

Almost a Miracle

[by MJ Hajost](#)

"You headin' over to 26?" Roy DeSoto asked.

His partner, John Gage, glanced over as he opened his locker. "Yeah," he began, glancing at his watch, "and I'm just gonna--" He darted back as something jumped out of his locker at him, then did a double-take and jumped up onto the bench with a yell.

Roy swung around and stared. "What?"

Johnny pointed at the thing writhing on the floor.

Roy leaned over and picked it up. "This?"

"Roy, that's a--" Johnny peered more closely. "A *rubber* snake! Chet, I'm gonna pulverize you!" he shouted, climbing back down from the bench. He flinched when Roy proffered the snake. "You keep it. Snakes and I don't get along real well."

"What's the problem, John?" Captain Stanley poked his head around the corner of the locker.

"Johnny found a snake in his locker," Roy grinned, holding up the offending item.

"Cap, you know how I feel about snakes--"

Stanley held up a hand. "I know, John, I know. I'll talk to the Phantom."

Slightly mollified, John nodded. "Thanks, Cap, I appreciate that." He glared at his snickering partner, then suddenly remembered the overtime shift he'd promised to cover. He grabbed his extra uniform from the locker, stuffed it into his duffel bag and swung shut the door. "See you guys later," he called, dashing out the door.

Stanley watched him go and turned to Roy. "He really ought to do something about those shaky nerves of his."

"Nothing a day or two away from Chet won't cure, Cap." Roy smiled, closed his locker and swung through the door to the apparatus bay.

Cap shook his head. It would be good to have a couple days away from those two kids, he thought idly as he turned back to finish changing.

Damn! John Gage spit furiously and rubbed weary fingers across his eyes once again.

"You okay?" Behind him, closer to the entrance of the cave, Ted "Dutch" Masters moved his flashlight to provide better light on the area where Johnny was digging.

"Yeah," muttered his friend, sparing a glance over his shoulder. "Just dirt in my eyes." He dropped his head for a few seconds to catch his breath. "Don't you guys ever get any normal rescues?" he complained. "Like up on skyscrapers or something?"

"Nah," smiled Dutch. "You work with 26, Gage, you gotta do the dirty work."

"That was really bad, Dutch." Johnny glanced around the confined space in which they worked, and carefully shifted. It was nearly impossible to work in the narrow area of the tunnel--there was barely enough room to squeeze his slender form through some of the openings; he couldn't imagine how Dutch was able to fit.

This had been one hell of an overtime shift, Johnny decided. 26 was usually a pretty quiet station, which was why he had jumped when Dutch called to mention the availability of the extra shift. He needed the extra cash, and he got along pretty well with the guys on Dutch Masters' shift. Moreover, the chance to do the work he loved without the constant niggling by Chet was a blessing.

Johnny was, however, beginning to be sorry he'd taken the assignment. This was the sixth run of the afternoon alone, the third with the engine, and every call had been worse than the last. They had barely had time to quench their thirst from the fire on the previous summons before they had been toned out to this tunnel collapse. And, being the first rescue personnel on the scene, Johnny and Dutch had been given the dubious honor of searching for the last missing worker.

"You can criticize anything about me you want, Gage," Dutch was saying, "but don't you start in on my jokes. And stop taking up all the room, would ya? Geez, you're worse than my kid brother."

"What, you spend your days crawling through tunnels with him, too?" He muttered a curse as his shoulder caught on an outcropping of rock, stopping his forward motion. He unsnagged his turnout coat and moved on.

"Worse. We had to share a bed when we were kids."

Johnny snorted, choking as he sucked in another cloud of dirt in the process. "Oh, the joys of being an only child," he muttered. He hitched himself forward on his elbows into a larger chamber and swiped the area with his flashlight as he paused to catch his breath. Nothing.

"Admit it, Gage," retorted Dutch, "you've always secretly wished you had to fight for the bathroom on those cold winter mornings."

"Dutch, you've never in your life experienced a cold winter morning." He crawled toward the other end of the ten-foot wide expanse, steadying the beam on a small, recessed area to the right. "Found him!" he shouted, scooting forward as quickly as he dared toward the feet he had spotted emerging from the side wall.

"He alive?" Dutch called from close behind. He tried to peer over Johnny's shoulder as the other shifted onto his knees.

"Not sure," Johnny muttered, half to himself. He reached the unmoving shape, pulling off his glove as he approached. "Hey!" he called. "You okay?" There was no response. He leaned into the opening, shining his light onto the form. The man was face down, and Johnny realized with a sinking sensation that the angle of the neck was all wrong. Still, he reached forward and, laying his hand on the neck, let it rest there for a long minute. *Nuts*. His head dropped in frustration.

"Johnny?"

Johnny shook his head and sat back. "He's dead."

Dutch heard the anger in Johnny's voice, knew it wasn't directed at anything but the circumstances. "Sorry you had to be the one to find it out." He glanced at the dead man and sighed as Johnny lifted the HT to his mouth.

"Squad 14 to Engine 14." Johnny's voice was suddenly drained of all the life it normally had, and Dutch felt the same sense of frustration. They had been working for nearly three hours on this rescue. Five men had made it out of the tunnel collapse. To lose the sixth seemed to negate all those saves.

"What's up, Gage?"

"Uh, Cap, we found the missing worker. He didn't make it."

Captain Pete Daniels digested the information. "John, can he be extricated?"

John glanced at the body, then around the small cave. He felt Dutch's eyes on him and lifted tired brown ones to meet Dutch's. Dutch nodded almost imperceptibly and began to slowly back into the tunnel through which they

had just crawled. "Uh, yeah, Cap, we can do that. We'll need a stokes in here."

"It's on its way," said Daniels. "Sorry, John."

John shoved down the antenna on the radio and stowed the handie-talkie in the pocket of his turnout coat. Then, he twisted around to get more leverage so that he could more easily lift the body into the stokes when it arrived.

"Okay," Johnny grunted, tightening the last strap across the metal basket and tucking in the blanket that covered the victim they had finally extracted from the crack in the wall. Not that he needed to keep the victim warm any more. They were, after all, hauling a dead body. "Just let me—" he shifted sideways "—get out of the way here, and you guys can pull him out."

Dutch reached forward and grabbed the end of the basket and tugged it forward.

"Agh! Dammit, Dutch, you just about yanked my arm out!" He thought he heard snickering from Andy Starks, crouched in the tunnel behind Dutch, but he wasn't sure. "Hang on a sec," Johnny told him. The equipment was caught on something. He slid as far forward as he could, looking for the obstruction. "Okay, got it!" he called, lifting the basket over the rock into which it had bumped.

Dutch pulled again, and the stokes slid easily along the ground in front of him. He dragged the rope through and passed it behind him to Starks and Jeff Grady, who kept a steady traction on the line. Dutch backed carefully toward the entrance they had dug, the basket in tow. "Coming, Johnny?" he asked.

