

The Nuisance: Marco's Story

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

My Saturday started when the tones sounded in the middle of the night. I used to be a heavy sleeper. *That* changed when I joined the fire service. The first time I slept through the tones, I got a bucket of ice cold water dumped on me. Since then, the second the first tone sounds, I'm out of bed pulling on my turnouts. My eyes might not be open, yet, but I always manage to get my pants on.

We all headed for the vehicle bay, even though the response could've been for just the squad, or just the engine. When the dispatcher designated the station, Chet and I climbed into our seats and hung on for dear life. Mike's a great guy, but he drives that engine like he's driving a Formula Porsche. My dentist just bought himself a Ferrari. I'll bet my loose fillings paid for it.

When we got to the scene, Cap told us to wait with the engine. As soon as we were back in our seats, Chet nudged me. It was dark, but I could see the smirk on his face. Chet and I have this little game we like to call, "How Long Will It Take?" The game being Chet's idea, the object is to annoy. With the Cap, the game lasts about 5 minutes before he tells us to "knock it off, you twits." Roy, the peacemaker, can last about 7 minutes before he starts trying to mediate.

So far, Johnny holds the record. He watched Chet and me go back and forth for 10 minutes the other day before he thought of somewhere else he had to be. He let us keep going, but it's a technical win. According to Chet, anyway. This would be Mike's first time at bat. So to speak.

I knew Mike was gonna be tough. But with the chance that the run would take awhile, I went along with the game. Hey, it beats sitting in the back of the engine at 2 in the morning staring at the street behind us.

So, for 7 minutes, Chet and I "argued" over whether or not the run was a bar fight. Chet took the fight side. I argued the not fight side. Neither one of us were debaters in school. That's the beauty of it. Lack of creativity adds to the annoyance factor. The game was called when Johnny and Roy walked out of the bar.

"Well, what was it?" Mike asked. I winked at Chet. Johnny still held the record.

"Ah, some spaced out dame," Johnny responded.

"Have you got the MICU form?" I heard Roy ask. The run must've been a false response. Being "just a firefighter" has it's advantages. No paperwork.

"No, I haven't got it," Johnny responded. "It's . . ." the rest of the response was drowned out by the sound of an engine revving. Probably some guy in a Formula Porsche.

Headlights blinded me and I heard the sound of tires squealing around the corner. I braced myself, waiting for whoever it was to hit the back of the engine.

"Jeez." Chet exclaimed, covering his eyes.

"Idiot," I muttered. The back of the engine was dark again.

What happened next isn't really clear. Mike made a noise, then I heard the car hit something. It didn't sound like another car. This sound wasn't metal and glass hitting metal and glass. Something bad had happened. I could feel it.

"Oh, my God," Chet breathed, jumping down from the engine.

I followed him. The car was about ten yards away, turned sideways in the street. Then the driver took off. I saw Johnny on the pavement, lying on his right side. "*Madre de Dios.*"

"Johnny!" That was Roy. "TRAUMA BOX!"

I ran over and knelt behind Johnny's head. Mike ran behind me and knelt next to Johnny's left leg. Chet must've gotten the trauma box out of the squad. He set it down and knelt between me and Mike.

". . . hell happened?" Cap steadied himself with a hand on my shoulder.

Johnny was trying to sit up. Maybe the car just clipped him and he was okay. I said a prayer that he was just shaken up. He didn't look just shaken up though.

"Johnny? Are you all right? Can you hear me? Can you hear me?" Roy put his hand on Johnny's chest. That meant he couldn't be all right. Johnny kept lifting his head, blinking like he couldn't keep his eyes open. He was trying to talk, but no sound came out.

"Head back!" Roy barked. Johnny was hurt. Bad. *St. Florian, Johnny's a firefighter and you're our patron saint. Please protect him.*

Cap stood up. "Engine 51, I have a Code I at this location. Respond an ambulance."

"Where do you hurt?" Roy asked.

St. Florian, protect Johnny.

"My . . . my hip . . . my back . . . my leg." Johnny's head fell back. He groaned, then went out on us.

"Somebody get a soft collar on him," Roy ordered.

St. Florian, protect Johnny.

Chet's hands were shaking so much, he had a hard time with the trauma box. When he got it open and pulled the collar out, I took it. I hoped it wasn't too late for the collar to do its job. *St. Florian, protect*

Johnny.

"Hang in there, Johnny," I whispered as I secured the collar.

"I'll get the backboard." Mike jumped up and ran for the squad.

Cap took his helmet off and tossed it behind us. Chet and I did the same.

