

Hat Trick Assist

by MJ Hajost and Redgirl

Authors' note: This story is set in 1971. That's for you hockey fans reading the story who might wonder about the hockey parts of the story, and you music fans who might wonder about the music part of the story. --M and R

"Hey, Garner!" Ted "Dutch" Masters leaned over and tugged at his skate laces as he called over his shoulder. "Come on, already, just grab any stick!" He shook his head in Jake Cormier's direction. "Poor baby left his own stick at home."

Cormier snorted as he slid his jersey over his head and picked up his own stick. "Like it's gonna make a difference in how he plays?"

Dutch grunted as he finished lacing and straightened up. "Can't shoot with a straight stick, can't hit the net with a curved one...." He reached for his gloves and stood, tugging and shrugging his pads into more comfortable place.

Cormier shrugged. "With any luck, Jonesie will forget his goalie pads, and we'll have a shot at a goal or two."

It was Dutch's turn to snort. "Let's get on the ice before we lose our time slot," he said, heading for the locker room door and the rink.

He hit the ice just behind Jake, transitioning easily from the awkward gait of skates on rubber to the smooth glide of blades against the frozen surface of the indoor arena. Instantly, he began a swift and powerful surge around the the edges of the ice, warming up leg muscles and grinning at the feel of the cold air against his face. He and Jake took a couple of circuits, and then joined the rest of the team shooting pucks at their goalie, Ed Forbes.

"Let's go, gents!" he heard and, turning, saw the game official signaling that it was time to start their amateur league game. The players gathered the errant pucks and skated to their bench for last minute talk of strategy, and then the game was suddenly under way.

It was a surprisingly fast-paced game, considering these were all amateurs who seldom even practiced regularly, and most of whom had put in a full day's work before arriving at the rink for the evening game. Before long, the sound of huffing and puffing was nearly as loud as the sound of sticks clashing and players rebounding off the boards around the ice. Halfway through the first period, there was still no score, despite several shots on both goals.

Dutch shoved a damp lock of hair back from his forehead as he skated into position for yet another face off, and he felt a grin spread across his face. It had been too long since he'd gotten to play more than an occasional game with these

buddies. Now, with brush fire season over, he was back to a more normal schedule and maybe he could play a couple of times a week, get his hand back in.

Ned Blasche, a real estate agent out in the valley, eyed him across the circle. "What's so funny, Masters? That was a lucky shot and you know it. Dave's concentration is off, what with dating your sister. I hope she shaves that mustache before the weekend. They've got that big date, you know, down at the zoo."

Dutch simply grinned. "Blasche, don't sweat it. If I had a sister, I'd have her send your wife some beauty tips. You might get lucky this weekend, too."

The byplay stopped as the official dropped the puck and the players swarmed into position. Blasche took the puck and sent it to his right wing. Dutch immediately dropped back as the play shifted into his team's end. Ronnie Seavers led the attack across the blue line and found himself forced into the boards as Jake Cormier slammed into him, but not before Seavers had sent the puck sailing across the goal line and behind the net.

Play continued with a lot of hitting and swearing and stumbling. At last came the end of the second period and a chance for the players to catch their collective breath. The score was tied with one goal apiece, which was less a tribute to good goaltending than to generally poor shooting.

"I'm gettin' too damn old for this," huffed Harry Shorn, dropping onto the player's bench as they settled in to start the third and final period of the game.

"Harry, you're 32 years old, you fix kids' teeth all day. You're not old. You're out of shape."

"Masters, some of us have to work more than two days a week," retorted Shorn. "We don't have time to pump iron."

Dutch flexed an arm. "Pumping iron, hell," he shot back. "Haulin' hose, buddy, haulin' hose."

"Ain't heard it called that before," said Cormier. Then, "B Line on the ice!"

Laughing, Dutch jumped up and vaulted over the boards as the shift changed. The puck was in the offensive zone, and he sailed down ice with the other wingman, behind the net and into the far corner.

Right behind him came Ned Blasche, full speed and crashing into his opponent in an attempt to put him off the puck. He hit Dutch hard and high, slamming him into the boards as he intended. Dutch bounced off and they scrabbled for control of

the puck before Ned shoved it away from Dutch's stick. Jim Elliott picked it up and sped in the other direction, Dutch and the rest of his team in mad pursuit.

To be honest, "mad pursuit" would have been a misnomer: the speed of the game was slowing a good bit by now. After forty minutes of fairly hard skating, they were all tiring. Line changes came more frequently, and freezing, icing and offsides calls came more and more frequently as the players sought ways to catch a breather. There were also a lot more mistakes in passing and puck handling. So to say Dutch's team was in "mad pursuit" was perhaps an exaggeration.

Jim was trying to lead Ned with the puck, but the backward skating Jake Cormier intercepted it and the game changed direction yet again. A quick glance told Jake that Dutch was wide open just this side of the blue line, and he sent a perfect pass to his teammate. Dutch grabbed the puck easily and surged forward, unimpeded, toward Jonesie in the opposite net. Head down, eyes darting between the puck in front of him and the goalie up ahead, Dutch grinned to himself. Piece of cake.

He hadn't anticipated any opponents coming up behind him. Nor did he anticipate his own faulty footwork. Maybe it was the rush behind him. More likely it was the uneven patch of ice he hit.

Whatever it was, it sent him sprawling headlong toward the boards at full speed. The spill happened so fast Dutch didn't have time to put out his hands to break the hit. He flew headfirst into the wall, his head bouncing with a resounding crack against the unforgiving panels that enclosed the rink. The world went instantly dark and silent.

"You okay?" asked Jake Cormier, breezing to a stop in a shower of ice shavings and bending over his teammate's still form, but even as the words left his mouth he realized that Dutch was not okay. "Hey, Harry!" he yelled, dropping to his knees and yanking off his gloves. "Dutch?"

The other players had skated over and now shifted back and forth on their skates as they waited to see what was happening. Harry, evidently the closest thing to medical help nearby, skidded to a stop from the bench and dropped beside the man sprawled on the ice. "Dutch?" he called, placing a hand on Dutch's chest and leaning forward. There was no response, and Harry turned to someone behind him. "Have the manager call the paramedics," he commanded, turning back to Dutch and carefully steadying the man's head.

Dutch's eyelids fluttered and he blinked at the face peering at him from a few inches away. "Wha..." he murmured.

"Easy, buddy," said Harry, pressing Dutch back as he struggled to move. "Okay, what hit first?" He peered for any noticeable signs of injury aside from the obvious disorientation Dutch seemed to be exhibiting.

Dutch blinked a couple of times, still blank.

"His head," said Cormier.

"Did you lose consciousness?" asked Harry, looking up at Jake.

Dutch blinked again. "Uh...I..."

"Yeah, I think he did," answered Jake.

"He didn't move for a minute or so," added Elliott, leaning on his goalie stick and nodding in Dutch's direction.

"I'm okay," muttered Dutch, trying to sit up. The arena did a slow loop, and he closed his eyes and fell back.

"Maybe not so okay," said Harry.

"I think he hit his head harder than he thought," added Jake with a wry smile. "Let's see if we can get him up. We can take him into the locker room and see how he is then."

"Can you stand up?" Harry asked Dutch.

Dutch blinked yet again and narrowed his eyes, then nodded briefly. "Yeah, I think so."

Harry and Jake each took an arm and helped Dutch to his feet. Immediately, Dutch bent over, clutching at the boards as the ice dipped and heaved. "Whoa...."

Their grips tightened. "You wanna lie back down?"

Dutch hesitated, then he took a slow breath. "No," he replied. "Just give me a minute."

But it was clear that he would not be able to skate off the ice under his own power. Together, Harry and Jake assisted him to the other side of the ice, where they led him to the locker room and sat him on a bench.

