

The Nuisance: Chet's Story

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

I used to think I was one tough cookie. I could crack jokes while overhauling a pile of rubble that used to be a house. Even with the family who lost everything shivering outside. I could nail Gage shift after shift and never feel a bit of remorse about it. Even when Cap and the guys thought this or that practical joke had gone too far.

I liked the great horror classics, like Terror at the Library. Or anything where Clint Eastwood asked some punk if he felt lucky. If I went to a chick flick, it was only 'cause my date wanted to. And 'cause I wanted a second date.

Heck, I grew up in the 50s and 60s, before all the touchy-feely emotional crap became the in thing. Even if it had been the thing, my brother would've made sure I didn't think it was so great. The worst insult I ever suffered as a kid was my brother calling me a "pansy," or a "wimp." So, I grew up being just as tough as my brother. I even joined the Army right out of high school.

Being such a tough guy came in handy when I joined the fire service. I've seen guys leave the service a month out of the academy 'cause they felt bad for every victim they came across. Roy's like those guys. He "feels" too much. I'm always afraid he's gonna walk away from it. Then again, he'd probably never be able to live with himself if he did walk away. He'd be letting a victim down.

Anyway, I always thought of myself as a tough guy. Okay, so Boot eventually grew on me. I couldn't help myself. The stupid dog was always at my feet, looking up at me like I was God, or something. He was a good dog, once I got to know him. Damn! Man, now I miss the stupid dog.

Tonight, I found out I'm not so tough. Hell, even Roy was tougher. Of course, the shift didn't start out so bad. I got Gage with a water bomb in his locker. It's not quite as funny now, but it was funny as hell then.

Until about 2 this morning, the shift was pretty slow. And pretty boring. The engine went out to a trash fire at about 9. We got back to the station right before 11. The squad was just coming back from a follow-up to Rampart. Heart attack, I think it was.

We turned in at about 11. Gage had short sheeted my bed. Now, I wish I'd fallen for it. But, I didn't and we all had a good laugh. At John, instead of at me. Okay, I'm Irish. We have a gift for making a short story long. Sue me.

I was dreaming about sailing when the tones sounded at 2. In my dream, the tones were a fog horn. The sound of the guys pulling on their turnout pants and putting on their boots made me see myself in a yellow rain slicker. That sight would wake anybody up!

I was the last one out of the dorm. The squad was pulling out, and Stoker had already cranked up the engine. You have no idea how hard it is to pull up turnout pants while running. Getting to the scene

was an adventure. It always is. Luckily, it was pretty close to the station. Then again, five minutes later and tonight might not have happened at all. Sorry. Getting ahead of myself. Bear with me.

Marco and I jumped down from the engine the minute Stoker stopped the rig. It was an unknown response at a bar in a pretty sleazy part of town. Vince Howard was there, too, so it had to be something interesting. We didn't get to see it, though. Cap told us to wait until they had an idea of what they had inside.

Once Marco and I were back in our seats, I decided to have a little fun with Stoker. What? You expected us to die of boredom? The game was called "How Long Will It Take?" I read somewhere that kids are always testing the boundaries set by their parents. Starting when they're still babies, if you can believe that. So, I decided to apply that to real life. Marco and I always won, of course. Let's just call Cap and the guys unwitting guinea pigs.

The object is to see how long it takes to get on somebody's nerves. Not something I'd recommend with a superior, mind you. But Cap's one of us. And if he sentenced me to latrine duty for the rest of my career, Marco'd be right there with me.

Cap could tolerate us for about 5 minutes. Roy lasted for 7 minutes, then tried to settle our dispute. Gage remembered he had to do a second biophone check with Rampart after 10 minutes. Stoker was the last one, and he wasn't gonna be an easy nut to crack. But we had time on our hands.

We'd been going at it 5 minutes when the door of the bar opened and two old biddies came out, clucking at each other as they went down the street. Gage and Roy walked out 2 minutes later. Stoker had gone 7 minutes without a word, and without trying to get away from us. It looked like he'd get a second shot. Until he asked Gage what the call was about. Can you believe some ditzy old bat drank too much and spaced out? What a waste of time!

Anyway, I was trying to come up with a new spin on the game when all hell broke loose. It started with headlights in my face.

"Jeez." I covered my eyes and turned my head away. I couldn't see crap, but I could hear an engine revving and tires squealing around the corner.

"Idiot," Marco muttered next to me.

