

Rocky Mountain Lows

By C. D. and A. F.

Johnny exited the locker room, practically bouncing and whistling a meandering tune. In spite of the twenty four hour shift just completed, he was energetic and in good spirits. He had good reason to be.

Rounding the corner of the engine, he stopped abruptly. His crewmates – Roy, Chet, Marco, Mike and Hank, the captain – all stood there waiting, in their civilian clothes. Sly grins and smirks met Johnny's questioning expression.

"What?" Johnny asked suspiciously.

Roy stepped forward bearing a wrapped box. "Johnny, on the eve of your great adventure, we present you with this parting gift."

Mike Stoker snickered.

Johnny's expression softened but retained a hint of wariness as he took the gift. "Well...what is it?"

"Open it," Hank suggested. The men exchanged knowing smiles.

Johnny set the package down on the squad's bumper and tore the wrapping off. He lifted the lid of the plain brown box and pushed the tissue paper aside. He sighed in annoyance. "A first-aid kit?"

Soft chuckling from the others was his answer.

"I already *have* a first-aid kit, thank you!" Johnny stated.

"Johnny, this isn't just any old first-aid kit," Roy explained. "This is a super-duper handy-dandy deluxe first-aid kit, far superior to that meager, inadequate Boy Scout reject you were planning to take."

"Oh yeah? Superior, huh? In what way?" Johnny challenged.

"If I may." Roy opened the lid of the kit as Johnny stepped aside and observed. Roy held up a vial. "Anti-venin—"

"So, I have anti-venin!" Johnny retorted.

"Hold it! Let me finish! This is just for bees, wasps and hornets. This one," he held aloft a different vial. "is for rattlesnakes." Roy gave his partner a meaningful look, at which Johnny narrowed his eyes contemptuously. Roy continued, holding up each vial in turn. "Scorpions. Water moccasins. Man-of-war."

“MAN-OF-WAR?!” Johnny shouted.

Everyone burst out laughing, including Roy.

“Okay, it’s really for black widows.” Roy pulled more items out of the kid. “Three kinds of antibiotic ointment. Calamine lotion. Chigger-Rid. Ice pack. Heat pack. Pressure bandages. Kerlix. Two sizes of splints. Cough syrup. Allergy medicine. 4X4s. Tweezers. Chapstick. Sunscreen. Every size and shape of Band-Aid you can imagine...”

“Roy, don’t you think you’re being a little...pessimistic?” Johnny asked.

“No, Johnny, he’s being a little *realistic*,” Chet answered.

“Huh! Is that so?” Johnny huffed. He turned to his superior. “Cap, don’t tell me *you’re* in on this too!”

Hank winced and placed a fatherly hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “John. Listen, Pal...it’s not *you* we don’t trust...” He gazed wistfully skyward. “It’s fate.”

Laughter again rang out at Johnny’s expense.

Johnny shrugged, knowing he couldn’t win against this group of skeptics. So he smiled gamely. “Okay, I’ll take the kit. You can never be too careful.”

“In your case, Gage, you can never be careful *enough*,” Chet opined.

“I didn’t know you cared, Chet,” Johnny sneered.

“Oh, I don’t...I just didn’t wanna have to break—“

“—in a new pigeon, yeah I know!” Johnny grinned. He was too excited about the trip to mind his co-workers’ ribbing. He’d been working overtime shifts and saving for a year for this trip. He was flying to Colorado to meet his cousin, Greg, for a backpacking vacation. Even though it was only five days, including travel time, Johnny couldn’t remember when he’d so eagerly anticipated something.

He gathered up the gift. “It’s a little heavy, but I guess I can heft it to the campsite, at least.”

“It’s good insurance,” Roy reasoned.

“Well worth the extra effort,” Marco added.

“I might strain somethin’ carrying it!” Johnny joked.

“There’s analgesics in there too!” Roy replied. “And Ace bandages!” His eyes twinkled.

“Okay, okay. You’ve convinced me. I guess I should be...flattered! Or something!”

“Just don’t get flattened” Chet quipped.

“Yeah, I don’t think there’s anything in there for ‘squash syndrome’,” Roy said.

“Don’t worry. I plan on having a fantastic time, and no accidents are in *my* itinerary,” Johnny assured the group.

“Are they ever?” Hank asked.

“I gotta be going,” Johnny said, ignoring the question. Holding the kit in one arm, he waved as he backed away from his co-workers. “See you guys in six days!”

“That remains to be seen!” Chet said.

“Says you.” Johnny smiled as he waved and headed out. “Bye!”

“Bye, Johnny. Be careful!” Roy called out.

“Oh, yeah!”

Johnny leaned his forehead against the inside wall of the fuselage as he stared dreamily out the plane’s window. The cumulus clouds provided the perfect backdrop for his reminisces as his mind replayed the flawless backpacking trip he and his cousin had just enjoyed. Everything had been perfect: the weather, the scenery, the preparations. There hadn’t been a single oversight or mishap the entire five days. *Unless you count the blister Greg got on his foot*, Johnny thought with a wry grin. *Good thing I had that first-aid kit.*

“Would you like something to drink, sir?” the flight attendant asked.

Johnny snapped out of his daydreams and considered the question. “Uh...” *I do feel pretty worn out. Probably a little dehydrated.* “Do you have 7-Up?”

“Certainly.” The attendant prepared the drink and handed it to him, as well as the half-empty can.

“Thanks.”

“Would you like some peanuts?” she inquired, offering the small bag to him.

The peanuts didn't appeal to him at all. "No. Thanks anyway." He smiled tiredly.

The flight attendant returned a perfunctory smile and continued to the next row.

Johnny sipped his drink steadily, emptying it quickly. He refilled it with the remains in the can and made quick work of draining that too. He stowed the tray table back in its upright position and set the can on the empty seat next to him. As he sat and absently munched on the ice cubes, he zoned out once again, lost in his thoughts. Before long, he dozed off, his fingers still gripping the cup lightly.

The plane bumped sharply and Johnny's eyes snapped open while his hands flew to the armrests, the empty cup dropping to the floor. He quickly ascertained that they'd landed, the touchdown causing the jolt. He looked around sheepishly to see if anyone noticed his panicked reaction, but everyone around him appeared to be preoccupied with the impending arrival.

As the plane taxied to the gate, Johnny massaged his tired eyes and yawned, equalizing the pressure in his ears. As good as the trip was, it was kind of good to be home, too, he thought. He looked forward to getting home and sleeping in a bed.

Johnny answered the phone on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, Junior," Roy said happily. "You're home."

"Yeah...just got in," Johnny said, stifling a yawn.

"Good, good. Well, uh...just wanted to see if you had a good trip."

"It was a *great* trip," Johnny assured him. "Fantastic. I'll tell you all about it at the station."

"Okay, great."

Johnny didn't miss the almost disappointed tone of Roy's response. He grinned. "By the way, Roy, I *did* make good use of the first-aid kit."

"Oh?" Roy tried to hide his bounding curiosity behind a casual tone.

"Yeah. Greg got a blister on his foot. Used three band-aids from the kit," Johnny explained.

"Oh. A blister, huh?"

“Yup. He hadn’t gotten his boots broken in properly.”

“I see. So...that’s it? You didn’t, uh...”

“I’m fine, Roy. Not a scratch,” the younger man said smugly, having known all along that Roy was fishing.

“Good!”

“Well, I’d better get unpacked and get some shut-eye. I’m pretty tired.”

“You do that. I guess we’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Yup, tomorrow.”

“Night.”

“See ya.”

As Johnny hung up the phone, he chuckled and wondered how much money was going to be changing hands tomorrow.

“Mornin, ” Johnny greeted his co-workers as he entered the day room from the parking lot.

“The prodigal son returns,” Mike said sagely.

“Hold it,” Chet ordered the paramedic, blocking his path.

Johnny rolled his eyes and sighed as Chet grabbed his wrists and raised his arms up, peering all around at the unscathed limbs.

“You’re wastin’ your time, Chet,” Johnny said, still tolerating the inspection.

Chet slowly circled the object of his scrutiny, visually examining the man from head to toe. Not satisfied with appearances only, he began to frisk Johnny in search of hidden damage, starting on his torso and working his way down to the legs.

“Hey! Cut that out!” Johnny protested, twisting away from the intrusive touch.

Roy and Hank entered from the engine bay at that moment and took in the comical scene.

“Didn’t know you missed him *that* much, Kelly,” Hank quipped.

Chet sighed in consternation. “Roy, would you take his vitals?” he asked.

“Now just a minute!” Johnny shouted.

“Chet, you’re gonna have to accept the fact that he’s okay,” Roy advised.

“But, Roy...” Chet whined.

“Oh, *I* get it!” Johnny said. He pointed an accusing finger at the Irishman. “You betted against me, didn’t ya!” He practically spat out the last part.

“Hey, I figured it was easy money,” Chet admitted.

Johnny’s eyes narrowed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Kelly!”

“John, babe, nothing personal, man,” Chet backpedaled.

“Yeah, well, it’s good to know who my friends are,” Johnny stated. He peered at each co-worker in turn, suddenly wondering who *e/se* had placed losing wagers. He decided he’d rather not know. “I’m not even gonna ask,” he muttered, heading for the locker room, ignoring the exchange of grins accompanying his exit.

The station enjoyed a quiet morning, for a change. The squad had been called out to one rescue only, a minor traffic accident with a whiplash victim. The peace and quiet afforded the men plenty of time to finish their assigned chores and they now relaxed in the day room, except for Mike, who was preparing lunch.

Johnny, Roy and Marco sat at the table, each engrossed in his own activity. Johnny rested his head in his hand as he perused the sports page before him. Roy worked on the crossword puzzle while Marco scribbled a letter to his grandmother.

Johnny looked up from his paper and watched Marco a minute, scowling. “What’re you writing to her for? Don’t you usually just call her?”

“I used to,” Marco confirmed. “Lately, she’s got so hard of hearing it’s impossible to hold a conversation over the phone.”

“Oh.” Johnny dropped his scowl and nodded, understanding.

“I had an aunt like that,” Roy said. “When I was younger, one of my first jobs was in a

restaurant. I told my aunt I got a job as a kitchen cook. She thought I bought a chicken coop.”

“I didn’t know you were a cook, Roy,” Mike said from the stove.

“It didn’t last too long,” Roy said. “I wasn’t really cut out for it.”

“Huh...no kidding!” Johnny said glumly, drawing a glare from his partner.

“Oh, look who’s talking,” Chet interjected, having heard the last of the exchange as he walked in the room. Hank was right behind him.

“Chet,” Johnny said irritably. “Don’t you need to go...comb your mustache, or something?”

“Not until *after* I eat,” Chet replied.

Johnny shuddered and made a face. “Sorry I brought it up.”

“Me too, Pal,” Hank added, a look of distaste on his face.

Johnny stretched his arms high over his head and groaned. He followed that with a yawn.

“What’s the matter, John? Are we keeping you up?” Hank asked.

“Still tired from the trip, I guess.” He dropped his arms back down to the table and looked sleepily back at the newspaper. Frowning, he closed and folded the paper and pushed it away. Chet happily retrieved it.

“You’re not supposed to come back to work to recover from your vacation! You’re supposed to be rejuvenated!” the captain teased.

“Yeah, I know...I guess I’m not in as good of shape as I thought.”

“Didn’t you get any sleep last night? You told me on the phone you were going to bed early,” Roy reminded Johnny. Roy studied his partner’s face, noticing for the first time how tired and pale Johnny looked.

“I did. I went to bed about a half hour after you called, and I slept like a baby,” Johnny said.

“It must be what you said, then. You’re just a putz,” Chet concluded.

“Chow’s on,” Mike announced. He started to the table with the dutch oven in his mittened hands. “Table’s not set?”

“Gage, that’s your job,” Hank reminded him.

“Oh, sorry.” Johnny got up and headed to the cupboard, counted out six plates and lifted the stack from the shelf. As he lowered them from the cabinet, he lost his grip and the stack of plates clattered onto the countertop, startling everyone.

“Damn it!” Johnny swore. He examined the dishes to discover that five of the plates had survived; the sixth, on the bottom, had shattered.

Roy jumped up and went to assist. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just this one broke,” Johnny said dejectedly. “Sorry, Cap.”

“Accidents happen,” Hank philosophized.

“Especially to Gage,” Chet concurred.

“I’ll get the table while you clean that up,” Roy offered, fetching a sixth plate from the cabinet.

“Thanks, Roy.”

The crew finally sat down to eat and dug into the stew Mike had prepared. For several minutes, the only audible sounds were the scrapes and clinks of the flatware against the plates.

