

With a Good Heart

by MJ Hajost

(Author's note: This story is a sequel to "Walk Hand in Hand.")

"With a good heart walk hand in hand to face the future.

From this day on may we walk hand in hand."

---Frank Fools Crow

9/5/75 opening prayer for the U.S. Senate

Roy

"Hey, it's almost dinner time!" Roy called into the kitchen as he passed by on his way to the front door. He smothered his grin as his son Chris guiltily snapped his hand back from the cookie jar. "Go wash up," he added over his shoulder as he opened the door.

"Well, I took a shower earlier, but I guess my hands do need a refresher...."

Roy's mouth opened as he stared at the speaker through the screen door, then relaxed into a slow smile as he pushed open the door to let him in. "Just make sure you use soap," he instructed as Hank Stanley stepped inside.

Hank made a face. "You sound like my mother," he grumbled good-naturedly as he stepped into the house, looking around while Roy closed the door behind him. "I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner," he apologized.

Shaking his head, Roy led the way into the living room. "You're not," he assured his captain, gesturing toward one of the easy chairs in the crowded room he walking over to the blaring television set to switch it off. "Dinner's not for another half hour," he smirked, glancing in the direction his son had disappeared, "but Chris doesn't know that."

The other man's answering grin was short-lived as he settled himself uncomfortably on the edge of the chair.

"Can I offer you a drink or something?"

Hank looked up, his expression unreadable, then shook his head slightly. "Thanks, no," he answered. "I won't stay long."

"So, what brings you out here?" Roy sat down on the sofa across from Hank and studied his captain carefully. "This isn't a social call."

The captain regarded the other man steadily. "I just came from Rampart," he began.

Roy stiffened slightly, his fingers tightening on one another. "Johnny?" he asked hesitantly.

Hank's gaze didn't waver. "They're going to take the kidney, Roy." He sighed. "He's probably on his way to surgery now."

Roy blinked and looked away. After a moment his head dropped, his whispered "Damn it!" swallowed by his chest.

"I thought you should hear it from me," Hank continued. "Brackett says the prognosis is good."

Tilting his head to look out the back window, Roy remained silent for a long minute. "This finishes him, doesn't it?"

Stanley grunted. "I don't imagine that's something to be decided right now." He watched Roy carefully. "Don't take this on your head, Roy," he advised quietly. "What's done is done."

DeSoto nodded but said nothing, and after a moment, Hank rose. "I'd best be getting home," he remarked idly.

Roy started and turned. "Uh...thanks for dropping by, Cap," he said, following Hank to the door.

"Let me know if you get any updates, will you?" Hank asked, turning, one hand on the doorknob.

The other man appeared surprised. "I'm not exactly in the know," he replied wryly.

Hank's head lifted. "You could be. You should be." He twisted the knob, yanked open the door, and was through it and halfway down the walk before Roy could think of a response. Roy watched Hank climb into his car, then carefully shut the door.

When Joanne came through the hall a short while later, she found an almost perfect fist-sized hole in the wall. She thought it odd that she hadn't heard anything out of the ordinary.

Steve

"Roy, this is Steve Fletcher." Hank Stanley gestured to the young man rising from the chair he'd been occupying. "Roy DeSoto."

Fletcher stretched out a hand in greeting. "Nice to meet you," he offered, a serious, almost curious expression flitting across his face as he regarded the other paramedic.

Roy nodded, slow to reach forth with his own hand to shake Fletcher's. "Hi," he said simply, his gaze darting toward Hank and back to the younger man.

Fletcher was as far from John Gage in appearance as he could be, a fact which annoyed rather than reassured Roy. He stood about four inches shorter than John, had close-cropped red hair, and more than his share of freckles. His teeth had been artificially straightened, and the smile he now tried went nowhere near his eyes. Roy disliked him instantly.

Roy forced down his feelings of disquiet, however, and mustered a grin of his own. "Welcome to 51s," he managed, releasing Steve's hand and nodding with what he hoped was an agreeable manner.

"Thanks," Steve said, relaxing only slightly. "I've, uh...heard it's a great place to work."

Hank nodded with satisfaction. "Roy, why don't you show your new partner around before roll call, huh?"

"Sure," Roy stammered, glancing again between the two men, "sure. Uh, why don't I find you a locker?"

He led the way from Hank's office, pasting a neutral look on his face and struggling to unclench his teeth and stomach. After these past several weeks back on the job and three temporary partners, he thought he'd been prepared for this. Yet, here he was, nervous as a probie on his first assignment, trying to find a place in his life for his new – permanent -- partner.

In the locker room, he opened a vacant locker—nowhere near Gage's old one—and invited Steve to place his belongings there. He forced a smile and said, "Come on, I'll give you a tour of the station."

Steve nodded, dumped his bag, and followed Roy through the locker room and into the dorm, where Roy pointed to the bunk that would be his. Unfortunately for both men, that bunk would be the one that had belonged to Gage. No sense in separating the paramedics in the middle of the night, Cap had suggested in his casual way.

Roy led the way through the apparatus bay. "Squad's pretty standard," he told Steve, opening the compartment doors and pointing out the equipment. "Trauma box, drug box, defibrillator...."

Steve nodded now and again as Roy continued the tour, inserting an occasional "Uh huh" for good measure, but for the most part he remained quiet.

"You always this quiet, or am I that frightening?" Roy finally asked, a smile softening his features.

Steve blinked, then grinned weakly. "Sorry," he shrugged. "I'm not much of a talker."

That'll be a switch, thought Roy. Aloud he said, "Let's get started on checking the O₂ cylinders."

The morning, like Steve Fletcher, proved to be quiet. Roy found himself struggling for topics of conversation as every question he asked or comment he made met with answers so brief as to border on rudeness. He finally stopped trying to force conversation and contented himself with teaching himself to enjoy the silence. He proved to be a poor student.

Just when he thought he'd go crazy from the lack of activity, the klaxons sounded, summoning the crew to a motor vehicle accident. With a grateful sigh, Roy pushed himself away from the table where he'd been nursing a cup of coffee, and followed the rest of the men to the apparatus bay. He grabbed the call slip Hank handed him as he passed by, slid automatically into the driver's seat of the squad, and slipped his helmet onto his head. As he had countless times before, Roy turned to hand the piece of paper to his partner in the passenger seat.

With a sickening lurch, his heart leapt into his throat as he watched the other man reach out to take the address from him.

Oh, my God, thought Roy desperately, *that's not Johnny...it's not ever going to be Johnny....*

He turned rapidly away before his expression could give away his sudden and overwhelming grief. There was nothing he could do about the rising nausea, the hammering of his pulse, the unexpected tears welling up.

How many partners would he have to go through before he would stop comparing each man to Gage?

With an angry shove, he put the truck into gear and pulled from the station.