Then I heard the sound of the car hitting something. Man, just thinking about it now makes my stomach turn. One minute, I wasn't sure what had happened. Then I realized what I'd just heard. The car hitting a person. I'd never heard it before, and I hope I never hear it again.

"Oh, my God," I breathed. Suddenly, I knew what it was. I jumped down from the engine just as the car swung sideways. The driver looked out, then peeled off. I looked around and saw Roy, but not Gage. Then Roy yelled, and I got moving. I grabbed the trauma box out of the squad and followed Mike and Vince.

Man, my stomach was in my throat by the time I got to Johnny. Seeing how bad he was hurt only made it worse. He kept blinking and trying to sit up. There was a roaring in my ears that drowned everything out. What was wrong with me? I'd seen Johnny hurt before. Hell, I rode on the back of the engine with him after he'd been bitten by a snake. Between you and me and the lamppost, I didn't want to be there. But I did it.

I had the same feeling after Johnny was hit. I wanted to get up, go back to the engine and wait. I didn't want to see Johnny down. Johnny needed me, so I stayed right where I was.

". . . soft collar on him." Roy's voice broke through the roar.

Things were moving fast around me, but I felt like I wasn't even moving. I fumbled with the trauma box, finally getting it open and pulling a collar out. I didn't know what to do with it once I got it out. Then somebody took it from me. Mike muttered, then jumped up and ran over to the squad. Cap and Marco took their helmets off. I followed their lead and took mine off.

"Johnny, can you hear me?" Roy's voice was shaking. If he was scared, Johnny had to be hurt really bad.

Johnny's eyes opened, and Roy said something about the drug box. Then Mike came back with the backboard. I had a job to do, and I did it. I helped roll Johnny onto his side, closing my eyes so I couldn't see how much it hurt him. I kept them closed until after we set him down.

When I finally opened my eyes again, Roy was looking at me. "Chet, can you help me get his turnout coat off?"

"Yeah, sure." It was the first thing I'd said, and my voice was shaking more than my hands.

"I'll give you a hand, Roy," Cap offered. I swear to God, I looked at Cap the way Boot used to look at me.

Johnny groaned, and I looked over Roy's head as Marco cut off his turnout coat. I didn't look back at Johnny until Roy and Cap pulled the coat off and tossed it behind us. Then Roy tore open a blanket pack and he and Mike wrapped it around the backboard.

Thank God the ambulance was there by that time. The quicker Johnny got to the hospital, the better his chances would be. Cap and Mike stood to lift the backboard. Vince appeared next to me and I ended up lifting the middle of one side.

Cap patted my shoulder after we set John down on the gurney. "Okay, Chet, you bring in the squad, Pal."

I nodded silently and headed for the squad. Marco caught up to me. "He's gonna be all right," he said. "Do you want me to take this stuff back in the engine?"

He was holding Johnny's helmet and turnout coat. "Ahhh . . . no." My voice was still shaking. "You can put it in the squad." I opened the driver's door, climbed in, then took the helmet and coat. I closed the door after setting them on the passenger side, as far away from me as I could get them.

"Johnny's tough, Chet." Marco patted my shoulder through the open window.

"Roy's too scared, Marco. He wouldn't be this scared if Johnny was just a little banged up." I looked over at the ambulance. The doors were closed, but I could see Roy leaning over Johnny.

"Johnny'll make it. He's got too many things to do." Marco paused. "He's too stubborn to just give up."

I shook my head. Johnny wouldn't get a choice. He'd either make it, or he wouldn't.

"Johnny's like a cat, Chet. He's got nine lives." Marco continued.

"What if he's used his nine lives, Marco?" I wasn't even sure he heard me. "What if this is it?"

"Don't think like that, Chet!" Marco snapped. "You're the one always reading those self-help books. What do all of them say?"

"Think positive," I muttered back. He was right. I had to think positive. And get Roy thinking positive, too. I took a deep breath. "Think positive."

"Want me to bring the squad to the hospital?" Marco thought I was too shook up to drive.

"Naw, I'm okay, Marco." I finally looked up at him. I heard Mike tap the compartment doors. The ambulance was getting ready to pull out. I turned the key. "I'd better get going."

Marco stepped back, and I pulled out behind the ambulance, switching on the lights and siren. I tried to just drive and not think about anything. But Marco and his stupid nine lives comment kept going through my head. All the way to Rampart I kept thinking about all the times Johnny'd been hurt.