“So, Johnny. I haven’t heard you mention your cousin Greg,” Hank mumbled around a bite of cornbread.

Johnny pushed pieces of meat around on his plate with his fork. “Actually, he’s my second cousin. My mom is the youngest of ten kids. Her oldest sister is Greg’s grandmother.”

“Hey, sounds like my family,” Marco laughed.

Johnny grinned and cleared his throat. He reached for his glass of milk and took a long drink.

“Where does Greg live?” Roy asked.

“He’s in Florida, still. We both lived on the reservation in grade school, so we were pretty much best friends then. He’s a full blood, whereas I’m half, of course. It never mattered to either of us like it did to some people.”

Roy was struck by the casual manner in which Johnny related the racial issues he’d

faced as a boy. He suspected that, despite his partner's indifferent attitude, the experiences had hurt him a lot. He wondered if that was why Johnny seemed suddenly not hungry as he watched the sullen man toy with his lunch.

The tones sounded, summoning the engine to a Dumpster fire. The four men of the engine crew had virtually finished their meals, albeit without seconds, but that wasn't bad for a firehouse. They jumped up and scurried to the call, leaving the paramedics to deal with the mess.

Roy noticed Johnny was only about half finished. "I'll clear the table," he volunteered.

"I'll help ya. I'm finished anyway," Johnny said. He carried his plate to the wastebasket and scraped the uneaten portion into the trash.

"I'll wash if you'll dry," Roy suggested.

"Sounds good."

They worked side by side, intent on finishing the task quickly. Conversation was sparse and mostly initiated by Roy, but Johnny wasn't taking the bait. He dried the dishes he was handed, but otherwise seemed in another world.

Johnny was not, as Roy suspected, even thinking about his formative years on the reservation. He was too busy stifling yawns and twisting the kinks out of his back to pay heed to old emotional wounds. Besides, he'd long since reconciled all the perceived injustices he'd been handed and, these days, was pretty successful at focusing on the here and now, as well as the future.

And here and now, all Johnny wanted to do was lay down and rest his eyes. He wondered if he'd be able to squeeze in a little nap between the dishes and the engine's return. Motivated by that prospect, he dried plates and flatware as quickly as Roy could hand them to him. With their concerted effort, the dishes were soon finished and stacked away.

"Well...I think I'll go and...brush my teeth," Johnny mumbled. Before Roy could reply, he'd turned and fled towards the locker room.

Roy had never known Johnny to be quite so conscientious about his dental habits, but he scarcely gave it a second thought as he sat down to resume his crossword puzzle.

As Johnny crossed the apparatus bay, a wave of fatigue washed over him and he had to stop to steady himself against the squad. *Just a short nap is all I need. That trip must've taken more out of me than I thought.*

He forged ahead, more slowly than before, and entered the dorm, making a beeline for his bunk. Collapsing onto it, he threw his arm over his eyes and reveled in the relief lying down provided. *I should've given myself an extra day off to recover before the first shift back.*

That was his last conscious thought before sleep overtook him.

The engine returned from the Dumpster fire fairly quickly. The men filed into the day room and got themselves some cold drinks as they bantered about the sunbathing woman they'd seen in a backyard adjacent to the alley. Roy listened with amusement but kept his eyes trained on the puzzle he worked.

"I think I'll shoot some baskets," Mike mentioned. "Anyone up for a little practice?"

"I'll play," Chet said.

"Me too. How about you, Roy?" Marco said.

"Nah, I think I'll pass," Roy replied.

"Where's Johnny? He'll wanna play," Marco said.

"I'll go find him," Chet offered. He went to the captain's office first and poked his head in. "Cap, you seen Johnny?"

"Not since we got back."

"Thanks." Chet sauntered to the locker room and entered. It was quiet and empty. He continued to the dorm where he found the wayward paramedic, sprawled on his bunk, sleeping soundly. Johnny's lips were slightly parted and he inhaled deeply with each breath, his chest expanding visibly. Chet snorted softly and grinned before he turned and crept out of the room.

"I guess it's just us three," he announced, entering the day room again.

"Johnny doesn't want to play?" Marco questioned.

"Who knows? He's conked out in the dorm," Chet said.

"He's asleep?" Roy asked, frowning.

"Uh, yeah, that's the generally accepted definition of 'conked out'," Chet said. "And I

don't mean a cat nap. He's sawin' logs in there."

"He shouldn't be that tired," Roy preached. "It's not like he got in late last night."

"Well, go see for yourself," Chet said.

"Should we wake him up?" Marco asked. "Will Cap be mad?"

"Nah, let him sleep," Mike said.

Roy shrugged. "As long as his chores are done and we don't get a call, I don't see any harm."

"Let sleeping dogs lie," Chet concurred.

"Let's go, then." Mike led the others out onto the back lot.

Roy turned his attention back to the puzzle as he heard the bouncing of the basketball outside. A few minutes later, Hank came into the day room.

"Roy, this is John's writing, isn't it?" He held the logbook open and pointed to an entry.

"Yeah, that's his." Roy squinted at the scribbling. "What's it say?"

"I'd like to know, myself." He looked around the room, and then craned his neck to peer out at the back lot. "Where is he?"

"Well, actually...he's asleep. In the dorm."

"Asleep?"

"Yeah...I'll go get him if you want," Roy hastened to add.

Hank pondered this option. "No, this can wait. From the way he was behaving, he could use the rest."

"You noticed, too?"

"Oh yeah. He looked like he'd just fought a structure fire all night long, if you ask me. Not the way I expected him to look after five days in the fresh air of Colorado."

"I agree." Roy chuckled. "He must have overdone it. Maybe that cousin of his is in better shape, and Johnny had to keep up."

"That would be just like Gage to not recognize his limits," Hank said, grinning.

“Yeah, it would.” Roy smiled conspiratorially.

“Let him sleep,” the captain said gently.

“Okay.”

The afternoon continued on as quietly as before. Roy had gone into the dorm at one point to look for a piece of paper with a phone number on it that he'd misplaced. It gave him an excuse to check on Johnny as well. The younger man was still sacked out, much the way Chet had described him, breathing deeply and stridently in his sleep. He showed no signs of stirring.

Around 3:00 PM the squad was toned out on a possible heart attack. Mike happened to be in the locker room when the call came, so he rushed into the dorm to make sure Johnny was responding. The paramedic was awake and rising groggily from his bunk.

“You got it, Johnny?” the engineer asked.

“Yeah...I'm up,” Johnny answered huskily. “I'm up.” Entering the engine bay, he broke into a lazy trot to the squad. Roy was already in and ready to go. Johnny slid into his seat and donned his helmet, then took the call slip Roy held out.

Roy gave his partner an appraising glance before pulling out in traffic. “You okay?”

“Uh-huh.” Johnny yawned but performed capably during the drive, giving accurate directions to their destination.

At the scene was a 58-year old man who was suffering an apparent heart attack. The paramedics treated and stabilized the patient, then readied him for transport per Rampart's instructions.

“You want to ride in?” Roy asked.

“No, you go ahead. I'll drive,” Johnny told him.

Roy climbed into the ambulance and Johnny set the equipment in after him. “See you there,” he called. He slammed the doors shut and thumped one of them twice with the heel of his hand, signaling the driver to pull away.

Johnny turned slowly and set about gathering any remaining equipment or refuse they'd been responsible for. Now that the adrenaline rush was wearing off, he was acutely aware of several discomforts all vying for his attention. The headache was first and foremost, pounding relentlessly between his temples. His back ached and

spasmed, not helped by the bending and lifting he was doing. And, although he wanted to deny it, his stomach roiled and burned tellingly.

I don't believe it. I'm coming down with something.

He climbed stiffly into the squad for the drive to Rampart. He remembered something just as he was getting ready to start the engine. He and Roy had stashed a bottle of aspirin in the glove compartment for just such occasions. Rummaging through the clutter, he found the small bottle buried towards the back. *I'll stop and pick up a Coke and take some aspirin; then, maybe I can finish out the shift at least.*

By the time he entered the emergency room of Rampart, still sipping the Coke he carried, Johnny was feeling marginally more human. The caffeine and sugar infusion seemed to perk him up, and the aspirin was just beginning to work its magic on his aches and pains. In fact, he began to believe he wasn't sick after all, just overextended and tired.

"Ah, a pit stop," Roy commented, eyeing the soft drink. "I was wondering what was keeping you."

"I was parched," Johnny explained, his voice a tad raspy.

"I'm not surprised, considering how long you sacked out back at the station."

"Yeah. Sorry about that. Was Cap mad about it?" Johnny asked worriedly.

"No, I don't think so," Roy assured him.

"Well, I'm sure I'll never live this down. Go off on a wilderness adventure and come back whipped," Johnny muttered.

"Maybe it's not your fault. Maybe you're catching a cold or something," Roy suggested. "I know that always knocks me for a loop." He gestured with the handie-talkie and led the way down the hall towards the exit.

"Nah, I'm okay. How's the patient, anyway?"

"He's doing well. They're going to stick him in CCU for a couple of days."

"Good."

They boarded the squad and Johnny called them in "available." He sighed, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes.

Roy studied his partner for a moment, noting the sag of his shoulders and the paleness of his complexion. *Just tired? Uh-huh.*

That evening, the crew gathered around the television for a much-anticipated nightly Olympic coverage. The games had provided a welcome diversion from the usual summer fare of program re-runs, and the men found they were addicted to the drama.

The aroma of fresh popcorn and the noisy clatter of rearranging furniture filled the station as the crewmembers dragged wooden chairs over in front of the TV. Johnny stood amidst the commotion, eyeing the effort being expended by his co-workers. He decided he'd just as soon sit on the couch, even though it was not a prime viewing spot. *More comfortable than a wooden chair anyway.*

He sprawled on the sofa, wedging himself into a corner and hiking one leg up off the floor. He nestled his head into the cushions and folded his arms over his chest. *What do they have the air conditioning set at, anyway? Arctic?*

The familiar strains of the Olympics theme wafted from the small TV's speakers as the firehouse audience settled in to watch, contentedly munching popcorn and trading quiet banter.

"Popcorn, Johnny?" Marco offered, extending his bowl.

"Hmm? No thanks, Marco," Johnny responded huskily. His chin was buried into his chest and he looked, and felt, ready to nod off. He watched the pageantry through half-closed eyes, very aware that his co-workers were alert and energetic in contrast to his malaise. *Couple days off and I'll be back in good shape.*

By the time the first commercial ran, Johnny was sound asleep. Chet stood to refill his beverage and noticed Johnny's unconscious form on the couch.

"Hey, did someone slip Gage a Mickey?" Kelly joked.

"He's asleep already?" Roy asked. "Johnny?"

"He's gone, Roy," Marco confirmed.

"He was really looking forward to this," Roy remarked. "I can't believe he's asleep again."

"He's not himself," Mike observed. "Did you notice he didn't eat anything?"

"He did all right on our runs today," Roy reported.

"I just think he's worn out from that trip," Hank opined. "I trust he'll let me know if he

can't perform his duties.”

“This is Gage we're talking about, Cap. He wouldn't admit that on his deathbed,” Chet said.

“No, that's not true. He wouldn't jeopardize the patients,” Roy asserted.

The commercials were over and everyone settled down to enjoy more Olympic coverage. Everyone except Johnny.

By late evening, the Olympics were over and the crew shuffled off to the dorm to get some sleep. Roy stood and looked at Johnny, who was still sleeping soundly on the couch. He turned and followed the others to the dorm where he retrieved Johnny's turnouts and boots, and a blanket, then returned to the kitchen. He lifted his partner's legs up onto the sofa and pulled him into a more recumbent position, then placed the turnouts on the floor beside the couch. He finished by draping the blanket over the sleeping man. Satisfied, he retired for the night, barely opening his eyes when Johnny stumbled into the room a few hours later, turnouts in hand.

At 4:13 a.m., the klaxons sounded and light flooded the dorm, rousing the sleeping crew. Roy sat up and quickly stepped into his boots, noticing immediately his partner in the bed opposite him, doing the same, but still clad in his daylight uniform. As the announcer summoned the engine to a vehicle fire in an alley, the two paramedics relaxed while the engine crew scrambled out of the room to board the engine and respond.

“I guess that's not us,” Roy stated sleepily.

Johnny grunted a response and slowly pulled his right foot back out of the boot he'd donned. He sat on the edge of the bed, rumped in his wrinkled clothing and shivering visibly.

“You okay?” Roy asked, eyeing him through tired eyes. Not only was Johnny shaking, but also his face bore a gray cast and his eyes were rimmed with dark circles. He looked at Roy with a vacant expression. “Johnny?”