Roy muttered something. All I caught over the thinking of our helmets were the words "wrap" and "run."

"Johnny, can you hear me?" Roy's voice sounded almost normal. Except for the shaking.

Johnny groaned, then his eyes opened. That was a good sign. *Thank you, St. Florian.* He made a sound. Another good sign. *Thank you, St. Florian.*

"The bad news is the drug box is in worse shape than you are," Roy informed, "The good news is you won't have any needles until you get to Rampart." Roy was making "good news, bad news" jokes. Another good sign. *Thank you, St. Florian.*

"Good," Johnny whispered.

Mike ran back over, carrying the backboard. Johnny gasped as we rolled him onto his side. Mike positioned the backboard and we set him down. Johnny groaned and his face relaxed, like he'd gone out on us again. *St. Florian, protect him.*

"No fractures on the right arm. Mike?" Man! Roy's face was white as a sheet.

"No fractures on the left arm," Mike answered.

"Chet, can you help me get his turnout coat off?" Roy asked.

"Yeah, sure," Chet's hands were still shaking.

"I'll give you a hand, Roy," Cap said.

Roy handed me his bandage scissors. They weren't much, but I managed to cut through the thick turnout coat. I was sweating and my hand ached, but the coat was off. When I looked up, Johnny's right leg was in a splint.

"Cold." Johnny's voice was barely a whisper. I looked down at him. His eyes were closed, but he was there. *St. Florian, protect him.*

"We'll have you bundled up in a minute." Roy tore open a blanket pack and he and Mike wrapped the blanket around the back board.

The ambulance, siren wailing, drove past us. Cap and Mike stood. Chet and I aren't blessed with their height. They can't lift a backboard from a squat like we can.

"Can you get it?" Cap asked. I'm not sure who he was asking. There was just too much going on.

I took the left shoulder, lifting with Cap, Mike, Vince and Chet. We've had enough practice that we can lift together without any coaching.

"Can you guys make it okay, there?" Roy picked up the biophone and trauma box.

"Bring up the gurney." The gurney was wheeled behind Cap and we set Johnny down.

"I'm gonna put this stuff in." Roy leaned into the ambulance, then leaned out, without the boxes.

"Okay, Chet, you bring in the squad, Pal." Cap patted Chet's shoulder. I turned and picked up Johnny's turnout coat and helmet. Then picked up my own helmet.

"How you feeling?" I heard Roy ask. Chet and I were walking toward the squad.

"He's gonna be all right," I told Chet quietly. "Do you want me to take this stuff back in the engine?"

Chet looked at the helmet and the tattered coat. "Ahhh . . . no." His voice was shaking. Worse than I'd ever heard it shake. "You can put it in the squad." He opened the driver's door and climbed into the squad. I silently handed him the helmet and coat. He set them on Johnny's spot on the seat, then closed the door.

"Johnny's tough, Chet." I reached through the window and patted Chet's shoulder.

Chet's face was solemn. "Roy's too scared, Marco." His voice was quiet. "He wouldn't be this scared if Johnny was just a little banged up."

"Johnny'll make it. He's got too many things to do." I started to say, "He hasn't caught the Phantom in the act, yet." Instead I said, "He's too stubborn to just give up."

Chet shook his head, but didn't respond.

"Johnny's like a cat, Chet. He's got nine lives." Johnny would've hated the comparison, which made me grin.

"What if he's used his nine lives, Marco?" Chet whispered. He wouldn't admit how worried he was to Cap, Mike, Johnny or Roy. "What if this is it?"

"Don't think like that, Chet." I didn't mean to snap at him, but I did. "You're the one always reading those self-help books. What do all of them say?"

"Think positive," Chet muttered, taking a deep breath, then blowing it out. "Think positive."

"Want me to bring the squad to the hospital?" I offered. Maybe Chet was too shaken up to drive.

"Nah, I'm okay, Marco." Chet looked up. They'd loaded the gurney into the ambulance and the doors were closed. He turned the key in the ignition. "I'd better get going."

I stepped away from the squad as the ambulance pulled away, siren wailing. Chet switched on the squad's lights and siren, then pulled out behind the ambulance. He didn't look at me. He was embarrassed. We're friends, but admitting to me how scared he was just wasn't something Chet could be comfortable with. *St. Florian, watch over us. We need you now.*

Cap was still standing in the street, looking at the white stripe on his helmet.

"You okay, Cap?" I called.

Cap looked up and tucked the helmet under his arm. "Yeah, Marco. Just fine." He walked over and the two of us silently returned to the engine. Mike was already in the driver's seat. His expression was more solemn than usual. I tapped the door as I passed him. He didn't respond.

