

Author's Note: The story takes place somewhere between the episodes Virus and Snakebite. Loosely. Enjoy!

GOING HOME: The Road Back

By Lisa O'Brien

John Gage pulled his Land Rover into the parking lot behind the station, the tires squealing as he pulled into an empty spot next to Chet Kelly's VW Bus. *Cap's gonna kill me.* He turned the key and pulled it out of the ignition. He jumped from the car, yanking his clean uniforms from the passenger seat before the engine stopped ticking. *Maybe he'll just yell at me. I've been back almost two months and this is the first time I've been late.* He rushed across the lot and into the vehicle bay.

"It's about time, Gage," one of C-Shift's paramedics declared. "I thought I'd have to sit through the Cap's drill for you."

John froze, looking around for Captain Hank Stanley, "Shush," he hissed, then resumed his dash for the locker room. Where he collided with Stanley, who was stepping through the door as John slid through it.

John grabbed the frame of the door to stop the imminent collision, "Cap," he said, startled, "I had to stop at the dry cleaners on my way in and the girl couldn't find my uniforms, then she couldn't get the register to work," he babbled.

"Well, since it wasn't your fault," Stanley began sarcastically. "Dishes the next 5 shifts. And consider yourself lucky."

"Yeah, thanks, Cap," John responded.

"We have a drill this morning," Stanley reminded.

"Two minutes, Cap," John promised, heading into the locker room.

"And Gage," Stanley called.

"Yes, Cap?" John answered, a little hesitantly.

"Stop sliding around the place," Stanley ordered.

"It's these street shoes, Cap," John returned, then regretted it when Stanley's expression darkened,
"Yes, sir."

Shaking his head, Stanley walked way, "Before you fall and break your neck," he muttered.

Once the Captain was gone, John hurried to his locker, threw the door open and quickly hung the uniforms inside. He unbuttoned his shirt with one hand, searching for a pair of socks in the bag he kept at the bottom of the locker with the other. All he managed to find was one sock. And plenty of clean boxers.

The other sock must've fallen out of the bag. He pulled it out and set it on the bench, then stuck his head into the locker to root for the missing sock under the books, magazines and newspapers that he cleaned out every couple of weeks. He was so intent on his search, he didn't hear Roy DeSoto enter the locker room.

"You told the Captain two minutes," Roy drawled.

The back of John's head met the corner of the locker as he tried to pull his head out. He yelped and brought his hand to the back of his head, blinking to clear away the stars.

"Don't sneak up on me like that," John muttered.

"You okay?" Roy asked, fighting the urge to grin.

"Yeah, yeah," John responded. "Do you have a sock?" he asked, "I can only find one."

With that, Roy grinned, "The black hole strikes again?"

"Or the Phantom," John returned.

Roy opened his locker, pulled out a pair of black socks and handed them to his partner.

The door of the locker room opened and Chet Kelly's head popped in, "Get a move on, Gage. Cap's getting' antsy," he informed.

"In a minute," John returned, then winced as the slight rise in his voice made his head throb.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Roy asked, genuine concern in his tone.

John sighed, "Yeah, I'm fine," he insisted. "It's just been one of those mornings."

"Your life is one of those mornings, Gage," Chet teased. "What'd he do to himself this time?"

"Cracked his head on the door of his locker," Roy informed dryly.

"Is the door broken?" Chet asked.

"Go annoy somebody else, Chet," John said, tossing his lone sock at the firefighter's head.

"C'mon, Chet," Roy said, escorting Chet out of the locker room. "Let Johnny change in private."

"Like he's shy," Chet joked. "Although, if I was that skinny . . ."

John rolled his eyes, "Always have to have the last word," he muttered, quickly kicking off his shoes, then sitting in his locker to pull off his socks and pull on the ones Roy had lent him.

Two minutes later, he was out of his street clothes and tucking his uniform shirt into his pants. Already behind schedule, he stuffed the bag back into the locker, slammed the door and rushed out of the locker room, sliding across the vehicle bay just as Stanley looked out of the door leading into the station kitchen.

"Gage!" Stanley boomed.

John grabbed the rail on the squad to stop himself, "Sorry, Cap," he said sheepishly, walking into the kitchen and pulling a chair from the large table into the rec room.

Once John was seated in the chair, the Captain turned to the blackboard, where a cut-away diagram had been drawn, "The warehouses on Olive Street are undergoing renovation," he began, pointing to a list of addresses in the upper right corner of the board.

"Renovation for what?" Chet asked.

"Condominiums," Stanley responded, "Some developer bought the four blocks on both sides of Olive from East Mountainview to Pacific Boulevard.

"It'll never happen," Chet declared with a laugh. "The neighborhoods are terrible. The buildings should've been torn down a hundred years ago."

Stanley looked tolerantly at Chet, "That's not our concern," he reminded. "Our concern is how to handle a fire if one erupts during renovation," he paused, "All of the warehouses are your basic 3 to 5 story brick and mortar structures."

John settled back in the chair, stretching his legs out and crossing his hands over his stomach as the Captain went on about the materials and equipment inside the warehouses. He knew that drills were a necessary and important part of their job. It was just that they were also very boring. And after his encounter with the locker door, he had a hell of a headache brewing.

Two and a half hours later, Stanley's drill continued. So did John's headache. The Captain didn't help matters any by calling on John every time he posed a question to the assembled group of firefighters.

It's like 3rd Grade all over again. Only now, it's Cap picking on me instead of Mrs. Walters. He'd even started making faces behind Stanley's back. Mrs. Walters never caught me. Maybe Cap won't either. A

run would get me out of this. When I want a run, I get a quiet shift.

John tried to focus on Stanley's drill, but his mind had other ideas. *Man, I wonder if Mrs. Walters is still at that little elementary school in Clewiston? Probably retired by now. She was in her 50s when I was there.* He took a deep breath and let it out. *I should go back to Florida on my next vacation. I can go camping anytime. It'd sure make Aunt Helen happy if I came home. Maybe she'd be able to finally stop worrying about me.*

The tones sounded a single alarm while Stanley was in mid-sentence. John suppressed a grin as he and the other men stood and filed out of the kitchen to the engine and squad waiting in the vehicle bay.

"Squad 51, man down. 21635 Ventura Place. 2-1-6-3-5 Ventura Place. Cross Street Hope. Time out 1047."

When the squad was designated on the call, John picked up the pace, using the slickness of the floor to slide around the corner of the squad. Unlike all the other times he'd done this, his feet left the floor, sliding out from under him. He knew what was happening and reached for the squad's rail to stop his fall. His hand grabbed thin air.

For the second time that day, John saw stars as the back of his head struck the concrete floor. He lay there a minute. *Moving would be bad.*

Stanley and the rest of the station, with the exception of Roy, had seen John's fall, "Dispatch, this is Station 51. Is there another squad available on that response? We have a possible Code I at the station."