A noise escaped from Johnny's throat and he gasped, clamping a hand over his mouth as he rose and stumbled to the latrine.

Roy sighed and massaged his brow as he listened to the unmistakable sounds coming from the bathroom. He eased himself off the bed and padded in to see if he could be of any assistance.

Johnny was sitting on the floor, shaking and breathing deeply. Roy grabbed a washcloth and wet it, offering it to his friend. Johnny swiped it over his face and wiped his mouth.

“Th-thanks,” he croaked.

“Let’s get you off that cold floor,” Roy suggested, grasping the hand that Johnny held out and reaching under his arm to pull him up. He could feel intense heat radiating from the sick man.

“Johnny, you’re burning up.” Once he had Johnny standing, albeit unsteadily, Roy placed an appraising hand on his partner’s forehead. “Yup. You got something.”

“No k-kidding,” Johnny whispered.

“Come on. Back to bed. I’ll call us in unavailable.” Roy started to lead him back to the dorm.

“Yeah...you better.” Johnny shuddered as a draft from the air conditioning hit him. “I jus’ better g-go home, I guess.”

“Hang on; I want to check you out,” Roy argued. “I’m not sure you’re in any shape to drive yourself home.”

“Nah...iss jus’ the flu or somethin’” Johnny insisted.

“You’re probably right, but humor me anyway.”

Johnny dropped down onto his bunk and groaned, falling heavily onto his pillow. “Oh, man.” He raised his hands to his head.

“Headache?”

“Killer.”

“Wait right here.”

Johnny didn’t reply, but it was obvious he wasn’t going anywhere. Roy went to the microphone and called dispatch to let them know the squad was out of service. Then he went to his locker and pulled on a pair of slacks before retrieving the drug box from the squad.

Roy set the drug box on his bunk and got out the thermometer. Johnny still lay on his back, his left forearm resting on his forehead, his blanket pulled up over him. He stared glassily at the ceiling.

“Okay, open up,” Roy ordered, wielding the glass cylinder.

As Johnny held the thermometer under his tongue, Roy took his wrist and checked his pulse. Had he been more awake, he might have noticed the splotchy redness of Johnny’s hand.

“Rrr thss nt nssry,” Johnny mumbled around the thermometer.

“Humor me.” He laid Johnny’s hand down and plucked the thermometer out of his mouth and studied it. “Pulse is 90. Temperature is 102. No wonder you feel like crap.”

“Hmm,” Johnny assented. He shifted on the bunk and moaned.

“Fever, nausea, headache, rapid pulse. Maybe I should call Rampart,” Roy said.

“No!” Johnny raised himself up on his elbows. “Jus’ gimme some aspirin and lemme go home.” He struggled to sit up, wincing with pain. “Better yet, I’ll get my own aspirin. At home.”

“Okay, look. I won’t call it in. But just lie back until the engine gets back, and I’ll take you home.”

Johnny was too busy fighting off the dizzy spell that hit when he sat up to protest as Roy gently eased him back to a lying position. Roy disappeared into the washroom and returned a minute later with a glass of water and two tablets. Johnny again raised himself on one elbow to take the aspirin.

“Meanwhile, we might as well get a little more sleep,” Roy added as he went to shut off the lights. Returning to his bunk, he couldn’t tell if Johnny was asleep or awake; it was too dark. But he’d grown awfully quiet and Roy surmised he was already asleep.

Half an hour or so later, Roy awoke to the sound of coughing. Johnny was stirring restlessly in bed, coughing dryly and swallowing noisily. Roy reached up and switched on the bedside lamp.

Johnny’s eyes snapped open and he emitted a telltale groan as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and strained to get up. As soon as he was upright, he threw up onto the floor, losing the water and aspirin he’d ingested earlier.

Roy was up quickly, grabbing towels and another wet washcloth. He returned to find Johnny still sitting and shaking. Johnny looked up wanly.

“S-sorry, Roy,” he rasped.

“Don’t worry about it,” Roy said calmly. “I guess that aspirin isn’t going to do you any

good on the floor.”

He handed Johnny the washcloth and reached for the blanket, draping it over Johnny’s shoulders. Roy placed his palm on Johnny’s forehead again. “You’re getting warmer, I think.”

“I’m really s-sorry,” Johnny apologized, eyeing the mess on the floor and shaking his head slowly.

They heard the engine backing into the station then, and the voices of the crew disembarking from it. Hank was the first one into the dorm.

“I saw the light on. What’s up?” he asked.

“Cap, Johnny’s pretty sick. I had to make us unavailable. He needs to go home,” Roy reported.

The captain surveyed the scene. “What is it? You gonna be okay, Pal?”

Johnny nodded tightly. “Jus’ the flu, Cap. Feel like hell.” He smiled unconvincingly.

“Roy, just get him home. I’ll get someone else to clean this up,” Hank said. He gazed appraisingly at the forlorn figure shivering on the bunk, clutching the blanket tightly.

“Okay, let me get halfway dressed, at least. Cap, can you arrange for someone to bring Johnny’s car over to his place after the shift?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Kay, good...” Roy bustled about, getting his shoes on and gathering his belongings. Hank met him in the locker room as he was stuffing his dirty uniform into a sack. The sounds of water splashing inside the shower stall filled the area and billows of steam rolled out of the space above the shower door.

“What do *you* think’s wrong with him?” the captain queried.

“Probably what he said. Nasty flu bug,” Roy answered.

“Did you check him out at all?”

“I took his temperature and pulse. He’s got a fever of over 102. He’s got to be feeling pretty lousy,” Roy said sympathetically.

“No kidding. You think he’s okay, though?”

“I think he just needs to sleep it off. It’s probably the same thing Chavez had.”

Hank clapped Roy on the shoulder. "Okay, you're the doc. Maybe he'll be over it by next shift."

"I think so. Chavez was only sick for 24 hours."

"Just long enough for you to get stuck with Brice during Gage's vacation," Hank said with a sly grin.

"Don't remind me," Roy mumbled.

The shower silenced and out stepped Chet with a towel around his waist, his hair dripping wet. He observed Roy's actions as he soft-footed over to his own locker. "Hey, it's not quittin' time yet."

"I'm taking Johnny home. He's sick."

"Gage is sick?" Chet asked with disbelief. Just as Roy began to think Chet was genuinely concerned, the Irishman exclaimed, "Whatever it is, I hope I don't get it!"

"He'll be touched by your concern," Roy commented wryly.

"Just for that, Kelly, there's a mess in the dorm with your name on it," Hank said. Roy chuckled.

"A mess? What kind of—oh, no! He didn't!" Chet's shoulders slumped in resignation. "He did, didn't he?"

"Yup. And hop to it, would ya?" Hank ordered.

"Don't worry, Chet," Roy soothed. "It's not that bad."

"Yeah, but how *good* can it be?" Chet grouched.

Roy pulled his car into a parking spot near Johnny's apartment entrance. Dawn was just breaking, the building reflecting the purplish cast of the sky at daybreak. Roy moved the gearshift into "park" and glanced over at his partner.

Johnny sat huddled in the passenger seat, trembling and gripping the blanket he still held around his shoulders. He blinked tiredly.

"You need some help getting inside?" Roy asked.

“Nah...I can make it.” He reached a shaky hand towards the door handle and released the latch, swinging the door open slowly. He proceeded to shift one foot to the outside.

“Are you sure?” Roy didn’t like the way Johnny seemed to be deteriorating so quickly. “Maybe I should at least get you settled.”

Johnny’s mind recollected the state of the apartment he’d left nearly 24 hours earlier. Having returned from his trip exhausted, he’d dumped his belongings in a heap and gone straight to bed. *At least now I know why I was so beat. I can’t let Roy see the place like that.* He summoned the last shreds of energy he could and began to climb out of the car a little faster. “No, no...’s okay.”

“Do you have plenty of fluids?” Roy queried.

Johnny tried to think. He’d been out of the apartment so much in the past week he couldn’t remember what he did and didn’t have. He knew he hadn’t been to the store since the trip, though. “Yeah,” he answered vaguely. “I got some stuff. Don’t worry. I’m sure I just need some sleep.”

“If it’s what Chavez had, you’ll be fine by tomorrow,” Roy offered.

Johnny frowned, perplexed. “Cha...Chavez? He was suppose’ to—“

Roy nodded, grinning. “Right. I had to work with Brice instead.”

“Oh, man...Roy, ‘m sorry.” Johnny struggled to keep his eyes open even as he stood leaning against Roy’s car looking in.

“Hey, it’s not your fault. But you’d better be back at work next shift, that’s all I got to say,” he warned gently. He noticed Johnny shudder and pull the blanket more tightly around him, even though it was a balmy summer morning. Johnny’s complexion looked pale in the unnatural pre-dawn light. “Hey, you’d better get inside before you collapse. Oh, and call me if you need anything.”

Johnny only nodded, sighing, as he pushed off from the car and slowly dragged himself to the building. Everything hurt. In fact, if he’d been asked, he’d have sworn even his hair hurt. He dug into his pocket for the key to his apartment.

Roy watched to make sure Johnny got in all right before backing out to leave.

Johnny entered his apartment with leaden steps. The closed up space had a vaguely musty smell despite the air conditioning. He stopped just inside the entrance and scanned the combination living-dining room. Aside from the heap of gear he’d

dropped in one corner, the place was actually fairly orderly. He'd left it that way prior to his trip. Johnny hated to return to a messy apartment.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and made his way unsteadily into the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator door, Johnny shuddered when the draft of cool air hit him. He studied the appliance's contents. *One out of date carton of milk -- yuck. A can of V-8 and a can of apple juice. Beer.* The thought of the ale made him gag. *Sheesh...not too good.*

Johnny pulled out the apple juice and filled a glass half full. He topped it off with tap water and sipped it. Replacing the juice into the fridge, he shuffled towards the bedroom, clutching the glass. A wave of dizziness swept over him halfway down the hall. He paused to steady himself against the wall. Johnny checked the thermostat and found it set at seventy-six degrees. Even at that, he felt cold, and turned it up to eighty. He continued on to his bedroom where he stripped off his pants and pulled on a pair of sweats. He took another swig of the diluted juice. The cloying sweetness of it repelled him and his face reflected it.

Another chill swept through him. He raised the back of his hand to the side of his cheek and felt the exaggerated warmth radiating from his skin. *I haven't had a fever this bad since that stupid monkey virus.* He plodded to the bathroom, a mere few feet away, to relieve himself before climbing into bed. Johnny glimpsed his reflection in the mirror. *A little green, but that's to be expected.* At that moment, his stomach roiled painfully, sore from its earlier contractions, and Johnny pivoted just in time to position himself over the commode for another bout of vomiting.

Spent and gasping, he sunk down onto the edge of the tub and cradled his aching head in his hands. His pulse hammered like a drum, piercing his skull with each beat. *Gotta get to bed, get some sleep...that's what I need...healing sleep.*

He pushed himself to his feet, squeezing his eyes shut against the vertigo that resulted. He quickly relieved himself as he'd come to do, and weakly trudged to his bed. Collapsing onto it, Johnny nestled into the covers seeking warmth. His back spasmed painfully and he emitted an involuntary groan. Settling onto his side, his knees bent, he pulled the blankets up to the level of his exposed ear and let his heartbeat lull him to sleep.

Roy inserted the key into the deadbolt of his front door and turned it slowly. He eased the door open as quietly as he could and entered the welcoming quiet of his home. He trudged up the stairs wearily and went to his bedroom, where Joanne was still sleeping soundly.

Roy sat on the edge of the bed and removed his shoes. He unbuckled his belt and

slipped it off. He studied the form of his sleeping wife, debating about whether to disturb her or not. He slipped beneath the covers as unobtrusively as he could, but she detected his presence and stirred.

“Go back to sleep,” Roy whispered.

Joanne turned and blinked awake. “Roy?” she said sleepily. Her eyes opened wider. “Did I oversleep?” She turned to look at the clock on the nightstand.

“Shhh, no. It’s early,” he said.

“Wh-...what are you doing home so early?”

“I had to take Johnny home. Cap said to go on home.”

“What’s wrong with Johnny?” Joanne asked through a yawn.

“He’s sick. Got that flu that’s goin’ around.”

“Oh, wonderful. Next it’ll be you, and then the kids,” Joanne groused.

“And when it is, will you take care of me?” Roy asked pitifully.

“Hmph! Let Johnny. He’ll owe you.”

Roy nodded his agreement. “That he will.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Joanne stated. “Is he really sick?”