Dutch

"He was doing *what*?" Ted "Dutch" Masters, one hand on a compartment door, stared incredulously at his partner.

Gary Chambers grinned goofily. "Swatting a fly from his rear-view mirror," he chortled.

Dutch looked unsmilingly over his shoulder at the carnage of twisted metal, shattered glass, and slick residue being hosed away. A six-car pileup caused by one young man not paying attention to the cars stopped in front of him. Two responding engine companies

had spent over an hour working to free six trapped people--two injured seriously enough to require hospitalization. 51's paramedics had wound up treating both of those serious injuries, while Dutch and Gary had found themselves with the minor cuts and scratches. Now, as the ambulance prepared to depart with Steve Fletcher accompanying the victims, Dutch and Gary were cleaning up their own debris and getting ready to also head to the hospital to restock supplies.

Dutch shook his head and tossed his helmet on the seat of the cab. "Takes all kinds," he muttered. He lifted a hand to swipe back his sweaty hair, stopping in mid-motion as he spotted one of 51's paramedics heading in his direction.

"I'll see you at the hospital," he heard Roy DeSoto call Fletcher as Steve climbed into the back of the ambulance.

Dutch felt his heart begin to race, and his breath caught in his throat. Logically, he knew this wasn't the time nor place to speak. Logically, he knew that he was too tired to be polite or diplomatic. Logically, he recognized the jeopardy into which he was placing his career.

The words escaped before he had time to think it through--logically.

"You planning on seeing your *real* partner while you're there?"

Roy halted, blinking. "What?"

Dutch stared intently. "I was just wondering when you're gonna stop in and see Gage," he repeated. "You know--the man you call your best friend?"

Roy's expression froze. "That's none of your business, Dutch," he said quietly, moving to walk around 26's angry paramedic.

"Dutch...."

Dutch ignored his partner's voice. "No?" He shifted his stance to block Roy's passage. "Just whose business is it, then? Somebody's gotta try to stick up for the guy you seem to have abandoned as a friend."

"Stay out of it, Dutch." Roy's voice was deceptively, almost menacingly, calm. Again, he made an attempt to move around the younger man.

Dutch grabbed Roy's shirt. "Start acting like a friend."

"You don't know anything about this, Dutch," Roy insisted, swatting at the other man's hand. "Back off."

Gary seized Dutch and tried to pull him back. "Dutch...." he repeated.

"I'll back off when you start shouldering some of the responsibility for Johnny's recuperation," he spat. He threw off Gary's restraining hand and leaned in toward Roy. "You had the guts to stab him, but you don't have the guts to help him put his life back together?"

The trauma box clattered to the ground from Roy's hand and his face flushed. "I said let it alone, Masters!" His voice rose alarmingly.

Dutch's eyes flashed heatedly. "Take your best shot, DeSoto," he offered. "Or," he went on after a beat, his voice taunting and low, "do you need a screwdriver to take me out, too?"

Roy's swing was so swift that Dutch barely had time to duck, and the punch caught him a glancing blow on the side of his head. He came back up, his own left arcing backward when he felt a powerful grip jerking his arm down.

"What the hell is going on here?"

The third voice pierced the argument icily. Dutch and Roy started and turned. Hank Stanley stared angrily at both men.

"We can handle it, Cap," Roy muttered after a short pause, stepping back, his eyes never leaving Dutch's face.

"It's just a...misunderstanding," Dutch added, his gaze on Roy just as intense.

"I don't care what your--*misunderstanding*--is!" hissed Hank, fury spewing the words from his mouth. "You take this out of the field *now*, or I'll have both your asses in a sling!"

Dutch felt his face flame, but Roy spoke before he could.

"Sorry, Cap," Roy murmured, reaching down for the dropped box. Straightening, he hesitated.

"You have a partner to meet at the hospital," Hank reminded him coldly.

Roy nodded, chastened, and turned away, disappearing into the crowd.

Hank turned back to Dutch. "You got a problem with one of my men, Masters, you take it up with me next time!"

Dutch stared as Hank spun back to his job. After a hesitation, he turned as well. Gary was staring at him, fury flashing in his dark eyes.

"What a dumb ass thing to do," Gary muttered. Then, he banged the compartment door and slammed his way into the squad.

Dutch stared, breathing heavily a moment. At last, moving like a man in a dream, he edged forward and climbed into the cab of the truck. Gary sat on the far side in stony silence. For another long minute, Dutch stared through the windshield sightlessly. When he finally reached for the keys to start the engine, he was shaking so badly it took him two tries to turn them.

Joanne

"That was Dixie." Joanne DeSoto pulled the screen door closed behind her as she returned to the deck.

The fear that flitted across her husband's face was there and gone so quickly that anyone else would likely have missed it. "Something wrong?" he asked carefully.

Joanne shook her head as she settled herself once more in the chair next to Roy's. "Good news, actually: Johnny's going home." She looked out across the dark yard as she spoke, fingers entwined in the stem of her wine glass.

A faint smile crinkled the corners of Roy's eyes without actually shining from them. "That's great," he said woodenly. "Good." The can in his hand rotated under the sudden shifting of his fingers. He stared unseeingly at the rings left by the moisture on the arm of the chair.

Joanne narrowed her eyes and gazed into the darkness. An uncomfortable silence descended on the pair as the one sipped his beer and the other her wine.

"So," Roy ventured at last, "what else did she say that she doesn't want you to share?"

Joanne hesitated a moment. "He misses you, Roy," she said finally, turning to look at her husband.

"And you don't think I miss him?" This argument had grown old weeks ago. Roy leaned forward, his arms on his knees. "Joanne, I *tried to kill him!* How can he forgive me for that?" Muscles screamed to be released from the tight rein with which he kept them in check.

"You know, Roy," Joanne said placidly, "I think it's about time you got off that pity pony of yours and stopped acting like a spoiled child. *Everybody* knows what happened to you. You're the only one who hasn't forgiven yourself!"

"How can I, Joanne?" He leaned forward, elbows on his knees and empty beer can dangling between his legs. "How am I supposed to forgive what I did?"

"Sometimes, Roy DeSoto, you are so thick it amazes me." She pushed herself from her chair and stood over him. "Sometimes," she added bitterly, "I don't understand why Johnny considers you his best friend." She turned and stalked into the house, not quite slamming the door behind her.

"Neither do I," Roy whispered to the empty yard.

Johnny

John Gage lay awake in his bed, his left arm pressed against his forehead as if that were enough to stop the shivering or sweating. The images from the nightmare flickered through his mind again, and Johnny's hand flashed out and snapped on the bedside lamp. In the sudden light the digital numbers on the clock radio flared into focus. 2:13. Johnny punched a button and music blared from the speaker atop the clock, the raucous sound somehow comforting.

He lay a few minutes more, fighting back the frustration and rage. With another sudden movement, he grabbed the glass that sat on the nightstand and flung it across the room. It shattered against the opposite wall with a loud pop, splattering droplets of warm milk on the pale walls.

