John's head swiveled of its own volition. "See, I told you there'd be plenty of worthwhile sights out in your neck of the woods."

---

John called Roy from Steve's house in Gallup to let him know of his latest change in plans.

"Maybe I'll back-track a bit on Sunday and take a side trip to that crater south of Winslow. Steve tells me the Apollo astronauts trained in it." John watched as Amy, Steve's wife packed a small box with peanut butter cookies.

"Sure. I'll still call you when I get in, but don't worry if it's late Monday night. I plan on taking a few other side trips and there are a few special attractions I might want to revisit on the way back to see if they are working a shift." John gave a wink of thanks to Amy as she set the cookies next to his car keys sitting on the kitchen counter.

He huffed a small laugh at whatever Roy was saying. "Yeah? So Chet got the snap shot?"

"Well, I'll see you back on shift on Tuesday, if not before then."

"Yeah, you too. You guys enjoy your four days off and tell Joanne and the kids 'hi' for me. I'll be rooting for the Rams from wherever I am Sunday afternoon."

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Headed west, and back towards Flagstaff, John was making good time even though he was paying attention to the speed limit and mostly honoring it. Steve had pointed out a few small-town speed traps on their way east to Gallop and John didn't want to deal with the hassle of an out-of-state speeding ticket. The newer section of divided highway narrowed back to two lanes just east of Jagged Rock and he slowed to compensate.

Something was going on up ahead and John slowed further. A white delivery truck was sitting with its back tires on the pavement, facing west. Its crushed left front fender dangled off the road's edge; its rear jutted out into the east bound lane.

The setting sun was in John's eyes as he pulled onto the shoulder to his right. He put the Rover in park a few car lengths beyond where the disabled vehicle rested across the highway. It was supposed to drop below forty degrees in Flagstaff before morning, but the elevation was 2000 feet lower here and John estimated the temperature to still be in the low fifties as he pulled his jacket on and grabbed one of his flashlights to shove in a pocket. He reached across his driver's seat to turn the hazard lights on before crossing the road to investigate.

The driver wasn't in the cab; no one was. He reached to remove the keys and tossed them onto the bench seat. He scanned the highway stretching west before him and then rotated to face the area on his left. The shoulder of the east bound lane dropped in a steep slope before flattening six feet below the road bed. Watching for signs of the truck's occupants, John continued to turn until he saw another vehicle lying just to the right of the highway as he faced east. The white Pinto looked as if it had rolled as it continued to travel for seventy feet from where he stood by the truck. The car had come to rest on its driver's side with its hood facing the highway; the lower edge of its roof just kissed the base of the slope.

John bounced on his toes as he sized up the accident scene. Still keeping a searching eye out for its driver, he rounded the front of the truck and noted the smell of gas but had no Chet or Marco standing by ready to mitigate that situation with an inch-and-a-half. He walked backwards as he started across the highway to the Rover and bent to take a peek under what turned out to be a Wonder Bread/Hostess delivery truck.

The last of the day's light was trading places with the grey before full dark.

He grabbed flares from under the Rover's front seat as well as the blanket and first aid kit. John heartily wished for a Halligan but had to settle for the small hatchet from his camping gear. He snagged his leather belaying gloves to shove in a pocket and then re-crossed the road, arranging the lit flares in a glowing trail to the truck and then beyond as he headed back down the highway to the Pinto.

The controlled journey down to where the car lay was a short one, accomplished in a standing slide. He held his arm outstretched, hatchet brushing the slope to balance his descent through a mini avalanche of gravel. John flicked the flashlight on and began to sweep the area around him as he approached the car.

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Someone, a man of average build, was standing at the front of the vehicle, facing its undercarriage. John emptied his arms and stepped into an area that he normally would avoid to snag the man's arm and tow him to a safer spot.

"Help me! There are people in there. It's gonna blow!"

"Hold on, now," John began in a steady, reassuring voice. He kept a firm grip on the forty- something-ish man in case he tried something heroic but unauthorized. There was, it seemed, a vacant incident commander's position and since John was being forced to step into those boots, he was also going to claim the right to make any further decisions regarding this accident scene - at least until other, qualified aid arrived. He positioned the flashlight to get a look at the man's face. There was blood tracing a trail from a receding hairline.

Triage began.

"Sir, were you in this car or in the truck? Can you tell me your name?"

"It's Paul; I was driving the truck... I, ah, work a route out of Phoenix."

"Here, let's sit you down. Do you hurt anywhere besides your head?" John asked as he tried to guide the man to a sitting position."