"10-4, 51," Sam Lanier, the LA County dispatcher, responded. A minute later, the call was dispatched to Squad 99.

"Roy, you might need to have a look at your partner," Stanley advised Roy, who was getting out of the squad.

"What happened?" Roy asked.

"Gage was sliding around on the floor. He took a header and fell on his ass," Stanley answered.

John was still lying on the floor, blinking up at the ceiling when Roy and Stanley reached the rear of the squad.

"You okay, partner?" Roy asked, kneeling next to John, who groaned, then winced.

"Yeah, I think so," John said finally. He didn't sound convinced.

Roy turned to Chet, Marco and Mike, who had stopped at the back of the engine when they realized

the run wasn't theirs, "Chet, could you get the biophone and equipment out of the squad for me?"

"I'm fine, Roy," John insisted, slowly sitting up. "I don't need anything more than a couple of aspirin," he declared, resting his aching head in his hands.

"What do you say, Judges?" Chet began mischievously.

Mike and Marco exchanged a look. John had declared himself to be all right, which made him fair game.

"Execution was good, but the landing left a lot to be desired," Marco said with a grin, "7.5."

"Judge Stoker?" Kelly prompted.

"An 8," Mike declared.

John slowly lifted his head, "Ha, ha," he said flatly, then winced.

Roy pulled his penlight from his belt, "Lemme check your pupils," he began.

John batted the light away, "I'm fine," he repeated with another wince.

"Your head says otherwise," Roy returned.

"I had the headache before my head hit the floor," John responded. "Really, Roy. I'm fine."

With that, John rose and carefully made his way to the locker room for some aspirin. Stanley, who had been standing out of the way, stepped over to Roy.

"If I order him, he'll have to let you examine him," Stanley commented.

Roy smiled, "He's got enough sense to say something if he's really hurt."

"This is John Gage we're talking about," Stanley began. "The same John Gage who went down on a scaffold even though he'd started showing symptoms of a virus he'd been exposed to."

Roy remained silent. *Should I laugh, or just keep my mouth shut?*

Stanley looked over at Chet, Marco and Mike, who were still standing at the back of the engine and trying to look like they weren't interested in the exchange between Stanley and DeSoto.

"Let's take this into my office," Stanley suggested. "Kelly, Lopez, Stoker," he began, "That engine doesn't polish itself."

Once Stanley and Roy were in the small office, Stanley motioned for Roy to sit in one of the chairs.

"Cap, if you have a problem with Johnny," Roy began uncertainly. "Maybe you should take it up with him."

"Have a seat," Stanley said, then pulled his own chair from the desk and sat, "That comment was out of line," he began, once Roy was settled. "I don't have a problem with John. He's a fine firefighter and a fine paramedic." He paused. "And I know that virus was so deadly because it hit so hard and so fast.

"But I can't help thinking about how close we came to losing him. Nevermind the virus. He fell from a scaffold 200 feet off the ground." Stanley paused again. "What if the safety belt hadn't held? What if Marco and Chet had lost their hold?"

"The virus would've been the least of Johnny's worries," Roy added quietly.

"I know the docs at Rampart checked both of you out and didn't find anything," Stanley continued. "But you and I both know now that something was wrong before Johnny went down to that scaffold." Another pause. "And Johnny knew it, too."

"A fire captain has a responsibility to look out for the safety of his men," Stanley continued. "In my family, that's a moral duty. And I haven't failed a man, yet."

Roy nodded, "If Johnny got himself into trouble because he had a head injury and didn't know it, I'd feel pretty rotten, too."

"This is a dangerous job. We all know that," Stanley began. "Anything can happen. But that doesn't mean we can't try to prevent the things we can control."

Roy smiled and stood, "You just gave me an idea," he informed, walking out of the office and back into the vehicle bay. He stopped next to the engine, where Chet, Marco and Mike were busy polishing, "Johnny still in the locker room?"

"He hasn't been past us," Marco replied.

"Or he'd be polishing the squad," Chet chimed in.

In the locker room, John was at the sink, splashing cold water on his face. When he straightened and dried off the water, he found Roy leaning on the frame of the door.

"Did ya find any aspirin?" Roy asked.

"Yeah, my last two," John responded. "I'm fine, Roy."

"Who said you weren't?" Roy replied, walking over and sitting on the bench. "Hitting your head and a headache go together, don't they?"

John tossed the towel onto the counter. "I told you, I had the headache before I hit the floor."

"From your encounter with the locker door?"

"Which was your fault," John said, then grinned. "And aren't you always calling me hardheaded?"

"Your head, or the concrete floor?" Roy began with a wry smile. "My money's on the floor."

John snickered, "Thanks. I think."

"Hey, you know the symptoms," Roy began. "If we're out on a run, you won't risk a victim's life by ignoring them."

"There's a but in there," John began suspiciously.

Roy shrugged, then shook his head, "No buts," he promised. "You know the symptoms. And, besides the headache, you're not having them now."

"That's what I keep telling you," John returned, then rolled his eyes, which made him a little dizzy. He grabbed the counter and held on until it passed. "Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to run through them," he admitted. "I hate it when you're right," he grumbled, crossing to the bench and sitting down.

"You should be used to it by now, kid," Roy returned with a grin, standing.

He ran through the orientation questions of name, date, day, year and president. Then he checked John's eye movement, which was normal. That done, he checked John's pupils, which were equal and reactive, although the light didn't help John's headache any.

"Pulse is normal," Roy informed. "You've had a couple of dizzy spells," he commented, reaching around to the back of Johnny's head, where he found a small bump beneath the thick, dark hair.

"Owww," John yelped. "Yes, the back of my head's a little tender," he griped. "And moving my eyes makes me a little dizzy, but that happens whenever I have a headache like this one."

Roy held two fingers up in front of John, "How many fingers?" he asked.

"Two," John responded, then flipped Roy off. "How many?" he asked.

Roy laughed, "Well, your sense of humor is still in tact," he declared. "You'll live," he added. "I'd have Rampart check me out, if I were you. Especially if the headache doesn't go away in an hour or so."

John stood, "If we have to go back to that drill, the headache won't be going away any time soon."

"Hey," Roy grinned. "You just found the perfect excuse to get us out of the drill."

John snorted, "I'd rather be stuck in the drill," he said. "Besides, you know Cap'd just wait for us until we got back."

"True," Roy admitted with a frown. "Well, we might as well get it over with."

Instead of returning to the drill, Stanley used the relative quiet that descended on the station to catch up on paperwork. The drill had been nearly concluded by the time the Squad had been toned out on its aborted run. Anything else could be handled at the beginning of the next shift, or later in the day.

Outside Stanley's office, the three firefighters finished polishing the engine, while the paramedics checked and tested the squad's equipment. Once the tests and checks were finished, Roy pulled the drug box from the squad to inventory its contents.

Roy looked over at his partner, who had just begun checking the Trauma box. "Remind me to pick up supplies on our first run to Rampart," he said. "C-Shift left us short. Again."

