

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

By: Carla Keehn

It was a balmy Christmas Eve day in the City of Los Angeles. Normally, regardless of whether it was day or night, the hospital's Emergency room was bustling with activity. On this day, however, an unusual calm had settled over Rampart General Hospital.

As she walked down the deserted corridor, Head Nurse Dixie McCall glanced at her watch and sighed. Time was passing slowly. *This won't last though...* Tomorrow the pace would be busier than usual. The gathering of families for the holidays always meant an increase in Rampart's business. *I should have taken Christmas day off...* Dixie mused. Of course she thought that every year, but never did it. It never seemed fair to make one of her nursing staff work on a day that should be spent with family. Dixie smiled slightly. No, they'd all be here working, just like they were every Christmas, Dixie and the doctors, Kelly Brackett and Joe Early. *My family...*

Dixie's paused outside of the lounge door, her thoughts diverted by the sound of heavy footsteps. The trace of a smile left her face. *Poor Roy... This is a lousy way for him to spend his Christmas...* she thought with concern as she pushed open the door and quietly entered the room.

McCall had seen quite a bit of DeSoto and his partner, John Gage, during the past five days and knew what a long, difficult week it had been for the men of Squad 51. Despite Gage and DeSoto's best efforts, the two paramedics had lost six patients, over a course of two days. The six loses, one right after the other, was a bitter pill for the hardworking team to swallow.

She didn't think that things could get any worse, but they did. That morning, while responding to a fire call at one of the strip malls, Gage had been injured.

McCall watched sympathetically from the doorway. She saw DeSoto shudder as the soft strains of "We Wish You A Merry Christmas" filtered into the room.

Merry Christmas... the disheartened man thought. Roy wasn't interested in Christmas or any other holiday, not after the events of the past week.

The weary paramedic dropped back down into one of the chairs and made a face. Even without his turnout coat on, the smell of smoke clung to him, making him cough. DeSoto closed his eyes and slumped forward. The exertions of the morning and worrying about his partner had taken what little energy he'd started out with.

Then a soothing voice broke into his troubled thoughts.

"Roy?"

DeSoto opened his eyes and saw Dixie's concerned face peering intently at him. "Any news yet, Dix?"

McCall brushed her cool hand across his warm forehead. She nodded. "Kel says Johnny's going to be fine. You were right about him needing some stitches." McCall paused and glanced around the room. "Where are the other guys?"

"They got a call." He lowered his head in discouragement. "I was so worried, Dix..."

"Kel told you when you brought Johnny in that he didn't think it was serious."

"I know he did, Dix, it's just that..." He sighed heavily. "I knew that floor was weak, I should've stopped Johnny before something happened."

"Roy, taking risks is part of the job. If you realized that floor was weak, then Johnny must have too."

DeSoto shook his head. It was too much to expect that McCall or anyone else would understand how he felt.

"All the hours that I've spent waiting at the hospital this week has given me a lot of time to think about things." He looked up at the concerned woman intently. "I've decided that I just can't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"This..." DeSoto rose from his seat and resumed pacing. "The waiting, the being responsible for the victims, for Johnny..." He looked at her helplessly. "We lost six people this week, Dixie, six - -"

His words hung heavily in the air between them. McCall offered no reply, waiting instead for DeSoto to finish.

"Two of them never even made it to the hospital," Roy added. "And then today, what happened to Johnny..."

"Roy, you did everything possible for those six people. Everyone knows that. You can't blame yourself for what happened."

"I thought that, too, at first, but... well, now I'm not so sure." He swallowed hard. "I realize now that I never should have become a paramedic. I wish I'd never joined the program - -" He sucked in a sharp breath as a cold chill coursed through his body.

That's the stress talking, he can't mean that, she thought. "Roy, listen to me. If it wasn't for men like you and Johnny, there wouldn't be a paramedic program." She tightened her grip on his sleeve. "C'mon. I think it's time we got you cleaned up so Joe can have a look at that arm."

DeSoto began protesting. "No, Dix..."

McCall silenced him with a look. "No, Roy, you listen to me. You refused to let Joe treat you until you knew something about Johnny. Fine. Now it's time that you let someone look after you."

