

## As Time Goes Bye

[By AF.](#)

"This is not my day," John Gage thought as he listened to the droning voice of his date. The two were in her car, trying to decide on a locale for dinner. Cindy Walters was a beautiful woman, but after a month or so of dating, the dazzle of her beauty had worn off for Johnny and he found himself bored with her often vapid conversation. In fact, it had taken about three weeks for him to realize that the two had little in common, and he'd spent the last week wondering how to extract himself from this relationship without hurting Cindy's feelings. This last date, however, was enough to make him not care about her feelings. He just wanted this done, he thought, as he rubbed his temple area. Lately, just the sound of her voice was enough to start a tympani band section playing in his head.

"...so I thought we'd do Italian, unless you'd prefer Chinese?" She trilled. "I like both, but we did Italian last time. Oh, Indian! Do you like Indian food? I adore curry!"

Johnny sighed. "Cindy, to tell you the truth, I'm kind of worn out. Maybe we can call it a night?"

His date glanced over at him. "Oh."

He grimaced. Now her feelings were hurt. He could tell a lot in the clipped tone she used to utter that one syllable. "Look," he started, "it's nothing personal. Really. I just had a long shift yesterday and I'm still beat."

She turned her head to face him. He tried to smile, but he simply couldn't pull it off. "We'll raincheck."

"Raincheck?" Cindy asked. "Look, Johnny. Maybe we need to talk. I get the feeling you aren't committed to us. I need to know where we're going."

"Going?" Johnny repeated. "Cindy, I don't really have a plan here. I mean, we barely know each other...."

"Barely?" Cindy repeated in a high-pitched voice. "We have spent a great deal of time with each other and frankly, I'm not wasting my time on someone who is...commitment-phobic. And I think you are...there, I said it."

"Commitment..." he blew out an extended breath, then in an instant, decided to hop on the life raft she had thrown him. Perhaps he could get out of this unscathed. "Yeah. I guess you're right. I am pretty...phobic."

"I could help you with that." She took her eyes off the road and spoke directly to him. "I did do our astrological charts and we are very compatible. If you'd just take a chance, I can help you get over that phobia and commit."

Johnny tried not to snort. At the moment, he only wanted to commit to two aspirins, a tall glass of water, and watching Johnny Carson on The Late Show...alone. "I don't know, Cindy. I'm very phobic. They don't come much more phobic than me. You deserve...better."

Once again, she took her eyes off the road. "Oh, babe, you're so cute when you put me first."

Johnny's eyes, however, stayed firmly on the road, and he yelled out a warning to her an instant too late. She never saw the light turn red or the car in front of them that had stopped. Thus, in the next few seconds, Johnny's headache went from bad to worse as his skull impacted with the windshield. Luckily, the impact did not cause him to lose consciousness. Unluckily for him, Cindy's voice was shriller than ever as she cried out,

bemoaning the damage to her car.

Johnny reached over and put the car into park. He looked at his date. "Are you okay?"

"My car!" she cried. "Look at my car. Look at my windshield. You cracked it."

He looked up, noting that, indeed, the impact with his head had "spider-web" cracked the glass. "Thank God it didn't shatter." He reached up to feel his head, sure his fingers would come away coated in blood, but he hadn't even broken the skin.

"But it's still broken. It has to be replaced," she moaned. "My car."

Annoyed by her even more than ever, Johnny exited the vehicle to go check the other car. Luckily, the other driver was fine. John felt relief. Having no major injuries occur was the best you could hope for with any type of collision. Even the damage to both cars seemed minimal. After exchanging insurance information, all the parties were free to go. Both cars were still drivable, though somewhat the worse for wear, and a mere thirty minutes later, an angry Cindy dropped Johnny off in front of his apartment. Her parting words to him were "this just isn't working for me." He agreed, managing to sound more remorseful than gleeful.

He entered his apartment and went straight to the bathroom. Peering into the mirror of his medicine cabinet, he noted with satisfaction that his head was free from cuts, bruises or any other abrasions. Johnny opened his medicine cabinet, took out the aspirin bottle and downed three of the small tablets. He briefly thought of calling Roy, but dismissed the idea. His partner was sure to escalate this into a major incident and frankly, Gage was too tired to spend his night sitting in Rampart Emergency to hear what he already knew. He had been lucky. His head felt fine. He had the headache even before the impact. He wasn't dizzy or nauseous. To be sure, he'd stay awake watching some television before he risked falling asleep. He wasn't stupid. He knew to watch for signs of concussion. Frankly, he'd take his head though the windshield versus any more dates with Cindy! All in all, he reckoned, he had gotten off easy.