"Right behind you," Johnny assured him. He started to turn around, stopping abruptly when the movement sent a shower of dirt and rock cascading down the sides of the room. Ducking his head, he shot his gaze over his head. This place was unstable as hell. It would be just as easy to back out, like Dutch was doing. He began to hitch himself backwards, feet first, toward the entrance. His helmet caught on the low ceiling and stopping, Johnny reached up, loosened the chin strap, and slid the offending headgear from his head. Cool air chilled his sweat soaked hair, and he paused to savor the sensation.

Rock and dirt began to tumble about him. Johnny pushed himself more firmly backwards, trailing his helmet, wishing he had gone ahead and turned around when he'd had the chance. It would be so much easier to figure out where he was headed.

Dutch had nearly reached the entrance when he felt the rumble. He scooted faster, absurdly glad that the victim had no idea how roughly he was being treated. He thought he saw Johnny closing the distance as well. As his feet cleared the opening, unseen hands grabbed Dutch and, with a mighty yank, pulled him free. The stokes and its victim followed almost immediately, seized by the same hands that had liberated Dutch.

Why me?

Johnny continued to hasten through the tunnel. *Next time, Dutch, you go in front.*

The rumbling stopped and Johnny swiped at a piece of grit in his eye. He felt as if every orifice in his body must be clogged with dirt. *I'm first in the shower, too*, he muttered to himself.

Dutch rolled onto his back and stared up at the darkening sky, pulling in great draughts of fresh air.

"You okay?" demanded Jeff Grady, stooping low and peering closely at the dirt-streaked paramedic.

"Oh, yeah," breathed Dutch. He took Jeff's offered hand and sat up, turning to the entrance he had just vacated and slowly shaking loose earth from his helmet.

Funny. Johnny should have been right behind him. As he started to move to the tunnel to see what the problem was, he felt the ground rumble again.

"Get back!" yelled someone from behind.

Dutch jumped forward. "Johnny!"

His foot kicked something behind him, sending a swift stab of pain up his leg. What the heck had he hit? Johnny twisted his foot around the obstruction just as the second rumble started.

Oh, shit.

He had just enough time to duck his head under his arms before the roof fell in on him.

A massive reverberation grew from the opening in front of Dutch, and dirt, rocks, and debris burst forth in a dark cloud, scattering in a wild heap across

the narrow opening. Dutch screamed again and, as the noise from the tunnel collapse ceased, his cry echoed in the air.

There was no sound for one long second, and then there was a violent, purposeful commotion as the rescuers tumbled to the opening.

Dutch was in front of them all.

Johnny had never thought himself claustrophobic until now.

The rumbling ceased, but not before he was firmly trapped in the earth that had cascaded around him. He tried to lift up to provide himself with a larger pocket of air, and only succeeded in showering himself with more dirt. He immediately flattened himself again.

It was absolutely black where he lay. *Not good*, he thought, *not good*.

Weight pressed down from all sides. Johnny tried to force himself to relax and breathe slowly.

Breathing. Why had he thought of that? No sooner had he told himself to relax and slow down than his respiration began to grow rapid and shallow. *Don't do this to yourself, Gage, you idiot!* He couldn't help it.

Dutch, you'd better be digging. *Now!*

Dutch finally spied Johnny's shoes poking out of the rubble, about fifteen feet from the entrance. He dug more furiously now, not realizing he was muttering and cursing aloud as he worked.

"Dammit, Gage, don't do this to me! DeSoto's gonna kill me," he added under his breath.

At his side, Jeff Grady heard Dutch's one-sided conversation and he, too, worked faster. Johnny was ominously still.

A few minutes later they had finally uncovered most of the trapped firefighter's legs.

"Okay, you grab the left and I'll get the right," Grady ordered. He was slightly in front of Dutch and had a little better leverage. Each man took hold of a booted leg and hauled on it with all their might.

"No good," muttered Dutch, gasping as Johnny's form refused to budge. He twisted and pawed at the dirt again.

Another few minutes and they had uncovered his hips. "Must be this damn turnout coat," mumbled Grady, shoving dirt and rocks from around Johnny's side. "Okay, let's try again."

Johnny was amazed at how quickly his breathing had become labored. The harder he tried to calm himself, the harder it became to breathe. He had tried again to move, and all he did was end up with a mouthful of dirt and a more panicky feeling than he had ever experienced in his life.

This can't be happening, he thought. I'm not ready to die yet. I have too much to do....

He began to kick and struggle to free himself, unable to free his arms to help, succeeding only in making it more difficult to draw a breath. He opened his mouth to shout for help, choked on the dirt he inhaled.

God, don't let me die here! Not like this! Help me....

"Wait a sec." Dutch reached underneath Johnny's coat and with a little difficulty found the waistband of his pants, getting as strong a grip as he could. "Okay."

This time Johnny moved, but only marginally. "One more time," groaned Dutch. Together they pulled hard enough that both men tumbled backwards off the heels of their feet, but Johnny had moved little more. Dutch was back on his feet instantly, tugging yet again while Grady frantically pawed away more rubble from around the trapped paramedic. Dutch gave another mighty yank and Johnny finally slid free, the movement knocking Dutch off his feet again. He jumped up, trying to get near Johnny's head.

Grady stopped him. "Let's just get him outside first," he suggested.

Within seconds, Johnny lay on the ground outside the tunnel opening. Dutch flipped him over and put his hand on the unconscious man's chest. It had taken them nearly twenty minutes to unearth him.

There was no movement.

"Respiratory arrest!" he shouted.

Grady was on his knees instantly, clearing dirt and grit from Johnny's face. He forced open Johnny's mouth and cleared as much dirt from there as he could. Dutch practically ripped open Johnny's coat and shirt, frantically searching for a pulse.

"Here, let me in."

Grady's head came up. Craig Brice dropped to the ground with the oxygen tank at his side. Bob Bellingham was there, too, and he flung open the drug box as Dutch grabbed the defibrillator. He put the paddles against John's chest.

"Don't do this to me, Gage," he whispered again. "Damn! V-fib!"

Brice slid underneath Grady with the non-rebreather. "Hyperventilate him," Bellingham ordered; Grady slid out of the way.

There was a flurry of activity, a shouted, "Clear!" and Johnny's body convulsed with the electrical charge.

"Nothing! Hit him again!"

Johnny flew again.

Damn. Still no conversion. Bellingham took over chest compressions while Dutch flew to the biophone.

It was very dark but he could see a dim light across the empty expanse in front of him. Where's that light coming from? He should investigate it--better than being here in the dark. Yet, he couldn't figure out how to get there.

A shape appeared in the distance. A very familiar shape....

Dwayne?

Hey, misun.

Dwayne, help me. I can't figure out how to get over to you.

Sorry, bro, no can do.

Wha--why not?

It's not time yet, Johnny.

Time? Time for what? Dwayne....

The figure was receding, fading.

You're okay, little brother.