When John didn't respond, Roy repeated the statement.

John lifted his head quickly, then winced, "What?" he asked angrily.

"Remind me to pick up supplies at Rampart," Roy repeated. "That headache still bothering you?"

"A little," John admitted. "And don't mumble. It's annoying."

"Johnny, are you sure you're okay?" Roy asked.

John had gone back to his inventory and didn't answer the question, ignoring it. Or he seemed to be. Roy had watched his partner pretty closely since they returned to the vehicle bay. Aside from a sudden spell of crankiness, he seemed fine.

"Why don't we get out of here and make a run to Rampart?" Roy suggested. *I did not mumble that time.*

"We'll be okay until we get a run," John responded, "It's quiet today."

"Johnny, maybe you should let one of the doctors check you out," Roy tried.

"I'm fine, Roy," John insisted.

"Then why didn't you answer me when I asked you if you were okay?" Roy asked.

"You were mumbling," John returned angrily, "I couldn't understand you. When you mumble, I can't tell if you're talking to me, or not."

When has that ever stopped you? Roy was about to voice the thought when the tones interrupted. Two alarms this time.

"Station 51, Truck 36. Explosion and structure fire. 2437 Loveland. 2-4-3-7 Loveland. Cross street McArthur. Time out 1202," the dispatcher's voice announced, reverberating through the station.

John and Roy quickly closed and stowed the Trauma and drug boxes, while the Captain acknowledged the call.

As Roy got into the driver's seat of the squad, he briefly considered pulling them off the run. *51's the closest station to the address. Besides, being cranky isn't enough reason to bench Johnny.*

Stanley hit the automatic opener on the bay door, then crossed in front of the squad as Roy turned the key and the squad's engine came to life. When the door was high enough, Roy pulled forward, hearing the engine's motor turn over.

The engine pulled out behind the squad as Roy turned right. With the squad leading the way, the crew of Station 51 reached the residential neighborhood within four minutes. Roy pulled the squad to the curb.

As the paramedics got out of the squad, the engine pulled to a stop in front of the squad, waiting only briefly as Chet and Marco unreeled the hoses. Then the engine pulled forward and stopped about ten feet farther down the street.

John and Roy were already out of the squad, donning their air tanks, masks and turnout coats. Stanley and the other firefighters, already wearing their coats, quickly got to work.

"Station 51, on scene," Stanley announced into his Handi-Talkie.

The house they'd been called to was a 2 story structure common to the subdivisions that had sprung up throughout the county during the fifties and sixties. The detached garage was fully involved, while the house had so far only been singed on one side by the heat and flames.

A woman ran up to Stanley, "I can't believe this happened," she said breathlessly, "I was just over there picking up the mail and making sure everything was okay. When I walked into my house - BOOM!"

Stanley nodded, "Explosions are pretty sudden, ma'am," he began, "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Oh, no. I'm okay" the woman answered, "I was in my house."

"Is anyone in this house?" Stanley asked, "Or the garage?"

"No, they're back east at a funeral." The woman looked back at the flames. "What a terrible thing to happen."

Stanley nodded, "Yes, ma'am," he agreed. "Are you sure no one was in the garage?"

The woman looked back at Stanley. "It was locked. And I looked inside. There wasn't anything in there but Kate's car," she said, then gasped. "Oh, my God! Kate's new car!"

"I'm sure it's insured," Stanley returned. "Now, why don't you step back across the street?" he suggested, turning to Chet and Marco, who had finished hooking the supply hose to the engine and fire hydrant on the street, "I'll cancel the 2nd alarm. Chet, Marco, get an inch and a half on the garage."

"LA, this is Station 51, return second alarm assignments," Stanley announced into the H.T. as John and Roy came up, still dressed in masks and turnout coats.

"The garage is empty," Stanley informed, "But you guys stick around. Just in case."

Roy and John removed their helmets, then shed the masks and heavy tanks.

"Gage, you wanna run the hose?" Stanley asked.

"Sure, Cap," John replied.

"Kelly, back Gage up," Stanley called. "Lopez, get the reel line and wet down the side of the house."

"Got it, Cap," Lopez called back, switching places with John on the hose.

"You sure you can handle this, Gage?" Chet teased.

"Kelly, I've forgotten more than you'll ever know," John growled back.

Chet patted John's shoulder. "Just messin' with ya, Johnny," he said, "Don't get your back up," he added, then turned his head. "Let her rip, Mike!" he called.

John braced himself, already feeling the heat from the flames engulfing the garage. *An inch and a half can get away from you real quick if you're not careful. And once it's loose, it's like a mad rattler, going after anything, or anybody it can get.*

A slight vibration was the only warning before the pressurized water reached the nozzle end of the hose. John opened the nozzle, releasing the water, which shot out toward the flames. John lifted the nozzle slightly, arcing the water just above the center of the wall of flame. *This hose is fighting with me!*

The heat, smoke and roar of the flames were hard to ignore as John fought both the hose and the fire. After what seemed like forever, the flames finally backed down. Still fighting the hose, John pressed forward, arcing the water into the still flaming recesses of the building, which was now not much

more than a shell.

"What do you think you're doing, Gage?" Chet asked, pulling John back. "We're good right here."

John didn't respond. *Man, it's just as hot outside a fire as it is in the middle of it.* His ears started ringing, making it hard to concentrate. The hose dropped slightly, then drastically. When he tried to lift it, his arms wouldn't obey.

"C'mon, Gage, don't go gettin' lazy just 'cause you've almost got the fire out," Chet said, tapping John on the shoulder.

When John didn't respond, Chet reached around and lifted the hose. "Hey, Gage, are you okay?" he asked, "Cap!" he called, when John failed to respond.

Cap looked over at Chet and John, then back to Roy. "You'd better get your gear ready," he advised, jogging over to John and Chet. "What's up, Kelly?"

"No idea, Cap," Kelly admitted, trying to hold both John and the hose steady. "One minute he was fine, then he spaced out."

"Lopez, come take over here," Stanley called to Marco. "C'mon, John, let's have Roy check you out."

John made an inarticulate noise, then turned, pulling the hose out of Chet's hand. The movement caused John to lose his grip on the hose, dropping the nozzle toward the ground.

"Lopez, watch out!" Stanley shouted.

The hose lost pressure before it could get out of control and hurt anyone, thanks to Stoker's quick thinking.

"Good job, Mike," Stanley called as Chet and Marco picked up the now dead hose.

Stanley turned back to John, who stood motionless, breathing heavily and staring at the ground, "All right, John," he began.

John looked up, pulling away and swaying when Stanley reached for him, "Don't," he whispered.

"It's okay, John," Stanley said, using his most soothing tone. The same one he used when one of his kids had a nightmare. "Take it easy."

John stared back at Stanley, his eyes wide and his chest rising and falling rapidly.

John looked away, his eyes suddenly drawn to the tan turnout coat. Stanley reached out to steady the swaying paramedic, who yanked his arm away.