"So, she dumped you?" Dutch Masters, one of John's best friends, eloquently summed up his feelings on Johnny's latest romantic entanglement. John had caught him up on the details, albeit, while omitting a few, such as the fact that his head had hit the windshield. "What's this, Johnny, dumping number one hundred and fifty or so...this year?"

Johnny grinned. "That's the beauty of it, Masters. She didn't dump me...I dumped her...but she thinks she dumped me, so no one's feelings get hurt."

"Romance 101 by John Gage." Masters snorted. "You know, you are a scary guy."

"You just can't see my brilliance," Gage retorted.

"Got me there, buddy." Dutch laughed.

"Laugh it up," Johnny added. "I don't care. I'm free...again. Hey, who's that new nurse at Rampart? The brunette?"

Dutch shook his head. "Down, boy. I got there first. That girl is Patty Lewis, a single lady who enjoys tennis, long romantic hikes, and me. We've been out about three times. Not your type, Johnny boy; she's normal."

Johnny snorted as the two hiked down a mountain trail. The two men had worked the same shift times this week, and had decided to spend a day off hiking in the mountains. They were enjoying a five-mile trail and were more than halfway through their walk. They continued to hold easy conversations about their jobs and their recent activities, conversation peppered with an easy, teasing tone. The two had been friends for quite some time and knew that if push came to shove, either man would stand up for the other without question.

They continued to hike, stopping occasionally to drink from their canteens. Dutch was slightly ahead of Johnny when he heard his friend cry out. He turned around, surprised to find the other man on his knees holding his head. A small trickle of blood was slipping through his fingers.

“What the hell happened?” Dutch asked, laying his pack down and bending to check out his friend. He grasped Johnny’s hand and tried to move it so that he could view the injury for himself.

“Something fell and hit me. Ow,” he moaned as Dutch palpated the small wound.

Dutch looked around and saw a small, but solid, tree branch. He gestured over to it, “Only you. Doesn’t look too bad. Let’s bandage it.” He grabbed his pack and began to rummage inside, still talking to Johnny. “You got a small lump, so we should probably get it checked out.”

“I’m fine,” Johnny protested, wincing again as his friend extracted the first aid kit and began to clean the wound. “Man, for a little branch, it sure hurt. Felt like someone through a rock at my head.”

“Laws of physics, my friend. What comes down...really hurts you.” Dutch inspected his handiwork and then held up a couple of fingers. “How many?”

“Two, Masters,” Johnny grumbled. “I told you, I’m fine. You bandaged it up, so don’t go all paramedic on me.”

Dutch frowned. “I only held up one, Gage.”

Johnny’s head snapped up and he winced in pain. “What? Really?”

“Nah, it was two,” Dutch smiled.

“Funny. You’re a funny guy. You know, you should start hanging out with Chet.” Johnny gingerly touched his bandaged wound.

“Seriously, John,” Dutch continued soberly. “You do have a lump. You should at least let me really check you out. Unless, maybe you’d rather go to Rampart?”

“No,” Johnny answered. “Fine, check me out. Then, let’s get out of here...before a whole tree falls on me.”

About a week later, Johnny yawned as he sat through a drill on responding to chemical storage plants. Their shift was not even half done yet, but he was already exhausted. It had been his turn to clean the latrines, a job he hated. Then he and Roy responded to an MVA, a cardiac call, and an unknown injury that turned out to be a drunk sleeping it off on a park bench. The inebriated fellow had been rather startled to be awoken by the two paramedics and downright belligerent when they tried to assess him. All in all, it was gearing up to be a long shift, and this drill was the last thing he needed. He fought valiantly to keep his eyes open. The captain was droning on about proper safety precautions when he dropped some of his papers on the floor near John’s chair.

“John,” Hank asked. “Could you get those for me?” He waited a few seconds, frowning when there was no response from the paramedic. “John? John can you...”

“...get that for me, Johnny?”

John’s head snapped up. His partner was looking at him expectantly. John looked down and was surprised to find himself kneeling on the ground next to the open drug box. He looked over. Roy was kneeling next to a victim, doing a blood pressure check. Johnny continued to stare at Roy, uncomprehending.

Roy looked up. "Ringers, Johnny. Can you hand it to me?"