It hurts, Dwayne....

I know, Johnny. It'll stop soon. You have to go back.

The figure faded and the light began to grow dim.

Dwayne!

"Rampart, this is Squad 26."

"Go ahead, 26." Mike Morton's calm voice filtered through the commotion surrounding the downed firefighter.

"Rampart, we have a 27-year-old downed paramedic; victim of a cave-in. He is cyanotic, in respiratory arrest, and in V-fib. We have him on oxygen, and have defibrillated twice with no conversion." He fought to keep the panic from his voice.

"26, administer one amp sodium bicarb and defibrillate him one more time."

"10-4, Rampart."

Bellingham was already injecting the drug. Dutch grabbed the paddles again.

"Clear!" Johnny's body jumped once more. The irregular rhythm stubbornly remained.

Johnny, no! Rampart gave orders to insert an esophageal airway. Brice tipped John's head back and carefully placed the tube into Johnny's throat, then placed the non-rebreather back over his nose and mouth.

"Clear!"

Brice let go of the mask and watched as once more Johnny's body spasmed under the electrical shock. The scope finally rewarded them with a slow, uneven blip.

"Rampart, we have a pulse." Dutch failed to sound relieved.

"26, push 50 milligrams lidocaine and continue oxygen; transport as soon as possible. Update us with vitals in transit."

Seconds later Johnny, clothes muddied and torn and hair plastered against his head with more caked-on dirt, was in the stokes, and they were rushing him to a waiting LifeLine chopper. Two IV lines criss-crossed EKG wires and oxygen tubes across his still form.

"It'll be all right." Dutch tore his eyes from Johnny's closed eyes to look toward the voice. Craig Brice stood looking at him, his own features streaked with sweat and dirt.

Dutch nodded briefly and jumped in beside Johnny. *I hope so*, he thought miserably. *I hope so*.

Dixie McCall gasped when she saw Johnny being off-loaded from the LifeLine helicopter. *God, Johnny, not again*, she thought helplessly. What was it about the man that made it seem as if he spent almost as much time in

the hospital as he did on the job? She didn't wait to try to answer the question, but instead jumped forward to lead the way to the ER.

"His BP is up to 60 over 40," explained Dutch, "but his pulse is only about 30, and he's still not breathing on his own. No reaction to stimulus." He had already told them that there was no other sign of injury or trauma.

They rushed him into the treatment room, and Dutch stepped back as Joe Early and Mike Morton moved in, quietly issuing orders for blood work, x-rays, and airways.

"How long was he without oxygen?" Joe Early turned steady eyes to Dutch.

"No idea, Doc," Dutch replied, wiping sweat from his face with the back of his hand. "It took us twenty minutes to dig him out, but he probably had some air in there for a while." He shook his head again. "All I can tell you is that he wasn't breathing when we got him out."

The greyish tint to Johnny's skin already told them that.

Dixie put a hand on his arm and gently led him from the room.

In the hall, Dutch shook his head. "He was buried for twenty minutes, Dix," he murmured. "It's anybody's guess how long he was without oxygen."

She nodded. "They'll do everything they can, Dutch, you know that," she assured him.

Dutch nodded tiredly. "Doesn't make it any easier, Dixie." He sighed. "Guess I better go make a few phone calls."

"I got it!"

Roy let the phone ring again and returned to the mess on the stove and stirred it again, leaning forward and sniffing experimentally. Something new Joanne must have cooked up, he thought. He hoped the kids would eat it. He was beginning to have doubts himself.

"Dad!"

Roy sighed in exasperation, wishing his children would learn not to shout from the other end of the house.

"It's for you!"

"Chris, next time could you come and find me instead of shouting like that?" he yelled back, setting down the wooden spoon and turning toward the kitchen phone.

There was no answer. Not that he expected one, of course.

"Hello?" Roy heard the click of the receiver being replaced on the family room phone.

"Roy? This is Dutch Masters."

Roy's heart did a little flip-flop. He knew his partner was working overtime with 26. "Johnny?" he managed after a second.

"Yeah. Roy, I'm sorry....He was trapped in a cave-in."

Roy closed his eyes and mentally ran through a checklist of possibilities, praying the topmost one would not bring the answer he dreaded. "Is he alive?" he asked at last.

"Yeah."

He let out a little sigh of relief and ran through the same mental exercise, this time regarding options about his children. "How bad?"

There was a silence. Then, "He was buried for twenty minutes, Roy. With no SCBA."

Oh, God. "I'll be there as soon as I can," he said at last. There was a short pause.

"Right...thanks, Dutch." He replaced the receiver on the hook and leaned on the wall for a minute.

"When's dinner?"

He turned to see his son, Chris, standing in the doorway. Dinner. "Uh, soon." He picked up the phone again. "Chris, I have to go to Rampart. Uncle Johnny's been hurt." He punched in some numbers and turned to face his son again.

Chris' face had gone still. "Will he be all right?" he demanded.

"I don't know, Chris," Roy said, "he's been hurt pretty badly." He spoke into the phone. "Beth? This is Roy. Can I talk to Joanne?"

"What happened, Dad?"

Roy turned to his son, debating how much to tell him. "He was trapped in a cave-in, in a tunnel," he said finally.

"How come he's working today?" Chris pressed. If Dad were home, Johnny should be home, too.

"He was putting in some overtime," Roy explained.

Chris nodded understanding. His dad often worked overtime, too.

"Jo? Hon, how soon can you get home? I gotta get over to Rampart.... Yeah, he was involved in a cave-in... That's all I know.... Listen, I'd like to get over there as soon as I can.... Yes, I think so.... All right.... Okay, I'll call you as soon as I can, then." He put the phone down and spoke over his shoulder to his son as he crossed to the stove to turn off the burner. "Chris, I need for you to take your sister over to the Silver's. Mom will be home soon, but I have to leave right away."

Chris stared at his clearly frightened father. "Is Uncle Johnny gonna die, Dad?" he asked, his lower lip trembling slightly.

Roy stooped down and hugged him. "I hope not, son," he said, "I hope not." He let go and rose, tousling the boy's hair. "Don't you worry, okay? Uncle Johnny is pretty strong. Now, you find Jen and go, all right?"

Chris nodded and turned away. His dad wasn't telling the truth, he knew. If it weren't that bad, he wouldn't be rushing to the hospital. Chris tried to stifle the fear that was rising to his throat as he went to find his sister. She didn't need to know how frightened he was.

Five minutes later, Roy was on his way to Rampart.

Jeff Grady entered the ER almost hesitantly, looking around and finally spying Dutch standing near the nurses' station. He dodged a couple of orderlies and a lab technician as he wended his way over.

"How's he doing?" he asked without preamble.

Dutch turned and Dixie regarded the newcomer solemnly. Dutch shrugged. "No word yet," he replied.

Grady jerked his head toward the treatment rooms. "He still in there?"

Dixie nodded.