"Damn you, Roy DeSoto!"

"Tell me about the dreams."

Johnny froze, his breathing stilled. A rushing noise filled his head, blocking out the sound around him. "I...I can't," he finally whispered.

"Why not?" Jim Powers sat calmly across from the other, the only separation a small stretch of carpeting.

Johnny's eyes darted around the room, looking anywhere but at the psychiatrist, not really seeing. He tugged nervously at the fabric of his jeans, then smoothed it out again.

"John?" Powers prodded gently.

Johnny shook his head. "They scare me," he admitted, his voice quavering.

Powers noticed the tremor in Johnny's hands and he shifted slightly. "What scares you?"

Johnny's fingers stopped drumming the arm of the chair. "He just keeps coming after me." His voice was strained, tinged with the fear that continued to linger.

"With the screwdriver?"

Johnny stared into the distance. "No, not last night," he replied after a long silence. "Last night..." He paused and swallowed. "Last night, it was a scalpel...." This last came out in a harsh laugh, Johnny's eyes briefly holding Powers' before sliding away. His fingers began beating their tattoo again.

"What happened?"

Johnny searched the room once more, as if seeking refuge from the memory. He clasped his hands in his lap to still their motion, letting his leg jitter instead. "He just kept coming at me with it--" His voice broke off and, jumping up from the chair, he paced restlessly around the small office, the fingers of one hand raking his hair while the other hand rested on his hip. "I could see the blade gleaming...I couldn't move, I couldn't scream...." His breathing became ragged.

Powers narrowed his eyes, watching Johnny carefully.

"And then he just lunged at me." Johnny abruptly stopped moving, speaking through clenched teeth. "And I couldn't stop him...."

"Did he stab you?" Powers spoke very softly from behind Johnny.

Johnny didn't answer the question. "Why am I still having these nightmares?" He turned haunted eyes to the psychiatrist and fought to still his trembling.

"There are a lot of reasons, John."

Johnny's eyes wandered away again. "I woke up," he continued very softly, "before he could stab me." He shut his eyes and shook his head, his hand falling to his side. "Didn't throw up this time," he reported with a dry laugh. He wondered briefly if that would happen now. Sometimes, he felt as if there had never been a time when he had not been battling almost constant nausea.

Powers peered up at the disturbed man. "Tell me, how much sleep have you been averaging?"

Johnny puffed out a breath. "Not a hell of a lot, that's for sure..." His voice broke in another bleak laugh.

"How much last night? Anything after the nightmare?"

Johnny sighed and shook his head.

Powers pursed his lips. "John, have you given any more thought to sleeping pills?"

Johnny lifted his head as if to ward off a blow. "I can't," he said flatly.

"John--"

Johnny, however, was now shaking his head vehemently. "No," he repeated, "no drugs."

Powers raised his fingers in a conciliatory gesture and inclined his head.

Johnny dropped back onto the sofa and ran a hand across his face. "Man..." he groaned.

Powers changed tack again. "Tell me," he said, "what do you do when you can't go back to sleep?"

Johnny laughed bitterly and scrubbed at an imaginary hangnail. "After I get tired of tossing and turning, you mean?" He lifted his eyes. "Let's see, sometimes I clean the bathroom, sometimes I vacuum. Gosh, just the other night I cleaned out the garage...."

Powers regarded him calmly, a hint of amusement playing around his lips. "I want you to try something new next time. If there is a next time."

"Oh, there'll be a next time."

"Probably," Powers agreed. "I want you to try writing the next time."

Johnny's eyebrow disappeared underneath the fringe of hair hanging on his forehead. "Writing?" he snorted. "Write what?"

"Whatever comes to mind. Describe the nightmare, describe your feelings, describe your room...whatever words you think of. They don't even have to make sense."

Johnny's expression grew slowly thoughtful. "I've never tried writing," he said doubtfully.

Powers shrugged and smiled. "We're not looking to replace Shakespeare, John."

Johnny grinned weakly, his first real smile of the day. "I don't have to make things rhyme?"

"Let's see if it helps."

"Can't hurt, I guess," Johnny replied slowly. He finally nodded. "I'll give it a shot."

"Good deal."

Johnny's laugh was genuine this time.

Dutch

Dutch Masters looked up from the magazine he hadn't been reading. The receptionist behind the desk across the room smiled flirtatiously and, with a small inclination of her head, indicated the closed door to her right.

"Through that door." She tried the smile again, but the man wasn't even looking at her any more.

Dutch tossed aside the magazine, rose, and wiped his hands surreptitiously on his pants. He wasn't sure he was ready for this, but it was too late to back out now. Taking a steadying breath and, wishing the butterflies in his stomach would start building their cocoons, he stepped to the door and went in.

The room beyond was large but sparsely furnished. A large, uncluttered mahogany-colored desk graced the opposite wall, an inexpensive leather chair sitting empty behind it. A narrow credenza left of the desk held neat trays, an electric pencil sharpener, and several framed photos. On the wall opposite, two tall bookcases held the requisite books and knick-knacks. Three chairs, a small sofa, a low coffee table, and an end table and lamp completed the ensemble. Dutch was instantly uncomfortable.

A middle-aged man with short graying hair rose from one of the chairs and held out a hand. "Jim Powers," he said as Dutch took the offered hand and shook briefly. "You must be Ted Masters."

"I prefer Dutch," corrected the other, "not Ted."

"Oh, right. Sorry." Powers smiled easily and released Dutch's hand. "We're both glad you could make it today."

Masters followed the other man's gaze to a third person seated nervously on the edge of the sofa.

"Dutch." Roy DeSoto's soft voice greeted Dutch in a friendly manner, but his expression was wary, uncertain.

The younger man nodded. "Roy," he said simply.

"Why don't you have a seat, and we can get started," suggested Powers. "Would you like some coffee?"

Dutch shook his head as he found the nearest chair and lowered himself gingerly into its casual comfort. His eyes found the floor and remained fixed on the nondescript carpet at his feet.

"All right, let's lay the ground rules down for this conversation," started Powers as he returned to his own chair. He looked at Dutch.

"You're both here to see if we can't hash out some serious personal differences that seem to be spilling over into the field. Let's agree that whatever is said here, stays here. I'd like to give each of you an opportunity to state your side of things. This means that, while one of you speaks, the other listens. No interrupting. Are you both willing to go along with that?" He waited a beat for their silent acknowledgement. "Roy, you expressed some concerns about Dutch's anger over the situation with your partner. Why don't we start with that?" Powers leaned back in his own chair, one leg crossed over the other, notepad in his lap and pen dangling loosely in his fingers.

Dutch lifted his eyes to Roy, though his head remained bowed.