"No, just my head. I'm telling you, we've got to get these people out of there!" Paul made another move toward the vehicle.

"No, now listen, Paul. My name's John Gage, I'm a fireman/paramedic with Los Angeles County. If the car didn't go up in flames when it rolled, we probably can take some time to get the occupants out in a way that won't hurt them anymore than they already are." Paul pulled away from John's searching fingers, but even with that abbreviated exam, John could tell the bleeding had already stopped and that the laceration didn't seem all that deep. He advanced on the retreating accident victim. "Come on, now. I need you to hold still a sec, so I can take a look at your head..."

Paul, both hands raised, dodged another attempt to touch him. John gave up for the time being, not having the time to play tag with one determined-not-to-be-touched victim while other, possibly critically injured patients waited. As he turned toward the Pinto, John gathered a pair of rocks roughly the size of shoe boxes. He juggled them and the flashlight and took a step toward the car before turning back to repeat, "Were you the only person in the truck?" The man had moved to join him. "Stay here while I check this out. Paul, *were you the only one in that truck?*"

John caught his balance as the gravel shifted under his left boot.

"Yeah," the man retreated with the chattering shift of sharp edged rock.

John's firm command of "Wait. There. I want to see how steady it is...maybe chock it to keep it from..." was interrupted by Paul's answering argument.

"I saw someone moving in there. I bet between us, we could tip it back off its side..."

John tried to reign in his disbelief at the man's suggestion that they purposefully cause the very thing he was taking the time to prevent. He closed his eyes for a split moment to face the mental image of the car slamming back down onto all four wheels and the accompanying tossing about of the vehicle's occupants that would ensue. "Just stay put while I place these chocks. We can't move the car without risking hurting whoever's inside." He was wedging the rocks while trespassing in what he considered "no-man's land", facing the upright undercarriage of the car. He grabbed several more large rocks and shoved them firmly in place for what he hoped was extra insurance.

"Alright, *Mr. Fireman*, it's all on you, then. They die and it won't be my fault."

John didn't flinch at this comment; it was simply a paraphrasing of the responsibility he had already shouldered. "Just stay put for a bit," he told the man who now seemed willing to stand back.

Carrying the hatchet and pulling on his gloves, John approached the Pinto's front end to stand between the vehicle's now-vertical hood and the slope from the road. He chopped around the front windshield's frame and peeled the safety glass back. This process went smoother than his worst nightmare, but was no cake walk and took longer than he could have wished. *If I was going to start making wishes, I'd start with one for better lighting. No, I'd wish for any one of the guys back home...* He forced his thoughts away from *that* train and repositioned several more handy rocks to brace the uphill side of the car.

"Hey, since you're the medic, why don't I take your rig and go for help? Somebody's going to have to, and you need to stay here and help them," Paul called from where he stood. For some reason, this second suggestion ranked only slightly lower than the first on the scale of negative reactions pinging around in

John's brain. John chose to ignore it and gave the car's frame an experimental tug. After leaning into it slightly, he was satisfied that his shoring job had as good a chance of holding as any he had time and resources to create. He dropped to his knees and under the glare of his flashlight got his first clear look at the interior of the Pinto.

The man lying against the open driver's side window was dead. Obviously and irreversibly beyond any aid any human, anywhere could offer him.

A woman was draped over his body, facing upward, her legs disappearing under the dash.

With a gloved, sweeping hand he dislodged what he could of the remaining fragments of glass that still rimmed the front windshield opening. Removing his gloves and stowing them back in a jacket pocket, he propped the flash light at the best angle he could manage.

"Paul, could you hold the light while I get a look at her?"

"Hey, somebody's coming," Paul announced from where he stood. Other than delivering that bit of welcome news, Paul seemed to have signed himself off of the case.

John was going to have to trust the man on that one, because he himself was in no position to check. He leaned to reach for a carotid pulse. *Got it.* He put it at near ninety, and a little on the weak side. John ran his fingers lightly behind the back of her neck and held C-spine with one hand as he squirmed further into the car to check the vertebrae down her back. "Paul," he called, "I could really use a hand. Could you bring the first aid kit?"

John was more than a little interested in the possibility of someone who could go for help. He'd been dreading the looming decision of whether or not to let Paul go in the Rover; there was just something hinky about the man. He held his breath hoping whoever was driving by during "dinner hour" would stop as he brought his bare hand up to hold pressure on the jagged head wound that was bleeding enough to drip.