Jake turned to the ice rink manager, who had come down from his office and followed them into the locker room. "Paramedics are on their way," said the manager. "He okay?" he added, pointing at Dutch.

By now, Dutch was again doubled over as wave after wave of dizziness hit him. "Oh, man," he mumbled. "This is not good."

"Let's get his skates off before he hurts himself," said Harry.

Dutch managed to achieve a slumped position, propping himself up against the bank of lockers. Jake shoved a trash can next to him, and Dutch grabbed it as much for support as for the possibility of his lunch finding its way back up from his digestive tract.

"Not to worry, Dutch," Harry told him as, with a little difficulty, he pulled off Dutch's left skate and went to work on removing the right. Dutch turned slightly green with the motion, closed his eyes, and moaned. "We've got paramedics on the way. They'll straighten you out."

Paramedics? Dutch groaned a little louder. "Crap," he muttered, "what day is it?"

"You tell me," suggested Harry, setting aside the skates and peering up at the other man.

"Crap," he said again. "I think it's Thursday." If it was Thursday, that meant it was "A" shift at 51s. And A shift meant...*oh man*. Dutch groaned again and clutched the wastebasket tighter.

Just then the swinging door opened. "Well, well, well! What do we have here?"

The only thing worse than having the world spinning crazily on its axis inside your head was to have John Gage jump on the Merry-Go-Round and hop up on the horse next to you.

Dutch slitted his eyes in Johnny's direction. "Who invited you to this party?"

"Looks like you've been crashing enough parties for all of us, Dutch. Let's have a look." Roy set the biophone on the bench and knelt beside Dutch. "You hit your head?"

Dutch glared at Roy this time, but Jake answered for him. "He slammed into the boards head first, full speed." He gestured to a spot on the back of Dutch's head. "Hit right about there, give or take an inch or three."

Roy gently palpated a developing lump near the base of Dutch's skull. "Looks like you've got a inch or so laceration there. You may need a couple of stitches." He rocked back on his heels and pulled his penlight out of his shirt pocket. "How long were you out?"

"He was out maybe a couple of minutes," answered Harry before Dutch could speak. "He's been conscious since then, but he's been dizzy and slightly disoriented."

Dutch looked up from where he was trying to read the blood pressure gauge--upside down. "And all this time I thought you got that diploma from a Cracker Jack box," he muttered to Harry.

"I'm thinking you got your certification from the same place." Roy arched an eyebrow in Dutch's direction. "Will you sit still and let us check you out?"

On the other side of the bench, Johnny had connected the antenna on the biophone, grinning widely at the other two. "Rampart, this is Squad 51." He struggled to keep the laughter out of his voice.

Dixie McCall's voice carried back over the air waves. "Go ahead, 51."

"Rampart, we have a 26-year-old male who was unconscious following a collision during a hockey game. He's dizzy and nauseous. Stand by for vitals."

"BP 130/80, pulse is 90. Pupils are unequal, but responsive," Roy told him.

Johnny repeated the information as he jotted it down.

Brackett's voice crackled back over the handset, and Johnny jotted down his instructions. "Rampart, be advised that the patient is Ted Masters."

Dutch closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Hey, Roy," he mumbled, "got anything to stop this place from spinning?"

"Yeah, we'll give you something in a minute," Roy assured him. He swabbed a spot on Dutch's forearm and inserted the IV port.

The door to the locker room opened and two ambulance attendants entered with a white-sheeted gurney. In a few minutes, Dutch had been lifted and strapped in. Johnny helped the attendants secure Dutch for transport. "Hey, Masters, nice pants. Maybe they'll impress that new nurse. What was her name?"

"You wish you could look this good, Gage," mumbled Dutch. The phenergan Roy had injected into the IV port was beginning to make him sleepy. Johnny shook his shoulder. "None of that, Dutchie. You gotta stay awake for me, okay?"

Dutch swallowed and blinked widely. "Just tryin' to avoid lookin' at your ugly puss."

"Uh huh. So you want to know the name of the nurse I'm dating this weekend or not?" asked Johnny conversationally.

"You're dating? You don't even know her name."

"Yeah, well, neither do you, Casanova, but I'm gonna be the one who's awake when we meet her."

"Ah, but this was all a part of my master plan. She'll have mercy on an injured man." His voice was fading out.

"Master plan," Johnny sniggered. "It's a *Masters* plan--doomed to fail."

The ride to the hospital took far too long for Dutch's taste; by the time they arrived the clamminess and sweat he was experiencing had nothing to do with his exertions on the ice, and he was turning a rather nasty shade of green. Clearly the phenergan was not having the effect it should.

"Room 2," called Dixie McCall as the orderlies wheeled the gurney through the ER doors.

Dutch closed his eyes and swallowed hard against the dizziness and nausea, and knew good and well that he was not likely to be going home that night. His stomach lurched as they shifted him from the gurney onto the exam table.

Johnny hung the IV bag onto a nearby pole. "BP's holding steady," he reported, "pulse and respirations both strong." He glanced down at Dutch. "Patient is extremely dizzy and cranky," he added with a grin.

"Patient is too damn miserable to argue," muttered Dutch without opening his eyes.

Dixie patted his shoulder. "Not to worry, Dutch. We'll get you taken care of. You just ignore him." She turned a mildly baleful glare on Johnny, who merely grinned back.

Johnny rested his hands on the edge of the exam table and stared down at Dutch as if daring him to open his eyes and glare. He opened his mouth, hesitated with the wisecrack on his lips, then made a wry face. "I'll check back later," he said instead. "Take it easy."

Dutch made no reply; he merely swallowed hard, his fingers twitching convulsively against the blanket covering him.

Johnny cocked an eyebrow and looked at Dixie, who nodded toward the door.

"We'll take good care of him," she assured him. Turning to her patient as Johnny departed, she smoothed the hair gently off his forehead. "It'll be okay, fella," she told Dutch. "The phenergan kicking in yet?"

A faint line appeared between Dutch's eyebrows. "A little," he answered. His hand came up and dropped onto his face. "Not enough."

The door opened and Joe Early entered. "Hey, Dutch," he called as he approached the exam table.

"Doc." Dutch wiggled his fingers weakly.

Early listened as Dixie reported on the injured man's vital statistics, then bent over to examine him. "This might be a little uncomfortable," he said as he opened Dutch's eyes and flashed his penlight into them, ignoring Dutch's pained "Ahh." "Let's get a full skull series," he said over his shoulder to Dixie.

"Already ordered," she told him.

"Did you black out when you hit the boards?" Early asked Dutch.

"Uh...I don't know," replied Dutch. "Don't 'member."

Early looked up at Dixie, who nodded. "The guys at the rink said he was out for a couple of minutes."

Early studied Dutch a moment. "Stay with us a little longer, Dutch," he said, "and we'll see about making you more comfortable. Try not to fall asleep."

Johnny opened the door to the treatment room a while later and peeked inside. Dutch was still lying on the table, now on his side, eyes squeezed shut. Turning to leave quietly, Gage was startled when his friend spoke up.

"You can come in; I'm awake." Dutch's words were slightly slurred.

Johnny grinned. "Must have you on the good stuff."

Dutch laughed weakly. "Ow...don't do that, Gage. My head still hurts."

"Seriously, man," Johnny responded. "You doin' okay?"

Dutch nodded, then winced. "Yeah, I'm okay," he answered, his words belied by the hand he placed over his eyes. "Still waitin' for the meds to kick in." There was a pause. "Got a mother of a headache."

"They gonna keep you?"

"Yeah, overnight at least." He exhaled softly.

"How come you still have your hockey clothes on?" Johnny's voice sounded puzzled.