Four hours later, Chet was back at the station, Johnny was in surgery and we were all waiting for Roy to call. Oh, yeah, we were waiting for Vince to call, too. Mike had seen the whole thing, so he'd be able to give Vince a description of the car and the driver.

The Cap looked at me like I had two heads when I said the car that hit Johnny was purple. It *was* purple. I see a lot of purple cars in East L.A. Purple's a very popular color. Don't ask me why. Give me Candy Apple Red any day.

I was beginning to feel like I was trapped in an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. Or having a really bad dream. I was rooting for the bad dream. That way, I'd wake up and Johnny would be in his own bunk.

Things were really *off*. Chet was quiet. Too quiet. He'd made two trips into the Captain's office with coffee. Chet's not above brown-nosing when he has to. He's a regular Eddie Haskell when he's in the doghouse with the Cap. He wasn't in trouble with the Cap tonight.

Mike wasn't quiet. When Chet got the Cap's first cup of coffee, Mike muttered something about two fistfuls drinking. Mike does that occasionally. He starts out with, "You know what they say . . ." Chet usually falls for it and says, "No, Mike, what do they say?" Then Mike shrugs and says, "I don't know. I was asking you." *I'd* just never seen him do it when Chet *hadn't* been picking on Johnny first.

I was at the table when Vince walked in through the street door. "I heard you were looking for me." When I looked up, he had his helmet tucked under his arm. "Here I am." You'd think the pot on the

stove was made of gold from the look in his eyes. "Mind if I bum a cup of coffee?" Then again, it was 6 in the morning. Vince had probably been on patrol for the last 4 hours.

"Help yourself," I told him.

Vince set his helmet down and poured himself a cup of coffee. Then he picked up the helmet in one hand and the cup in the other and walked over to sit next to me at the table. "How's John?"

I expected Mike to answer the question before Chet did. They weren't talking. Which left it to me. "He had internal bleeding, so they took him to surgery a couple of hours ago. We haven't heard anything."

"What's up?" Vince paused for a second sip of coffee. "You didn't bring me all the way out here to tell me Johnny's in surgery."

"I saw the car and the driver. It was a 1975 purple Datsun 280ZX. The license plate number was GTA and the driver was a male, in his early twenties with sandy blond hair." Mike was still talking after all.

Vince put the cup on the table and pulled a pad and pen out of his pocket. "You're sure it was a '75? What about the color? And the plate?"

"I'm positive about all three. The guy had to be doing at least 40 when he rounded that corner. He should'a wiped out and hit the back of the engine." Mike sounded like he wished the guy had hit his precious engine instead of Johnny.

When Vince finished writing, he looked at me and Chet. "What about you two? Can you confirm this?"

"Geez, they'll let anybody in here." Cap's voice startled me.

"Talk to Stoker, Hank." Vince replied, "He's the one that called me over here."

"Hey, I'm trying to tell Vince about the guy that ran Johnny down this morning." Whoa. Mike sounded really ticked. Things just kept getting stranger.

"Settle down, Mike. We're all wound a little bit too tight." At least Cap was acting like Cap.

Vince looked past me at Chet. "Okay, Chet, can you give me a description of the car, or the driver?"

"All I saw was the car stopped for a second, then peeling off." Chet looked down at the table. "I was looking for Gage."

Vince turned to me. "What about you, Marco?"

All I could do was shrug. "I saw the car coming around the corner. That's about it."

Vince turned his attention back to Mike. "Let's go through it from beginning to end. Where were you when the car came around the corner?"

"In the driver's seat of the engine." Mike stopped.

"When did you climb down from the engine?" Vince asked.

Mike's face turned red. "Right after the car drove away. I couldn't move."

"Did John look before stepping out into the street?" That was when the real trouble started. Well, it almost started.

Mike knocked the chair over as he stood up, leaning in toward Vince like he was gonna hit him. "What the hell kind of question is that? The car wasn't even there when he stepped off the curb. He was barely in the street." I was hearing Mike shout for the first time since I'd met him. And it was almost as scary as the sound of that car hitting Johnny. "The street's one way for the last block, so he would've checked the wrong direction anyway."

"Cool off, Mike." Cap stepped between Mike and Vince. He's a brave man.

I walked around the table, picked up the chair and put both hands on Mike's shoulders, "Vince is just doin' his job, man." I caught the smirk on Chet's face disappearing as I pushed Mike back into the chair.