Two people came scrambling down the slope, and John was not only relieved to hear them, but grateful they chose to descend several yards further down the road from where the Pinto lay. Their flashlights were what made it possible for him to track their progress through the moonless night.

"Hey man, can we help?" One of them asked as they approached. *Teenage boy,* John thought.

Paul met them before they reached the car.

"Yeah, we've got an injured woman here. She's hurt bad. Can I borrow your car to go get help?" Paul asked.

From inside the car, John's head snapped up. "Hold on guys," he called. "I could really use a hand over here." John wasn't lying, he was really hampered by having to assess this victim and maneuver his flashlight at the same time. But more than longing for an extra pair of hands, when someone did finally go for help, he wanted to be able to trust that that person would follow through. This was a lonely stretch of the highway and he was afraid it might be awhile before another car happened along.

John twisted his head over his shoulder sighting across his body to where he could feel as much as see someone kneel behind his protruding lower half. Another form joined the first. "Okay, guys. Here's the deal," John said in a low voice. "I need someone to go for help and I need it to be one of the two of you because Paul, the man you just talked to, has a head injury and shouldn't drive." John thought that was clear enough without vilifying the man, who, after all *did* have a head laceration. "I need the other one to stay and lend a hand if you can."

"It'll have to be Tony that goes; I won't get my driver's license 'til next month."

"Okay, Tony. You're up. Get to the nearest phone and dial the operator. Tell her there's a two vehicle accident a couple of miles east of town. One rollover, a fatality and two other victims, one of them seriously injured. Hurry, but drive safely. Go now." John felt the gravel under his right hip shift a bit as one of the boys stood and started to scramble up the slope.

"So, my name's Johnny. What's yours?" John was twisting at an unlikely angle to keep pressure on a head wound, maintain C-spine precautions and continue an assessment in the dark.

"Jake," the boy answered. John actually heard the gulping swallow the boy took before he asked, "What do you need me to do?"

"Jake, I want you to hold your flashlight so I can see this head wound. Can you bring that first aid kit closer? Yeah, that's good." John dug one-handed in the kit for a dressing and applied it with his left hand as he moved his right over the victim's body. *Left clavicle, shoulder... one, two, three ribs.* His hand stopped when it encounter the wet, torn fabric covering her left leg. "Jake, I'm going to need you to hold her head...here, like this. And Jake," John paused to make sure he had the teenager's full attention. "If this car moves at all while you're holding this, I want *you* to move back and up the hill. Up and away from the car. You got that?" John saw that he needn't have worried about having the boy's undivided attention.

Two eyes glinted in the extended illumination outside of the main beam of the flashlight, each stoically locked on the paramedic's face. Jake gave a silent jerk of his chin which John would accept as an affirmative response. It didn't take a rocket scientist to calculate from what, or whom, Jake was averting his gaze. "You're doing great, pal." In a carefully modulated, conversational voice John said, "She's losing a lot of blood." *Too much blood and not the strongest of pulses.* He arched to free his belt and with some more contortions on his part, got it wrapped around her thigh.

She moaned and he moved back to her head. "Hey there, try not to move. I'm John, my pal Jake here is going to be holding your head while I see about getting your legs free. Hang on, okay?" John shortly discovered she had no choice in that matter, seeing as how her legs were stuck tight. *Damnit.* John sighed in frustration, achingly aware of the gravity of her situation. Without access to the tools of his trade, she was going to be waiting for an EMS response greater than that of one off-duty paramedic and his newly deputized, scared-spitless trainee before she saw the exterior of her car again. He moved back up, checking the tourniquet on the way. Her eyes were open. "Hi there, can you tell me your name?"

"Vickie" was the weak response.

"Okay, Vickie, help is on the way. "Jake, you doing alright holding that? See if you can keep her talking, but keep her *calm.*" John reached for the flashlight, even as he realized he was asking a lot of a fifteen year old kid. He took a moment to sweep the back seat and the interior of the car with the beam and a searching gaze.

Jake's face was set in grim lines of stress, but he gave another quick nod of understanding. "So, ah, Vickie, you live around Jagged Rock?"

John patted the boy on the shoulder as he slid past him between the car and the slope. "Jake, you make sure you remember what I said. If this car even hints that it's going to move, *you move.* I think that it's pretty stable, but make sure you stay on this uphill side at all times. Call if anything changes. I'm gonna go grab a blanket and check on old Paul."

Just before he reached the spot where he'd left the blanket, an anguished wail came from the interior of the Pinto. John stooped to snag the blanket before approaching the truck driver who was pacing in a small circle a few feet away. "How's it going, there, Paul? Are you sure you don't want to sit down?"