"What?" Johnny asked. "Oh, Ringers, yeah, yeah...here." He took the medication from the box and handed it to his partner. A cold sweat broke out on his brow as he tried to recall any information that could tell him how he had gotten from the drill to this rescue. Nothing came to mind. He shook his head to clear it. If it weren't for the real feeling of the hard cement digging into his knees, he might have thought he was dreaming. *I must be more tired than I imagined*, he thought. He tried to concentrate on the rescue. *Why were they there? What was wrong with this man?*

Roy expertly guided in the IV, glancing once at his partner. It wasn't like Johnny to space out like he had. "You okay?" he called over.

"Yeah," Johnny said shakily. He repeated the answer with more conviction.

"Want to update, Rampart then?" Roy prompted, frowning.

"Ah, yeah." Johnny picked up the biophone. "Rampart, IV has been established. Stand by for new vitals." He looked at Roy anxiously, relieved when his partner began calling out the updated information. Glad that their normal rhythm had been restored, Johnny was able to finish the rescue with his usual confidence. Apparently, this confidence seemed to have satisfied his partner and the worried glances ended.

Johnny helped Roy package the patient and watched as his partner climbed into the back of the ambulance. He closed the ambulance doors and smacked them once lightly before heading to the squad. Once he was alone in the driver's seat, though, his unease returned. As hard as he tried, the last thing he remembered was the chemical drill. He didn't remember getting toned out to this rescue. He couldn't remember the details from headquarters, nor recall anything about the ride there. For that matter, he wasn't even sure if it was the same day. He opened his notebook, relieved to see that the entry date was the same. Apparently, he hadn't missed that much time. Looking back through his notes, though, he was dismayed to see that this was apparently the second rescue they'd been on since the one before the drill.

"I'm just overly tired," he reasoned, but another part of his brain objected. "You had a blackout. If this was happening to a patient, you'd be concerned." He frowned as he debated the pros and cons of his situation, finally deciding on a solution that seemed to make sense at the time. "If this happens again, I'll talk to one of the docs at Rampart." Having made this decision, he started the engine and tried to leave the thoughts of the blackout behind at the scene.

The incident truly appeared to be isolated. Several more days passed with no recurrence of lost time. Johnny had almost forgotten that it had happened, and then it happened again. Prior to the second lapse in time, Johnny had been home watching football. Dutch was with him and the two were arguing over whether a screen play had been the right play call during the last drive. The last thing Johnny remembered was Dutch saying to him, "Gage, what you know about football would fill..."

"Fill out this form stating you refused treatment," Johnny heard himself saying. He looked down to see a form in his hands. Startled, he passed the form over to a man in a business suit, who was sitting on a bumper of a car. Johnny looked up and took in the scene. He was at an MVA. This man had apparently run into the car in front of him. He seemed fine, except for a bandage on his head. Johnny assumed that he'd been the one to bandage the man, but he had no recall of doing so. The man took the form and signed it, handing it back to the distracted paramedic. Johnny thanked him and walked over to Roy, who was talking to the other driver.

Roy glanced at Johnny as he approached. "Mrs. Morris here also prefers to see her own doctor."

John nodded and the two men gathered their equipment and put it away, climbing into the squad.

"Well," Roy said. "You called that one." He started the engine, shaking his head.

“I did?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah,” Roy said. “When we got here...you said that you bet they’d refuse medical treatment. The way that they were arguing made it pretty clear that no one was injured badly, huh?”

“Huh?” Johnny squinted, trying to remember as Roy called them in as available. “Yeah, sure did.” He hesitated, and then decided he needed to come clean to his partner. This second blackout clearly shook him. This time, he knew that more than a few hours had gone by. “Hey Roy...”

Before he could say more, the radio came to life and the men were en-route to yet another call. The call turned out to be a three alarm fire at a warehouse. It was many hours later before the exhausted paramedics were back in the squad, returning to quarters. By this time, Johnny was hungry, tired and in need of a long shower. Any conversation that he wanted to have with his partner was tabled for the time being. Later, lying in his bunk, he tried to remember anything that had happened since the previous day’s football game (a quick glance at a newspaper had answered his question about just how much time had passed). Try as he may, just like the last time, the hours were simply missing from his memory.

Johnny tried to reason with himself. No one else seemed concerned, so he must be functioning normally. But if he were functioning normally, why was he having these time lapses? Logic told him he needed help. This could be a symptom of a severe underlying medical condition...like a brain tumor. Fear however, kept him from seeking that aid. *I feel fine*, he reasoned. *I’ll just wait and see*. He tried to sleep, but that respite remained elusive to him for most of the evening.

