

*Author's Note: This story continues the events of Going Home: The Road Back and Going Home: The Past Revisited. These stories take place somewhere between the episodes Virus and Snakebite. Loosely. Enjoy!*

## **GOING HOME: The First Step**

### **By Lisa O'Brien**

"We've got him back," the anesthesiologist announced.

Morton took a deep breath and let it out, puffing the mask covering his nose and mouth. *Even on the table he's gotta be difficult.* He flexed his shoulders as he watched the heart monitor. When the monitor continued to display sinus rhythm, he went back to the head of the table to observe and assist the neurosurgeon, Charles Kennedy.

"All right, let's get back to work," Kennedy began. "This guy's lucky."

Morton frowned beneath his mask. "I fail to see how cardiac arrest could be considered lucky."

"I was talking about the hygroma," Kennedy returned.

"That's something I haven't encountered before," Morton admitted.

"A hematoma this size could cause enough brain damage to leave the patient in a permanent vegetative state." Kennedy paused and tossed something onto the tray. The nurse handed him another instrument. "A hygroma is a collection of cerebrospinal fluid and blood that occurs in the subdural space. There's a possibility of brain damage, but it's not a certainty."

"What would've caused it?" Morton asked. "He fell and hit his head, but he didn't lose consciousness, or exhibit any signs of a head injury."

"Hygroma's usually occur with a head injury that isn't severe. The articles I've read documented them in the elderly. They're pretty rare in someone this young and, for all intents and purposes, healthy." He tossed the instrument on the tray and the nurse handed him another. "They're caused by a tear in the arachnoid lining. Can go undetected for weeks."

"This one almost did," Morton reminded.

"Well, this one got big enough to be a problem. If he'd been on a high rescue . . ." Kennedy trailed off and tossed another instrument onto the tray.

"That's already happened to him once," Morton muttered. "Long story," he added when Kennedy peered at him over the mask.

"I'll bet," Kennedy returned.

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A cup of coffee appeared in front of Roy's clasped hands. Stanley, Marco and Mike had arrived at the hospital an hour before, but Roy had preferred to keep to himself. He took the cup, wrapping both hands around it.

"Still no word?" Stanley asked, sitting next to the paramedic.

Roy silently shook his head and sipped from the cup.

"I hate waiting," Stanley muttered, then lifted his cup and took a sip from it.

"I'm not crazy about it, either," Roy responded. "Especially when it's John."

"Roy, you did everything you could," Stanley began. "This was like that virus. It hit hard and fast, without any warning."

*I missed the warning.* Roy nodded, still staring into the brown liquid in the paper cup he held.

"You're nodding, but you're still gonna beat yourself up, aren't you?"

Roy blushed. "Sorry, Cap." *He's really got us figured out.* He took a deep breath. "Dr. Brackett said they might've missed this, but they didn't. I did."

*Maybe they **did** miss it.* Stanley sipped his coffee, trying to find the right response. *What can I say to that?* He finally fell back on repeating himself. "You did everything you could, Pal." He patted Roy's shoulder gently, then stood.

Across the room, Mike, Chet and Marco were playing a game of cards to pass the time. Chet absently pulled a card from his hand and laid it on the pile at the center of the table. Without missing a beat, Mike reached over, picked up the discard and added it to his hand. He then pulled a card out and laid it face down on the pile. "Gin."

Chet fingered his cards. "Go on, Marco."

"Game's over, Chet," Marco informed.

Chet frowned. "Over? How? We just started."

"I've been collecting spades and you've been throwing 'em down." Mike glanced at Marco, who shrugged.

"Oh." Chet tossed his cards down. "You wanna sit in, Cap?"

Stanley shrugged. "Sure. Why not?" He sat in the table's only empty chair. "What're we playing?"

"Gin," Marco informed, shuffling the deck.

Chet stood. "I'm gonna go get a cup of coffee. Anybody want anything?"

Marco looked up at Chet, then back to the cards, then to Stanley and Mike. "I'll take a walk with you." He set the deck down and stood.

Stanley picked up the cards. "Go Fish?" He shuffled the deck.

Mike shrugged, then nodded.

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Marco waited until they reached the cafeteria before trying to pick Chet's brain. *Madre de Dios! Talk about a dark and scary place.* "You're really worried about John, huh?"

"What? Me worried about Gage? No way." Chet rolled his eyes. "You been smokin' wacky weed."

"Chet, you can fool Roy, Mike and the Cap. We know you can fool John . . ."

"With my brain tied behind my back." The barb was delivered in a flat voice.

"But you can't fool me, *amigo*." Marco nudged the stocky Irishman. "What's eatin' you?"

"Guess I have been pretty distracted," Chet mused.

"Dee-stracted!" Marco exclaimed. "Chet, you sleepwalked through the last shift. You were the first one at the hospital this morning." He paused. "And don't even get me started on that card game. You weren't payin' attention to your own cards, let alone what Mike and I were picking up."

"Sleepwalked is not a word," Chet muttered.

"Oh, quit arguing with me and talk," Marco ordered.

They moved through the service line, paid for their coffee, then entered the main dining room. Chet went to an empty table at the back and sat, looking around as Marco settled in the chair across from him.

"When Gage stopped breathing, the first thing I thought about was that stupid peace pipe thing." Chet paused. "I never should've done that to him, Marco."

*That was over and done with weeks ago.* Marco frowned. *But it was a stupid thing to do.*

"What got me was that I wasn't even sorry until you chewed me out." Chet took a deep breath and let it out. "I really hurt Gage. I mean, he opened up about his heritage and I turned it into a joke." He shook his head. "I don't know why I did it. My grandfather used to have pictures of these signs that said stuff like `Irish need not apply' and `Dogs and Irish not allowed'. They were his pride and joy.

"He'd put a hand on my shoulder and say, `Lookit how far we've come, Chester. Now we can do

anything we want. We run cities like New York, Boston and Chicago where signs like these once hung in every shop window. We even put a man in the White House." Chet sighed.

*I never realized Chet's ancestors had to fight bigotry, too.* Marco was speechless.

Chet shook his head and sighed again. "It was just plain stupid. I never should've done it."

"You apologized, didn't you?" Marco frowned when Chet ducked his head. "You didn't apologize? Even after I chewed you out?"

"I was going to," Chet insisted. "Then Gage got me with that blanket crack and . . . well, I figured it didn't bother him, so . . ."

Marco shook his head. "Chet." He clucked his tongue. "Well, John doesn't hold grudges," he began. He narrowed his eyes. "Id never speak to you again."

Chet looked down at his coffee and turned his cup in his hands. "Roy said this was really bad."

"So was that virus," Marco reminded. "John beat that." He reached over and nudged the Irishman. "He'll beat this."

"What's Johnny gonna do if he can't work?" Chet shook his head. "It'll kill him. If this doesn't."

"We'll cross that bridge if it comes," Marco returned quietly.

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Roy's stomach grumbled and he looked at his watch. *Five hours. They've gotta know something by now.* As he stood to check with the nurse at the desk, Morton entered the waiting room with a doctor Roy didn't know.

Station 51's five crew members met the doctors, quickly surrounding them and impeding their progress further into the waiting room.

"How's Gage?" Stanley asked, acting as the spokesman of the group.

"He came through surgery. He's on his way back to ICU," Morton responded. He motioned toward Kennedy. "This is Dr. Kennedy."

"What happened?" Roy's voice was quiet. "Was it a hematoma?"

"Mr. Gage suffered a hygroma . . . an accumulation of fluid and blood in the tissue lining the skull. We were able to evacuate the hygroma and repair a small tear." Kennedy paused. "We had a close call during surgery. Mr. Gage went into cardiac arrest, but we were able to stabilize him." He paused

again. "He's got a long road ahead of him, but he should make a complete recovery."

"How long?" Chet asked.

"That varies from patient to patient. This type of injury isn't severe, but surgery of this type requires a longer recovery period." Kennedy paused briefly. "Then there are some possible side effects related to the surgery and the cardiac arrest, but we won't know what we're dealing with there until Mr. Gage wakes up."

"He hasn't?" Roy prompted.

Kennedy shook his head. "No, he hasn't. As of a few minutes ago, Mr. Gage was still unconscious." He looked down at the floor briefly, then back up. "The length of that will also determine the recovery period, as well as the overall potential recovery."

"Dr. Brackett's made arrangements for Roy to stay with John in ICU." Morton finally spoke up. "The rest of you will have to stick with regular visiting hours."

*Dr. Brackett must've remembered what I told him after Johnny and Chet were trapped in that elevator shaft. He might not believe Johnny heard everything that went on around him when he was comatose after that virus. But he's not taking any chances, either.* "I'm gonna go call Joanne." Roy walked into the hall to find a pay phone.

Stanley put his hands in his pockets and nodded. "Rules are rules."

"Will we be able to see John today?" Marco asked.

Morton nodded. "Once he's settled in, I'll have one of the nurses take you in." He looked to Kennedy. "We're on our way up to check on him right now."

"Thanks." Stanley looked around at his crew as the doctors turned and disappeared in the hallway. "Well, let's move to the ICU waiting room." He led the way to the elevators in the hall.

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Roy startled awake and almost toppled out of the uncomfortable plastic chair. He had no idea where he was until he recognized the *thump-hiss* of the ventilator. He squinted at his watch. *3 in the morning*. His back and shoulders ached and he stood, stretching and bending to work out the kinks. The thousand cups of coffee he'd consumed were burning a hole in his stomach.

"You can wake up anytime now, Johnny." He wanted to shout the words, but spoke quietly in deference to the other patients. "Remember how much you hated being in a coma after that virus? Well, it's been 13 hours. That's long enough, don't you think?"

John's eyes stayed closed and there wasn't any sign that he'd heard Roy's words.

Roy took a deep breath and sat back down. Sitting with John had seemed like the right thing to do until Roy realized that he was the wrong man for the job. He wasn't capable of maintaining a constant

monologue to keep John company. *In fact, Johnny's the only person I know who could possibly do that.* But Dr. Brackett had bent the rules for Roy and for Johnny. Roy wasn't about to just give up.

An alarm sounded and Roy nearly jumped out of his skin. He identified the source of the alarm as the ventilator. *Hanged if I know what to do about it.*

A nurse hustled into the cubicle. "Mr. DeSoto, would you step outside for a few minutes?"

"What is it? What's wrong?" Roy stood. The nurse was blocking his view of the bed, but he could still faintly hear noises more unsettling than the vent alarm.

"Please, Mr. DeSoto." The nurse motioned toward the curtain.

Roy silently stepped out of the cubicle and into the hallway. He anxiously paced from one end of the hall to the other, pausing briefly to peer around the curtain each time he passed. Within minutes, Dr. Morton and one of the hospital's therapists passed him and disappeared behind the curtain surrounding John's bed.

*This is it. I'll have to find his aunt's phone number. I'll have to tell her that her nephew's dead. And Johnny's father. How will I explain not calling them right after Johnny got hurt? He didn't even know these people, but he'd let them down.*

Roy stood at the curtain, waiting for the whine of the defibrillator. He expected the worst when he didn't hear it. And that made him incredibly angry. *Why aren't they even trying to bring him back?*

Dr. Morton collided with Roy as he stepped through the curtain.