"No, I 'don't want to sit down'. I'm freezing my ass off. It's gettin' cold out here."

Paul was right on that score, John judged the temperature had dropped into the forties.

He whirled at the second scream. He could hear Vickie's cries over Jake's pleas that she try to hold still. "Paul, just stay close, okay?" John nurtured no illusions that this man was at all inclined to obey him.

There was no calming the trapped woman. John was fairly certain she hadn't realized that she was lying across a body. He sure as hell wasn't going to quiz her on who that person might be to her. There was also no need to play twenty questions as to whether she had a daughter and what that daughter's name might be.

"Tammy Sue? Is she alright? Where is she?"

John was maneuvering past Jake and crawling further in through the windshield before she finished her last question.

"You've got to get my baby! Tammy Sue! She was asleep in the back seat!" The woman was not going anywhere, but it was all the teenager could do to keep her from trying.

"Vickie, hold still now and I'll check again." John braced an arm to support his weight as he contorted to keep from jarring or hurting the patient he was stretching over to inspect the interior of the car more closely. "She's not in this car," he called as he twisted and turned and arched back out until he could face the trapped woman again.

"Vickie?" John's hand reached for a carotid because his patient didn't respond.

He should stay with her. This victim in front of him *needed* him to stay with her. Hell, even Paul should have been even assessed and on his way to a hospital by now. In spite of the truck driver's initial stubbornness, John was fairly certain he could have gotten him to submit to an exam. It was the rare victim that, given enough time, John couldn't convince to allow him to care for them, especially if he felt they really needed treatment. Both victims' "platinum ten minutes", from the time "aid" arrived on scene to the time they were packaged, loaded, and an ambulance's wheels rolled, had long expired. He should, he should...he made a deal with himself and an unconscious mother. If she would just hold on, he would look for Tammy Sue.

He set out to search for a child, realizing that a "baby" in mom vernacular - particularly frantic-motherese - could describe a newborn right up to, and past the teen years.

He was very, very sure that this was not covered in Triage 101, not in the orange EMS manual and not in the pristine, controlled environment of paramedic school. He'd been a paramedic for years now, but he'd never gotten to the point of being able to take in stride the occasional, bitter necessity of choosing between patients.

And yet he swept his flashlight and took that stride out into the pitch black of night stretched to infinity with no illuminative help from nonexistent lamps along this godforsaken stretch of highway. Shit, but this was one lonely, unpopulated corner of the universe. *This is the crew mate on vacation alone, that left one victim to die and another to roam.*

John shook his head wishing Chet hadn't started the game of expanding C-shift's wallpapered prose. He shook it again to clear his mind's whispered offering and continued his search at the rear of the Pinto. "Tammy Sue!" he called as he angled his way up the slope. He made a quick, calculated guess at the car's probable path as it left the highway.

He swept the slope and the road and its shoulder, looking for, dreading to find a small body. *How far from a moving, rolling vehicle - 50 feet? More?* He slid back down the slope, and turned to work his way back towards the car. "Tammy Sue?" In the illumination of his sweeping flashlight beam, he located a Kleenex box, a magazine... and left them in place. A Pinocchio coloring book that lay open with finished art work narrowed the age of the child he was searching for to somewhere between "old enough to hold a crayon" and "too young to be at all concerned about staying within the lines". Something already coiling in his gut tightened just a bit more at the building composite image of the person he was searching for.

The beam of his flashlight skittered across a body of water and the tension on that spring increased. *A lake? Reservoir?* The glint off to his right was maybe two hundred feet from the highway. *Could the girl have been thrown that distance?* No, but any toddler worth their salt and unharmed - which is what he/they all were praying for - could motate that far - downhill and unencumbered by supervision.

"Tammy Sue?"

John continued to sweep the area with his flashlight, and...

... stepped unevenly. He started to fall, but with a twist, he managed to turn a headlong plunge into a bounce and a skid. He ended his short slide abruptly, mostly standing, in knee-deep water.

Searching hands brushed the cement side of what John guessed must be an irrigation or drainage ditch. He swallowed the shout of frustration, the building *anger* of discovering yet another hazard for the young child. He *hated* that this ditch defined the boundary as to how far they would be searching as he played the flashlight up and down the channeled, dark surface. John found himself pausing to listen for splashing, even knowing that if the child was in the ditch, she was most likely under that glassy surface and that the chances of him finding her at all, let alone in time, were crushingly against him. Still, he paced and slosed the length of the ditch one hundred feet in each direction from where the car now

rested; an arbitrary distance at best, and not enough, not enough. A sound escaped from somewhere deep in his chest.