DeSoto glanced down at the bandage that Cap had hastily wrapped around Roy's arm then at his dirtied hands. In all the confusion of the fire and Johnny's injury, he'd forgotten about his arm. Roy let out a heavy sigh. "I guess you're right. Maybe I could use some cleaning up."

A half hour later, McCall had Roy cleaned up and settled down on the sofa in the lounge. "You look exhausted, Roy. Why don't you rest for a few minutes while I check and see if Joe's ready for you."

He gave her a weak smile. "Sure... thanks, Dix." Roy watched McCall leave, then shifted himself up. A weariness came over him that was too strong to fight. He took a deep breath. I can't fall asleep, not here... Roy didn't think that Cap would be too happy if word got back to the station that one of his paramedics was seen sleeping in the hospital lounge.

But, despite what his mind thought, the strain and worries of the past week won out. He felt a warmness envelope him and then nothing . . .

* * * *

Someone was shaking him. Gently at first, then more insistently as DeSoto's body tried to ignore the intrusion.

"Roy," the masculine voice called, "wake up!"

DeSoto struggled to consciousness. The warm sunlight that streamed in from the open window behind him was making the struggle harder. As he hovered between sleep and wakefulness, he was aware of new sounds in the air.

Judging by the traffic he heard passing by the lounge door, the hospital was bustling with activity.

I must have been out for a while... Roy thought. There was hardly any business at all when Dix and I came in here...

Bits and pieces of detached conversations and peals of laughter from people passing by the window floated past his ears.

DeSoto shifted himself up in annoyance. It was too noisy to sleep. And hot. Too hot. If he didn't know better, he'd think it was the middle of summer instead of a mild December day.

Then the first voice returned, louder than before, still clamoring for DeSoto's attention.

"C'mon, man, we've got things to do!"

It was a familiar voice yet Roy couldn't place it immediately. He opened his eyes and glanced around. DeSoto started in surprise at the sight of the dark haired man standing in front of him, cheeks tanned with good health and dressed in black levis and a black workshirt.

"Tim? Tim Duntley?" Roy shook his head to clear it. It couldn't be Tim Duntley, he was dead, killed by the virus that had almost taken Johnny's life too. *Another failure come back to haunt me...* DeSoto thought, recalling how Duntley had died before a cure for the virus had been found.

"Yeah, Roy, it's me." Duntley gave the man a broad grin. "You're lookin' a little worse for wear, my friend."

"It can't be..." Roy stared incredulously at the man in front of him. *I must really be out of it... Now I'm seeing things...*

"You're not seeing things, Roy," Duntley said, echoing DeSoto's thoughts. The smile left Duntley's face and was replaced by a sober expression. "You asked for something earlier, something that's not usually given to people."

"Asked for something?"

"Yeah, you made a wish, remember? Said you wished that you'd never joined the paramedic program. Your wish has been granted, Roy."

"But how? I don't understand."

Duntley shrugged. "Look, I've only been given a short amount of time to be with you and I don't want to waste it on long explanations. Let's just say that someone's lookin' out for you and leave it at that."

DeSoto's senses were on overload. He wasn't a religious man and he didn't believe in ghosts. Yet he couldn't argue that the person with him wasn't his friend.

"There are some places we need to be, so c'mon." Duntley motioned towards the door. "Just one more thing though, Roy. You're not gonna like some of what I have show you. Once we leave this room, there's no turning back - we have to go on whether you want to or not."

This has to be some kind of a dream, a nightmare... DeSoto thought, taking a deep breath as he followed behind his friend.

"C'mon, man!" Duntley urged. "There's a meeting over at the Administration Building we need to be at that's starting right about now."

Although he couldn't explain why, Duntley's words suddenly frightened him. *You're not going to like what I have to show you...*

Tim Duntley paused at the door and looked at Roy in exasperation. "Move it, Roy, we're gonna be late!"

I'll just play along. It didn't look like he had any other choice. *Dix'll probably be back soon and then I can wake up...*

Duntley looked at DeSoto and shook his head sadly. Roy didn't know it yet, but his nightmare was just beginning...