*He's smiling. Why is he smiling?* Roy frowned at the doctor. Inside, he was boiling. Outside, he wore the wide-eyed, confused look of the shell shocked.

Dr. Morton's smile broadened. "John's breathing on his own, Roy." He slapped the stunned paramedic's shoulder. "That's a step in the right direction, I'd say."

It took a minute for the words to sink in. The hours of waiting and worrying had left him numb. Roy took a deep breath, let it out, then managed a tired smile of his own. "I won't argue with you there, Doc." *Now, he just has to wake up.*

"We've given him something to help him relax," Dr. Morton informed. "We should be able to extubate him tomorrow."

Roy smiled and nodded dumbly. "That's good."

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Joanne DeSoto looked over at her husband as he listlessly pushed food around on his plate. *Three days since Johnny was hurt. I'm sure he hasn't slept, or eaten.* Roy set the fork down with a quiet sigh.

*He's used to that with brush fires. But this is different. He doesn't have the excitement. He's just sitting in that room and worrying himself sick about Johnny.* "I've got a tip for you." Joanne smiled. "You scoop the food up, or stab it with the fork. Then put it in your mouth."

"What?" Roy looked up at her, surprised. He smiled shyly, ducking his head as his face turned a light crimson. "I've got a lot on my mind."

"It might help you to talk about it," Joanne suggested.

Roy scrubbed his face with his right hand, then rested his chin on his hand. "It's been 2 days since the surgery. Johnny's condition hasn't changed."

"He's off the ventilator and he's breathing on his own. That's a change," Joanne offered. "Remember when Erin started to crawl? She wanted to be able to keep up with the boys, but every time she tried to stand, she fell down?"

Roy smiled. "And I'd tell her she had to take little steps." He paused. "I haven't called Johnny's family." He shook his head. "I know I should, but Johnny wouldn't want me to."

"Why on Earth not?" Joanne didn't bother to hide the surprise in her voice.

"He doesn't want to worry them when there's nothing they can do." Roy shook his head. "I know how it sounds, but . . . that's Johnny." He fiddled with the napkin dispenser on the table. "When he was sick with that virus, Cap realized he didn't have a phone number to notify Johnny's family. When I asked Johnny about it later, he told me he didn't want them called."

*That is Johnny. And Roy, if he could get away with it.* "You've got quite a dilemma."

Roy sighed. "They'll find out one way, or another." His voice trailed off and he dropped his head.

"He'll be all right, Roy."

Roy looked up, then nodded. He took a deep breath. "Yeah, he'll be all right." He looked at the plate, then pushed it away. "Guess I'm not very hungry."

Joanne smiled, then reached over and squeezed Roy's left hand with her right. After a minute, she released his hand and pushed the plate back in front of him. "I don't care. You need to eat." She used the mom-tone. The one her children didn't argue with. Neither would Roy.

Roy nodded. "You're right." He picked up the fork and attacked the food on his plate with determination, rather than desire.

Joanne went back to her salad.

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Murmuring voices surrounded John, swirling around him like smoke at a fire and making it hard to tell who was talking, or what they were talking about. *It doesn't sound like Spanish. When did I go to Mexico?* He searched his memory for a trip to Tijuana, but all he came up with was an undetermined period of black, nothingness. *Voices I can't understand is probably better than that. My head hurts. That isn't a good sign.*

*Beep-beep. Beep-beep. Beep-beep.*

*The klaxon's about to go. I'll have to go out on a run.* He groaned when he realized what the klaxon and the run would do to his headache and the darkness reared up and swallowed him whole.

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Roy stood and leaned closer to the bed. "Johnny? Johnny, can you hear me?"

No response.

"Mr. DeSoto?" Linda, one of the ICU nurses came into the cubicle.

Roy blushed. "I'm sorry." He shrugged and sat back down. "I thought I heard him groan. Guess I was just imagining it." Another shrug. "Wishful thinking."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Linda smiled, then turned to John. "Can you open your eyes for me, John?"

Roy thought he saw the dark lashes flutter, but didn't trust his own eyes.

"Show me two fingers, John," Linda ordered. She watched John's left hand, which remained still. "I'm sorry about this." She pinched his left upper arm.

For the first time in 2 days, John's arm jerked away from the nurse's hand.

Linda looked over at Roy and smiled. "I think you might've heard that groan after all."

Roy returned the smile. "I guess I did."

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John woke alone in a cold, dark room. The chill was the first sensation, followed by a sense of enclosure. Unable to see, he reached out, but couldn't feel a wall on either side. The air was still, in spite of the chill. *That's impossible. Where the hell am I?*



He sat up, awakening a dull throb in his head. He vaguely remembered a time when the pain had been worse. He stood and put his hands out in front of himself, shuffling along until he encountered a flat surface. *Is this a dream? I should be freaking out about now, but I'm not.* He followed along the wall until he felt a break in its surface.

John stepped through the break in the wall and into thick white smoke. He instinctively stepped back, watching the smoke as it swirled and curled its way past the opening he'd stepped out of. *I don't need the SCBA.* He wrinkled his nose. *Smells like a hospital.*

He ventured into the smoke, standing in the middle of it as it flowed past him. The smoke and the current moving it were neither hot, nor cold. *It's just there.* The coolness of the room he'd just left seemed to have stayed there.

Instead of following the path the smoke was taking, John moved against it. *If this isn't a dream, somebody's gone to a lot of trouble.* The identity of the culprit escaped John. *Chet's not that smart.*

John followed the smoke down the long, dark corridor. *Hope this doesn't turn out to be a bad idea.* He walked for what felt like miles, but never found the source of the smoke. *Okay. I give up.* He stopped, watching the smoke for several minutes before finally following it.

"Is there anybody here!" John called. Suddenly anxious, he took several deep breaths, trying to slow down his heart. "Hello?!?"

When he reached what should have been the opening he'd stepped through, he found a solid wall in its place. *I know it was here. Where'd it go?* His fingers scrabbled along the surface, looking for an indentation he could pry open. All he could find was a smooth, cool surface.

Movement in his peripheral vision drew his attention back to the floating smoke. The antiseptic smell grew stronger.

"Hello?!?" John felt his heart rate shoot up again as he waited for an answer. "Who are you?" The words were shouted. *No echo. And no other sounds.* He reached up toward the ceiling he sensed was there, but his fingers encountered only air. *I don't like this. I want out.* "What do you want from me?" *I've asked that. Who did I ask?*

A bright, white light appeared on the wall across from John. It skittered away and blended with the smoke when he reached for it. He stood there, panting and watching the light dance in and out of the smoke. The inactivity slowed his heart and calmed his breathing.

*That light will get me out of this.* He started after the light, then stopped short. *Wait, how do I know that?* He couldn't answer the question, but followed the light anyway.

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Hours later, John was hot and exhausted. *This tunnel doesn't end. I'll never get out.* He stopped abruptly, sliding down the cool wall to his left. He closed his eyes for a minute, only to open them and find the light just inches away. He batted at it. "M too tired to play follow the leader," he muttered.

The light persisted. The smoke continued its never ending journey, but John was too tired to care why or how. His skin continued to burn, even though he'd stopped moving.

"Go away." John batted at the light, which skittered out of reach yet again.

The throbbing in his head swelled. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he rested his head in his hands, closing his eyes and welcoming the cool darkness.

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When John opened his eyes, he was lying on something hard. He tried to get up only to find his arms and legs strapped down. "What?" He craned his neck as much as he could, but his vision was too blurry to see where he was. He pulled at the restraints on his left arm and a blurry shape loomed over him.

A muffled voice spoke to him and John shook his head, blinking to try to bring the shapes into focus. He recognized the soothing tone, but his inability to understand words gave it the opposite effect. Instead of calming him, it served to renew his struggle to free his arm.

Exhaustion soon overcame him. *Just like in that tunnel. I fell asleep and they brought me here. Oh, God. What'll they do if I fall asleep again?*

The voice sounded pleased while John lay there, more miserable than he'd ever been. A long needle had been imbedded in his left arm. Hot pads burned holes in his chest and sides. The restraints around his wrists and ankles rubbed his skin raw.

"The light." John's voice sounded weak and strangled. "Have to follow it."

The voice continued.

*Maybe they didn't hear me.* He tried telling the voice about the light, but he wasn't sure whether he was talking, or just thinking. He thought he was talking, but he was so tired. He couldn't be sure. In spite of his fear of waking up to worse things, he let the voice lull him to sleep.

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John drifted in and out, surrounded by faceless shadows and shapes. When he was awake, they tortured him. They woke him by rubbing a fist in the center of his chest. They pinched him and dragged sharp objects along the soles of his feet. The needle in his arm wasn't enough. They poked and prodded him until he was too exhausted to care anymore.

The light was there, too. It danced around his head and taunted him while he lay helplessly strapped to a bed. *Maybe I was wrong about the light. Or maybe this light isn't the right one.*

He thought he recognized Roy's voice among the voices that swirled around him. He tried to tell himself that the voices weren't speaking English and that was why there weren't any words. But part of him knew that was wrong. Something was broken inside.

*I can't give up.* He'd heard Dixie's voice, too. And Dr. Early's. *They can fix whatever it is I broke.*

*They can fix it. I know they can.* John drifted away.

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The first thing John saw the next time he opened his eyes was the white ceiling of a hospital room. To his right was a curtain. To his left a dark, lanky man sat in a chair. *Dad?* John blinked and the figure came into focus. *Cap.*

John swallowed and tried to clear the cotton balls from his throat. White hot pain lanced through his head and he groaned, making the world gray at the edges.

". . . c'mon. Answer me."

*Words! I can understand words!* John wanted to whoop and shout, in spite of what that might do to the pain in his head. *To hell with that. I'll deal with it later.* "Hurts." He barely had the energy for one word, let alone a full shout.

"Try and stay with me, John," Cap's voice ordered.

John closed his eyes, unable to obey the order.

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When John opened his eyes, a pretty nurse was looking down at him. "Glad to have you back with us, John." She smiled.

"Where'd I go?" John whispered back.

"Wherever it was, it was one hell of a trip, John." John could hear the smile in Cap's voice. "I'm gonna go tell Roy and call the rest of the guys."

John closed his eyes again. The headache was gone. *I hope Roy hasn't been at the hospital all this*

*time*. His eyes flew open. "What day is it?" *I had a shift on Tuesday, then I was s'posed to work Thursday.*

The nurse frowned slightly. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"A run . . ." John closed his eyes, searching for the last clear memory. He finally found it. He was in the squad with Roy, pulling out of the station on a run. Roy was driving. *As usual*. What the call had been eluded him. ". . . leaving the station." He opened his eyes and stared up at the nurse. "Were we in an accident? Is Roy all right?"

"I'll let him answer that." The nurse smiled and left the bed as the curtain parted.

Roy stepped through, a broad smile on his face. "Hey, how ya doin'?"

The fear and tension drained as suddenly as they'd appeared. Sleep called and John couldn't ignore it. "Tired," he murmured. His eyes slid shut and he surrendered.