"Hockey clothes?" Dutch opened his eyes and peered blearily at his friend.

Johnny raised one eyebrow quizzically and gestured. "You hit your head playing hockey." His tone clearly said Dutch should know this.

"Don't remember," sighed Dutch.

Johnny nodded in understanding. "It'll come back eventually." His mouth twisted. "Hope they don't have to cut off your shorts--they do so much for you."

"Not funny, Gage, not funny."

"Listen, I gotta get back to work. You take it easy," Johnny said. "I'll catch ya later."

"Mm hm," murmured Dutch absently.

With a grin, Gage turned and swung back out of the exam room and into the hall. He spotted Roy talking to Dixie at the nurse's station and headed over. Before he could join in the conversation, the handy talkie beeped. "Squad 51, what's your status?"

"Squad 51, available," Roy answered.

"Squad 51, possible heart attack. Vista Del Rio Residential Care Center. 21429 Beverly, cross street Archer. Time out 20:39."

"Squad 51, 10-4." Roy beckoned to Johnny and the two, waving to Dixie, headed back out.

They returned to the station an hour later discouraged at the loss of the nursing home patient, who had been unresponsive when they had arrived and had not responded, either on scene or at the hospital.

"Bad run?" asked Cap quietly as Gage wandered into the kitchen in search of distraction. Johnny's normally long, fast stride always slowed when a rescue had gone badly.

Johnny blinked in momentary confusion, his thoughts still far from the squad room. "Huh? Dutch? He's gonna be fine."

"Dutch Masters?" Cap said. "He was at the nursing home?"

Johnny blinked in confusion and Roy came to his rescue as he followed him into the squad room. "Dutch was the hockey player down at the ice rink--our original call," he explained. "He's got a concussion but he'll be fine." He shook his head. "The nursing home patient didn't make it."

"Ah..." Cap's expression cleared. "Sorry." He turned to Johnny. "Well, I'm glad ice hockey isn't something you're into, Gage," he said.

"Yeah," agreed Chet, closing the door of the refrigerator where he had been rummaging. "John Gage and ice just wouldn't mix."

"Ha ha, Chet. For your information, I can't skate, and I'm not ashamed to admit it."

"Small favors," muttered Cap with a smile as he headed back to his office.

"But if I wanted to," Johnny grumbled, "I could learn."

"Do us a favor, Gage," Chet drawled. "Stay off skates."

Johnny scowled. "I'd be a great skater. Wouldn't I, Roy? I mean, I was a good athlete in school." He looked up to his partner for confirmation, just in time to see Roy slink back out of the door. "Thanks for the vote of confidence!" he called after him.

"I'll get Dutch to teach me and show that Kelly," he thought mulishly as he opened the refrigerator. Before he could voice his thoughts, though, the tones sounded and he and Roy were once again called out.

The next afternoon, Johnny entered Rampart whistling. Dutch was being released today, but because of the relative severity of his concussion, Brackett had suggested he have someone with him for the next forty-eight hours. Since this coincided with Johnny's off-shift time, Gage had volunteered to take his friend in. He made his way up to Dutch's room and through open the door.

“Okay, Dutchie boy,” Johnny cried out, “I’m here to spring you.”

Dutch was sitting on the edge of the bed, buttoning a shirt cuff. Jake Cormier had dropped off his clothes and skates the night before, though Dutch had been out like a light at the time. “Bout time,” he grumbled. He hopped off the bed, and was immediately assaulted by a wave of dizziness. He clutched the edge of the mattress.

“Easy there,” Johnny said as he reached out and steadied his friend. “You can see why Brackett is insisting you stay with me.”

“Lucky me.” Dutch straightened up. “I’m okay now.”

“Uh huh.” Johnny’s frown changed to a grin as a nurse entered with the wheelchair. “Here’s your ride now. You know, Dutch, I’m looking forward to your stay. It’ll be fun...like summer camp...or a sleepover.”

Dutch snorted. “Don’t even think about short-sheeting my bed. Or putting whipped cream on any body part.” He grinned at the pretty young nurse as she helped him into the wheelchair. “I would make an exception to that rule for you, love.”

She laughed good-naturedly. “Well, it’s a nice offer, but my husband prefers it if I enjoy my dessert at home.”

Gage laughed. “Smooth, Dutch...very smooth.”

“Her husband’s a nice guy--met him last night.” Dutch winked at the nurse, who laughed. “Okay...let’s get out of here.”

They stopped first at Dutch’s so that he could pack some clothes, razor, toothbrush, and anything else he thought he might need for the couple of days he would be at Johnny’s. He dropped the bag holding his hockey uniform onto the floor in his bedroom, his skates following, and slowly began to gather belongings. His head pounded furiously, making it hard to concentrate, and he kept stopping in the middle of a room and looking around in puzzlement, as if he had forgotten why he was there. Johnny found it amusing at first, but humor soon gave way to annoyance, and he finally stepped in and directed Dutch in finding what he needed. At last Dutch’s overnight bag was full--though whether it was full of useful things was questionable.

It was obvious by the time they arrived at Johnny’s apartment that, in spite of his small attempts at humor as they had left the hospital, Dutch was still suffering the aftereffects of the concussion. His pale face spoke of the residual headache, but it was the difficulty he had negotiating the stairs that was the most telling. Johnny had Dutch precede him so that he could make sure his friend made it up without

mishap, and almost immediately with the first step he had to grab Dutch's arm to steady him as he lifted his foot.

He steered Dutch into his apartment and gently pushed him to the sofa, setting down the bag he carried. "Here," he said, "maybe you oughta just lie down a while."

Dutch's response was to nod weakly as he fell against the cushions. Johnny disappeared into the other room and returned with a pillow, which he placed against one arm of the sofa. Dutch lay back on it obediently and shut his eyes, willing the room to stop its whirling motion. He heard movement around him as Johnny lifted Dutch's bag and took it into the other room before moving into the kitchen. Gradually, the sounds faded and Dutch drifted to sleep.

He awoke to the distant sound of Johnny's voice. He blinked sleepily and waited for full consciousness to return while he tried to sort out where he was and what day it was.

"Yeah," he heard from the other room, "but don't you have to--?" There was a short pause, "I know, but--" Another pause. "Well, why would anyone want to--?"

Dutch listened in sleepy amusement to one side of a conversation in which Johnny never once uttered a complete sentence. It sounded, from the noises emanating from the kitchen, as if Gage were seeking assistance with a recipe of some sort, and Dutch thought vaguely that he was in no way interested in being the subject of another of Johnny's culinary experiments. He was, however, too lethargic to put forth any objections. Instead of getting up and interrupting his friend's apparent meal preparations, he lay where he was and allowed his eyes to wander the room.

Johnny was fairly economical when it came to decorating, Dutch decided. Cheap, even, was a good word. There was a small portable black and white television sitting atop an inexpensive wheeled cart on the adjacent wall, a set of rabbit ears crookedly tuning the set to the evening news. The bottom shelf of a tall bookcase to its right was filled with paramedic textbooks and a couple of loose-leaf binders labeled "notes". The rest of the shelves held only dusty magazines which, from this distance, Dutch guessed were of the sort that interested men more than women. There was a reclining chair in the far corner; it faced the television comfortably. A few framed photos sat on the bookcase and on the lamp tables on either side of the sofa Dutch was lying on. One of the tables held a single tall lamp, the other a telephone extension. Several larger frames on the walls held some good photos of landscapes--mountain peaks, lakes, and such. Dutch knew they were Johnny's own work, and he admired them lazily from where he lay.