“Fever, chills, the usual. He threw up in the dorm. Cap made Chet clean it up.” Roy chuckled.

“Johnny’ll never live that down,” Joanne laughed.

“I imagine the phantom will get his revenge,” Roy agreed.

“Poor Johnny. After all, it’s not *his* fault he’s sick.”

“No, it’s really not. And Johnny being Johnny, if it’s going around, he’ll get it. In spades.”

“Maybe you should call him later and see if he needs anything,” Joanne suggested.

“Oh, I will. He’ll be fine by tomorrow. Chris Chavez was.”

“That’s good. I don’t look forward to dealing with you after another shift with Brice,”

Joanne teased.

“Dealing with *me*?” Roy shot his wife a wounded look. “Was I that bad?”

“Worse!” she laughed. “Even the kids steered clear!”

Roy sighed. “I didn’t realize I was such a bear.” He searched her eyes for forgiveness.

“Don’t malign the poor bears,” Joanne said with a sly smile.

Roy grabbed his pillow and swatted her playfully on the hip. Joanne yelped, but her outburst was quickly muffled by the passionate kiss Roy planted on her very willing lips. His body gravitated to a superior position over hers as they lingered in the kiss.

Pulling up and away, Roy studied his wife’s face for a clue to his unasked question. The familiar expression on her face was one of loving invitation. Her chest rose and fell with breathless anticipation.

Roy grinned. “So...do you want to go back to sleep, or what?”

Joanne waited a beat, then coyly answered, “What.”

Roy growled as his eager mouth once more descended onto his wife’s lips...neck... chest...

The resounding crack of thunder stirred Johnny from his deep slumber. He blinked awake, unsure of his surroundings. It was fairly dark and he couldn’t remember lying down. His eyes tracked about the room and he recognized it as his own as shadowy furnishings came into focus. *Oh yeah, I’m sick...as a dog. Roy brought me home from the station this morning.* A flash of light at the window preceded another rumble of thunder, and he heard the sound of large raindrops pelting the window at an increasingly accelerated rate.

Johnny turned his head to look at the alarm clock on the bedside table. The slight motion sent spasms of muscle pain through his neck and down his back. He gasped at its intensity. The clock read 4:48. In his fog of confusion, he couldn’t discern whether that meant a.m. or p.m. It was dark enough to be a.m., but that would mean he’d slept almost 24 hours, and he found that hard to swallow. *Well, no matter how long I slept, I don’t feel any better.*

Johnny recognized nature’s call then, and began to summon the strength to get up and answer it. He lay in the near-darkness, beneath a covering of thick blankets, and shivered. Knowing it would not be pleasant but that he had no choice, he threw off the

covers. His legs jerked spasmodically as the shivers intensified. Johnny pushed himself to a sitting position on the bed, confused as to why that action would cause the thunder outside to suddenly escalate. It was only when the pain registered that he recognized the “thunder” was actually his own pulse sounding loudly in his ears. He waited in that position several minutes, fully expecting the pounding in his skull to crack it open at any second.

Sure he'd lose control if he didn't get to the bathroom soon, Johnny forced his legs over the side of the bed. His body tensed in convulsive shivers and he awkwardly rose to make his way jerkily to the bathroom. Halfway there, his vision narrowed precipitously accompanied by a roar in his head, and he faltered, nearly collapsing to the floor. Grabbing the edge of his bureau for support, Johnny managed to stay upright. He rested there, his head cradled on his forearm as he regained his equilibrium. He fumbled around the wall to switch on the bathroom light, theorizing, however illogically, that light would prevent a recurrence of the near-syncope.

The ordinary light of the bathroom seemed like a floodlight, illuminating everything to an exaggerated degree. Johnny squinted tightly as he shuffled into the small space. He sat on the commode, not trusting himself to stand. He draped his arm on the vanity and rested his forehead on it. Sometime later, he startled, not sure if he'd been daydreaming or actually sleeping. He stood unsteadily and pulled up his sweatpants, damp with the sweat of his raging fever. *No wonder I'm cold. My clothes are wet. I should have dried them better,* his confused mind concluded.

Johnny idly contemplated changing into dry clothes, but only for a minute. As he made his way back to bed in a near blind trance, all thoughts but those of glorious sleep slipped away. He knew he'd reached his destination when he clumsily bumped into the bed, and he eagerly dove into its welcoming warmth and comfort. The effort he'd exerted on his short journey had exhausted him, and he lay, spent and panting, the drumming of the rain on the bedroom window keeping time with the pounding in his head as he sank into oblivion.

Roy slammed the receiver back into its cradle. “It's still dead.”

“That doesn't mean you have to break it, too,” Joanne admonished.

Roy sighed. “I just wanted to give Johnny a quick call and see how he's doing.” Roy stood and stared out the sliding glass door at the deluge of rain flooding his back yard.

“I'm sure the phone will be back in service soon.”

“It's been out for an hour,” Roy complained.

“The storm is already letting up. It’ll come back on soon,” Joanne asserted.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Roy strode to the counter by the garage door and scooped up his keys. “I think I’ll head over there for a few minutes.”

“Roy, I’m sure he’s fine. You said yourself this is a short-lived thing. He’s probably sleeping it off,” Joanne said.

“Yeah, but I feel bad that I didn’t make sure he had what he needed this morning. What if he’s out of aspirin or something?”

Joanne smiled, knowing she’d lost the argument. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about Johnny too; she just sometimes felt that the two partners went a little overboard with the concern. She realized that probably went with the paramedic territory, however. “Okay, go ahead. But try to be back by 7:00. We’ll have supper late.”

“Sure, hon.” He leaned to peck his wife on the cheek before ducking out the side door and dashing through the rain to his car.

Joanne watched out the window as her husband climbed in his car and drove off into the torrential downpour. *Johnny’s all right, you’ll see. It’s just the flu.* As Roy’s taillights disappeared around the first corner, she turned away, a niggling doubt making its presence known in the back of her mind.

Roy veered his small car into the parking lot of Johnny’s apartment building. The Land Rover was still in the same spot that Chet had left it this morning. The rain was lessening now, coming down in a light shower. The clouds also seemed to be dissipating, lightening the sky considerably. Roy walked briskly to the building entrance. Once inside, he climbed the stairs to the second floor hallway and stopped in front of Johnny’s door. Listening intently, he could hear sounds coming from the apartment behind him, but his partner’s home seemed quiet. Roy ventured a soft rap on the door.

He pressed his ear against the door and listened for footsteps or any sign of life. Johnny usually had the TV on when he was home. Hearing nothing and figuring Johnny was asleep, Roy fished his key ring out of his pocket and quietly let himself in.

The apartment was dark and quiet. The hum of the refrigerator could be heard in the stillness. Roy entered the kitchen and switched on the overhead light. The kitchen was neat and orderly, with only a single glass sitting beside the sink. He opened the refrigerator and noted its sparse contents. *I knew he needed stuff. There’s hardly anything to drink here. Soon as I check on him, I’ll make a quick run to the corner market and stock him up on some liquids.*

Roy shut the fridge and started down the short hallway, then stopped and doubled back. He hadn't even looked in the living room. It wasn't unusual for Johnny to sack out on the couch during daytime naps or when he was under the weather, and Roy hadn't even glanced in there yet.

Peering over the back of the couch and finding it unoccupied, Roy then proceeded to Johnny's room. It occurred to him that his sudden appearance might startle his friend, so he began calling out before getting to the door.

"Johnny? Hey Johnny, it's me, Roy."

The bedroom was dark, the blinds shut against the late afternoon storm. Roy flipped on the hall light and went in, approaching the blanket-covered figure on the bed. He could hear Johnny's soft, regular breathing now and he smiled in spite of himself. *Joanne's right. He's fine and I'm just going to end up disrupting his rest.* Roy leaned in close to try to get a look at his partner's face. Johnny had the heavy covers pulled up high, to his jaw-line, and his body was curled in a semi-fetal position. Roy realized that, in his lightweight slacks and short sleeved shirt, it felt comfortable to slightly warm in the room. Yet Johnny was huddled beneath a pile of blankets. *Fever must be pretty high.* Roy tentatively reached his hand toward Johnny's cheek. Within an inch of contact, he could feel the heat radiating from the sick man's face. He placed the backs of his fingers lightly against the hot flesh and pursed his lips in chagrin. *Very high.*

Johnny jerked and drew in a sharp intake of breath at the touch. He shifted in the bed, straightening his legs. The motion elicited a weak moan.

"Johnny, it's me. It's just me," Roy spoke softly.

In the swath of light created by the hall fixture, Johnny's face was illuminated as he blinked awake.

"Roy?" he rasped.

"Yeah, it's me. I just came over to see how you're doing" Roy said. He eased down onto the edge of the bed. "Sorry to wake you."

Johnny groaned miserably. He attempted to push himself to a semi-sitting position, but as soon as his arms left the warmth of the covers he shuddered. "S'all right. I been... sleepin' a long time," Johnny said hoarsely. He squinted, trying to read the clock.

"Here, let me get this pillow for you." Roy reached for the second pillow on the far side of the bed, and carefully wedged it beneath Johnny's pillow, elevating his head and shoulders slightly. "How's that?"

Johnny's face was pinched in discomfort, but he didn't let on. "Tha's good." He raised

the back of his hand to his brow and rubbed it back and forth.

“How’s your fever been? Have you taken your temperature?” Roy asked concernedly.

“Uh...” Johnny sighed. “Don’t have a...thermom’ter.”

Roy smiled. *If anyone should know the importance of a thermometer as part of a normal household’s contents, a paramedic should.* “Well, then, have you taken any aspirin? You feel pretty warm.”

Johnny lowered his hand and looked at Roy blankly.

“Johnny?”

Johnny studied the clock’s face again. *5:30...in the morning? What’s Roy doing here at this hour? Did I take aspirin?*

Roy’s concern deepened. “Johnny, are you okay?”

“I...I think...” Johnny’s rheumy eyes roamed over his patterned bedspread. He frowned. “Roy, is it 5:30?”

Roy checked the clock. He nodded slowly as he answered. “Yeaah.” *What’s with you, anyway?* “Johnny, can you see okay?” Roy felt foolish asking, but why else would Johnny be questioning the time with the clock right beside him?

Johnny laughed weakly. He shook his head in self-deprecation. “Yeah, yeah...I can see. ‘M jus’...not quite awake.”

Roy smiled, vastly relieved. “Well, no wonder. You’ve been sacked out all day, looks like.”

“Uh-huh...tha’s me. Lazy, good fer nothin’...” Johnny coughed dryly, the action sending searing pains through seemingly every nerve ending he possessed. He grimaced.

“You bringing anything up with that, Johnny?” Roy asked worriedly.

Johnny shook his head, his features still contorted. “Nah,” he whispered. “S’nothing.”

“Let me get you something to drink.” Roy got up and headed to the kitchen.

Johnny closed his eyes and laid his head back, and wondered how long that buzzing sound had been in his brain. He didn’t remember it from before. It almost distracted him from the torturous muscle aches that engulfed his entire being, however. Another shiver passed through him and he gritted his teeth. The tensing of his muscles only

accentuated the aches he felt.

Roy came back in and noticed the tension in his friend. Truth be told, he was a little disconcerted to find Johnny still obviously so sick. He'd expected improvement by this time, based on the experiences of the other guys who'd had the bug. "Here ya go," he said, sitting and offering a glass of apple juice.

Johnny reluctantly slid his arm out from under the blanket and accepted the glass. He had absolutely no desire to drink anything, but he had every desire to reassure Roy he was going to be fine and accept Roy's well-meaning help. Unfortunately, his memory betrayed him. One whiff of the juice caused his stomach to rebel instantly, as that morning's bout with severe nausea made a sudden return appearance. It *had* been apple juice that triggered the previous episode, and it was about to have the same effect again.

Johnny swallowed convulsively and thrust the glass back towards Roy. "I...uh, I...gotta go," he stammered, throwing off the covers and bolting from the bed. He lurched to the bathroom, threw on the light and slammed the door.

Roy sighed as he heard the water begin running full force from the tap. Johnny's retches could still be plainly heard over the running water. He went to the kitchen to dispose of the offending drink, and returned in time to meet Johnny coming out of the bathroom. Spent, weak, and panting, Johnny staggered to the bed and collapsed onto it. Roy helped him get covered up. Johnny threw his left arm over his eyes in a familiar gesture.

"Johnny, I'm...just going to run down and pick up some better drinks for you. I'll be right back. Okay?"

Johnny only nodded weakly in reply.

"You'll be all right?" the senior partner queried.

Johnny nodded again, his eyes still covered by his forearm.