"Don't!" John repeated, yelling this time.

"It's okay, Johnny," Stanley repeated, raising his hands, "Okay?"

John looked around, then turned and stared at the squad. He started toward it, his right leg collapsing on the third step. Stanley was right behind him.

"I've got you, Johnny," Stanley said as he caught the paramedic, then helped the younger man to the rear of the engine, where Roy had set up the gear. Only the orange box that carried the biophone was missing.

Roy met them, taking one of John's arm, while Stanley held the other. Initially, they tried to get John lie down. He fought them and tried to pull away. They sat John on the rear platform of the engine.

"Let's get you out of this coat," Roy said quietly, unbuckling the coat and pulling it off. "Cap, could you get the biophone for me? It's still in the squad," he said as he removed John's helmet.

"Do you want LA to dispatch an ambulance?" Stanley asked.

"No!" John shouted, trying to stand, "M s'posed to be home."

"Okay, okay," Roy said soothingly, gently holding his partner down. "No ambulance," he promised, turning to Stanley. "We'll wait and see what we've got," he informed quietly.

When that got no reaction from John, the earlier hearing trouble suddenly made sense to Roy. *I wasn't mumbling. Johnny wasn't processing what I was saying. It's a common side effect of some head injuries. The serious ones. God, it's so simple. How did I miss it?*

Please, let me be wrong about that. He turned back to John. "Okay," he began, "I'm gonna check your b.p.," he informed, slowly wrapping the cuff around John's upper left arm.

He didn't take his eyes from John's face to read the gauge until the cuff was fully inflated. And then, he only looked down long enough to read the pressure.

Stanley returned with the biophone as Roy was taking Johnny's pulse. He set the box on the ground, opened it, then attached the antenna. "How's he doing?" he asked quietly.

"He's probably got a head injury," Roy said, keeping his eyes on John, who looked like he was watching things happening to someone else. "The heat might've got to him, too." He paused and lowered his voice. "We're gonna need that ambulance."

Stanley nodded, then jogged forward to the cab of the engine.

Roy was measuring John's respiration when John looked down at his now bare arms, then began looking around.

"It's okay, Johnny," Roy assured, gently holding John in a seated position.

"My jacket," John mumbled. "My dad'll kill me."

Roy reached behind John. "Your coat's right here," he informed.

"Tha's not mine," John slurred.

"I'll have somebody find it for ya," Roy promised. "Now, you just sit back, okay?"

Roy reached for the oxygen and gently placed the mask over John's nose and mouth. John flinched and tried to push the mask away.

"We're just gonna get you some oxygen," Roy advised, gently placing the mask and pulling the strap around John's head.

John relaxed and his eyes drifted shut.

"John," Roy said, "Johnny," he repeated, gently shaking John's shoulder.

The brown eyes opened half way and he made an annoyed sound under the mask.

"I know you're tired, but you know the drill. You need to stay awake. Okay?" Roy asked.

John nodded, then blinked several times. He tried to lift his right arm, which fell back to his thigh.

"You having weakness, or numbness in your right arm?" Roy asked, the concern in his voice going up a notch.

John nodded, his eyes closing again.

"Stay with me, Johnny," Roy ordered, picking up John's left hand from his lap. "Squeeze my hand," he ordered.

The responding squeeze wasn't as strong as he knew John's grip to be, but it was a definite squeeze. Roy gently set down John's left arm on his lap and picked up the right hand. "Okay, squeeze," he ordered.

There was a marked difference between the grip strength of John's left hand and right hand, which barely closed. *His right leg gave out when he walked toward the squad.*

"Okay, Johnny," Roy began, picking up the black handset on the biophone. "I'm gonna call Rampart and let them know what's going on," he informed.

John said something that was muffled by the mask, but didn't make any move to resist.

"Rampart, this is Squad 51," Roy announced.

"Go ahead, 51," Dr. Kelly Brackett's voice responded.

"Rampart, we have a 28-year old paramedic with a possible head injury," Roy began. "BP is 140/95, pulse is 120, respiration 22. Pupils are equal and sluggish." He paused. "Patient is experiencing right sided weakness and some difficulty processing speech. Patient also seems slightly disoriented," he stopped, suddenly unsettled by having to refer to his friend as "the patient."

"Is he conscious, 51?" Brackett's voice inquired.

"Semi-conscious at this time, Rampart," Roy informed.

"51, start an I.V. with Normal Saline TKO and transport as soon as possible," Brackett ordered.

"I.V. Normal Saline TKO and transport," Roy repeated, "10-4, Rampart," he concluded, placing the handset back in the red box. "Okay, Johnny, Rampart wants an I.V." he informed, turning to the drug box.

"How's Gage?" Stoker asked, as Chet and Marco stepped over to the rear of the engine, where Stanley had silently been watching Roy work.

"Roy says he might have a head injury," Stanley answered.

"The fire's out, Cap," Marco informed. "Chet and I are going in to check for hot spots."

Stanley nodded, "Be careful," he warned, then walked over closer to Roy. "How's he doing?" he asked.

Roy took a deep breath, "I don't know," he admitted. "It could be a concussion, or a skull fracture. Maybe the doctors at Rampart can figure it out."

As he mentioned Rampart, the ambulance pulled up with its lights and sirens going. Roy was shocked when Johnny threw off the mask, stood and stumbled to the front of the engine. Chet and Marco, who were still getting gear from a compartment, intercepted him.

"No hospital!" John yelled, struggling between the two firefighters.

"Take it easy, Johnny," Chet consoled. "It's just the hospital."

"No! Le'me go!" John screamed, then his eyes rolled back and he sagged between Chet and Marco.

Roy supported John's head and neck as the now unconscious man was lowered to the ground.

"Easy, easy," Roy said quietly.

Marco straightened once John was safely settled on the yard. "You want your gear over here now?" he asked.

"Yeah," Roy answered. "And have the attendants bring the gurney," Roy responded. "Hell, load the gear on the gurney."

Chet leaned over, hands on his knees, "What the hell was that all about?"

"Sometimes people with head injuries get combative," Roy returned. "I guess it's 'cause he didn't want to go to the hospital earlier."

Marco and the ambulance attendants returned with the biophone, drug box and oxygen tank. Chet helped remove the gear, then to lift John onto the gurney.

"I need to check his vitals, start an I.V. and update Rampart," Roy informed. "Then we're ready to go."

Roy turned his attention back to his partner. "Makin' me chase after you," he muttered, using his penlight to check John's pupils. He then ran through checking blood pressure, pulse and respiration.

Once he had updated vitals, Roy opened the drug box and started the I.V., which required the pressure cuff to get a vein.

"Can you guys strap him in?" Roy asked.

At Rampart, Dr. Kelly Brackett and Nurse Dixie McCall stood at the base station, waiting on an in transit update from Roy. A treatment room was ready and waiting. All it needed was the arrival of the patient.