Unbeknownst to Johnny, not all his co-workers thought he was “functioning normally.” His astute partner found himself beginning to worry. Roy had been somewhat concerned over Johnny’s behavior of late. It wasn’t a big, noticeable change, but he could tell something was “off.” For one thing, Johnny never spaced out on a rescue, not like he had on that cardiac call. Roy could still see his partner’s confused look as he stared into the drug box. In their years of working together, he couldn’t recall Gage getting so flustered on a call...well, other than calls that involved naked ladies and bathtubs, he thought with a grin. And today, he swore he’d seen that same look on his partner’s face ...a look of wonderment, as if he was surprised to find himself in the moment. After both rescues, Johnny had been eerily quiet. Perhaps he had something going on in his life that was causing this preoccupation? Whatever it was, Roy wished he’d talk about it. Roy trusted Johnny with his life. He was sure that if this were something to worry about, Johnny would speak up immediately. Therefore, Roy reasoned, it must be an issue that he just needs to work out. Resolving to give his partner time, Roy pushed the matter to the back of his own head and fell asleep. He’d have been more concerned had he witnessed his partner’s long night of tossing and turning...and obvious lack of sleep.

Another few days passed uneventfully. Johnny relaxed as the time lapses seemed to resolve themselves. Placing their cause down to stress and fatigue, Johnny made sure he rested and tried not to dwell on the matter. Surely, if this was a pressing medical matter, he’d be suffering more, instead of less, blackouts. Convinced that the matter was an anomaly, he resumed his normal activities; he was glad his friends were not aware of what had obviously been a transient issue.

Johnny wiped the sweat off his brow as he entered the break tent. Wildfires had plagued the California forested areas for the past two days and most of the county’s firefighters were working overtime. Station 51 was no exception. Johnny grinned as someone handed him a canteen of water. He took a large swallow before looking up to thank his benefactor, sure that it was Roy. To his surprise, Dutch Masters grinned back at him.

“Thanks,” Johnny said.

“Don’t mention it.” Dutch answered. “Hot one, huh, buddy? How’s your crew holding up?”

“Good,” Johnny replied. “Marco was treated for heat exhaustion, but the rest of us are hanging in. You know, the usual complaints from this stuff. Soot in your eyes, smoke in your lungs and blisters on your hands.”

Dutch nodded. "I wish people would learn to be careful out here. I really hate the Santa Anna winds." He paused as he observed his friend gulping more water. "You look tired."

Johnny shrugged. "No more than anyone else." He smiled as Dutch greeted Roy, who had just approached the pair, clutching a canteen of his own.

After greeting the new arrival, Dutch addressed both men. "Did you think any more about what we discussed? Got any ideas?"

Roy nodded. "We talked about a few." He looked at Johnny. "Why don't you tell Dutch your idea?" He turned back to Dutch. "He actually came up with a great suggestion."

Dutch snorted. "Gage? This I have to hear," he teased. He and Roy looked expectantly at their friend, who was staring at them as if they each had sprouted an extra head. Dutch spared a look at Roy, noting the concern on the other man's face.

"Johnny?" Roy prompted, dismayed to see that same deer-in-the-headlights confusion he had noted on his partner's countenance too often lately.

"Uh...yeah," Johnny answered. "Listen, I got to use the men's room. All that water. Why don't you tell it, Roy?" He stood up quickly, clapping his partner on the shoulder. "You're much better at that...explaining thing than me." He hurried off, leaving both men grimacing behind him.

"What's with him lately?" Dutch wondered.

Roy looked at Masters. "You've noticed it too?"

"What? The fact that lately he seems to be ...not there... or something? Yeah," Dutch sighed. "I've noticed. I keep wondering what it is he's thinking in that noggin of his?" He glanced again at the other man. "He hasn't told you anything right? Like maybe what his problem is?"

Roy shook his head. "No." He blew out a breath of frustration. "I thought the same thing. Something's going on that's worrying him. But I've seen that Johnny before and this...this is different. It's like he has no idea what you're talking about."

Dutch nodded. "Yeah, it's like he wasn't there when you had the conversations."

Roy frowned. "I'm beginning to worry about him. Something's not right."

"Yeah," Dutch shook his head. "But this is Johnny we're talking about. How do we get him to admit that there could be a problem?"

Roy's eyebrows knitted in worry. "I don't know. But I think we need to. Something's just not right with him."