Grady glanced involuntarily at the clock in the base station. It had been nearly an hour and a half since they had pulled Johnny from the tunnel. What could be going on in there?

"You both look beat," Dixie said. "Why don't you wait in the lounge? I'll go see what I can find out and I'll meet you there." She tried to smile encouragingly but the two firefighters weren't buying it. They were too seasoned for that.

They also ignored her suggestion and remained where they were while she went on her errand.

Dutch leaned tiredly against the counter. "Damn!"

"Ditto." Grady looked just as tired as Dutch. "You okay, Dutch?"

Dutch squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head silently. "No," he answered honestly.

"Daniels is gonna want you back at the station." It wasn't a question.

"Eventually." Dutch opened his eyes, which gleamed briefly. "Once I've gotten word on Gage." The smile flashed and was gone. *Oh, God, Johnny...* He shook his head to rid himself of the image of Johnny's bluish features as they pulled him from the cave-in. Blue can't be good.

Blue wasn't even Johnny's favorite color.

Doors at the end of the hall opened and closed. Dutch ignored them.

"Dutch...Jeff. How's Johnny?"

Dutch opened his eyes and turned to face Johnny's best friend.

"Hey, Roy," he said quietly. He glanced in the direction in which Dixie had disappeared, shrugging. "Nothing yet."

"What happened?" Roy wondered, finding his own spot against the desk.

"Typical Johnny," Dutch sighed. "Wrong place, wrong time." He described the attempted rescue of the missing worker and the final collapse of the tunnel area. "He was blue, Roy, *blue*." He shuddered again at the memory.

Roy looked a little sick himself.

No one said anything, but the thought was in each man's mind.

Brain damage.

Dammit, Dwayne, I know you're there! Answer me!

Misun, what're you doing here?

I gotta get to your side, Dwayne. They're hurting me here.

Johnny, I told you, you can't come here. You're not ready yet.

Ready? Ready for what?

Ready to cross over, Johnny.

Tiblo—

No, little bro. Not now.

Dwayne! Don't leave me here.... I don't want to stay here!

"I've got a couple of very anxious firefighters outside, wanting to know how their friend is." Dixie spoke calmly, but her worried expression was not lost on Joe Early.

He looked up briefly from the sutures he was placing in the gash behind the paramedic's ear. "I think he's one very lucky man," he answered, bending back to his work.

Dixie followed his eyes and saw that color was slowly returning to John Gage's features. His skin still looked ashen and waxy, but it no longer had the blue tinge she had seen when he had first arrived.

"His blood pressure is still low," Joe told her, "but it's been holding fairly steady for the last twenty minutes, and his pulse has picked up a little." He shook his head. "His reflexes are very sluggish, though. Some even unresponsive. It would be a miracle if he hasn't suffered any neurological damage."

"Why Johnny?" Dixie wondered aloud.

"Probably because he cares more than most," Joe replied. He snipped the last suture and tossed aside the instruments he'd been using.

The treatment room door opened and Mike Morton strode in, barely watching where he walked as his eyes studied the papers in his hand. "Lab report," he frowned.

Joe rose and leaned over Mike's shoulder to read the numbers. He glanced at Dixie. "CO2 levels are still pretty high," he noted. He scanned the papers further, shaking his head. "We've gotta flush his system. Carol," he said to the ER nurse who was currently trying to clean the mud from Johnny's face, "increase the flow to 15 liters. Then, let's try one milligram atropine, IV push. Let's get a new set of vitals in ten minutes."

"How are his responses?" Mike asked.

"Sluggish," Joe admitted. He turned to Dix. "I'll go talk to the guys."

Just then, Johnny began to jerk spasmodically. "Joe!" called Mike, tossing aside the chart he held and rushing to Johnny's side. Johnny's head was swiveling from side to side, and a weird sound issued from around the endotracheal tube that prevented him from speaking outright. His arms were shaking, threatening to dislodge the cannulas in both arms, and his legs had begun their own strange dance.

"Let's go with ten milligrams diazepam," Joe called.

Dixie, Joe and Mike each grabbed an appendage as Carol, already grabbing the drug, moved in to push the injection. Dixie struggled to hold Johnny's head still and prevent him from dislodging the ET tube, while Joe and Mike tried to steady an arm for Carol. Johnny only thrashed more vehemently. At last, Carol managed to get the needle in, shoving half a dose before he broke away. By some miracle, the syringe managed to stay in the cannula, and she was able to grab his arm on the backswing and finish the injection.

Gradually, the spasms slowed, then finally stopped.

Joe and Mike exchanged glances, but neither said anything.

"Let's go talk to the guys," Joe suggested.

"You go," Dixie told him. "I'll stay here and help."

Out in the hall, the firefighters found him before he had a chance to wonder where they would be found. He quickly ushered them into an alcove, away from the bustle of the main hallway.

"How is he?" demanded Roy, his concern reflecting the fears of the other two.

"Well, he's stabilized now," Joe began. "His BP is still low, but it's holding steady, and his heart rate is leveling off. He's still having trouble breathing--it looks like he might have inhaled some debris. His CO2 levels are still too high, also, and his reactions are minimal." Johnny's pupils had barely reacted when he had checked them a few minutes before.

"Brain damage?" Dutch voiced the thought on all their minds.

Joe looked at each man in turn. "We just don't know yet," he answered finally. "I'll be honest, though, guys, it'd be a miracle if he came out of this unscathed."

There was a short silence while the men digested this information.

Roy was the first to find his voice. "Can we see him?"

Joe nodded. "Sure. Keep it short, though. And--remember, he can probably still hear you."

Roy and Dutch exchanged a glance, then nodded.

"Listen, guys," said Grady, "you guys go ahead on in. I'll wait here." Johnny was, after all, not a friend.

Dutch almost smiled when they entered the treatment room. "God, he looks a million times better than he did an hour ago."

Looking at his partner, Roy was glad he hadn't seen Johnny an hour ago.

Carol still worked at cleaning away the dirt on Johnny's face, and Dixie was working on removing his uniform. As always, she tried to keep its integrity, so avoided cutting it when possible. She was losing the battle with his shirt because of his IV, but the pants had proved an easier task. She handed the grimy shoes, socks, and pants to Dutch, piling atop them the envelope containing John's personal belongings--keys, badge, nameplate, pens, assorted loose change, and wallet. Dutch promptly deposited them in Roy's hands and leaned over the still form on the table.

"Hey, Johnny, good news. DeSoto hasn't killed me yet. Guess he figures I must be good for you or something." He lifted Johnny's hand in his own and squeezed gently. "I know you're there, man," he went on softly. "Come on, give me a sign, huh?" He waited, but Johnny remained oblivious. He held Johnny's hand a moment longer. "It's okay, John. I gotta run. You get some rest; I'll check back later." He squeezed Johnny's hand again and turned away.