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Three days later, Dixie opened the door and stepped into John's room, not surprised to find the patient already occupied with other visitors. *They're nurses, they should know better*. She left the door open. "All right, ladies. I know for a fact that all of you have work in other parts of the hospital." *The first one to mention the ER cleans bed pans for a month.*

Each of the three nurses and two nursing students had sense enough to get out of the room without invoking Dixie's wrath. When they were gone, Dixie quietly closed the door and went to the bed.

"I swear I'm gonna put a guard on that door, Johnny Gage." Dixie picked up the chart from the end of the bed and looked it over. Satisfied, she replaced it. "How're you feeling?"

John grinned. "Great. Just great."

*He doesn't look great. He looks tired.* Dixie frowned. "You're not getting enough rest." She turned the handle and slowly lowered the head of the bed. "Of course, how can you with the entire nursing staff traipsing in and out of here at all hours?" She moved to the head of the bed and gently fluffed the pillows. "When it's not nurses, it's firemen. I swear, we ought'a start charging admission to your room to supplement the ER's budget."

John lowered his head and put on his best innocent face. "Can I help it if I'm popular?"

"Don't smirk at me, Johnny." Dixie was unable to maintain the stern face to back up her tone. She laughed. "What am I gonna do with you?"

John waggled his eyebrows at her and immediately regretted it. He closed his eyes and winced as his

head throbbed in response to the movement.

"How bad is it?" He felt Dixie's fingers on his wrist.

"Not too bad," John managed. He took a deep breath, slowly let it out and willed his body to relax. The pain subsided to a dull throb and he heard the curtains on the nearby window being pulled together. When he opened his eyes again, the room was dim. "The cafeteria must be awfully busy today."

"What makes you say that?" Dixie smoothed the blanket covering his legs.

"Roy said he'd be right back."

*Roy's working today. He was here yesterday.* "Johnny, Roy's working today. I'm sure he'll come by if he has the chance on a follow-up."

"Oh, yeah." John shrugged. "I can't tell one day from another in this place."

*I don't think that's the only reason. But we'll get to the bottom of that later.* Dixie smiled. "Are you criticizing this hospital?"

"I'm criticizing all hospitals," John teased.

"Well, then, you should be resting so you can get out of here, shouldn't you?" Dixie's right eyebrow arched.

"Yes, ma'am." John settled down in the bed and closed his eyes. He opened them again when he heard the door close. *Dixie knew I hadn't just lost track of time.*

*Now Dr. Kennedy and Dr. Early are gonna know I'm not getting better. Man, I can't believe I screwed up like that! Of course, I did. I can't remember not to screw up.*

*If it doesn't get better, I'll tell the doctors about it.* John closed his eyes and let out a quiet sigh. *Man, I hope this is only temporary.*

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Dixie went from John's room to the nurses' station on the floor. "Hi, Susan." She smiled at the young woman who looked up from the Kardex she was filling out.

"Hi, Miss McCall. What can I do for you?"

"I was just in John Gage's room. I had to clear out 5 visitors." Dixie laughed.

Susan rolled her eyes. "Not again. I'm sorry, Miss McCall. We'll start checking his room more frequently."

Dixie smiled and shook her head. "I'm tempted to just transfer him from floor to floor. Let the nurses get their fill of him that way."

Susan frowned. "He's a bad patient?"

Dixie frowned slightly. "He's a challenge," she said, her brow furrowing. "He gets bored."

"He's been a model patient so far," Susan commented.

"He hasn't kept you and the other nurses running back and forth to his room?"

Susan shook her head. "No. In fact, he hardly calls the desk."

"Has he had problems with his memory?"

"It's been spotty. He's disoriented when we wake him up." She paused and laughed quietly. "But so am I."

Dixie smiled. "Thanks, Susan."

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Dr. Early was at the base station drinking a cup of coffee when Dixie returned from her visit upstairs.

"Just the man I wanted to see." Dixie sat on the stool behind the desk.

"I see you've finally given up on Kel." Dr. Early grinned, then winked at her.

Dixie turned her eyes heavenward. *Don't encourage him.*

"Seriously, Dix, what's on your mind?"

*Maybe I should keep my mouth shut.* "How's Johnny doing?"

Dr. Early laughed. "Now, Dix, I know you've gone over John's chart with a fine tooth comb at least twice in the last week." His tone was teasing. "Why don't you tell me?"

Dixie shook her head. *Smartass.* "I was just upstairs visiting Johnny. I think he might be having problems with short term memory." Dixie paused. *I hope Johnny can forgive me for this. But it's for his own good.* "It's just a hunch."

Dr. Early nodded thoughtfully. "Difficulty with short term memory isn't unusual. We'll be starting John in physical therapy." He tapped the desk. "We'll run a few more tests while we're at it."

*I wonder what would make Johnny try to hide this?* Dixie frowned, tapping her pencil on the desk.

*What else is he trying to cover up?*

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John woke from his nap with a headache. He lifted his left arm to throw it over his eyes and stopped short when he remembered the I.V. in his forearm. He glared at the marks from the 2 previous I.V.s he didn't remember dislodging, then dropped his arm back to the bed.

He shifted in the bed and tried to lift his right arm. Lacking the strength to reach his own head stoked the growing frustration he'd been battling for days. *There's no point hiding any of this anymore. My life's over. Not even 30 and I'm washed out.*

That this injury had occurred not while he was doing something heroic, but while he was doing something stupid was the final insult. John still didn't remember it. Roy, Cap, Mike and Marco had avoided telling him how he'd been injured. Even Chet had managed to not answer John's questions. Dr. Kennedy had finally given him a straight answer. As far as John was concerned, he hoped he'd never remember it. *I've done enough stupid things I can remember.*

Not for the first time, John felt a knot tighten in his chest as tears burned his eyes. The door opened and he couldn't find his voice to tell the person to go away. *I'm tired of smiling and pretending everything's gonna be okay. It's not. I left home. I hurt my dad. And I ruined my life. Just like he knew I would.*

John hunched down in the bed and pulled the blanket up, hoping that ignoring the visitor would make them go away.

"Dinner, John." Nancy, one of the evening nurses, announced cheerily. If he'd had the use of both arms, John probably would've strangled her.

John cleared his throat. "Take it away." He heard her set the tray down and approach the bed. When she touched his forehead, he jerked his head away.

"Headache?" Nancy reached for his wrist, which he kept firmly burrowed beneath the blanket. "I'll be right back with your pain meds."

John closed his eyes. *Get it together, Gage! You can't let her see this. This is nuts!* He didn't want to be at Rampart. He wanted to be home. At that moment, home wasn't his apartment in L.A. Home was Florida. Anywhere that his Aunt Helen was. *I'd even let her fuss over me. Like my mom did when I was little.* The knot in his chest tightened and he felt the hot tears spill out of his eyes.

He heard Nancy walk in and turned his head to the right. *Let her think this is just the headache. Please don't ask me any questions.* He felt the warmth of the pain medication as it entered the port at his wrist.

"You'll feel better in a minute, John." He felt Nancy gently squeeze his left hand. "Do you want me to stay with you for a few minutes?"

John cleared his throat. "No . . . thanks."

Nancy squeezed his hand again, then quietly left the room. John took a deep breath, then struggled to sit up. The smell of the food on the nearby tray gagged him, but he wasn't able to reach the table to push it away. After several minutes of struggling, he awkwardly pushed at the rolling table until it moved. The tray slid along with the table's momentum and crashed to the floor.

Nancy appeared in the door a minute later. "John, are you all right?"

"I'm sorry . . . I couldn't reach the table."

Nancy smiled and, to John's surprise, looked relieved. "It's just a tray. I shouldn't have left the table out of reach."

"I'm really not hungry," John returned quietly. "I just wanna go back to sleep."

Nancy came over to the bed. "I'll help you get settled, then clean that up."

With Nancy's help, John was able to get comfortable again. The headache was still there, but it had been pushed to the background. *Maybe I'll be able to sleep all night tonight.* He closed his eyes and listened as Nancy cleaned up the mess he'd made. He felt guilty for not telling her he was pushing the tray away, not trying to reach it. By the time he got up the nerve to do that, she'd already left the room. *No way I'll remember to do it tomorrow.*

Sleep eluded him, though. Thoughts of his aunt and Florida ricocheted through his head. *Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I've been wrong all this time.*

"Wrong about what?" John asked aloud. The silent hospital room didn't answer.

The "what" was there. He knew it was. But it was just beneath the surface where he couldn't reach it. *I'll probably never know.* He tried to shut the thoughts out, but they crept up on him again and again.

John let out a tired sigh and opened his eyes, staring up at the ceiling. He started counting the specks in the tiles until he fell into an uneasy sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chet showed up to visit the next day after dinner. John managed to smile and make small talk, praying the whole time that Susan, or Nancy, or one of the nurses would come in and rescue him.

Two hours later, Chet was still there, sitting in the chair and rambling on about something. John had



no idea what. He didn't have the energy to pay attention.

"Hey, Gage!"

John blinked, then turned toward Chet. "What?"

Chet leaned forward, pulled his wallet out and pulled out a ten dollar bill. "I owe you."

John looked at the bill, but didn't reach for it. "What do you owe me for?"

"Remember I once bet you ten bucks you didn't have a brain?" Chet's mouth twitched in a nervous smile. "Okay, so it's not funny." He stuffed the bill back into his wallet. "I thought you'd at least get a kick out of me giving away 10 bucks."

John turned his head back to the ceiling and started counting specks in the tiles. Chet would be gone by the time he woke up.

"Hey, Gage," Chet repeated. "What's going on with you?"

*What is going on with me?* "I'm tired, and I'm sick, and my head hurts, and I'm sick and tired of all of this." *There, I said it. It's not gonna change it, but at least I said it.* The anger was there, but he didn't have the energy to vent it. *One day, I'll just implode.*

Chet leaned forward in the chair. "Hey, come on, Johnny, think positive." He reached over and nudged John's left arm. "Things are crap right now, but they'll get better." He nudged the arm again. "You'll get better."

John closed his eyes. *I want to believe that. But thinking positive isn't gonna do it this time.*

"Sorry, Chet, you're gonna have to find yourself another pigeon," John muttered.

"Don't say that, man."

"Why not? It's the truth. And I've gotta learn to live with it." John took a shaky breath. "I'm tired." He closed his eyes and turned his head away from Chet.

"Okay, Gage, you get some rest." He felt Chet squeeze his left knee, then listened as the fireman's footsteps left the room.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Rise and shine, Mr. Gage." A strange woman pushed a wheelchair into John's room at eight o'clock the next morning.

*Being that cheerful at this hour should be outlawed.* John had been awake for hours already, but not

because he was ready to tackle another day.

"I'm Mel and I'll be taking you to physical therapy to get you back on your feet." Mel pushed the chair over next to the bed.

Susan came into the room and crossed to the I.V. stand. "I'll have you set in a minute," she promised, then closed off the flow on the I.V. and clamped off the tubing, which she then removed from the port on John's wrist. "Okay. Just stop by the desk when you bring John back."

"Thanks, Susan." Mel smiled as Susan left the room, then turned to John. "All right, let's get you out of that bed . . ."

"Physical therapy?" John held onto the sheet and blanket as Mel tried to sweep them away. He shook his head. "I'm not going to physical therapy."

Mel smiled. "Oh, yes, you are. Dr. Early and Dr. Kennedy ordered it. If you don't go, they'll fire me."