He was panting more from frustration and building despair than from the exertion of climbing out of the water. He had to force himself to move deliberately as he began a grid search of the area below the car. He could be all but stepping on her in the dark and miss her just as thoroughly as if she had toddled her way into the irrigation ditch. With a deep breath, he paused for a second to redirect his thoughts.

It was past time to check on Vicky again. He turned, and his beam fell on a dark mound fifteen feet behind the car. Some not-mentioned-in-the-paramedic-texts organ lodged in his throat as he hurried towards the still form. It was a large stuffed animal, which John recognized as a well loved rabbit before he turned it over. It might have had plush fur at one time, but now lay starkly bare in the beam of his flash light, possessing weave as open as a burlap sack. He tucked it into his jacket, not pausing to visit the reasoning behind the action. He allowed another fruitless and jaw grinding sweep of the area around the rabbit's landing zone, then continued back to the car to check on Vickie. The guilt he felt at feeling relieved when he didn't have to explain to the still-unconscious mom that he had failed was matched only by that of the failure itself.

He found her where he had left her in the care of one cold, terrified teenager. Her blood pressure had dropped from a palpable femoral to a thready carotid. John almost whirled away in frustration. He forced himself to calm, to check the tourniquet and the head wound, all the while trying to gauge the status of Jake.  *Holding up? Check. Warm enough? Passably.* Haunted eyes met his in question; he answered with a silent shake of his head.

He turned to look for Paul-the-Neglected and ran smack into him before the man grabbed him roughly by a shoulder.

"I'm going to go look for that little girl myself. She's got to be somewhere close by."

"Hold on," John started; thinking all he needed was to have Paul fall in the darkness or somehow find a way to be further injured.

"No, *you* hold on. You might be ready to give up, but I'm not. That gal begged you to find her baby. Who put you in charge anyway?" The man gave John a shove before whirling off to start up the incline behind the Pinto.

"Jake, you okay to stay with her a bit longer?"

"Sure, I can keep holding her head and I'll call if I need you."

"Atta Boy," John told the teen who seemed willing to kneel where he was until hell, or his knee caps, froze solid. He suspected Jake was pulling strength from unplumbed depths, but the kid had been a godsend who hadn't wavered in the face of the gruesome situation he'd stepped into.

He moved stiffly to follow Paul, not entirely due to the stiffness of wet jeans and numb legs, nor due to the bruise he envisioned blooming over his left hip from his trip over the cement lip of that ditch, but from the cold weariness of knowing he was failing on not one, but on at least two fronts of this battlefield.

The woman in the car was slipping further into shock, the teen in his charge was getting cold, John himself was shivering, the child was still missing, and he had no idea where Paul had taken himself off to. *Make that all fronts. This is the link that failed them all: parents and toddler, Jake and Paul.*

He was grateful beyond measure when he heard sirens before he reached the shoulder of the road.

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It took John and the members of the Jagged Rock Volunteer Fire Department just over fifteen minutes to extricate Vicky. They had her loaded into the back of the ambulance and almost ready to roll, Jake was getting warm in the back of a patrol car, and several members of the sheriff's department and the balance of the rescue response were scouring the area for both Tammy Sue and Paul, who had gone missing *again*.

The plan was for John to ride along with the EMT as an extra set of hands; he would worry about the Rover later. He scanned the accident scene one last time, rounding the front of the ambulance parked behind the delivery truck. He was more than a little concerned that they hadn't located Paul. John was still trying to decide if the man was just a garden variety asshole, a criminal-on-the-run as he suspected or an atypical presentation of a head injury. That last possibility worried him a bit, not that he'd had the time or resources to properly woo, examine and treat an unwilling, uncooperative patient.

Paul himself cleared the matter up some when the rear doors of the delivery truck flew open, thwacking John on the back of his head. The man landed squarely on top of John, climbed over the downed paramedic and scrambled to his feet. This was when John felt his knee twist at a painful angle.

It all became even a little clearer when Paul took off at a dead run cross-country, getting a jump on the law enforcement officers present and taking an early lead.

From John's perspective, it became *much* clearer the moment Paul used his head as a starting block. It was, John decided as he closed his eyes against the spray of dirt and gravel, quite possible to be a criminal, a patient and an asshole, all at the same time.