"Mike, I know what happened. I've got to convince the D.A. there's a case when we catch this guy." Vince closed his notebook. "I'm gonna be honest with you, guys. When we track the owner of the car down, he's gonna tell us one of two things," he paused, "He loaned the car to a friend." Another pause, "Or the car was missing and he was just about to report it stolen."

"So this is all just a big fat waste of time." If I didn't know Chet better, I'd swear he was gonna cry.

"Mike can put the owner behind the wheel. It's a start." Vince frowned. "Unless he did loan the car to a friend. Then, we're back to Square One." He put the pen and notebook away.

"Sorry about a minute ago, Vince. It was a bad scene." The hesitant, shy Stoker we all knew and loved was back. At least for now.

"No problem, Mike. I was there." Vince stood and picked up the helmet. "I'll get this on the wire. If the driver's still out, he'll be picked up. Otherwise, Detectives'll have a talk with the owner. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks, Vince." I needed another cup of coffee. The pot was empty. "Of course," I muttered. Why do I always get stuck making coffee? My coffee is terrible. Well, the Cap's is worse, but that's another story.

Cap walked out to the vehicle bay with Vince. "I'll walk you out, Vince. Then I've got to get back to paperwork."

I was making breakfast when the wake-up tones sounded. I didn't even realize I was fixing Johnny's favorite until it was half done. If nobody wanted to eat it, I'd throw it out.

"Smells good, Marco." Cap said as he walked into the kitchen and sat at the table with Mike and Chet.

The phone rang. "I've got it." Chet's voice called. I turned from the stove as he was lifting the handset. "Station 51, Fireman Kelly. It's about time, DeSoto. How's Gage?" He paused. "Uh-uh. Uh-uh. That's not a surprise." Then he nodded. "Okay. Yeah, I'll tell him. Yeah, see you Monday." He hung the phone up and went back to the table.

Cap and Mike were on the edge of their seats. I was Chet's partner-in-crime most of the time. I knew better than to give him the satisfaction. "Well?" Cap asked. "How's John?"

"Oh, sorry, Cap," Chet returned. Sorry, my a . . . aunt Rosita. "Roy says he came out of the anesthesia okay. They just moved him from Recovery. Gage's still out of it, so Roy's gonna head home for a couple hours sleep."

"That's a relief. Did Roy say how long Johnny'd be out?" Cap went from relieved to worried again. He still had things to deal with.

"Dr. Early says 6 weeks with his leg," Chet told him. "He'll be in the hospital about 2 weeks, 'cause of the surgery."

"He's gonna go nuts." I felt bad for Johnny. Even so, I couldn't help but grin. Probably because I knew Johnny would be bored out of his mind. Johnny never seemed to be able to sit still for long. When he wasn't at the station, he was camping, or working on his house. He'd be housebound, too. "Man, his right leg's broken. He won't even be able to drive."

"That's what you think," Cap said with a snort, "He'll have my wife and Joanne and Beth chauffeuring him all over town. What a rough life." To Cap, sarcasm is a fine art.

That made me laugh. "I get your point, Cap," I admitted. "But is it worth getting hit by a car?" I stood and went to the stove. The pot was dry. Again.

Cap stood. "Probably not," he muttered. "I'd better call Battalion. It's not gonna be easy finding somebody willing to work in this nuthouse for 6 weeks."

That made me laugh. Cap jokes about the Department instituting psychological testing as part of our yearly physicals. He says that if they do, A-Shift at 51s would have a lot of new faces. He's right.

Johnny and Chet alternated as "head nut." Roy and Cap had their moments. Even Stoker was starting to get goofy. I remained completely sane, of course. "Good luck," I called after him.

Chet stood and walked over to the couch. He dropped onto it, leaning his head back.

"How's that coffee coming?" Mike asked, leaning over my shoulder.

"Keep your shorts on, Mike." Chet called from the couch. "You're just a ball-o-fire tonight."

"When you're hot, you're hot, Chet. Oh, you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" Mike was talking again.

I laughed. "He got you, Chet." If I'd thought about it, I wouldn't have said it. It just added fuel to the fire.

"Watch it, Stoker. The Phantom might want a new pigeon with Gage out of commission," Chet warned. I couldn't believe he'd just said that. Things were getting ugly. Again.

I shut my mouth and concentrated on the coffee pot. Okay, I knew sometimes Chet couldn't help himself. I sure hoped Mike could.

"Do your worst. Just be prepared to suffer the consequences,." Mike boasted. I reminded myself that we were all on edge.