"They won't if I refuse," John countered.

Mel shrugged. "Okay. If you're afraid of a little physical therapy . . ."

"I'm not afraid . . ." John started to argue. *But I am. I'm afraid of a lot of things right now. And if I don't go, Dr. Early's gonna wanna know why.* "Fine." He threw the sheet and blanket back and struggled to get out of the bed.

"All right, first things first." Mel put her hands on his shoulders and stopped him. "We're gonna do this as a team. You do what you can and I'll take up the slack."

"Fine."

Mel moved to his right side, taking the weight his right leg refused to support on her shoulders. Within a minute, he was in the wheelchair, with his feet propped on the footrests. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

John ignored her.

\*\*\*\*\*

Twenty minutes later, John was lying on his back on a mat while Mel bent and flexed his right leg. She laid his leg on the mat and sat back.

"Hey, you, come on." Mel tapped his right knee. "Quit layin' there like a dead fish and work with me."

"I said I'd go. I never said I'd participate," John huffed.

"Hey, you don't participate, you don't get better." Mel snapped her fingers. "Wait! That's the plan, isn't it? You're just gonna lay around the rest of your life feelin' sorry for yourself."

John glared at her. "Great bedside manner."

"Yeah, well, my dad and my brothers are Marine Corps drill sergeants. Sue me." Mel tapped his knee again. "So, come on, slacker." She picked up the leg again. "Show me what a big strong man you are." She applied pressure and bent his leg at the knee. When John didn't resist, she laid the leg down again and sat back. "Come on, John. You can beat this if you just give it a little effort."

"Aren't you supposed to have two people to do good cop/bad cop?" John muttered.

"We're shorthanded this week," Mel shot back.

For the first time in days, John laughed. Once he started, he couldn't stop. He laughed until his sides hurt and tears rolled out of his eyes and into his hair. *Oh, God. I've finally lost it!*

Mel helped him sit up, supporting him until the laughter died away. "That felt good, huh?" She smoothed the hair from his forehead and wiped a few stray tears from his cheeks.

"No . . ." John took a deep breath. "I'm going crazy."

"Why? 'Cause you're feeling like you're never gonna get better? You'll never get the strength back in your arms and legs? You'll never be able to walk on your own?" Mel squeezed his shoulders. "You will. You're only crazy if you don't try."

"It's worse than that." John took several deep breaths. "I have this feeling that there's something I have to do . . . that I want to do. But I don't know what. I'm afraid I'll never know."

"So, you take it one step at a time." Mel squeezed his shoulders again. "You fix the things you can and deal with the rest later."

John nodded and closed his eyes. *It's gotta be better than feeling like this forever.*

"You wanna call it a day?"

John shook his head. "No, but let's get this over with before I change my mind."

Mel gasped and put her right hand over her heart. "God, I just love it when a man says those words to me."

This time, John laughed, but only for as long as he wanted to.

\*\*\*\*\*

The banter with Mel helped John's mood more than he'd believed possible. While Mel worked with

him on exercises to strengthen the muscles in his arms and legs, he worked on his own to sort through the thoughts and images that had been rattling around in his head. For the first time since he'd awakened, he felt in control of them, rather than the other way around.

An hour after Mel returned John to his room, he was tired from the exertion of physical therapy, but too exhilarated to sleep. He'd read about manic states in the paramedic manuals, but didn't think he was having one of those. Once again, John Gage was going to search that cloud until he found the lining. *I don't care if it's tin. As long as it's there.*

The door of his room opened and another woman entered. "Hi, Mr. Gage. I'm Gina. Dr. Early's ordered some tests." She slid the tray table over and laid a pad and pencil down.

"I've never been very good with tests." John gave her a shy grin.

Gina laughed. "You can't charm your way out of this." She pulled the chair over and sat down. "First of all, let's see if you're up to writing."

John shrugged and lifted his right arm to the tray. He picked up the pencil and wrote his name on the pad. *A little slow, but doable. My handwriting's never been that great anyway.*

Gina leaned forward, then smiled. "Good, you got the first question right."

"All right," John returned, favoring Gina with another grin.

\*\*\*\*\*

Roy stepped through the doors of the ER. For some reason he couldn't fathom, he dreaded his upcoming visit to John's room. He still felt a tremendous sense of guilt for not catching his friend's injury sooner. Seeing John silent and withdrawn didn't help. In fact, it made it worse. Both men were facing the possibility that this injury might leave John permanently disabled. Roy was afraid of what that might do to their friendship. *I wish Johnny would tell me what was scaring him. Maybe this time, I can help him.*

As he'd done on his last 2 visits, Roy pasted on a smile and entered John's room.

"Hey, Roy!" John grinned and motioned with his left arm, then slid down in the bed and pulled the covers up. "C'mon in."

Roy froze in the door, his brows knitting together. "Okay, who are you and what've you done with John Gage?"

John laughed. "Oh, come on, I haven't been that bad." He frowned. "Well, okay, I have."

Roy shook his head, laughed and stepped into the room, letting the door swing shut behind him. "Glad

to have you back." He sat in the visitor's chair.

"Well, I'm not all the way there." John was still smiling. "I might even be gettin' out of here next week."

"That's great." Roy grinned. "They say anything about work?"

"Not yet." John frowned briefly and Roy regretted asking the question. "Well, Dr. Kennedy and Dr. Early said it might take a couple of months." He paused, grinning again. "It's not as bad as I thought it was."

Roy nodded. "That's good." He sat back in the chair. "Where're you gonna stay when they turn you loose?"

John shrugged. "My apartment, where else?"

"Well, if you wanna stay with us, just say the word."

John's grin widened. "Still tryin' to repay me for the night you stayed at my place, huh?"

"Me?" Roy was all wide-eyed innocence. "Now, why would I do that?"

"You know. . ." John started, then stopped. "Never mind."

"What?"

"You'll think it's weird."

Roy snickered. "From you, Johnny? Nah."

"Thanks, pal." John snickered, then shook his head. "Really, never mind."

Roy shrugged. "Okay." *I really hate it when he does that.* That made him grin. *Johnny's definitely on his way back.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*From the roof John could see the barn of his aunt and uncle's ranch, and beyond that, the house. He stood and crossed the roof, then clamored down the ladder. When he jumped down from the ladder, his feet landed on the shingles of the roof.*

John startled awake, sitting up and staring in confusion around the hospital room. *Rampart.* Getting his bearings didn't make him feel any better. He threw back the soaked sheets and carefully climbed out of the hospital bed. His steps were slow and not very steady, but he managed to make it across the room to the small sink.

He turned the water on and stuck his head under the tap, then grabbed a towel from the shelf and straightened. As he dried his hair, he felt the shaved patch at the back of his head that went from the nape of his neck all the way to the top. *I must look ridiculous. Now I know how Shadow must've felt.*

John's heart pounded at the memory. *I haven't thought about that in years! But I can see it. Like it was yesterday.*

The door opened and a nurse walked into the room.

"Damn it! Don't you people ever knock!" John threw the towel into the sink and started across to the bed, yanking his arm out of the nurse's reach.

"You're supposed to be asleep. And what're you doing out of bed?" The nurse put her hands on her hips. "Without calling the desk."

"Getting some exercise," John huffed, dropping into the chair, which was closer than the bed. *Stop being an asshole, Gage. "I'm sorry . . ." What's her name? I can't remember. Damn it!*

"Gail," the nurse supplied. "Tell you what, while you're up, I'll change the sheets on your bed."

John nodded. "Thanks." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. *Gayle Smith.* He brought his head up. "I dated a girl named Gail in high school. She spelled her name with a `y' and an `e'."

The nurse snickered as she pulled fresh linens from a closet. "You've dated a lot of girls, Johnny."

John smiled sadly. "Yeah. She was special," he said quietly. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes again. *What's wrong with me? I can walk. I can use my right arm. The headaches aren't as bad. Dr. Early and Dr. Kennedy are gonna decide when I get out of the hospital.*

". . . John?"

John startled, pushing the chair away from Gail, who was suddenly over him.

"C'mon, let's get you back in bed." The nurse patted his arm gently.

"M fine here," John protested.

"You won't be if you fall asleep and slide out of that chair." Gail smiled and patted his arm again.

John sighed, then pushed himself out of the chair. He swayed briefly and decided to let Gail take his arm and help him back to the bed. He sank gratefully into the pillows and closed his eyes. He didn't even hear Gail leave the room.

\*\*\*\*\*

John's appetite shifted with his moods. After Roy's visit, John finished his dinner in record time and

charmed a student nurse into bringing him a second tray. Less than 24 hours later, it was all he could do to choke down two bites of dry toast. He pushed the tray over and away from the bed, then slid down and pulled the blanket and sheet up.

*Man, what's with me?* Boredom was the first answer. *I need to get out of this room. Maybe I should hijack a wheelchair.* John didn't have the energy to get out of the bed.

The door opened as he laid his left arm over his eyes to go back to sleep. He dropped his arm as Cathy, the day nurse crossed the room.

"Do you need a little more time for breakfast?" Cathy put her hands on the table to position it closer to the bed.

John shook his head. "I'm not very hungry."

Cathy frowned. "Do you think you're running a fever?"

John managed to smile at that. *Most of the doctors and nurses seem to forget that I'm a paramedic.* He shook his head again. "I don't think so. I don't feel sick or anything. Just not hungry."

"That's not like the John Gage I've heard so much about," Cathy commented. "Your partner tells me you'll eat anything that doesn't eat you first."

*Figures Roy would say something like that.* John didn't voice the thought. Instead, he shrugged. "Hospital food'll kill anybody's appetite."

Cathy chuckled. "Well, if you feel hungry later, call the desk. I'll bring you something from the cafeteria."

"Thanks, Cathy." John settled back down in the bed. "I guess I'll just go back to sleep."

Cathy picked up the tray. "I'll check on you later." She left the room and pulled the door shut behind her.

John put his arm over his closed eyes.

*He's always had more energy than any two people put together.*

John's eyes flew open and he sat up at the sound of his father's voice. His heart sank when he found himself alone in the hospital room. *Okay. I'm really cracking up. Thinking about my high school girlfriend. Hearing my dad's voice. This is starting to scare me.*

*There has to be a reason for all of it.* When the explanation remained just out of his reach, John threw his arm over his eyes and went back to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Mr. Gage." The voice was like nails on a chalkboard. An insistent hand shook John's right shoulder. "Mr. Gage."

John dropped his arm and pulled his eyes open. "What?"

The woman was stick thin, with steel gray hair pulled back into a tight bun on top of her head. From the ample wrinkles on her face and neck, John figured she was 80 if she was a day. *She looks like she ate a case of lemons for breakfast.*

The woman pushed the tray table over to the bed and picked up two cans of a dietary supplement, which she plopped onto the tray. She shook one vigorously and pulled the tab from the can. "Drink both of these. Every drop."

"Who are you?" John asked.

"Mrs. Tilly, the hospital dietician." She shoved a straw into one of the cans, then picked it up and handed it to John.

John took the can to keep it from dropping onto his lap. He took a cautious sip and his mouth turned down at the corners. "Oh . . . man . . . that's awful!"

"You should've thought about that before you sent back your breakfast and your lunch." Mrs. Tilly jabbed the straw back in John's mouth.