Late afternoon winter sunlight slanted through glass patio doors that led to a narrow balcony on his left. Looking through the uncurtained doors, Dutch

watched dark clouds amassing in the distance, soon to obscure the setting sun, and he could see a stiff breeze whipping tree limbs on the edge of the park near Johnny's apartment complex. Looked like a winter storm was on the way. With a rush, he remembered that it was November and hockey season, and he started with the memory of his crash into the boards. Everything fell into place and he realized why he was on Johnny's sofa and not his own.

"Well, if Sleeping Beauty hasn't finally awakened."

Dutch turned and lifted an eyebrow. "Don't even think of pretending to be Prince Charming," he retorted, sitting up slowly and swinging his feet to the floor.

Johnny grinned. "Have a good nap?"

Dutch rubbed a hand over his face and rolled his neck. "I must've," he yawned. "Looks like I've been out for a while."

Johnny shrugged. "Your body's way of working toward recovery," he said. "Not to worry," he added as Dutch frowned, "I kept a pretty close eye on you. That's why you're here and not home, if you recall."

"Thanks," said Dutch simply.

"Pizza's on the way. Hope you like anchovies."

Dutch made a face. "You got a beer, I'll be happy," he muttered.

"One 7-UP, coming up." Johnny grinned. "No alcohol until your concussion is healed." He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a can of soda and a bottle of beer. He handed the can to Dutch and then dropped onto the other end of the sofa and lifted his bottle in a salute before taking a swig. "How's the head?"

Dutch sipped his own drink and narrowed his eyes. "Sore," he admitted. "Feels like I've got a couple of prize fighters going at it in there."

"Brackett gave you some high dose analgesics, if you want some."

Dutch massaged his forehead with his free hand. "I think I'll wait a bit," he replied. He glanced at Johnny. "Hate that groggy feeling they give me. Kinda groggy enough, if you know what I mean."

Johnny nodded sagely. He knew all about that groggy feeling. "Well, if you change your mind," he offered. "I don't think there's anything in them that'll knock you out."

Dutch set his can on the table and pushed himself slowly to his feet. "Be right back," he muttered, shuffling toward the bathroom.

In the bathroom, Dutch splashed cold water on his face and tried to avoid sudden movements. He lifted his eyes and gazed at his reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror. Try as he might, he couldn't ignore the pale grey eyes with their slightly glazed look, the dark circles underneath underscoring the weariness of post-concussion. He needed a shave, and come to think of it, he could use a shower, too. He had gone to the hospital still wearing his hockey clothes, and he couldn't remember even getting a sponge bath. A shower might help him feel better, he decided. Opening the bathroom door, he called down the hall. "Hey, Gage, mind if I shower?"

"Be my guest," came the reply. "Let me find you a towel."

Dutch waited, leaning on the sink as sudden lightheadedness hit.

Johnny appeared in the doorway, towel and Dutch's carryall in hand. He frowned at the other man. "You okay?"

"Just a little lightheaded." Dutch took his things from Johnny. "Thanks."

"Be careful in the shower," warned Johnny. "Holler if you start getting dizzy."

"Yes, Mom." Dutch closed the door firmly.

Ten minutes later he felt much better--refreshed and clearheaded, if still scruffy and unshaven. He wore a clean long-sleeved t-shirt and a pair of loose-fitting jeans.

"Better?" asked Johnny as Dutch lowered himself carefully to the sofa and lifted the soda he had left on the table.

"Cleaner, anyhow. Thanks." He tilted the can in Johnny's direction and took a sip.

"You betcha." The doorbell rang and Johnny set his beer down. "Pizza's here," he said, jumping up and heading for the door.

Pizza? Dutch thought Johnny had been kidding about pizza being on the way. He sure hoped he'd been kidding about the anchovies. His stomach shifted uncomfortably at the thought and he put his 7-UP on the table next to him.

Johnny reappeared with a large pizza box in hand, and he set it onto some newspapers scattered on the coffee table. Dutch turned his head slightly to the side and watched warily from the corners of his eyes as Johnny lifted the lid and

studied the contents. Dutch took an experimental sniff and leaned forward for a closer look. Sausage.

Johnny watched him in puzzlement. "What?"

"Checking for anchovies."

"Get real, Masters." Johnny helped himself to a piece and gestured that Dutch should do the same.

"Let me get my wallet," said Dutch, looking around in confusion as he realized he had no idea where his wallet was.

"Eat," ordered Johnny around a mouthful of crust, sauce, and cheese. "You can get the next one."

Dutch hesitated only a fraction of a second, then selected a piece from one edge. "Good deal."

They ate in companionable silence until the news ended, then squabbled amicably about what to watch next. Dutch won the argument as Gage took pity on him and grumpily turned on a hockey game. "Woulda thought you'd have had enough hockey for a few days," he muttered as he returned to the sofa and the pizza.

"We could watch The Brady Bunch if you really want to," suggested Dutch, draining the last of his soda and shaking his head at Johnny's offer of a refill.

"There's gotta be a movie on or something," Johnny mumbled. He picked up the empty pizza box and took it into the kitchen, refusing Dutch's offer of help. "You're supposed to take it easy, remember?" He returned in less than a minute with a fresh beer for himself to find that Dutch had stretched out the full length of the sofa, reclining his head on one arm. Johnny made a face and settled into the recliner. "Who's playing?"

"Kings and Canucks," answered Dutch around a yawn.

"You know, there's one thing I don't understand about hockey," Johnny said.

Dutch cocked one eyebrow. "Only one?"

"Shut up," retorted Johnny. "I was wondering how come hockey players don't wear helmets. I mean, football players wear them, baseball players wear them. How come hockey players don't?"

Dutch shrugged. "Some of 'em do," he replied. "I guess there isn't really any reason. It's not like you're getting hit in the head.--"

Johnny snorted and spit beer down his shirt front.

"Okay, okay," laughed Dutch, watching Johnny swipe at his wet front. "Hardly *ever* getting hit in the head. It was a freak accident," he added, as if to explain his own injury. "Real hockey players don't trip like I did."

"You got that right," grinned Johnny. He peered at the television. "How can you see the puck?"

"You need a bigger set," Dutch told him. "And how about color?"

"Any other complaints?"

"Nope. Just that."

Johnny merely shook his head and leaned back to watch the game. Halfway through the second period, he realized that he was talking to himself--Dutch had fallen asleep again. With a wry grin he got up and covered the sleeping man with the blanket lying across the back of the sofa, and turned off the lamp on the end table near Dutch's head. He turned down the sound on the television set a little and returned to his chair to watch the rest of the game. It was a hard game to watch on television--it was nearly impossible to see the puck, it moved so fast--but he could appreciate Dutch's interest in the sport. The fighting was kind of stupid, but the speed and finesse of the rest of the game more than made up for that.

He woke Dutch as he turned off the television and lights, and the other grouchy reported name, date, and rank. "Anything else you wanna know, Mom?" he demanded.

"Yes. You wanna put on your pajamas, or you gonna sleep in those jeans?"

"Might as well get comfortable," muttered the other, rising with a grimace and looking around.

"Your bag's in the bedroom," Johnny reminded him. "You put it in there after your shower."

Dutch found his bag and rummaged in it for his toothbrush and the shorts and t-shirt he generally slept in. Five minutes later he was parked back on the sofa, wide awake now and irritable.

“Here.” Johnny handed him a paramedic manual. “Guaranteed to put you back to sleep.”

Dutch made as face as Johnny disappeared into the bathroom, but by the time he emerged, Dutch had actually opened the tome and was perusing the section on treatment of concussions.

“I’d tell you to sleep well, but you know I’ll be waking you up a lot,” Johnny told him with a grin.

“Says here I should be left alone and allowed to sleep as much as I want,” Dutch said without looking up. He yawned.

“Don’t stay up all night,” laughed Johnny.

“Yes, Mom,” answered Dutch absently.

