Cold Comfort

by Icecat62

Summary

An accident changes the lives of the Station 51 family.

Notes

Originally posted on AllEFanFic and Johnny's Green Pen - 2002.

He didn't know how he got there. One minute he was making his way through a room and the next, he was lying in a pool of ice-cold water, pinned amidst a pile of debris.

A beam lay across his chest making it virtually impossible to move. His entire body was numbed by the cold causing him to shiver uncontrollably.

Prying an arm away from his body, he pulled his facemask back, calling out for help. "Roy! Chet!"

His breathing was labored as the pressure on his chest increased. The pain was quickly replaced by fear as he turned his head to take in his surroundings.

The water that he lay in was rising. In a matter of minutes it would cover him completely. He would drown. He called out again. "Roy! Anyone! Can you hear me?!"

He thought he heard something. A faint voice in the distance reached him. By the sound of it, the
voice was coming from the floor above where he had been only a few short minutes ago.

"Johnny?"

Trying to remain calm, Gage called out again, straining to keep his head above the rising water. "Roy, I'm down here!"

The voice drew closer. "Johnny?!"

A light flashed down on him. This time the voice that called to him was filled with relief. "Chet, Marco! I found him! We have to go down one floor!"

Roy looked down at his partner, trying to keep the panic from his voice. "Hold on Johnny, we'll be right down."

His teeth chattered as he spoke, his voice tinged with playful sarcasm. "I'm not...going anywhere, Roy." He took a shuddering breath. "Can you hurry up though...it's gettin'...kinda' cramped in here."

Roy nodded yes and gave Gage a weak smile before he and the beam of light disappeared.

He listened to the sounds of footsteps moving away. The fear inside of him was now turning to terror as the water deepened around him.

"Come on Roy..."

Then it happened. Without warning the beam shifted, pressing him down and the debris below him collapsed, plunging him under the water.

Gage struggled wildly trying to bring his head above the liquid. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't reach the surface only inches from his face.

Flailing about, he shoved violently at the beam with all his might, kicking his legs against the debris beneath him. His lungs burned, screaming for oxygen.

He knew if he breathed in he would die, but he couldn't stop it, the urge was too strong. His gasped and his lungs drew in the water. Choking on the liquid, he body tried to expel it, but there was nothing but water to breathe in or out.

A part of his brain remembered what he had been taught about drowning victims as he choked and gagged...each movement slowed. He felt sharp stabbing pains in his lungs and eyes; his entire body protested everything that was happening to him.

His struggles lessened as the cold numbed him further and he slowly succumbed to the lack of oxygen.

He never heard the sounds of footsteps splashing toward him. He couldn't call out to them to let them know where he was.

His body twitched one last time as the hand that clenched on the beam loosened and slid silently back into the water, his eyes staring upward, not seeing a thing.

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They rushed through the building trying to locate the stairs that would take them down one floor. Marco was the first to see the doorway and he ran toward it with Chet and Roy closely behind.
When they reached the bottom of the stairwell, Marco's voice was panicked. "The door's jammed, it won't open."

He motioned for Chet and Roy to help him. They pushed at the door and when it finally gave way, water rushed into the stairwell.

Roy cursed under his breath, knowing that Gage only had a few minutes before he would be submerged. They had to find him before the water got any higher.

He moved past Marco and Chet. "He's this way, come on."

They sloshed their way through, careful to not trip or fall. Roy scanned the area ten yards in front of him. He was sure that was where he had seen Gage. Glancing upward, he saw the hole where the floor had given way.

His heart beat wildly as he looked back toward the ground. There was the beam that Gage had been pinned under. It must have shifted and that meant...

Chet had come to the same conclusion that he had. "Oh my God...Roy..."

They went as fast as they could through the still deepening water. Roy could see his friend beneath the surface. A shiver went down his spine as he locked eyes with him. Lifeless eyes that stared blindly back at him through the murky liquid.

Time was a factor now and they couldn't waste it checking the stability of the beam or anything else for that matter. Gage was already technically dead and if they didn't get him out of there, he would stay that way. Roy wasn't about to let death win this battle. "Let's get this beam off of him."

With Chet and Marco working together, they were able to lift the beam. Roy reached down and grabbed the collar of Gage's turnout. As he tried to pull him up, something held fast.

Groping around Gage's shoulders and head, Roy found the reason for him not being able to pull his body free. The facemask of the SCBA was snagged on a piece of debris.

Working it free, he hauled Gage's lifeless body up and staggered under the waterlogged weight. Why did this happen? What in the hell was he supposed to do now? Take him to the stairwell and wait for the others?

Pushing the panic down, he shut off his emotions. He had to be a paramedic now, not a friend.

"Marco, Chet..." He looked frantically around for any surface above the water. He thanked God as he spied a worktable against the wall to their left. "...help me get him over there."

Carrying Gage's limp form, they removed his SCBA and placed him on his back. Roy could see his own fear mirrored in the faces of the two men standing beside him.

"Marco, contact Cap...have them meet us by the stairwell where we came in. Bring a stokes and the drug box. Get an open line to Rampart for me."

"Okay." Taking a quick look at Gage's bluish face, Marco said a prayer as he began talking to Cap over the HT as he made his way back to the stairwell. He knew Gage was dead, but he prayed to God that Roy would be able to bring him back. He had seen the two paramedics do it for others...why not for one of their own?

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With shaking hands, Roy began unbuckling Gage's turnout. He couldn't help taking quick looks at his friend's face. The bluish skin, the half opened eyes. He took a deep breath as he practically ripped open the buttoned work shirt. He wasn't dead...he couldn't be. He wouldn't let it happen.

He stared at his hands, cursing under his breath. He hadn't checked for a heartbeat and had almost started chest compressions.

Pressing his fingers to Gage's neck, he found a faint heartbeat. One part of him was shocked while the medical part of him was not. This wasn't unusual in a drowning victim. It meant the chance of revival was good.

As he began mouth to mouth, his mind ran over everything he had been taught about drowning victims. Get them breathing again as soon as possible...without oxygen there would be brain damage. With each breath into Gage's lungs, he tried to calculate how long it had taken them to get from the floor above and down to where they were now.

He pulled back as Gage's lifeless figure suddenly jerked away from him. He felt his body go weak in elation as his friend began coughing violently. He gave Chet a quick smile.

Chet tried to smile back at him, but it wavered. "Roy...he's going to be okay, right?"

Leaning over Gage, Roy helped him to roll to the side. The coughing had changed to gagging. When he retched up water and phlegm, Chet flinched.

"Roy?"

"It's...trust me Chet, he'll be okay."

There was a light pinkish tinge to the phlegm, indicating there was some damage to the lungs. What level of damage would be decided once they got to Rampart.

Helping him lay back, Roy smiled reassuringly at Gage as he spoke in soothing tones. "Johnny, I need to ask you a few questions okay?"

Gage's body shivered uncontrollably. He looked in Roy's direction. Blinking slowly, he appeared disoriented. When he turned his head away to look at the wall, Chet bit his lip.

"What's wrong with him?"

Roy ignored Chet. Taking a hand, he turned Gage's head back to him, making his voice more forceful. "Johnny, can you understand me?"

This time he received a direct stare and to his surprise, had his hand batted roughly away.

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Sitting in the ER waiting room, Chet fidgeted. Twisting at a buckle on his turnout, chewing on his lower lip, picking up a magazine only to immediately throw it back down. Redbook wasn't his type of reading material. Gears and Wheels would be more his taste.

His thoughts darkened and a blanket of depression returned to weigh heavily on him. Gage liked to read Gears and Wheels. What if he couldn't read any longer? What if he was so whacked out that he'd never return to the station?

"Chet, has Dixie come out yet?"
His head snapped up to stare at Roy's concerned face. He had left the waiting room to go and call Joanne. Chet didn't even want to think how she was taking it. She loved Gage like the brother that she never had. And the kids! He thanked God, he wasn't married and had to deal with crap like that. "No...no she hasn't been back."

"Oh."

One simple word that held so much emotion. Chet could see that Roy was just as worried as he was. If he was worried, then Gage really was worse off than Roy had let on. He couldn't stop the words that came out of his mouth. "He's gonna' be a vegetable. You should've let him die."

Roy's mouth dropped open in shock and he jumped out of the chair that he had just settled in. "Don't say that Chet! I don't ever want to hear that from your mouth again, do you hear me?!"

Chet flinched at the loud outburst by the normally calm paramedic, then openly glared at him. Who was he to be telling him what to say? "Yeah I hear you, but I'm right! Have you ever seen someone who..."

His voice trailed off. He didn't want to remember, but it all came back to him in a flood of memories and emotions. The screams of terror, then the silence.

"Chet?"

Shaking his head no, Chet dropped his face in his hands. Bernie. He hadn't thought about his cousin in years, now it was all he could think of.

Him and Bernie at the lake. Them going off in the row boat, horsing around, having fun. What kid wouldn't have done what they did on such a wonderful summer day?

Rubbing his hands over his face, he leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling to avoid looking at Roy. He didn't want to answer him. Saying everything out loud would reinforce what had happened then and what was about to happen now.

"Chet...what happened?"

Looking at Roy, he frowned. "Nothing...nothing happened."

Roy gave him that look. The look he always gave Gage when he knew that the dark haired paramedic was hiding something. He might as well tell him because he wouldn't let up until he did.

"My cousin...when I was a kid, I had a cousin who drowned. We went out in a rowboat and somehow we tipped it. I was able to hold on, but Bernie...he didn't. Ya' know I can still hear him yelling for help, but the worst part was when he stopped yelling. It was stupid ya' know. Two kids who couldn't swim for shit, out in a boat, but...we weren't afraid. We had been out on the lake a million times and nothing ever happened."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well so was I. When my uncle and dad came looking for us...man my uncle went nuts. Dad pulled me into the boat and my Uncle Bobby dove into the lake and the next thing I know he's dumping Bernie in the boat. I remember watching him trying to get Bernie to breath again and he did! I was amazed that he could do something like that. I thought everything was okay."

Chet fell silent and looked down at his now interlaced fingers.
"But he wasn't okay was he, Chet?"

"No. Bernie...he wasn't normal after that. Mom use to go and help Aunt Jessie take care of him. They had to treat him like he was a baby again. Spoon feed him, change him...it was sickening Roy."

Looking at the top of Chet's curly head, Roy now understood why he was so worried. "That's not going to happen to Johnny."

"Yeah and how do you know that? You saw him; he couldn't even remember his name. Hell, he didn't even know we were there."

Roy knew he was in for a battle with Chet. The man had a tendency to latch onto what he felt was the truth, not what really was. "Chet, how long was your cousin under?"

Chet frowned. "I don't know. The boat tipped and then it seemed like forever before my dad and uncle showed up. It could've been five minutes, it could've been twenty."

"Johnny was only under for two or three minutes."

"Yeah...but it doesn't mean he's going to be okay."

"Chet, he was disoriented, that's normal for a drowning victim."

Chet sighed heavily. "Man, I hope you're right Roy. Johnny wouldn't want to be like that...he deserves better ya' know."

"Yeah, I know. Trust me, Chet, he'll be okay."

Chet sighed again and began pawing through the pile of magazines. Finding an old issue of National Geographic, he settled back in his chair to wait.

Roy sat back down and looked around the waiting room. There were a few other people sitting around in small groups. He knew their numbers would increase soon. Cap, Marco and Mike would be up. They had gone down to get some coffee. The only thing that would prevent them from staying would be if they were toned out. Cap had already called in for replacements for Roy and Johnny.

Leaning back, he prepared himself for the worst. What he told Chet was the truth, but as with everything in life, what was supposed to happen wasn't exactly what always did happen.

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Following Chet's lead, Roy looked through the pile of magazines at his side. He smiled as he found a Dr. Seuss book titled 'Sam the Firefly'.

Having read it to his children, it had become a favorite of his because of the illustrations that reminded him of hot summer nights spend capturing fireflies in jars.

"Any word yet Roy?"

He slammed the book shut and shoved it under some magazines before looking up at Cap. "Uh...no...there's no word yet."

Looking past Cap, he found Mike smirking at him.
Marco handed Chet a cup of coffee and leaned against a wall, his hand automatically going into a pocket of the turnout he wore. His fingers found the worn old St. Christopher's medal that was pinned there. He rubbed absently at it, lost in thought.

Mike's smirk had faded, but the smile in his eyes was still there. Sitting down beside Roy, he picked up an issue of Field and Stream and made a point of waving it at Roy.

Cap handed Roy a cup of coffee, then looked down the hall. There should have been some news by now. Then again, wasn't the saying no news was good news?

It was then that the door to the room that Gage was in opened. Instead of seeing Dixie walking out, Doctor Brackett appeared.

Standing, Roy's heart began to race. It was bad. He knew it. If only they had gotten to him sooner.

Brackett stopped before the group and smiled. They looked like a bunch of boys standing outside of a gym caught smoking.

As soon as everyone saw the smile on Brackett's face they all slumped in relief. Brackett wouldn't be smiling if it weren't good news.

"Thanks to your quick work out there, it looks like Mr. Gage has beaten the odds again."

Chet yelled. "All right!!!"

Everyone turned to look at Chet. The goofy smile he wore stayed. "So sue me! I won't have to break in a new probe since Gage is okay."

Brackett tapped the pen in his hand on the clipboard he was holding. Roy caught the movement. There was something more to it. Gage wouldn't be getting released to go home any time soon.

"How's he doing? Can I see him?"

Chet piped in. "Yeah, can 'we' go and see him Doc?"

"Once we have Johnny stabilized, we'll move him to a room. Then you can see him."

Cocking his head to the side, Chet frowned, his voice sounding irritated. "Stabilized? I thought you said he was okay?"

"No, I said he beat the odds. He's not dead. We're working on getting his core temperature back to normal and we're monitoring his heart rate, lungs and myriad of other thing. He's not out of the woods yet gentlemen."

Roy finally found the nerve to ask the most important question. "Um, Doc...Johnny was disoriented when we brought him in..."

Brackett smiled. He knew what Roy wanted to hear. "And that's all it was. Disorientation. We've questioned him on a number of things. He knows who he is and where he's at, he's just having a bit of trouble remember how he got here."

Roy finally felt some of the fear that was twisting his stomach into a knot fade. Gage wasn't brain damaged. "That's good to hear."

"Yes it is. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go and make arrangements for some testing to be done."
With a final smile, Brackett turned away from the relieved group. It was always nice to be able to give good news for a change. Hopefully Gage's body would co-operate and he wouldn't have to worry about bringing them any bad news.

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Running a hand over his face, Roy leaned back and winced as his back twinged. The hard plastic chairs they placed in the emergency waiting rooms weren't built for comfort, even if the people sitting in them usually did so for long periods at a time.

Looking at the clock on the wall, he frowned. It had been almost an hour since Brackett had been out to see them. Looking around the room, he could see that the rest of his station mates were getting a bit restless as well. Just as he was about to go to the exam room and peek his head in, the door opened.

Standing, he along with Chet, Cap, Mike and Marco watched as a gurney was wheeled out of the room. They could barely see Gage's form between the tubes and people surrounding him. As the gurney disappeared down the hall, Brackett made his way toward the wary group. Stopping before Roy, he fingered the clipboard in his hands.

"He's stabilized for now. His temperature is within normal range; his blood pressure and heart rate look good. For now he'll be placed on oxygen and antibiotics and he'll be under observation. Barring any complications, Johnny could be released to go home in a few days.

Chet's face screwed up and his voice rose slightly. "What type of complications? I thought you said he was doing okay."

Brackett hesitated before answering him. He knew how emotional Chet could be and he wasn't in the mood to deal with it at the moment. All he wanted was to be able to get a quick bite to eat and a take short nap. He was saved from having to answer Chet by Cap stepping forward. "Chet, I think we need to let Doctor Brackett take a break."

"Whaddy'a' mean give him a break?"

"Chet, that's enough."

Cap turned to Brackett and gave him a grateful smile. "Do you know when we can see John?"

"I've already asked Dixie to let you know as soon as they get him settled in."

Cap held his hand out to Brackett, who shook it and smiled. With a nod at the others, he walked down the hall toward a much deserved rest.

Just as Chet opened his mouth to complain about being kept in the dark again, at least as far as he was concerned, Cap's HT sounded.

Chet grimaced and Cap shrugged his shoulders before responding to the call. Within moments, with the exception of Roy, the group made their way out of the building. Duty called.

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Roy sat down and looked around the emergency room for what seemed like the thousandth time. Now that he knew Gage was out of the woods as far as being dead or brain damaged, he could relax a bit. The tightness in his chest and the upset stomach that had been churning for the past few hours were now fading.
With a guilty feeling he reached out and dug under the pile of magazines next to him. Finding the Dr. Seuss book, Sam the Firefly, he sat back and set out on a mental journey into a land where no one ever got hurt or died. A place where summer nights lasted forever and dreams became a reality.

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When Dixie finally came to get Roy, she had to wake him. His back ached as he unfolded himself from the uncomfortable plastic chair. With a sheepish grin he rubbed at the small of his back while trying to discreetly drop the book in his other hand on the table in a way that she wouldn't see what he had been reading. "How's Johnny doing Dixie?"

"He's fine."

The look in her eyes betrayed her words.

"But..."

Dixie looked at her feet and then at Roy. "You know as well as I do that there could be complications. Me...I like to think positive."

He nodded his head absently, thinking of all the things that could go wrong. Heart failure, pneumonia, damage to the lungs, the list went on depending on the victim and the time they were submerged.