"Only in your dreams, *Mikey*." Chet emphasized the nickname. If Mike took offense at that, I couldn't stop him without the Cap.

"Better than yours, Chester," Mike shot back.

I'd had enough. This shift would be over soon. But we still had to work together. "Coffee's ready."

Mike got the message. I hoped Chet did, too. "I'm gonna go over to see Johnny later today," Mike began, pouring himself another cup of coffee. "I can pick you guys up."

"Sounds like a plan to me," I said, looking at Chet. "What time's good for you, Chet?" I didn't give him the option of saying "no."

Chet shrugged. "Two. Gage'll probably be asleep, though."

"Think positive, Chet," I reminded.

When I got home, I couldn't sleep. I passed the time by doing chores around the apartment. The phone rang while I was on my way out to the dumpster. Most times, I would've ignored it. I didn't this time.

It might've been about Johnny.

"*Hola?*"

"Marco, it's Stanley," Cap's voice responded.

"*Si?*" I think in Spanish. I dream in Spanish. When I'm nervous, I revert to Spanish.

"Listen, I stopped by to see John on my way home this morning." That's funny. Cap's house is on the other side of town. "He's in Room 220. But don't stay too long, will ya?"

I got the feeling Cap wasn't telling me something. "Is everything okay?" English, this time.

"He's fine He just had surgery, that's all. He needs to rest." I still had the feeling Cap was leaving something out.

"Okay," I responded, "We won't stay long."

"All right, then," Cap began, "I'll let you go. Take it easy and I'll see you on Monday."

"Sure thing, Cap. 'Bye." I set the handset on the cradle. When I looked up, Chet was standing in the open door.

"Couldn't sleep." Chet strolled into the apartment and plopped down on the couch. He propped his feet on my coffee table.

"Make yourself at home, Chet," I teased him. "I've got to take a bag to the dumpster. Don't loot the place while I'm gone."

Chet snorted. "Yeah, like you've got anything worth stealing." He looked around. "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 shot back. "Don't pick on my *matador*."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go take out your garbage, Marco." We had an hour before Mike was supposed to pick me up. It was gonna be a long hour.

Mike was on time picking us up. Which was good and bad. It was good because we were all anxious to see Johnny. It was bad because Chet needed to talk. He always had to be the tough one. When things got heavy at a fire, Chet started making jokes. I guess he and I got along so well because I understood it. We were both raised in the same kind of culture, even though our ancestors came from different parts of the world.

Where Chet and I came from, men didn't openly display many emotions. Showing anger and hate were acceptable. Happiness was okay, but not too often. The rest fell into a sort of gray area. Sadness if you lost a child was acceptable, only if followed by *macho* displays of anger, or hate. Showing emotion when a friend died was different. There was something wrong with a man who showed sadness at the loss of a friend. No matter what, men never worried. And they were never afraid.

That doesn't mean I think that Roy, John, Mike and Cap are any less *macho* than me, or Chet. We all have to be strong, physically and emotionally, to do the jobs we do. The other guys were raised in the same generation Chet and I were. I swear Roy's got to have some Catholic in him somewhere. He's too good at feeling guilty to be purely Protestant. Roy, Mike and Cap just had the benefit of more loopholes than Chet and I did. Sometimes, I'm not so sure about Johnny.

He never talks about growing up. It's like he didn't exist before he moved to L.A. When something bad happens to him, he gets quiet and keeps to himself. You'd think we'd all enjoy the peace, but it's unsettling. At least it is for me. And, being the *macho* men that we are, none of us ever asks him what's wrong. When Johnny feels like talking, he talks to Roy.

The little we knew about John, we knew because Chet opened his big mouth and stuck his foot in. And did Chet ever hear it from me when he pulled that very un-funny peace pipe stunt. He did it out of stupidity, not bigotry. And he's never done anything even close to it since.

On the way to Rampart, Mike pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall. Talk about a blight on the face of the city. But they're popping up all over the place and there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to stop them.

Chet reached over the seat and tapped my shoulder. "What's he doin'? Buyin' Johnny flowers?"

I looked up to see Mike in a florist's shop. I shrugged. "We'll see when he comes out."

"Hey, Marco, I didn't mean to put down that bullfighter painting." I told you Chet wasn't a bigot. And he may not be a practicing Catholic, but he's still a Catholic. You can take the boy out of the Church. You can never take the Church out of the boy.

I flashed a grin at him. "I didn't mean to put down your pool playing dogs, either."

Mike came back to the car carrying a plant. In a bright red planter. I didn't get a good look at it because he opened the back door and set it on the floor. He did it quickly, so I'll bet he didn't want us to get a good look at it.