John spit the straw out. "Now, wait a minute. I didn't send lunch back. I was asleep." He set the can on the table. "I'm not hungry."

"Mr. Gage, you've lost 8 pounds since you were admitted. It's my job to see that you gain those pounds back before you're released." She picked up the can and placed it back in John's hand.

"Well, if you want me to eat the food, why don't you make it edible?" John thumped the can back on the tray. "I'm not drinking that."

"For your information, Mr. Gage, food does not have to be loaded with salt and dripping with grease to be edible."

"I didn't eat paste in grade school. I'm not gonna start now." John motioned at the cans on the tray. "I didn't eat chalk either."

The door opened and Karen, another nurse, walked in. "What's going on in here?"

"I brought a dietary supplement for Mr. Gage, which he refuses to drink. Please note that on his chart." Mrs. Tilly paused. "Intravenous feeding will probably be the only way to get any nutrients into him."

"Now wait a minute!" John exclaimed.



"I'll handle this, Mrs. Tilly. Thank you." Karen motioned to the door and the rail thin woman took the hint. Once she was gone, she turned to John. "She's . . . overzealous."

"She's a bitch," John muttered. *If only I could walk outta here.*

Karen's eyes widened, then she laughed. "You're right," she allowed. "But so is she. You need to eat."

"I know that." John huffed, then sighed and closed his eyes. "I'm not hungry. I don't know why. I'm always hungry."

Karen rolled the table away from the bed, then picked up the cans. "Dr. Early and Dr. Kennedy will be by on rounds in a few minutes. Since your diet isn't restricted, I'll talk to them about letting you eat in the cafeteria."

"Why's the food great in the cafeteria and terrible for the patients?"

Karen laughed. "When you figure out the answer, let me know." She took the cans and walked out into the hall.

\*\*\*\*\*

In an attempt to stave off death from boredom, John turned on the television mounted on the wall opposite the bed. After 20 minutes, he realized his mistake. Turning off the t.v. didn't alleviate the headache watching it had caused.

"Damn it," he muttered, throwing his arm over his eyes and trying to ignore the pounding behind his eyes.

He heard the door open, then a familiar voice. "How're you doing today, Johnny?"

John dropped his arm and sat up in the bed. "You're the doctor, you're supposed to tell me." He gave Dr. Early a half-hearted grin.

Dr. Early frowned. "Headache?" He stepped over to the bed, pulled something from his pocket and examined John's eyes.

"I tried to watch t.v.," John informed.

"That's why it's on your list of `don'ts'." Dr. Kennedy looked up from John's chart. He replaced the chart on its hook on the end of the bed and walked around to the side opposite Dr. Early.

John suffered through the two doctors checking his reflexes, the healing incision on the back of his head, his grip strength and his pupil responses. He obediently got out of bed and paced the room so they could observe his gait and his coordination. He gritted his teeth and didn't comment on the two of

them talking over his head as though he were a 5 year old.

By the time the doctors finished, John's headache was approaching a pain level he hadn't had to endure since just after the surgery.

"Everything looks really good, Johnny." Dr. Early smiled at him.

*Let's cut right to the chase.* "When do I get out of here?"

Dr. Early and Dr. Kennedy exchanged a look, then Dr. Kennedy spoke up. "I'd say two days, maybe three, provided you have someone you can stay with for the first week."

"What!?" John's voice rose. "If I'm well enough to get out of here, why can't I go to my own apartment? Alone."

"Do you want the long list, or the short one?" Dr. Kennedy returned. "You're still getting headaches, which will probably get worse again before they get better. You're still unsteady on your feet and you haven't regained full control and range of motion on your right side."

"So? I'll take it easy." John crossed his arms. "Look, I've been looking out for myself since I was 9. I can take care of myself."

"I'm not implying that you can't." Dr. Kennedy smiled. "You'd just be better off with a little help during the first week. We'll see how you do and go from there."

*We'll see how you do and go from there.* The words irked John. He almost repeated them in a less than respectful tone. "I can take care of myself."

"Charlie, can you give us a few minutes?" Dr. Early tried to head off further confrontation.

Dr. Kennedy nodded silently, then turned and left the room.

Dr. Early pulled the chair over and sat down. "What's up, Johnny?"

John rolled his eyes, immediately regretting it. He put his hands to his temples and closed his eyes. "I wanna go home to my own apartment. I've been in this place almost 2 weeks. I've had nurses and doctors in and out at all hours." He paused and huffed out a breath. "Somebody's watching me every minute and making notes on a chart." He dropped his hands and opened his eyes. "A dietician threatened me with intravenous feeding a little while ago."

Dr. Early chuckled. "You haven't had much appetite, but we don't plan on going that far," he commented. "Do you think whoever you stay with'll be reporting back to us?"

John huffed out another breath. "No." He looked at Dr. Early. "Where'm I gonna go? Chet's? Marco's?" He paused and threw his hands up. "Mike's? Roy's?" He snapped his fingers. "I've got it. I'll go stay with Cap and his wife."

"I'm sure you'd be welcome there. Or with any of the guys." Dr. Early rubbed his hands together and

eyed John from beneath the fringe of his gray bangs. "Or is that the problem?"

John sighed. "I don't need a baby sitter, Doc. I went home alone after that virus. And after I broke my leg in that elevator shaft."

"You weren't dealing with a head injury, or the residual effects." Dr. Early stood. "You won't be giving up your independence permanently. Just for a week, or so."

John sighed and picked at the blanket, not looking up until he heard the door open. "Doc?"

Dr. Early paused in the door and turned back.

"I guess I'll go to Roy's." *Hope he and Dr. Kennedy aren't mad at me for bein' such a jerk.* "Thanks." John went back to picking at the blanket after Dr. Early smiled and left the room. *I just won't tell Roy I'm s'posed to stay with them.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Roy entered the hospital through the ER entrance and headed for the elevators. The improvement in John's mood the day before had done wonders for Roy. *Maybe I can finally stop worrying about him.* He chuckled. *At least until he gets himself into trouble again.*

The base station was unoccupied, so he decided to stop there on his way out. Roy stepped out of the elevator and waved at the nurses' desk, then headed to John's room. The door was partially open, so he knocked and stuck his head in. "You busy?"

He frowned when he didn't get an answer. He finally spotted John sitting in the chair at the window. *Uh-oh.* "Johnny?"

John turned in the chair. "Oh, sorry, Roy." He turned back to the window.

*There goes his good mood.* Roy stepped into the room, leaving the door open to let some light in. He waited a minute for John to turn the chair. When he didn't, Roy went to the window and sat on the sill. "You okay?"

John sighed and leaned his chin on his left hand. "Yeah. Just bored."

*He still can't bluff.* "Well, you'll be out of here pretty soon, right?"

"Yeah." John continued staring out the window.

"Listen, I was thinking about you going back to your apartment," Roy began. "It didn't sound like a good idea, so I talked it over with Joanne and we want you to stay with us. At least for the first few days."

John smiled half-heartedly. "That's nice, Roy, but I don't wanna impose on you and Joanne and the kids."

*No cracks about him cleaning out the fridge right now.* Roy laughed. "It's not an imposition, Johnny. Heck, the kids overheard us talking and they can't wait." He paused and laughed. "Geez, Erin woke up this morning and expected you to be there. She's such a sweet kid most of the time, I forget what she's like when she's ticked off."

That got a quiet chuckle out of Johnny. "Well," he began, then stopped. He took a deep breath. "Actually, I'm getting out of here in 2 or 3 days."

Roy grinned. "That's great. I'm working tomorrow, but I'm off the next 2 days."

"I really appreciate this, Roy," John said quietly.

Roy frowned. *This isn't 'cause he's bored.* "Hey, it's the least I can do." He paused. "I got you into this mess."

John rolled his eyes, then winced. "I'm the idiot who slipped on the bay floor."

"And I'm the idiot who didn't bring you to the hospital," Roy returned.

"Did I say, `Roy, I think I'm hurt. Take me to Rampart.'?"

Roy frowned. "Well, no, you said you were fine."

"Then it's not your fault." John stood and slowly crossed to the bed. Once he was settled, he looked over at Roy, who was still sitting on the sill. "I do anything else stupid that day?"

The question made Roy blink. *He still doesn't remember. He probably never will. Maybe that's what's eatin' at him.* He stood and pulled the chair over closer to the bed. Once he was seated, he folded his hands and looked down at his fingers. "You did some kind of scary stuff." He looked up at John, who had the covers pulled up to his chin. *Tread very carefully here, DeSoto.* "You were okay most of the day. Then, you . . . kind of . . . went out of it."

Roy paused, resisting the urge to look down at his hands again. "You didn't want to go to the hospital. Which wasn't a surprise." His brow furrowed. "You said something about losing a jacket . . . and your dad."

John jumped like he'd been shot through with a couple hundred volts of electricity. "A jacket? I said I lost my jacket?" He ran his left hand through his hair once. "Did I say my dad was gonna kill me?"

*Way to go, DeSoto. You're just gonna make him worse if you don't shut up.* He knew John and his father had a fight over John leaving home. He had no idea what kind of home life John left behind. *I can bluff, but I can't lie to Johnny.* "Well . . . yeah, you said something like that." He tried to change the subject. "But you know how people with head injuries are." He tried to laugh, but it came out sounding as forced as it was. "You tried to make a break for it when the ambulance got there. You would've made it if Chet and Marco hadn't grabbed onto you."

John ran his left hand through his hair again. "That happened when I was in high school. I went to the bowling alley and some rednecks took my jacket and burned it. I had to let 'em 'cause I was outnumbered." The words seemed to be tumbling out and Roy didn't dare interrupt them. "I thought my dad was gonna kill me. I told Kenny that for hours after we left the bowling alley." He put his head in his hands. "Oh, man. Oh, man."

Roy stood. "Johnny?" *I've seen guys go nuts right in front of me. Please don't let that be what's happening to Johnny right now.*

John looked at him. "He didn't kill me. He didn't even yell at me."

John's eyes brightened and a shiver went down Roy's spine.

"When I was unconscious, I saw my life, Roy." John paused. "I saw my mom and my dad. My aunt and my cousin. My best friend in school. My first girlfriend. All of it."

Roy felt the blood drain from his face and he was glad he was sitting down. *He doesn't know they lost him on the table.*

"You don't believe me, do you?" The sudden burst of energy was gone. John's voice was as listless as it had been just minutes earlier.

"I don't know, Johnny," Roy answered honestly. "You . . . you went into cardiac arrest during the surgery."

"But it wasn't like the stuff you read about your life passing before your eyes." Some of the energy seeped back into John's voice. "It started with a bright, white light. Then I was there. I saw it all, but I saw myself, too." He sighed quietly. "The hardest part was not being able to change anything." He leaned back into the pillow. "Oh, man. I thought I was going crazy. I kept having all these memories at the weirdest times. I couldn't figure out why."

"Well, now you know why." *Oh, that's comforting.*

"There's something else." John closed his eyes. "But I can't figure out what it is."

"Give it some time." Roy reached over and patted John's shin. He stood. "I'm gonna head out before the nurses kick me out." He grinned. "I swear, Dixie actually gave me the evil eye as I went by the desk yesterday."