DeSoto took a breath and pressed his hands together. "Uh...." he began. He stopped, looked at Powers, then found Dutch. The other man's grey eyes gazed unwaveringly back. "I was hoping to clear the air here," Roy said finally.

Dutch continued to stare wordlessly.

"I need to know where you're coming from, Dutch," Roy went on, glancing back at Powers before directing his eyes back at the younger paramedic.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," Dutch replied, his gaze steady, his voice level, only a trace of wavering betraying the turmoil seething within. He was beginning to feel slightly ill.

"I think you do," countered Roy. "You're coming at me out of nowhere. I need to know why."

Masters continued to stare unblinkingly. "You want me to list the reasons alphabetically or chronologically?" he asked flippantly. His voice carried a slight tremor.

"As long as you're not throwing 'em at me in the middle of dealing with patients in the field, it doesn't matter to me how you detail them," retorted Roy.

Dutch flushed, and remained silent.

"One reason will do--any reason." Roy's voice shook a little, too. "Why can't you just tell me one reason?"

Dutch Masters' grey eyes finally flashed angrily. "You want a reason?" he snapped. "I'll give you a reason: Johnny's my friend, and my friend is never gonna work his job again, and I'm having just the littlest problem talkin' to you right now." He clenched his fists to still their trembling and took a shaky breath.

Roy looked as if he'd been struck. For an instant, Dutch felt a glimmer of remorse--his reaction was irrational, he knew. Roy was Johnny's friend, and Dutch knew Gage would be furious with him for his behavior. And, then, the vision of Johnny lying on the station bay floor, a screwdriver protruding from him, flashed into his mind. Suddenly, Dutch felt overwhelmingly ill. He propelled himself from his chair, stumbling over to the large mahogany desk that graced the psychiatrist's office.

"Sorry...." he choked, then threw up in the trashcan.

Jim Powers wordlessly handed him a tissue, and Dutch wiped his mouth silently. He dropped the wadded up paper after his vomit and dropped back into the leather chair. For a minute he stared at the carpet, and then he leaned forward, pressed his hands against his eyes, and released a strangled sigh.

After a long silence, he lifted his head and gazed at Powers. "This is still a little too raw," he said hoarsely. He glanced at Roy, blinked at the obvious distress on the man's face. "I know you didn't do it on purpose, Roy," he said, exhaling forcefully to quell the shakiness. "You've gotta be kickin' up more'n me."

Roy said nothing.

"Have you spoken to him, Roy?" Powers' voice was unperturbed. He sat relaxed and easy opposite the two firefighters.

"No." Roy shook his head and looked away.

"Why--" Dutch stopped, took a breath, and began again, more softly. "Why not?"

"I--I don't....I wouldn't know what to say....He doesn't want to see me." Roy turned pleading eyes back to the other men.

Dutch glanced at Powers, but the doctor seemed willing to let him and Roy hash this out. "He asks about you, you know." His voice was dull now.

Roy looked up, surprise and guilt etched on his face.

"Wonders why you haven't talked to him."

Roy looked away, dismayed.

"What do you tell him when he asks?" Powers interjected, frowning slightly at the younger man.

Dutch turned his glacial stare on the psychiatrist. "I lie," he said flatly. "I tell him the kids and Joanne are sick, I tell him he's been asleep when Roy's been there, I tell him he's been too sick for visitors when Roy's been there." He looked away and swallowed. "He knows better," he whispered.

"Why don't you tell him the truth?" Roy's soft-spoken question nearly brought Dutch to his feet.

"Why don't *you* tell him the truth!" he demanded.

Roy merely stared back.

Powers watched with interest.

"Don't do this to me, DeSoto!" Dutch forced himself back into his chair.

"You're not the one who tried to kill him," said Roy firmly. "You've got no right to tell me what I should or shouldn't do."

Dutch leaned forward, eyes blazing again. "And, you're not the one dealing with the fallout," he spat angrily. "You're just hiding away, letting the rest of us prop him up!"

Roy's calm exterior grimly hid the terror seething within. "Walk a mile in my shoes, Dutch," he suggested, his voice quavering.

"And, just what would that mile be like, Roy?" Dutch lifted his head slowly, his voice low. "Just what sort of hike does it take to talk to your best friend?"

Roy was slow to respond. "I wasn't allowed near him at first," he began at last. "Then, when he got so sick, no one was allowed in."

He spared a glance at Dutch and read the confirmation of this information in the other man's eyes. This brought him a measure of reassurance--for a long time he had wondered if the isolation had been a story the doctors had concocted to keep him away from Gage.

"After that....it just got harder...." He stopped and swallowed. "I was so scared...of what he'd say to me."

"He's just as scared as you are," Dutch said softly, his voice far from gentle.

Roy stared at him, his head shaking slightly. "I don't think so," he replied, just as quietly.

"How do you *know* if you don't talk to him?" pleaded Dutch. "All he wants is to know you're there." He pounced as Roy's expression softened a bit. "You don't have to go alone," he suggested, almost eagerly. "Go with Hank or Mike...Chet...hell, anybody. *Just go talk to him, Roy.*"

Roy looked away, his eyes troubled.

"I don't get it," Dutch whispered after another lengthy silence.

"I know you don't," Roy replied, his gaze returning to the other man. He took a breath and leaned forward. "That's just it, Dutch. You *don't* get it, and you don't *want* to get it. I'm just tryin' to make you understand my side of it, is all."

"I'm *tryin'* to understand your side of it," Dutch protested.

Roy shook his head. "No, you're not. You think this is all about Johnny."

Dutch's grey eyes flashed again. "Of course, it's about Johnny!" he snapped.

"No!" Roy's shout thundered in the office. "This is about you and me! Johnny can fight his own battles!"

"Not if his enemy keeps hidin' in the brush, he can't!"

"His *enemy*? I'm not his *enemy*!"

"You sure as hell act like it--"

"I'm tryin' to get my own life back together, Dutch!" Roy's voice was high-pitched and strained. "I can't deal with Johnny until I come to grips with this myself. Can't you understand that?"

"All I understand is that you're ignoring your best friend, and it's killing him." Dutch closed his eyes and covered his mouth with a hand as if he might be forced back to the trash can.

"That's something he and I have to work out ourselves," Roy insisted. "It's none of your business."

Dutch's eyes snapped open. "The hell it isn't!"

"Dutch...."

"No!" Dutch threw a glance at Powers, but his gaze reverted almost immediately to Roy. "It *is* my business! His best friend sure as hell isn't in his corner."

It was Roy's turn to lose his temper. "Where do you get off telling me what kind of friend I am?" He stood up, towering over Dutch.

"I'm the one who stabbed him, remember? It's *my* fault he's where he is!"

Masters jumped up and thrust his face forward. "Then, tell him you're sorry!" he shouted. "For Chrissake, Roy, *just tell him you're sorry!*"

"I can't!"

The grey-eyed man blinked and leaned back in stunned silence. "You son of a bitch," he whispered.