Victim. He didn't like the word, especially if it pertained to Gage. Johnny wasn't a victim; he was his partner and friend. He was family.

"Can I see him now?"

Dixie gave Roy a small smile and ushered him out of the waiting room.

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Slowly pushing the door open, Roy peeked his head inside the room. It was something that he would never get use to no matter how many times he saw one of his station mates injured and when it was Gage, it hit him the hardest.

This time had been too close. He had actually lost him. Yes, he had managed to pull him back from death's grip, but what if he hadn't been able to? What if they had been a minute or so late in finding him or getting him out from under the debris?

Stepping into the room, he stared at Gage. Except for his breathing, he didn't move. As he drew closer to the bed, Roy felt a surge of relief wash through him as he noted the color in Gage's lips and nails. The bluish tinge was gone, replaced by a normal healthy pink.

Standing beside the bed, he resisted the urge to reach out and brush the hair off of Gage's forehead the way he would do with Chris when he was sick. Gage wasn't a little boy and it made him feel squeamish to show how he was really feeling.

What if Dixie or one of the nurses walked in and saw him doing it? Worse yet, what if Doctor Morton or Brackett came in? It was bad enough people thought of him as the quiet one, but to have them thinking he was soft just wouldn't do. Instead he stood as close to the bed as he could and held onto the railing that surrounded his supine friend.
His eyes traveled along Gage's body, taking in the IV, then the heart monitor. The thing that relieved him the most was seeing only a nasal canella instead of a respirator. The fact that he was breathing on his own was a good sign.

Walking to the foot of the bed, he picked up the medical chart. Rubbing a hand across his eyes, he frowned. This was ridiculous. Why did he feel like crying when Gage was alive? Why was he fighting to keep a tight rein on his emotions?

Putting the chart back, Roy went back to stand at the head of the bed. He remained frozen in place, counting the respirations. Gage may have been alive, but until he could see him walking out of the hospital, he wouldn't relax for one moment.

He felt cheated when Dixie came and told him it was time to go. He had wanted Johnny to open his eyes. He had wanted to see that stupid grin of his. Taking one last look at Gage's sleeping figure, Roy walked into the hallway, then glanced at his watch. If he were lucky, he'd be able to catch a few hours of sleep before going to work.

In his dream he was drowning. The water in his lungs choked him, the scream was soundless. They wouldn't get there in time. He knew he was going to die and there wasn't a damn thing he could do except lay there trapped only inches from the surface. His vision faded and then there was darkness.

Jerkling awake, Gage squinted his eyes against the pain. Bringing a hand up to his face, he stopped the motion as he saw the IV attached to him. What was he doing with an IV? Looking around, he saw that he was in a hospital room.

His mind was a jumbled mass of confusion. Did he really drown? All he could remember was arriving at a fire and he and Roy had been canvassing a building, looking for victims. What happened to him? Was Roy okay?

Bring a hand to his chest, he noticed that it hurt to breathe. His eyes hurt too. Okay...so maybe he had smoke inhalation of some sort judging by the oxygen he was on. Then again, this pain wasn't anything like he had experienced before. No, it had to be something different.

Looking down at the foot of the bed, he slowly sat up. Straining forward, he stretched a hand out and snagged the top of the chart hanging at his feet. No, he wasn't a doctor, but reading a medical chart wasn't exactly surgery either.

He stared at the pages, not really believing what he was reading. He frowned and cursed under his breath. Brackett may have been a great doctor, but his handwriting sucked. Deciphering the chicken scratch, he felt his mouth go dry. He had drowned, it wasn't a dream.

Sliding the chart back into place, Gage lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling until his eyes began to water. Closing them, he tried to remember how it had happened, but all he could remember were snatches of the dream, not really what had happened.

His eyes snapped open as a feeling of panic overtook him. His heart raced in his chest as he fought down the overwhelming terror. He may not have remembered everything, but the feeling of not being able to breathe overrode everything.

Willing himself to relax, he tried to even out his breathing. His chest now ached and his eyes burned. He had drowned and died, only to be brought back. Did Roy save him? Was Roy okay? There were too many questions that needed to be answered.
He needed to talk to someone. He wanted to know if Roy was all right. Picking up the call button, he pressed it, counting the seconds that it would take for someone to respond.

He smiled as he realized that at least he wasn't mentally impaired in some way if he could still count and read a medical chart.

The door to his room opened and his smile widened as Dixie walked into the room. The smile she gave him in return spoke volumes.

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Waking, Gage rubbed at his face before even thinking of what he was doing. He quickly pulled his hands away as his eyes stung. Blinking slowly, he remembered brief snatches of a conversation with Dixie. Between the chart and her telling him things, he was assured that Roy was okay and yes, he had drowned.

He hadn't remembered falling asleep after Dixie had come into the room. Now that he thought of it, he didn't really know how he had gotten there. His brain was like a piece of swiss cheese. Too many holes and not enough substance. The little that he did remember made him relax a bit. Dixie had said he may have aches and pains, but from what she could tell, he was doing remarkably well.

The door to the room swung open and he sat up a bit. Roy stepped in, followed by Chet and Marco. All three of them wore wary expressions as they greeted him.

Waving the HT in his hand, Roy gave him a small smile. "Dixie said it would be okay if we stopped by for a bit."

Gage stared intently at Roy, then peered around him to look at Chet and Marco. He smiled and sat up straighter. "You guys are funny. Where'd you get the mustaches?"

Chet grinned. Gage was okay, he was already trying to get them in a prank. "You're a load of laughs John. Just because you came back from the dead, it doesn't mean you can expect us to fall for your lame jokes." Chet and Marco smiled at one another.

The door opened and Mike and Cap strolled in. Cap walked to the end of the bed and gave Gage a big smile. "Sorry we were held up, I wanted to stop and ask Doctor Brackett a few questions."

Gage stared up at Cap, then shot Roy a questioning look. As he ran a hand through his hair, he stopped in mid-motion.

The small feeling of uneasiness that had begun to settle in the pit of his stomach now flared into full-fledged panic. Fingering his hair, he looked around the room. Roy and Mike's hair looked weird, Chet and Marco had mustaches and the guy at the end of the bed acted like he knew him. "Uh Roy...um...who's this guy?"

Cap's smile faded and the room grew silent.

Chet snickered. "That's real funny Gage. You couldn't get us with the mustache crack so now you're pretending you don't know Cap."

"Cap? What happened to Captain Hammer? Was he hurt in the fire?"

Roy could see that Gage was becoming agitated. This wasn't him playing a prank or a joke. He picked up the call button and pressed it. As he looked over at Hank, he shrugged his shoulders slightly. The door pushed open and Dixie stepped into the room. "Well hi guys."
She walked over to the bed, immediately sensing something was wrong. "Johnny?"

Gage gave her the once over, noticing small things about her that he hadn't paid attention to the night before. "Uh Dix...remember what we talked about last night? I think something's wrong."

"What's wrong?"

Running a hand through his hair again, Gage gave Dixie a wavering smile. "Well...for one, my hair..." He nodded in the direction of Mike and Roy. "Their hair. Chet and Marco's mustaches." He took a deep breath and looked at Cap. "And him. I have no idea who he is."

Dixie looked at Hank and could tell how upset he was. It appeared that there was a problem and it could end up being a big one. She immediately took control of the situation. "Sorry fellas, but I think we'll have to cut this visit short."

Chet's face screwed up in confusion. "Why? Maybe if we ask him some questions he'll remember Cap."

Cap directed an irritated glare at Chet. "Chet, you twit, it's not that easy."

Cap motioned the men out, letting Roy be the last to leave the room. Roy stood at the end of the bed feeling awkward and uncomfortable. How much did Gage forget? Would it be permanent? "Well, I guess I'll get going so Doctor Brackett can come in."

Taking a deep breath, Gage exhaled loudly. "Man, I can never do things half way can I?"

Both Roy and Dixie smiled. Dixie took a step toward the door. "I'll be back as soon as I find Kel and Joe."

"Both of 'em?"

"Yes Johnny, both of them."

Gage's look of annoyance made Dixie smile again. His memory may have been spotty, but from the brief conversations she had with him so far, he hadn't lost any of his attitudes or characteristics. That had to be good.

As soon as Dixie left the room, Gage gave Roy a hopeful look. "This isn't you guys pulling a big joke on me is it?"

"No Johnny, it's not a joke."

Gage looked toward the closed door. "Why'd Cap leave? I mean not that guy leaving the room, but Cap...ahhhh, you know what I mean."

Roy could see Gage's frustration at not remembering Stanley building up. "Hammer transferred to a different station. His commute was getting to be too much of a hassle. Cap...Hank Stanley, he's been our captain for about three years."

"Three years?!"

Roy winced as Gage yelled. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned that little detail.

"Three years? You're telling me I can't remember three years of my life?!"

"I don't know. Maybe you don't remember Cap...Hank. Maybe you remember everything else."
Gage's voice was sarcastic. "Yeah right, and that's why Marco and Chet have magically grown mustaches and you're starting to lose your hair."

Roy's hand automatically went up to brush over his head, his voice a bit defensive. "I'm not losing my hair."

Gage smirked at him. "Are too."

Without thinking, Gage ran his fingers over his head, a small smile coming to his face. "At least I still have mine and they've let me grow it longer."

Roy frowned and dropped his hand to his side, resisting the urge to touch the thinning spot on the top of his head. Gage was right, he was losing his hair and was a bit touchy about the subject, but something more was upsetting him than his hair. Three years. Gage was forgetting three years of his life. Three years of experiences and rescues. So much had changed in the past three years, both on the job and off.

The door to the room pushed open and both Gage and Roy turned to watch the small group entering the room. Roy immediately made a move to leave. "I'll be outside if you need me."

Roy's quick exit wasn't lost on Dixie. She'd have to make sure she had a talk with him after they were done checking Gage's condition.

Picking a shirt out of a bag, Gage held it up for inspection. It looked as if his tastes hadn't changed all that much over the past three years. It was a short-sleeved blue work shirt. Pulling it on, he buttoned it up and tucked it into his jeans.

Reaching in the bag, he withdrew a belt. The buckle on it caught his eye. Turning it over in his hands, he smiled. It looked like he had visited home in the years he was missing because he recognized the silversmith's work as being that from the rez he grew up on.

Finishing dressing, he walked over and stood in front of a mirror. He hadn't really changed all that much, but the differences were glaring to him. First and foremost was the length of his hair. Fingering it, he smiled. It appeared that he won the battle of wills with the Chief over getting a haircut.

Flexing an arm, he noticed more muscle than he remembered. He was still trim, but he no longer looked like a scrawny teenager. The weight gain looked good on him. Twisting at the waist, he noticed his back felt a little stiff. Testing each joint, he frowned. His one leg ached a bit. Nothing on his chart said anything about him hurting his leg.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he tried to wait patiently for Roy to come and get him, but he felt uneasy. The way DeSoto acted around him was way different than he remembered. It was as if he expected something more from him. No matter how hard he tried to think about what happened in the past few years, he couldn't.

Exhaling loudly, he pushed off the bed and began pacing the room. Why did DeSoto arrange for him to stay at his home for a few days instead of taking him back to his place? They worked together and he had been over his house a few times, but to take him home?

The door to the room pushed open and in walked Dixie pushing a wheelchair. Roy followed behind her, still wearing that concerned look that he'd developed over the past few visits.
"Aw come on Dix, I can walk."

She gave him a stern look and pointed at the chair. "You have a choice. Sit and leave or stay here until you do."

Frowning with distaste, he flopped in the wheelchair.

Dixie smiled at Roy who grinned back at her. This was the John Gage they knew. Now if they could some how get his memory back, things would be normal again.

********************************

Leaning back in the passenger seat, Gage enjoyed the feeling of the air blowing through his hair. It was good to be out of the closed confines of the hospital. Running his hand along the top of the doorframe, he talked over the wind.

"I would've thought you'd sold this thing by now."

Roy gave him a sharp look and shook his head no. Gage knew how much he loved his Porsche, but then again, he wouldn't remember their trading vehicles before.

"You haven't moved have you?"

Roy could feel his hopes fading fast. He had thought that maybe the ride home would have jarred some small memories. "No...I found a quicker way home."

The remainder of the ride was made in silence. When they pulled into the driveway, Gage ran a critical eye over the house and lawn. "I see you painted it. And the trellis is new."

"You helped me paint the house. You surprised Jo with the trellis."

"Oh."

Climbing out of the small car, Gage could feel the uneasiness coming back again. He wasn't really looking forward to seeing Roy's wife. The first few times he met her, he got the distinct feeling that she didn't like him. They had finally settled into a more tolerable relationship. Apparently they were now close enough that he had bothered to build her a rose trellis. Taking a second look at the structure, he suddenly grinned. He'd done a great job in building it.

Roy watched the emotions flickering across Gage's face. This wasn't going to be an easy week. As they made their way toward the house, the door flung open and Jennifer DeSoto came running down the sidewalk. Before Roy could open his mouth to stop her, she launched herself at Gage.

"Uncle Johnny, you're here!"

Gage took a step back as Jennifer ran toward him. He instinctively scooped her into his arms as she flung herself at him. Holding her, he gave Roy a shocked look before he slowly lowered her to the ground. As soon as her feet hit the pavement, she grabbed him by the hand and began pulling him toward the house, all the while chattering happily. "Mommy said you're gonna' stay for a whole week! Can we go to the zoo? Or do you wanna' make cookies? We can play Barbies too!"

Gage looked at Roy and mouthed the word Barbies. He played dolls with Roy's daughter? As she pulled him into the house, he took a good look at her. She'd changed so much compared to what he remembered. He could feel the room closing in on him.
His head snapped up as Joanne came into the kitchen to greet them. She didn't look the same either. Her hair hung just past her shoulders and she looked more mature. He mentally kicked himself. Of course she looked more mature, she had aged three years!

"Uncle Johnny, you're hurting my hand."

Jennifer pulled at his hand, trying to get him to release his tight grip. He quickly let go and took a step back. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to..."

Taking a deep breath, he looked first at Joanne and then back at Roy. The looks of pity he was receiving disgusted him. He should have insisted on going back to his place where he could be alone. "Roy, this is a mistake. Can you take me to my apartment?"

Roy ran a hand over the back of his neck, trying to work out the knot that was beginning to form. He had hoped to ease some of the changes in their lives into conversations bit by bit. Now he found himself having to discuss a huge difference in Gage's life. Before he could open his mouth, Jennifer piped up. "What happened to your house Uncle Johnny?"

Gage looked at Jennifer, then directly at Roy. "I have a house?"

Roy sighed. "Yes."

"I can afford a house?"

"You got a great deal on it. It needed a lot of work."

Gage's eyes widened. "I'm not married am I?"

Roy couldn't help smiling at the tinge of panic in his voice. "No, you're still single."

Gage looked up at the ceiling in relief. "Thank you."

Joanne watched Gage's emotional rollercoaster and knew it would be up to her to keep things running smooth. "Jen honey, Uncle Johnny needs to get settled in his room. Go out back for a bit while we put his things away."

"But Mommy, I wanted to help!"

Joanne pointed a finger at the back door. "Out. Now."

Jennifer turned teary eyes toward Gage. He could feel his heart melting at her look. "I don't mind her. Maybe she could help me unpack."

"Are you sure?"

"It's okay. I'm fine with it."

Jennifer took him by the hand again and began pulling Gage out of the kitchen.

As soon as they left the room, Joanne smiled at Roy. "Well one thing's for certain. Our daughter can still work her special magic with him."

Roy gave her a weak smile before following the pair. Yup. It was definitely going to be a long week.
Gage dug his heals into the carpet stopping Jennifer from pulling him any further into the bedroom. His eyes widened as he took in the room.

*What in the hell?!*

To him it appeared that someone had puked pink and everything Barbie and frilly into the room. Had Roy gone totally nuts or what? He was supposed to live in this room for an entire week and not lose his mind? He snickered when it occurred to him that he was here for just that reason.

"Uncle Johnny is sumthin' the matter?"

He looked down at the innocent face of Jennifer, finding his heart constricting. What was it about this little girl that made him feel so protective? He didn't want to feel like this. He didn't want to love anyone, but here he was having those feeling for this little waif in pigtails. "No Sweetheart, nothing's the matter, I'm just tryin' to get use to things."

"Use to what things?"

Joanne and Roy came up behind them. Joanne came into the room and took Jennifer by the hand. "Jenny, how about you and I make Uncle Johnny some cookies instead of helping him unpack."

Jennifer smiled brightly at Gage. "We're gonna' make you peanut butter cookies!"

Joanne gave Gage an apologetic look as she led Jennifer from the room.

Gage frowned as he looked at Roy. It was distressing that these people knew more about him than he did about them. "Instead of me bringing in my suitcase, how about you take me to my...house."

He shivered as he said the word. He owned a house. He had a mortgage. How in the hell did he afford to take out chicks with a bill like that? And the utilities! What in the hell had possessed him to buy a house?!

"Johnny, it's only a week. I think you need time to try and get yourself situated. We can talk, look at pictures and maybe you'll remember everything."

Running a hand through his hair, Gage exhaled loudly as he flopped on the Barbie spreadsheet covered bed. "Do you honestly think me talking to you will make me remember stuff?"

"It might. Doctor Brackett said that sometimes little things could trigger a persons memory."

"Little things huh?"

Roy gave him a small smile. "Yeah."