* * * *

Roy and Tim Duntley left the hospital lounge and began making their way through the crowded hallways of Rampart's Emergency room.

The voices of crying children and impatient adults rose about the general din of confusion and disorder that filled the air.

Roy glanced around uneasily. The waiting area was jammed. Several adults were arguing with the harried Head Nurse seated behind the desk closest to the entrance.

"Why is it so busy today?"

Duntley shrugged. "No particular reason. It's summer - business is pretty steady in the summer, you know that."

It can't be summer... DeSoto opened his mouth to speak, then paused, when a loud crashing sound diverted his attention.

In a fit of temper, one of the angry people at the front desk whirled around to walk away. He collided with one of the nurses, sending the nurse and the tray of medications she carried, to the ground.

Looking up from the floor, the young trainee saw her supervisor giving her a critical look. She scrambled to her feet.

"I-I'm sorry, Miss Porter, this man bumped into me and..."

The woman rose from her seat and waved her arm angrily at the mess. "I've told you before, Sally, that you're too clumsy!"

"But it wasn't my fault - -"

"I'm not in the mood for any of your excuses!" the woman raged. "Get this mess cleaned up and report to my office in fifteen minutes!"

"Yes, Miss Porter," the trainee whispered. "Right away..."

This isn't right... DeSoto continued to watch scene unfold before him. "Everything is so unorganized," Roy commented to Duntley. "Where's Dixie? I can't believe she's letting this kind of thing go on."

"Dixie doesn't work here, Roy." Duntley nodded towards the nurse seated at the desk. "Carol's in charge but, unfortunately, she's not as organized as a head nurse needs to be."

"Carol?" Roy paused. "But Dixie..." He looked at Duntley in confusion. Dixie McCall had turned down job offers before, good ones too. DeSoto couldn't believe that she would leave Rampart.

"Dixie McCall is the Head of Nursing over at St. Francis Memorial." Tim shook his head. "Things are different here at Rampart, much different." Duntley steered Roy towards the elevator. "C'mon, we're gonna be late for our meeting."

Ten minutes later, they were walking down the corridor towards the hospital Board Room. As they neared their destination, they heard loud voices drifting towards them.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Brackett," a deep voice intoned, "while the evidence you've presented is impressive, it isn't enough to justify allocation of further funds."

Duntley stopped and nodded into the Board Room. Roy hesitated.

"Go on, Roy. I think you'll find this meeting very interesting. Don't worry, no one can hear or see us." Duntley gave Roy a gentle shove into the room. "Go on."

DeSoto reluctantly stepped into the room.

Seated in the front of the room across two tables, the ten members of Rampart's Board of Directors were an imposing sight.

There was an uncomfortable silence broken only by the sound of shuffling of papers as the Board reviewed the mountain of files in front of them. Several Board members were huddled over what looked to Roy like an adding machine tape.

Seated at a smaller table in the middle of the room, Kelly Brackett turned and whispered something to the dark haired man sitting next to him. DeSoto caught a glimpse of the man's face as he leaned forward to listen.

"Craig Brice - here with Brackett?" Roy whispered to Duntley. "What's going on here?"

Tim shook his head to silence the man. "Listen," he said.

One of the board members cleared his throat and began speaking. "So, it is with great regret, Dr. Brackett, that this Board must rule that the Paramedic program be discontinued."

"Discontinued - -" Brackett rose from his seat in anger. "I told you during our initial meeting that a program like this needs time to develop before any decisions like this are made."

"Dr. Brackett." Another man waved the voluminous adding machine tape at him. "A staggering amount of money has already been spent during this first six month period. And for what? You've graduated one class of these paramedics and, by your own admission, you do not have enough recruits for a second class."

Brackett nodded. "I admit, we've had some setbacks. As I expected we would. That's why I feel that it is premature at this point to consider abandoning this program. Maybe in a year, year and half..."

"A year and half!" The adding machine tape fell to the floor. "Dr. Brackett, need I remind you that we're dealing with tax payer's dollars here? That kind of time is a luxury that you do not have."