Roy replaced him at Johnny's side. "Hey, Junior, you're looking a little scruffier than you were the last time I saw you. Guess they work you a little harder over at 26, huh?" Johnny's cold hand surprised him and he glanced sharply at Mike.

"He's still working at restoring circulation," explained the intern.

Roy nodded slowly and looked back down at his partner. "Gotta run, Junior. They won't let us stay. I'll be down the hall, though. Holler if you need anything." He didn't expect an answer, nor did he get one.

The vent alarm summoned the night nurse once more to John Gage's side. According to the log, this was the fourth time tonight the alarm had gone off. He was having a bad night--again. She found him struggling silently, his hands jerking spasmodically against the restraints that held them in place. Neck muscles strained as his head pulled alarmingly at the tube in his throat.

Anne shut off the alarm and tweaked Johnny's IV, muttering a low oath at the previous shift who seemed to have forgotten the meds last hour. *Inexcusable*. She placed one hand on his forehead soothingly, massaging his chest with her other hand and, all the while, speaking to him quietly. Gradually, Johnny ceased his convulsing until he finally lay limp on the bed, his face and hair damp from the exertion. His eyes twitched behind closed lids once or twice, his left hand twisted against the restraints again, and then all movement stopped and he lay relaxed and still under the blanket.

Anne continued to talk to him, gently mopping his face with a damp cloth and settling his arms more comfortably alongside his body. She hated seeing him restrained, but after he'd ripped out the second cannula the doctors had agreed it would be for his own safety. She waited another few minutes, then stole softly out of the ICU once more and went to look for a doctor.

"How's Johnny doing, Roy?"

Roy looked up from his morning coffee as Mike Stoker entered the squad room.

"No change," he shrugged.

Mike clapped a hand on Roy's shoulder as he passed him in search of a cup of coffee for himself. "We're all pulling for him."

Roy yawned and massaged tired eyes.

"You spend the night at the hospital?" asked Hank Stanley, frowning. Roy wouldn't be much good to him today if he hadn't gotten any sleep.

Roy, however, shook his head. "They kicked me out," he replied. "Said they'd call if anything happened." He sighed. "I just didn't sleep much at home, I guess."

It was only the first shift back without his usual partner, but it felt as if weeks had gone by. Was it only the day before yesterday that Johnny had been working the overtime at 26? He hoped it would be a busy day--he needed something to keep his mind off Johnny.

Klaxons interrupted his thoughts. Seemed as if someone had heard his wish.

"Hey, that reminds me, Johnny, winter's almost here. When you gonna show me a real winter's morning? I'm still waitin' for that trip into the mountains you've been promising me since last spring."

"Go home, Dutch."

He turned to look tiredly at Dixie and shook his head. "In a little while," he told her. "It's

my watch."

"You've been here all afternoon, Dutch. Why don't you at least get a sandwich or something?"

Dutch shook his head stubbornly. "I'm all right," he insisted.

"Dutch, did it even occur to you guys that Johnny might want a little time to himself now and then?" There had been someone with Johnny almost from the moment he'd been brought in three days ago. It seemed as if every firefighter or paramedic in LA County had spent time standing vigil. None as often as the men of Station 51, of course, or a couple of select friends, including Dutch. Not to mention the bevy of women whose numbers staggered the imagination.

Dutch's head moved again from side to side. "Are you kidding? You know how unhappy he'd be if he woke up and there was no one around to tell his story to?"

Dixie had to grin at that thought. "Well, visiting hours will be over soon. Then you'll have to go!" Smiling, she left the ICU, shaking her head at the stubbornness she had encountered the last few days. She suspected Johnny would be downright embarrassed if he knew about all the fuss.

And secretly pleased, of course.

"Dix?"

Dixie McCall looked up from her log and smiled. "Roy, just the person I was hoping to see!"

He raised his eyebrows.

"They took him off the vent this morning," she told him.

Roy's face creased in a smile of his own. "That's great!" His sense of relief was tempered,

however, by the knowledge that it was only a small step.

Dixie nodded. "Well, it's a step in the right direction, anyway. You going up to see him?"

"Yeah, in a minute." Roy leaned against the desk. "How are his responses?"

Dixie's smile faded a bit. "He's reacting to pain, now," she acknowledged, "but not as well as we're hoping for."

Roy nodded. It was better than nothing. He was optimistic--probably more so than the doctors, but he had much more at stake than did they. "I'm gonna go up and say hi," he told her. "If you see Bill, tell him I'll be right down."

Up in ICU, it was a help to see the tube gone from Johnny's mouth, although the still pale features and stubbornly closed eyes momentarily saddened Roy.

"Hi, Roy."

Roy blinked at the strange face seated at Johnny's bedside. "Hi..." he said uncertainly.

The other stood up. "John McGowan, Pasadena...." He held out his hand. "Oh, yeah." Roy's face creased into a smile as he shook McGowan's hand. "The fighter jet in the apartment building."

McGowan grinned. "I guess your partner here--" he waved a hand at the unconscious paramedic "--got himself into another predicament, huh?"

Roy shook his head, smiling ruefully. "That's Johnny."

"Yeah, well, I heard about it, thought I'd pop in for a bit." He gazed at Johnny a moment, then turned back to Roy. "We've hung out a few times since then--met up at bowling tournaments, stuff like that."

Roy nodded, not surprised. The number of people Johnny seemed to know never ceased to amaze him. "I'm sure Johnny appreciates that."

McGowan shook his head. "A lot of people are pullin' for him," he murmured. He shook himself and smiled again at Roy. "Well, I'd better get going. I haven't been home yet, and it was a long night last night. Good seeing you again. Maybe, next time, it won't be while your partner is down and out." They shook hands once more and McGowan disappeared through the door.

Roy shook his head in wonderment. Did Johnny have any idea, he marveled, just how many lives he touched? He approached his friend's bed and spoke quietly.

"Hey, Junior, looking good without that tube in your throat. Bet it feels better, too." He rested a hand on Johnny's arm a moment. "You need to get off that feeding tube, though, pal. You can't afford to lose much more weight. You don't want to have your pants dropping on you in the middle of a rescue."

He lowered himself into the chair at Johnny's bedside. "Joanne sends her love, and the kids, too. I think even Chet misses you today. I guess it's just not as much fun pulling a prank on Bill as it is on you. Not that I pay much attention to Chet and his pranks, you realize." He grinned as if Johnny were actually paying attention. "If you get back soon enough, though, he won't pine away."

He sat a minute or two in silence, watching the slow rise and fall of Johnny's chest, the steady and reassuring flicker of the EKG monitor.

Come on, Junior, talk to me.

Johnny slept on peacefully.

Johnny floated in the darkness, neither happy nor sad, cold or warm. It wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't comfortable, either. At times, he thought he heard sounds--voices, maybe-- but they were so far away and indistinct that he couldn't identify them.

Hey, Johnny.

Dwayne? Hey, brother...

Where the hell was he? Johnny couldn't see anything.

Not this way, little bro. Look the other way.