Dr. Joe Early stepped out of the elevator and walked over to the base station in answer to a page.
"What've we got, Kel?"

"Roy DeSoto's bringing John Gage in," Brackett began. "Possible head injury. Blood pressure's elevated. And he's experiencing right sided weakness."

"Cerebral contusion," Joe began. "Is he conscious?"

"Semi-conscious, according to Roy. Some disorientation," Brackett replied.

"Rampart, this is Squad 51," Roy's voice announced.

The siren they all expected to hear in the background wasn't there. "Go ahead, 51," Brackett

answered.

"Patient has lost consciousness," Roy's voice began. "He became combative and attempted to make a break for it when the ambulance arrived."

Brackett frowned, exchanging confused looks with Dixie and Joe. "Could you repeat that, 51?"

"You heard it the first time, Rampart," Roy's voice said tiredly. "The patient attempted to flee, then lost consciousness." He paused. "BP is 120/80, pulse 125, respiration 24 and labored. Pupils are sluggish, right pupil slightly larger."

"51, have you started an I.V?" Brackett asked.

"Affirmative, Rampart," Roy's voice answered.

Joe stepped closer to the receiver, so that the mike to the biophone would pick up his voice clearly.
"51, did the patient suffer additional head trauma during the combative phase?"

"Negative, Rampart," Roy's voice responded. "He didn't have a whole lotta fight in him by then," he informed.

"51, continue monitoring b.p. and transport immediately," Brackett ordered.

"10-4, Rampart," Roy acknowledged.

"What was the first b.p.?" Joe asked.

"140/95," Dixie read from her pad. "Pulse was 120, respiration 22. Pupils were equal and sluggish."

"I don't like it, Kel," Early began. "B.P. dropping. Respiration labored. Unequal pupils."

Brackett sighed, "Hematoma, probably epidural." He paused. "What I don't understand is the sudden deterioration."

"The damage may be extensive," Joe returned quietly. "What happened?"

"Roy didn't give a history," Brackett answered, as though just realizing it himself.

"And you didn't ask," Dixie stated. "We're all worried about Johnny," she added. "I'll go check 3. Make sure it's ready."

The ambulance was en route to Rampart General when John started to come around. Roy, who was checking John's blood pressure to update Rampart, stopped what he was doing and put a hand on his partner's shoulder.

"You're okay," Roy said soothingly, "You're gonna be okay," he repeated, as John's brown eyes slowly pulled open.

John's eyes tracked around the interior of the ambulance, finally settling on Roy's face. His brow furrowed and he tried to lift his right arm to remove the oxygen mask, unable to lift the arm because of the safety strap securing him to the gurney. Roy saw the panic in his friend's eyes and rose from the bench seat across from the gurney, wedging himself in the small gap between the gurney and the bench.

"Johnny, it's okay," he assured, struggling to hold onto John, who had started thrashing and kicking, "What's our ETA to Rampart!" He shouted to be heard over the siren.

"Two minutes," the attendant in the jump seat called after turning to check the front windshield of the vehicle.

"Make it in one!" Roy shouted back.

"51, this is Rampart," Brackett's voice announced from the open biophone on the bench seat behind Roy. "Do you have an update on vitals?"

The attendant in the jumpseat awkwardly leaned past Roy and pulled the biophone across the bench. He picked up the handset, "Unavailable at this time," he informed. "Patient is conscious and combative. Our ETA is one minute to your location."

"Standing by, 51," Brackett's voice responded.

"Do you want to request sedation?" the attendant asked.

"Not with the head injury," Roy answered. "Johnny, it's okay. Nobody's gonna hurt you," he said.

Roy continued repeating the statement, hoping that the words would get through. Finally, the movement of the ambulance changed as the driver backed the vehicle toward the doors of the ER. As the rear doors opened, Roy lost his grip on John's left arm, which the injured man pulled through the strap, pulling out the I.V. along the way.

The attendant closed the flow off, but not before a good bit of fluid leaked onto the floor, making it as slippery as the space was tight.

"Hold it," Roy ordered as a nurse and orderly reached for the foot of the gurney. He quickly got hold of John's flailing left arm. "I need a pressure dressing."

The attendant grabbed a package from the open trauma box, ripped the wrapper and handed the dressing to Roy.

"What's the hold up?" Mike Morton appeared at the open doors.

"Johnny just pulled his I.V.," Roy informed, applying the bandage to the I.V. site. "Okay. Go."

Morton and the orderly pulled the gurney from the ambulance and Morton immediately checked John's pupils. "Good thinking immobilizing his head," he complimented, nodding toward the towels Roy had taped on either side of John's head.

Roy moved to follow the gurney out of the ambulance and slipped, a combination of the slippery floor and the lack of circulation caused by the tight spot he'd wedged himself into. By the time he climbed out of the ambulance, the orderly had taken over the job of holding John, giving Roy a much needed break.

"It might've done more harm than good," Roy said. "He's had trouble processing speech."

"Let's get him into 3," Morton said, taking the head of the gurney.

Roy and the nurse took the foot, pushing through the automatic doors, with the orderly riding on the lower rail of the gurney.

Brackett and Early met them in the hall, clearing a path to the treatment room. Brackett opened the door, stepped inside and propped the door open, stepping away as the gurney was wheeled in.

John's struggling stopped as the gurney was wheeled next to the exam bed. The orderly relaxed, glad the patient had finally run out of steam.

"Let's get him onto the exam bed," Brackett began. "Then start another I.V., Dixie."

The now complacent orderly unstrapped the safety belts across John's chest and legs. Without any warning, John renewed his struggle to escape, turning and pushing the gurney away from the exam bed and knocking the hulking orderly into Brackett and Early.

Dixie hurried between the gurney and exam bed and gently pushed John's shoulders back to the bed as Morton held his legs, "Johnny, it's okay," she began, trying to calm him. "We're trying to help you, but we can't with you putting up such a fuss."

"Please, I just wanna go home," John pleaded, having managed to dislodge the mask during his struggle. "I los' my jacket and my dad's gonna kill me," he slurred. "Please, le'me go home."

Dixie frowned, unsure of what John was talking about. Years of practice kicked in, "Your dad's gonna be so glad you're all right, he's not gonna care about a silly jacket." She smiled gently. "He wants us to make sure you're all right. Will you let us do that?"

John blinked up at her, then his eyes closed and his body relaxed. A minute later, the eyes opened again and blinked in confusion. "Dix?"

Dixie smiled and nodded, "That's right," she said. "I'm gonna be right here. Nobody's gonna hurt you." She winked. "You know I won't let 'em," she added, gently smoothing John's hair from his brow. "Now, be a good boy and stop trying to hurt the doctors."

John's eyes closed again. "Okay." His voice was a tired whisper. "Okay."

"I'm gonna put your mask back on, then we're gonna move you off the gurney."