He knew Roy wasn't going to let him leave. If he learned one thing in the year that they worked together with one another...well apparently it was four years...was that Roy could be one stubborn son-of-a-bitch. Hell, he wouldn't relinquish the driver seat of the squad for a day, what made him think he'd drive him back to his place?

Roy had dropped his suitcase off in the room and now Gage was slowly unpacking his clothes. Roy had said that Joanne had gone over and gotten all of his things. As he picked up a pair of boxers, he cringed. Roy's wife had dug through his underwear. It was kind of gross to think she had handled
them. The only people who had done something like that were his mother and some of the women he had slept with. A voice drew his attention to the doorway.

"Hey Uncle Johnny."

Gage looked over the young boy standing at the entrance to the room. He was the spitting image of Roy. He remembered meeting him the few times he had come to the house. "Uh...hi kid."

Chris frowned. Kid? What happened to sport or pal? His mom and dad had told him Uncle Johnny had amnesia. They explained to him what it meant and he had thought they were exaggerating. Only people on television had something like that happen to them. "Mom and Dad said you might not remember me."

Gage felt guilty as he looked into Chris' sad blue eyes. What could he say? "I remember you, just not the way you remember me."

Chris shrugged his shoulders. "That's okay. Dad said that maybe you being here would make you remember us. The normal way. You know what I mean."

Chris walked into the room and picked up a picture from one of Jennifer's bookshelves. He held it out to Gage. "Here's a picture of you and Jennifer at one of her tea parties. Mom embarrassed you by showing this to everyone at the station before she gave it to Jenny. You have a copy of it too."

Gage tentatively took the picture from Chris' outstretched hand. Looking at it he could feel his face flushing in embarrassment. He was dressed to the nines in a suit and tie, squatting down in a ridiculously small chair. Jennifer was sitting across from him, pouring tea from what was obviously a child's tea set. The bad part was he looked as if he were enjoying it.

He practically shoved the picture back in Chris' hand before going back to unpacking his things. He pulled out toiletries and other items, setting them on the small dresser by the bed, trying to control the emotions that swirled around inside him. He didn't do tea parties with little girls. What in the hell had happened to him to make him change so much?

"Uncle Johnny, are you okay?"

"Huh? Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Chris looked at him, then at the floor. Scuffing his foot on the carpet, he looked back up at Gage. "What happens if you don't remember? You can still be a paramedic can't you? I mean Dad said you'd have to pass a physical and take some tests. He even said they might make you go through the whole program again."

Gage straightened, his voice rose, his tone irritated. "What?! I shouldn't have to do the whole thing again. I know how to do my job."

Chris took a step back, clearly not use to Gage using that tone of voice with him. Gage bit off the smart retort he was ready to throw at the boy. It wasn't the kids' fault that he couldn't remember the past three years. Heck, it wasn't anybody's fault. It was all the result of some dumb accident. "Look...I kind of want to get this stuff taken care of so could you maybe go and ask your dad when dinner is?"

Chris slowly backed out of the room. This wasn't his Uncle Johnny. It was some stranger who looked like him. "Okay. I guess I'll talk to you later."

Gage turned his back on Chris without answering him, missing the crestfallen look on his face.
Sitting down on the bed, Roy ran a hand over his face and yawned. Pulling his feet up, he slipped under the sheets, scooting in close to Joanne. Wrapping his arms around her, he stared at the curtains as a breeze blew them gently about the window. He'd lain in this bed night after night, never thinking that something like this would have ever happened.

He'd thought about what would have happened if Gage had been severely burned. He'd thought about what would have happened if he had been crippled. He had even had thoughts about what life would have been like if his partner ever died on the job. He wasn't prepared for this. His best friend was alive, but was now nothing more than a stranger.

Joanne nudged him with her shoulder. "Honey?"

"Hum?"

"Roy...give him some time."

"He's not...Jo, he's not Johnny. He's...I don't know 'who' he is."

Resting her head on Roy's chest, Joanne idly ran her fingers over his stomach.

"He's still Johnny, he's just not the one that we've gotten to know these past few years. You have to remember, what he's going through has to be a thousand times worse than what we're feeling. His life isn't the life that he remembers. As far as he knows, you're just the guy he's been working with for a little while. He doesn't know me or the kids, he doesn't know Hank..."

Her voice trailed off as the enormity of it all sank in. She thought that she'd been prepared after all the discussions she and Roy had over the past few days after they had decided to bring Gage back to their home for the week.

Replaying the evening over in her mind, she surprisingly felt tears stinging her eyes. The man that she had come to know as family was once again the person who she had once regarded in disdain. Her thoughts went back to the first time she had met him. God how she had hated him. Young, arrogant and so full of himself that it had taken all of her self-control to not tell him off.

It had taken her so long to at first tolerate him and Roy hadn't understood her hostility toward his junior partner. Having to hear Roy's stories of Gage's daily rants, his attempts at dating the nurses and the stories about his short temper, had only added to her initial dislike of him. The topper had been when Roy had called home about some stupid television show. She couldn't even remember what it was. All she recalled was how annoyed she had been when she found out why Roy had called her so late.

The John Gage she knew before was immature and hotheaded. The few times that Roy had brought him home that first year, she had avoided being in the same room with him as much as she could. Laundry would need to be done or some other household chore would pop up so that she didn't have to sit across the table from him. If Roy had wanted to associate outside the station with that 'boy', then let him, but she would have no parts of it.

It wasn't until Roy had come home from work one day, silent and withdrawn, that her resolve to hate Gage finally cracked. It had taken hours to get Roy to talk to her and what he told her, had left her completely surprised.

A doctor had accused him of being negligent. Her Roy, her husband who wouldn't hurt a fly, was being accused of hurting someone. When the doorbell had rung and she opened it to find Gage
standing before her, she had almost slammed it in his face, but there was something about the look in his eyes that stopped her.

Letting him in, she sat back and watched how he interacted with her husband. She was shocked by the way he acted. Totally supportive, one hundred percent behind his friend. Not once did he doubt Roy. Not once did he say, maybe you were wrong. The temper that she had seen was now being directed at, in Gage's words, 'a complete horse's ass'.

She had listened to them rehash the rescue that had supposedly gone wrong and found herself amazed at the level of knowledge this young man had. It was at that moment that she stopped seeing Gage as a spoiled oversized boy. It was then that she felt that her husband was safe with him as his partner.

It had come down to that one defining moment. She hadn't trusted Gage to pour a glass of milk in her house without screwing up and now she was seeing the person that her husband saw day in and day out. Still hotheaded, but it was tempered by intelligence and determination. He believed in Roy the way she did. He saw what she saw. From that day on, she vowed to try and get to know him better.

It was kind of ironic when only a few months later she almost lost the chance to get to know him. Having to comfort Roy when he called from the hospital to let her know that there was a possibility that his partner, and yes his friend, lay dying from some unknown virus. Having to hear the anguish in his voice and not being able to do anything about it had upset her. Knowing that she may never get the chance to know the man her husband knew, bothered her.

After that incident, she made sure Gage was warmly welcomed in their home. His confusion at her change in demeanor toward him, slowly gave way to a shy, almost uneasy reaction to her. It took months before he opened up and she saw him as he truly was. Dedicated, loyal and with a strange sense of humor that bordered on quirky. Half of the things he said were lost on Roy, but ended up leaving her breathless with laughter.

As the years went by, he became a fixture in their lives, a part of the family. The tall thin stranger became 'Uncle Johnny' to her children. The man that she despised became something of a brother to her. Someone she could talk to when Roy wouldn't answer her questions. Sure he never told her exactly what was going on, but that was to be expected. He helped bridge the gap between home and work. The secret life that Roy led wasn't as scary or foreign to her any more.

Now that seemed to be all over. The stranger was back. The hotheaded boy in a grown man's body had made his reappearance. All she wanted was for Gage to get his memory back so life could go on the way it had been for the past three years. That was the problem. Their lives were changed drastically, while to Gage, nothing had changed for him. Time and memories were one sided.

"We have to give him some time. Talk to him...help him remember."

She felt his arms tighten around her.

"What if he can't remember Jo? He'll have to start over."

"Maybe. You said that he'll have to take some tests."

Roy exhaled loudly. "So much has changed since we started the program. More than likely they'll make him go through the classes again."

"I know, we talked about this before, but you also said there was a chance he might remember what he learned, he just wouldn't remember 'how' he learned it."
"I know...it's just...he won't remember the rescues."

Snuggling closer, Joanne knew what Roy had meant to say. Gage wouldn't remember him, their friendship...the adventures they shared. So much would be lost forever. Closing her eyes, she made a silent prayer. What happened next was out of their control. It was up to fate to give back what had been taken.

***********************************

Undressing for bed, Gage pulled his jeans off and tossed them to the floor. Sitting on the bed, he lifted his leg up to get a better look at the marks that he had discovered in the shower. It looked like a snakebite of some kind. Lowering his leg back to the floor, he flexed his knees. The one leg seemed tighter than the other.

Sighing, he unbuttoned his shirt and added it to the pile of clothes on the floor. Reaching down, he grabbed the hem of the t-shirt and peeled it off. As his fingers hooked onto the band of his boxers, he thought he'd better leave them on. He was in someone's home, not his apartment. He mentally kicked himself. He didn't live in an apartment now he had a house.

Flopping back on the bed, he stared across the room at a large teddy bear, unaware that he was the one who had won it at a fair for Jennifer. He kept thinking about the house. Roy had said he got a great deal on it. Was it a dump? No matter what, he'd talk him into taking him to see the place tomorrow.

Reaching over, he switched off the lamp. He thought he wouldn't be able to get comfortable, but it didn't take long for his body to relax. Maybe it was because he was exhausted or maybe it was because his body was use to the bed, but it wasn't long before he fell into a deep slumber.

********************************

He could feel something warm and soft by his side. It was too small to be a woman, so what in the heck was it? Opening his eyes, Gage was startled to find Jennifer DeSoto snuggled against him in the small bed. He pulled himself roughly away from her, jolting Jennifer out of the peaceful dream filled sleep she was in.

Scrambling off of the bed, he quickly grabbed his jeans from the pile of clothes on the floor and yanked them on. His voice squeaked an octave higher than normal. "Does your mom and dad know you're in here?!

Rubbing her eyes in confusion, Jennifer's lower lip began trembling. Where were the hugs and kisses she was use to? What happened to the tickles and giggles? Yes, her parents had told her that he had something happen to him where he couldn't remember things, but it didn't mean a thing to her. She was only a little girl who was upset by the way 'her' Uncle Johnny was acting toward her.

Tucking her head down, she pulled the comforter to her chest and began crying.

"Aw...come on don't cry...ssshhhh. Look, I didn't know you were in here. Are you allowed to be in here when I'm here?"

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"Aw...come on don't cry...ssshhhh. Look, I didn't know you were in here. Are you allowed to be in here when I'm here?"

Turning her back to him, she cried into the comforter, muffling her sobs. Gage shifted back and forth on his feet not knowing what to do. Should he go and get the girls mother or should he try and stop her from crying?

Exasperated, he ran a hand through his hair, then took a tentative step forward. As soon he sat down on the bed, Jennifer crawled into his lap and tucked her head against his chest. Instinctively he
wrapped his arms around her, patting her back as he began to rock her slowly back and forth.

The door to the room cracked open and Joanne peeked in. She looked at Jennifer huddled against Gage and then at Gage who looked like a deer caught in headlights. "Uh...she was in here when I woke up. I ah...I guess I scared her."

Walking into the room, Joanne held her arms out for Jennifer. When he went to relinquish his hold on her, she began crying loudly. Joanne's heart went out to Gage. She could see that he was scared to death by the way her daughter was acting, totally confused as to why a little girl who he hardly knew was in his bed.

Holding her tightly, Joanne tried to calm Jennifer down, not wanting Roy to come in. It was bad enough for Gage to be going through something like this so early in the morning and she didn't want to add to his stress by having Roy charging in and interrogating them all. "Jennifer, what did we tell you the other day?"

Choking back a sob, she lifted her head from Joanne's shoulder and looked directly at Gage. "You said...you said he was hurt. And he'd forget stuff." Taking a deep breath, she let loose a loud wail. "You didn't say he'd forget me!"

Dropping her head back on Joanne's shoulder, she began crying in earnest, her small body shaking and hiccupping.

Patting Jennifer on the back, Joanne gave him a weak smile. "I'm really sorry Johnny, I thought she understood what we had told her."

Feeling self-conscious at his state of undress, he crossed his arms across his chest, trying to resist the urge to jump up and run out of the room. The last thing he had expected this morning was a crying girl and an apologetic mother. He wished he could remember why they cared so much about him when all he felt was...nothing. They meant nothing to him.

Joanne was Roy's wife, he knew that much. He also knew that she didn't care all that much for him. At least that was how he remembered her. The way she was acting now confused the hell out of him. Jennifer's reaction to him scared him. He had only met the child a few times. Apparently their relationship had changed drastically over the past few years to the point that she idolized him. The way he acted around her had reduced her to tears and he hadn't really done all that much except question why she was in the room alone with him. "I'm okay. I mean, I'm sorry."

"It's okay Johnny. We'll have to deal with things like this day to day until you get your memory back."

The look he gave her broke her heart. She knew exactly what he was thinking. What if he didn't remember? He would be left to pick his way around the people who knew him. People, who to him were only acquaintances, not trusted friends and comrades.

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Leaning against the doorframe, Gage stared out to the side, trying to avoid any conversation with Roy as they drove down the highway. He found himself not wanting to talk, afraid that he'd do or say the wrong thing. Every time he opened his mouth, all he received were looks of disappointment and sadness. He'd received several confused frowns from Chris and had managed to make Jennifer cry again before they had left the house.

His foot tapped nervously against the floorboard the further they drove out of Los Angeles. Was he
nuts? Had he bought a dump on the outskirts of the city? What type of commute would he be looking at when he went back to work?

Before he knew it, Roy was slowing down. As they tuned down a dirt road, his eyes locked onto the mailbox with his name painted on it. His stomach began cramping up. He owned a frigging house. He sat up straighter in the car, trying to see the house over the small ridge. As they crested the hill, his eyes bugged out.

There was no way in hell he could own a home like this. It was a two-story ranch style home flanked by a barn and a corral. He stood slightly in his seat as he strained to look for a horse. There would be no way he'd have a barn and there'd not be a horse in it. He'd have to check the barn after he looked in the house.

Flopping back in the seat, he looked at Roy who was watching his every move. He wasn't surprised to find the man smiling at him. As soon as they pulled to a stop in front of the house, Gage jumped out of the Porsche without opening the door.

Making his way up to the front door, he jiggled the handle. Finding it locked, he quickly looked around. Where would he hide a key if he had a house? Snapping his fingers, he reached above and felt along the doorframe, chuckling as he found the key. Jamming it into the lock, he opened the door and stepped inside.

He came to an abrupt halt as he looked around the room. It was open and airy, decorated in a Native American style. So he had finally gotten over what other people thought and let a part of his culture come out of hiding. As he made his way around the room, he ran his hands over furniture, admiring what he knew to be his own handiwork.

He couldn't believe this place was his. There had to be a trick to it. How could someone like him afford a nice place like this? He heard Roy walk into the room. Turning to him, he gave him a confused look. "Roy...how? I mean this place is great! How can I afford it on what I make?"

Walking over to a bookcase, Roy picked up photo album and set it down on the coffee table in front of a large overstuffed sofa. Opening it, he pointed at the pictures. "Here's what it looked like when you first bought it."

Sitting next to Roy, Gage listened to him as he described all the things he'd done to the house. There were pictures of the rooms as they were redone. There were group photos at the end showing him along with all of his station mates as they did repair work on the roof.

"Man, this place was a real dump before I got to it."

Roy shook his head and shot him a wry grin. "Yeah, it was, but you wouldn't admit it back then. You said it only needed a little TLC for it to be a great place to live in."

Gage snorted. "A little? I bet I spent all of my free time for months working on it."

"Just about."

Standing he gave Roy a small smile. "You mind if I check the rest of the place out?"

"No...go ahead, it's your house."

Gage's smile widened. "Yeah. It is."

Making his way around the lower level, he checked out the kitchen, amazed that he had a fully
stocked pantry. Since when did he keep food in the fridge? Hell, now he had a pantry!

He had a mudroom and a laundry room on the lower level as well as a bathroom. He shook his head at the obvious feminine touches. "Hey Roy...who did this?"

Roy peeked into the bathroom and smiled. "Joanne did. You gave her carte blanche in decorating it."

"I did?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Huh."

Roy could see the wheels turning in Gage's head, wishing he could read his mind.

"I'm gonna' go upstairs now, you wanna' go with me?"

"Sure, lead the way."

Roy followed Gage as he went upstairs and through the rooms. It was obvious that even though he hadn't been in the house as far as his memory was concerned, he instinctively knew his way around the place. His steps slowed as he entered the master bedroom. Picking up a photo resting on the dresser, he turned to Roy and frowned. "Did anyone call my dad and let him know what happened to me?"

Roy felt his throat close up. He hadn't even given it a thought. His silence spoke volumes.

Gage rubbed at the picture frame with his thumbs, knowing what Roy was about to tell him. Taking a deep breath, he sat down on the bed and stared at the picture. His father looked tall and strong, his profile so like his son's, yet different. "What happened to him?"

Clearing his throat, Roy walked over to where Gage sat. It was bad enough to have seen his friend suffer through this once. It wasn't right, but because of the circumstances, he had to tell him. "Your dad...he died about two years ago."