Brackett felt his stomach knot. He glanced at Brice who sat stone faced, unmoved by what they were hearing. *Brice graduated at the top of his class, he'll make an excellent paramedic...* Outside of the classroom, Brackett had been disappointed by Brice's inability to improve morale among the recruits or muster support for the fledgling program.

Roy looked at Duntley in horror. "This can't be real. They can't dissolve the program, it's important, it's helped so many people!"

Brackett was speaking again. "I've talked with several people, the community wants and needs the Paramedic program - -"

Again, Brackett was cut off by one of the Board members. "I find that hard to believe, Doctor. This public hearing has been advertised for a number of weeks. I know that this Board was hoping for the opportunity to listen to some public testimony on this matter. Yet, here we all are, and no members of the community are in attendance." The man shook his head. "I'm sorry, Dr. Brackett, but this Board has no intention of reversing its findings."

DeSoto thought Roy turned on Duntley. "This is wrong! Can't you stop this - -"

"I can't change these events." Duntley shook his head sadly. "I'm only showing the reality of what exists

now, Roy. You and I both know how Craig is. He knows his stuff, but he's no PR person. What Brackett needs is someone that can help the recruits and get support for the program from the community and the Fire Department." He gave DeSoto a pointed look. "You're the person he really needs, Roy."

Roy watched as Brackett left his seat and began strenuously arguing with several members of the Board. "What's going to happen now?"

Duntley shrugged. "'Brackett's Folly', as several of the Board members have named the Paramedic program, will end. You saw how things were in the Emergency room, the situation won't improve." Duntley took DeSoto's arm. "Our time here is finished, Roy, we need to be moving on."

DeSoto shook his head. "No, this isn't right, there has to be something that we can do to help!"

"There's nothing that any of us can do now, Roy - the program's finished. Kind of strange, though, don't you think? How one event in a man's life can affect so many people."

Roy remained silent as he struggled to comprehend what he'd just witnessed. Then in the blink of an eye, his surroundings suddenly changed.

Roy glanced around. The two men were standing in the Apparatus Bay of Station 51. Or at least it looked like the Station.

DeSoto shivered. Something felt very wrong.

As Roy adjusted to his new surrounds, the smell of coffee wafted towards them.

"C'mon," Duntley prodded. "There's something going on in the kitchen that I want you to see."

An unexplained fear suddenly rocked DeSoto. He couldn't shake his feeling that something was different here, something that made him uncomfortable. Roy shook his head. "No, I-I've changed my mind, I don't want to see anymore."

"Sorry, pal, I told you going in that we had to finish what we started, remember." Duntley grabbed Roy's arm and began pulling him towards the kitchen. "Let's go."

Reluctantly trailing behind Duntley, the two men came around the corner into the kitchen. They paused at the doorway and watched as Captain Hank Stanley paced angrily back and forth. Stanley stopped suddenly and glared at his men, who were lined up and standing at attention in front of the sink.

The Captain moved to each man, viewing with a critical eye.

"Kelly! Your shirt's dirty -explanation, NOW!" Stanley barked.

"Eh, Cap," Chet stammered, his body relaxing, "I - I - -"

"Who gave you permission to stand at ease, Mister?"

"No one!" Realizing what he'd done, Kelly snapped back to attention. "My shirt is dirty, sir, because after our last run, there wasn't time to change before the inspection."

"There's no excuse for a slovenly appearance, Kelly. I believe we've discussed this before." Stanley

berated. "30 days latrine duty, beginning immediately. Go -"

Chet made a face and began protesting. "30 days, but, Cap . . ."

"Maybe you'd rather that I wrote you up for disciplinary action by the Chief?" Stanley said with an evil gleam in his eye.

"N-No, sir."

"Then get busy. And Kelly, make it shine, or else - -"

"Yes, sir," Chet muttered as he left the room.

Roy looked at Duntley in disbelief. The only time he'd seen Hank Stanley act like that was after one of Chet's phantom pranks. "This isn't real, it's a trick, it has to be..."

"I told you before, Roy, I'm only showing you the realities of today - - now watch."

After Chet left the room, Stanley pounced on Marco Lopez, citing him with other infractions of various rules and issued a punishment. Then Mike Stoker was the only one left.