That way? What are you doing over here on my side now?

I'm not, Johnny. But, look. The light is on that side now. Not here.

Light? Oh, yeah...

Go, Johnny.

Can't. Hurts...

No, it won't hurt. Go.

Dwayne...don't leave me again, man...

I'm right here, Johnny.

Don't make me go...please...it hurts

It's all right, Johnny. Everything's all right.

"It's all right, Johnny. Easy, easy."

The light was too strong, and he pulled away from it irritably. "Get that thing outa my eyes!" Why did it hurt to speak? He swallowed, but that wasn't any better.

There was a surprised exclamation, so he cautiously slid open one eye to see what the fuss was.

A clearly startled Kelly Brackett was staring down at him. In one hand he held a small penlight. "Johnny?"

He blinked slowly, opening his other eye and bringing the rest of the darkened room carefully into focus. "Doc?"

Brackett's face creased into a broad grin. He stashed his penlight in the pocket of his white lab coat and leaned his hands against the bed railing. "Welcome back," he smiled.

If being "back" meant he had to put up with the pounding currently going on his head, then Johnny thought he'd rather be gone.

"How do you feel?"

Johnny closed his eyes and sighed. "Head hurts....hangover?"

"Hardly." Brackett had to force himself to keep from laughing.

Johnny's eyes opened again and he looked around more thoroughly this time. ICU? He swiveled his eyes to the doctor, the unspoken question hanging between them.

"You were in a cave-in, remember?"

Johnny frowned. *Cave-in...cave-in...cav--* His focus sharpened and he stared at Brackett. "Where's Dwayne?" His voice trailed off. Dwayne wasn't here.

Brackett frowned. "Dwayne?"

Johnny tried to sit up, but Brackett pushed him back.

"Not so fast, Johnny. You're one sick paramedic."

Johnny could believe that. Suddenly he felt terribly weak.

"Hey, easy there." Brackett steadied Johnny with a hand.

Whoa. The world had performed a lovely loop-the-loop. Johnny lifted a hand to his face. "How long...?"

"You've been in the hospital four days, John," Brackett admitted slowly.

"You've been coming around now since yesterday."

"Did I break my head?" His smile was fleeting and uncertain.

Brackett almost grinned. Once, trying to explain the reason for his being in the hospital after one of his many collisions with trouble, John had told Brackett that he had broken his head. He had obviously been disoriented on that occasion. As a sign of limited neurological damage now, though, it would be hard to beat. "Not exactly," he told him. "You were trapped. It took them twenty minutes to dig you out, Johnny, but we're not really sure how long you were actually without air."

Johnny looked very puzzled. "Is my head supposed to hurt this much?" He lifted his hand to his head.

Brackett regarded the young man intently for a moment. "Johnny, I want to you do something for me," he said, pulling his penlight from his pocket once more and flicking the switch. "Follow the light for me, okay?"

Johnny squinted at the light, shifting his head to look away.

"No, John, look at the light."

Johnny shut his eyes determinedly. "Hurts," he mumbled.

"I know it does, but you need to look at it for just a minute, okay?" Brackett kept his voice very soft. "I promise I won't let it bother you more than I have to."

Johnny finally, reluctantly, opened his eyes.

"That's it. No, just your eyes, John," Brackett said as Johnny swiveled his head to follow the beam. "No, John," he repeated, this time bracing his free hand against the side of Johnny's head as the younger man once more moved with the light, "don't move your head to follow the light. Just your eyes."

"My head hurts," Johnny complained again, screwing up his face and turning away from Brackett and his annoying illumination.

Brackett frowned, put the penlight back into his pocket, and considered his patient for a long moment. "I'm sorry, Johnny. Tell you what, why don't you get some sleep? You'll probably feel better when you wake up."

"Okay." Johnny relaxed back against the pillow as Brackett adjusted the drip on the IV. He felt a little sluggish, and his throat was sore—almost as if he were suffering from a bad case of the flu--or, a hangover. He wondered what had really happened. For a while he let himself drift in his nothingness state before finally falling asleep.

"Short term memory loss?" Roy frowned.

Joe Early nodded. "It's not uncommon with brain injuries, Roy, you know that."

Roy nodded his head, still slightly bewildered. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"Well, it means that Johnny might have difficulty keeping track of thoughts or words for more than a few minutes. Most of the time, we can follow a conversation, whatever, because our memory links one idea to the next. In Johnny's case, when new thoughts or ideas comes into his mind, the previous ones might disappear. Too many words coming at him at one time might

short-circuit the memory pattern, and he'll forget what it was you just said to him."

Roy appeared horrified. "This would affect him on the job?"

Joe hesitated before answering. "In all likelihood...yes. He'll remember things from the past--he remembers almost everything about the cave-in, for example, up to blacking out. He'll be able to recognize faces, things like that. But it will be difficult for him to remember something you said to him five minutes ago."

Roy absorbed this information as if from a distance. It would kill Johnny to have to give up being a paramedic....

"Roy, there are things we can do to help Johnny over those stumbling blocks. He might not have to quit his job."

Roy studied the doctor's face. "Will these be things that will help him in the heat of the moment, Doc? Because you know that a lot of the decisions we make are split second ones."

Joe nodded. "Johnny won't forget his training. What he is apt to forget is the treatment we just ordered. Writing it down will help, but you'll need to be patient."

"Doc, there might not be time for a patient to wait while Johnny thinks about what we just told him to do."

"I didn't say he would return to work overnight, Roy. This is going to take some time. Johnny will work hard, you know that. And, there are some new drugs out now that show some promise of helping. Don't give up on him, okay? He really needs your support."

Roy's face brightened again, slightly. "Does Johnny know all this?"

Joe smiled. "Well, we've told him. Whether or not he remembers that we told him is another story."

"Okay, let's get you outa here." Dutch Masters settled Johnny into the wheelchair and spun it around and through the door of Johnny's room.

"Whoa, Dutch, easy there." Johnny grabbed the arms and tilted his head back to look at his friend. "What are you trying to do, put me back in there?"

Dutch grinned. "Hey, ain't any traffic police here, buddy. Besides, I didn't know there was a speed limit for wheelchairs."

As he wheeled his friend to the elevator, Dutch decided that it was a greater relief for him than for Johnny to be able to get him out of this hospital. Maybe now the nightmares would stop.

"You want some milk?"

Dutch smiled. "No, thanks," he answered for the third time in ten minutes.

Johnny saw something in Dutch's eyes and grinned ruefully. "I asked you before, didn't I?"

"You're only being polite," Dutch shrugged.

Johnny poured himself some milk and put the carton back in the refrigerator.

"You bought all that food?"

"Well, it was Joanne's idea," he admitted. This information, too, had already changed hands. But only once. Johnny appeared to not be paying much attention to what he was doing or saying right now. Obviously something was on his mind.