That didn't work because Chet was sitting in the backseat right next to the thing. "Awww, Mike, a fivre engine." He picked the plant and planter up, displaying it for me.

"That's a ladder truck!" I exclaimed. "*We don' need no stinkin' ladder trucks.*" You can take the boy of the *barrio* . . . you know the rest.

"Put it down," Mike ordered, starting the car. After this morning, Chet didn't argue with him. He set the plant back down on the floor behind Mike's seat. Which was pretty funny, especially after Chet's threat that the Phantom would pick on Mike until Johnny came back.

"A ladder truck, Mike." Chet clucked his tongue. "I'm disappointed."

Mike tried to ignore us by driving. He should know better by now.

I peered over the back seat. The plant's leaves were droopy and it looked like it wouldn't survive much longer. "Did you buy it for the planter?"

"Didn't they have a sorrier looking plant, Mike?" Chet chimed in.

"Be careful what you say, Chet." Sounding serious wasn't easy, but I managed. "You don't want to kill it before we get to the hospital."

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

I looked over at Mike, who was trying not to laugh. That's something he and Johnny have in common. Just when I think I've got one of them figured out, they do something completely unexpected. Like Mike this morning trading insults with Chet. He *never* openly gets into it with Chet. Mike's so subtle that I swear sometimes Chet doesn't even know he's been got.

So, I guess Mike was trying to lighten things up before we got to the hospital. You have to admire a guy who sets himself up as the butt of the joke.

"What was it when it lived?" Chet lifted the plant again and examined it.

"Roy would know. Too bad he didn't come with us." I figured Roy would be at the hospital already. "We'll ask him when we get there."

"What would they call an autopsy on a plant?" Chet turned the plant a final time, then set it down. "A botopsy?"

"A plantopsy?" I tried. Talking about dead people was too creepy. So I decided to steer the topic in another direction. "Necropsy is for animals. I know that. What would they call it for a plant, Mike?"

"Why're you askin' me?" Mike finally spoke.

"I know, we'll call your dad. He'll know." Chet laughed. "Your dad knows everything, doesn't he, Mike?"

"Yep." Good idea, Mike. Go back to one word answers.

We got to the hospital before Chet could start cracking jokes about Mike's dad and his wealth of knowledge. Personally, I think Mike uses his dad as a cover. The man's house is full of books and I'll bet he's read every single one. Cover to cover. At least twice.

"We should stop at the nurse's station when we get to the second floor." I made the suggestion as we stepped into the elevator. I went from being Chet's ally to his adversary.

"We know the room number, Marco. We don't need to stop by the nurse's station." He was seriously arguing with me. Not just playing around with Mike.

"What if he's down in x-ray or something? We can't just hang out in his room." I didn't want to argue, so I kept my tone as neutral as I could. It was a logical, rational idea.

"What if he's not supposed to have visitors? Then we've wasted a trip over here," Chet said smugly.

"I didn't think of that." Well, I didn't think of it. I didn't want to argue, but I wasn't giving up that easily. "Still . . ."

"Still nothing," Chet interrupted. "We're not staying long."

The doors opened before I could say anything to wipe that smug look off Chet's face. My stomach picked that minute to head for the hills. Chet didn't look so smug any more. I'll bet our stomachs were together. Wherever they were.

If I didn't admire Mike's restraint before, I sure admired it now. He didn't give me and Chet a hard time for acting like we were the ones going into the hospital for major surgery. He just ignored us, taking the lead and stepping out of the elevator.

Mike turned to me when Chet and I followed him into the hall. "What's the room number again?"

"Ah . . ." What was the room number? "220." *Mierda*. I should've pretended to forget the room number. Then we would've had no choice but to go to the nurse's station. There went that plan.

We were right in front of a sign with an arrow pointing the way to rooms 214 to 224. "That way." I gestured to the right, in case Chet and Mike missed seeing the little arrow. I wasn't going to be the first one in Johnny's room. When I looked over, neither was Chet.

Mike pretended not to notice. He headed down the hall. Chet and I followed. Mike stopped in front of an open door, then stepped in. Like good little puppies, Chet and I followed him.

I couldn't see anything at first. Mike isn't skinny like the Cap and Johnny. He's not fat. Just stocky. For a tall guy.

When I stepped around Mike, I wanted to leave. Johnny looked horrible. His face was paler than I'd ever seen it. Any paler and he'd be invisible. Anybody could see he was exhausted, but in too much

pain to sleep. "Hey, Johnny, how ya' doin'?" I hoped my voice wasn't too loud.