"Something's wrong," Johnny admitted aloud as he peered at his reflection in a small glass mirror in the make-shift latrine. He stared at his eyes, as if he could find the problem in his stressed out brain simply through their reflection. "Okay. I think I need help. It's about time I talked to..."

"...Roy," Johnny said aloud.

"What?" Chet asked as he turned a page in the newspaper.

Johnny looked up. He was no longer standing in the latrine. He was now sitting at the kitchen table back at the station house. Obviously, they were no longer fighting the wildfires. He looked around the room. Chet and he were at the table, newspapers in front of them. Marco was in the dayroom, watching television and

scratching Henry's head. No one else was in the room.

"Where's the front page?" Johnny asked, hoping to gain information on just how much time had elapsed now. He began to rifle through the pages.

"Come on, Gage," Chet snapped. "You had that front page for over thirty minutes. I just got it. Why do you possibly want it again? Forget to read an ad?" He raised the newspaper in front of his face.

Johnny grabbed another section and looked at the date, dismayed to see that three days had passed. "Three days!" he said aloud.

"What?" Chet asked. "What about three days?"

Johnny shook his head. "Nothing. Um...where's Roy?"

Chet put the newspaper down on the table. "Where's Roy? Funny, Gage." He was about to pick up the paper again when he realized Johnny wasn't kidding. Gage's face wore a look of utter confusion. "You okay?"

"Uh...yeah," Johnny said as Gary Chambers, Dutch Master's usual paramedic partner entered the room. "Hey Gary, what are you doing here?"

Gary grinned. "Nice one, Gage. Like I haven't been here all morning subbing for your partner. Hey, did you call Rampart and check on him? I hear he's being released today, right?"

Johnny's face paled as he realized the implications of this statement. Obviously, Gary was a replacement for an injured Roy, but just what type of injury had his partner suffered?

"Yeah, Gage," Chet asked, studying Johnny through narrowed eyes. "Did you talk to him today?"

"I just did," Hank Stanley entered the room, clapping John on the shoulder and unknowingly saving him from answering. "Roy's good. His lungs sound fine and he may even be cleared to work next shift."

"Great," John grinned. "Not that it wasn't fun working with you, Gary. But I bet you're anxious to get back to your own shift with Dutch. Though, how you put up with him is beyond me."

Gary laughed. "That line's getting old, Gage. You only said that about ten times today."

Chet snorted. "Yeah, Gage. You need some new material."

"Shut up, Chet," Johnny said as he rose and walked out of the room. He crossed the bay, entered the latrine, and sank into a stall, his shaky hands belying his worry. He scrubbed them over his face and shivered when he felt a cold sweat envelop him. "Something is really wrong," he whispered to himself. "Okay, that's it. I need help. After this shift, I'll go see a ..."

"...doctor said I'm good as new," Roy grinned.

Johnny looked up. He was now sitting on the back of the DeSotos' deck, clutching a glass filled with what looked like ice tea. He took a cautious sip. Yup, ice tea. Roy was sitting near him on another lawn chair, also sipping ice tea. On Johnny's other side sat Dutch.

"So, there goes Chamber's overtime," Dutch grinned. "I bet he'll be thrilled to not be working with this one anymore. Time he worked with a real paramedic again, huh, Gage?" He did a double take when he saw the expression on Johnny's face. *He's confused again*, Dutch thought. Masters glanced over at DeSoto and could tell by the frown on Roy's face that he too had noticed Johnny's expression.

*This needs to end*, Roy thought. *Now*. "Johnny," he began, but was interrupted by Dutch.

“So, what did you think of the new protocol Brackett introduced at the paramedic meeting the other day?” Dutch glanced at Roy, who frowned. When he saw Dutch nodding nearly imperceptibly at him, he picked up the thread.

“Oh, yeah,” Roy added. “I found it interesting. How about you, Johnny?”

Johnny looked from Roy to Dutch. “It was...um...interesting,” he agreed slowly.

“So, you think we should hang upside down when we treat patients under ten?” Dutch asked in a deadpan voice.

“What?” Johnny asked. “Now you’re pulling my leg. There’s no new protocol for hanging upside down.”

“No,” Dutch agreed. “And there was no paramedic meeting either. But you didn’t know that, did you?”

Johnny frowned as he shifted his gaze to Dutch and Roy respectively. Both men were staring at him, wearing equal masks of concern. “You were lying?”

Roy sighed. “Not the point, John. The question is why didn’t you know we were lying? Like Dutch said, you didn’t remember a meeting, but you were afraid to say that. Therefore, you went along with us. So the question is what’s going on with you?”