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He closed his eyes in shivering exhaustion and tried to ignore the throb of a head-turned-traction-device. *How the hell did I lose the "full c-spine precautions/no c-spine precautions" debate?* John wondered from where he lay, knowing the answer was framed by his unwillingness to distract the EMTs' attention from Vickie any more than absolutely necessary with an extended argument over protocols.

He shifted within the confines of the straps, trying to get comfortable on the bench in the back of the ambulance. He tried to distract himself by hoping An-Asshole-Named-Paul was every bit as miserable as he himself was right now. If John had been in a charitable mood, he might have been satisfied with the fact that Paul had seemed less than comfortable the last time he had seen him, what with being hand-cuffed and all. He'd also looked a little more ragged around the edges than he had before his mad dash and subsequent apprehension. *Resisting arrest could do that - muss up even the most fastidious of folks.*

John was working on supposition here, having no personal experience with that genre of hairstylist. Said stylist being the "officer" that had done the actual apprehending. Too bad Ajax was too well-trained to eat a prisoner.

The only hint of fairness to the situation came when John was being loaded into the back of the ambulance. Jake had leaned in to say goodbye and to give him an update on Paul. It seemed that the truck driver was more than a little allergic to the beast still guarding him. Not only was he sporting red, swollen eyes, but every few minutes he sneezed volcanically three times in succession. The vigilant dog's hackles rose with each eruption.

As far as John was concerned An-Asshole-Named-Paul deserved to be uncomfortable. Of the many and varied ways that the man had earned this final "in-the-mind-of-Gage" moniker, the most damning was that he had compromised a patient's care.

John had been demoted from "riding along as an unofficial extra set of hands", to "a second patient needing transport." This meant a delay while one of the two EMTs did a quick assessment and got him strapped to a second backboard. He hoped the dog's prisoner sneezed until his sinuses bled. Not only did John's head hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, but the EMT in the back of the ambulance was now dividing his attention between two patients.

John shifted again and tried not to draw attention away from Vickie. *At least the back of the ambulance was heated.*

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When eight o'clock rolled by without a call from John, Steve himself started making calls. He reached Roy at home, who wasted no time in getting hold of Captain Stanley. Between the department resources at their disposal in both Carson and Gallup, it had not taken long to gather the bare details of the accident. By nine o'clock they knew, at least, that John had not been injured or even involved in the original accident, but had somehow managed to *become* injured at the scene and was being transported to Flagstaff. Plans were forming immediately as to who else would be headed for John's city of seven wonders. Sometime after the rest of A-shift was brought up to speed, but before all five firemen decided to head out, they got word that John's injuries were limited to a minor concussion, a twisted knee and a bruised hip. The response level was ratcheted down several notches and Cap managed to convince Mike, Marco and Chet that he and Roy could handle getting both friend and Rover home after an expected discharge on Sunday. They left an agitated, agitating group of concerned co-workers in Carson at the mid-October pre-predawn hour of 0430. They had all given up trying for a full night of sleep.

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Early Saturday afternoon, John woke to a neuro check, a captain and a best friend. To both a captain and best friend's discerning eyes, the man lying before them was still several percentage points shy of a passing grade. They exchanged glances, and waited to see if he would immediately slide back to sleep as he had an hour ago, or if this time some level of lucidity would take hold for a bit.

"Vickie Hanie, how is she? I lost track of her after we reached the hospital."

Roy turned the volume on the television down. "She was stabilized last night and then transported by fixed wing to Phoenix. Her final tally is a concussion, a broken left shoulder and collarbone, three broken ribs, a broken ankle and the deeply lacerated thigh. Last word we had, she'd just come out of surgery. The jury's still out on whether she'll keep the leg."

As far as juries went, there was another one also still in session as to whether or not a certain paramedic would make his predicted "pull date" of Sunday morning.

"Paul Sullivan had a shorter trip last night than you and Vickie. He came away with a minor head laceration and a court date. He's cooling his heels in the county jail back in Holbrook." Cap picked up the baton of bringing Johnny up to speed on the chaotic aftermath of last night's adventure in the face of what, the doctor here assured his patient's friends, were normal responses of a body dealing from not only the slight concussion, but also exhaustion and the lingering effects of "nearly freezing its ass off in a ditch on the other side of nowhere." Cap had almost caused Roy to snort in the presence of this doc when Hank had added a barely audible aside of "Flagstaff serving as the actual 'nowhere' in point of reference."

'What'd they charge him with?' John shifted and forced his eyes to remain open.