Roy hesitated, but realized he needed to get going. Johnny was no doubt dehydrated and in need of some fluids.

Johnny lowered his arm slowly. His glazed eyes roamed upward until he focused on Roy standing near the foot of the bed. He smiled wanly. "Hey, thanks...for comin' over."

"It's no problem. I'm just sorry you're not feeling any better yet." He noticed the dark shadows around Johnny's tired eyes and the pallor of his face. *Not looking well at all.*

Johnny shrugged slightly. "Just gonna take a little...while longer. I don' do anything

halfway, y'know." He blinked slowly, fatigue overtaking him.

"Yeah, I know."

Johnny's eyes were almost closed now. "I'll pro'ly be asleep when you come back," he murmured.

"You'll probably be asleep before I get out the door," Roy observed.

Johnny's mouth quirked into a half smile, his eyes now closed.

"I'll check on you tomorrow," Roy said.

"Kay...I mean, no...I'll call...if I need anything." Johnny's face relaxed into the peaceful look of sleep.

By the time Roy got to the convenience store, picked up a few bottles of 7UP, Gatorade and Coke, and lugged the load out to his car, the rain had stopped. In fact, a few rays of sunshine were trying to peek through the cloud cover. Roy dumped the heavy sacks in the passenger seat and floorboard before sliding behind the wheel for the short drive to Johnny's.

When he let himself into the apartment, it was as quiet as when he'd left. He figured that was a good sign; at least Johnny was peaceful, and, hopefully, sleeping. He set the bottles down on the countertop and began situating them in the refrigerator. He kept out one bottle of the sports drink and poured half a glass, and diluted it with a small amount of water. He found an ice cube tray in the freezer and released two of the cubes, placing them in the drink. Once finished, he crept down the hallway to check on Johnny.

Johnny was asleep, in almost the same position that Roy had found him the first time. The senior paramedic approached the bed slowly to determine if his sick friend was just resting or deeply asleep. He didn't want to wake him, necessarily; but he wanted to give him a chance to make last-minute requests before Roy left.

"Johnny?" Roy whispered. But the sleeping form on the bed didn't stir, and the slow, even breathing continued without change.

Roy set the glass down on the nightstand, chewed his lip a minute in indecision before entering the bathroom. He opened the medicine cabinet and studied its contents, locating a bottle of aspirin. He plucked it from the shelf and examined it, finding it nearly empty. *It'll be enough to get him through the night. I'll come back tomorrow with*

more. He re-entered the bedroom, setting the medicine down next to the glass. Satisfied he could do no more for now, he quietly left the room and let himself out of the apartment.

Joanne heard the car door slam and peered out the window to see her husband walking up the drive towards the side door. His face was set in a serious, preoccupied expression. She turned away before he entered so he wouldn't know she'd been waiting, and busied herself with setting the table.

Roy walked in wordlessly and tossed his keys on the counter. He opened a cupboard and retrieved a glass, carried it to the refrigerator and poured himself some iced tea.

"Well?" she finally asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

Roy drained the glass of tea and set it down, a faraway look in his eyes.

"Roy? How's Johnny?" she asked more insistently.

"Huh? Oh." He seemed to snap out of his trance. "Not too good, actually. I thought he'd be doing a lot better by now, but he's got a high fever and he's still throwing up."

Joanne frowned sympathetically. "Could you do anything for him?"

"I went out and got him some more fluids. He didn't have much in his apartment. Other than that, no, I really couldn't do much. He seemed to be mostly intent on sleeping, anyway."

"Well, I know I wasn't exactly in favor of you going over there and mother-henning him, but I'm glad now that you went," Joanne said. "It sounds like he really did need some help."

"Yeah, he did." Roy shook his head slightly. "I'm not convinced he's going to sail through the night, either. He was burning up." The more Roy thought about it, the worse he felt. Johnny was really sick and had no one to check on him or help him. Roy recalled the pallor on Johnny's face, the weakness he displayed when he staggered to and from the bathroom. And, although he couldn't prove it, Johnny had seemed slightly disoriented. It could have been from his long period of sleep, but it could also be a sign of something more serious, like a dangerously high fever. *I have no idea what his temperature actually was.*

"Are you wanting to go back later?" Joanne asked pointedly.

Roy felt torn. He was worried about Johnny but he also wondered if he was being over-reactive. "Ah...no. He'll call if he needs anything. I'll go see him tomorrow."

Joanne nodded. Although relieved, she could sense Roy's concern, and it didn't ease her mind much. She finished placing the flatware beside the plates as she thought about her husband's skill and knowledge. Roy seemed to have an innate sense about his patients, a talent that contributed to his exemplary status as one of L.A.'s best paramedics. And even though Johnny wasn't technically one of his patients, that ability would still be in effect, just as it was when he tended to one their kids during their myriad ailments. She smiled as her respect and pride for her husband's virtues welling up inside her. She looked him in the eye. "Do what you think is best."

Roy returned the smile gratefully. He no longer felt conflicted. He'd decide what to do after dinner. "Is supper ready? I'm starved."

Johnny slowly regained consciousness and peeled his leaden eyes open. The room was dark. The glow from the bedside clock was the only illumination. 7:37.

He lay shivering, despite the heavy blankets covering him. *I must be on a block of ice...I feel chilled to the bone.* The muscle spasms were acutely painful, especially in his lower back. He continued to lie there a few minutes longer, willing himself to at least reach up and switch on the lamp. Even that minor task seemed insurmountable. *I gotta get warm...I can't stand this...*

An idea suddenly occurred to him; one that held immense appeal: a hot bath. His imagination conjured up the inviting sensation of floating weightlessly in a tub full of soothing hot water. He knew it would give him the warmth he craved, and probably ease his sore muscles as well. The anticipation of it was the impetus he needed to move. Sliding his left arm out from beneath the comforter, he stretched upward to turn on the light. The ambient air felt frigid to his hot forearm and his entire body shuddered in response. The light stabbed his eyes painfully and he squinted against its intrusion. Johnny noticed a glass of liquid on the bedside table and wondered how it got there. *That's right...Roy was here. Sometime. When was that? Man, I'm totally confused. I don't even know what day it is. Should I be at work?*

He sat up, reached over and lifted the glass, which felt surprisingly heavy in his weak grasp. He raised it slowly to his lips, but the cold wet glass slipped through his fingers, leaving a puddle of green Gatorade pooling in his lap and running down his legs. The glass shattered on the floor near his feet and he jerked away reflexively. His shivering intensified. Johnny just stared at the mess, too tired to even contemplate cleaning it up. *Gotta pick up the glass. Gotta get outta these clothes!*

Slowly he forced himself to stand, fighting the dizziness that threatened to engulf him.

Being careful to avoid the glass, he shuffled sluggishly to his bureau, holding onto every piece of furniture between the bed and it. With great effort he pulled open a drawer and grabbed a clean pair of sweatpants. Unceremoniously, he stripped off his shorts and boxers. He attempted to pull on the clean pants, but lost his balance, nearly falling to the floor. He caught himself by grabbing the edge of the bureau, but not before he banged his hip hard into the open edge of the drawer. He shuffled back to the bed, pants in hand. He forgot about the broken glass until the shard dug into his heel. He howled in pain as he balanced precariously on the edge of the bed, dropping the clean sweats next to him. Blood ran from the cut on his heel, staining the rug. Slowly, he pulled on the pants, ignoring his bloody heel. Energy spent, he collapsed back onto the bed, all thoughts of the mess on the floor, the warm bath and the cut heel pushed aside. Too tired to even pull up the blankets, he curled into a ball and shivered uncontrollably. *I'm dying!* he thought a bit melodramatically.

"That was great, hon. Thank you." Roy dropped his fork and knife on his clean plate and sat back. Joanne smiled.

"I put coffee on."

"Even better!" He smiled at his wife. "We should call the kids for dessert." Both children had eaten their meal and been excused from the table, allowing the married couple a few moments of welcomed peace. "I think after dessert..."

"...you'll take a ride and check on Johnny."

Roy grinned. "Read my mind." His expression turned serious. "You don't mind, do you?"

"God, Roy, how can I mind you caring about your friend?" Joanne dropped her fork on her plate and stared at her husband. Roy shrugged self-consciously.

"I thought you would think I'm over-reacting."

Joanne smiled. "You probably are, but better safe than sorry. Besides, you'd just sit and worry about him all night." She stood up and began to clear the dishes. "And, by the way, I love that about you."

He stood up and grabbed her from behind, eliciting small protests as his one hand playfully groped her breast. "And I love everything about you."

Joanne giggled as she wriggled out of his arms. "Don't start anything you can't finish, Mister." She moved to the sink to put down the dishes.

Roy laughed as he moved behind her, embracing her in a playful bear hug. "Well, maybe when I get back-"

A loud thumping noise from the hallway interrupted him.

“What the hell?” He and Joanne turned quickly and were both moving to the kitchen archway when they heard a howl of pain followed by crying. The frightened parents rushed to find the source.

“Oh dear God!” Joanne said, stopping abruptly when she saw her eight-year-old son lying at the bottom of the stairs, clutching his right arm.

Roy was already in full paramedic mode. He surmised by the strange way the limb was bent that Chris had most likely fallen down the stairs and broken his arm. He turned to his wife. “Get my keys. I’m going to take him to Rampart!”

The trip to Johnny’s was all but forgotten.

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It was hours later when Roy returned home from the hospital. The ER had been backed up and he and Chris had waited half the night for treatment. Chris had fractured his arm, but luckily, it was a clean break. He was sporting a new cast, already signed by Dr. Morton, three nurses and the orthopedic resident. Already the experience was turning into an adventure for Chris, who couldn’t wait to show the kids at the playground. His parents were not quite as thrilled by the turn of events.

Roy turned his key in the lock and led the child into the house. He had insisted Joanne stay behind with Jen, and although he had called her from the hospital with updates, the anxious mother was waiting up for their return.

“Six weeks,” Roy stated to his wife. “Then, he’ll be good as new.”

“Look, Mom,” Chris held up his cast. “People signed it. Want to sign it, Mom?”

She smiled, glad to see her son in one piece. “You bet, but it’ll wait till morning. Bed, young man.”

Roy watched tiredly as she led their oldest up the steps. Only then did his mind drift to thoughts of his sick partner. He followed Joanne upstairs. “Did Johnny call?”

“No,” Joanne answered.

Roy nodded then hurried into the bedroom. He picked up the phone, then looked at the clock and reconsidered. It was way after midnight. *Surely, Johnny would have called if he needed anything. Well, it’s been longer than twenty-four hours. I bet the fluids and aspirin kicked in. I’ll check on him tomorrow.* He put the phone back on the hook and got ready for bed, emotionally drained from the evening.

Joanne walked into the room, opening a drawer to retrieve a nightgown. "I was so worried."

Roy nodded, following this with a yawn. "Thank God it was a clean break. He'll be fine, mom."

Joanne nodded. "When I saw him, lying at the bottom of those steps..." She shuddered.

Roy stood up and removed his shirt and pants. He padded to his wife's side and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "If this is the worst thing that happens to them..."

"...we'll be lucky," she finished.

Roy nodded. "I'm going to get some aspirins. I got a killer headache."

"I hope it's not the flu!" Joanne said.

Roy shook his head, yawning again. "I'm just tired. Long night."

"Well, I won't keep you up tonight." She walked over to the bed and turned down the covers.

"Too bad," Roy laughed. "I do so like when you keep me up."

She giggled as he climbed into bed beside her. "Raincheck?"

"Raincheck!" He kissed her goodnight and rolled over. His ears were tickling and his throat was starting to ache. He sighed. *If I get the flu, I'll kill Johnny!*

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The night passed in a daze for Johnny. Fever dreams held him in their grasp. At one point, he was sure that a giant rat had entered his room and was chewing his foot. He could feel his heel throbbing but he was powerless to move. At some point, he became lucid enough to remember the broken glass incident. Pains hit him low in the gut. He rolled slowly across to the other side of the bed, practically crawling to the bathroom. The next hour had found him sitting on the cold porcelain toilet while he dry heaved into the trashcan. Finally, he managed to stand up, hoping he had the energy to return to bed.

The paramedic in him knew he needed fluids, but the thought of making the trip to the kitchen was unbearable. He settled for turning on the tap and drinking from a small Dixie cup. He managed to swallow three cupfuls before his stomach rebelled. Luckily, he was able to hold the water down. He leaned against the sink, contemplating the

long trek back to his bed. He considered sitting on the tile floor and remaining there until the next stomachache hit or death claimed him, but in the end, he opted for the pillows and blankets. Slowly, he turned and shuffled back to his bed. *This is worse than the monkey virus!* He groaned as the simple act of tugging on the blanket initiated an eruption of back spasms. He closed his eyes, praying that the morning would bring a respite from these symptoms.