“I’m fine,” Johnny began, only to be interrupted by Dutch.

“Can it, Gage,” Dutch snapped angrily. “You are not fine. Lately, you seem confused, forgetful...you can’t remember conversations we had, you look at us as if we’re crazy. We thought you may be preoccupied, but I’m beginning to think that this is something more than preoccupation. So help us out here?”

Johnny looked from one man to another and then admitted, “I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” Roy prompted. “What’s going on?”

“Sometimes,” Johnny began, “sometimes I’m in one place, like the station and then I’m somewhere else and I don’t know how I got there.”

Roy and Dutch exchanged looks of apprehension. “How long has this been happening?” Dutch asked.

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t know. A few weeks?”

Roy sighed. “Okay, let’s get a better picture here. Give us an example.”

“Well, I remember watching football at my apartment with Dutch. I think we were watching the Forty-niners game,” he glanced at Dutch who nodded. “Then, in an instant, I was working with Roy and we were at a car accident. I think it was a fender bender and both victims refused treatment.

“Okay,” Roy said. “I remember that. The football game was Sunday. The rescue happened Monday.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “So it sounds like you’re having...”

Johnny shrugged, continuing the thought, “I think they’re some kind of time lapses.”

Dutch stood up and paced. “Johnny, these are blackouts. You’ve been suffering blackouts for weeks and said nothing? Are you crazy?”

“Dutch,” Roy said warningly, noting how pale and anxious his partner had gotten. “Let’s forget that for now. Let’s concentrate on what best to do at this moment.” He turned to his worried partner. “I think we should take you into the emergency room. Now,” he added, looking to Dutch who nodded.

“No,” Johnny shook his head. “I don’t need an emergency room. I’ll go see Brackett or Early tomorrow and talk to them. But I don’t have to rush into the ER.”

“That’s if you even remember this conversation,” Dutch pointed out. Johnny glared at him quickly and then looked away, studying the yard.

Roy exhaled. “Johnny, look at this as a paramedic, not the patient. Okay, say you’ve been called out on a run. You learn that the victim is experiencing these blackouts. We’re talking multiple episodes right? Maybe increasing duration?” He looked to his partner, hoping for some kind of denial. His anxiety increased when Johnny hesitated, but then nodded. Roy held his apprehension in check as he continued to speak calmly, hoping to reason with his obviously alarmed and apparently ill friend. “What would you suggest that this victim do?”

“Seek medical attention,” Johnny mumbled.

“When?” Dutch added, staring knowingly at his friend.

Johnny sighed, knowing he’d been backed into a corner. “As soon as possible.”

Relieved, Roy nodded. “And that’s what we’re going to do. Now!” He continued in a gentle tone. “This has really waited too long already.”

Johnny scowled. He knew when he was beat. And, by the way both of his friends were standing over him determinedly staring at him, he knew that he had been bested. “Okay,” he acquiesced. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

The three men headed out to Dutch’s car. In a strange way, Johnny was relieved. Finding out a reason for these alarming time warps had to be better than the many scenarios that had been running through his head. Hopefully, soon, this would all be resolved. One way or another. He prayed it resolved itself well. He spent the entire ride staring out the car window, barely acknowledging the conversation around him, hoping this didn’t spell the end of his career...or who knows? Maybe even his life.

Kelly Brackett looked up from the Emergency room base station, surprised to see the three off-duty paramedics approach him. “Hi, fellas.” He glanced at each, noting the concerned looks of both DeSoto and Masters, and the resigned, yet somewhat wary look on Gage’s face. “What brings you here on your off day? Especially you, Roy. Didn’t we just let you go a couple of days ago?”

“Got another patient for ya, Doc.” Masters gestured towards Gage, who scowled at his younger friend.

Kel nodded, doing a quick visual survey of Gage, noting nothing of alarm. “Should we take this into a treatment room or would you prefer to talk first in my office?”

Johnny shrugged wordlessly. Kel knew the man was less than happy to be put in this situation. However, he knew none of the three would be here if they weren’t troubled over something. “Room three is open,” Brackett offered. He followed the three men into the room, curious as to the circumstances surrounding this visit. His curiosity quickly turned into unease as Roy, Dutch, and to a lesser extent, Johnny explained why they’d sought his medical expertise. A quick check of vital signs showed a slightly elevated blood pressure, but to be honest, Kel would have been more surprised if Johnny’s stress wasn’t showing in an elevated blood pressure.