Dixie gently replaced the mask, then nodded to Roy, Morton and the orderly. Once she moved out of the gap, they slowly pushed the gurney against the exam bed. The three men then lifted John and moved him onto the exam bed while Brackett steadied the injured man's head and neck.

Dixie moved around to the left side of the bed as the orderly pushed the gurney into the hall.

"I've got to start another I.V., Johnny," she informed. "I know you hate them," she added, although she wasn't sure John could hear her.

Morton was on the right side of the gurney, wrapping a pressure cuff around John's right arm, while Early stood at the head, checking John's pupils.

"How'd this happen?" Brackett asked Roy, who was standing close enough to keep an eye on his partner, without getting in anybody's way.

"He's gonna kill me for telling you," Roy muttered.

"Pressure's 110/80," Mike called out.

"Go on, Roy," Brackett coaxed.

"He fell in the vehicle bay," Roy informed. "Hit his head pretty good on the floor." He paused. "I checked him out and he seemed fine. He wouldn't come in . . ." He trailed off.

"How long ago did this happen?" Brackett asked.

"About an hour before we got this last run," Roy responded. "A few minutes before that, he accused me of mumbling, but I didn't think anything about it." Another pause. "He had a headache and I thought he was getting cranky."

"Was there any loss of consciousness when he fell? Or later?" Brackett asked.

"I don't know," Roy said, shaking his head. "I didn't see it happen. Chet's bringing the squad in. He, Marco and Mike were right there."

Brackett nodded, "Okay, Roy, why don't you go out and wait for Chet? Bring him in the minute he

gets here."

"Doc, I . . ." Roy began.

"I know, Roy, I know," Brackett responded. "But you know we need as much information about the initial injury as we can get." He paused. "We'll ask Johnny, but if he can't tell us, somebody has to."

Roy nodded. "Okay," he said quietly, stepping over to the door, opening it and walking out.

Brackett walked over to the exam bed, where Early was trying to rouse John.

"John, can you hear me?" Early asked, gently shaking John's shoulder. When that got no response, he tried a sternal rub.

John's only response was a low groan. A second rub opened the brown eyes, which immediately drifted shut.

Early shook his head. "I don't like this," he commented. "How'd it happen?"

"Johnny fell on the vehicle bay floor," Brackett informed. "Chet Kelly's on his way in. Roy didn't see it."

"Was there a lump on the back of John's head?" Early asked. "I found one about the size of a baseball."

"Roy examined John and he refused to come in," Brackett began. "If there was, it probably wasn't that big, or Roy would've brought him in, refusal or not." He paused. "Mike, order a full skull series and C-spine films, type and cross-match, CBC with diff and platelets, full set of chemistries and a urinalysis."

"A portable x-ray is on the way down from radiology," Dixie offered, as the door opened and Chet and Roy entered the treatment room.

Both Brackett and Early stepped over to the door as the orderly returned and began removing John's shoes and cutting off his uniform.

"Dr. Early, Dr. Brackett," Chet said, peering around the doctors. "How's Gage?"

"He definitely has a head injury," Early answered. "Roy said you saw John's fall."

Chet nodded. "Yeah, his feet went out from under him and BAM! He went down."

"Did he lose consciousness?" Brackett asked.

Chet shook his head. "I don't think so," he said honestly. "He was kind'a dazed, but his eyes were

open."

"He's coming around, Kel," Mike called as a low groan came from the table.

Brackett walked over and stood behind Dixie. "Maybe you should be the first one he sees, Dix. Since you have the magic touch."

Early stepped over to observe, as did Chet and Roy.

Dixie smiled and leaned a little closer to John. "Johnny, can you hear me?" she asked. "If you can hear me, open your eyes." The brown eyes slowly pulled open. "Hey, there, good looking." Dixie smiled, laughing when she saw the paramedic blush. "You know the drill. We're gonna ask you some silly questions and you're gonna try to answer them."

Morton leaned in when John's response was muffled by the mask. "What was that, John?"

"Wha' . . . do I . . . win?" the paramedic mumbled.

Morton looked up at Dixie. "He wants to know what he'll win."

Dixie smiled, "Now that sounds more like our Johnny," she commented. "Do you know what day it is?" she asked, leaning close to hear the response.

"Sorry," Johnny mumbled.

"How about an easy one, like your name?" Dixie asked.

"John . . . Gage," John mumbled. "My head . . . hurts."

"I know," Dixie said quietly. "We'll take care of that."

"Okay," John whispered, closing his eyes briefly, then opening them again. "Where's my dad?" he asked.

Dixie smiled and gently patted John's shoulder. "We'll have somebody check for you, okay?" she asked.

"I wan' my dad," John whispered, then his eyes slid shut.

"Respiration's dropping," Morton called. A second after the words left the intern's mouth, John stopped breathing. "Respiratory arrest!" he called, grabbing the laryngoscope from the tray next to the exam bed.

Early turned back to Chet. "Were there any other symptoms, Chet?" he asked. "Roy said you were with Johnny when he started having problems."

"What are you asking me questions for?" Chet shouted angrily. "He's not breathing! Do something!"

"Take it easy, Chet," Roy said quietly.

"Dr. Brackett and Dr. Morton are helping John," Early advised gently. "For me to help him, I need to know all I can about his symptoms."

Chet closed his eyes and let out an explosive breath. "Okay," he whispered. "Sorry."

"What was John doing when he started having problems?" Early asked.

"He was running an inch and a half on a garage fire," Chet began. "One minute, he was fine. The next, he spaced out. It was like he couldn't hold the hose up." He paused. "Then he freaked out when the Cap tried to take him over to Roy."

"Did he hit his head? Fall? Was there an explosion?" Early prompted.

"No, nothing like that," Chet answered. "The garage had pretty much burned itself out."

Early turned to Roy, "Was there a lump on the back of John's head when you examined him?"

Roy nodded. "Yeah, about the size of a marble. Tender."

Morton and Brackett had successfully intubated John. A ventilator now forced air into John's lungs.

"Why don't the two of you get a cup of coffee?" Early suggested. "We'll be out as soon as we can."

Dixie walked over. "Come on, guys," she said quietly. "I'll buy."

Roy opened the door and held it, following Dixie and Chet into the hall, where they found Stanley, Mike and Marco waiting.

"How's John?" Stanley asked.

Neither Chet, nor Roy wanted to answer the question.

"He's got a head injury," Dixie began. "We'll know more once x-rays are taken and we run a few tests," she added, looking at the five men. "I was about to buy Roy and Chet a cup of coffee."

"You guys go on," Roy said quietly. "I'd like to stick close."

"I'll catch up to you," Dixie promised the four men.

"I'm fine, Dixie," Roy insisted. "You go on."

Dixie gently squeezed Roy's arm, then followed Stanley and his crew to the staff lounge. Roy walked into the waiting area and dropped into one of the chairs. *John will be all right. He beat the virus last year. He survived 17 hours in an abandoned elevator shaft with Chet. He'll beat this, too.*

How did I miss seeing that Johnny was hurt? Roy leaned his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands. *If anything happens to him, it'll be my fault.*

"Roy?" Early's voice startled him.