"Come on," Johnny said, taking his glass and leading the way into the living room. Dropping onto the sofa he gazed around as if he had never seen the room before. "I don't think it's ever been this clean," he commented.

Dutch arranged himself in a chair and grinned. "This is woman clean, son."

Johnny arched an eyebrow. "What?"

"Joanne was here."

Johnny reached out and picked up the pad of paper that sat on the table and jotted on it.

"That how you keep track?" Dutch pointed at the paper.

"Yup." Johnny tossed the pad back on the table. Later, he would call Joanne and thank her. Hopefully.

Dutch said nothing, but Johnny didn't seem to notice the silence.

"Man, I wish I could have a beer," he muttered, finishing his milk and setting the glass next to the pad.

"You can't have liquor? Man, that's gonna take some of the edge off the trip to the bars I had planned for tonight." Johnny was forbidden to drink as long as he was taking the meds that helped ease the pain of his headaches.

Johnny grinned. "Dutch, you and I both know you wouldn't want to be seen there with me--not as long as there's a chance there's a single woman within a square mile of the place."

"Guess there's nothing wrong with your ego."

"Just as long as you know when you're licked, pal."

"Not a chance, Gage, not a chance."

Johnny started to retort but the phone interrupted him. "Remind me I owe you an insult," he said as he picked up the phone.

Amused, Dutch watched him as he dealt with a wrong number. "Pretty good," he grinned as Johnny hung up the phone.

Johnny made a face. "I hate wrong numbers," he muttered.

Dutch stood up. "Listen, John, I'd better go. You be okay?"

Johnny nodded. "Thanks for the ride home." He seemed relieved that Dutch would be leaving, and the other smiled inwardly. "You did drive me home, didn't you?"

Dutch started, then saw the gleam in Johnny's eye. "Yeah, you twerp, I drove you home." He grinned and shook Johnny's hand. "I'm glad you're finally home."

Johnny nodded. "Yeah, me, too."

When Dutch had gone, he dropped back onto the sofa and allowed the trembling to take over. He grabbed the old afghan that lay there, wrapped it around himself, and huddled in a ball for a long time.

Home for what?

"What do you think, Joe?"

Joe Early looked up from the set of papers he held and gazed steadily at Kelly Brackett across the desk. "Sounds like he still needs some time," he commented.

"That's what I thought, too," Brackett sighed.

"He's still suffering headaches?" Joe studied the documents some more.

"Sometimes violent ones, yes."

"CT scan is normal."

"I know." Brackett puffed his cheeks out in exasperation.

"Anxiety?"

Brackett shrugged. "Probably some. You know Johnny. Sometimes you can't shut him up, and then, when you need him to tell you what's bothering him, he won't open his mouth."

"What's Jim Powers say?"

Brackett shrugged. The staff psychologist had been working with Johnny now for a couple of weeks. "Nothing specific. Says Johnny's working through whatever's bothering him but Powers didn't feel it necessary to divulge the details."

Joe smiled at Brackett. "Doctor-patient privilege. What about Sue Barres?"

"She's encouraged by his determination, too." He was quiet a minute.

"But?" Early finally asked.

"But, I don't think he's ready to go back yet."

"And, you don't want to be the one to tell him?"

Brackett's smile was grim. "Would you?"

"Not on your life."

The set to his jaw told Brackett how upset Johnny was, though the young man said nothing.

"I'm sorry, Johnny, I know you want to get back to work. But, we've all compared notes, and you're still a little shaky."

Johnny closed his eyes, massaging them with the back of his thumb, another sign, Brackett knew, of his frustration.

"Johnny, you know we've discussed this." Jim Powers studied the paramedic carefully, ready for the explosion he knew lay just below the surface.

"I know." His eyes closed, he spoke tersely.

"We understand your frustration--" Sue Barres started.

"No, you don't!" Johnny's eyes flew open, his hand waving helplessly in front of his face. "You--you have no idea...." His voice failed him as tears welled up. He sought out Brackett. "It's been six weeks...."

"And, it might be another six weeks, Johnny." Brackett's voice was unusually soft. "Or ten, or twelve....or it might be never."

"No! Not 'never!'" His finger waved at the doctor, then faltered and dropped to his side. He looked away and struggled to stop the trembling in his jaw.

Brackett glanced at the psychologist and therapist, telling them with a lift of his head to give him a minute alone with his friend.

Johnny didn't acknowledge their departure-- like Brackett, waiting for them to go before he spoke. "What's wrong with me, Doc?" He sounded exhausted and defeated.

Brackett moved around his desk and seated himself in the chair next to his patient. "I think that's the wrong question to ask, Johnny," he said, folding his hands in his lap.

Johnny wiped angrily at the moisture slipping from his eye. "I can't work much harder than I am!"

"Maybe that's the problem." Gage glared at him, but Brackett refused to back down. "You're trying to force things to happen, but your mind isn't quite ready to let them happen. It's still trying to deal with the past. It isn't ready to handle the future."

"I need to go back to work, Doc."

Brackett nodded. "I know that, Johnny, and I'd like nothing more than to give you the go ahead. But the fact is, you're still suffering from violent headaches--"

"The meds control them," Johnny interrupted.

Again Brackett's head admitted the truth of John's words. "I know that, I know that." He smiled. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, how about a little less of John Gage the patient and a little more of John Gage the person?"

Johnny looked at him in puzzlement.

"What say you take a camping trip?"

Roy hadn't seen Johnny this relaxed in several weeks but, knowing Johnny as well as he did, he also knew that whatever had been bothering his friend had not quite resolved itself on this trip. For a minute or two he studied the dark-haired man's silhouette against the fading sunlight, noting the slight tension in the jawline, the slight tilt to his head that in Johnny was always a sign of inner turmoil.

"You wanna talk about it?"

Johnny accepted the beer, shifting into a more comfortable position against his rock. Roy dropped down beside him and gazed out at the tremendous view of the valley which the campsite afforded.

Johnny slowly sipped, and Roy waited patiently as Johnny conducted some sort of inner debate.

"Who's winning in there, Junior?" Roy smiled.

Johnny set the bottle down, toying with the label, and gave Roy a weak smile. "I'm scared, Roy."

No news there, pal. "Of what?"

The other was shaking his head. "Do you have any idea how much of this conversation I'm going to remember in five minutes?"

Roy shook his head numbly. "No."

Johnny looked across the distance to the hills across the valley. "Neither do I," he said softly. "I can't remember what we had for dinner. I don't remember how we got up here. I couldn't tell you if I put a sleeping bag in that tent or if I left it in the car." He laughed shortly. "I don't even know if I'm gonna be able to sleep in that tent." The lingering claustrophobia....

"It'll get better, Johnny--"

Johnny's eyes slid back to Roy in disagreement. "How much better?"

"I don't know," Roy answered helplessly. "But you know it's not as bad as it was a few weeks ago."

Johnny shook his head. "It's so hard, Roy."

"I'm sorry, Johnny. You know if there was something I could do, I'd do it."