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A hacking cough awoke Roy the next day. He sat up in bed trying to clear his throat. His head felt funny, foggy. He groaned.

Joanne opened her eyes as Roy's coughing woke her. She studied her husband. He was very pale, yet his cheeks were rosy. She reached her hand up to his forehead. It was warm.

"Roy," she started.

"Don't say it."

"You're sick."

He frowned. Two seconds later he hurried from the bed and into the bathroom.

Joanne grimaced at the telltale retching noises. She threw off the covers and went to get her robe. Between Chris's broken arm and Roy's illness, it was gearing up to be a long day.

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"How much?" Chet Kelly asked the delivery boy as he took his square cardboard box. The aroma of the spicy pizza wafted from the cardboard, causing Chet's stomach to growl with hunger.

"\$6.50," the kid answered.

Chet placed the box on the floor, then took money from his pocket. Peeling a wad of ones off the roll, he counted out seven dollars. "Keep the change."

The kid stared at the money with a frown. "Thanks, man," he said sarcastically. As he turned to leave, he mumbled, "Cheapskate."

Chet closed the door and picked up his pizza. He carried it to the coffee table and plopped it down. With anticipation, he opened the cardboard lid. Inside laid an entire pepperoni and sausage pizza.

Chet dove in eagerly, ripping apart a cheesy slice. He had just folded the slice in half and was ready to take a bite when the phone rang. He glanced from the phone to the slice and back, finally dropping the pizza back in the box and answering the phone.

“Hello?”

“Chet?” Roy rasped.

“DeSoto? You sound weird.”

“Flu,” Roy answered. “I’m feeling better than this morning, though.”

Chet snorted. “Guess you’d like to hang Gage about now. I just hope I don’t catch it.”

Roy’s sigh was audible through the phone line. “That’s what I like about you, Chet. Your compassion.”

“I hate being sick,” Chet answered. “It hasn’t been any fun since I moved away from Mom. No one to wait on me.”

“Speaking of,” Roy interjected. “I wanted to check on Johnny today, but I can’t. I called a few times but there’s no answer. Can you go check on him?”

“Why?” Chet asked. “It it’s a twenty-four hour bug, he should be better by now. Maybe he’s out running errands.”

“He was really sick the other night. Really sick,” Roy emphasized. “I’d just feel better if someone checked on him.”

“Okay, okay,” Chet sighed. “I’ll get a hold of him.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chet answered. “See ya.” He hung up the phone and went back to his pizza. *I’ll just eat my pie...then give Johnny a call. Man, that DeSoto! He’s such a worrywart!*

A couple of hours later, his stomach satiated, Chet sat on the couch snoring softly, his television blaring in the background.

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The buzzing and ringing in his head awoke Johnny. It took him a minute to realize that while the buzzing was in his head, the ringing was coming from the telephone. By the time he disentangled himself from the mussed bed-sheets, the ringing had stopped. He lay there panting, his head pounding, his heel throbbing. Every part of his body

ached dully. His hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat.

Slowly, he rolled out of bed, vaguely disoriented. He shuffled slowly to the door of his bathroom. Reflexively, he flicked the light switch, squinting at the sudden brightness that sent daggers of pain through his skull. He shielded his eyes with one hand. With the other, he filled another Dixie cup and sipped lukewarm tap water. Opening the medicine cabinet, he searched in vain for aspirin, forgetting that Roy had moved the bottle to his nightstand. A small groan of frustration escaped his throat. He stared at the tub.

Bath, he thought. He turned on the water and stripped clumsily. He climbed into the tub, shivering as the cool water engulfed his limbs. With great effort, he turned up the hot water and sank back down, resting his head on the tile wall. Johnny closed his eyes and drifted into a state of semi-consciousness. Visions of waves and waterfalls danced in his head. He could hear the water washing onto the rocks. The noise startled him awake and he groaned as he realized the bathtub was overflowing. Already a half-inch of water covered the floor.

His hand shook unsteadily as he shut off the water and lifted the drain, nearly sobbing in frustration. He climbed out of the tub, grabbing a towel from the rack. His back spasmed and the pain intensified as he shivered with fever-chills. He threw the towel on the ground, hoping it would sop up some of the water. He walked on wobbly legs to the linen closet and retrieved a few more towels. He wrapped one around his slim waist. The others he tossed around the floor to sop up the water. *Good enough*, he thought, too sick and tired to care.

Johnny directed all of his remaining energy on crossing the bedroom. He knew he needed to grab another pair of sweatpants, and then return to his bed without stepping on the remains of broken glass that still lay by the side of it. Slowly, he began to move one foot unsteadily in front of the other. Halfway there, his rubbery legs gave out and he slid to the floor, shaking. *I need help!*

Slowly, he crawled to the bed table, avoiding the broken glass by sheer luck. He pulled the cord until the phone fell off the table. He propped himself on his elbows and began to dial. He had dialed three numbers when his strength gave out. Head pounding, he curled up on the floor, receiver in hand. He grabbed for the damp towel and wrapped it around his upper body as a dry coughing spell overtook him. Johnny felt like a large vise was constricting his chest. He struggled to catch his breath, lying on the floor panting. Slowly, he drifted back to unconsciousness, the receiver still clutched in his hand.

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Chet Kelly awoke a few hours later, surprised to find the ball game over and the news playing. He opened the pizza box and retrieved a slice of cold pizza. He munched on it as he stretched.

Ooops, he thought. *Forgot about Gage!* He grabbed his phone and dialed, still chewing. When he heard only a busy signal, he hung up. Ten minutes later he called again. *Still busy! Guess he's feeling okay if he can yack on the phone.* Satisfied, he placed the receiver back on the hook, licking the grease from his fingers. He deposited the pizza box into the trash and padded off to bed.

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The next morning found Roy DeSoto feeling one hundred percent better. He smiled to himself as he dressed for work. *I knew it was just a twenty-four hour bug!* He was sure he'd find Johnny over the bug and back on duty also.

He wasn't concerned as he pulled onto the lot and noticed the Land Rover missing. Johnny often arrived after Roy was dressed. He entered the locker room and changed, then headed for the kitchen to grab coffee. As he crossed the bay, he noticed that the squad and engine were out. *Good; time for coffee!* He greeted Mike Stoker and Marco Lopez. Both men were reading the paper. Roy poured a mug of the hot brew and sat at the table, reaching for a section of newspaper.

Roy looked up a few minutes later as Chet entered the room, followed by Hank Stanley. He greeted both men then turned his attention to the Captain.

"Johnny's not out sick, is he?"

Hank shrugged. "He didn't call out. Do you think he's still sick?" he asked, surprised. He expected the paramedic to be recovered by now.

"No," Roy assured him. "In fact, I caught that same bug yesterday. It's definitely a twenty-four hour thing. He must be running late."

"As usual!" Chet chimed in. Roy turned and looked at him.

"How was he yesterday?"

"Huh?" Chet asked, confused.

"Didn't you check on him?" Roy frowned. "I asked..."

"Oh, yeah." Chet filled a mug with coffee. "I called him a few times, but it was busy."

"Well, that was helpful," Roy sniped.

"Come on," Chet replied. "You said yourself this was a twenty-four hour thing. Bet he runs in any minute."

Fifteen minutes later, when Hank called roll, Johnny was still absent. Hank went into his office to call the paramedic's apartment as the others returned to the kitchen. Roy paced the floor, wearing a concerned expression.

"Relax, Roy," Marco advised. "He's probably stuck in traffic. If he was sick, he'd have called in."

"I hope so, Marco." Roy sighed, leaning on a chair. "I haven't seen him that sick since..." He trailed off as Hank Stanley entered the room. "Did you reach him?"

Hank shook his head, his brow furrowed in concern. "His line is busy."

"Still?" Chet asked, catching the anxiety of his co-workers.

Roy frowned and shook his head. "Something is wrong."

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"All right, I telephoned headquarters and Dispatch. They haven't heard from John either. We've been cleared to do a welfare check as long as we stay 10-8," Hank said to his crew. "And the squad is out of service until a replacement for Gage shows up," he added to Roy.

"Good. Just let me grab the drug box and bio-phone and we can go," Roy replied before he disappeared around the side of the squad to retrieve the items.

"Chet, you tried his number again?"

"Still busy." Chet shook his head. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd really screwed up the night before by not taking Johnny's illness seriously enough. He didn't know how he'd face Roy if Gage was in trouble.

"Hey, don't sweat it, Kelly. Imagine how embarrassed Johnny's going to feel when the engine pulls up and we all get off," Mike said.

"Yeah." Chet smiled gamely. He hoped Mike was right.

"You guys wait here. Roy and I'll go in first," Hank directed.

The two men walked to the front door and rang the bell. As they waited, Roy commented, "His Rover's here."

"I noticed." Hank jabbed the doorbell button a second time.

Roy rapped sharply on the door with his knuckles. "Johnny?" He tried again. Impatience showed on his face.

"You have those keys with you?"

Roy dug into his pocket and pulled out a ring of keys. He sorted through until he found the one to Johnny's apartment. "Well, here goes."

They let themselves into the apartment. All the blinds were closed, making it dark and shadowy. "John?" Hank called out.

Roy immediately headed for the bedroom. "Johnny?" he called to announce his presence. He didn't want to startle his friend.

He reached the bedroom, where the smell of sickness filled the stale air, and flipped the switch. His "Oh shit!" could be heard all the way to the living room. "Cap! Back here!"

Hank was already there. "Good Lord." He raised the HT and keyed it. "HT 51 to Engine 51. Bring in the equipment, stat."

Roy knelt beside the unconscious man and felt first for a carotid pulse. ***Be there, be there...come on. *** He sighed with relief upon detecting the faint rapid throb against his fingertips. "He's alive."

"Roy, there's some broken glass around. Be careful." Hank keyed the HT once again. "L.A., this is Engine 51. We have a still alarm at 1608 Marquette, Apt...2K. Man down. Respond an ambulance to our location."

"Let's get him onto the bed."

Chet, Mike and Marco crowded into the small room, carrying the supplies.

"Someone go get the O2," Roy commanded. Chet set the drug box down and retreated.

"How is he, Roy?" Marco asked.

"I don't know. Not good."

Roy maneuvered himself near Johnny's head to reach under his armpits. Hank took Johnny's ankles while Mike reached for his midsection.

"Watch out for glass, Mike. He's laying all over it," Roy cautioned. "Okay, on three. One, two, three!" They lifted in concert, depositing the limp paramedic onto the bed.

Johnny's head lolled limply to one side, clumps of his hair plastered to his face.

"Floor's all wet here, Roy," Mike observed.

Roy's first thought was that Johnny might have voided his bladder. On closer inspection of the towel encircling Johnny's waist, though, it was wet only on the side where his hip lay on the soaked rug.

Roy tilted Johnny's head back to open his airway. He noticed the stark paleness of Johnny's face and the white color of his lips. He leaned in and placed his cheek near Johnny's parted lips, feeling the ever-so-slight wisps of air as Johnny breathed in and out shallowly. "Where's the O2?"

"Here, Roy. I got it." Chet skirted the bed and approached from the opposite side, unfurling the tubing as he went.

"Put him on 15 liters."

Chet applied the non-rebreather mask, lifting Johnny's head to secure the straps. "Roy, he's hotter than hell," the Irishman commented fearfully.

"I can't find a radial pulse, Roy," Mike reported.

"Okay," Roy murmured. That told him Johnny's blood pressure was dangerously low. "Try to get a palpated pressure, will you, Mike?"

Roy inspected Johnny's bare chest and abdomen for any abnormalities. At first glance, all he noticed was the obvious weight loss this illness had wrought, as Johnny's abdomen sunk sharply inward below his ribs. On closer visualization, however, the blotchy red rash on Johnny's stomach jumped out at him. "What's this...this rash?" he said as much to himself as anyone. He touched the skin lightly, feeling for bumps.

"Roy, I noticed his hands are really red," Mike commented. "It kind of tapers off as it goes up." Mike twisted Johnny's arm gently as he reported his observation.

Roy raised Johnny's arm and noticed the spots in the crook of his shoulder. "What the..." He frowned in puzzlement. Roy rolled Johnny onto his side and inspected his back, where he found more evidence of the rash down low. "I've never seen anything like this..." he said thoughtfully.

"What could it be, Roy?" Hank asked.