There was the virus that killed Tim Duntley. It almost killed Johnny and Doc Brackett. Johnny'd been exposed to radiation. He'd had Roy fall on him and knock him off a ladder. He got stuck in a warehouse with a bomb. He'd been bitten by a rattlesnake. He'd been in a building during a gas explosion and fell down a flight of stairs. He'd been in an apartment when a jet engine blew up. The way I figured it, Johnny was on his eighth life. And what if the minor injuries counted as a life? Then he was on his ninth life already. Hell, maybe he was through his ninth life.

When I got to the hospital, I pulled around the ambulance and parked the squad. I was out of the squad and waiting at the E.R. door when the ambulance finished backing in. I wanted a chance to let John know I was there, but Morton and Early were on the gurney like ducks on a June bug the second the doors opened.

"What happened, Roy?" Dr. Early asked.

"A car came out of nowhere. Johnny tried to turn and get out of the way. It caught him on his left side." Roy's voice was still pretty shaky.

"High? Low?" Early asked.

Roy motioned to his left side. "Abdomen. About here." He motioned with his hand again.

Early turned to Johnny. "John, can you hear me?"

They wheeled the gurney into a treatment room before I could hear whether or not John answered. I was stepping in behind them when Morton turned to me and put a hand in the middle of my chest. "Why don't you wait out here, Chet?"

Before I could argue, Morton shut the door in my face. Lucky for him he did. If he hadn't, I would've argued with him. First of all, if I wanted to wait in the hall, I wouldn't be trying to walk into the treatment room. Second, Brackett let me in when John was bitten by the rattler. Early would probably let me in. They were the bosses. Not Morton. Can you tell that Morton just rubbed me the wrong way?

So I was stuck standing in the hall. The sign on the wall said "Surgical Emergency." That didn't make me feel any better. I got a few funny looks from people passing in the hall. Then I realized I was in full turnout gear. I would've unhooked the coat, but I probably would've gotten more funny looks standing there in an open turnout coat with suspenders and no undershirt. What can I say? It was a chilly night and Cap set the heat on "roast" before we turned in.

The door opened, and a nurse stepped out. My eyes were drawn to the vial in her hand. I wished I hadn't looked at it, 'cause I knew Johnny's blood was in that vial. I bet I got a few more funny looks when I turned around and put my forehead against that nice cool wall.

It seemed like I stood like that for a while. Then again, it could've only been a minute or two. I was about to go down the hall and find a chair in the waiting room when the nurse came back. She held the door open for an x-ray machine and the guy pushing it. I was about to sneak into the room when Morton walked out and brushed past me. Doctor Early wasn't that lucky. I grabbed his arm.

"Hey, Doc, how is he?" At least my voice had stopped shaking some.

"He's hanging in there. I'll know better when I see the films." Then Early followed Morton down the hall.

Roy was standing outside the closed door when I looked back at it. We both watched Early until he disappeared down the hall.

I took a deep breath and let it out. Please don't let my voice shake. "Hey, he's gonna be all right.

Nuthin' can hurt Johnny."

Roy looked down at the floor, then back at me. "Yeah."

It was all so stupid. The response was a waste of time. None of us should've been there. "But what a dumb way for it to happen. Ya know? Gettin' a call out into the middle of the night for some spaced-out dame."

Roy chucked my arm and smiled. "He's gonna be all right." It wasn't a real smile, and he was nodding like he was trying to convince himself.

So was I. I smiled and nodded. Inside, I wanted to hit something. I wanted to hit someone. I'd start with the driver of that damn car. He wasn't there, and my hand was in a fist. So, I gave the treatment room door a tap. If I still wanted to hit something later, I'd find a nice private spot and break my hand.

Roy and I stood there, listening to the hum of the x-ray machine inside. When Early and Morton came back, the three of them went back in. I'd changed my mind about going in. Whatever was happening in there had Roy pretty shaken up. And he dealt with this stuff every day. But this time it was different. The victim was Johnny.

I guess another couple of minutes went by before the x-ray machine and the nurse came back out. I stayed where I was, holding up the wall, waiting for Roy and getting funny looks 'cause of my turnout gear.

There are a lot of reasons Johnny was chosen when The Phantom came to 51s. The mark can't outrank you. That would be just plain stupid. So, Captain Hammer, Stoker and Cap were out. You don't target a guy whose job description is to watch your back. Again, not smart. That put Marco out. Roy was just too damned nice. Oh, he'd be a good sport about things, but he'd probably take it personally. Targeting Roy would be about as funny as putting kittens in a bag and throwing them in the Pacific.