"This helps, I guess." Johnny waved a hand at their surroundings. He picked up his beer and took a healthy swallow. "But I can't run up here every time it gets rough. What am I gonna do then?"

He didn't seem to expect an answer so Roy, uncertain of what else he could say, remained silent. The pair sat like that for a while, each man sipping slowly, deep in his own thoughts.

Abruptly, Johnny said, "I talked to Dwayne, Roy."

Roy gaped. "Dwayne? Johnny, he's--"

"Yeah, I know, I know, he's dead." He took a swig of beer, peering at the bottle as he brought it down--as if it contained poison. "But, I talked to him." He drew his eyes back to his friend. "I was trying to die, Roy. I wanted to go to him, be with him."

Roy's head was spinning. "Johnny--"

"I was angry with him," Johnny went on, ignoring Roy's attempt to interrupt. "because he wouldn't let me...join...him." He gave an involuntary shudder and swirled the liquid in the bottle.

There was a short silence while Roy tried to think of something sensible to say, his mind completely blank. Johnny turned somber dark eyes to him.

"You probably think I'm crazy, don't you?"

This was a little out of his league, Roy admitted to himself. And, he'd always thought--affectionately--that Johnny was a little on the unusual side. "I think it sounds like a very bad dream," he said, shifting to more easily see into Johnny's face.

"It scared me, Roy," Johnny insisted, shaking his head. "What if something happens and I try....something stupid?" His eyes were filled with uncertainty.

"Suicide?" Roy was stunned. "Johnny," he said as the other nodded fearfully, "what you experienced in that tunnel was terrifying, to say the least. When they pulled you out, you were clinically dead." He leaned forward when Johnny's eyes darted away. "But you weren't trying to die."

"Sometimes, it's really hard to try to remember that it was just another accident. They almost lost me *three times*, Roy. Seeing Dwayne like that...." His voice trailed away and he lifted the bottle to his lips, lowering it before anything came out. "Don't let me do anything stupid, Roy, okay?"

"Junior, if I could stop you from doing stupid things, don't you think I would have done it years ago?" His voice and smile were gentle. "I can't stop you being Johnny Gage any more than I could stop an earthquake. What's more, I wouldn't want to."

Johnny offered a half-hearted, bitter laugh.

"Johnny, you're here today because you didn't want to die. Dwayne was only telling you what you already knew. Come on, anybody who knows you knows that you do whatever you want no matter what anybody else suggests."

"I don't know, Roy," Johnny began.

Roy put a hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Junior, I promise I won't let you do anything stupid if you promise me something in return."

Johnny raised his eyes.

"You talk about this to Dr. Powers."

"I already have," Johnny assured him.

Roy thought Johnny probably had, but it was still a relief to have it confirmed. He nodded. "Good."

"He said the same thing you did." Johnny smiled again, hesitant but more reminiscent of the old John Gage than his earlier attempts. "Guess I just wanted you to know."

"I'm glad you told me," Roy admitted. "It's a lot easier to fix one of your problems if I know what the problem is."

"You sure you still want to have this crazy idiot for a partner?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way, Junior," Roy grinned.

"Roy?"

Roy looked at him quizzically.

"You gotta stop calling me 'Junior.'"

"Physically, he's almost as strong as ever--"

"What does that mean, 'almost'?" interrupted the battalion chief.

Joe Early sighed. "It means, Chief, that the only lingering physical effect is a tendency toward headaches. We've been able to control it with medication, and he seems fine with that. Hopefully, even that will disappear with time."

"And, mentally?"

Early gazed steadily at the grey-haired chief. "Believe me, Chief, no one wants Johnny back on the job more than Johnny, unless it's the hundred other people he's been driving nuts for the past three months. You've read the psychologist's report." He leaned forward and laced his fingers together on the desk. "He's ready."

"Can he carry his weight?"

Early grinned. "And then some, Chief. Look, Johnny might be one of the most accident-prone people I've ever met, but he's also one of the toughest, and there aren't many who are more dedicated to their job than John Gage."

"What about the claustrophobia?" A claustrophobic firefighter was, without a doubt, a hazard to his co-workers.

"Johnny has worked very hard to overcome that, Chief. All I can do is point you to the report. But you and I both know the only real way to test it is in the field."

"And the short term memory problem?" This was probably the most troubling area.

Joe Early stared steadily at the Chief. "It's not going to go away," he admitted, "but Johnny has worked harder than anyone I've ever seen at finding ways to work around it. He's made remarkable progress in keeping the effects to a minimum." He smiled at a thought. "He'll remember his conversation with you long enough to relate it to the crew if you reinstate him."

"And that would be your recommendation?"

Early regarded the man across from. "Chief, it's been six months since Johnny's accident. We've put him through the most comprehensive battery of tests you could imagine. He'll do fine." He paused. "You have my personal guarantee that you would not be making a mistake in putting him back on the line, Chief."

McConikee nodded. "Thank you, Dr. Early. I appreciate your candor."

Early rose to leave.

"Would you send him in on your way out, please?"

Early shook McConikee's hand and departed. In the hall, he indicated with a jerk of his head that Johnny should go in.

Johnny rose nervously and approached the door. He wore a sport coat and tie, and his hair had been recently cut short again. "What do you think, Doc?"

Early smiled. "I'm thinking that a suit and tie looks wrong on you."

Johnny's face brightened. "Yeah?" He flashed a tentative grin and, taking a deep breath and giving Early one last glance, he opened the door and went in.

Man, it felt good to be back at work! Even if it was only half-shifts for the time being. Johnny bounced happily into the locker room, his grin nearly splitting his face, not really caring that there was no one in there to greet. He switched the uniforms he carried to his other hand and pulled open his locker door. "Hey, Smokey!" He playfully tapped the bear on the nose. "Long time, no see." He hung up the clothes, then looked down at the floor of his locker. "What the—" He peered more closely at the small, plastic containers that lay stacked neatly in his locker. Five deep and six high, they seemed to all have holes punched in the tops....

"Chet!" he yelled, dropping back onto the stack the one container he'd opened .

"Geez, Gage, they can hear you across the street," said Chet as he laconically rounded the corner.

"Get these worms out of my locker!"

"Well, I just wanted to make sure you felt at home your first day back," Chet said placatingly. "You don't have to get all bent out of shape."

Captain Stanley poked his head through the door. "Welcome back, John."

Johnny looked over his shoulder. "Thanks, Cap." He glared at Chet.

"Is there a problem?"

Johnny shook his head. "Just Chet, Cap, just Chet."

"Mornin', Cap."

Stanley moved aside to let Roy enter the locker room.

"Mornin' John, Chet." Roy studied the pair for a minute, then leaned over and poked his head into Johnny's locker. "Going fishing?"

Chet burst out laughing, and Johnny's glare was now directed at his partner.

Stanley left discreetly.

Roy grinned at Johnny. It was good to have him back.

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