Johnny smiled a little. He was gonna play the tough guy for us. "Hey, guys. How's it goin'?" His voice sounded like he'd been eating sandpaper. Worse than that time he took a faceful of chemicals.

"We should be asking you that," Chet responded, "How're you feeling?"

Boy, that wasn't what I expected out of Chet. I've never seen him pass a chance to rib Johnny. You'd think he'd do it now just to give Johnny the chance to get him back.

"Pretty good. Just havin' a hard time finding a comfortable position." I would've believed him if he hadn't followed that with a wince and a groan.

"We brought you a plant." Mike announced, setting the plant on the table next to the phone.

I almost asked Mike what the "we" stuff was about. Chet and I had nothing to do with the ugly plant in the ladder truck. He did.

Then again, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. Johnny turned his head and looked over at the plant. He even managed a pretty decent smile. Probably at the ladder truck. "Thanks, guys." He either liked the thing, or the drugs he was on were just enough to make the plant look pretty. He turned back to us and he was still smiling. "That's really nice, guys."

"No big deal, Gage." Just because Chet took some of the credit didn't mean he was gonna fork over his share.

"Yeah, John. Is there anything we can do?" Like find the driver of that car and beat him to a pulp? Okay, maybe we wouldn't actually do it. But it would probably feel real good to think about doing it for a while.

"Break me outta here." Johnny groaned and shifted in the bed. The poor guy was really hurting.

"No can do, buddy." I almost laughed. It was just like Johnny to want to be alone in his house instead of the hospital where he belongs. "We can go by your house and bring by some clothes, or books."

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

When the door opened behind us, we all froze. I had to bite my tongue to keep from telling Chet we should've stopped at the nurse's station. The heart attack I almost had was for nothing. It was just Charlie Dwyer.

"Yo, Johnny, how ya' doin'?" Charlie closed the door and stepped around me and Mike.

"Better than I was this morning." Groaning and shifting in bed made that sound less than convincing.

"Man, you've got some luck. I heard the idiot didn't even slow down." Charlie has never been tactful. We shouldn't have expected that to change just because Johnny was lying in a hospital bed.

"Oh, yeah, I'm real lucky. I only bounced once when I hit the concrete. Guess that is pretty lucky." Johnny's sarcasm isn't as subtle as the Cap's. In fact, subtle isn't one of the words I'd pick to describe Johnny. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. "Sorry, guys. I didn't mean that."

"So, you bounced *more* than once?" Charlie was grinning from ear to ear. Mike laughed. Chet laughed. I laughed. Then Johnny laughed. That was when bad stuff happened. I swear, one more word out of Charlie and I'm gonna stuff a pillow down his throat.

Johnny stopped laughing, groaned and clutched his side. He got even paler than he already was. I was wrong. He didn't disappear.

"Johnny?" Chet stepped toward the bed, then changed his mind.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit." Johnny's teeth were clenched so tight, I thought he'd break his jaw.

"I'll go get a nurse." I hurried toward the door.

Johnny's sandpapery voice stopped me. "No." He took a shallow breath and blew it out. "M okay."

"You never could bluff, Johnny." Mike turned to me. "Go get a nurse." Not a request. An order. I wasn't about to disobey him, either.

I went to the nurse's station. I took very big steps to get there quickly, without running. One of the nurse's looked up at me from a chart.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

She didn't look like a *Latina*, so I had to concentrate to get the words out in English. "John Gage. The patient in 220. He's in a lot of pain."

Thank God she didn't ask me any questions. She stood, walked around the desk and headed down the hall. I stepped in behind her and nearly got knocked over by Chet, Mike and Charlie as she sent them out into the hall.

"That was a boneheaded thing to do, Charlie." I guess I won't have to worry about stuffing that pillow into Charlie's mouth after all. Chet sounded ready to kill him.

"Get a grip, Chester." Charlie never did have much patience with Chet. "How was I s'posed to know he'd laugh? He never laughs at my jokes."

"That's true, Chet." Now Mike knew how I felt in the kitchen this morning when he and Chet were

going at each other. Wasn't fun, was it, Mikey? "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." He also didn't tell us that Johnny was in so much pain. We would've stopped by tomorrow. Then again, Cap probably would've offered to stop us. Johnny probably wanted the company. I can't blame the poor guy. But a little warning would've been nice.

Chet looked down at the floor and scuffed his shoe. "If she'll let us back in."

The door opened. "Not too long," she said, stepping out into the hall. "John needs to rest."

"Yes, ma'am." Mike nodded.