Roy quickly straightened, then stood. "How is he?"

"We're moving him to I.C.U.," Early informed. "He's got a build-up of intracranial pressure. We've got to determine what's causing it. We're hyperventilating him and administering meds to reduce the pressure."

"But . . .," Roy prompted.

"If the pressure continues to build, we'll have to perform a craniotomy," Early informed.

In the staff lounge, Brackett was relaying the news to Stanley and his crew.

"Surgery? On his brain?" Chet exclaimed. "You can't do that!"

"Chet, we'll only perform surgery as a last resort," Brackett responded. "If the pressure continues to increase, it'll kill him."

"If he can't be a paramedic, it'll kill him, too!" Chet shouted.

"Chet, sit down," Dixie said, gently forcing the agitated firefighter into a chair. "Now, none of this is going to keep Johnny from being a paramedic. He won't let it. A craniotomy will reduce the pressure, which could cause brain damage," she informed. "These doctors are the best in the business. Johnny's going to be just fine."

"Sorry, Dr. Brackett," Chet said sheepishly.

"No harm done," Brackett responded. "Johnny'll be transferred to I.C.U. in a few minutes. Once he's settled, I'll make arrangements for you to see him. If you'd like to."

"Isn't he in a coma?" Chet commented.

"He's in and out of consciousness, but I think he'll be able to hear you. Even if he's unconscious," Brackett informed.

"At least he's not in a coma," Chet muttered.

Slowly, John opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling tiles and light fixtures moving above him. *My head is killing me. Wish I had the energy to tell somebody.* The tiles and light fixtures became an elevator ceiling. John closed his eyes as the elevator moved up.

When John opened his eyes again, he was still. There was a beeping noise in the background and Chet Kelly was looking down at him.

"Hey, Gage," Chet began. "This is a heck of a way to get time off," he said, then winced. "You know, Gage, I can't help myself." He paused and took a deep breath. "Do you remember when we were in the shaft and I told you that I gave you so much grief 'cause you're the youngest one on the shift?"

"I guess you don't," Chet continued at John's blank look. "Well, it kind'a makes you like a little brother, you know?"

Right now, I don't know much, buddy. Everything's getting fuzzy around the edges. As much as John wanted to keep his eyes open, he felt them slide shut again on their own.

Chet watched as John's eyes closed. "I guess you don't," he whispered.

"Mr. Kelly, I need you to step out for a few minutes while I get John's vitals and check him out a little," a woman's voice informed as she entered the cubicle and walked to the other side of the bed.

"Yeah, okay," Chet acknowledged. "Just get better, Gage," he added.

"John, my name's Pat," the nurse informed. "I'm just going to check your vitals and listen to your heart and lungs."

Chet watched Pat wrap the cuff around John's arm, then walked out of the cubicle and returned to the waiting room.

"How's Johnny?" Stanley asked anxiously.

"He came to for a minute," Chet informed, dropping into one of the chairs with a tired sigh. "Man, it's so weird seeing him like this. Gage is always running his mouth and fidgeting." He paused and shook his head. "He's lying there and it's like he doesn't even know he's got all those tubes and wires stickin' out of him."

"That's the head injury," Brackett's voice informed. "When this is over, he probably won't remember

any of it."

"The visitors for Gage can return now." The announcement sounded through the waiting room intercom.

"Your turn, Roy," Marco informed.

Roy shook his head. "You go ahead," he said quietly.

Brackett's brow furrowed. "Roy, could I have a word with you?" he asked.

"Sure." Roy shrugged and followed Brackett down the hall to a small lounge.

Brackett waited for Roy to step inside, then followed, closing the door behind them. "Spill it," he ordered, pulling two cups from a shelf and filling both with coffee.

"Nothing to spill, Doc," Roy said casually, sitting down at the table.

Brackett set both of the now filled cups on the table, then sat. "And I thought you'd be the first in to see him," he commented as Roy poured sugar into the mug. "Since you weren't, I took it to mean that something's wrong."

Roy sighed, setting the sugar back down on the table. "I shouldn't have listened to him," he said miserably. "He said he was fine. But he wasn't."

"Roy, you know as well as I do that head injuries are the hardest injuries to diagnose," Brackett began. "Even if you'd brought John in, there's no guarantee that Joe, or Mike, or I wouldn't have sent him on his way, thinking he was fine." He paused. "The technology we have available sometimes isn't enough. Especially with this type of injury."

Roy shook his head. "The headache was bad," he began.

"Without any other symptoms," Brackett interrupted. "Just like that damned virus. I checked the bloodwork myself and sent you on your way. Johnny almost died."

"So did you," Roy reminded with a wry smile.

"As my father used to say, `Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades'." Brackett chuckled softly. "In the field, paramedics are the eyes and ears of the doctor," he continued. "Your information also relies on what the patient reports. If a patient doesn't tell you, you can't know." He paused, "You can't see that a patient's in pain if he hides it. You can't see internal bleeding."

Roy took a deep breath and let it out. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"You guess," Brackett chuckled again. "Roy, I'm hurt."

Roy allowed a small smile, in spite of his concern. "Johnny insisted he was fine."

"And he was telling the truth as he knew it," Brackett allowed. "This kind of injury has a way of sneaking up on you. Even on doctors."

Roy took a sip from his cup. "What about the x-rays and tests?"

"No skull fracture," Brackett began. "His vitals have stabilized. We'll just have to wait and give the meds a chance to do their job."

"How long will you wait?" Roy asked.

Brackett smiled wryly. "I forgot my crystal ball, Roy," he joked. "I'd guess no more than 4 hours. If there's no improvement, we'll have to go in to relieve the pressure."

"I guess the worst part is knowing all the things that can cause us to lose him before he gets to the table," Roy said quietly. "Makes me appreciate a saying my father had."

"What's that?" Brackett asked.

"Sometimes ignorance is bliss," Roy replied.

John heard soft footsteps and female voices approach. He could tell that there were two voices, but couldn't make sense of the words. *I was wrong. My head could hurt more. Funny, Chet was standing here just a minute ago when I closed my eyes.*

". . . every 15 minutes, especially the pupils." Finally the voices spoke English.

"Any changes, page Dr. Brackett." The second voice. "The order's on the chart, Pat." A quiet chuckle. "So's Dr. Brackett's pager number."

"This one's special." The first voice. *Pat.* "He's one of the paramedics from 51."

"The infamous Johnny Gage." The second voice. "I know."

"Infamous?" John tried to repeat the word and found that his voice had been replaced by a shrill alarm.

"John, it's Pat." Pat's voice was close now. "Can you hear me?"

John tried to answer, but the only sound he could make was the shrill one.

"You're on a ventilator, John," Pat informed, "Can you open your eyes?"