Gage gripped the frame until his knuckles turned white. His voice was tight. "How?"

Roy didn't want to do this. What could he do to get out of telling him what had happened? "Johnny, maybe we should ask Doctor Brackett if..."

Gage looked up and glared at him. "I don't need his permission to hear how my dad died."

Roy knew Gage was right, he was just hoping to delay the inevitable. "He was killed in a car accident."

Closing his eyes, Gage swallowed hard. His dad was gone. Dead and gone over two years ago and he couldn't remember anything about it. "How'd it happen?"

"It was snowing...a semi lost control on the highway. They said he died instantly."

Visions of his dad being crushed beneath a mac truck invaded his thoughts. Taking one last look at the smiling image of his dad, he set the photo back down on the dresser. Without saying a word, he stood and pushed past Roy.

Half running down the stairs, he rushed out of the house. Any of the joy he had felt from seeing the house had been sucked away. Taking deep gulping breaths, he headed toward the barn, trying to
escape the feelings of anger and hurt.

Unlocking the door, he shoved it open and stepped into the quiet retreat of the barn. His heart sank even further. It was empty. No hay, no horses, nothing but empty space. A motion drew his attention to his left. Squinting, he walked closer to it. Without warning a cat trotted into view, meowing as it saw him.

"Oscar?"

Bending down, Gage held his hand out to the large orange tabby. It came right to him and rubbed its head into his palm. A smile spread across his face and he picked the cat up, cuddling it to his chest.

Roy walked into the barn and saw him holding a cat. He cocked his head to the side. When did Gage get a cat? "You never told me you had a cat."

"Oscar isn't 'my' cat. You can never own a cat. They own you."

Roy's mouth dropped open. Gage was completely oblivious to what he was saying. "Johnny. You remembered the cat."

He looked up from the orange ball of fur in his arms. "I did what?"


"So?"

"Johnny, as far as I know, you don't own a cat."

"I don't? Then whose is it and why do I know his name?"

"I don't know, but we'll ask your neighbors. Maybe they'll be able to shed some light on this."

Gage smiled down at the cat as it purred loudly. It looked like he finally remembered a piece of his past.

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Walking out of the barn, Gage reluctantly placed the cat on the ground. As he locked the door, he could feel Oscar rubbing in and around his legs. Kneeling down, he rubbed the large tabby under the chin. It felt good to be able to connect to something that didn't have any expectations from him. This small creature couldn't talk and remind him how little he knew about it. A soft word or a rub would make it happy.

As they made their way back to the house, he could feel himself tensing. How long had he owned the place? Did his dad ever get the chance to see it? He could feel deep within himself that he hadn't. There would have been subtle differences in the structure if he had. Gage may have been handy with woodwork, but his dad was a master carver.

Stepping into the kitchen, Roy picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Uh, Mr. Nicolas? This is Roy DeSoto. Yes. Yes, he's right here. No, he hasn't gotten it back yet, but...uh huh. Do you know if Johnny owns a cat?"

Gage watched as Roy began smiling. "You have? Thank you. I'm sure he'll tell you the next time he sees you. Okay. Thanks a lot. 'Bye."

Hanging the phone up, he gave Gage another smile. "Yes, the cat is yours and his name 'is' Oscar.
Mr. Nicolas said he's been feeding him these past few days."

At the sound of his name, Oscar let out a loud meow. Gage walked over to the refrigerator and rummaged through it. Taking a bowl out, he sniffed it, then set it down on the floor. Oscar trotted over and dug into the leftovers.

Roy made a face. "What is that?"

"I think its liver pate."

"You eat that?"

Gage looked down at the bowl and frowned as he shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

Roy could see that this small admission upset him. Except for the discovery of Oscar, nothing here had rattled any of his memories. Looking at his watch, Roy decided they would be better off going home.

"Do you maybe want to stop and have lunch some where before we head back?"

Gage's eyes never left the cat as he spoke. "I guess so. It beats eating that stuff."

*************************

Taking the bowl outside on the porch, Gage gave Oscar a few final strokes before they got into the Porsche. As Roy drove down the lane, he watched Gage out of the corner of his eye. His friend was looking over his shoulder at the house. His face was a mixture of pride and confusion. As he turned to face forward, he raked a hand through his hair before leaning back in the seat.

Roy could see the stress of this small trip weighed heavily on him. He could only imagine the feelings that Gage was having. Sorrow over his father's death. Disappointment at not remembering anything about his home. Elation at remembering he had a cat. The cat was a small step in the right direction. Maybe it would be the crack that would open the floodgates to his mind. Or maybe it would only be the first of small trickles that would dry up and not amount to anything.

***************************

Wiping his hands on a napkin, Gage leaned back and smiled as he patted his stomach. "Man, that was one fine burger." He looked over at Roy's plate of french fries. "Are you gonna' finish them?"

Roy stopped chewing his sandwich. How could Gage eat so much so fast was beyond him. He should have been use to his endless appetite by now, but it never ceased to amaze him. "No...go ahead."

Grabbing a few fries, he jammed them in his mouth. With his mouth stuffed full, he almost opened it to talk, but stopped. Roy didn't like him talking with his mouth full and had nagged him about it over and over. As soon as he thought it, Gage opened his mouth and yelled. "Wou don' wike mhe talkkin' wiwh meh mowh fuwl!!!"

Roy choked on his food and began coughing. Gage quickly stood up and came around to pound him on the back. Both men swallowed the food they had and looked at each other. Gage was smiling and Roy was glaring at him. "What in the heck is wrong with you?!"

"You don't like it when I talk with my mouth full."
"No, I don't. I've been trying to get you to stop it for years."

Gage's smile grew wider and Roy looked blankly back at him. Gage's smile faded, then came back. "You...don't...like...it..."

He motioned his hand at Roy who finally got what he meant.

"When you talk with your mouth full."

Gage slapped him on the shoulder. "Exactly!"

Grinning like an idiot, he flopped back down and grabbed another handful of fries and jammed them in his mouth. Chewing them...with his mouth closed...he kept smiling at Roy who was smiling back at him like an idiot.

Two memories had come to him in the past few hours. Maybe things weren't going to be that bad after all.

***********************

Joanne could tell that something good had happened the moment they came into the house. There was something about the way Gage bounced into the room that reminded her of how he usually acted before the accident. The moment he looked at her, he immediately froze, then looked away from her.

He only remembered their relationship as it had been at the beginning. Looking him over, she knew they'd need some time alone to talk. At least with Roy, Johnny remembered him and knew where he stood in a sense. With her, all he could recall was how cold she used to be around him.

She felt herself regretting her initial reactions to Gage all those years ago. If she hadn't ignored him the way she had, they would have had some type of relationship to work with. Luckily Roy gave her the opening she needed.

"Honey, I'm going to cut the grass."

"It needs it."

She turned to Gage. "While he's doing that, could you help me with dinner? I have a ton of potatoes to peel."

He gave Roy a wary look.

"It's okay Johnny, you help her all the time."

Roy knew it was a lie the moment the words left his mouth. Usually Gage would help him in the yard, but he could tell Joanne was trying to get back 'her' Johnny as well.

"Oh. Okay...I guess. I mean all right."

She watched Gage out of the corner of her eye as she opened the refrigerator. She could tell that being alone with her in the kitchen was the last place he wanted to be. Looking over her shoulder, she smiled. "The potatoes are in the basket under that counter and a knife is in that drawer."

Gage didn't smile back at her. He went directly to work on the potatoes, keeping his eyes downcast. Roy gave her a small shrug and exited the kitchen.
As she moved around the small room, Joanne knew she'd have to be the one to start any form of communication. "So what did you and Roy do at your house?"

After a few violent strokes on the potato in his hand, he spoke softly. "Nothin' much happened. I have a cat named Oscar. I remembered his name."

"That's good."

She paused for a second, knowing there was more to it. "And...?"

He stopped peeling the potato and sat back looking her over. Shaking his head, he pointed the knife at her. "I don't help you in the kitchen do I?"

"Weeeeell...you do help eat the food I cook."

He snorted in what seemed like disgust, then set the knife on the counter. Crossing his arms, he looked intently at her. He was blunt. "You don't really like me so why do you want me here?"

Wiping her hands on the apron around her waist, she gave him a sad smile. "I'm sorry Johnny. I can't change how things were between us, but I can tell you this. You're special to me in a way no one else is. You're family. I'll admit it wasn't like that at first and it was my fault, but you and I...we share something special and I don't want to lose that."

She could see his discomfort grow by leaps and bounds as she spoke. Raking a hand through his hair, he looked down at the floor. When he looked back up at her, she could see how upset he was, how unsure.

"Mrs. DeSoto..."

"Joanne."

He took a deep breath. "Joanne...I don't..." He laughed nervously. "I don't remember...well you know that...but you and I...I tried, I mean I really tried to get you to like me, but you didn't want to be bothered. What made you change your mind?"

Leaning against the counter, she looked him over and smiled. "You changed my mind."

"How?"

Grabbing an onion, she began slicing it into a bowl. "It took a while for me to figure you out. The first time I met you was at 'that' party." She gave him a meaningful look. He shrugged his shoulders, not really understanding the way he had acted had been wrong. "Well after that I really didn't think much of you."

Gage snorted, looking like he was going to leave the room. She stopped slicing the onion and raised her voice slightly. "Johnny, don't go."

Rinsing her hands off, she moved to stand at the table across from him, feeling frustrated and angry. It was like someone she knew had died. "I judged you on that first meeting. I didn't want to give you a chance and with some of the things Roy would tell me that went on at the station...well... they didn't help matters any."

"What exactly did he tell you?"

She chuckled lightly. "Oh let's see. Chet and you arguing every single shift about stupid little things.
The water bombs, the crazy schemes. Some of the tangents you'd go off on. I think Roy felt that if I knew more about you, I'd see the man he saw."

She could tell that the more she talked, the deeper the hole she was digging. So far she hadn't really said anything nice about him.

"It was a lot of things that made me change my mind about you. You always made sure Roy was safe. I knew that no matter what, you'd be there to help him in any way that you could, on or off the job. Once my eyes were opened to that, I began to see what Roy saw. A man who would do anything for you if you gave him half the chance."

This time Gage looked away from her in embarrassment, not irritation.

"See, there you go again."

He looked back at her, his expression slightly confused.

"You can never accept a complement."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'm not use to 'em."

"Maybe you weren't then, but you are now. You may not be able to remember, but you have a lot of friends. You've helped so many people Johnny and they don't forget that."

He pushed away from the chair top he was gripping and paced across the room. "Okay, so I'm mister helpful and an all-around nice guy. It doesn't do me any good to know this if I can't remember anything."

Joanne walked over to where he stood and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Even if you don't remember, we do."

"But what happens if I never remember? What happens to me? I don't want to go through the training again, I shouldn't have to. I know my job." He spit the words out angrily and moved away from her.

Taking a deep breath, she resisted the urge to yell at him. Then it hit her. Maybe she shouldn't coddle him. Maybe everyone was tiptoeing around, hoping that if they took it easy, the memories would come back. What if he didn't remember anything but the name of a cat?

"You know, the John Gage, I know wouldn't whine about having something bad happen to him. He'd get up, dust himself off and get on with his life."

Wheeling around to face her, his eyes narrowed in anger as he tapped a hand on his chest. "Well this John Gage is tired of fighting. I'm tired of having to start over. I'm tired of moving around and not getting anywhere. I read the charts ya' know. I dug around in my files, Roy's shown me some things and I want that life, not the one I use to have. Hell, I have a house, a great job...my dad never had that at my age."

"Johnny you still have those things."

"What good is it to have any of it if I can't remember how I got them? What happens if I have to go through the paramedic training again? Who's going to pay my mortgage while I'm doing that?"

"I don't know. I guess there has to be some type of assistance or aid..."
Gage shook his head no. "Oh no! I'm not taking charity. My dad never did and neither am I."

"Johnny, it's not charity, it's being smart. When you need help, you take it. When you get back on your feet, then you can work on paying it back."

He shook his head no again, not liking the idea. "If you don't mind, I think I'll go help Roy in the yard."

Without giving her the chance to answer him, he walked out the door leaving her standing alone in the kitchen. Moving over to the window she watched him as he stalked across the lawn, heading toward the tool shed.

With a resigned sigh, she picked up a half-peeled potato up and frowned. She still had the rest of the week to convince him that things would work out, no matter what. Now if only she could convince herself.

***********************

Staring at the plate of food before him, Gage moved the peas listlessly to one side while piling the mashed potatoes beside them. He poked at the piece of chicken, not really wanting to eat it. His stomach was tied in a knot, achy and tight. The last thing he wanted to do was sit at the table with the DeSotos and eat a meal with them.

"Uncle Johnny, how come you're not eatin'?"

He glanced briefly at Jennifer, then quickly away. Every time he looked at her, he felt guilt or remorse. Everyone told him how much he meant to the little girl and not remembering her was like he was doing something wrong. "I just not very hungry tonight."

Jennifer's childish giggle caught him off guard. "Not uh! You're always hungry!"

He glanced up to see her smiling teasingly at him. He found himself grinning back at her. "Well, sometimes I am. Do you remember that time you had the flu and you wouldn't even eat the pie I brought over?"

"Yeah, but I was sick. There's nothin' wrong with you."

"Sweetheart, sometimes you don't have to be sick to lose your appetite."

"Then what's makin' you not want to eat?"

Tapping his fork on his plate, Gage chewed thoughtfully at his lower lip. "Okay...do you remember when you got sick before your ballet recital last year?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, that's how I feel right now."

"But you're with us. Why would you feel bad?"

He paused again to think and as he did it, he noticed Roy, Joanne and Chris staring at him and Jennifer with big smiles on their faces. "Okay, what's so funny?"

Roy's smile grew wider. "Have you been listening to yourself?"

"Huh?"
"You're talking about things that have happened in the past two years."

Gage gave him an annoyed look. "So."

"Johnny... the past two years."

He sat motionless for a moment, replaying the discussion he had with Jennifer. Images and small incidents flickered briefly in his mind, then they faded. The harder he tried to remember more details, the more frustrated he became.

Roy watched as the look of recognition on Gage's face slowly turned into one of frustration. He could see him beginning to breathe faster, his jaw tightening in anger.

"It's okay Johnny. You're getting it back, bit by bit."

Everyone at the table jumped when he slammed his fork down and it bounced to the floor.

"No, it's not okay! Why can I remember stupid things like her not eating pie, but I can't remember anything else?" Pushing his chair back, he stood. "I'm goin' out. I'll be back later."

He stomped away from the table and headed toward the living room. Joanne got up and picked the fork up from the carpet and placed it on the table as the front door slammed shut.

"Roy, could you go with him?"

"Honey, I think he needs time alone to cool off."

She smirked as she spoke. "I agree, but he might not remember how to get back here after he's done throwing his tantrum."

Chris' mouth dropped open in surprise. "Mom!"

Roy couldn't help grinning at her choice of words. "Okay, I'll go after him... Mom."

**************************

As he left the house, Roy hoped that Gage hadn't decided to run because if he did, there'd be no way he could catch him. Stepping onto the sidewalk, he breathed a sigh of relief as he spied his friend trudging down the street. As he started down the walkway, he wondered just how much of a tantrum Gage would throw once he caught up to him.

Jogging a bit, he slowed down to a walk as he came beside Gage. Just like he thought would happen, he was ignored.

They walked side by side, neither man speaking. The quick pace that they set soon slowed down to a meandering stroll. The more they walked the less tense Gage seemed to be. When Roy felt that the chances of him going off half-cocked were less than likely, he spoke. "I know you're frustrated Johnny, but at least you're starting to remember some more things."

Gage snorted in disgust. "Cats, habits and pies. Whoopie."

"It's better than nothing."

Gage stopped walking and wheeled around to face him. "It might as well be nothing! Why can't I remember something important?! Why can't I remember a rescue or Captain Stanley? I didn't even know I had a house. A house! I got a friggin' house!"
Roy remained calm. "It's a nice house."

"Well...yeah it's nice, but I don't remember gettin' it or fixin' it up."

Gage began to pace back and forth as he ran a hand through his hair. "It's like someone's flickin' an on and off switch. The light goes on, the light goes off. On off on off. It's drivin' me nuts!"

"Johnny..."

"Every time I look up I see your little girl staring at me with that sad face of hers. I turn around and I see your wife checking me out."

Roy smirked. "She's checking you out?"

Gage made a face and waved a hand in irritation at him. "Oh, you know what I mean. She's lookin' at me like she's expecting something."

Roy crossed his arms and gave him a thoughtful look. Joanne said they should be more blunt. That maybe it would help. Maybe he should try and see if she were right. "You know Johnny, you're being really self-centered about this. It's all about you. Poor Johnny, he can't remember anything that's happened in the past few years." Roy placed a hand on his chest, patting it to emphasize his point. "What about me? What about Joanne? How about Cap, Jennifer, Chris and the rest of the people who know you? You're not the only one whose been affected by your memory loss. There are people that really care about you who find themselves a nobody to you. How do you think they feel?"

Gage stared back at him, his expression first shocked, then it slowly changed to one of guilt and remorse. Just as quickly it turned to anger. "Well it's not my fault! I didn't ask for the floor to collapse. I didn't ask to be trapped underwater. I didn't ask to...to..."

"To what Johnny?"

"Die. Okay, I didn't ask to die and I didn't ask to be brought back this way. It's not my fault."