Mike was the first one brave enough to step back into Johnny's room after the nurse went down the hall. I let Charlie go in ahead of me so he and Chet wouldn't get too close to each other.

Johnny was pale. And stoned. Unfortunately, I see that a lot in the *barrio*. We'd be lucky if he could stay awake five more minutes.

"Sorry, Gage," Charlie said.

"No problem, Charlie." Yep, Johnny was stoned all right.

The thought of Johnny Gage stoned made me grin. "Yeah, who knew Charlie would pick today to perfect his delivery?" What? I had to come up with a reason for the stupid grin on my face.

Johnny was smiling when his eyes drifted shut, then snapped open. My guess is he was getting ready to orbit Venus about now. "Sorry, guys. I'm fading here." No kidding.

"Get some rest." For a guy who doesn't talk much, Mike can sound like a captain when he wants to. "We'll stop by after shift change on Tuesday."

Johnny's eyes closed, then snapped open again. "Kay. Thanks."

"C'mon." Mike pointed to the door. He'd make a great captain some day.

"Take it easy, John." It seemed like the right thing to say.

Chet followed me. "See ya, Gage," he called, then stepped into the hall.

We were all quiet on the drive from Rampart. For me, seeing John in the hospital made me worry more. I knew it was too much to expect him to be up, laughing and joking around with us. He just had

major surgery this morning. Still, seeing him in so much pain reminded me of all the complications that can happen after surgery. Sometimes broken bones don't heal right. If he couldn't pass the physical, he'd lose his job.

We were passing St. Alphonsus' on Atlantic Boulevard when I managed to almost give Mike a heart attack. "Stop the car," I said urgently.

Mike cut hard toward the curb and slammed on the brakes. We screeched to a stop and he looked out the windshield. After a minute, he turned to me. "What?"

I smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Mike. I didn't want to miss St. Alphonsus." Mike blinked and I could tell from the look on his face that my explanation didn't make any sense to him. "I want to stop at the Church before I go home."

"Oh." Mike nodded. He looked at Chet in the rearview mirror. "Where are you parked?"

"Chet and I can walk from here. It's only a few blocks." It was closer to ten blocks, but Chet didn't need to know that. Both of us needed the exercise. I opened the door and got out. "C'mon, Chet."

"I don't know," Chet said. He sounded really hesitant

I still had part of my penance to do from my last confession, before I went to confession this week. Bringing Chet back into the Church would probably take care of it. "C'mon, Chet."

Chet rolled his eyes and opened the rear passenger door. "See ya Monday, Mike." He got out and closed the door.

Mike waved, then pulled away from the curb. Chet and I turned back and headed for St. Alphonsus'. Alphonsus Liguori was a lawyer before he abandoned the legal profession and became a priest who worked with the homeless and the poor in Naples, Italy. Imagine that. Then again, maybe lawyers in the Eighteenth Century weren't like lawyers today.

Chet stopped on the steps outside the church. "I'll wait out here."

I stopped and turned to him. "C'mon. Lightning isn't gonna strike you."

"It wouldn't surprise me if it did," Chet muttered. He put his hands in his pockets, put his head down and followed me.

We stopped at the font in the vestibule, dabbed our fingers in the Holy Water and crossed ourselves. Like I said, you can take the boy out of the Church. We then entered the Sanctuary. I chose a pew in the middle, genuflected, then stepped into the row. Chet stepped in behind me and knelt next to me.

I crossed myself, folded my hands, put my head down and closed my eyes. Exactly what I said is between me and God. Basically, I thanked St. Florian for all he'd done for Johnny so far and prayed

that Johnny would recover from his injuries without any complications.

I looked up to find Chet staring at the Crucifix behind the altar. I nudged him and he looked at me, then turned back to the altar. He crossed himself, folded his hands and bent his head.

When Chet finished, he looked over at me. "Why don't we light a candle . . . while we're here."

I smiled. "Good idea." We both stood and walked out of the pew. After genuflecting again, we walked to the altar, which had tables of votive candles on either side. We each placed an offering into the collection tray, lit a candle and crossed ourselves after extinguishing the tapers.

Chet started planning the Phantom's first prank on Mike while we walked to his car. Of course, I agreed to be his accomplice. I'm his partner-in-crime, so I couldn't let him down. Taking Chet to church had been a good idea. It made him feel like he was doing something to help Johnny.

Faith and prayer do that for you. Although I believed that Johnny was as tough as I thought last night, everyone needs a little help now and then. There might be a few bumps in the road ahead, but he'd make it.