“We really need to run some tests, Johnny.” The doctor pulled a stool next to the examination table

and sat down. “Blackouts are a serious symptom of an underlying problem. I know that as a trained paramedic, you understand that.” He paused, studying his patient. Johnny nodded. “That’s why I’m disappointed that you didn’t come in sooner.” Gage looked away. The doctor patted him on the knee, deciding to go easy on him. “But, you’re here now, so let’s get some more information. I’m sure I know this answer, but have you taken any drugs or new medications lately?”

“No,” Johnny responded, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“Okay,” Brackett smiled. “Rules out any problems from substances, but we’ll do a tox screen just to cover all our bases. Head injuries could be another cause. But I don’t remember you being here lately with any.” He looked to Roy, who agreed. He turned back to Johnny. “Have you suffered any recent head trauma at all or could we rule that out?”

To Brackett’s surprise, both John and Dutch answered simultaneously.

“The car accident,” Johnny replied as Dutch cried out, “The tree branch.”

Both men looked at each other in surprise. “I forgot about the tree branch,” Johnny said as Dutch asked, “What car accident?”

“Hold it,” Brackett sighed. “Let’s take these one at a time. Johnny, what car accident?”

The men listened as Johnny confessed to hitting his head on Cindy’s windshield. Roy shook his head in disbelief, while Brackett’s grimace deepened. Then Dutch explained what happened to his during their hike.

Brackett exhaled with exasperation as he regarded his embarrassed patient. “Two head traumas...not one but two...and you, a paramedic, don’t think to come in and get checked?” He noted Johnny’s averted eyes. Then he turned on Dutch. “And as bad as he is...what’s your excuse? Were you hit on the head too? Why didn’t you insist he get checked?”

Dutch wore an equally sheepish grin. “I checked him out, Doc. He was fine and it really didn’t seem like that major an incident at the time. Honestly.”

The doctor shook his head. “Next time, do me a favor. When in doubt, come in and see us”. He stood up and regarded the younger man lying on the examination table. “You’re a great paramedic, Johnny. But you sure are a lousy patient. “

“What do you think is wrong?” Johnny inquired nervously, deciding not to fight the negative label.

Kel shook his head. “It could be a number of things. Before we play anymore guessing games, here’s what I’d like to do. I want to get you admitted and then order some tests. This way, you can be monitored while we try to see just what’s going on in that hard head of yours. Then we’ll talk. Is that o...”

“...kay?” Dixie asked as she handed Johnny a glass of water.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly before looking around. He must have been admitted already since he found himself lying in a bed at Rampart. “Where’s Roy and Dutch?” he asked.

“They went home, Johnny. Yesterday. You’ve been here overnight, remember?” Dixie studied the confused man, who shook his head side to side. “Okay, I guess I’ve just witnessed one of those blackouts I’ve heard you’re having.” She patted his hand, then went and made some notations on his chart. “Don’t worry. I think Kel and Joe are looking at your test results now. You know they’ll get to the bottom of this for you.”

“I’ve had the tests?” Johnny asked. “Well, guess I don’t mind forgetting those.”

“You should rest,” Dixie added as she placed his chart back at the bottom of his bed.

“Yeah,” Johnny agreed. “I guess I am kind of tired. To tell you the truth, I don’t remember the last good night’s sleep I had.”

Before the head nurse could exit his room, the door opened and Dr. Brackett walked in, followed by Joe Early. Both men smiled, but Johnny detected a sense of urgency about them.

“We have your results, John,” Joe Early began. “The MRI showed a small collection of blood near your frontal lobe, a chronic subdural hematoma.”

“A blood clot? I have a blood clot on my brain?” Johnny asked nervously. “From the head trauma.”

“Most likely,” Kel confirmed. “Either one or both of those injuries could have caused a slight bleed. Over time, symptoms develop. In your case, the blackouts.”

“Now what?” Johnny inquired apprehensively.

“I’d like to evacuate the blood,” Joe replied. “After this surgery, I’m hopeful that your memory problems will resolve themselves.”

“When?” Johnny looked from Joe’s to Kel’s face and back again.

“As soon as possible,” Joe answered.

Johnny nodded before dropping his head back on his pillow. He blew out an anxious breath, dreading the thought of anyone cutting into his brain.

“You’ll be fine,” Joe promised, patting him on the shoulder. The two men left to make arrangements, leaving Dixie still in the room with the fearful patient. She walked over to his bed, pulled up a chair and sat down. Gently rubbing his arm, she smiled reassuringly at him as they sat together in silence .