"Well, it seems his truck had been mislabeled. A more accurate bill of lading would have included the bricks of cocaine tucked between the Ding Dongs and Twinkies. I guess his boss is suitably appalled," Hank supplied.

John didn't miss the look that passed between his two incident reporters and he consciously steeled himself.

Roy took a deep breath, met his partner's eyes and plowed ahead. "John, the coroner stated in his initial report that Mr. Hanie died instantly of a massive head injury."

John took this news calmly, since he had seen the mechanism of injury first hand. He hadn't been the only one. "Jake, the teenager who help out at the scene... have you heard how he's handling it all?"

Roy continued, with an eye to his partner's reactions. His friend was alternating between subjecting the call-bell cord to a fidgety-twisting and a rapid swing of his right foot beneath the hospital-grade blanket. Balancing the otherwise frenetic show were John's increasingly less-than-successful efforts to keep his eyes open. Roy would have smiled at the effect, except for his partner's distress. "He called this morning to check on you, 'said he'd try again later." Roy waited a second, wondering if John was going lose his battle to stay awake before he could to put voice to the looming elephant of a question hanging in the air.

Cap placed a hand on his junior paramedic's shoulder and with a small smile took up the report again. "John, she's fine..." Hank noted that he had the man's full attention; the metal bedrail that had picked up the frequency of John's foot-swing stilled. "They finally got hold of the family earlier this morning. Tammy Sue was never even in that car last night. She'd been safely tucked in bed the whole time. Her aunt was watching her for the weekend here in Flagstaff." Roy and Hank waited for John to digest this unexpected bit of news.

Johnny started to ask something, and then reconsidered. He closed his briefly hanging mouth, thought for a moment and tried again only to hesitate once more. Finally, trusting that his friends would understand, he simply matched Cap's smile with a crooked one of his own, closed his eyes on a sigh and drifted back to sleep.

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He woke again at the end of the third quarter of the LA/Chicago game. "Aw, man, you guys are missing the game!"

"No we're not, we lucked out. It's being sent in living color for our viewing entertainment by KPHO, the CBS affiliate out of Phoenix," Roy said from his perch in the deep window sill to the left of John's hospital bed. "We get to watch it in the climate controlled comfort of your hospital room with 'room service' no less." Roy raised a cup of kindly-nurse-supplied coffee in demonstration. "We were promised ice-cream cups if the Rams win."

Right on cue, a nurse popped in to check on her patient. Cap stood and moved to the foot of the bed to give her better access. "It's good to see you awake, Mr. Gage," she said with a warm smile. She took his wrist for a pulse, so John waited for a moment before turning on the charm.

When she set his wrist down, the dance began, even though she was clearly in her mid-to-late forties and wearing a wedding ring. Roy and Cap each raised their estimation of John's condition a few points. It seemed their boy might indeed rally; he'd naturally fallen into his easy way with women, especially those not of his generation.

By the time she had finished vitals and plumped his pillow, he had wrangled a milkshake and a pair of Tylenol 3's in lieu of the injectable pain med she first offered. The entire population of the room realized what John was shooting for, knowing full well that an I.V.'d paramedic was a hospitalized paramedic.

The three settled in to watch the end of the game and enjoyed ice cream and milkshake and pain pills in celebration.

Johnny's nurse shoed Cap and Roy out and the two went in search of an early dinner at the Crown Railroad Cafe further east on Route 66 at John's envious recommendation. His Gage charm had failed to cage him an upgrade in hospital cuisine from "soft diet". They were staying at a little motel nestled in the pines just off the highway. Roy had high hopes that this meant they wouldn't be sharing a room with any of the ghosts that John seemed to consider such an added value at the Weatherford.

Before he followed their captain out into the hallway, Roy paused in the doorway. "Don't let your pain get away from you, Junior. Playing catch-up won't do anything but hurt and set you back further than if you'd stayed on top of it."

"I know that, go away and enjoy your dinner. I'm sure I'll be having something perfectly lovely." John changed his disgruntled tone to something softer. "Stop worrying. I'll see you in the morning." Roy thought John was resigned to his current dietary restrictions, until his partner called from his bed, "Hey, Roy, bring me some real breakfast if you think of it."

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John finally felt as if he was beginning to thaw sometime after his second cup of coffee Sunday morning, especially after Saturday's stood-up climbing buddies dropped by for a brief visit. Roy and Cap showed up and the ladies relinquished their seats and made their goodbyes.