"It's no ones fault, that's the point. It was an accident, pure and simple. You're lucky to be here and we're lucky to have you back, but that doesn't give you the excuse to yell at everyone every time you can't remember something."

Gage snorted again. "Well, if my getting upset bothers you so much, then how about you take me back to my house? If you recall, I didn't ask for you to take me to your place."

Roy's voice was bland. "Of course I remember, I'm not the one with the memory loss."

Gage looked at him like he had been slapped. His mouth opened, then closed, his expression hurt.

"Look Johnny...this isn't going to be easy. You may or may not get your memory back, but I have to...we have to try and get it back. I wanted you to come home with me so that we could have some time together. I can show you things and take you places. Maybe something will jar that thick head of yours and things will come back to you. Just give me the chance to at least try."

Gage knew that Roy was right. The man had been bending over backwards since the moment he had woke in the hospital. The sliver of friendship that they had developed that first year together must have bonded into one so strong that he would be willing to do anything for him. It was almost like having a brother.
All the frustration he was feeling was still there, but it was now tempered by a feeling of warmth. He did belong somewhere. He had a place in life no matter what was going to happen. He knew that Roy wouldn't desert him even if he never did regain his memories and something deep inside of him told him the same would be with the rest of the DeSoto family. "I'm willing to give it a shot if you are."

Roy began grinning and he felt himself smiling back at him. Without thinking, they turned together and started heading back to the house.

"So do you think maybe tomorrow you'd be up to a visit to the station?"

Gage pursed his lips, then shook his head yes, then he frowned slightly. "Does Chet still do those stupid water bombs?"

Roy chuckled. "Yes he does."

"And does he still do them to me?"

"All the time."

"You would've thought he'd get tired of doin' 'em."

"No...not when you still fall for them."

********************************************************************

For the second day in a row he found himself driving along with Roy. For the second day in a row he also felt queasy. Everything that he knew to be normal was now turned upside down. The man in the seat next to him was still his partner, but the relationship that he remembered had changed. They had become more than partners, they were close friends.

Friend. He mulled the word over his tongue, tasting it. It had been a long time since he had someone close enough to him that he could consider them a friend. Sure he had acquaintances, but there wasn't one person that he could truly consider a friend that he could trust. There wasn't one person who he could rely on to stand beside him when he needed them.

He liked the idea that he'd finally found someone that he could turn to when he was in doubt of how he felt about things. The only problem with this friendship is he didn't know just how much the man next to him knew about his life. Did he trust Roy enough to tell him all that he had gone through or had he become friends and still managed to hide who he was?

Glancing across the small space of the car, he looked at Roy, wondering just what their relationship was truly like. Judging by the past few days, he knew it had to be something special. No one other than his aunt had ever opened their home to him. No one had welcomed him unconditionally.

In Roy's home, he found himself the focal point. There were four people who cared how he felt. Four people who felt as if they had lost something to the point that he could see the desperation beginning to appear on their faces when he couldn't remember a small insignificant detail from the past.

So here he was driving up to the station that he thought he'd been going to for the past year when in fact it had been almost four years. His heart rate began to pick up as he spied the flag waving gently in the morning breeze. Normally he and Roy would have been going over the supplies and checking in with Rampart. Now he wondered if he would get to go back to the job he loved or would he be forced to go through the paramedic training again.
As they pulled into the parking lot, he found himself relaxing. This was home, not the house he had visited yesterday. The apartment that he use to live in was just a place where he slept while not on duty. The station was where he truly lived. Where his life actually had some sort of meaning.

As the engine cut off on the Porsche, Roy turned to him. He was giving him that look again. He smiled easily back. This was one place that he knew he'd remember. Sure he probably wasn't going to recall small details, but at least he knew the station couldn't have changed all that much.

As they walked into the kitchen of the station, he glanced quickly around the room. Nope, nothing had changed. The same refrigerator, the same stove, the same walls. It was exactly as he had remembered it. The people in the room were the same too except for the small changes in their physical appearances. Marco and Chet were sitting at the table drinking coffee. Mike was at the stove making what appeared to be an omelet.

Chet looked up and gave him the once over. He wanted to snap at him to knock it off. He was tired of people looking at him like he was a freak. It wasn't like he had died or something. Well...yeah he 'had' died, but not for long so it didn't really count. "Chet, knock it off."

"Huh? Knock what off? What am I doing?"

"Between you and everyone else, I'm getting tired of the looks of pity you're givin' me."

Chet sat up a bit straighter. Cap had warned him to not jerk Gage around, but when his favorite pigeon instigated a confrontation, then he was fair game. "John, it's not pity we're giving you, we just can't believe you're getting time off for forgetting stuff. I mean you forgot things all the time before. It's normal for you."

"What?"

Chet smirked at Marco. "See now he's pretending he's losing his hearing." He turned back to Gage and shook his head in disapproval. "You need to quit faking it and get back to work."

Gage stared back at him, then to Chet's surprise he smiled. "Chet, I can always count on you to be a jerk, but for once I'm glad you are."

Before Chet could respond, Cap walked into the kitchen. Feeling more than a bit awkward, he walked over to Gage and held his hand out. "Since you don't remember me, let me introduce myself. I'm Hank Stanley."

He felt a little more than weird as he took the offered hand in his own. Stanley's grip was firm, which immediately made him feel better for some reason. "Hi...uh...you kinda' already know me I guess."

Stanley chuckled lightly. "That I do."

The awkward feeling came back as they stood before one another not knowing what to say next. Clapping his hands together, Stanley solved the problem. "You might as well take a look around the station. The squad's out on a run and I have no idea how long they'll be gone."

Gage couldn't help sounding disappointed. "What kind of call was it?"

"Unknown rescue."

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't know when they're gettin' back would you."

Roy walked up to them and gestured out toward the bay. "After you."
As they walked out of the kitchen, Chet frowned. "He's not going to remember anything is he?"

Marco nudged him. "Stop thinking so negative."

"Okay...I'm positive he's not going to get his memory back. How's that?"

"You're not funny you know."

Mike came over to the table and sat down with his omelet. Poking at it with a fork, he looked at them seriously. "At least the Phantom's old pranks will be new to him then."

Stanley smiled and headed toward the coffee. Only Mike would think of something off the wall like that.

************************************

Walking up to the engine, Gage ran a hand lightly over the shiny red surface. Grasping one of the railings at the rear, he pulled himself up and stood on the backboard. Closing his eyes, he got an image of himself riding on the back of another engine, the wind whipping across his face, the sirens blaring.

He could remember all his years in the department before coming to 51s so why in the hell couldn't he remember the past few years? Thumping a hand on the red painted metal, he pushed away and hopped off.

He knew Roy could tell he was getting frustrated again and he didn't want to deal with another pity party. Walking away from him, he headed toward the dorm. He went directly to his bunk and sat down. Resting his face in his hands, he leaned forward and took a few deep breaths. He could feel the memories edging forward, then darting away just before he could grab a hold of them.

He jumped to his feet, feeling his heart pounding in his chest. Each time he thought something good would happen, he was left feeling empty. As Roy walked in and came toward him, he turned away and headed to the locker room. Going to his locker, he jerked the door open and stared at the small poster of Smoky the Bear taped to it.

His eyes trailed over the few pictures that now joined the poster. One of him, Chris and Jennifer at what appeared to be one of the fireman's picnics. He had his arms around them, all three of them smiling broadly. Another picture was of him and Roy standing in front of an old engine, dressed in old style firefighter's uniforms.

Roy came up behind him and pointed at the photo. "We kind of made it our special project."

Pulling the photo from the door, Gage stared hard at it, willing himself to remember something, anything about it. A gray edged thought faded in and out, then snapped into perfect clarity. He frowned and slapped the picture in the palm of his hand. "All that work and we never even got to the parade. Can you believe our luck?"

Roy grinned back at him. One memory down, a thousand more to go. "Yeah, we put all that work into it only to have the wall of the building damage it."

Patting the photo back onto the door, Gage frowned. "We'll get it fixed up eventually. Money's just tight right now, that's all."

As suddenly as the memory came, the additional details began to fade. Closing his locker with a slam, he resisted the urge to punch the door.
"So what's changed with our job? Is everything so different that you think I'll have to go through retraining?"

Roy was caught off guard by the sudden questions. "I uh...I don't know. Things have changed, but as far as them being so different...I can't say."

"Do you think they'll just let me retest the written portion or will I be stuck going through the program again?"

"Johnny, I don't know. It'll be up to the department."

"The department." He snorted. "If they handle my case the way they handle everything else, I'll be up for retirement by the time they decide what to do."

Exhaling loudly, he looked around the room wondering when and if he'd get his old position back. "I guess I'm done here."

"Done?"

"Yeah, done. I mean it's not like I got my memory back or anything by coming here, so we might as well go."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know, where do we go when we're not here?"

"Home."

"Your place?"

"Yes."

"Don't we go to a bar or pool hall?"

"No."

"You're kidding? What in the heck do we do at your place all the time?"

"Mow the lawn, sit on the deck, house repairs."

"What do we do for fun?"

Roy had to think for a second. Fun? Was playing lawn darts with the kids considered fun to Gage now? "Well, we play cards some times, the kids'll play yard games..."

"Wait a minute. You're telling me we don't go out and play pool or darts? We play in the yard with your kids?"

"Well...yeah."

"I do this stuff?"

"Uh huh."

"Willingly?"

"Yes."
Placing his hands on his hips, Gage frowned. For some reason he was finding it hard to believe that he'd be into the domestic type of life. "Let's go play some pool."

"Pool?"

"Yeah Roy. You know...cue sticks, little round balls that you hit into pockets. Pool."

A touch of sarcasm slipped into Roy's voice. "I know what pool is, I just didn't know you liked to play it."

Gage gave Roy a hard look. They may have been friends, but apparently he didn't tell Roy everything. Their relationship wasn't what he had hoped it would be. Then again, what did he expect? Every time he trusted someone they ended up letting him down. Apparently he had given up on totally trusting someone, even the man before him. "How about I show you how much I like it?"

Roy looked at his watch. "Isn't it a bit early to be going to a bar?"

"We're gonna' play pool, not drink. There's a difference."

Roy paused for a second before answering. He didn't know if Joanne would like him going to a pool hall. Then again, maybe going out would be a good idea. Everything else they had done so far had only managed to leave Gage frustrated and angry. Maybe taking some time off to do something totally meaningless would help. He only hoped Joanne wouldn't blow a gasket when she found out where they had gone. "Okay...we'll go play pool."

Gage finally smiled. "Good deal."

The tones sounded and they automatically headed for the bay. They pulled up short remembering that they weren't on duty. They watched in silence as Cap, Chet, Marco and Mike took their places on the engine and sped away from the station.

Standing in the empty bay, Gage could feel a dark mood settling over him. For some reason he knew getting his old position back wasn't going to be as simple as taking an exam.

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Roy looked around half expecting to see Joanne glaring at him from the doorway. Nervously twisting the cue stick in his hands, he watched Gage as he sunk another ball into the pocket of the pool table.

He couldn't believe he was at a pool hall. Even when he was single he never went to one and when he got married he didn't give it a thought. Gage seemed to completely at ease in their surroundings, something that shouldn't have surprised him, but did.

He'd known him for a little more than four years and not once had Gage ever mentioned that he loved playing pool. Not once did he suggest they go out and shoot a few games. Now that they were here, Roy found himself wondering what the big secret had been. Why hadn't he ever mentioned it?

Glancing at his watch, Gage frowned. It was only ten o'clock. He knew if he got a beer Roy would freak. He knew his type. The middle class American white bread family man who wouldn't dream of drinking a beer before noon. If Roy knew he drank an occasional beer with breakfast, Gage knew he would have been appalled.

When he was growing up on the rez, it wasn't unusual to see people drinking before noon. The problem was too many of those drinkers didn't know when to stop. His father had taught him that
one beer was European, two beers meant you were a drunk. So no matter what, he'd never drink more than one beer before noon, but still people would see him as having a drinking problem.

Looking at Roy, he smiled. The man didn't know how to relax. If he whipped around and smacked his cue stick on the table's edge, Roy would probably piss himself. He knew the exact reason for his edginess. He had a wife. A wife was nothing more than a ball and chain as far as he was concerned. They nagged and laid guilt trips. He was relieved to find out he wasn't married.

Lining up another ball, he sharply dropped it into a side pocket. If he had a wife, he wouldn't be here right now enjoying himself. Instead he would have probably been at home doing some stupid chore that could be put off for later. He paused for a second. If he had a wife, he wouldn't have to do laundry or make his own meals. The best benefit would be the sex.

He frowned again as he lined up another ball. Sure it would be nice to have constant access to sex, but didn't he have that already? And with a different woman every few weeks? Would it become boring with just one woman? He looked hard at Roy. He didn't seem to be bored with Joanne, but then again as far as he knew, neither one of them had been with anyone else to compare what they had with one another.

Sinking another ball, he thought of his own experiences and a smile quickly made its way back to his face. Roy would freak again if he knew just how many of his dates ended in bed...sometimes in the car...sometimes on the car. He smothered a snicker as he thought about what Roy would think of him if he knew he'd been involved in a threesome with a couple of stewardesses only last week.

He stood suddenly and struggled to think. Was it last week in this year or last week over three years ago? Closing his eyes, he tried to visualize how he looked at the time, but all he could remember was what the two women had looked like as they danced naked above him.

"Johnny, are you okay?"

"Huh? What?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah...yeah. Um Roy...have I been dating any stewardesses lately?"

"Not that I know of. You'd been seeing a nurse at Rampart for the past two months, but she kind of decided to call it quits."

"You mean she dumped me."

"Well...yeah."

"It's okay. She probably was wanting me to commit to a relationship or something."

"You're not upset?"

"Nah. It just means I'll have to look around for a new one."

He smirked at Roy, then he quickly wiped the look off his face when he noticed that Roy didn't seem amused. Turning back to the pool table, he wondered just how they had ever become best friends. They obviously didn't have much in common.

Roy was married, he wasn't. Roy like to do homey stuff, he didn't. Roy's idea of sex was probably doing the missionary position so his soul wouldn't rot in hell. How had he ended up spending all of
his time with a guy that was as bland as a vanilla milkshake?

Going back to the table, he lined up another ball and sighed. It was going to be a long morning.

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By the time they left the pool hall Gage felt relaxed for the first time all week. Looking across the interior of the car, he couldn't say the same for Roy. The man looked tense. He knew Joanne could be a real bitch, he had first hand experience, but was she really so bad at home that she could make Roy fear her? Was he really that henpecked or was he just a big worrywart?

As they drove along the highway and made their way back home, he took in the sights. Some things brought back memories others were just buildings and roads that were like a million others he'd seen.

Passing a gas station, he got a vision of attending to a heart attack victim. As soon as that memory faded another took its place. Closing his eyes to the images that flew by, he concentrated on those that were appearing in his mind. It seemed that each time he remembered something he'd get more details than before. The only bad part was the majority of those memories seemed to be work related. Things about his life outside the job seemed to not want to come back.

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Driving down the highway, he gripped the steering wheel tightly. What if Joanne smelled the beer on them? Would she be upset that he had gone out to a bar early in the day? What would she think about him being at a pool hall? He knew she never liked them when they were dating. Maybe she wouldn't care because Johnny suggested it. Maybe...maybe he needed to quit worrying so much.

Loosening his grip, he looked to his right. Gage had leaned back in the seat and had his eyes closed. At first he thought he was asleep, but when he opened his eyes and looked at store to their right he definitely wasn't. Gage seemed the opposite of how he felt. His posture was completely relaxed, his expression thoughtful.

Roy found himself wondering how he would have reacted had he been the one to lose his memory. What would it have been like to wake up and find out that a whole chunk of his life had disappeared? Thinking about all the things he would have missed...Jennifer's dance recitals, Chris learning how to finally slide into second base. All his days and nights with Joanne.

No wonder Gage's moods swung from high to low from moment to moment. The frustrations at not being able to recall people and places. The irritation at not remembering details of a picnic that he'd been to only a few weeks ago. No, Roy didn't know how he'd react, but he did know that he'd want to get back to some type of normal life as soon as possible.

The moment he thought it, he finally understood the looks of irritation that he'd been getting from the man beside him. They all wanted Gage to remember so they could get things back to normal. Well Gage was probably thinking the same thing, except his idea of normal wasn't like theirs. They wanted something that was gone and looked like it was never coming back.

Maybe it was time to let go of the past and concentrate on the future. When Gage asked to go home again, maybe he'd take him. Nothing was being accomplished by keeping him captive. Joanne and the kids were getting upset on a daily basis. Hell, he was waking up with a tight chest each morning. Yes...it was time to move on. It was time to see if they could rebuild the friendship they once had. The only problem with this...would Gage want to re-establish that relationship?

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Joanne heard the car pull into the driveway and looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost two-thirty. She knew they hadn't spent all day at the station. Folding a towel, she resisted the urge to run out to the kitchen to greet them. She didn't want to smother Gage. She could tell her constant attentions were irritating him and she couldn't blame him. He had no idea how close they had become and how much she missed talking to him about every day things.

Picking up a pair of boxers, she held them by the elastic waistband and smirked. They were so small compared to Roy's. It was like a teenager living in the house rather than a grown man. Gage ate like a kid and burned off the calories like a kid while Roy had to diet and cut back to remain at a normal weight.