"I really don't know. An allergic reaction, possibly." Even as he said it, something more sinister tried to emerge from the recesses of his mind, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. As Roy lowered Johnny back down supine, the sick man's limbs stiffened and he squirmed. "Johnny? Johnny, can you hear me? Look at me, Partner!"

A low moan from Johnny accompanied the weak movements. Roy remained fixated on Johnny's face and the stubbornly closed eyes. "Johnny. Wake up. Come on," he prodded firmly.

Johnny's moans took on a more insistent timbre and he thrashed suddenly, flinging his arms outward.

"Whoa!" Roy remarked, placing restraining hands on Johnny's shoulders. "Cap, Marco, watch his legs. He could throw himself off the bed with another one like that."

"Roy, he's got a pretty good cut on his foot here," Hank advised. "Must be from the broken glass."

Roy took a cursory glimpse of the laceration. "Cap, could you...?" He fished in the drug box and tossed a roll of gauze to the captain.

A prolonged groan escaped Johnny's throat as he arched his back off the bed.

"Johnny, wake up. Open your eyes. It's me...it's Roy."

Johnny's eyes fluttered open a fraction but showed no recognition. The dark orbs stared dully at him past heavy lids. His mouth worked to speak but he only mumbled unintelligibly.

Roy nodded. "It's okay, Partner. You'll be okay."

"Grr...Greg?"

Roy looked startled. "Uh...no, Johnny. It's me, Roy."

"I...I...think the...fire...went out....s'cold," Johnny slurred.

"Johnny, it's me, Roy. Do you understand?"

"Roy?" Johnny heaved several deep breaths. "Where...Greg? He...getting wood? Cold..." Johnny coughed persistently for several moments.

Chet cast a worried gaze at Mike, who looked away.

"Where's the bio-phone?" Roy asked.

"Here it is." Hank hoisted the instrument and handed it to Roy, already opened and set up.

"Rampart, this is Squad 51," Roy stated. ***Well, half of it anyway.***

“Go ahead, 51,” Dixie’s smooth voice responded.

“Rampart, we have John Gage here as a patient. He was found unconscious for an unknown period of time. He’s febrile, disoriented, and exhibits a distinct red rash on his trunk and extremities. Upon our arrival, he was lateral recumbent on the floor and unresponsive. Respiratory status was depressed and pulse was palpable only at the carotid. We have him on 15 liters of O2. Pulse is 106 and weak. BP is 80 by palpation. Respirations 25 and shallow. Request permission to start an IV.”

As Roy prepared the infusion, Johnny continued to stare unseeingly. He seemed oblivious to the roomful of people hovering over him. He’d occasionally cough, grimacing in apparent pain with each hack. Roy swabbed the vein and inserted the needle.

“Ooowww,” Johnny complained, tensing. His free hand wandered over to swat at the offending needle but Chet caught him by the wrist before he could compromise the IV. Roy hurriedly attached the tubing and taped the cannula down.

*** At least his reaction to needles is in character, *** the senior medic thought.

The ambulance was waiting. They transferred Johnny to the cot and wheeled him to the door. The draft of air caused by the movement set off a bout of violent shivering in the feverish man, even though the apartment was near 80 degrees.

Roy pulled the sheet up over Johnny’s chest as he walked alongside. Several neighbors stood gawking when they emerged from the apartment. Roy heard the muffled comments. “Isn’t that the fireman?” “Wonder what’s wrong with him?”

“We’ve gotta go 10-8, Roy,” Hank advised with regret. “Keep us posted, will ya?”

Roy’s protective gaze didn’t waver as he watched the attendants load the gurney into the rig. “You got it, Cap.”

In the ambulance, Roy took another set of vital signs. He dug a thermometer from the drug box to try to get a temperature, but he questioned whether his partner was lucid enough to hold the glass bulb under his tongue like he was supposed to without the danger of biting down and shattering it. Roy pulled the oxygen mask down.

“Johnny.”

Johnny blinked, his eyes roving randomly.

“Johnny, I need to take your temperature. Hold this in your mouth, okay?” Roy grasped Johnny’s jaw and opened his mouth as he slid the thermometer past the lower teeth. Johnny stiffened and gagged at the intrusion. “Easy, now. It’s just a thermometer.” He

held it up so the sick man could see. "I need to get your temperature. Do you understand?"

Johnny's dark eyes fixated on the object uncomprehendingly. He raised his untethered hand and weakly batted it away.

"Okay, we'll do it your way," Roy acquiesced. He placed the bulb in Johnny's armpit and positioned the arm to hold it in place, then replaced the oxygen mask on John's face. As he waited for the temp reading, Roy did a more thorough examination. The rash he'd observed in the apartment was even more evident in the brightly-lit confines of the ambulance. The dark red spots dotted his midsection and his hands and feet were almost solid red. Roy retrieved the thermometer and squinted at the mercury. ***103.8 axillary. That's almost 105-core temp. ***

Roy's pulse quickened as he suddenly realized what had been niggling at his mind. ***Rash, high fever...meningitis! Shit, Johnny, you better not have. *** He remembered a few days earlier, at the station, when Johnny had first become ill. ***He complained of a "killer" headache. ***

"Rampart, this is squad 51," he said into the bio-phone. "I have updated information. Patient's axillary temperature is 103.8. Vitals are: pulse, 100. Respirations 24 and non-labored on 15 liters. BP is 85 over 50."

Rampart acknowledged the transmission and inquired as to their ETA. As Roy was finishing the exchange, he noticed Johnny holding his arm up and studying the IV sleepily. Johnny turned questioning eyes to his partner.

"It's okay, Johnny. You're going to be okay. We're almost to the hospital." Roy gently eased Johnny's arm down by his side.

"Wha'...happen'?" Johnny winced as the ambulance hit a bump. He shuddered as a wave of muscle spasms gripped him.

"You're sick but you're gonna be okay. Do you remember anything?" Roy mentally ticked off the pertinent signs of meningitis: rash, decreased level of consciousness, high fever. ***Meningitis is spread by airborne droplets...I haven't been wearing a mask and neither did anyone at Johnny's apartment. We could have all been exposed. ***

"Camping...Greg? No...Roy? A fire? Somethin' 'bout...fire..." Johnny strained to make sense of his circumstances.

"No, no fire. You're sick with a high fever and I'm taking you to the hospital. Your camping trip is over and Greg went home. Do you remember anything else? How'd you get this cut on your foot"

“Cut?...I dunno...so...tired...why’m I...so tired...”

“I know you’re tired. Is anything hurting you?” Roy’s brow furrowed. “Like your neck?”

“Head hur’s...hurt...all over...feel lousy.” He squirmed on the stretcher and closed his eyes.

“Yeah...I bet.” Roy glanced out the rear window and recognized Rampart’s entrance. “We’re here now. It’s gonna be okay.” He gave Johnny’s shoulder a squeeze, but the sick man didn’t respond.

“Dix, what is it?” Brackett asked.

Dixie stood near the base station transmitter, single-mindedly studying the clipboard in her hand. She looked up at the sound of Kel Brackett’s voice.

“It’s 51. Well, it’s Roy. He’s on scene with Johnny as the patient.”

“Johnny? Is he hurt?”

“No, he’s sick. Found unconscious. He’s febrile and disoriented. Low blood pressure... rash. It sounds serious. They started an IV, got him on oxygen. I’m waiting for an update now.”

“A rash and a fever?” Brackett frowned. He reviewed the notes Dixie had taken. Roy’s voice crackled over the radio with the update. “Almost 104 axillary,” Brackett muttered. “Dix, let’s prepare for a lumbar puncture. Oh, get x-ray down here. I want some pictures of his brain first due to the LOC.”

“What kind of precautions?” Dixie asked. She’d already surmised what the doctor was speculating.

“Let’s get a room ready and set up quarantine procedures. Essential personnel only. I want everyone who treats him gowned and masked. I need to know the names of everyone who’s had contact with him, especially the rescue personnel and the ambulance attendants. They’re going to need prophylactic antibiotics if this turns out to be what I suspect.”

“I’ll get right on it but there’s not much time. They’ll be here inside of five minutes.”

“Delegate, Dix. I don’t want anyone put at risk unnecessarily. Let’s get these safeguards in place.”

Dixie nodded curtly. "Right."

The head nurse stood at the entrance to the emergency room, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the ambulance. Although only a few minutes passed, the wait seemed interminable. Dixie felt her face beneath the protective mask grow warm in the humid air she exhaled. At last, the ambulance appeared and swung wide in preparation for backing into the bay. She stepped up to activate the doors.

Roy glanced out the back window and saw the gowned and masked nurse waiting. ***So they obviously share my suspicions. *** He stood and unhooked the IV bag from its hanger while the attendant switched the oxygen tubing from the main bottle to the portable. "You're going to need to stick around for a little while," Roy told the man, who looked at first perplexed and then resigned.

The mask Dixie wore couldn't hide the concern in her eyes. "Roy, how is he?" She peered past Roy and the attendants while they gently eased the stretcher out of the back and released the undercarriage.

"Not good."

Dixie quickly assessed Johnny's appearance. His face was white as a sheet, his eyes rheumy in their sunken orbits. Although he appeared to be conscious, his eyes roamed blankly, periodically rolling back as he fought encroaching unconsciousness. She saw his body tense suddenly and he groaned in pain.

"He's having some severe muscle spasms," Roy explained.

Dixie shook her head. "Treatment 4's all set up," she directed the crew.

Dr. Brackett and Betty, a floor nurse, were waiting in the treatment room when the group entered. The mood was decidedly serious, not helped by the gowns and masks.

"Roy, any change?" Brackett asked. The doctor, nurses and Roy positioned themselves to transfer Johnny to the exam table by his sheet.

"Not really," Roy answered quietly.

"On three. One, two, three."

Johnny's eyes widened and he gasped at the sensation of being lifted. The crew set him down as gently as possible.

"Dix, call the lab. I want a CBC with diff, full chemistries, 2 sets of cultures and a

urinalysis. Also, let's get chest and skull x-rays. And start him on IV penicillin."

"Right away."

"Let's see what we've got here." Brackett lifted the sheet and inspected the rash. "Roy, you say he's disoriented?"

"He's been confused. He acts like he still thinks he's on that camping trip he took last week."

Brackett frowned. "Camping," he mused out loud. "Johnny? Johnny, talk to me," the doctor commanded. When he received no response, he applied his knuckle to Johnny's sternum and rubbed. The paramedic tensed and groaned in irritation. "Johnny, do you know where you are?" the doctor asked loudly.

John struggled to recognize his surroundings. He mumbled incoherently.

"What day is it, Johnny?"

The sick man focused on the masked face of the doctor hovering over him. Something about the eyes looked familiar. "Ahh...dunno." He blinked slowly.

Brackett moved near the patient's face. He removed his penlight and leaned in close to Johnny's eyes, shining it into each eye in turn and studying the orbs intently. Johnny tried to recoil from the light's beam but the doctor held fast. "Ahh stop," he protested weakly. Brackett relented and stood straight.

"Johnny," Roy said, taking the other's hand. His partner's gaze slowly shifted to meet the blue eyes he knew. He tensed with yet another muscle spasm, squeezing Roy's hand tightly. "I think he knows me," Roy said hopefully.

As if in acknowledgement, Johnny spoke. "R-r...Roy."

"Johnny, you're at Rampart. You're very sick, but we're going to take good care of you," Brackett said. "I'm going to examine you, so try to relax." The doctor began palpating Johnny's chest and continued downward to the quadrants of his abdomen. When he pressed on Johnny's stomach, the sick man began to retch.

"Suction!" Brackett ordered. He and Roy quickly turned Johnny onto his side. The dark-haired man produced a small amount of emesis for the considerable effort he made, gasping and heaving forcefully long after he'd emptied his sparse stomach contents. They laid him back to recover. He panted and moaned with each lingering stomach contraction. His large muscles of his back and legs spasmed painfully.

"Dix, let's get the lumbar puncture underway," Brackett said solemnly. He looked pointedly at Roy. "You and whoever else was on that rescue will need to be

prophylaxed to prevent infection. That includes the ambulance attendants, the engine crew, and anyone else on that scene.”

Roy nodded. “I know,” he said softly. “The ambulance guys are waiting. I already told ‘em.” Roy sighed. “I guess I better notify Cap.”

“Good. That has to be started today, Roy. Why don’t you go ahead and arrange for the station personnel to report here as soon as possible? I’ll be right back.” He strode from the room.

Roy turned and heaved a loud sigh as he ambled to the opposite side of the room. Dixie eyed him sympathetically.

“Thought it was the flu,” he murmured.

“Roy...”

“Just...” He shrugged. “The flu. We all had it. Even me.”