"Dutch--"

Masters didn't bother to look at Powers. "I think I've had enough," he choked out, his chest heaving suddenly. "Call me when you change your mind." He stepped around Roy, ignoring Powers' call again, and slammed the door on the way out.

The sound echoed in the deadly silence that followed. Powers was on his feet, following in Dutch's wake. By the time he reached the door, Dutch was already across the outer office, his hand on the far door.

"Dutch!"

The paramedic ignored him and pushed his way through to the outer hallway. Powers dashed after him.

"Dutch!" he called again as Dutch punched the elevator call button.

Powers stopped as the other man turned away, then touched him gently on the arm. "Please, come back," he said quietly. He could feel the violent trembling through the sleeve of Dutch's shirt. "I realize how frightening this is for you...for both of you," he went on.

Dutch slumped against the wall, refusing to meet Powers' gaze. A bell sounded and, with a quiet *whoosh*, the elevator doors slid open. "I can't," Dutch murmured, lurching into the cab, "not today...."

The doors closed and the elevator bumped into motion, and Dutch fought another battle with his stomach all the way down to the ground floor.

Roy

"That went real well, didn't it," muttered Roy sullenly, dropping back into his chair after a minute. He pulled his eyes away from the still-open door of the psychiatrist's office and shook his head disgustedly.

Why was it that no one could understand his side?

"Didn't go quite the way you imagined it?" Powers closed the door quietly and returned to his chair.

"Not even close." Roy waited for the doctor to seat himself, then sagged back in his seat. "I could have told you he wouldn't come back," he added bitterly.

"I think we gained a lot more today than you're giving yourselves credit for," Powers told him.

Roy said nothing.

"You don't think so?" Powers' voice remained level.

"I think this was a big waste of time." Roy sighed.

"Why is that?" Powers asked.

Roy shrugged. "It didn't solve anything. He didn't listen to me."

"Did you say what you wanted to say to him?"

"I tried." Roy tilted his head, and his voice rose petulantly. "He wouldn't listen...." He stopped, but the psychiatrist made no comment. After a pause he went on. "He's got no right butting his nose into my business. He's trying to fight this battle for Johnny and Johnny wouldn't want that!"

"What do you think Johnny does want?" Powers' voice was calm.

DeSoto stared at the floor a long time before he answered. "I...I think he'll want things to be exactly like they were before."

"What about what you want, Roy?"

DeSoto shook his head slowly. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "I think I want to stop being afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of being too dependent on his trust, his friendship."

Powers leaned his head sideways as he studied the other man. "Do you think you are?"

Roy shrugged. "I never thought I was, but...." He paused and took a deep breath. "I don't remember any of it, you know."

The psychiatrist shifted in his chair. "Tell me, Roy," he said, "what would be different if you could remember what happened that night?"

A frown creased Roy's forehead. "I might be able trust myself again," he replied quietly.

Powers nodded approvingly. "What do you think might be able to help you learn to trust yourself again?"

DeSoto's eyes widened. "Talking to Johnny? Oh, come on, Doc, that's too easy."

"It's often the easiest solutions that are hardest for us to find." Powers straightened in his chair.

The pair sat in silence for a while longer. Roy finally spoke. "Should I talk to him alone, or with someone else there?"

"I think you should do whatever makes you comfortable," suggested the doctor.

Roy sighed. He felt drained.

"I think that's enough for today," Powers said, setting aside his notebook and leaning his arms on his knees. He smiled at the other man. "I'd say we managed to cover quite a lot of ground today."

"I'm scared."

"Being scared is okay. Letting it control you is not okay."

DeSoto smiled tiredly back. "You sound like every instructor I ever had at the Academy."

"Psychology 101," agreed the other man. "We can talk about it at another session."

Roy nodded and stood up, the doctor following suit. He opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, then said simply, "Thanks, Doc."

Powers nodded. "Any time."

They shook hands and Roy departed, tired but slightly more hopeful than he had been in a long time.

Hank

Hank nodded slowly, hoping with every ounce of his being that his satisfaction didn't show. "I think that's a great idea, John," he agreed, trying to sound as if the thought had not occurred to him before.

Johnny appeared surprised, a slow smile creasing his face. "You think so?" he asked, momentary doubt in his voice countered by his relaxing back against the sofa on which he sat.

Hank nodded more firmly this time. "What can I do to help?"

Johnny's brow furrowed as he studied his feet while he pondered the question. "Well, I think I'm gonna need someone to talk to Headquarters with me," he began. He stopped and looked up at Hank again, uncertainty battling with sadness in his expression this time. "Guess I won't be able to come back to 51s," he murmured.

"Not to A-shift," Hank agreed softly, "probably not."

Johnny was silent only for a few seconds, then he shrugged and offered the other man a weak, crooked grin. "Well, just gettin' back into the field is gonna be hard enough, I suppose."

Hank narrowed his eyes slightly. "If anybody can do it, it's you," he assured him.

"Yeah," Johnny nodded, his head dropping back once more, his expression becoming more determined. "Yeah, you're right."

"You doing okay? Really?"

Johnny grinned sardonically. "As long as I keep seeing the shrink."

Hank's expression remained sober. "Does it help?"

Johnny grew thoughtful. "Yeah," he said slowly, "yeah, it does, actually." His mouth quirked a little. "Gotta have someone to talk to, I guess."

Hank made a noncommittal grunt in reply. It had become an unspoken rule that Roy's name was not mentioned during conversations with the younger man. At first, his name had cropped up easily and naturally. Now, the mention of his one-time partner's name was enough to send Johnny into a funk that could last for days. So, it was best left unsaid.

He smirked as Johnny yawned. "Guess I'd better head out," he commented dryly.

Johnny had the grace to blush. "Sorry, Cap," he offered.

Hank shook his head as he rose. "As long as that's what it is, and not my boring you." He shook Johnny's hand. "Get your rest--you'll need your strength if you wanna get back into the field."

Johnny's smile was genuine. "Yeah," he sighed, "you're right. Thanks, Cap."

"I'll stop by when you're more settled," Hank told him. "We'll discuss your return then."

Johnny watched him go, then swung his feet onto the sofa and closed his eyes. He'd convinced his captain that he was ready to go back. Now all he had to do was convince himself.

Johnny

Gage heaved a resigned sigh at the sound of the doorbell, pushed himself from the sofa, and padded to answer the summons. He forced a grin as he opened the door. "Hey," he greeted Dutch Masters.

"I was in the neighborhood, thought I'd stop by," Dutch said.

"Come on in," invited Johnny, stepping back and allowing his friend into the house. "Want a beer?" he offered.

"Only if you're having one," Dutch told him. He followed Gage into the kitchen and accepted the bottle the other man wordlessly handed him. "You're lookin' a little on the skinny side, Gage," he opined, gulping a mouthful of cold ale.