Then Johnny Gage came along. He's the perfect straight man. Even when I'm trying to be good, he feeds me these lines that I just can't pass up. Like the time he said, "I was pretty dumb when I was ten years old." A Saint wouldn't have been able to resist that opening.

Johnny doesn't take any of the jokes or teasing personally. Oh, he gets indignant and tries to defend himself. But he doesn't get mad. He may go into the dorm and pout for 5 minutes, then he's back like nothing ever happened.

He has a temper, and I've seen it. I'll bet he's busted his hand on a wall at least once. But he doesn't get mad at me for the pranks, or the guys for laughing at them. And he's come a long way since those first days at 51s when The Phantom got him with his own garlic-laden candy. He's laid more than a couple of pretty good zingers on me. He's just not devious enough to set up a good prank. It's his one flaw. Well, one of them anyway.

Two orderlies wheeled a gurney into the treatment room. When I looked up at the clock over the base

station, it said it was 2:55. Man, it seemed like we brought Johnny in hours ago. It hadn't even been one hour.

A man in green scrubs walked past me into the treatment room. A couple seconds later, the door opened and Roy stepped out. The look on his face had me scared all over again.

"How's Johnny?" My stomach was in my throat.

"He's bleeding internally. Dr. Morton and Dr. Early are getting ready to take him up to surgery." Roy smiled. "They've got him in a G-suit and his pressure came back up."

I nodded. "That's good."

"He's got a stable tib-fib fracture." Roy went on. I got the feeling he was just talking to talk. And I let him. "No signs of a head injury. That's good. They'll have to watch him pretty close, though."

The door opened and the orderlies wheeled Johnny out into the hall. His eyes were closed, so I guessed they'd already put him to sleep. "Hang in there, Johnny." He grinned a little and mumbled something. Then the orderlies wheeled him past us to the elevator at the end of the hall.

Early, Morton and the other doctor followed the gurney out of the treatment room. Early stopped next to us. "We'll let you know as soon as we can," he promised, then followed the gurney.

We watched the doors close, then Roy turned to me. "I was gonna go into the staff lounge and get some coffee."

"Coffee would be good." I let Roy lead the way to the staff lounge. I was so out of it, I couldn't remember where it was, but Roy could probably get us there in his sleep.

While we were getting coffee, Roy turned to me, "How about you? Are you okay?"

It was so Roy I almost laughed. Almost. "I hope I never see or hear anything like it again," I said honestly. "Even if it's somebody I don't know."

Roy nodded and sipped from his cup. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

We sat down at the table. "Are you okay?" I really wanted to know. Besides that, I had the feeling that if I didn't get Roy talking, I'd start talking. And end up sticking my foot in my mouth. I wasn't feeling very "positive" now that Johnny was in surgery.

Roy shrugged. "I'm okay." He turned his cup around between his hands. "Worried."

"Me, too." I nodded.

Then we just sat there, not drinking coffee and not talking. And trying not to think. At least I know I

was. I can't speak for Roy. I had a Handi-Talkie with me to monitor dispatch. I hoped the engine wouldn't get any more calls tonight. As far as I was concerned, we'd done our duty for the County.

Then again, I wouldn't have been surprised if the County pulled somebody out of bed to finish the rest of Johnny's shift. I know it's important to keep every unit and every man available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. The companies and paramedic squads the County has are responsible for the lives of millions of people. But when one of your own is down and you can't be there, you start to feel like your life isn't yours anymore.

I knew there wasn't a chance in hell of catching the driver that did this to Johnny. Oh, sure, we had a cop right there. But he didn't do anything. He didn't chase the guy. He didn't try to get a description of the car. He didn't even get statements from us. When the ambulance pulled away, he just went back on patrol.

I must've looked like something was wrong, 'cause Roy nudged me. "You okay?"

I nodded.

"Why don't you go back to the station?" Roy suggested. "It'll probably be a few hours before we know anything."

"You'll need the squad to get back out . . ." I didn't want to say, "When the County finds a replacement for Johnny."

"LA put the squad out of service," Roy informed. "I'll call Joanne when I'm ready to go home."

"You sure? 'Cause I can stay."

Roy nodded. "Go back to the station and get some sleep. I don't wanna have to fight you for the couch." Then he smirked at me! I nearly fell off the chair. "I'll end up trying to sleep on the floor."