Folding the boxers, she set them in one of the five piles of clothes. She knew Gage would be angry that she did his laundry, but it was easier to do a huge load than to have him do it separately. As she finished folding the remaining clothes, she heard the back door open and close, then the sounds of their voices reached her.

Gage was talking about a rescue, the excitement in his voice made her hopeful, then his voice grew softer and it was tinged with confusion. Roy's answer was the standard. It was okay. You're remembering more than before. With a sigh she placed the last folded shirt down. Nothing was happening. Gage wasn't remembering things any better than he had the entire week. Maybe it was time to give up. Maybe they should let go of any hopes of him getting his memories back.

Picking up Gage's clothes, she headed out to the kitchen and made a beeline to him.

"Well I see you two finally made it home."

Trying to act as casual as possible, she handed Gage his things.

"I hope you don't mind, but I figured as long as I was doing the laundry, I might as well do yours."

Looking at the clothes in his arms, Gage could feel himself blushing. His underwear was right on top of the pile. She'd been handling his underwear. He wanted to yell at her for doing it, but another part of him felt warm and fuzzy at having someone do something for him. He wasn't use to being taken care of and Joanne seemed to love making sure his life was easier than he could remember. How could he be mad at someone who actually cared about him?

"Uh...no...it's no problem. Thank you for washing them...my clothes."

"You're welcome Johnny."

Walking over to Roy, she reached up and gave him a quick kiss. As she pulled back, she eyed him. Was that beer she smelled? Then she noticed how tense Roy seemed. Had he and Gage gone to a nudie bar? No. There was no way her husband would ever do that no matter what. Or would he?

Taking a closer look at him, she figured out where they had been. The telltale blue chalk marks on Roy's clothes were a dead giveaway. They'd been playing pool. She frowned for a moment, then brushed it off. Why worry? It wasn't like Roy was going to be hanging around the pool hall all the time. She knew Gage had to have suggested them going there. She remembered him telling her one time how he liked playing pool, but never seemed to have the time to do it. "Any suggestions for dinner?"

Gage gave her a small grin. "Hamburgers."

Roy groaned and shook his head. "Don't you get enough of those at work?"
"There's nothin' wrong with hamburgers. Besides, I'm sure Joanne's tired of cooking so maybe you and I could grill them."

Did he just suggest to Roy that they grill them on the deck? What was wrong with him? When did he get so buddy buddy?

"Sure...I guess we could do that? Jo?"

Joanne couldn't help smiling. Dinner tonight would be more like old times. The five of them sitting on the deck, eating a nice picnic style dinner. "That sounds fine. I can make some potato salad and baked beans. Maybe I could run to the market and get some corn on the cob too. And dessert...does ice cream sound good to you?"

"Ice cream sounds fine. Can we have hot fudge too?"

"Sure Johnny. Roy do you have any favorites? Walnuts maybe? Cherries?"

"Both."

"Both it is."

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Dinner was better than she thought it would be. The food was perfect and best of all, Johnny was acting more like his old self, joking with the kids, bantering easily with Roy. The only let down for her was he still didn't seem to want to talk to her. He spoke to her when he needed something or when he wanted to tell her how good the food was, but beyond that he didn't speak to her.

Brushing her hair, she looked over her shoulder at Roy as he lay on the bed reading a book. He felt her looking at him and raised his head giving her a devilish grin. "You coming to bed soon?"

Biting the inside of her lip, she stood and slinked her way over to the bed. Taking the book from his hands, she dropped it on the nightstand. "Is this soon enough?"

Any worries about the lack of conversation with Johnny were soon forgotten as she and Roy played one of their favorite bedtime games, the cop and the stranded driver.

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Down the hall Gage turned off the nightlight and slid under the covers. Dinner had been nice for a change. He didn't find himself feeling all that uncomfortable and the kids were fun instead of annoying. He still found it hard to talk with Joanne but as time went on maybe things wouldn't be as strained.

Staring at the ceiling above him, he made a decision. Tomorrow when he made the trip to Rampart for his check up, he'd have a small talk with Brackett about when he could go back to work. He wanted to know now, not later, if he'd have to go through the paramedic program again. He knew the job inside and out, the problem would be convincing the powers that be that he could still do the job.

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Walking down the hall he looked at the people around him. Some he recognized, others were complete strangers. A young nurse walked by and smiled broadly at him. Turning slightly, he followed her form as she walked away from him. If it weren't for the appointment with Brackett, he
would have followed her to see if she knew him or not. If she did know him had they dated before? If she didn't know him, he would ask her out.

Threading his way past a group of people mingling in front of the nurse's desk, he gave a cocky grin as he waved a hand at Dixie who nodded at him while rolling her eyes. Some things never changed and for that he was grateful.

Pushing the button, he waited for the elevator. A nurse came and stood by him, her expression peeved. Looking at her nametag, he gave her a concerned look. S. Smythe. Did he know her? Was she mad at him? He could feel the anger beginning in the pit of his stomach. How in the hell was he supposed to know who was his friend or who he had words with. He looked down at the nurse, his voice snippy. "Do I know you?"

The woman started slightly, the miffed expression immediately disappearing. "What? Oh...yes you know me Johnny."

"Are you mad at me or something?"

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"I don't know." He ran a hand through his hair, tousling it into a tangled mass. "You come over here looking mad and I don't know if you're mad at me or if I did something. Heck, I didn't even know if I knew you."

A look of pity, which made him even more irritated, appeared on her face.

"I heard about your accident. I'm really sorry. I hope you get your memory back soon."

He stared down at her trying to not say something rude. He wasn't going to get his memory back and this was how his life was going to be from now on. One encounter after another of him not knowing whom he'd met or what he'd done.

"Look, I gotta' go."

Turning away from the nurse, he made his way down the hall to the stairwell, ignoring her as she called after him. When he was done his talk with Brackett, a visit with Dixie was in order. He was sick of the guessing games and if any one would know who he had met or dated at the hospital it would be her.

Jogging up the stairs, he pushed open the door and walked into the hall. He made a beeline to Brackett's office. The door was open, so he knocked on the frame as he came into the room. Brackett looked up and waved him to a seat.

"Come in and take a seat, I'll be with you in a moment."

Turning back to some forms on his desk, Brackett scribbled a few notes then closed the folder before him. Gage could see his name on the tab of the folder and immediately tensed. His future was in that stupid manila folder and all it would take was Brackett's yea or nay for him to go back to work. Well, his word and the opinions of a few higher ups at headquarters.

Brackett smiled at him and all Gage could think was he looked like a viper waiting to strike.

"So how have you been feeling Johnny?"

"Fine. I feel fine. When can I go back to work?"
Brackett held a hand up.

"Now hold on a minute. Let's take things one step at a time. Have you had any headaches? Blurred vision, trouble breathing? Have you had any type of chest pain?"

Rubbing a hand along a jean clad thigh, Gage resisted the urge to lie. As much as he wanted to go back to work, if Brackett found out he hadn't told the truth about how he felt, he'd be in deep shit. "I've had a coupla' headaches, but other than that, I feel fine."

Standing Brackett walked around the desk and nodded at him as he adjusted his stethoscope.

"I'd like to check your lungs. We could go to an exam room, but if you wouldn't mind, we could do it here."

"No I don't mind, go ahead."

Brackett hesitated for a second. He wasn't use to Gage being so co-operative. Leaning over Gage, he began his exam. "Breathe in. Okay, take a deep breath. Again." He shifted to the other side of Gage's back. "Breathe. Again." He paused and frowned. "Breathe deep again."

Gage knew something wasn't right by the look on Brackett's face.

Pulling the stethoscope off, Brackett gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm sending you down for a full exam and blood work. Your left lung sounds a little tight."

Unconsciously Gage ran a hand over the left side of his chest. Sure he had an occasional twinge of pain, but he wasn't sick. "I feel perfectly fine."

Brackett smiled a real smile this time. This was more like the Gage he knew. "I'm sure it's nothing, but you did inhale contaminated water. You could have an infection and the last thing we want is you having a case of pneumonia."

"Contaminated? No one said anything about the water having anything in it."

"Johnny, the water you were in was flooding a room, it didn't come out of a bottle and you weren't in a tub. Either way, you had something foreign in your lungs and now your body is reacting to it. I had hoped that the antibiotics we had put you on would have prevented this, but apparently your body has other ideas."

"Great, this just gets better and better."

Brackett gave him serious look. "You know you're really a lucky man."

"Lucky?! I drowned, I can't remember stuff that happened for the past few years and you call that lucky?"

"Yes, I do. You could be dead. You could be paralyzed or in a coma. How many rescues have you gone on where a drowning victim wasn't revived? Yes Johnny, I'd say you're very lucky."

Gage knew Brackett was right, but he was in a mood to sulk. "Well I don't feel lucky."

Shaking his head, Brackett pointed to the door. "I'll call down and they'll have an exam room ready and waiting. After they do the tests, you can wait for the results. I'd like to know what's wrong so we can start immediate treatment."

"Great. This is just great."
Pushing out of the chair, Gage stalked out of Brackett's office. As he made his way down the hall, he hoped that it wasn't anything bad because he wasn't in the mood to spend the night at the hospital. All he wanted to do was go home. If he had to stay here, someone was going to be the recipient of a major rant.

He sat in a corner of the waiting room irritated beyond belief. After being sent down to the exam room, Morton poked and prodded him and Dixie took what he thought amounted to a pint of blood. He was then ushered out of the room and down the hall to wait for the results.

Shifting his position, he fumed in silence. He knew they'd find some lame ass reason to keep him from going back on duty. A bronchial infection or pneumonia, he knew they'd pick one of those.

Stretching, he took a deep breath. He felt fine. There was nothing wrong with him. So what if he felt a slight tightness in his chest. It was because he was stressed out, not sick. Leaning back in the hard plastic seat he sighed. He was going to be off duty forever.

Looking around the room, he frowned. The people sitting across from him were the sick ones. A woman held a bloody towel to her arm, her face twisted in pain. Another woman had a tight grip on a screaming child, her expression harried. To his left sat a man softly moaning in pain.

He didn't belong with these people. He was healthy as a horse and he knew that Brackett was just picking at straws, trying to keep him off duty with a medical reason and not a mental one.

Sitting up, he began flipping through a pile of magazines sitting on the table beside him. A colorful book cover caught his attention. Picking the book up, he flipped through the pages, smiling at the images. Roy's kids loved this book. Heck, he thought that Roy liked it even more than the kids. Sam the Firefly.

Once he was done the book, he tossed it to the side. He was getting antsy. Standing, he made his way out of the waiting area. Walking down the hall he stared at the floor lost in thought. What would he do with his life if they refused to let him go back to work? His worries evaporated as he staggered back, then quickly recovered to grab the person he'd run into.

"Man, I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

The nurse he'd run into openly glared at him. "Can't you take a hint? I don't want to go out with you."

"Excuse me?"

She pulled roughly away from him. "Look I know how you are so I'd appreciate it if you'd quit bothering me."

"Ya' know, I don't even know who you are so you're wastin' your breath."

She smirked at him. "You don't know me? That's original. You've only asked me out five times."

"Maybe I asked you out and maybe I didn't, but you won't have to worry about me asking you now."

"Johnny?" Gage and the nurse turned to look at Dixie who had come up behind them. "I've been looking for you. Kel has your results, he's waiting in room three."

"Thanks Dix." Without giving the nurse a second thought, he strode down the hall.
Dixie arched an eyebrow at the nurse. "Was there a problem Sara?"

"Yes there's a problem. 'Mister' Gage won't stop bothering me."

"What did he do?"

"He practically ran me over in the hall, then he denied he even knew me."

Dixie smiled at her. "He probably doesn't remember you. He has partial amnesia."

Sara gave Dixie a look of disbelief. "You're joking."

"I wish I were."

"So he really didn't know me?"

Dixie nodded her head in affirmation.

Sara looked down the hall in the direction that Gage went. "I guess the next time I see him, I should apologize."

"I think he'd like that. Things have been pretty rough for him lately."

Dixie knew those words were an understatement and as she and Sara parted company, she hoped that Gage's life would get back on track.

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Pushing the door open, Gage walked in the exam room and went straight to the point. "So what's the verdict Doc?"

Brackett held a folder tightly in his hands knowing that the man standing before him was not going to be a happy camper. "Your left lung has an infection..."

"It figures."

"It not bad, but we're going to put you on a series of antibiotics to make sure it doesn't get worse."

Gage placed a hand on his chest, his voice rising. "You 'had' me on antibiotics!"

"Well you're going to be on them again and you'll stay on them until this infection clears up!"

"Okay, fine...whatever. How long do you think this'll take?"

"A week, possibly two."

Gage bit his tongue resisting the urge to curse. Two weeks was ridiculous. He wanted to get back to doing what he was trained to do. "And once the infection's clear, 'then' can I go back to work?"

He could see Brackett hesitation and decided it was time to be pushy.

"Don't jerk me around, I want the truth. Are you gonna' let me go back on duty or am I supposed sit around the rest of my life doing nothing?"

"The truth?"

"Yeah, the truth and don't candy coat it."
Brackett looked him directly in the eye, his expression serious. "Once the infection clears, you'll be given a thorough physical and mental work up. If you pass those, you'll be given the paramedic exam. If you pass that, then you'll be placed on a three month probationary period."

Gage stared at Brackett, not believing he had to jump through all those hoops to get his job back, but at the same time he breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't going to have to go through the entire program again, but he also couldn't stop the words from coming out of his mouth. "I'm not a probe, I know my job."

"You're going to have to prove it."

"What genius made this decision?"

"Several people, myself included, discussed it. What happened to you is a first so there aren't any set rules as to how to go about dealing with it."

"So a group...you, the Department and whoever, sat down and decided all of this. Instead of me getting to go back to work, I have to go through all of that?"

Brackett shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I'm afraid so."

Gage again resisted the urge to yell or curse. He'd play their game and when it was all over, he'd have his job back and that's all he wanted. "Fine. I'll take the drugs, take your tests and then I'll be back where I belong."

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Parking in front of the DeSoto's home, Gage sat in the Rover contemplating the bottle of pills in his hand. If he were lucky, in one week he'd be getting prepared to take some tests. Looking up, he sighed. He didn't want to stay here any longer. He was getting too use to the routine. Heck, he had to admit to himself that he was getting a bit too attached to Roy's little girl, but he was also feeling suffocated. He wanted to go home. All he had to do was convince Roy that he would be okay. The man was more smothering with his attentions than Joanne at times.

Opening the glove compartment, he chucked the bottle of pills in and snapped the door shut. He was going home no matter what Roy said. As he walked up to the house, he figured he could pack his things and be home by dinnertime. Home. It was still weird thinking that he owned a house, but at the same time it gave him a warm feeling. It had been a long time since he could say he had a home.

Out of habit, he tapped on the back door before entering the house. Joanne and Roy had told him it wasn't necessary, he was family, but to him it didn't feel right. He felt like an intruder. No...a guest. A guest without a clue as to why he was there. Joanne turned to him with a big smile on her face. "So how'd it go?"

He shrugged his shoulders, feeling weird again. He still couldn't see him and Joanne being friends. She was...had been...too angry, too hateful for him to believe he had forgiven her for all the nasty attitude that she had thrown his way. "I have an infection in one of my lungs."

Joanne's smile vanished and was replaced by an expression of deep concern. "Is it bad? Are you going to be okay?"

"It's not that bad. In fact Brackett thinks it should clear up in about a week."

"That's good news then."
"Yeah."

They stood looking at one another and Gage could feel himself growing tense. "Uh...is Roy around?"

"He's in the garage polishing his baby."

"His what?"

"The Porsche."

"Oh. Well I'm gonna' go and talk with him."

"Okay. Tell him dinner'll be ready in an hour. I'm making fried chicken."

Gage could feel himself starting to smile and couldn't stop it. He loved fried chicken. In fact Joanne had been making all of his favorite foods the entire time he had been staying there. "I'll let 'em know."

Making his way out to the garage, he decided he'd stay until after dinner.

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Rubbing a spot on the rear bumper, Roy concentrated on buffing out the small scratch. How had it happened? He didn't remember bumping into anything. How could someone have done this and not tell him?!

The door to the garage opened and Gage walked in. Roy pointed at the scratch, his voice rising. "Look at this! Someone scratched her...my car."

Leaning down, Gage squinted at the small scratch. "It's not that bad, you can buff it out."

"That's not the point. They did this and didn't have the courtesy to let me know."

"Maybe 'they' didn't know they did it."

"Yeah...maybe."

Roy went back to rubbing at the spot causing Gage to smile. It was the first time all week that Roy hadn't immediately asked him how he was doing. He wanted to keep quite about his exam, but he also wanted to get this small talk out of the way. "Brackett found an infection in one of my lungs. He put me on antibiotics and said I should be clear in about a week."

Roy's buffing stopped and he gave him a concerned look. "An infection?"

"A small one."

Roy went back to buffing. A small infection could lead to something more serious. It was a good thing Gage was staying at their place so he could keep an eye on him.

"I'm gonna' go home tonight after dinner."

Roy stopped buffing the bumper and stood up. "I don't think that's a good idea. You're not a hundred percent yet and..."

"Roy, it's a little infection. I feel fine and I want to go home."
Roy wadded up the rag in his hand, then tossed it onto the shelf behind him. "Why don't you stay a few more days just to be on the safe side."

Gage's voice grew irritated. "Safe? Come on Roy it's a minor infection. I've dealt with things worse than this on my own. I don't need to be hovered over."

"Hovered? Who's hovering?"