“And it was a logical conclusion,” Dixie asserted.

“No. No, I should’ve seen...he was so sick. I just...assumed.”

“Roy, you and I both know how quickly something like this can escalate. It probably did start out as the flu, but for whatever reason, turned into this. It probably happened very quickly. It’s one of those things.”

Roy disagreed but kept his silence. He looked at his partner, who appeared to be sleeping through the tormenting muscle cramps. An occasional soft moan would be heard.

There was a knock on the door followed by its opening. “X-ray,” the tech announced.

Dixie and Roy vacated the room for the few minutes required for the films.

“I’m going to make that call and then grab a quick cup of coffee,” Roy said. “I think I’ll need it.”

“Good idea. Get something to eat too, if you can. It’ll be a while before the x-rays are developed.”

“No, I couldn’t eat now.” Roy smiled self-consciously. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Dixie watched the paramedic walk away, his back slumped and his head hanging.

***Roy DeSoto, this is not your fault. ***

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Hank Stanley sighed as he entered the day room and faced three pairs of concerned eyes. "No word yet."

The others nodded and looked away. Hank studied Chet. The stocky fireman looked haggard. "You okay, Chet?"

Chet glanced at Mike and quickly looked away. "Yeah...I mean, no....I...this is...oh never mind."

Hank looked questioningly at Mike. "Chet's blaming himself," Mike explained.

Hank raised his eyebrows as his attention returned to Chet. "Am I missing something?"

Chet sighed. "DeSoto asked me to check on Gage. He told me how worried he was. I called maybe three times...got a busy signal and just figured he was okay. I was just too darn lazy to go over and check on him." He balled his fist in frustration and hit the kitchen table. The others flinched.

Hank shook his head. "Sounds like a fair assumption. We all thought he just had the flu. You couldn't have known –" He broke off as the station phone rang. Hank hurried to answer it, hoping to hear DeSoto on the other line. He was not disappointed.

A short while later, Hank hung up the phone. He frowned as he studied the others. "Our presence is requested at Rampart."

"Why?" Marco asked nervously. "Is Johnny..."

Hank sighed as he folded his arms across his chest. "They think Gage may have meningitis."

"Meningitis!" Mike exclaimed.

"Isn't that contagious?" Chet asked, his eyes narrowing.

Hank nodded. "We need to go back and get some precautionary shots...just in case."

"Great," Chet exclaimed. "Can't just get the flu, can he? Not Gage. Man, I could kill..." He trailed off slowly from his tirade as he realized that the disease might do just that to his co-worker. "Sorry." He mumbled to the others.

Hank nodded. "I'll call us out of service. We need to go."

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The door swung open and Drs. Brackett and Early appeared. "The skull series is negative. Let's get this done."

"Roy." Early greeted the paramedic warmly. His eyes crinkled in a reassuring smile over the top of the mask.

The preparations were soon complete and Johnny was on his side, his back curved towards the doctor. Roy stood in front of him, steadying hands on his shoulder and side. He felt the heat radiating from Johnny's skin, as well as the trembling and jerking of his muscles. Johnny appeared semi-conscious, but how much he comprehended what was happening, no one knew.

Johnny flinched at the shot of anesthetic, but within minutes, Dr. Early had successfully drained an appropriate amount of fluid. He held the vial up, a baffled frown creasing his forehead.

"It's clear," Brackett announced in surprise.

"How long has he been sick, Roy?" Early asked.

"Bout...four days, I guess," Roy estimated. "That fluid shouldn't be clear if it's meningitis...should it?" His tone was hopeful.

"You're right. I think we can tentatively rule it out, for now."

"I agree." Early sighed. "I guess that puts us back at square one. We'll keep him on the antibiotics and wait for the blood and CSF cultures to be sure, but I think we're barking up the wrong tree, Kel."

"It's still some kind of infection," Brackett speculated. "Just what?" The three of them watched Johnny stir restlessly with each muscle cramp. "Roy, where did Johnny go on that camping trip?"

"Uh, Colorado...some mountains there."

"What are you thinking, Kel?" Early asked.

"Well, as far-fetched as it may sound..." Brackett wandered near the bed and began a more thorough examination, starting at Johnny's head. His fingers raked through Johnny's tousled hair, scouring every square inch of his scalp. "I'm beginning to wonder if it could be a tick-borne disease. Like Lyme Disease or Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever."

"That would certainly explain the symptoms," Early agreed. He raised Johnny's arm and probed the patch of hair beneath. "Are we looking for a tick or just a bite?"

“Could be either. The severity of his symptoms suggests the bug could still be attached somewhere...if it’s that at all.”

Roy stepped in and began to help search. He inspected the area under Johnny’s opposite arm.

Johnny squirmed uncomfortably and raised his hands to fend off the scrutiny. “Don’t,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry, Johnny, but I’m looking for something,” Brackett apologized, continuing to dredge through the younger man’s thick hair. He stopped momentarily. “Johnny?”

“Mmmm?”

“Do you remember your camping trip?”

“Uhhnn...Greg? Is he okay?” Johnny fidgeted nervously.

Brackett looked at Roy questioningly.

“That’s his cousin he went backpacking with,” the senior medic explained.

“Johnny, as far as we know, Greg’s fine...right now we’re worried about you,” Brackett assured him. “Think back, Johnny. Did you get a tick any time during your campout?”

“Tick?” Johnny frowned as though concentrating made his head hurt more. “No...no tick.”

Dr. Brackett resumed his inspection of Johnny’s scalp as Dr. Early pulled the sheet aside to search the groin area. Roy averted his gaze out of respect for Johnny’s privacy...even if Johnny was too out of it to know or remember it later.

“A-ha!” Brackett exclaimed triumphantly. He stood straight and reached around to untie the mask on his face, allowing it to fall. “I knew it!”

Dr. Early re-covered Gage and he and Roy convened at the head of the bed.

“Would you look at that,” the gray-haired doctor mused. He too slowly untied his mask.

Brackett had John’s head turned slightly, his ear bent forward. There, in the fold behind his ear, sat the culprit.

“It’s not surprising he didn’t notice it,” Brackett opined. “He wouldn’t even feel it washing his hair.”

“That’s what’s making him sick?” Roy asked.

“If our guess is correct, yes.”

Johnny tensed sharply, his back arching off the bed. He whimpered from the discomfort of the contracting muscles. “Doc...”

“I’m right here, Johnny.” Brackett moved into John’s view and smiled.

“Do somethin’...can’t...stand it.”

“Just sit tight a little longer, Johnny. Relief is on the way.”

“Can it be treated?” Roy asked.

“Absolutely. It won’t happen overnight, but he’ll most likely be fine, Roy,” Dr. Early said.

Dixie entered then, surprised to see the masks down and relaxed, relieved expressions. “Kel, I have the lab results.”

“Don’t tell me. Low sodium and platelets?” he asked with a wry grin.

“What’s going on?” the nurse inquired, searching the three faces.

“Dix, what we have here, is a case of,” Brackett paused for drama. “Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.”

“You’re kidding,” she replied drolly.

“It’s a disease transmitted by ticks,” Early explained.

“I know what it is,” Dixie cut in. “I’ve never seen a case of it.”

“Leave it to our favorite calamity-prone paramedic to be the first,” Brackett remarked as he fished for the items he’d need to dislodge the tick.

“Dix, let’s change his antibiotic to Tetracycline. Then let’s give him some diazepam for the muscle contractions,” Early ordered.

Dixie nodded, casting one more look at her ill charge before heading out to fulfill the doctor’s orders.

Roy smiled. “I better call the station. They’ll be relieved.”

He headed out of the room, a small smile of relief on his face. Whistling softly, he strode to the pay phones, searching his pockets for change. His fingers closed on

some coins, which he sorted through. He found a dime and dropped it into the phone. He dialed the station phone number, frowning as his call went unanswered. He hung up the phone, retrieved his dime from the box and tried the call again. But the ringing went unanswered. Sighing, he placed the receiver back on the hook and turned toward the treatment areas. However, he stopped when he heard someone calling his name. Turning, he spotted his captain and co-workers hurrying towards him.

“I was trying to call you...” he started, but was interrupted by Chester Kelly.

“Yeah, yeah. We heard. We have to get shots because Johnny had to go and catch meningitis.” The stocky fireman sighed in frustration.

“Chet-“ Roy began, until to be interrupted again.

“Now, Roy, I know what you’re going to say. Johnny didn’t do this on purpose, and he’s really sick, and I do feel bad, don’t get me wrong. But I REALLY hate needles.”

“Chet-“ Captain Stanley admonished, but Kelly continued his rant.

“Cap! Believe me, I am sorry Gage is sick. I hope he’s okay, but if he felt sick, he should have stayed home. I mean, the guy was barely back from vacation. Oh, I know it’s not his fault, but I REALLY hate needles!” Chet frowned, placing his hands on his hips. He looked at Roy. “Are the needles big?”

“Really big,” Roy said, trying to suppress a grin. He spread his thumb and finger two inches apart. “About this big.”

Chet paled, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he gulped.

Roy laughed. “I’m kidding. Actually, Johnny doesn’t have meningitis. He has Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.”

“What?” Chet asked.

“He picked up a tick camping. That’s what made him sick.” Roy smiled. “Doctor Early’s starting him on antibiotics. He should start making progress real soon.”

Hank Stanley smiled. “Well, that’s the best news I heard all day.”

Chet looked at Roy. “That means no needles?”

Roy grinned. “No. But if you want, we can probably arrange a special one just for you.”

“Ha ha,” Chet dead-panned. “You’re really funny.” He paused for a second before adding, “Johnny will be all right, right, Roy?”

Roy nodded, still smiling. "Yeah. He'll be fine."

"That's great news," Marco said.

"Well," Hank said. "In that case, I think we'd better all get back to work. Roy, I've got a replacement coming in for Johnny, but I do need you, pal."

Roy nodded. "Cap, do you mind if I check in with Dr. Early again before we go?"

Hank smiled. "I think we can wait a few minutes. Go ahead."

"Thanks, Cap," Roy answered as he turned and headed back down the hall towards the treatment room.

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The following morning, Roy pushed open the door of Johnny's hospital room. He padded into the room and paused. His partner was sleeping. Roy entered the room quietly and took a seat next to the bed. He studied his slumbering friend. The sick man was still very pale, a slight sheen of sweat on his brow. *But, Roy thought, it sure beats the dangerously flushed look he had sported the previous day.*

Roy glanced down at Johnny's bare arms. The telltale rash that gave Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever its name was also present. Roy reached over lightly and touched Johnny's forehead. The younger man was still warm, but not nearly as hot as he'd been the day before. As he withdrew his hand, Johnny opened his eyes.

"Hey," Roy said. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's ok," Johnny rasped before breaking into a dry coughing spell.

Roy quickly picked up a pitcher of ice water and poured some into a glass. He opened a straw, placed it into the glass and held it out to his partner. Johnny took it from him and drank a few sips. Roy quickly took the glass back from his partner's shaking hands.

"How are you feeling?"

Johnny shrugged lightly as he leaned back into his pillows. "Been better. But I've been worse. Recently, I hear."

Roy grinned. "Well, you do look a lot better since the last time I saw you."

Johnny smiled. "Thanks for coming over, by the way."

“Yeah,” Roy sighed. “I would have come earlier, but Chris broke his arm. Then I got the flu...”

John cut him off. “It’s okay, Roy. I’m just glad you came when you did.”

“Yeah,” Roy answered soberly, “me too. If I had known you were that sick...”

Johnny shrugged. “Even I thought it was the flu.”

Roy nodded.

Johnny yawned, fighting to keep his eyes open. Roy stood up.

“Look, get some rest. I’ll come back later.”

Johnny nodded, his eyes sliding shut. Roy turned and started to walk for the door, stopped by Johnny’s raspy voice.

“Roy?” Johnny’s eyes were opened again.

Roy stopped and returned to his friend’s bedside. “Yeah, Johnny?”

“Guess I needed the super-duper deluxe superior first aid kit, huh?”

Roy laughed. “I guess so. But listen, don’t remind Chet.”

Johnny frowned. “Why?”

“Because I bet **on** you,” Roy laughed. “And I really don’t want to give Chet back his money.”

Johnny grinned weakly as he shut his eyes again. “I’ll never tell.”

Roy waited a minute, listening to his friend’s even breathing. “Somehow, with you, partner, I don’t even think the super-duper deluxe superior first aid kit would do it. You’d have to bring the whole hospital.” He chuckled to himself as he headed to the door.

“I heard that,” Gage called weakly.

Roy laughed as he shut the door and walked down the hall.