Johnny got up several times during the night to check on Dutch, and the first time found his friend asleep with the manual still open on his lap. With a smile he woke him and insisted that Dutch prove orientation before letting him settle back down. Dutch grumbled about having his sleep interrupted, but barely remembered the encounters in spite of his protests, and finally fell into a deep and dreamless sleep near dawn.

When Johnny rose mid-morning, he found Dutch tangled in his blanket and his head buried under the pillow Johnny had provided, but snoring softly in genuine slumber. Grinning, he went into the kitchen and set a pot of coffee to brew while he made his bed and brushed his teeth. He went back to the kitchen, poured himself a bowl of cereal, and started in on it as he waited for his friend to wake up.

“Where are the pancakes?” he heard from the other room as he lifted his first spoonful.

“Down the road at the IHOP,” he called back.

“Can I at least have coffee?” Dutch’s tousled head appeared in the kitchen doorway as he smothered a yawn.

“Help yourself.” Johnny gestured with his spoon toward a mug that sat on the counter, and shoveled in another mouthful of cereal. “How’d you sleep?” he asked as Dutch poured himself a cup of coffee and dropped into a chair at the table.

Dutch glared at him sleepily. “I seem to recall you interfering with my sleep a time or two.”

Johnny smirked. "It's a good sign that you remember that, you know. And you might remember that, if I was disturbing your slumber, I had to get up first to do it. Want some cereal?"

"Maybe some toast?" Dutch yawned again and ran a hand over his face, shoving his glasses onto his forehead to massage his eyes.

Johnny rose with his now empty bowl and set it in the sink. He opened the fridge and pulled from it a loaf of bread, took out two slices and set them in the toaster. Returning the bread to the fridge, he brought out a tub of margarine and set it on the counter.

"I can do that," Dutch offered.

Smiling, Johnny handed him the margarine and a knife, and when the toast was done, a plate with the toast. He watched bemusedly as the other man spread a miniscule amount of margarine onto the bread. "That's it?"

Dutch pushed the tub away and bit into the toast. "I'm on a diet," he answered, carefully avoiding spewing crumbs.

Johnny made an "as if" face but said nothing. "How's your head this morning?" He refilled his own coffee cup and sat back down.

"Still pounding," replied Dutch, "but a little better than it was. Thanks," he added.

"Glad I can help."

Johnny sounded sincere, and Dutch looked up from his toast. "Don't let me keep you from whatever you had planned today," he said. "I'll be okay on my own."

Johnny grinned and shook his head. "Oh no, you're not getting off that easy, Masters. Brackett wants someone to keep an eye on you, and I intend to follow doctor's orders. For a change," he added. "You got at least one more day with me."

"Can I at least finish my breakfast?" Dutch pushed his empty plate across the table and shoved the last of his toast into his mouth. He dropped his head onto one hand and toyed with his coffee cup with the other as he swallowed the final bite. "You got any ideas about getting rid of this headache before we start your day?" he asked.

Johnny frowned but only for a moment. He smiled ruefully. "One or two," he replied. "I've, uh, got some experience with concussions." He rose and left the room, returning shortly with a small white package he was crushing between his

hands. "Here." He settled it gently against the back of Dutch's head, where it nestled on the lump that had resulted from his contact with the boards. "Start it there. You can move it to your forehead in a bit if you need to. Trust me," he added, forestalling a comment Dutch had been about to make.

"I was going to say thanks," said Dutch as he held the ice pack against his head and closed his eyes.

"Listen, I'm gonna shower and get dressed. Feel free to turn on the cartoons."

Dutch snorted but made no move to leave his chair, and when Johnny emerged from his room twenty minutes later, showered, shaved, and dressed, he found his friend pressing the ice pack to his forehead as suggested. Johnny shook his head and rummaged in a cabinet for a glass, which he filled with water and set in front of Dutch, alongside two white tablets he'd removed from a bottle on the counter. "Step two: take two of these and you won't have to call the doctor in the morning."

Dutch stared at the analgesics a long moment, then with a sigh tossed them back with the water Gage had provided. Johnny clapped him lightly on the shoulder and removed the ice pack from his friend's hand. "Step three: your turn in the shower. When you're dressed, we'll get you some fresh air. You'll be surprised at how it'll clear your head."

Half an hour later, the two were strolling across the street to the park. The storm of the night before had blown itself out, leaving behind a brisk and steady breeze blowing across the open expanse, but a clear blue sky kept it from being too cold. Still, Dutch hunched into his jacket, and Johnny zipped his sweater closed. He eyed his friend. "Feelin' better?"

Dutch nodded. "Yeah, thanks." Truth be told, his head still ached, but he didn't want Johnny hovering any more than necessary.

"Thinkin' twice about playing any more hockey?"

Dutch snorted. "Three and four times," he replied, shaking his head slightly. "Never thought I'd get hurt playing with all those old fogeys. Nobody skates fast."

It was Johnny's turn to laugh. "Old fogeys? Dutch, the oldest guy on your team is thirty-two!"

"And not out to prove anything," argued Dutch. "It's the twenty-year-olds we play against who'll get you, every time."

"You're so old yourself at twenty-six."

Dutch shook his head again. "My legs ain't what they used to be, Gage, my boy."

"Nobody's legs are what they used to be." Johnny stopped himself, frowning at his words.

"Say what?" Dutch laughed outright.

"You know what I mean!"

"I don't think even you know what you mean," Dutch assured him. "Anyhow," he went on before Johnny could respond, "I'm off the ice for a couple weeks at least. Got plenty of time to figure out how I'll go back."

"How you'll go back?"

Dutch grimaced. "I'm thinking I should put on a helmet."

Johnny stopped in his tracks and stared as Dutch kept walking. Realizing Johnny was no longer at his side, Dutch stopped and turned. "You're right," Johnny said, grinning at last. "You do play with a bunch of old fogeys. And you're the fogey-est."

When Dutch had stopped laughing at Gage's inanity he said, "If I didn't agree with you, I'd make sure you were out there on skates the next time I hit the ice, Gage."

They came to a low stone wall overlooking a large multi-purpose field. Dutch sat down and squinted into the morning glare from the not-too-distant ocean. On the field below, a group of kids and adults were gathering for what looked like a soccer game. As Johnny dropped beside Dutch, a young boy of about six dashed past, racing for the field, his mother pushing a stroller after him and calling to him to slow down.

"See there?" Dutch nodded in the direction of the boy. "I used to be able to run that fast."

Johnny snorted. "You're not for real." He stood up. "Let's keep walking. You haven't gotten enough fresh air yet."

They followed the path around the park, stopping for a few minutes to watch the soccer game, moving on when Dutch noticed that several of the women were no longer watching their children on the field but were, instead, glancing surreptitiously at an oblivious Johnny with much girlish giggling. Tugging Johnny's arm, he steered them away from the field and toward a gap in the trees where an empty bench afforded abundant sunshine and a partial view of the beach some blocks away.

“Check out the surf action,” murmured Johnny.

Dutch nodded slightly, then laughed. “Gonna be a few rescue calls out to the beach today.”

Johnny laughed, too. “Amateur Day at Huntington.” He glanced sideways at the other. “Please tell me you weren’t a ‘surfer dude’ growing up.”

Dutch cocked one eyebrow. “And would that bother you?” He laughed again at Gage’s expression. “Gage, surfing is one sport I have no interest in.”

“A sport you’ve never tried? Will wonders never cease?”

“Not all California boys surf, Gage,” replied Dutch drily.

Johnny clapped him on the shoulder. “You’ve destroyed all my illusions, Dutch old man.”

“Happy to oblige.” Dutch yawned and grimaced slightly, closing his eyes and tilting his head back to catch the sun’s full rays on his face.