Gage frowned. "You hover, Joanne hovers, and your son hovers."

Roy smirked slightly. "What about Jennifer?"

Gage waved a hand at him. "She's just a little kid, she doesn't know what she's doing."

"Yes she does. We all do. It's called caring Johnny, not hovering. We care about you, that's all."

"Well I'd appreciate if you'd care without hovering."

Roy could see that there would be no talking Gage out of leaving. Hell, he'd been lucky enough to have kept him there for an entire week. He would just have to make a point of checking up on him every day. "It's your choice."

"Yeah it is and I'm going home tonight."

Roy sighed and reached over to the bench and picked up a container of rubbing compound and a clean rag. Bending down, he went back to the task of buffing out the scratch.

Gage was a bit surprised when Roy caved in so easily. He was also a bit put out about being ignored as Roy's entire attention centered on the car's bumper again. Walking around the garage, he fiddled with a socket wrench. "Joanne said dinner'll be ready in about an hour."

Roy looked up briefly. "What's she making?"

The smile worked its way to Gage's face again. "Fried chicken."

Roy grinned back at him. "I love her fried chicken."

Gage patted his flat stomach. "Yeah so do I."

Roy turned his attention back to the bumper. It was no accident that they were having fried chicken. Joanne had gone out of her way all week to make sure she had prepared meals that Johnny liked. That meant that he benefited indirectly being that Johnny was never on a diet and all the foods he liked were extremely tasty and highly fatty.

"Roy, I don't want you to think I don't appreciate what you've done for me, but I need to go home. You know what I mean?"

Roy nodded his head in understanding. "If you're not use to having a family it can get a bit overwhelming."

"You ain't kiddin'."

Gage had the grace to look guilty the moment the words left his mouth causing Roy to chuckle. "Don't feel guilty. I sometimes wonder how Jo and I deal with it."

They spent the rest of the time before dinner talking about work. Gage questioned Roy on the
changes that had taken place in the past few years and was amazed at how much the job had changed. By the time Joanne sent Chris out to tell them that dinner was ready, Roy had promised Gage that he would help him study for his re-certification.

While they were eating, Gage announced that he was going to go home after dinner drawing cries of disappointment from Jennifer, disinterest from Chris and a look of disapproval from Joanne.

After dinner, he made a quick exit to what was his room and began packing. He felt someone staring at him and as he turned, he resisted the urge to start laughing. Jennifer stood in the doorway looking pathetically sad. In the short week that he had been at the DeSoto’s, he had come to the conclusion that the little girl was a master manipulator.

"Well hi there Jenny, whatcha' doin'?"

"Don't gooooooo!"

He couldn't hold the smile back. "Jennifer, I can't stay here forever."

"But I don't want ya' ta' go."

"Jenny, this isn't my home."

Jennifer sniffled dramatically. "But you don't' 'member me yet."

The tears began to slowly track down her cheeks. Feeling guilty, Gage held his arms out and Jennifer immediately rushed into his embrace, tucking her head on his shoulder. Patting her back, he reassured her.

After a moment he held her slightly away and looked her directly in the eyes as he wiped the tears from her face. "Just because I don't remember the old stuff we use to do together it doesn't mean we can't make new memories."

Gage couldn't believe himself. When in the hell did he get so soft and mushy? He was telling this little girl he'd spend time with her in the future when he didn't even know if he was interested in hanging around Roy's family. It wasn't exactly the life of a bachelor to spend his down time with a family when there were all those single nurses needing his attention.

Jennifer on the other hand wasn't about to let him go home without a little more arguing. "Mom said if you left, you wouldn't take care of yourself. You'd get real sick like last time."

Gage couldn't remember what last time Jennifer was referring to. All he knew was he wanted to get packed and go home and he wouldn't be doing that until he got Jennifer to give up on keeping him captive. "What if I promise to call you everyday so you can see that I'm okay?"

Jennifer gave him a wary look. "You promise?"

"I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die."

The sad face before him immediately transformed itself into a winning smile. She reached out and hugged him tightly. As she released him, she spoke the words he was hoping to hear. "Can I help you pack?"

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Pushing the door open with a foot, he carried the suitcase in and dropped it down with a loud thud.
Before he had a chance to close the door, a ball of orange fur dashed in past him and headed straight to the kitchen. With a tired sigh, Gage shut the door, then followed the cat into the room.

"Now that's a real friendly greeting. I come home and all you want is food."

Oscar looked up at him and meowed loudly as he walked in and around Gage's legs.

"All right, all right, I'm gettin' it."

Digging around in the pantry, he found a bag of dry food. Looking around the kitchen, he didn't see a bowl so he took a plate and poured some food onto it. As the kibble hit the plate, Oscar stretched up and picked his claws on one of Gage's legs.

"Hey, knock it off!"

Gently pushing Oscar away, Gage set the plate of food down and watched him eat. Crouching down, he ran a hand over the cat, smiling as the tabby arched his back into his hand.

Standing, he walked over to the refrigerator, then changed his mind. He was still full from dinner. Making his way out to the living room, he looked at the suitcase, then at the sofa. The sofa won out.

Turning on the television, he flipped the channels until he found something decent, then flopped down on the sofa. Sighing he settled back hoping to relax and enjoy the quiet. The only problem was it was too quiet.

Pushing off the sofa, he walked over to a desk in the corner of the room. Papers and envelopes were surprisingly stacked in neat piles or put away. Since when was he organized?

Picking up a stack of papers, he went through it, whistling at the amounts of money he owed. The mortgage, the utilities and the food alone were astronomical. Setting the pile down he picked up a recent pay stub. Well, at least he made more money.

Going though the past few pay stubs, he found he worked a lot of overtime shifts. Apparently that was how he could afford living here. Dropping the pay stubs, he frowned. Was owning a home really worth working himself to death?

Walking back to the sofa, he flopped back down. Running a hand through his hair, he sighed. Maybe owning his own place was worth working hard for it, but if he worked a lot of overtime, when did he get the chance to enjoy the place?

His attention was drawn to a folded magazine sitting on the coffee table. Picking it up, he found the real reason for his overtime shifts. Circled in pencil was a horse for sale. Flipping through the magazine, he found several others circled. He was saving up to buy a horse.

Lying back on the sofa, his thoughts wandered to the empty barn out back. If he bought a horse, how was he going to afford the feed and vet bills? Who would take care of it when he was at work? Tossing the paper down, he shook his head. He had to be nuts if he thought he could own a horse and pay for the house at the same time. Maybe some day, but not right now.

His thoughts were interrupted and the breath rushed out of his lungs as Oscar jumped on his chest.

"Umffffff! Oscar!"

The cat rubbed his face on the hand that was prepared to propel him to the floor. Gage immediately began petting the cat, smiling as the feline settled on his chest like a large orange meatloaf. The purrs
that followed relaxed him.

The remainder of his night was spent on the sofa napping along with Oscar. He woke once to the late show playing. He should get up and go to bed. He should get up and let Oscar out. Instead he closed his eyes and followed Oscar's lead. Sleep, relax and forget all his troubles, they could be dealt with in the morning.

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Popping the pill in his mouth, Gage chased it with a large swig of water. Placing the glass back on the sink, he took a close look at his reflection in the mirror. Shaking his head, he turned away and walked into the bedroom. Pulling a pair of faded jeans on, he frowned as he buttoned them. Brackett was going to give him hell for losing weight, but he couldn't help it. He was too keyed up to eat. All he could think of was getting back on the job. Every spare minute was spent studying the paramedic manuals or thinking about studying them.

Speaking of said manuals, he had a date to keep. Roy had promised they could do some studying together and that meant him going over to the DeSoto's. A part of him was glad to be going, but another part of him was reluctant to go. He could tell they were still hoping that he'd remember them the way he used to. He knew it wasn't going to happen and so did they, but they just wouldn't give up in hoping.

Scooping the books up, he headed out to his truck. As he made his way to the vehicle, his eyes rested on the empty barn. There had to be a way he could buy a horse and not go broke, he just hadn't figured it out yet. Living here meant a long commute to work. If he was going to put himself through that, then he deserved some kind of reward.

Getting into the Rover, he started it and drove down the dirt lane. He was going to get a horse come hell or high water. Roy had said he was pretty close with his neighbors so maybe he could make some type of arrangement to watch the animal when he was on duty.

Making his way down the highway, he switched on the radio and turned the volume up. By the time he'd made it to Roy's house, he'd worked himself into a good mood. He was going to buy a horse, he had a great house and he was going to be back on the job soon. Life was pretty damn good.

Pulling into the driveway, he parked the Rover and picked up the manuals. As he made his way up to the house, Jennifer came running out to greet him.

"Uncle Johnny, Mom said that if you wanted to you could spend the night!"

Gage stopped in his tracks and regarded the small girl as she stood before him. She smiled brightly up at him, her expression completely open. She trusted him. Deep down inside, he knew this child loved him. He didn't know if he could handle it. Every time he opened up to someone, he always ended up getting burnt. Before he could say no, she grabbed him by the hand and pulled him toward the house.

"We're having roast meat, smashed potatoes, gravy, rolls, an' corn." She grinned at him, the pride shining in her eyes. "Me an' Mom made cookies for dessert."

"What kind?"

"Your favorite." Her voice lowered dramatically. "Peanut butter."

"That was really nice of you to make my favorite cookies."
Jennifer pushed the back door open and urged him into the kitchen. "Dad, Uncle Johnny's here and he brought his books again!" She let go of his hand and gave him a solemn look. "When you get done studyin', can you play with me?"

Gage stared down at Jennifer, not knowing what to say. Play with her? What in the world had his life come to? He had engrained himself into the lives of a family to the point that he was the object of a child's adoration and affection. He'd promised himself that he'd never trust anyone again and it looked like he had gone a bit overboard in that department. The words left his lips without him meaning them to. "Sure sweetheart."

Jennifer rewarded him with a wide toothy smile and was about to say something else, but was interrupted by Joanne who walked into the kitchen and headed directly to the stove. As she opened the oven door and checked on the roast she spoke over her shoulder. "Hi Johnny. Jennifer, go wash your hands and tell Chris that supper will be ready in twenty minutes."

Jennifer's smile turned into a pout. "If dinner's in twenty minutes, then why do I hafta' wash my hands now?"

Joanne closed the door to the oven and walked over to Jennifer. Placing a hand on her back, she gave a slight push. "Because by the time you go tell Chris to get ready and you actually do wash your hands, supper will be on the table."

"But Mom..."

"No buts. Skiddaddle."

Jennifer's pout grew and she stomped out of the kitchen. Joanne shook her head and gave Gage a smile. "So how are you feeling today?"

"Pretty good actually."

She ran an appraising eye over him, immediately noticing the weight loss. Roy could lose a few pounds and no one would ever notice, but let Gage lose the weight and it was glaringly obvious he wasn't eating right. "I hope you brought your appetite with you."

Patting his stomach, he smiled. "Yeah I brought it with me. Although I'm gonna' hafta' watch what I eat 'cause Jen said you two made peanut butter cookies."

Going over to a cupboard, Joanne pulled out the dinner plates. Without thinking about what he was doing, Gage put the manuals down and smoothly took the plates from her. Pulling a drawer open, he picked out the silverware and headed to the dining room.

Joanne followed him into the dining room and watched as he set the table. It seemed so normal, like nothing had ever changed. When he turned to go back in the kitchen and saw her watching him, he seemed almost embarrassed.

"Don't worry, you always set the table." Joanne thought for a second and suppressed a smile. "You usually do the dishes too."

He frowned at her. "I do? Then how come you didn't make me do the dishes last week?"

Snickering, Joanne went back into the kitchen. "Johnny, you never do the dishes. You told me that since you end up doing them all the time at the station, you weren't about to do them anywhere else."

"I don't do the dishes 'all' the time."
Joanne arched an eyebrow at him and Gage frowned.  

"Okay, so I'm lousy at cards, but I don't lose all the time ya' know."

Snickering, Joanne pulled on two oven mitts and took the roast out of the oven. It was almost like it had been before the accident. They were talking together and joking so easily.

As she set the roast down and began carving it, she noticed that he was beginning to fidget. She knew it had been too good to be true.

"Roy'll be down in a few minutes. He did some work on the wagon and had to get a shower."

Gage nodded his head in acknowledgement. Picking up one of the books on the counter, he leafed through it until he found the section that he had left off at. The relaxed feeling that he had only moments ago evaporated and was replaced by the tense mistrust that he was use to feeling around Joanne.

It confused the hell out of him to have his emotions seesaw up and down the way they did. Maybe it was him. Maybe he was the reason for him and Joanne not getting along. It seemed as though she was more upset at him not talking with her, than when he wasn't talking.

Reading the same paragraph a third time, he closed the book. Maybe it was time for him to close a chapter of his life as well. He knew what he felt, but he also knew that he had changed over those missing years and so had she. "Joanne...I wish I could remember how we are...I mean you and me...ah, you know what I mean."

Opening a can of corn, she dumped it in a pot and set it on the stove. Turning to him, she could see frustration and even a touch of anger in his expression. "It's okay Johnny. I think I...all of us...know that there's a good possibility that you're never going to get your memories back."

Wiping her hands on a towel, she took a can of biscuits out of the refrigerator and with more force than was necessary she smacked the tube against the counter. As she place the round circles of dough on a cookie sheet, she sighed. "I know we've talked about this, but believe it or not, we are good friends. It took a while, but once we got use to one another...Johnny, you're the closest thing I have to a brother and I don't want to lose that."

Looking at him, she almost laughed. He had that scared little boy look that he wore so often when she would tease and flirt with him.

"Like a brother huh?"

"Yes."

Turning away from him, she placed the sheet of biscuits in the oven. Walking over to Gage, she smiled up at him. "I know this is a bit daunting, but I'm hoping we can be like that again."

Running a hand through his hair, Gage let out a nervous laugh. "I can try...I mean it's not like I won't be seeing Roy. And there's always the company picnics."

"I hope you see us more than the picnics. I expect you to come over once in a while for dinner or picnics here." She gave him a gentle poke in his stomach. "Someone has to make sure you don't starve to death."

The smile that appeared on his face this time was more relaxed as he backed away from her touch. "I'm not gonna' starve to death."
"At least not tonight."

Looking at the clock on the wall, she went over to the stove and stirred the corn.

"Dinner'll be ready in a jiff. Could you go round up the troops?"

"Sure...no problem."

As Gage left the kitchen, Joanne knew this was something of a new beginning. Her finally saying out loud that she knew he wasn't going to remember the past set the stage for them laying down the foundation of a new relationship.

With an evil smile, she checked on the biscuits. Maybe this time around, she'd be able to set him up with the right woman.

*************************

Dinner was a typical DeSoto affair. The kids tried to jog his memory and Roy and Joanne reprimanded them. The bad part was he did remember a few things. Or at least he thought he did, but everything was becoming a blur. He'd had so many people throw out things from his past that he was probably recalling what they told him, not the actual occurrence.

It bugged him to the point that he felt like yelling at them to shut the hell up, but as he looked around the table, he knew he could never do that. These people cared about him. His co-workers all acted like they truly liked and respected him...with the exception of Kelly. He still hadn't figured out if they were friends or if he was just a patsy for the guy's pranks.

Poking at the meat on his plate, he hoped that once he was back at work, people would just accept things the way they were. Joanne had said she hoped they could start over. That's what he wanted with everyone else. They were the ones who were having a problem with moving on with their lives, not him. He was the one who had lost his past, but if he couldn't remember it, then what was the big deal?

Stabbing a piece of meat, he shoved it angrily in his mouth drawing a look from Roy. Ignoring him, he remained silent. If he told Roy that he didn't care about his lost memories, the man would think he was loopy. Sure it would be nice if he regained them because then everyone would stop yapping about it to him! He also wouldn't have to jump through any hoops to get his job back.

"Johnny, do you want another piece of meat?"

"Huh?"

Joanne was holding the platter out to him; a fork poised above it, ready to hand him over another large piece of roast..

'Uh...yeah...sure. Thanks."

He knew he'd given the right answer when she smiled. It was easy to make her happy. All he had to do was eat the food she cooked and talk to her. If everyone else were like this, his life would be a heck of a lot easier.

*************************

Chewing on the end of a pencil, he could hear the clatter of dishes in the background as Joanne cleaned up the remnants of dinner. Scribbling a few notes on the paper before him, he wondered if
Brackett was devising a ball-busting test or if he was going to give him a standard re-certification exam.

"Are you ready?"

Setting the pencil down, he shot Roy a cocky grin as he sat back and crossed his hands behind his head. "Take your best shot."

For the next twenty minutes he flawlessly answered question after question. He knew he was ready for anything they would throw at him when Roy's face split into a wide smile. Snapping the manual shut, Roy smiled again. "You won't have a problem passing the test."

"I told you I knew my stuff."

"Yes you did, but now you have to show Brackett and the review board as well."

Gage snapped his fingers. "Piece of cake. Tomorrow I go see Early for my physical, then all I have to do is wait for the test and we both know I'm gonna' ace it."

Roy scratched idly at his chin, feeling uneasy bringing the subject up. "Um...what about the...you know...the mental review."

Surprisingly Gage smiled. "Early's doing that too."

"He is?"

"Yup. Tomorrow I kill too birds with one stone. Before you know it, I'll be back at the station."

*************************

Walking down the hall, he nodded and smiled at anyone who acknowledged him, whether he knew them or not. In the past few weeks he had discovered that if he faked remembering things, people wouldn't make such a big deal out of his current condition.