Johnny shrugged and sipped at his own beer. "I'm doin' all right, thanks for asking," he muttered.

Dutch eyed him silently a moment. "Did I pick a bad time?" he asked. "'Cause if I'm intruding, I can go, but...." He stopped.

"But what?" frowned Johnny.

It was Dutch's turn to lift his shoulders. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay, see if you needed anything—"

"Stop it!"

Dutch swiveled his head, as if he'd find behind him the source of Johnny's annoyance. He looked back at Johnny. "What?"

Johnny was glaring at him. "Just stop it!" he repeated, slamming his beer bottle on the counter with such force that it shattered. Glass shards flew in several directions, and beer splattered on the wall and down the cabinet fronts underneath the counter.

Dutch blinked at his friend's vehemence. He stepped forward to move Johnny's hand away from the bottle remains he still held. "Stop what?" he wondered.

"Stop hovering...stop asking me if I'm all right, if I've heard from Roy, if anyone stops by besides you...." Johnny's voice trailed off tiredly.

"I'm just tryin' make sure you're all right," objected Dutch as he bent to pick up the glass from the floor.

"Just leave it!" snapped Johnny.

"What is your problem!" Dutch whipped his head up and fixed Johnny with a glare.

"My problem?" Johnny gaped at Dutch in disbelief. "*My problem* is you!"

Dutch straightened abruptly, one hand cupping the glass shards he'd picked up from the floor. "What the hell did I do?"

"You're smothering me," Johnny told him heatedly, his hand pressing against his chest. "I feel like I can't breathe when you're around." He took a breath and ran his hand through his hair. "I can't even enjoy a beer, for cryin' out loud!"

"I'm tryin' to *help* you!"

Johnny's eyes blazed anew. "Well, you're doin' a pretty crappy job of it!" he retorted. His hand swung wide to encompass the room. "You think you're helping me by spending all your spare time with me? Did you ever think that maybe I just want to be left alone?"

"Well, maybe I'll just do that!" Dutch thumped his bottle on the counter where it, too, disintegrated. His hand jerked back as glass and beer spurted across the counter.

Johnny blinked, then looked up at Dutch, his face a confusion of sudden insight, anger, and hurt.

Dutch stared back only for an instant. "I know my way out," he said, his voice low. He pushed past the other.

"Dutch--" Johnny reached for his friend.

"I got the point," Dutch called back, not turning around.

"Dutch-- Dammit! Don't--" The slam of the door cut him off. Johnny stood gaping as the anger resonated in the small room. He turned slowly back to the kitchen, watching the beer puddling on his floor. "*Damn* it!" he muttered.

Why did he feel like he was in the wrong?

* * * * *

Crap!

Dutch stared furiously at Johnny's house. He pounded the top of his car with a fist, ignoring the stab of pain that flared and faded in the knuckles, threw open the door, and hurled himself into the driver's seat. With a muttered oath, he shoved the ignition key in and twisted it angrily. He pulled the door closed, thrust the car into gear, and peeled from the curb with a noisy squeal.

Halfway down the block he stopped abruptly and let out another frustrated breath. He looked into his rearview mirror and carried on a brief inner debate before he shifted into reverse and backed his car to Johnny's driveway. Leaving the car parked in the street, he climbed back out and made his way to Johnny's front door.

He stood on the porch and ground his teeth while he once more fought with himself. At last, he reached out and rested a finger on the bell.

Almost instantly the door opened. Johnny stared a moment, then reached out and pushed open the screen door. "You're a jerk, Masters," he offered as he stepped back to allow his friend into the house.

Dutch snorted, the sound a mixture of relief and apology as he followed Johnny inside. "Yeah," he agreed, his eyes on his feet, "well, it's all part of my charm." He lifted his eyes and his mouth quirked slightly. "Sorry."

Johnny shrugged, his own face relaxing into a grin. "What, that you're a jerk?"

"Dope."

"That, too."

"I meant you."

"I know."

Dutch shook his head. "Why do I put up with you?"

"Mostly 'cause I know where all the girls are."

The two men regarded one another for a moment, then Dutch made a small face. "We okay now?"

Johnny nodded slowly. "Yeah," he agreed, "we're okay now."

Dutch felt the tension begin to drain away, and he smiled weakly. "Good," he breathed. "I can't afford to lose my source for female companionship." He shifted his keys in his hand.

"Dutch."

He looked up.

"I've been approved to return to the field." He shrugged at Dutch's look of surprise.

"I'm glad," Dutch said at last. "When do you start back?"

"As soon as I pass the physical."

Dutch nodded. "Do you know where yet?"

Johnny shook his head. "Not yet."

Dutch's eyes narrowed. "Not 51s, though," he said softly.

Johnny didn't blink. "Not 51s."

"I'm sorry, Johnny." He studied his friend's carefully neutral expression. "You gonna be okay?"

"If I'm not, I'll let you know." A wry smile flitted across his face.

Dutch nodded. There was a moment of silence. "I'd better go," he said finally. "I'll see you."

He walked down the driveway without looking back, sketched a brief wave to Johnny as he climbed into his car, and pulled away without the squeal of tires of the first departure.

He stopped again after two blocks, dropped his head onto the steering wheel, and let his fury out in a storm of epithets. When he finally ran out of words, he drove home, feeling drained.

Roy

Roy's smile froze as he opened the door.

Dutch, haggard and unshaven, stared back unsmilingly from the doorstep. "Can I come in?" he asked.

Roy noted the slight tremor in Dutch's voice and stepped back. "Sure," he replied.

Dutch stepped across the threshold and stood uncertainly in the foyer, his gaze darting around the unfamiliar surroundings. He felt like an intruder.

"Come on in," Roy invited, leading the way into the living room. He gestured to the sofa and seated himself in a chair.

Dutch lowered himself carefully and spent a long minute studying his hands. Roy waited patiently. At last, Dutch lifted his eyes and regarded Roy thoughtfully. "I, uh...I'm sorry," he began. He stopped, looked away, heaved a sigh, and returned to his scrutiny of his hands. "I've been way out of line."

Roy nodded slightly. "Yeah, you have," he agreed quietly.

Dutch passed a hand over his face. "I guess I'm a little too close to the situation to be objective," he admitted.

"We're both a little too close," Roy agreed.

"I just want to help him, Roy." The words were almost whispered.

"I know that."

Dutch's eyes shot up, then almost immediately closed.

Roy watched silently, his stomach flip-flopping, while Dutch struggled with his emotions. "I want him back again, too, Dutch," he said at last.

"Then, help me to bring him back, Roy," whispered Dutch. "Help me bring him back."

"What does Johnny want from me, Dutch?" DeSoto asked.

Dutch swiped ineffectually at the moisture on his face as he replied. "He doesn't want anything besides your friendship."

"And what do you want, Dutch?" Roy spoke matter-of-factly, but his heart hammered in his chest.