Johnny watched his friend’s face a moment, then rose. “Come on. Time to head back and think about lunch.”

“We just had breakfast, Gage.” Dutch followed him to his feet.

“Exactly. We need to start planning lunch before we’re too hungry. You know what happens then.”

“What?” Dutch asked, turning to follow his friend along the path.

“You wind up eating dry toast and drinking cold coffee and cursing your friend because he kept arguing with you about planning lunch.” He looked at his watch and added, “Besides, the guys’ll be at my place in an hour.”

This brought Dutch back to the present. “Guys?”

“Uh...guess I forgot to tell you the guys are coming over to play poker.” Johnny did not seem in the least repentant.

“Poker? In the middle of the day? What guys?” This last almost as an afterthought.

Johnny shrugged. “Give me a break, I had to arrange some way to keep you occupied today, and I didn’t have a lot of time to plan.”

Dutch shook his head. "Whoever heard of a dry poker game?"

"Who said anything about dry?" demanded Johnny.

"You never cease to amaze me, Gage." His natural cheerfulness appeared to be returning. Johnny was very careful to avoid mentioning it.

They made their way back to Johnny's apartment, and while Johnny hunted playing cards, poker chips, ash trays, and snack food, Dutch parked himself back on the sofa and dozed. The ringing doorbell startled him awake when the other men began to arrive, but he remained where he was, greeting them lazily from his supine position as they entered the living room.

"Nice," said Chet Kelly, nodding approvingly at Dutch's apparent comfort. "How'd you manage to steal the couch?"

"He didn't steal it, Chet," explained Johnny without irritation. "I gave it to him."

"Hope you're not gonna keep it," said Roy DeSoto as he took a seat in Johnny's recliner.

"Oh, thanks a lot, Roy." Johnny favored his partner with a glare that only earned a wide grin in reply.

Jeff Grady wandered in from the kitchen, a beer in one hand and a handful of peanuts in the other. "You gonna get into the game, Dutchie, or continue with your imitation of roadkill?"

"Being roadkill has its benefits," Dutch retorted. "Having minions catering to you, for one." He accepted the can of soda Johnny handed him and slowly righted himself.

"We gonna play poker, or sit here picking on my furniture?" demanded Johnny.

"We could pick on you instead," offered Chet.

"Here." Jeff tossed Dutch a set of keys. "Jake dropped 'em off for ya, and I drove it over. It's parked in the lot."

"Hey, thanks." Dutch was surprised, and seemed genuinely pleased.

"Don't you have a new deck?" This from Roy, who had lifted Johnny's cards from the table in his dining alcove and was studying them suspiciously.

"Who buys new cards every time they play poker?" asked Johnny, setting the bowl of peanuts in the center of the table and stepping back as if to study the effect.

"Uh, Johnny?" Jeff Grady looked at him with amusement. "You're short a chair."

"Oh, yeah." Johnny snapped his fingers and disappeared into the bedroom, returning almost immediately with a folding chair, which he deposited at the table. He went back into the kitchen and brought out a bowl of potato chips, placing it next to the peanuts, and went back again, this time setting out a plate of the sandwiches that Roy had brought. He looked at the others. "Well, are we gonna play poker or what?"

The men jostled their way into chairs, grabbing sandwiches and arranging drinks for maximum comfort. There was minimal concern directed at Dutch, a couple of questions about his head and recovery process, and then they got down to poker. Conversation ranged from movies to television to ribald jokes and eventually to sports--as usual.

Grady rattled his chips between his square fingers as he contemplated his bet. "So, Masters, did you see the game last night?"

Dutch motioned for a couple of cards. "Yeah, Gage and I caught part of it."

Johnny fanned his cards in his hands and noisily cleared his throat.

"Regan is a bum," Grady said. "They'll be lucky to finish .500 this year."

"Oh, I don't know," Dutch put in. "They played pretty well last night. DeJordy had a good start."

"Were you watching the same game I was, Masters?" Grady raised his eyebrows. "I think he forgot what season it was. He played like he still played for the Hawks."

"Maki's tough on everybody," shrugged Dutch. He tossed down a couple of cards and took the two to replace them.

"I'll raise you a dollar," Grady said to Johnny who had upped the ante. "What was the final score, anyhow? We got called out about five minutes before the end of the game."

Johnny sniggered, "Don't ask Dutch--he got called out about five minutes into the game." Johnny tipped his head back and gave a loud snore.

"Give the guy a break, Gage, he was watching the game with you. Heck, I'm feeling sleepy sitting here." Chet let his head fall forward onto the table.

After the laughter died down, Roy asked, "Is it my turn? In that case, I'll fold. I just could never get into hockey," he went on. "I'm more a baseball man myself."

"You don't seem to be all that into poker, either," groused Dutch. He tossed in a chip and sat back, sipping his 7-UP.

Johnny studied his cards, looked at the pile of chips, made a face, and finally put in his own chips. "I'll see you and raise you a quarter. Gimme one," he said to Jeff, tossing down one card and picking up its replacement.

Out of the game for the moment, Roy rose and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with the potato chip bag and emptying it into the bowl on the table.

"So, Dutchie boy," said Jeff, meeting Johnny's bet and raising it, "when are you cleared to go back to work? Chambers was cursing you all shift. Your replacement was a probie who didn't know a nozzle from a noodle."

"Haven't been cleared yet," replied Dutch with a wry grin, "but it's good to know I'm missed."

Chet shifted some cards from the front of his hand to the back and studied them seriously. He tossed two cards on the table, "Gimme two." He picked up the cards that Jeff gave him, and added them to his hand. He hid a smile behind a stroke of his moustache, and began to hum very softly.

Roy drew back and threw an incredulous glance at Chet. "Are you humming / *Think I Love You?*"

Beer spewed in Roy's direction from his left, and he jerked back. "Hey!"

Jeff Grady was bent double over his lap as he choked and coughed. Dutch, too, had dropped his head into his lap and was laughing so hard that for a moment he couldn't breathe. "Oh my God," he gasped. "What kind of song is that, Kelly?"

"Just who exactly do you think you love, Chet?" asked Johnny.

"I think," wheezed Jeff, as he dropped his cards, "it means he loves that hand he's got. And I fold." He stood up and struggled to control his laughter, wiping his eyes and turning away.

"What?" complained Chet as the rest of the hands fell to the table. Johnny reached across the table and snatched the cards from Chet's hand.

"My daughter loves The Partridge Family, too, Chet," grinned Roy.

"This is 'what', Kelly." Johnny flipped the cards over one by one, "Jack, Jack, Jack, five and eight. You may have a 'poker face' but you need to work on your 'poker hum'. You always hum when you've got a good hand. I think it's time for a break," he added. Johnny gathered up the cards to stack them as the others agreed to the break in the action. It was already almost five o'clock. "Ouch," he said, sticking his finger in his mouth and sucking at the blood. "Whoever heard of getting a paper cut from a playing card?"

Dutch, over his laughing fit, rose and stretched, making a face as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

Roy put out a steadying hand. "You okay?"

Dutch nodded. "Yeah, just got up too fast."

"Uh huh," Roy nodded.

Dutch made a face and looked from Roy to Johnny. "Are you two related?"

"Hey, Grady, how much longer you gonna be?" Outside the bathroom, Chet danced impatiently.

Ignoring the others, Dutch headed out onto the balcony and breathed in the chilly air. He hadn't lied to Roy--he really had risen too fast from his seat. But the noise and sandwiches and stuffy air of the apartment was starting to bring back his headache. A break in the game was very welcome.

Jeff emerged from the bathroom, waving toward it grandly. "All yours," he told Chet as the other scuttled in and slammed the door behind him. He wandered back to the table and tossed a potato chip in his mouth. "Hey, we're out of sandwiches," he announced.