As he neared the nurse's station, he grinned. Dixie was busy directing patients and nurses like a sergeant directing his troops. She looked in his direction and her face broke into a large smile. Inwardly he felt a warm fuzzy feeling. He was her favorite. Sure she treated everyone the same, but deep down inside he knew he was special to her. The reasons he didn't know and he really didn't care. Just knowing she liked him so much made him feel good.

"Well hi there Johnny! Are you ready to see Joe?"

"Am I ready? Heck yeah, I'm more than ready."

He gave her a cocky grin and she arched an eyebrow at him, not missing the inflections he added to his statement. It wasn't like he'd ever date her, but heavy flirting was another story.

"Johnny, what am I going to do with you?"

Leaning against the counter, he smiled innocently. "I don't know, you tell me."

Shaking her head, Dixie tapped him lightly on the arm with a clipboard. "You're a bad boy."

"Someone has to be."

The smile never left her face as she gestured down the hall. "He's in treatment one."
"Thanks Dix."

As Gage strode down the hall, Dixie's eyes followed him. The bounce was back in his step and he was acting more and more like his old self. She was sure that he'd pass all the tests, mental and physical and that meant that one of her favorite paramedics would soon be back on duty.

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Poking his head in the room, Gage cleared his throat. "Are you ready for me, Doctor Early?"

Early turned and waved him in, then patted the exam table. "Hop right up so we can get this show on the road."

Gage couldn't help grinning. The difference between Early and Brackett was like night and day. He hardly ever felt stressed when he was around the man.

"So Johnny, how're you feeling?"

"Like a million bucks."

"Well, how about I verify that."

Early poked and prodded him, but it never irritated him the way it did when Brackett or Morton did it. Early always joked or talked about sports. Brackett was so stiff sometimes that Gage thought he had a stick up his ass and Morton was about as gentle as a green horse that had been stung by a bee.

As Early checked his lungs, Gage remained silent. He knew he was fine, but it was up to Early to clear him. If his lungs weren't clear, it would mean another week of his life wasted sitting around the house doing nothing.

The exam continued. His blood pressure, weight and everything else was checked. Walking away from the exam table, Early jotted some notes down on a clipboard. He wore a slight frown as he turned back to him.

"Your lungs sound clear, but I'm worried about this weight loss."

Early looked him directly in the eye and he shrugged his shoulders. "I've been too busy studying to eat." Early stared blankly at him. "It's the truth! Ask Roy. I've been studying every single spare minute and then some."

Tapping his pencil on the clipboard, Early frowned. "You've lost close to six pounds in one week. That's a bit much don't you think?"

He busted his ass studying all week and now he was going to be punished for it? When was he going to get a break? Placing a hand on his chest, his voice rose in irritation. "So I lost a few pounds! I was too busy getting ready for the 'test' that Brackett's gonna' spring on me."

He could feel his blood pressure rising with each word. Lucky for him, Early had already taken his heart rate and pressure or he would have had inaccurate readings on them.

"That doesn't mean you stop eating Johnny. Your body recently went through a traumatic experience and you abusing it is not going to help you any."

"I'm not abusing myself, I was busy studying."

Early looked at the clipboard and then back at Gage before scribbling a few notes. "How do you feel
about having to be re-certified?"

"How do I feel? I'll tell you how I feel."

Early suppressed a smile as Gage began what he knew to be a typical rant.

"I know my job! I think it's ridiculous that I have to take a test and I'm tired of people asking me how I feel. Okay, so I can't remember people or some things I've done, but I can answer any question out of the paramedic manuals without batting an eye. Do you know what it's like to have everyone staring at me like I'm a freak show? Feeling sorry for me? I'm sick of it!"

Clamping his mouth shut, Gage tried to get his anger under control. Knowing his luck, Early would have him committed to the psychiatric ward for extra evaluation. To his surprise, Early smiled at him.

"I'm sure you are, but we have to make sure you're physically and mentally prepared to go back on duty. We're only doing 'our' jobs."

"Well...yeah, I know that, but do you have to run me through the ringers to do it?"

"Yes Johnny we do. You know as well as I do that you have to be in top shape to do the job that you do. If we send you out in the field knowing that you're not ready, then we've failed and the people whose lives depend on you have also been put at risk."

Running a hand through his hair, he left it in a disheveled mess. "Look, have I passed the physical or not?"

"Physically you're fine, mentally...it's understandable that you're frustrated. The good thing is it's because of how the people around you are acting, not because you've lost your memories."

"Well, I can't do nothing to bring them back, so why keep harping on it? It's Roy and Joanne and everyone else that can't accept that I'll never remember stuff."

"You don't think you'll ever get your memories back?"

"If I was going to get them back, I think they would've come back already. What do you think?"

Taking a deep breath, Early scribbled another note. "More than likely you'll never regain all of your lost memories. You might experience small flashes of your past..."

"Yeah, I know. On, off, on, off. I feel like a light switch."

Early smiled and wrote a few more notes before looking at Gage again. "I'll let Kel know you're clear to take the test."

Gage stared back at him dumbfounded. "That's it? I'm done?"

"Other than the weight loss, you're fine." Tearing off a sheet of paper, Early handed it to him. "I want you to follow this diet and exercise program. If you haven't regained the lost weight in three weeks, we'll have to see about putting you on supplements."

Looking at the paper in his hand, Gage smiled. "Oh don't you worry, I'll gain the weight back in less than a week." Jumping off of the exam table, he held a hand out to Early. "Thanks a lot Doc."

Shaking Early's hand, he left the treatment room and headed down the hall at a fast pace. He wanted to get out of there and do some celebrating. He was back in business!
He had to resist the urge to run as he made his way past the nurse's station and an extremely curious looking Dixie. Yes it was rude, but he didn't want to stop and chance Early coming down the hall and telling him he had changed his mind.

Pushing the doors open, he picked up his pace and finally gave into his feelings. With a broad grin on his face, he ran across the parking lot to his truck. Jumping in the cab, he slapped the dash and let out an exuberant whoop of joy.

Starting the vehicle, he turned on the radio and jacked the volume on high as he shoved a tape into the player in the dash. The strains of Boston's, "Don't Look Back" filled the cab. It was an appropriate tune. He didn't want to look back; he wanted to look to the future.

So what if he looked like an idiot as he drove out of the parking lot, he felt great! Singing at the top of his lungs along with the song, he waved at a pair of nurses who shook their heads at him, laughing at his antics.

By the time he pulled up to the DeSoto's house, he had wound himself into a frenzied state. He knew he had to calm down or Roy would think he had lost it. The man didn't have a clue as far as emotions were concerned. Gage giggled as he thought about Roy singing along with the radio. He doubted he even owned any rock music let alone sang to it.

He paused for a second, then laughed out loud. He had to take that thought back. Roy did own some Beetles albums. Just once he would love to drag Roy to a Led Zeppelin concert to see him freak out. The fumes alone from the pot being smoked would probably send him into cardiac arrest if a beer before lunch spazzed him.

Composing himself, Gage took a few deep breaths before knocking on the back door. He bounced in place as he impatiently waited for the door to be opened. When the door pulled back, he stepped in and grinned like a mad man as he looked down at Jennifer. Scooping her up before she had a chance to speak, he twirled her around and danced about the kitchen, chanting in a singsong voice.

"I'm gettin' my job back! I'm gettin' my job back! I'm gettin' my job back!"

Rubbing a hand over tired eyes, Roy sighed as he looked at the checkbook in his hand and the bills on the desk before him. He'd have to pull a few overtime shifts to make ends meet. With Chris being scheduled to have braces money was going to be beyond tight.

It was times like these that made him wonder why he didn't take the engineer position. As he wrote out a check to pay for a repair to the station wagon, he sighed. He knew why he didn't take the job. He loved the one he was doing and he enjoyed working with the guys on his shift. He smiled slightly as he thought of his partner. Gage was another big reason why he stayed in the position of paramedic. Every day with him was an adventure.

His hand stilled as he heard someone singing. No, not singing, it was more of a chant. Gage? Looking at his watch, he frowned. Shouldn't he have been at Rampart getting his physical and mental review? It couldn't have been over already. Could it?

Dropping the pen, he closed the checkbook and pushed away from the desk. As he made his way through the house and to the kitchen, the voice that he heard was definitely Gage's and he sounded happier than he'd heard him in a long time.
He stopped in the entryway to the kitchen, staring at the pair dancing around the room. Jennifer laughed as Gage twirled around in a tight circle, then came to a stop directly in front of Roy. He sang out loudly. "I'm gettin' my job back!"

Bouncing Jennifer up and down in his arms, he wiggled his eyebrows at Roy, his voice gleeful as he spoke. "Early passed me. All I hafta' do now is take that stupid test and I'm back."

Roy knew his own smile matched Gage's. "That's great news."

He wanted to grab Gage in a big hug and jump up and down like a fool, but it wouldn't look very dignified or grown up to do it, so as always he restrained himself. Gage on the other hand had no qualms about expressing how he felt as Joanne walked up behind Roy.

"Hi Johnny. How did things..."

Before she knew what was happening, Gage thrust Jennifer into Roy's arms and grabbed Joanne in a hug. Lifting her off of her feet, he bounced her up and down just as he had Jennifer. "I'm gettin' my job back, that's what's happening!"

"Johnny! Put me down!" Joanne giggled as Gage set her down, then she quickly reached up and hugged him tightly. "I'm so happy for you Johnny!"

Roy watched them, feeling a bit envious at how easily they expressed how they felt. He wished he would have followed his own feelings, but for some reason the idea of hugging Gage and dancing around the kitchen didn't strike him as all that manly. He settled with hugging Jennifer instead.

Pulling away from Gage, Joanne headed straight for the refrigerator. "We need to celebrate!" Grabbing a container of grape juice, she smirked at them. "This'll have to do for champagne."

"Champagne, grape juice, whatever, I'm just glad Early cleared me."

As Joanne poured the juice in the glasses, Roy set Jennifer down who immediately went back to Gage who scooped her up. He smiled again at Roy and crowed happily. "Bring on the test!"

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Sitting at the desk, Gage took a deep breath as he fiddled with the pencil in his hands. His eyes nervously tracked Brackett as he walked into the room. There it was. The small pile of papers in Brackett's hands would determine whether or not he got his job back.

"Good morning Johnny. Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Good."

Setting the stack of papers on the desk in front of Gage, Brackett made his way back to the desk at the front of the room. Looking at his watch, he nodded at Gage. "You may begin."

Gage flipped the first page off of the pile and paused in disbelief. Then a wide smile appeared on his face. There would be no tricks or surprises in store for him. Thumbing through the papers, he quickly flipped back to the first page and began answering the questions. It was a standard paramedic recertification exam. It would be a piece of cake!
Pulling into the parking lot, he breathed deeply, then exhaled slowly. He didn't want to start his day off by hyperventilating. Running toward the building, he jumped over a large mud puddle and laughed as cleared it. Hell, he had a reason to be happy. He'd aced the written exam and had been reinstated as a paramedic. Sure he was on probation, but he really didn't give a shit. He was back where he belonged. He was home.

Pushing the door open, he walked into the kitchen and made a beeline for the locker room. Shaking the rain off his jacket, he spoke in a loud voice, sure he'd get a reaction from one of the men in the room. "Isn't it a beautiful day!"

Chet looked up from tying a shoe and frowned. "You're nuts! It's pouring outside."

"Chet my man, it's a beautiful day despite the rain."

He reached for the handle of his locker, then stopped. Casting a look of distrust in Chet's direction, he stepped to the side before opening it. A splash of water flung out and landed on the floor. With a smug look, Gage stepped back in front of the locker and began undressing. Chet's look of confusion wasn't lost on Gage. Neither were the smiles on Marco and Roy's faces. As he unbuttoned his shirt, Gage nodded at them. "Mornin' Roy. Marco."

Marco snickered and grinned at Chet who rolled his eyes. "Welcome back Johnny."

Chet muttered under his breath and slammed his locker shut before leaving the room. Leaning back slightly to look through the glass of the door, Gage waited a second before reaching in his locker and removing the spring loaded devise. Moving over to Chet's locker, he set it up. Jogging into the bathroom, he came back with a cup of water that he carefully poured it into the container. Closing the locker door, he went back to changing.

Roy shook his head and smiled. "Chet's not going to be happy about that."

Gage shrugged his shoulders. "So what." Unbuttoning his jeans, Gage smiled. "He had better get use to it 'cause I'm not gonna' put up with his shenanigans this time around."

Marco looked at Gage's face and knew by his expression that he was serious. Roy's smile faded.

"I remember some of the crap he pulled on me and from the stuff people have told me, I put up with a lot from him. It's gonna' stop. If it doesn't, I'll bombard him every chance I get."

Roy's voice held a tinge of warning. "Johnny, you're on probation."

Gage snorted. "I'm on probation, I'm not a probe. Either he knocks the crap off or I'll make his life a living hell of itching powder in his bed and laxatives in his food."

Marco stared at him in disbelief. The John Gage that stood before him didn't whine about the Phantom's antics, he was dead serious about handing out paybacks and then some. Things could get interesting. Very interesting. He wondered if Cap was prepared for it. Hell, he wondered if he was prepared for it! Chet would be bitching in his ear every chance he got.

Tucking his uniform shirt in, Gage zipped up his pants and buckled his belt. He tapped the poster of Smokey on the locker door before closing it. He smiled broadly as Cap leaned into the room. "Roll call in five minutes gentlemen."

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They made their way out to the bay and Gage nodded at Stoker. "Mornin' Mike."
"Welcome back Johnny."

Standing in line, Cap walked before them and held a hand out to Gage. "John, it's good to have you back."

Clasping the pro-offered hand, Gage shook it. He had a feeling he'd like working with this captain. He seemed to be the no nonsense kind, but he could also tell that he wasn't going to be as strict as his last captain. Or should he say the last captain he remembered. "It's good to be back Cap."

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Life went on as normal. He drove to work each day, not really minding the commute when he knew he'd be going home to the quiet of his house outside the city. He deposited money every pay and tagged it toward purchasing a horse. He figured at the rate he was going it would take him closer to two years to save enough money, but eventually he'd have what he wanted. In the mean time, he'd spend his free time fixing up the barn and the house.

Leaning back in the lounge chair on the deck, he took a swig of the beer in his hand. He'd just finished trimming the hedge in Roy's backyard while Roy had mowed the lawn. Stretching, he sighed in contentment. He now knew why he and Roy had become such good friends before the accident. Roy and his family welcomed him in their home. They weren't just saying the words when they told him he was family. He really was.

"You there Johnny?"

"Huh?"

"I asked you if you wanted to stay for dinner. Joanne made extra just in case you wanted to."

"Oh...sure. I'd like that."

Roy watched as Gage's expression blanked out again. "So what's on your mind?"

Shaking his head no, Gage took another sip of the beer. "Nothin' much. I was just thinkin'."

"About what?"

"The past."

They remained silent for a few minutes, then Gage sighed loudly as he stared out at the now pristine yard. "You know how I tell everyone I don't care about remembering everything?" He stood and tapped his fingers on the beer bottle in his hands. "I lied."

Roy sat up in his chair and looked Gage directly in the eye. "I know."

Gage smiled slightly. "You always seem to, don't you?"

Roy returned his smile with one of his own. "That's why I'm the senior paramedic."

Gage snorted. "You're only the senior paramedic because you're older than me. We both started the job at the same time. If anything..." He hooked a thumb at his chest. "...I have more experience than you, being that I was a rescue man. That makes 'me' the senior partner."

"I had the training before you...'Junior'."

Gage made a face. "I hate it when you call me that."
Roy leaned forward in his chair, drawing the word out as he said it. "Junior."

"You love to push my buttons don't you? Everyone thinks you're mister nice guy and you're not."

Roy smiled as he leaned back in the lounge chair and Gage blew out a deep breath, his expression serious again. "It's driving me nuts ya' know. Just when I think things are coming back, they disappear. I look at some of the nurses at Rampart and wonder if I ever asked them out. I do a rescue and it feels like I did something exactly like it...but I can't remember if I did or not."

He looked back at the yard and squinted, then his eyes widened in surprise. "Roy, did you see that?"

"See what?"

"I swear I just saw a lightning bug."

Roy looked out into the yard and strained to see what Gage saw. "I don't see anything and I doubt you did either. We don't have fireflies around here."

Gage leaned against the railing of the deck and scanned the yard. "There could be some out there you know. They could come in on trucks bringing in food and stuff from the farms."

The silence stretched on for more than a few minutes making Roy decidedly uncomfortable. Gage being silent wasn't a good thing. "Maybe that bug was like your memory. You think you see it. It's out there. All you have to do is wait and maybe someday it will come back."

Gage looked directly at Roy. "Or maybe my memories are like the lightning bugs. Gone and they aren't coming back."

"Maybe...maybe not. Only time will tell."

Joanne opening the door interrupted them. She smiled as she spoke to them. "Johnny, are you staying for dinner?"

"Would I miss one of your meals?"

"Not if you can help it you don't. Come on in and wash up."

Standing, Roy walked over to Gage and clasped a hand on his shoulder as he directed him to the house. Life went on and he was glad that his partner and friend was there to share it with him. No matter what happened, at least 'he' still remembered everything that had happened over the past few years of their lives and he would make sure that he'd tell Gage as much as he could. Even if the memories were second hand, he wanted him to know what they'd done with their lives. He wanted him to know just how much he meant to his family and especially to him.

END

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