"Maybe she thought you were Chet." John laughed quietly. "He was here one day for hours. I thought he'd never leave."

Roy laughed out loud. "I don't think I like being mistaken for Chet."

"Must be that spare tire."

"Gee, thanks," Roy returned sarcastically. *Now isn't the time to remind him that he's lost weight.* "I'll talk to you tomorrow. Keep me posted on when you're getting out of here."

"Hey, Roy," John called as Roy reached the door.

"Yeah?" Roy turned expectantly.

"Thanks for lettin' me stay with you."

Roy grinned. "Just repayin' the favor." *Wonder if he'll recognize the funny voice from the last time I said that?*

John's quiet laughter disappeared as the door swung shut behind Roy.

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The day of John's release from the hospital dawned gray and overcast. He tried not to let it bother him. But after staring out at the Southern California sunshine for days, he'd been looking forward to being out in it for a change. *Being out of the hospital will just have to be enough.*

He was at the window, watching the clouds roll by when the door opened behind him.

"Hi, Mr. Gage. I'm Marynelle." The woman crossed the room and set a sheaf of papers on the tray table. "I've got your release papers and discharge instructions. Are you ready to go over them, or would you like me to come back?"

John carefully made his way across to the bed. "I'm ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

Marynelle smiled and rolled the table closer to the bed. "I'll try to make this as painless as possible."

A knock sounded on the frame of the door and Roy walked in. "Oh, boy, just in time for the paperwork," he joked.

"You don't have to sign any of it." John snorted. He indicated Marynelle. "Roy, this is Marynelle. Marynelle, my keeper."

Roy frowned, went to the window and perched on the sill. Marynelle flashed him an uncomfortable smile, then bent to the paperwork on the tray.

"All right, let's go over the discharge instructions," Marynelle began.

The soft words soon ran together and John's attention wandered. *It's a good thing Roy's here. He'll pay attention and remember all this stuff. It'd probably be easier to tell me what I can do.*

*The kids'll probably be at school by the time I get out of here. I wonder if they're really excited about me staying there? Or is Roy just trying to be polite? Erin would probably be the only one glad to have me there. I don't think the boys like me much. They don't call me Uncle Johnny, or rush to tell me everything they've done since the last time they saw me.*

John's eyes drifted to the window. *Why'd it have to be overcast today? I miss the sunshine. It'll probably be a month before I can go up to the mountains again. Maybe I should fly out to Florida and*

*see my dad before I go back to work. Guess I should call him and see if that's okay.*

Someone shook him and pulled the phone out of his hand. John blinked in confusion at Roy, then took several deep breaths to still his pounding heart.

"Are you all right, Johnny?" The concern was evident on Roy's face and in his voice, which shook slightly.

John took another deep breath and blew it out. "Yeah." He swiped a hand across his face, surprised to find it bathed in sweat. "Guess I kind'a spaced out, huh?"

"Yeah. What happened?" Roy's voice was still shaking.

John looked around the room. "Where'd she go? Marynelle?"

"To get Dr. Early." Roy set the phone back on the table to John's left.

"No!" John exclaimed, then closed his eyes. "Shit, shit, shit," he chanted through clenched teeth. He finally opened his eyes. "They're gonna make me stay here."

"Maybe they should."

"No!" John exclaimed again. "They can't. They're not doing anything except annoying me." He looked at Roy, his eyes pleading. "I really need to get out of here, Roy."

Roy took a deep breath, let it out, then dropped into the chair. "What happened?" He narrowed his eyes at Johnny. "And you'd better answer me this time."

John leaned back into the pillows. "I . . . I just got distracted . . ."

"What made you go for the phone?"

"I wanted to call my dad and ask him to let me come home," John admitted quietly. He closed his eyes again. "Maybe they should just move me to the psych ward now and get it over with." He opened his eyes and looked at Roy. "If I have to stay here one more day, I'll go nuts."

Dr. Early came in before Roy could respond. "What happened, Johnny?"

John laughed nervously. "I'm not sure . . . I just started daydreaming. I guess it wasn't a very good one."

Dr. Early frowned and pulled a pen light from his pocket. He checked John's pupils, then his eye movement. He had John squeeze his hands. "It doesn't seem to be neurological." His frown deepened. "How often has this been happening?"

"I'm not getting out of here, am I?"

"Not necessarily." Dr. Early perched on the bed. "However, I'm a little concerned about this, not to

mention your loss of appetite." He paused and looked at Roy, then turned back to John. "I'm not going to keep you in here, but if your ability to concentrate and your appetite don't improve, we'll need to have a serious talk about it." He stood. "I'll send Marynelle back to finish your release papers."

"Thanks, Dr. Early," John called as Early stepped out of the room. He then looked over at Roy. "Thanks."

"When you're ready to talk about it, I'll listen," Roy offered quietly.

John smiled. "Yeah, I know. Thanks, Roy."

\*\*\*\*\*

Roy spared a glance at John as they drove through the rain-soaked streets. He'd hoped John would perk up again when they finally left the hospital. *No matter how sick he was, or how tired he was, he always perked up before.* A flash of lightning burst up from the ground twenty feet to Roy's left, making him jump.

"Geez, that was close!" Roy exclaimed, his heart still pounding from the scare.

To Roy's surprise, John blinked and shook his head. "What happened?" He finally turned to look at Roy.

*He's got a lot on his mind. Maybe it's this weather.* "Ah, just a bolt of lightning barely missing the car." Roy chuckled quietly.

"We're insulated," John muttered, turning back to the window.

*Maybe if I talk to him, I can distract him a little.* "We're gonna put you in Erin's room. She's gonna stay on the couch."

"Don't put Erin out of her room. I can sleep on the couch."

Roy laughed. "She says it'll be like having a t.v. in her room." He paused, then shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if you want to sleep on the couch, you can tell her." He spared another glance at John, who was still looking out the window. "Erin's room'll give you a little bit more privacy. And you won't have to listen to her and the boys tearing through to get their breakfast and get off to school."

"Okay, I'll stay in Erin's room."

"Do you feel like going by your apartment?" Roy paused. "If you don't, you can give me a list and I'll go pick up whatever you need."

"No, we can go now."



\*\*\*\*\*

John made a beeline for the phone when he walked into the apartment. On the ride from the hospital, he'd decided to call his father and get it over with. *One way, or the other.* John knew his father left the reservation and moved back to the Gulf Coast. He also knew that Jim Gage had kept in touch with his aunt, who'd given John his father's phone number.

He pulled his wallet out and retrieved a piece of paper, unfolding and smoothing it. John's stomach fluttered and his hands shook as he picked up the handset and dialed the number. *Here goes nothing.* The phone on the other end rang once, then twice.

"The number you have reached has been disconnected, or is no longer in service. Please check the number and dial again." When the female voice repeated the first part of the message, John slammed the handset onto the base.

"What's the matter?" Roy stepped into the kitchen.

John took a deep breath. "I just tried to call my dad. The number's been disconnected." He turned from the phone, stepped past Roy and disappeared down the short hallway.

When he got to the bedroom, John closed the door, then sat on the bed. *He must've found out I had the number. He doesn't want me to call him.* John fell back onto the bed, wishing he could stay in his own apartment and shut out the rest of the world. *That's not an option, 'cause Roy's waiting for me.*

John finally stood and slowly moved through the room, tossing the things he wanted to take to Roy and Joanne's on the bed. Once he was pretty sure he had everything, he pulled a suitcase and duffel bag out of the closet and stuffed the items into the bags. By the time he got the bags closed, exhaustion had crept up on him. *I didn't do anything.* He pushed the weariness aside and struggled to carry the two bags out of the room.

Roy rose from the couch and intercepted him in the hall. "I'll get that." He took the suitcase, then laughed. "What'd you put in here?"

*Thanks for trying to keep me from feeling bad, Roy.* "Just a few bricks." John flashed a half-hearted grin.

"Anything else?" Roy set the suitcase next to the door.

John stood in the living room, looking around. *I can't read, so I don't need books.* He started to tell Roy he was ready, when something on the bookshelf caught his attention. He walked over and pulled the large, leather bound photo album from the shelf. *Aunt Helen sent this to me my first Christmas in California. Looking at it made me homesick.* He fingered the leather for a minute. Instead of putting it back on the shelf, John carried it and the duffel bag to the couch, set the duffel bag down and opened it. After putting the photo album inside, he closed the duffel bag.

He met Roy at the door. "Ready."

\*\*\*\*\*

Joanne DeSoto stepped out on the front porch as Roy pulled into the driveway. She waited for Roy to turn off the car, then went to the passenger door, bracing her arms on it once Johnny swung it open.

"It's great to see you out of the hospital, Johnny." Joanne smiled down at John as he swung his legs out and pushed himself up from the seat.

"Thanks for lettin' me stay here, Joanne." John's voice was quiet and weary.

Joanne didn't miss John putting his left arm on the roof to steady himself. *He's worn out, but he'll be damned if he admits it. Men!*

John leaned away from the car and closed the door, without letting go of the roof.

*He's looking at the house like it's a hundred miles away.* Joanne looked over at Roy, who was behind the hatch of the station wagon. "Can you get John's things, Roy?"

"Yep." Roy hefted the suitcase and duffel bag out of the back of the car.

Joanne winked at Roy, then put her left arm through John's right. "I made tomato soup and sandwiches for lunch. Is that okay with you, Johnny?" She led him toward the house, all the while letting him think he was doing the leading.

John smiled half-heartedly and shuffled along with Joanne beside him. "That sounds great."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was dark when John woke up. It took him a minute to realize he was on the DeSoto's couch. The next thing he realized was that he'd skipped lunch. *Whatever Joanne made for dinner smells awfully good.* His stomach growled and he realized suddenly that he was starving.

John pushed himself up from the couch and quietly made his way into the half-bath off the living room. He could hear the sounds of quiet conversation as he washed and dried his face.

When he was finished in the bathroom, John opened the door to the breakfast room.

"It lives!" Roy grinned at him from the head of the oval table.

"And it's starving," John declared, taking the empty seat next to Erin.

"See, Mom, I told you Uncle Johnny would wake up when he smelled your roast." Erin leaned over and quickly hugged John. "That's why I set your place."

John smiled. "I see that. Thanks." He tousled Erin's hair, then picked up the plate and carefully spooned potatoes and vegetables from the bowls on the table.

Roy held out his hand. "I'll get you some roast."

John handed the plate to Roy, who speared 2 slices of roast beef, laid them on the plate, then handed the plate back to John. He set the plate down and stood to get a glass of milk.

"What do you need, John?" Joanne asked, rising from her chair.

"Glass of milk. I'll get it." John went into the kitchen as Joanne sat down again.

"So, Mom, will we be able to have my birthday party at McDonald's?"

"Erin, sweetie, your birthday isn't until September."

"Yeah, Punkin', you don't wanna pick some place months ahead of time," Roy chimed in. "What happens if you find some place better?"

"McDonald's is the best place."

John smiled at the conviction in the Erin's voice. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out the gallon jug of milk.

"With that face, you should'a been born on Halloween."

"Good one, Chris." Tommy laughed at his older brother's joke.

"Awww, Chris, you weren't born that close to Thanksgiving."