"I want you to give him back that friendship," choked the other.

"I've never taken it away, Dutch," Roy assured him. "I just..."

"You just what?" Dutch's voice carried a plaintive ring, his grey eyes intense and penetrating.

"I tried to tell you in Powers' office that day." He sighed. "I have to forgive myself first, before I ask him to forgive me."

Dutch blinked. "Forgive yourself for what?" he asked. "For stabbing him?"

Roy merely stared back.

"Roy," Dutch protested, "you didn't do it on purpose!"

Roy nodded. "I'm beginning to understand that," he agreed quietly.

"Then, what's the problem?" Faint exasperation colored his voice.

"I'm scared of the dependency," Roy finally answered. "I'm scared of the hold his friendship has on me, that mine has on his."

Dutch frowned, trying to follow Roy's reasoning. Roy went on before he could interrupt.

"I'm scared that he'll forgive me, and that he'll want things to be the same when I know that can't ever be." He sighed. "I'm scared that I can't live up to the level of trust I know he'll have in that friendship."

Dutch slowly digested Roy's words. "Roy," he asked, "if the situation were reversed, what would you want?"

Roy laughed bitterly. "That's the million dollar question," he told the other, shaking his head. He looked up intently at Dutch. "I don't know."

Dutch blew out his breath slowly. "Must be hard to be so uncertain," he murmured, massaging a temple tiredly.

"You look like hell." Roy's smile took some of the sting from the words. "You want some coffee or something?"

Dutch nodded gratefully, his pale features relaxing slightly. "Yeah," he managed, "some coffee would be great. Thanks," he added.

Roy studied the other man a moment before he rose. "I'm sorry, too," he said softly. "I've been wrong...about a lot of things."

He missed the look of surprise on the other man's face.

Mike

"No--don't get up." Mike Stoker smiled his gentle smile as he held out his hand toward John. "How you doin'?"

Johnny settled back into his chaise and nodded, smiling tiredly. "Ah'm doin' all right." He shrugged a little. "Thought I'd get a little fresh air."

Stoker sat down in the only other chair on Johnny's deck and set down the foil-covered plate he held. He smiled at Johnny's curious look. "Thought you might want something to eat besides hamburgers and hot dogs," he said. "Brought you some fried chicken."

Johnny's expression brightened. "Oh, yeah?" He sounded pleased, but he left the plate untouched.

Mike looked around. It was a beautiful day--unusually clear and cloudless and, for mid-January, also unusually warm. Johnny wore a heavy sweater, though, and a jacket over it, though his yard was sheltered and flooded with sunshine.

"Can I get you a drink or something?" Johnny offered.

Mike shook his head. "Thanks, anyway." He studied John a minute. "You're looking pretty good, John." It was a lie, of course.

Johnny laughed. "For a skeleton," he replied.

Mike grinned. "Well, I guess you couldn't get much skinnier, no," he agreed. In truth, Mike had expected John to look more rested than he did. Must still be having nightmares.

"I'm still tryin' to make up for lost time," Johnny smiled, swallowing a mouthful from the glass of juice he held, "but I guess I'm not makin' too much headway."

"Well, I imagine you'll get your appetite back soon enough."

Johnny's glance fell on the plate. "That oughta help it along," he opined.

"Had to practically take it out of Chet's mouth," Mike told him dryly.

Johnny's expression lost a shade of its humor, but only for a moment. "How's ol' Chet doin'?" he asked.

"The same as always. Said to tell you he and Marco are coming out tomorrow to check up on you, if that's all right." He waited, but Johnny didn't object. "I said I'd let him know if you'd rather they didn't."

"No, it's okay." Johnny shifted in his chair and looked across his yard to the distant, hazy mountains. He'd been pretty much ignoring the phone since he'd been home. In the hospital, he had to put up with visitors. At home, he didn't have to do anything he didn't want to do.

"Cap said he was out last week, too."

Suddenly, Johnny knew what was coming. He continued to direct his gaze to the distance, waiting in silence.

"Have you talked to Roy at all?" Mike tried to make the question sound casual, Johnny thought, failing miserably.

Johnny's eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. For a long silence he stared across the yard, his breath going in and out slowly and with a forced evenness. Mike waited patiently. "He's here, isn't he?" Johnny's voice was soft and full of sadness.

"John, he's your best friend."

Johnny took a breath and held it, closing his eyes. "Mike," he whispered, "you know I don't blame him for this."

"I know that, Johnny, but Roy doesn't."

"Mike, I'm not sure I'm ready to face him...."

"Johnny," Mike started softly.

Johnny held up a hand. "Mike, please." He shifted on the seat, rising cautiously and stepping to the edge of the deck. He studied the distant view a few minutes. "I wouldn't know what to say," he said at last.

"Tell him you're still his friend."

Johnny tilted his head and looked sideways at the other. Yeah, I'm still his friend. But can he still be mine? "He never came to see me. Not once." His voice was emotionless, carefully in check.

Mike shook his head. "He was there every day, John." He lifted troubled blue eyes to meet Johnny's dark ones. "Every day," he repeated.

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" He turned to face Mike.

"You think he tried to kill you on purpose?" Mike stood and stepped across the deck to stand at Johnny's side.

"Of course not--"

"Johnny, he doesn't remember anything about that night, except coming back from that last run and going to bed."

"Yeah, well, I remember everything about that night!" His finger nearly jabbed Mike in the chest. "And, I remember every single minute of pain after that." He took a shaky breath, trying unsuccessfully to still his raging emotions. "But nowhere in any of that do I remember Roy DeSoto being there!"

"Johnny," asked Mike carefully, "did you even want to see him in the hospital?"

"Of course, I did! Why wouldn't I?" Johnny blinked in surprise.

"Then, why don't you want to see him now?"

"Because I'm scared!"

This answer startled both of them. Mike took an involuntary step backwards. Johnny's eyes widened and he slowly leaned against the railing, holding his breath and then letting it out with a shaky sob. "I'm scared...."

"I'm sorry, Johnny."

Johnny closed his eyes and remained absolutely still.

"I should never have let you think I meant to hurt you."

"Roy...." The name came out in a strangled syllable.

"Junior...."

He turned as if in a dream, lifted his eyes, still holding his breath.

Roy stood uncertainly at the bottom of the steps on the far side of the deck. Johnny's former partner looked ten years older than when Johnny had last seen him. Dark circles outlined his eyes, and his clothes hung loosely on a frame carrying at least twenty fewer pounds than Johnny remembered.

Roy slowly climbed the steps and stood at the top, his expression more afraid than hopeful.

Mike took another step backwards, his eyes darting back and forth nervously between the two other men. Neither even seemed aware of his presence.

"I'll leave if that's what you want," Roy stated softly. "I'm hoping it's not."

Johnny's eyes filled. "Pally..." he whispered.