### **Two Months Later**

“Hey,” Johnny called as he wandered into the dayroom, wearing his street clothes.

A cacophony of greetings called out to him as his shift-mates, who were currently eating lunch, welcomed him. It had been about two months since the day Roy and Dutch had insisted Johnny go to the emergency room. That was the beginning of a long journey for Johnny. He had come through the surgery fine. However, there were a few scary days when the confusion and lethargy caused his friends to wonder if they had indeed done Johnny a favor. Dr. Early assured them that John would be fine and that this particular confusion was likely to be more the result of brain surgery than a permanent problem. The day had finally come when their friend was thinking more clear-headedly. The subsequent downtime for recovery was always tough on their kinesthetic friend, but soon Gage had more company than he could imagine. Lots of fellow firefighters stepped up to help keep the recovering paramedic occupied. Soon, the day came when he begged off the company, needing some quiet time to recuperate and come to terms with all the events that had happened on his own terms. Now, pronounced fully recovered by the good doctors at Rampart, Johnny was eager to get back to work...and relished every minute that stayed in his memory banks.

“Sit down, John,” Hank Stanley said after shaking the younger man’s hand. “Join us.”

Johnny smiled and, helping himself to a plate, he began to make a sandwich.

“So what are you up to?” Marco asked as he handed a jar of mayonnaise to his friend.

Johnny smiled. “Well, I just dropped off the paperwork at headquarters clearing me for duty.”

“That’s great,” Hank Stanley called. “Looking forward to having you back, John.” Most of the others called out similar remarks, with the predictable exception of Chet Kelly.

“Well, there goes our peace and quiet,” Chet bemoaned in a teasing tone. He addressed Hal Johnson, the young paramedic that had replaced Johnny in the interim. “Hey Hal, can’t you hurry and make this a permanent gig?” He turned to Johnny. “No offense, John, but Hal can cook more than ‘burgers and ‘dogs.’”

Hal grinned. “Sorry, Chet. I’m not going to be the guy who breaks up the famous Gage/DeSoto team.”

Johnny laughed. “Maybe Hal would like to go back on the rig. You can give him your place Kelly. You aren’t exactly a gourmet, ya know.” His fellow co-workers laughed good-naturedly, actually welcoming a Gage-Kelly interaction again.

“Oh, Gage,” Chet added seriously. “That money you owe me...feel free to pay me anytime.”

Johnny frowned, speaking around the bite of sandwich he had just taken. “What money?”

Kelly answered in a casual tone. “I lent you money. A few weeks ago. You were short a twenty one day and I lent it to you.”

“Did not,” Johnny retorted.

“Did so,” Chet responded.

“Kelly, I’d remember if you lent me money,” Johnny explained, “and I didn’t borrow any money from you. So, I don’t owe you money.”

“You sure you’d remember?” Chet asked shrewdly. “I mean weren’t you suffering from memory lapses? You don’t know for sure that you don’t owe me money do you?”

Johnny frowned again and then shook his head. “You’re pulling my leg?”

Chet grinned. “It was worth a shot.”

Johnny threw his sandwich back onto a plate disgustedly. “You’re really something, Kelly. You’d have taken advantage of a guy’s medical problem to shake him down for a few bucks?”

Kelly shrugged. “Yeah. Only you though my pigeon.” He grinned appreciatively at Johnny. “Lighten up, Gage. I wouldn’t have actually taken the money from you.”

“Yeah?” Johnny retorted as he picked up his sandwich and took another bite. “I don’t know if I buy that about you.”

Chet feigned disbelief. “Johnny, I’m hurt. I think you ought to get that head examined again. You seem to doubt my character.”

“I think that’s proof enough that he’s healed,” Roy DeSoto piped up. The others, including Johnny and Chet, began to laugh.

Hank Stanley smiled as he watched the men under his supervision. A-shift was nearly back to normal. And Hank wouldn’t have it any other way.

*Okay, Mel...this one is for you...for hosting my first trip to Chicago and encouraging me to write again and by editing what I did write! Most of all...it’s for you because, although it was a heck of a series...the Flyers*

*just couldn't pull out that magic in the 6<sup>h</sup> game...elevating the Blackhawks to a Stanley Cup title...and causing me to lose a bet and owe you this story. If things had been the other way, I'd have gotten a good read...and Dutch would be wearing a Flyers jersey! Thanks for trusting me with Dutch...I hope I fulfilled that trust!*