"Okay. But you call as soon as you know anything."

"Scout's honor." He held up his right hand, three fingers up. Why am I not surprised that Roy was a Boy Scout?

I didn't sleep when I got back to the station. Losing it at the scene after Johnny got hit really bothered me. We were all scared. But I was the one who couldn't function. For the first time I could remember, I was paralyzed by fear.

Cap, Mike and Marco came out of the dorm as I was pulling the squad back in. I wanted to be by myself, but I didn't tell them that. And I got to see Mike Stoker on a roll. Or maybe he'd been on a bender. Maybe he had a stash of something in his locker. He must've hit it when they got back to the

station, 'cause he sure wasn't "quiet, dependable Stoker" this morning. Whatever it was, he wouldn't shut up.

Then we found out that Mike got a good look at the car and the driver. If Vince had done his job, the guy wouldn't have gotten away. If Mike hadn't been on a roll, he might never have volunteered that bit of information.

Cap went into his office to do paperwork while we waited in the kitchen for Vince to show up. I planned on giving him a piece of my mind when he got there, too. Right after Mike finished giving him a description of the car and driver that hit Johnny.

When the first pot of coffee was finished, I called dibs. "Me first. That hospital coffee is the *worst*." I started to add "Worse than Cap's." Turns out, this was one of the first times in my life I wasn't in the mood to crack jokes.

Mike stepped away from the stove and I poured the first cup from the pot. Then I decided to take a cup of coffee to Cap.

"You know what they say about two-fisted drinking," Mike muttered.

He had to be drunk. "No, Mike. What do they say?" I let him think I didn't know what he was gonna do.

"I don't know, Chet. I was asking you." Ha, ha. How original. I should've asked him what his dad said about two-fisted drinking.

"I like you better when you don't talk, Stoker." Then I walked out of the kitchen.

Cap looked up when I stepped into the office.

"Brought you a cup of coffee." In case he was too caffeine deprived to recognize the cup.

Cap smiled. "Thanks, Chet." He took the cup and blew on it, then took a sip.

I wondered if Cap had ever been paralyzed like I was tonight. I wanted to ask him. But my mouth wouldn't work. It didn't work on the next two trips, either. Maybe when things settled down, I'd be able to ask him.

I didn't sleep when I got home, either. I was tired, but every time I closed my eyes, or even sat still for too long, I heard the sound of that car hitting Johnny. And saw him writhing on the ground. Or lying on that gurney at the hospital.

Mike was still on a roll after Vince came. For a minute, I thought Mike was gonna clean Vince's

clock. As far as I was concerned, Vince would've deserved it. First, he didn't do anything to catch the guy that hit Johnny. Then he tried to blame Johnny for what happened. Cap and Marco broke it up. Too bad.

I think all of us make the mistake of thinking that Mike doesn't have a lot going on upstairs because he hardly ever says anything. What he does say is usually preceded by "My father says . . ." Which makes you think the guy doesn't have an original thought in his head.

Mike Stoker probably has more going on upstairs than the other five of us. Put together. I was gonna have to watch Mike very closely while Johnny was out. The Phantom had found an alternate pigeon. If he wasn't a good sport, he'd pull rank on me. It was worth the risk.

I headed over to Marco's at noon. Mike was picking us up at 2 to go to the hospital. I figured I'd save him the trip to my place. When I got there, Marco's door was open. I was a little worried until I saw him inside, on the phone.

He turned and looked at me as he hung up. "Couldn't sleep." I walked in, sat down on the couch and propped my feet up on the coffee table. Hey, fair's fair. He always puts his feet on my coffee table.

"Make yourself at home, Chet." He picked up a plastic trash bag from the floor next to the door. "I've got to take a bag to the dumpster. Don't loot the place while I'm gone."

"Yeah, like you've got anything worth stealing." My eyes were drawn to a painting of a bull fighter. On black velvet, no less. "Come to think of it, I've always had my eye on that bull fighter on black velvet."

"Chet, you have a painting of dogs playing pool." I've trained him well. He used to be too polite to criticize others. "Don't pick on my *matador*."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go take out your garbage, Marco."

Dependable Mike got to Marco's at exactly 2. By that time, he was quiet Mike again. He didn't even tell us he was stopping on the way to the hospital. He just pulled into the parking lot, got out of the car and went into a florist shop. Yes, a florist.