*Good one, Erin.* John chuckled as he poured milk into a glass. When he went back to the table, Joanne and Roy were laughing behind their napkins and Chris was frowning across the table at his sister.

Chris turned from Erin to Roy. "Dad, Erin just called us turkeys."

John was in the middle of a sip of milk when Erin responded.

"I didn't call Daddy a turkey. I was callin' you a turkey, Chris." Erin paused. "I'm surprised you figured it out that quickly."

"Oh, gross!" Chris and Tommy exclaimed when John spit his milk out.

"I'm sorry, Joanne." John stood. His face and ears were beet red as he swiped at the milk with his napkin.

Joanne chuckled. "No harm done." She stood and helped him clean up the mess, then left the table to get fresh napkins from the kitchen. Once she was seated, she cleared her throat. "All right, you two. No trading insults at the dinner table."

"Chris started it, Mom," Erin protested.

"Erin." With that one word, Erin went back to her dinner. Joanne turned to Chris, who looked entirely too smug. "Christopher."

Chris rolled his eyes, then went back to eating his dinner.

"Thomas." Joanne added, then looked across at Roy, who was still laughing behind his napkin. "Roy."

Roy blushed, then lowered the napkin. "Sorry, hun." He winked at Joanne, then turned to Tommy. "How'd that History test go today?"

*It's nice being part of a family again.* John took a bite of mashed potatoes and followed that with a bite of roast. *Staying here was a good idea.*

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After dinner, John excused himself and went upstairs for his first shower since the day he was injured. For the first time in two weeks, he was free to wash his own hair and body, rather than having a nurse and nurse's aide perform these tasks for him. He welcomed the feel of the steaming water pouring over him. He took his time, lathering and rinsing his hair, then standing under the showerhead as the silky suds slid down to the mat and circled the drain.

When the water turned lukewarm, John turned it off and stepped out of the tub, quickly drying off, then hurrying across the hall to Erin's room with the towel around his waist. He briefly heard the sounds of Roy and his family downstairs as he closed the door of Erin's room.

He put on a tee-shirt and a pair of running shorts and was trying to decide whether to unpack his things, or just set the suitcase and duffel bag on the floor when a quiet knock sounded on the door.

John looked over at the door. "Come in."

The door opened and Joanne stuck her head in. "Roy and the kids are busy downstairs. I thought'd I'd see if you wanted a hand getting settled in."

"I was just trying to decide whether I wanted to live out of the suitcase, or not," John admitted, smiling shyly.

"Did you decide?" Joanne asked, her right eyebrow raised.

John ducked his head. "I can unpack."

Joanne chuckled quietly. "Mind if I keep you company? I've only got a few minutes before they miss me and come looking." She winked.

John laughed. "Hiding out, huh?"

"You bet." Joanne went to the dresser and opened the two top drawers. "Erin cleared out these two drawers. And there should be two in the chest of drawers on the other wall." She went over and pulled open the left and center drawers. "If you need more room in the closet, we can shift Erin's clothes to our room."

John pulled several shirts and three pairs of jeans from the suitcase. "I don't have anything formal," he joked. "The drawers'll be fine."

Joanne sat down in the chair at the desk while John unpacked. He'd just closed the suitcase and set it on the floor when another knock sounded on the frame of the open door. "What's up, Erin?"

"Can I come in?"

John laughed. "It's your room. Of course you can."

Erin crossed to the desk chair and Joanne pulled the little girl up to her lap. "I thought you'd be playing with your dad and brothers downstairs." She smoothed the girl's shoulder-length, strawberry blond hair.

"They're playing Stratego and they won't let me play." Erin put one arm on Joanne's shoulder and rested her head on her mother's shoulder.

"Well, why don't you go get your bath, then put your pajamas on? When you're done, you and I can do something without your dad and brothers. At least until bedtime." Joanne set the child on the floor and gently patted her butt.

"Tell you what, Erin, you pick the game and I'll play it with you," John offered.

Erin smiled. "Really, Uncle Johnny?"

John returned the smile. "Really. But you've gotta take your bath and put your pajamas on first."

"Thanks, Uncle Johnny." Erin dashed out of the room and across the hall.

John opened the duffel bag and set the photo album on the bed, then continued unpacking. "Guess Stratego's a little over her head."

Joanne laughed. "No, she beats the pants off them every time." She laughed again. "With her friends, Erin's a graceful loser and an even better winner. But not with the boys . . ." She trailed off, still laughing. "Erin learned to crow from her brothers."

"So, I'm not gonna have to let Erin win, huh?" John laughed.

"Nope." Joanne laughed. "I swear, I don't know where any of the kids got their competitive streaks. Roy and I are just about the least competitive people in the world."

John laughed. "I never realized that, but you're right." He paused and sat down on the bed. "I don't think I'm competitive. But, boy, do I hate to lose."

"So I've heard," Joanne teased.

"That's why I've been such a jerk the past few days, I guess."

"You've been through a lot, Johnny." Joanne reached across the short space between the desk and where Johnny sat on the bed and gently squeezed his leg. "The important thing is that you're on your way back." She gave his leg another squeeze, then sat back. "And if you don't think you can talk to Roy, I hope you know you can talk to me."

John smiled. "Thanks, Joanne."

Erin dashed back into the room without knocking. She froze inside the door and frowned at the adults. "Oh, man. You're talkin' about grown-up stuff." Her mouth turned down, she cocked her head to the side and put her hands on her hips. "I have to get out now, don't I?"

"Erin!" Joanne exclaimed, then laughed.

"C'mere, Erin." Johnny motioned with his left arm. "We're done." He lifted Erin to his lap and kissed the top of her head. "And you owe me a game."

Erin blushed, then spotted the photo album on the bed. "What's that?"

John turned and looked where Erin was pointing. "That's a photo album my aunt sent me when I first moved to California."

"Does it have pictures of you when you were a kid?"

John laughed. "Of course. A couple of really embarrassing ones, too."

"May I look at it?"

"Erin," Joanne began.

John waved over Erin's head. Joanne smiled and winked at him.

"You can look at my pictures." Erin hopped off John's lap and dashed to the closet, returning with a small photo album covered in a floral print. "If you want to look at them."

John took the photo album. "Well, I'll bet you I've seen every one of these pictures," he began, then picked up the leather bound album. He handed it to Erin. "But you can look at this one." He leaned forward. "You have to promise not to laugh, first."

Erin nodded, her expression serious. She took the photo album and clutched it to her chest with her left arm. "I promise." She held out her right hand. "Pinky swear?"

John smiled, then curled his right pinky around Erin's. When he let go, Erin sat on the bed next to John and set the album on her lap. She turned to Joanne and patted the bed. "Do you wanna look too, Mom?"

Joanne smiled, stood and sat next to her daughter. "Sure."

"You have to promise not to laugh, too."

Joanne winked at John again over Erin's head. "I promise."

Erin opened the photo album, the first page of which held 3 pictures. The first was a black and white picture of a man who was an exact duplicate of John. "That's you!" Erin exclaimed.

John laughed. "No, that's my father. He has blue eyes. You can't tell in the picture."

Erin looked up at John. "Oh, yeah, your eyes are brown." She turned back to the page, running her fingers along the edge of a second picture of a young girl with long, black hair and large dark eyes. "Is that your mom?"

John smiled. "Yeah."

"She's really pretty." Erin ran her fingers along the edges of the photo again. "I'll bet she's still pretty."

John smiled sadly. "Well, she passed away when I was in high school."

"Oh. Like my grandpa." Erin looked up at him, again wearing an expression entirely too serious for a child so young. "I'm sorry." She closed the photo album. "We don't have to look at it if it makes you sad."

John smiled and opened the cover. "It's okay." He smoothed Erin's hair, then pointed to the picture in the center of the first page. "Those are my parents right after they got married."

"Look, Mom, Uncle Johnny's dad was in the Navy, like Uncle Scott."

"Eileen's husband," Joanne supplied.

*Dad's dress hat. I used to put that thing on and march around the yard. When Mom and Aunt Helen took me to Naples and I saw my first fire truck, it became a tillerman's uniform hat. The memory brought a smile to John's face.*

Erin turned the page.

"Uh-oh, here come the embarrassing pictures." John laughed. "Don't forget your promise."

The next two pages held pictures of John from infancy through grade school. Erin fingered the pictures without comment.

*I was a pretty happy kid. Not bad looking, either. A little skinny, maybe. I haven't really changed that*

*much.*

Erin turned the page. The next two pages held pictures of John from grade school through high school. Again, Erin fingered the pages, but didn't comment. She looked up at John several times, going from the faces on the page to the one beside her.

*She can see a change.* John looked more closely at the pictures. He was smiling in all but the last 2. And in each one, the dark eyes held a sadness that belied the smile.

After a minute, Erin turned the page again. The left page held several pictures of a young man on a horse.

"That was my first rodeo," John informed. "Calf roping." *That was a great trip. My first one out of Florida. Just me and my cousin. We had a blast.*

"A real rodeo?" Erin looked up at him. "Cool."

The right page held an 8x10 graduation photo showing John in his cap and gown. *I looked so serious. I should've been happy, but I would've given anything for my mom to see me graduate. If she'd been there, she might've been able to talk some sense into dad about taking help from the Tribe so I could go to college.* He'd never blamed his father, though. *I didn't want their help any more than he did. She would've set us both straight.*

Erin traced the various emblems hanging behind John. "What're those?"

John squinted, then smiled and tapped the picture. "Oh, those two are for track. I ran the 440 and relay." He tapped the remaining emblem. "And that one was 'cause I was the editor of the school paper."

"Really cool." Erin turned the page. The remaining pictures showed a barn and two story house, as well as a smaller, single story house.

"That's my aunt and uncle's." John tapped one of the pictures of the single story house. "And that's the house I grew up in."

The remaining pictures in the album were of relatives from John's mother's family. Some of the pictures dated back to the 20s and 30s.

"Who're they?" Erin asked, fingering a picture of two girls and a boy dressed in winter coats and hats.

"That's my mom." John pointed to the shorter of the two girls. "And that's my Aunt Helen. And my Uncle Clyde." He cleared his throat. "Ah, I think this was taken at a mission school in Pennsylvania."

Erin looked up at John, then turned the page. The next pages contained more recent pictures. John pointed out aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents and great-grandparents. His father appeared in several. For the first time, John saw the same sadness in his father's eyes that he'd discovered in his own. *I looked at dad every day for 5 years. How did I miss that? Probably the same way I missed seeing it in the mirror.*



On the last page was a group picture, taken right before the photo album was sent to John.

"November 1, 1968." Erin read the date written beneath the photo out loud. She pointed at a man in the back row. "Look, there's your dad. And your Uncle Howard. And your Aunt Helen. And your Uncle Clyde." She scanned the picture. "There's Howard." She looked up at John. "He's the one who locked you in the root cellar, isn't he?"

John laughed. "Yep, that's him." His eyes were drawn to his father in the back row of the family photograph. *What was he doing in this picture?*

Erin linked her arm through his, then leaned against him. "I really missed you, Uncle Johnny." She looked up at him. "I . . ." She trailed off and looked down at the photo album.

John kissed the top of Erin's head. "I missed you, too," he admitted quietly. He closed the photo album, lifted it from Erin's lap and sat it behind them. Then he disengaged his arm, pulled Erin onto his lap and hugged her. "I'm gonna be just fine now," he promised. Then he pulled away. "How about that game?"