"Well, I'm off guys," Cap announced as he unfolded his frame from the chair at John's bedside. "You two take it slow. I should be getting home around about dinner time. I'll leave a message at the hotel in Needles you're staying at when I get in. We'll get the vehicles shuffled back around before John's cleared to drive and come back to work."

"Wait, wait. You mean I have to get cleared to return to work? This wasn't an on-the-job injury, and I shouldn't need to use enough sick time to need a doctor's release."

Hank watched the belligerent arguments brew and foment as his junior paramedic started to wind up. He waited for a break in the sputtering. "Why yes, John, that is exactly what I mean. A hospital admission, a knee that bears watching and my say-so all add up to Bracket or Early, or Morton if you prefer, needing to be involved. Rank and privilege, John; rank and privilege."

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Steve dropped by for a visit and to deliver the keys to the Rover, which Johnny had left with the County Sheriff so it could be moved off the highway. He was picking up his truck from their buddy Chad anyway, so the trip from Gallup had already been in the works. This way, Amy just dropped her husband off in Holbrook, turned around and returned home while Steve continued on to Flagstaff in the Rover.

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John and Roy headed slowly toward the small conference room at the end of the hall.

"Hold up, Roy. I need to lengthen these things; they're about two notches too short."

Roy waited patiently while John took several minutes to adjust the crutches. Crutches that, in his estimation, ended up the same exact length they'd been before Johnny stopped to fiddle with them.

"It'll be okay, John. They just want to thank you before they drive down to Phoenix to be with Mrs. Hanie."

"Yeah, I rescued a thread-bare bunny rabbit," John muttered, indicating the stuffed animal tucked under his right arm.

"Look, I mean it. I talked to them earlier this morning. Her parents drove down yesterday. It's just the aunt, her husband and little Tammy Sue." They realize what you managed to do under less-than-ideal circumstances. You saved a life the other night, John. Not the one beyond help, and not one that didn't need saving, but Vickie is alive today because you were there.

From down the corridor a squeal of delight was followed by the soft patter of small shoes.

John pivoted on a crutch just as someone reached him, arms raised toward a ratty, floppy bunny sporting a bright new ribbon.

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Half an hour later John was signing his discharge papers.

"Come on, Junior, time to bust you out of here. I'm sorry you didn't get all the climbing in you wanted, but we should have time to take a peek at the Grand Canyon caverns. I have it on good authority that they are over 200 feet deep. With the help of their handy elevator, your knee should be able to hold up just fine, and it'll be a chance to get out and stretch for a bit."

Roy was pacing his stride to keep Johnny from swinging down the hall at the reckless speed that reflected his undisguised opinion of being a patient in a hospital.

John stopped and turned to wait for his slower-than-erosion partner. "Hey, 'think we could have dinner at the Hungry Bear in Needles? It's got a neat little gift shop where we can get souvenirs for your kids."

John had to turn back a second time when his partner came to a full stop, giving him a knowing look. "What? Can I help it if they make a tasty bowl of chowder?" John's hand was on his chest in an earnest gesture, but his facial features broke rank. "The service is exemplary, and Roy, you won't believe the scenery you can find out on the desert if you know where to look."

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*This? Well, this is a link who can stand on his own,*

*But prefers to be standing with five links at home.*

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\*Roy called that one right. In 1983, Cynthia (Fralick) Barbee became LA County Fire Department's first female recruit. She later became a paramedic and by the time she retired as a captain 27 years later, there were 33 female firefighters on the force. Little Daphne could have grown up to be one of these women. Whether she did or not, I bet her brothers had their work cut out for them trying to keep up with her.

\*\*Chet was also having a moment of clairvoyance. Originally, *optimistically* slated to be finished in 1972, the final segments of Interstate 40 weren't laid until 1984.

\*\*\*From *Take It Easy*, off The Eagles' 1972 Debut Album, written by Jackson Browne and Glen Frey

A/N: C-shift's opening parody is one of an old English nursery rhyme, *The House that Jack Built*, perhaps first published in *Nurse Truelove's New-Year's-Gift or the Book of Books for Children* in London in 1755.

The song *Get Your Kicks on Route 66* turned 66 years old in 2012 during the writing of this story. (Now, how cool is *that*?) Nat King Cole recorded it first in 1946. Bobby Troup's cover of his own song stands solidly amongst those of the many artists who later recorded it. Chuck Berry, the Rolling Stones, and more recently, John Mayer... yeah, some were cool and iconic and all, but Johnny's right, Bobby Troup *owned* it.

P.S. Five rug rats this go 'round... a veritable population explosion.