Dutch turned from the open patio door. "Jeff, where do you put it all?"

"Hollow legs, Dutchie," grinned the other. "Anybody for pizza?"

"No anchovies!" called Dutch as he turned back to the view.

"You know," said Roy, "people always say 'no anchovies'. I've never yet met anyone who's ever actually had anchovies on their pizza."

"Who wants fish with mozzarella and tomato sauce?" Jeff shuddered and made a face.

“What do you guys want on your pizza?” Johnny stood in the kitchen doorway, the phone receiver in his hand as he prepared to dial.

“Pepperoni,” said Chet, coming out of the bathroom.

“Mushrooms,” added Roy, taking Chet’s place.

“Onions,” Jeff said.

“Dutch?” called Johnny.

“Anything but anchovies!”

“I don’t think Dutch wants anchovies,” grinned Roy.

“We oughta have a few put on, anyhow,” said Jeff.

“I heard that!” Dutch came back inside and closed the door behind him. “You’ll find ‘em in your lap, and not from the top of the pizza.”

Jeff just grinned.

Dutch wandered into the kitchen and helped himself to the analgesics still sitting on the counter. Johnny, watching him as he spoke to the pizza parlor, raised an eyebrow in question. Dutch shrugged and downed the tablets with a glass of water.

Leaving the kitchen, he disappeared into the bathroom with a small carrying case and came out a few minutes later wearing his glasses, contact lenses soaking safely in their solution. Roy and Chet had migrated to Johnny’s minute balcony and Jeff was admiring the prints on Johnny’s wall. “You take these yourself?” he asked Johnny as Dutch entered the room.

“Yeah.” Johnny moved to stand before the shot of a sunset over the tips of snow-capped mountains.

“Nice,” nodded Jeff approvingly. “You do good work.”

Johnny flushed and grinned. “Thanks. It’s just a hobby.”

Dutch smiled to himself from the other end of the room. It wasn’t often Johnny was the recipient of praise instead of needling.

“How soon will the pizza be here, Gage?” came from the open patio door.

“About an hour, Chet,” replied Johnny over his shoulder.

"Pizza's on me," Dutch told Johnny, putting up a hand when Johnny opened his mouth to protest. "I owe you."

"All right," the other shrugged. "If you insist."

"I insist," grinned Dutch.

For a while the men stood around and breathed in the chilly evening air and admired Johnny's view and his framed prints, and then they decided to return to the poker game.

"Crap," said Dutch, tossing his cards onto the table with a sigh of disgust a few hands later.

"Aw, come on, Dutch. How'm I gonna win your money if you keep folding?" Chet dropped two cards on the table and took the replacements Roy dealt him.

"It's bad enough losing to Roy," retorted Dutch. "No way I'm gonna tolerate your sorry soul taking my hard-earned wages. Anybody need a refill?"

Chet and Jeff handed him their empty bottles and Dutch took them to the kitchen. When he came back, he was carrying a beer for each of them and what appeared to be a glass of water for himself. Roy gave him a puzzled look as he returned to his seat and Dutch shrugged without comment. Roy nodded in understanding.

"Goin' soft on us, Masters?" wondered Chet as he dealt the next hand.

"Hard keeping a clear head with all your jabbering," responded Dutch, picking up his cards and sorting them with a frown. "Figured water might drown out your voice." No one was fooled, least of all Chet, and three hands later their suspicions about Dutch's health were confirmed.

Johnny was sitting to Dutch's left, and the hand had been his deal. Everyone had anted, the bidding had gone around the table, and it was Dutch's turn to wager. He had generally been slow to make decisions all afternoon, and had endured a great deal of good-natured teasing about his slow wits, so none of the others paid much mind when he merely appeared to be trying to decide how to play. Gage had opened his mouth to hurry him up when he stopped with his mouth comically open, and stared at his friend. "I don't believe it," he muttered.

"What?" Roy didn't look up from his hand.

"He's asleep." Johnny's voice sounded his disbelief.

“Who?” Jeff looked up, and realizing instantly who Johnny meant, started to laugh softly. “Oh, my God.”

“Should I wake him up?” Johnny was staring at Dutch in fascination.

Roy was grinning. “I don’t think so,” he opined kindly. “I’m thinking his concussion is acting up.”

“Where’s your camera, Johnny?” asked Chet, not kindly. “You gotta get a picture of this.”

“Chet!” Johnny gave his coworker a pained look. “What do we do?” He turned to Roy. “It’s his bid.”

“Let’s see what he’s got,” suggested Chet. On Dutch’s right, he leaned to his left to see what the other man held in his hand.

On the other side, Johnny did the same. “Hm,” he said, “figures.” He tossed his cards onto the table.

“What’re you doing?” demanded Jeff.

Johnny turned his gaze to him. “He’s got a straight!”

“And he’s asleep, Einstein! We coulda taken him and he’d never know it!”

Johnny opened his mouth, blinked, and closed it. “Oh,” he said.

Roy dropped his cards onto the table and laughed. “You are not for real.” He rose, stepped around Chet, and gently removed Dutch’s cards from his hands and laid them on the table. Dutch awoke with a start and looked around. “Come on, Sleeping Beauty,” Roy said, taking Dutch by the arm, “I think it’s time for your nap.”

Dutch stared at the others for a few seconds, then started laughing. “I didn’t,” he said.

“Oh yeah, you did,” said Chet, “and with a winning hand.”

“Figures,” snorted Dutch. “I’m sorry, fellas.”

“Oh, I don’t mind in the least,” muttered Johnny. “I only had a pair.”

“Now that he’s awake,” suggested Jeff, “let’s keep playing.” He gathered the cards from the table and began to shuffle.

“Oh yeah, sure,” said Dutch, “now that you’ve scotched my straight.” He pushed his glasses up to his forehead and massaged his eyes.

Johnny grinned. “Yeah.”

Dutch yawned noisily and everyone laughed. “Guess I oughta take myself out for a bit,” he said. The others tried to protest, but he shook his head. “Hate to break up the game, fellas, but I can’t even see straight anymore. You go ahead without me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” demanded Jeff. “I’m only winning ‘cause you keep folding.”

Roy, however, looked at his watch. “I think it’s time to cash in our chips,” he said. “Some of us have to work tomorrow.”

Chet and Johnny both looked at their own watches. “Nine o’clock? When did it get to be nine o’clock?” asked Chet.

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” said Roy.

“Who said anything about having fun?” retorted Chet.

“Shut up, Chet,” interjected Johnny as he gathered cards. “You had a good time and you know it.”

Jeff Grady was sorting his few remaining chips. “I would’ve had a better time if I’d come out ahead,” he grumbled.

“What are you griping about?” said Dutch. “Not only am I tapped out, I fell asleep with a winning hand.”

They laughed again, then helped Johnny clear the table, gathered their winnings, and departed in good spirits. Johnny flopped into the recliner and studied Dutch, who had dropped onto the sofa. “How you doin’?” he asked.

“I’m doin’ okay,” Dutch smiled. “Good way to spend a day. Even if I came out on the losing end.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t bad,” agreed Johnny with a grin of his own. “But I was talking about your head. You’re more than welcome to spend another night right there.” He nodded at the sofa.

“If you’re sure you don’t mind,” replied Dutch, smothering a yawn. “I’m too tired to drive.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Besides,” he continued, his grin widening, “it’ll give me more opportunity to disturb your sleep.”

“You’re a real pal.”

They spent the remainder of the evening watching a movie, though neither saw the ending as they both fell asleep about halfway through. Dutch was less irritated about Johnny awakening him to go to bed, and found his headache fading gradually through the night. By the time Gage was dressed and ready to leave for the station in the morning, Dutch was feeling much more normal.