Johnny

"Was the reality worse than what you imagined?"

Johnny thought for a moment. "I don't know," he answered finally. He folded his arms across his chest and glanced nervously around the all too-familiar office.

"John."

He turned his eyes to the psychiatrist, who was leaning forward in his chair, arms on his knees.

"If you don't want to do this, we don't have to." Powers spoke quietly, his expression serious. "We can wait until you're more sure of yourself."

Johnny snorted softly. He swallowed and shook his head, pulling his hands into his lap with an effort. "No," he countered, "let's do this now." He lifted his eyes again to meet the doctor's. "I might never be ready."

"There's no point in doing this if it isn't going to help, John. You've worked very hard, and you're doing quite well. I'd just as soon not jeopardize any of that with another meeting for which you're not prepared."

"I want the nightmares to stop." Johnny said this very softly, firmly, looking away.

"This isn't an exact science, John," Powers reminded him. "There's a good probability the dreams will continue for at least a while."

Johnny lifted weary eyes. "I want my friend back."

Powers nodded, satisfied. "Good." He stood up and walked to his desk, where he pressed a button on the phone console. Glancing at Johnny's determined face, he smiled. "Try to relax, John. This is a safe place, remember?"

Johnny nodded nervously, an agitated bobbing of the head that was more a knee-jerk response than agreement. His fingers drummed on his leg as Powers spoke briefly to his secretary. When the door opened a moment later, his head shot up with an almost audible snap. His heart seemed to stop beating, his lungs seemed to forget their function. He forced a smile onto his face as he greeted the newcomer.

"Hey, Roy."

Roy DeSoto closed the door quietly behind him and stood a moment. He looked scared and uncertain, and he waited for Powers' reassuring nod before crossing the room. Johnny rose, and the two men stood facing one another for a long, silent minute.

"I'm glad you came," Johnny said at last.

Roy nodded, relief evident in the sudden, slight relaxing of his shoulders. "I am, too," he replied, a faint smile appearing and disappearing in rapid succession.

"Why don't we all sit down?" Powers gestured to the chairs, and situated himself so that Johnny was on his left and Roy on his right. The other men seated themselves.

Johnny's leg jittered a few times, and he pressed down on it forcefully to hold it still. The only sign of Roy's edginess was his position on the very edge of his chair, as if he were afraid to get too comfortable.

"John? Would you like to start?"

Johnny startled as if his mind had been miles away, though his gaze had been fairly steady on his former partner, but he didn't even glance at Powers. He took a deep breath, let it all out in a rush, and blurted out, "How come you waited so long?"

Roy recoiled at the abruptness of the question. He did glance at Powers, who was staring intently at Johnny.

"I was so scared, Roy." Johnny jumped up from his seat suddenly, ran a hand over his hair, and paced toward the far side of the room, stopping with his back to the others. "And you weren't there..." He stopped again. "There wasn't anybody to talk to." He turned and glared at Roy. "I needed my friend, and you weren't there for me." His voice was faintly accusatory.

Roy's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, and then his face crumpled. "I'm sorry, Johnny," he whispered, "I am so sorry."

Johnny said after a long silence, "I know that, Roy, but you're sorry for the wrong reason. And," he added very softly, "you're apologizing to the wrong person."

Roy met the other man's gaze. Johnny's face creased into a small, self-deprecating smile.

"I know that I'm too trusting sometimes," the younger man went on after a beat, "but I've never had any cause to not trust you." Johnny came slowly back to his chair, but stood next to it for a long time before he finally sat down. He looked down at the hands folded in his lap. "I just wanted to tell you that," he sighed, lifting his eyes once more. "What

you did was not your fault, and you can stop trying to apologize for it." His voice was calm, his gaze now steady. "Just start being my friend again."

"I...I never stopped," Roy whispered.

Johnny's mouth quirked. "You got a funny way of showing it."

"How can you be so forgiving?" Roy studied the other man with frank astonishment. The psychiatrist had been completely forgotten.

"How can I possibly still have your faith and trust after everything that's happened?"

"You're here now, aren't you?"

A lump rose in his throat, and Roy swiped suddenly at wet eyes as he shook his head. "I don't deserve a friend like you."

"I know." Johnny grinned sardonically and leaned forward. "But I can't think of a better man to have for a friend than you."

There was a short silence.

"Please tell me we don't have to hug now," Roy begged with a weak laugh.

"You try it, and I'll deck you," Johnny shot back.

"So," Roy wondered, finally seeming to remember Powers, "what's the next step?"

Powers directed his attention to Johnny. "It's your call."

Johnny stared back. "I think now we talk."

Powers nodded in satisfaction. "Now, you talk."

Roy

"Shaving cream in the boots, Fletcher?" Chet Kelly clicked his tongue and shook his head ruefully. "A rookie trick. My mother could do better than that."

"Who do you think gave me the idea?" Steve replied, unperturbed. He dropped his own boots next to his bunk and dropped his turnouts onto the bed.

"You're gonna have to wake up pretty early to pull one over on ol' Chester B., pal," Chet called over his shoulder as he headed into the locker room.

"Or stay up later," Fletcher murmured. He glanced at Roy, who was staring at him curiously. Steve shrugged and returned his attention to rolling his turnout pants over his boots, whistling cheerfully as he worked.

Roy tilted his head and studied the other man a moment. His thoughts were interrupted by a bellow from the other room.

"I'm gonna get you for this, Fletcher!" Chet's voice thundered throughout the station.

Roy lifted a quizzical eyebrow in his partner's direction.

"Garlic in the toothpaste," explained the other nonchalantly, dropping onto his bed and sliding his feet under the covers.

Roy watched him plump the pillow and settle comfortably. A slow grin spread across his face. "You're a good man to have around, Steve," he chuckled, climbing into his own bed.

"Good man, my foot!" stormed Chet as he stalked back into the dorm.

"Think of it as protection against vampires, Chet," suggested Steve innocently.

"Ha ha, very funny." Chet grimaced. "Man, and I thought for sure I had me an easy victim."

"No, Chet," Roy called, "what you got is as good as you give."

"Not better?" wondered Steve mournfully.

"You know, you're right," agreed Roy. "Much better."

Steve grinned and rolled over. "G'night, partner."

Roy answered the grin with one of his own. "'Night, partner."

He waited for a moment, but the ache didn't rise up this time.

*Author's note: A million thanks are not enough to Susan and Lisa for seeing this story through from start to end. Susan was especially motivating. Rose, thank you for pointing out my repeated idiocies before I let the rest of the world see them. And, to everyone else who saw bits and pieces of this and still encouraged me to finish it, there is no more. Please, PLEASE don't beg for another sequel. It took a year and a half for Roy to start talking to me once more...I'd hate to lose him again after all that time!
February 2004: Thanks to CJ for providing a new home for this story!*

May 2010: Thanks for Linda for taking this one along with the original!