I tapped Marco on the shoulder to get his attention. "What's he doin'? Buyin' Johnny flowers?"

Marco shrugged. "We'll see when he comes out."

"Hey, Marco, I didn't mean to put down that bull fighter painting." Marco hadn't said much to me. Maybe he was mad about that crack about his painting.

"I didn't mean to put down your pool playing dogs, either." He looked back at me, and was grinning.

When Mike came out of the florist's, he was carrying something in a red pot. He opened the back door and put it on the floor next to me. That was when I saw that it was a plant. In a fire engine planter. How cute! "Awww, Mike, a fire engine." I picked it up and held it over the seat so Marco could see it.

"That's a ladder truck!" Marco exclaimed. "*We don't need no stinkin' ladder trucks.*" Man, he sounded just like the guy in Sierra Madre.

"Put it down." Whoa! I didn't want to piss Mike off. Not after the way he went after Vince this morning. I put the plant down. That didn't mean I was gonna let up on him, though. "A ladder truck, Mike. I'm disappointed."

Marco leaned over the back seat. "Did you buy it for the planter?"

"Didn't they have a sorer looking plant, Mike?" I laughed. I don't think it could really be called a plant. Plant-like seemed more appropriate.

"Be careful what you say, Chet." Good ole Marco was playing right along with me. "You don't want to kill it before we get to the hospital."

I snorted. "Kill it? You can't kill something that's already dead. Mike, we're supposed to lift Johnny's spirits, not discourage him."

That was when I saw Mike biting the inside of his cheek so he wouldn't laugh at us. Like I said, we definitely underestimated him 'cause he didn't talk. Big mistake. He's got more going on upstairs than any of us.

"What was it when it lived?" I examined the plant, trying to figure that one out.

"Roy would know. Too bad he didn't come with us," Marco commented. "We'll ask him when we get there."

"What would they call an autopsy on a plant?" I set the plant down before Mike could tell me to. "A botopsy?"

"A plantopsy? Necropsy is for animals. I know that. What would they call it for a plant, Mike?" Marco sounded a little uncomfortable. Maybe it was time to move on to something else. And I knew the perfect topic.

"Why're you askin' me?" Mike asked indignantly.

"I know, we'll call your dad. He'll know." That was safe, if we didn't pick on it too long. "Your dad knows everything, doesn't he, Mike?"

"Yep." Maybe picking on Mike's dad wasn't such a hot idea.

Luckily, we were at the hospital before it got too quiet again. Marco had talked to Cap, who'd gone by the hospital on his way home. I think Cap preferred the trip across town without us over the trip across town with us. He called the station a nuthouse. If it was, he was the head nut. Like I said, he's one of us guys.

"We should stop at the nurse's station when we get to the second floor." Marco said as we got in the elevator.

"We know the room number, Marco. We don't need to stop by the nurse's station." What a dumb idea! If we stopped at the nurse's station, they'd make us go in one at a time. Or worse, not let us in at all.

"What if he's down in x-ray or something?" Marco argued. "We can't just hang out in his room."

"What if he's not supposed to have visitors?" I argued back. "Then we've wasted a trip over here." And I didn't want to waste this trip. What if we didn't get a chance for another?

"I didn't think of that. Still . . ." Marco trailed off. He knew I was right. He just didn't want to admit it.

"Still nothing, We're not staying long." There. That settled it.

Actually, the doors of the elevator opening settled it. I got that same feeling I'd had at the scene. Heart pounding. Stomach fluttering. Maybe I'd wait to see Johnny in a couple of days when he was up and around. Marco'd never let me hear the end of it if I did that. Then again, he looked like he was thinking the same thing.

Mike stepped out of the elevator, ignoring the both of us. We followed him. Hey, it was either that, or ride the elevator all afternoon. Mike turned to Marco. "What's the room number again?"

"Ah . . . 220." Marco looked to the left and right, then pointed. "That way." Then he just stood there.

So did I. Seeing Johnny tomorrow seemed like a pretty good idea. Until Mike headed down the hall without us. I suddenly didn't want to wait out in the hall for him. He stopped in front of an open door, then stepped in. Marco and I followed him.

Johnny looked like shit. That's the only way to describe it.

"Hey, Johnny, how ya' doin'?" Marco must've thought he'd gone deaf, too.

"Hey, guys. How's it goin'?" Johnny's voice sounded like shit, too. And he was trying to trick us with that grin of his.