He gathered his things as Johnny prepared to depart and held out a hand. “Thanks for everything,” he told Johnny sincerely. “I really appreciate it.”

“Anytime.” Johnny’s eyes twinkled. “Next time, you can host.”

Dutch grinned. “I guess I owe you that.”

“Come on. I’m gonna be late if we don’t get outa here.” Together, they headed down the stairs, out to the parking lot, and to their respective cars. Johnny pulled away first, sketching a wave to his friend. Dutch followed, turned in the opposite direction, and made his way home, feeling as if he’d been away for a week instead of just a couple of days. With luck, he’d also be back to work by next shift. Feeling slightly more normal than he had in a couple of days, he rolled down his window and cranked up the volume on the radio, and enjoyed the feel of the wind in his hair--and the lack of major pounding in his head.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Dutch stood in the locker room and looked down at Johnny sitting on the bench in front of him.

“Hey, give me a break, I’ve never done this before.” Johnny frowned down at the skates he’d managed to squeeze his feet into. “Think they’re tight enough?”

“Stand up,” Dutch told him. “Walk around a little.”

Johnny stood, grimacing. “Are they supposed to hurt?”

“Most skaters don’t even wear socks,” grinned Dutch, “much less those hiking ones you have on.”

Johnny steadied himself with one hand on the row of lockers and the other on Dutch’s shoulder and took a few experimental steps. Dutch managed to hold his laughter in check as he watched the other man’s awkward gait. “You walk like you just got off a horse.”

“Feels like I’ve got chains around my ankles,” Johnny complained.

“Takes a little getting used to,” agreed Dutch.

“Takes a LOT of getting used to, if you ask me,” Johnny retorted. They reached the end of the row of lockers and Dutch stepped aside to let Johnny try it on his own. Johnny took a few more clumsy steps and turn around.

“Come on, let’s get you on the ice,” said Dutch. “It’ll be a little more natural.”

“Somehow, I don’t think so,” Johnny told him, following the other through the locker room door and toward the rink, clutching at the wall all the way.

At the entry to the ice, Johnny hesitated. Dutch, on the other hand, stepped easily onto the slick surface and glided smoothly away, turning easily and skating backwards and grinning at the other man. “Come on,” he beckoned. “You said you wanted to try it.”

“I’ve tried it, and I don’t think I like it.”

Dutch laughed and skated back to Johnny, reaching out and taking Johnny by the elbow. “Here.” He steadied Johnny as he stepped over the edge of the wall and onto the ice and held on even as Gage grabbed wildly for the top of the boards. “Okay,” he said, as Johnny tried to walk on the ice, “you’re not supposed to walk in the skates. Keep the blades on the ice and push sideways, like this.” He demonstrated slowly. “And don’t look at your feet,” he added, watching Johnny stare wildly down.

Johnny looked up just as two children swept past confidently.

“And don’t watch the other skaters,” advised Dutch. “Most of them have been doing this for ages.”

Johnny moved stiffly, grabbing Dutch for balance with one hand and the boards with the other.

“Here, let’s try this.” Dutch stopped and released his arm from Johnny’s death grip. “Put your feet together, like this.” He waited for Johnny to do so. “Now, point your toes out and push a little.” He demonstrated and watched the other man’s feeble imitation. “That’s it. Now, turn your toes back in and bring your feet back together.” Again he demonstrated, laughing at the other man’s ungainly attempts to move. “Yeah, like that. Now, do it again.” Slowly, they moved along the edge of the rink, Dutch oblivious to other skaters taking advantage of the late open skate practice session going on around them, Johnny’s concentration so deep he was

only aware of Dutch's instructions. "These are called swizzles," he explained as Johnny continued his gawky motions. "The easiest skating movement there is."

"Says you," muttered Johnny.

"It'd be easier if you would let go of the boards," advised Dutch wryly. "Your arms balance you, and if you keep holding on you'll never be able to move."

"I'm fine right where I am," Johnny assured him.

Dutch laughed. They continued their sedate progress along the edge of the rink, Dutch periodically swinging around and skating backwards as he watched Johnny plod along, skating slowly but easily and offering encouraging words, nodding in approval as Johnny began to move his skates more smoothly and comfortably.

And then, just as Johnny thought he was getting the feel of the ice under his blades and began to move with a bit more confidence, he overbalanced. His feet shot out from under him and before he could grab onto anything, he was landing on his rear end, arms windmilling madly as he fell.

Dutch glided to his side and looked down, masterfully refraining from laughing. "Well, that was supposed to be Lesson 2, but I guess you didn't need the instruction...."

Johnny glowered. "Help me up, Masters."

Grinning, Dutch held out a hand and easily pulled Johnny back to his feet, steadied him, and made him continue his swizzles.

Half an hour later, Johnny insisted they call it a night. "My ankles are killing me," he told Dutch, "not to mention my ass."

"Can't imagine why--you only fell three times." He grinned and guided Johnny to the exit. "I'm gonna take a few spins around the rink," he told Johnny. "Gonna see how it feels." With that, he sped off, startling Johnny with his speed and grace. Dutch took three turns around the rink, alternating between forward and backward skating, crossing one skate over the other effortlessly on the turns, arms casual and graceful at his sides. He made it look downright easy.

Johnny studied him as he slid to a stop and hopped off the ice. "Nice," he said approvingly.

Dutch's grin split his face. "Felt great," he agreed.

“When’s your next game?” asked Johnny as they made their way to the locker room.

“Monday.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good deal!”

“As a spectator,” added Johnny.

Dutch merely shook his head, still grinning.

A few days later, Johnny sat huddled in the stands above the ice rink, half surprised that he didn’t see his breath it was so chilly up there. Below, the Zamboni finished laying down a fresh layer of water to smooth out the surface of the ice. This was only his second time at an ice rink, the first being his lesson the previous week. He had never seen a hockey game in person, and was curious to see if it would be easier to follow the game in person than on television. He wasn’t sure what he expected, and hoped he didn’t make a fool of himself watching. He knew next to nothing about the game.

The Zamboni drove off the ice, and he watched absently as the nets were placed back onto the posts and the clock was reset on the wall opposite. He recognized two stripe-shirted officials standing near the player benches under the clock. He looked around him, and saw only a few people in the stands besides himself. Evidently, amateur league hockey was not a draw. Maybe the play would be awful, he thought suddenly. What would he say to Dutch if it were?

And then the players were clambering out of the locker rooms and onto the ice.

Johnny peered at them, at last spotting Dutch skating easily and fluidly around his team’s end of the ice. As Dutch skated toward the stands he looked up at Johnny, his teeth flashing in a wide grin. He nodded as he swept past, and Johnny watched him and his teammates shooting pucks at the goalie in the net at that end. After a few minutes, one of the officials blew a whistle and the players gathered the loose pucks and skated toward their respective benches.

For a minute, Johnny lost sight of his friend, and then the players sorted themselves out, some climbing onto the seats separated from the ice by the low boards, while others took their places around the center face off circle. One player separated himself for a moment from the others and looked up into the stands.

Johnny suddenly grinned widely as Dutch tapped his helmet twice lightly with his stick and skated back into position for the face off.

“Way to go, Masters,” he murmured approvingly.

From MJ: I was stunned to realize that this story took more than 2 years to finish! Thanks to CeCe, Alice, Carol, and Linda for the ideas and assistance with the story!

*And Alice, sorry but...**GO HAWKS!!!***

From Redgirl: It was all Mel's fault! Thanks to Alice and Carol for their advice along the way, and special thanks to MJ for the lovely ride. (We get paid by the word and not by the hour??) Go Blackhawks!

More from MJ: I get blamed for everything.