After some effort, he succeeded in pulling his lids open. A blurry face he didn't recognize hovered above him. He blinked several times and the face came into focus. *Not that I recognize it.*

Pat smiled. "Does your head still hurt?" she asked, then, "One blink for yes. Two for no."

John blinked once. It was a struggle to pull his eyes open once he closed them.

"Linda, would you get a cold compress?" Pat asked someone out of John's limited line of sight. "And can you check to see if Brackett wrote something for pain?"

"Sure," Linda's voice responded.

"John," Pat's voice brought his attention back from the swaying curtain separating his bed from the next. "I'm going to check your pupils. Okay?"

John managed another blink, again struggling to pull his eyes open.

Pat pulled a pen light from a pocket in her uniform and put her left hand on John's forehead. With her thumb, she gently held the lid open, shining the light into the eye, pulling it away, then shining it again.

The pain in John's head flared, causing Pat's soft voice to melt into a jumble of unrecognizable sounds. Then those faded away.

John felt something cool on his forehead and struggled to open his eyes. Pat stood next to him, holding a stethoscope to the inside of his elbow.

"Sorry about that, Johnny," Pat said when she was finished. "You scared the hell out of me, though. So we're even." She unwrapped the cuff and removed it.

John blinked three times, this time finding it easier to keep his eyes open. *What a relief.*

Pat smiled. "Is that an apology?"

John blinked once. The coolness on his forehead withdrew and he tried to turn his head to follow it, causing something in his throat to pull.

"Is that better?" The second voice asked. *Linda.*

John blinked once. *Hope Linda can see me better than I can see her.*

"My shift ends in half an hour," Pat informed. "Linda will be here all night."

John tried to ask what time it was and how long he'd been there, forgetting about the ventilator and its alarm. The noise brought his headache back. He closed his eyes, willing the cool cloth to make the headache go away.

"Take very good care of this one, Linda," Pat said. "Otherwise, Dixie McCall will skin you alive."

Good ol' Dix.

Linda laughed. "Of course I will. He hasn't chased me, yet."

This time, John felt himself drift away.

Pat and Linda were gone when he opened his eyes. *Is it day, or night? Can't tell without windows. Beeps and hisses swirled through his head. Where am I? How do I find out?*

My head doesn't just hurt anymore. It's going to explode now. That's gonna hurt.

He startled when a hand touched his forehead. *When did I close my eyes?*

"It's okay, John," Linda's voice said, the tone soothing. "Page Dr. Brackett and Dr. Early, STAT!"

John tried to tell Linda about the building pressure in his head, setting off the alarm. Linda's voice faded in and out, then multiplied.

" . . . up an O.R.," a male voice.

" . . . legs . . .," a different voice, also male.

" . . . watch . . . got it," a female voice.

John felt himself lifted, then moved and set down again. A sheet was spread over him, then something heavy was laid between his ankles. He felt movement and opened his eyes, unable to see through a dark shape over his nose and mouth.

John closed his eyes, listening to the voices following him. He opened them again when he was moved and deposited on something cold and hard.

" . . . prep . . . under . . . shave . . ."

" . . . conscious . . . arm . . ."

Eyes and a mask appeared above him. A hand touched his face and he struggled to understand what the voice was saying.

"Johnny, can you hear me?" Morton's voice finally came through the jumble. "You're in the O.R. We have to relieve the intracranial pressure. Do you understand?"

Finally. Wonder for how long. John blinked once.

"You need to relax. Okay?"

John blinked again. *I'll try. I can't promise. I don't seem to be in control of anything right now.*

"Good," Morton responded, then lifted his head. "Let's get him under," he said, turning back to look down at John. "Just relax, John. You're gonna be fine."

John felt something cold enter his arm at the wrist, travelling up to his elbow, where it stopped. Morton's masked face wavered above him as his eyes fluttered. The voices faded to silence as his eyes fell shut.

Roy rose from the uncomfortable plastic waiting room chair and walked over to the surgical information desk.

"Excuse me," he began quietly. "Is there any word on John Gage?"

The nurse behind the desk looked up. "Nothing yet, Mr. DeSoto," she responded.

Roy nodded, turning from the desk to begin pacing the waiting room. The rest of the crew had returned to the station after two hours. Stanley had arranged for replacements for both paramedics. Now, the shift was over and they'd all gone home. Unable to leave his friend, Roy had spent the night at the hospital.

He'd checked on John every hour, but his partner had never been conscious. An hour ago, the pressure in John's skull had reached a critical level and he'd been rushed to surgery.

"How is he?" Chet asked as he walked into the waiting room, dressed in his civvies. "Joanne called," he added when Roy looked at him with a puzzled frown. "Cap, Mike and Marco'll be here in about an hour."

"Thanks," Roy said, not sure he wanted the company. In spite of his conversation with Brackett, he still felt responsible for this mess.

"This is bad, isn't it?" Chet asked, fear evident in his voice.

"Yeah. It's bad," Roy answered honestly.

The sound of a drill woke him. John tried to open his eyes, but they refused to cooperate. The drill stopped.

"... so, I called the waiter over and asked for a salt shaker and a pepper shaker." A male voice.
"Swab."

"Sounds reasonable." A female voice.

"That's what I thought." The male voice again. "Next thing I know, the chef's at the table screaming at me in French and dumpin' a whole carton of salt on my plate." The voice chuckled. "Then the guy threw us out."

"I've heard a lot of those chefs are real prima donnas." A different female voice.

"Kind'a like doctors, huh?" The first female voice, followed by a chorus of laughter.

"Well, I learned an important lesson." Back to the male voice. "If there aren't salt and pepper shakers on all the tables, I won't eat there."

"That's not really a problem on our salary." A second male voice.

"Yeah, all the tables have salt, pepper and ketchup." The first female voice.

"And you get to yell your order into a clown's mouth." The second female voice.

Everyone laughed. *I've just heard a conversation stranger than anything Chet and I could ever dream up.*

"Whoa." The first male voice. "I'll be damned, it's a hygroma." A pause. "Get some suction on that."

The sound reminded John of his last trip to the dentist.

"... got the bugger. I've found the star of my next article." First male voice when the liquid suction stopped. "How are his vitals?"

"Holding steady." The second male voice.

"Keep it that way." First male voice. "We've got a real mess in here."

"That's up to him." Second male voice. "But I'll do what I can."

"Hard to believe he was up and walking around." One of the female voices, John couldn't be sure which.

"No surprise to me." The first male voice. "The ancient Egyptians used to pull the brain out through

the nose and toss it aside."

I don't think I like where this is going.

"Five thousand years later, we still don't understand it." Still the first male voice.

"The chart says this guy's a firefighter." John recognized the second female voice this time. "I thought they had to be bigger to lug those hoses and chop down walls."

"Maybe they use this one for tight spaces." It had to be the first female voice.

Something's changed. The voices faded and were replaced by static. *My heart's gonna come through my chest.* Then the blackness behind his closed eyelids became a bright, blinding white.

To be continued in Part 2

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