"We should be asking you that. How're you feeling?" Didn't Marco just ask that? Ooops. I decided to keep my mouth shut after that. Too bad nobody'd believe it was possible.

"Pretty good," Johnny lied. He winced and shifted in the bed. "Just havin' a hard time finding a comfortable position." Nope. He wasn't foolin' me. I didn't think Marco and Mike believed him either.

"We brought you a plant." Mike announced. He set the plant down on the table next to the phone.

We didn't have anything to do with that plant! No way I'm paying a third for that.

Johnny looked over at the thing. And smiled! "Thanks, guys." He was really smiling when he turned back to us. "That's really nice, guys."

Okay. Maybe I'd chip in a little. But not a whole third. "No big deal, Gage." If I'd called him Johnny, he'd have gotten suspicious.

"Yeah, John. Is there anything we can do?" Like I said, Marco was the polite one.

"Break me outta here." Johnny's voice was sounding a little weak. He groaned and shifted again.

Marco laughed. "No can do, buddy. We can go by your house and bring by some clothes, or books."

"Roy's gonna do that." Johnny's eyebrows came together and he frowned. "At least I think he is. He was here this morning, but it's kinda fuzzy."

The door behind us opened, and I felt the blood drain from my head. I just knew Marco was gonna say something about stopping at the nurse's station.

"Yo, Johnny, how ya doin'?" Charlie Dwyer closed the door. He went over next to Marco and Mike. For some reason, the guy just didn't like me.

"Better than I was this morning." The weak voice and the groan made that one hard to believe. He looked and sounded worse. Then again, Charlie hadn't been there.

As usual, Charlie put his foot in his mouth. "Man, you've got some luck. I heard the idiot didn't even slow down."

Johnny grimaced. "Oh, yeah, I'm real lucky. I only bounced once when I hit the concrete. Guess that is pretty lucky." His eyes closed for a second. Then he opened them again. "Sorry, guys. I didn't mean that."

Charlie grinned at him. "So, you bounced *more* than once?"

I couldn't believe my ears. Charlie Dwyer actually said something funny. I was so surprised, I laughed. Right along with Marco and Mike. And Johnny.

It wasn't funny when Johnny groaned. His left hand went to his side and he was gritting his teeth so

hard, all the muscles in his neck were standing out.

"Johnny?" I took a step toward the bed, then realized I didn't know what to do.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit." Johnny was starting to look like he had lockjaw.

"I'll go get a nurse." Marco went to the door and opened it.

"No." I don't know how he managed it, but Johnny took a shallow breath and blew it out. "M okay."

"You never could bluff, Johnny," Mike said, then turned to Marco. "Go get a nurse."

Marco nodded and went out into the hall. I wouldn't have argued with Mike, either.

"Yeah, Johnny, you should've said something. There aren't any cute nurses in here. We all know what a baby you are." That showed how little Charlie knew about Johnny. If a nurse had been in here, Johnny would've been playing it for all it was worth. He would've been acting like he was in twice as much pain. He was playing tough for us.

"Asshole." Johnny was still gritting his teeth, but the word was perfectly clear. And perfectly true, too. "It's your fault, Charlie."

"My fault? How do you figure that, Gage?" Charlie thought this was funny. If Mike didn't smack him, I was gonna reach across the bed and do it myself.

"I was fine until you made me laugh." John groaned, then closed his eyes.

The nurse came in before Charlie could say anything else stupid. One look from her and we headed for the door. It looked like a scene right out of The Stooges. I collided with Marco. Mike ran into my back, then Charlie ran into his.

Once we were out in the hall, I glared at Charlie. "That was a boneheaded thing to do, Charlie."

"Get a grip, Chester. How was I s'posed to know he'd laugh? He never laughs at my jokes." Charlie Dwyer, King of Lame Excuses.

"That's true, Chet." Mike didn't sound quite as confident. In fact, he was starting to sound a little nervous. "Look, when the nurse comes out, we'll go back in, tell Johnny good-bye and let him get some rest."

"Yeah. Cap told us not to stay too long, anyway." Marco sounded pretty uncomfortable, too.

"If she'll let us back in." I didn't think she would.

Luckily, I was wrong. The door opened, and the nurse stepped out into the hall. "Not too long. John

needs to rest."

"Yes, ma'am," Mike said, nodding. Then he went back into Johnny's room.