DeSoto saw Stoker swallow hard as Stanley lifted the lid of the stock pot on the stove and took a taste of the boiling liquid inside.

"You call this soup, Stoker?"

"Yes, sir," Mike answered quickly. "my wife's special recipe."

"Well if this is an example of the best your wife can do, you have my sympathies." Stanley spit the soup into the sink. "We're not eating this crap - fix something else!"

"Right away, sir!"

Roy turned to Duntley for an explanation.

"Not what you expected, is it, Roy." Duntley said quietly.

"No," Roy replied in a strained voice. "Cap's not like that, I don't understand."

"Ask yourself, Roy, who did Captain Stanley go to for advice when he was worried about his arthritis? And other times, when he was troubled about something?"

"Me." DeSoto whispered. "He'd ask me."

"Well, you're not here. And the pressures of being a Captain can make a man act differently. Absolute control of every detail of life at the station is the way he's compensated for not having anyone to talk to."

"No - -" Roy shook his head. He couldn't be responsible for the scene they'd just witnessed. *One man can't have that much of an influence...* DeSoto's thoughts cried out.

"But he can, Roy," Duntley said, reading DeSoto's thoughts. "I would have thought you'd realized that by

now. Come, we have one more place to visit."

"No, I'm not going. This is some kind of a nightmare - I want it to end!"

"I'm sorry, Roy, but these are things you must see."

Duntley took Roy gently by the arm and began leading him out of the room. He searched for some words of comfort that he could offer, but decided that none would do. He knew that the worst nightmare of all was in front of Roy - - and no words would be enough - -

* * * *

Quiet... except for the hum of cars traveling on the distant freeway, the quiet of his new surroundings disturbed Roy DeSoto.

Things look peaceful enough, Roy thought. He let out a shaky breath. At any other time, he'd have no reason to suspect that there was anything unusual about the park-like setting around them with its towering trees and neatly trimmed beds of sweetly smelling flowers.

"Nice, huh?" Duntley commented.

"Yeah," DeSoto agreed. He cleared his throat nervously. "But you didn't bring me here because it was nice, did you."

"I could lie to you and say that bringing you here will be a comfort to you, but that would be cruel." Tim slowly shook his head. "C'mon, it's just a short walk from here, at the top of this hill."

There was an overcast sky above as the two men started off. A light breeze that held the promise of rain, gently slapped at Roy's cheeks as he walked.

Duntley reached the top first but stepped aside so that Roy's view of what lay on the other side wasn't blocked.

"You go on ahead, Roy."

DeSoto paused and took a deep breath. *Whatever is there... I can handle it...* He marched past Duntley, then stopped.

No... not this...

Duntley hadn't taken him to a park... he'd brought Roy to a cemetery. Frightened, Roy turned on the man beside him. "Why - - why did I need to see this?"

"There's more," Tim said in a cold voice. He turned and started towards one of the clusters of burial sites, finally stopping at one of the graves. Duntley looked at Roy expectantly.

The grave marker was obscured by a pile of fallen tree limbs and other debris. "Who's grave is this?" Roy demanded. "Mine?"

"You'll have to find that out for yourself," Duntley said softly. "Go on, Roy, clear away that debris from the headstone and find out for yourself."

Find out for yourself... find out for yourself... The words thundered through his mind. Icy fingers of dread clutched at DeSoto's insides as he knelt down in the soft dirt, his fists tightly clenched.

DeSoto stared at the grave in apprehension.

"Stalling won't change anything, Roy. This is something you must do," Duntley ordered.

Roy nodded in defeat. It only took a few minutes to clear away the small pile of debris. The words carved into the weathered concrete slab screamed at him.

IN MEMORIAM

JOHN GAGE

1945-1976

"WELL DONE, THOU GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT" (MATT 25:21)

No... Roy thought numbly. *Not Johnny...* He glanced up at Duntley. "How did this happen?"

"There was a building collapse during a fire. Gage was trapped inside," Duntley explained. "They got him out right away but by the time the ambulance got to the scene, he was past being helped."