Erin smiled up at him. "Do you know how to play Monopoly?"

Joanne laughed. "Not Monopoly." She held up her hand as Erin opened her mouth to argue. "That takes hours, Erin. And it's almost bed time."

"Okay. Is Operation okay?"

Joanne tweaked Erin's nose. "Yes. But no arguments when I say it's bedtime."

"Yes, mom."

Joanne nudged John. "You, either."

John rolled his eyes and laughed. "Yes, mom."

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Hours later, John was still awake, staring at the ceiling of Erin's room. His father's attendance at the family gathering at his aunt and uncle's ranch was no great mystery. His father had always been considered a member of the Jumper Clan, though others on the reservation didn't share that sentiment. Jim Gage's presence in the group photo puzzled his son. *He must've known the picture was for me. Aunt Helen was never good at keeping secrets.*

John had looked at the album hundreds of times over the years. But he'd never really looked at the last photograph. The pictures of the ranch and the two houses were usually the last he looked at before

putting the album away and pursuing something that didn't make him homesick.

John's journey to California had been a long one. In fact, several times it had taken every bit of will and determination for him to keep moving forward, rather than running back. When he arrived in Los Angeles, he felt as lost there as he had in Florida. Until he joined the fire service, becoming a firefighter, then a rescue man and finally a paramedic.

The family photograph at the back of the album also reminded John of all that Jim Gage had given up. His father's family had cut all ties with him when he married John's mother. His mother's heritage had only been part of the problem. The Gages had been a moderately wealthy family in Alabama for generations. When Jim Gage married someone his family believed was beneath his station, his mother, brothers and sisters disowned him.

*Dad didn't want to cut me off when I left. He didn't want me to get hurt. So he tried to keep me from leaving the only way he could think of at the time. Being in that picture must've been his way of telling me that. And I missed it. God, I hope Dad hasn't given up on me.*

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Fourteen weeks after his injury, John was back on duty. His life was returning to normal, or what passed for normal when Chet Kelly was involved. In his second week back, he'd been drenched by so many of The Phantom's water bombs he was surprised he hadn't sprouted gills. *So much for the little troll being worried about me.*

He walked into the station from the back parking lot. "Morning, Mike." He waved at the engineer, who was already in uniform, checking the pumper's various gauges and dials.

Stoker waved as John pushed open the door to the locker room.

"Johnny, you're early," Roy teased as John walked into the locker room.

"Morning, morning, morning." John crossed to his locker, stood to the side and slowly opened the door.

Roy watched John's caution with an amused look.

"What's the matter, Gage?" Chet smirked at him from his locker across the aisle.

"Better safe than sorry, Kelly." When he was sure the locker wasn't booby trapped, John swung the door open and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"So, Gage, still no luck with that new x-ray technician?" Chet sat down on the bench and stuck his left foot in his shoe. "What was her name? Marie? Maria?" He tightened the lace, then tied it.

"She's cautious." John pulled off his shirt and hung it up, then pulled out an undershirt. "Once she gets to know me, she'll go out with me."

"What about all those nurses that took care of you?" Chet pulled on his right shoe. "They were all good lookin'." He looked up. "Oh, yeah, they all saw you without your clothes."

John made a face at Chet. "Very funny."

Chet chortled, pulling on the lace of his right shoe to tighten it. The left side of the lace snapped off in his hand.

John laughed out loud. "That's even funnier." He pulled his uniform shirt out of his locker.

Chet took off his right shoe and stood. "Man, I gotta go find some tape."

Marco followed Chet out of the locker room. "I wonder who made the coffee this morning?"

Roy closed his locker, then finished buttoning his shirt as John pulled off his jeans and pulled on his uniform pants. "So, any luck finding your dad's new phone number?"

John sighed and sat in his open locker, pulling on a pair of black socks. "No. I must'a spent four hours at the library getting the name of every town on the Gulf Coast, but there's no listing in any of 'em." John put on his shoes, then quickly tied the laces. He rested his right elbow on his leg and his chin in his right hand. "I tried callin' the Coast Guard to see if I could track him down through his boat." He stopped.

"And?" Roy prompted.

"They said she went down in the Gulf last summer. One fatality, but they wouldn't tell me any more than that."

"Did you try the local papers?"

John rubbed his left eye. "No." He paused. "It couldn't have been him. Aunt Helen would've told me."

"What about your aunt?" Roy sat on the bench. "He's kept in touch with them, right?"

"Aunt Helen and Uncle Howard are on the road." He laughed. "They've been goin' to county fairs, cattle shows, stock auctions." He paused. "I finally talked to my cousin last night. He's been working offshore. He'll have her call me the next time they check in." He rested his arms on his thighs. "Man, I wish just I'd done it years ago."

Roy shrugged. "Well, sometimes it takes a close call to put things in perspective."

"Tell me about it." John muttered. "I hope it's not too late." His voice was almost too quiet for Roy to hear. He sat up and looked at his watch. "Roll call in 2 minutes. We don't wanna be late." He got out of the locker and closed the door.

The paramedics filed out to the engine bay, where Stanley was waiting, clip board at the ready. They fell in line with Mike, Marco and Chet, standing at attention as Stanley inspected uniforms and badges. When he returned to the head of the line, he read off the duty assignments.

"DeSoto, kitchen. Gage, dorm. Kelly, latrine." Stanley paused and looked at Chet, effectively silencing any protest. "Lopez, engine bay. Stoker, outside. And somebody's leakin' oil. It's all over the driveway and the parking lot." He paused and looked up at Chet, who was busy examining the mechanism over the bay door. "C-Shift was busy, so we've got an extra couple hundred feet of hose to hang and dry." He stopped and looked up from the clipboard. "Well, let's get to work."

The five men fell out. John and Roy went to the squad to check and test the equipment. John pulled the biophone out, then knelt and set it on the floor. He opened it up and attached the antenna to perform the daily calibration check on the telemetry equipment.

"Hmmm."

John looked up to find Chet standing behind him. "What're you doin', Kelly?"

"I think you've got a bald spot going, Gage." Chet smirked. "Maybe some of that hair isn't gonna grow back."

John glared at the fireman. "Go clean the toilets, Chet."

Joanne had cut John's hair so that sides and front were only 2 inches longer than the stubble on the shaved patch at the back of his head. *It's growin' back. It's almost as long as it was when I got hurt.* John knew that because he checked it almost daily.

Chet walked toward the locker room door, whistling tunelessly. John watched him disappear behind the door, then turned back to the biophone. Roy was smirking at him.

"What're you smirking at?" John raised an eyebrow.

Roy grinned, hefted the drug box from it's compartment and set it on the concrete bay floor.

"And I thought I belonged in the psych ward," John muttered, picking up the handset on the biophone and depressing the transmit button. "Rampart, this is Rescue 51, calling in for daily calibration check."

"Go ahead, 51." Dixie's voice responded.

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John was in the dorm, changing the pillow case on Stoker's bunk when the phone rang. He wrestled the pillow into the case and set it on the bunk, then picked up the next stack of clean linens for Chet's bunk. *Maybe I should short sheet his bed.* He pondered the idea, then rejected it. *I'll wait 'til the engine gets a run in the middle of the night or somebody else does the dorm. Maybe The Phantom'll*

*pick on him instead.*

"Gage! Phone!" Chet's bellowed.

"Like it'd kill him to walk across the bay to tell me." John dropped the linens on Chet's bunk, then went to the phone on the desk near Cap's bunk. He picked up the handset. "I've got it." He waited for the click of the other extension being placed on the cradle. "Hang on a second." He leaned to the open door of the dorm. "I've got it, Kelly!"

He waited until he heard a click, then spoke, "Fireman Gage."

"Johnny? Is everything all right? Were you hurt at work again? I tried to call you and let you know about this trip, but I never got any answer at your apartment. I should've called the station . . ."

John smiled. "Aunt Helen, I'm okay." He paused. "Well, I fell and hit my head, but I'm back at work and everything's gonna be fine."

"Johnny, I just don't understand why you won't let the Fire Department call us when you're injured." Helen paused. "We're your family. That's what we're there for."

"I don't want you to worry about me. I know you'd drop everything and come out here." John paused. "But you and Uncle Howard have enough on your plates." *Better change the subject.* "How's the trip? Howard said ya'll got yourselves a camper and you've been all over the Southeast."

Helen laughed. "If I could teach your Uncle Howard to ask for directions, it'd be perfect. I swear that man could get lost in his own house. Absolutely no sense of direction." She paused, still laughing. "We've got some good stock comin' in next year. We'll be able to expand the ranch over the next 2 years." She paused. "But you don't wanna hear about that."

John smiled. "I'm glad things're going well down there. I was worried when you lost part of your herd last winter. Did they ever figure out what happened to 'em?"

"Oh, I see, you can worry about us, but not the other way around."

*Uh-oh.* John frowned. *How do I get myself outta this one?*

Then Helen laughed and John smiled.

"I had another reason for calling," John began. "Is everything okay with my dad?"

"Of course it is." Helen paused. "Oh, Johnny. He took a job in Panama City last winter. I must've forgotten to give you the new number. I'm so sorry."

John smiled. "That's okay."

"You tried to call him." He could hear the smile in Helen's voice. "After all this time you finally tried to call him."

John laughed. "Yeah, I did."

"I have the number in my bag. Just a second." The phone was pulled away. "Howard, would you get my bag, dear? John needs Jim's new phone number."

John patted his pockets, looking for his pen and pad. When he failed to find them, he dug around the desk, finally locating a pencil and pen in the center drawer.

"We stopped by on our way across the Panhandle," Helen continued. "Thank you, dear." He heard the pages of an address book rustling. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am." John tucked the phone in his shoulder.

"813-342-4730, that's his home number. He works Tuesday through Saturday, so you should be able to reach him at home today. Do you want the number at work, too?"

"No, thanks." John set the pencil down and leaned back in the chair. "If I don't get him at home today, I'll try him at home tomorrow night."

"I'm on the phone, dear. What?" Helen laughed. "Uncle Howard says `Hello and stay out of trouble'."

John laughed. "Tell him ditto from me."

"Well, I'd better let you get back to work. We love you, Johnny. Be careful."

John smiled. "I love ya'll, too. Ya'll be careful, too. 'Bye."

"Bye, Johnny."

Johnny gently replaced the handset and picked up the piece of paper from the desk. After staring at it for a few minutes, he stood and went to the locker room. He again opened his locker without standing in front of it, then pulled a roll of quarters from his bag. *It's now, or never.* A flock of butterflies fluttered in his stomach, but he ignored them and left the locker room, crossing the vehicle bay and going to the pay phone in the common room of the station.

The butterflies were swarming as he picked up the handset. He dialed the area code and exchange, then replaced the handset in its cradle. *You've gotta do this, Gage. You promised to set things right. Now just do it!* John picked up the handset, dialed the number, then deposited 3 quarters in quarters for the first 3 minutes of the call.

John's hands were shaking as the line rang. *One. Two. Three.*

"Hello?"

"Hi. . ." John's voice faltered. "Dad . . . it's me . . . Johnny."

To be continued in Part 4

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