Charlie pushed his way past me and followed Mike, leaving me and Marco to bring up the rear. Hey, we're used to it.

"Sorry, Gage," Charlie said. Okay, so he wasn't such a bad guy after all.

"No problem, Charlie." Johnny sounded funny. Not funny ha-ha. Funny strange.

"Yeah, who knew Charlie would pick today to perfect his delivery?" Marco was grinning, and I wished he'd let me in on the joke.

Johnny's eyes drifted shut, then snapped open. And I figured it out. He was stoned.

"Sorry, guys. I'm fading here." John Gage stoned was a pretty funny thought. Too bad I didn't feel like taking advantage of it.

"Get some rest. We'll stop by after shift change on Tuesday." Mike sounded confident again. Probably for Johnny's benefit.

"Kay. Thanks." Johnny closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"C'mon." Mike motioned to the door. I wasn't about to argue with him. Maybe Johnny would be better on Tuesday.

"Take it easy, John." Marco said before stepping out of the room.

"See ya, Gage," I called over my shoulder.

Charlie followed us out into the hall. "I'll see you guys on Monday."

"See ya, Charlie," Marco responded.

Mike came out a minute later.

"Is he okay?" I asked.

Mike just smiled, nodded and headed down the hall. Marco shrugged, then followed him. They're all nuts.

We were on our way back to Marco's when Marco decided to try to give Mike a heart attack right in

the middle of Atlantic Boulevard by shouting, "Stop the car!"

Mike nearly took out his passenger side tires on the curb. After a minute, he looked over at Marco. "What?" He sounded really pissed. At least it wasn't at me.

"Sorry, Mike. I didn't want to miss St. Alphonsus." Marco must've been thinking in Spanish, 'cause that didn't make any sense. "I want to stop at the Church before I go home."

"Oh." Mike nodded, then looked back in the rearview, "Where are you parked?"

"Chet and I can walk from here. It's only a few blocks." First Mike with the plant, then Marco with church. What had gotten into people today? "C'mon, Chet." Was I wearing a sign on my forehead that said, "Take advantage of me"?

I hadn't been in a church in 5 or 6 years. I wasn't sure today was the day to start back again. "I don't know."

"C'mon, Chet," Marco insisted.

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea. But I couldn't give in that easily. I took my time getting out of the car. "See ya Monday, Mike." I closed the rear passenger door. We watched Mike pull away, then turned back and headed for St. Alphonsus'.

I hadn't stopped going to church for any particular reason. I just stopped. The longer I went without going, the harder it was to go back. When we got there, I couldn't go inside. "I'll wait out here."

Marco was at the top of the steps. He stopped and looked down at me. "C'mon. Lightning isn't gonna strike you."

"It wouldn't surprise me if it did," I muttered. I'd been away from the church so long, I was kind of afraid to go back. Afraid I wouldn't know what to do. You know?

I followed Marco through the doors into the vestibule. And it all came back to me. We stopped at the font, dabbed our fingers in the Holy Water and crossed ourselves. Then we went into the Sanctuary. Marco walked up to a pew in the middle, genuflected, then stepped into the row. I did the same, then followed Marco into the pew and knelt on the kneeler.

That was when I forgot what to do next. I stared at the Crucifix behind the altar, trying to get up the nerve to explain to God why I'd been away so long. "I just didn't have time. Sorry," seemed pretty lame.

Marco nudged me, then nodded when I looked over at him. Okay, maybe I shouldn't try to explain anything. God probably knew. I just hoped He understood. I crossed myself, folded my hands and bent my head.

"God, it's me. Chester Kelly," I prayed silently, "I've got a friend that needs Your help." I wondered what I could offer for that. Then it came to me. "I promise I'll treat him better from now on. I'll try to see things through his eyes. And let him know that he's my friend and not my enemy."

I looked over at Marco. "Why don't we light a candle . . . while we're here."

"Good idea." Marco smiled.

We went to the altar at the front of the Sanctuary. There were two tables with votive candles on either side. We put an offering in the collection box, then each of us lit a candle, put out the tapers and crossed ourselves.

We were walking back to Marco's when it came to me. Charlie had been right about one thing. Johnny Gage did have a special kind of luck. It would take some time, but Johnny would come out of this in one piece.

"So, Marco, which do you think Stoker prefers - lemon meringue, or banana cream?"

Marco laughed. "I think he likes coconut cream."

I wagged my eyebrows and cackled. "Coconut cream, it is, then!"