A drop of rain hit Roy's face. He wiped it away with a shaky hand. *I'm sorry, partner...* DeSoto thought mournfully. *All the times we were there for each other...*

Duntley was speaking, his voice hard and accusing. "A senseless death, one that could have been avoided. The ambulance was delayed in rush hour traffic. If there had been a paramedic team assigned to Gage's engine company, he might have made it."

The words struck Roy like a knife. "No..." he whispered in a broken voice. "No... I can't be responsible for this... not for Johnny's death..."

"I'm sorry, Roy. But you and Johnny were never stationed together. You weren't there to save him this time. And there was no help available when Gage was injured."

Heartsick, images of what Roy had already seen rumbled through his mind, the meeting at Rampart, the incident with Cap at the station. Twisted realities that had left him fear-struck. And now this - -

"Don't you see, Roy?" Tim continued in a kinder voice. "The true measure of a man is the impact he has on others. This is just a fraction of what I could show you. Each and every person's life touched because you were never a part of the Paramedic program."

"These images that you've shown me," Roy said desperately, "they can be changed, can't they? Tell me they can be changed - -" His voice broke.

"Do you really want them changed?" Duntley pressed. "Earlier you were certain that this was the best path to take."

DeSoto stared at the grave in silence, mourning the loss of his best friend and the life he had come to appreciate too late. "Yes - - I was wrong, take me back, please, make things the way they used to be - -"

Unmoved by Roy's words, Duntley bent down and picked some wildflowers that were growing nearby. He

set the small bouquet down on the grave in the spot that Roy had cleared.

The bouquet of tiny blue and pink flowers, so healthy and alive tore at DeSoto's insides. The flowers are alive and Johnny's dead! Furious at Duntley for ignoring his appeals, Roy got to his feet, determined to use force, if necessary, to convince his friend of how wrong he'd been. That's when DeSoto realized that he was, suddenly, alone.

"No! Don't leave me here! I want to go back - - take me back - -"

DeSoto's words were still ringing in his ears when the darkness closed in around him.

* * * *

He briefly felt a sensation of falling then, suddenly, DeSoto's body jerked awake with a start. Disoriented, his eyes flickered around the hospital lounge in confusion before coming to rest on the bandage on his arm. Seeing the injury eased Roy's fears.

Thank, God, none of it was real... he thought, recalling the horrors he had just witnessed.

"But it was real, Roy," the voice cut in, interrupting his thoughts. Tim Duntley stepped out of the shadows to face his friend one last time. Grasping one of Roy's hands in his, DeSoto felt Duntley slip something inside his cupped hand.

"What's this?"

Tim smiled. "My gift to you, Roy - - a reminder of our time together in case you ever begin to doubt your worth again."

DeSoto opened his hand. The tiny blue and pink flower petals were still alive and healthy looking, just as they had looked when Duntley had placed them on Johnny's grave. Roy glanced up and realized that he was alone. But alone where? Did Duntley return him to the life that Roy so desperately wanted back?

He was still sitting there studying the flowers when Dixie came in the room a few seconds later. Lost in his thoughts, it was several minutes before Roy realized someone else was there.

"Roy? Roy, answer me!"

For a moment, Roy was overcome with emotion. *Tim made everything right again*, Roy thought, finally grasping McCall's hand convulsively. *The nightmare's over, I'm home again!*

"Dix, I'm so glad to see you!"

McCall looked at DeSoto warily. She'd only been out of the room a few minutes and now suddenly Roy was acting much differently than the depressed man she'd left earlier. She noticed the flowers Roy still had clutched in his hand. "How pretty - I didn't see those in here before."

"A - A friend left them," Roy explained hesitantly. "One of the guys heard about Johnny and came by..."

"Oh?" McCall frowned. She didn't see anyone come past her desk. "Well, Joe's waiting to take a look at your arm."

"Great!" Roy said, a twinkle in his blue eyes.

* * * *

"Roy, are you sure you're okay?" She found it hard to believe that a few minutes rest could make such a change in a person's disposition. *Roy's acting like a new man...*

DeSoto nodded. "More than okay, Dixie - much more than okay." Roy tightened his grip on the flowers. "For a moment, I forgot about some things that were very important - but I won't make that mistake again - - ever."

The End

