

## The Nuisance: Roy's Story

By [Lisa O'Brien](#)

As I watched our victim and her friend walk out of the bar, I couldn't help but think that ladies that age should be at home with their grandchildren on a Friday night. Not out tottering from bar to bar, drinking themselves into a stupor. Johnny liked ribbing me about being too old-fashioned. I was, am and always will be old-fashioned. This was the 70s though, and times they were a-changing. I didn't like it, but I'd eventually learn to live with it. I hoped.

I looked over at the bartender. "Happen all the time around here?"

"Yeah." The guy sounded like he thought I was criticizing him. He cocked his head to the side, like he was challenging me to start something with him. Not me, Pally. I just go where the dispatcher tells me to.

I picked up my helmet and the "Dad" part of my brain told me to check it to make sure the blond lady didn't decide to get rid of her gum in there. She didn't.

"Let's go back to the station and get some sleep," Cap suggested as I closed the drug box.

"Really," Johnny muttered. He lifted the drug box off the bar, leaving me with the biophone. I thought they weighed about the same, but Johnny swore the biophone was 5 pounds heavier.

"Well, thanks fellas for comin' by. And jus' like I said, I jus' didn't know what to do about her." You've gotta admit, the bartender was in a fix. He couldn't lock the lady up in here.

I just wish he'd called us six hours ago when she first went out.

"We're here to help," Cap began. "Just glad it wasn't anything serious."

Johnny turned away from the bar and headed to the door as Cap asked Vince for the victim's name. I hoisted the biophone and followed my partner.

"Well, that's about all I can give you, Cap. I only got her first name. Lenore."

Johnny was at the door by then, and I could tell from the way he was walking that he was gearing up to start working on yet another plan to improve the dispatch system. Tonight.

This run would be the screw-up *du jour* that could end up costing some hypothetical victim his or her life. I knew the system wasn't perfect, and Johnny had some pretty good ideas. Trouble was, the good ideas didn't come to him right away. He took hours to hit on something that might actually work.

Johnny put his helmet on, then threw the door open. It was gonna be a long ride back to the station, unless I could find some way to distract him.

Mike leaned out of the cab of the engine. "Well, what was it?"

"Ah . . . some spaced-out dame." The tone of Johnny's voice confirmed my earlier suspicion. He shifted the drug box from his right hand to his left with a grunt. Guess it wasn't as light as he thought.

I took my helmet off as we passed Vince's squad car. "Have you got the MICU form?"

"No." Johnny shook his head and put the palm of his hand to his chest. "I don't have 'em." He pointed at the biophone. "They should be there. In the biophone."

I stopped, set the box on the hood of the squad and popped the latches. I only got a second to look for the forms. The squeal of tires made me look up in time to see a sports car careen around the corner. I tracked him past the engine and Vince's squad car, thinking "He's going way too fast." In the next second, I realized that he was gonna hit Johnny, who was in the street on the other side of the squad. I looked over in time to see Johnny frozen there, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open as the car bore down on him.

I opened my mouth to warn Johnny a second too late. Johnny turned and the car slammed into him, catching him on the left side. All I could do was watch as the car scooped him up and his head and shoulder hit the windshield. Just as quickly, the car spit him out and deposited him face down on the pavement.

Johnny rolled onto his back and I couldn't tell whether he'd moved on his own, or whether momentum carried him over. The "Paramedic" part of my brain knew he was dead. It was cataloging all the injuries he had to have. Multiple fractures. Blunt trauma. Closed head injury.

"Are you all right?" It didn't sound like my voice. I knelt next to Johnny, and he rolled toward me. Thank God! He was still alive. That was when the "Paramedic" took over. I ran my hand down his spine, checking the vertebrae, then trying to keep his spine straight as he rolled away from me onto his back. "TRAUMA BOX!"

I leaned over him and put my hand on his chest. "Johnny? Are you all right?" I was shouting with somebody else's voice. "Can you hear me?" His eyes were open, but unfocused. "Can you hear me?"

Johnny lifted his head, blinking. His mouth opened and closed. I thought he was trying to answer me, then realized he was gasping. His airway was clear, but he was having trouble breathing.

I kept my hand on his chest to keep him from sitting up. "Head back." His right leg was bent at an awkward angle at the knee. His lower shin and his foot didn't move when he moved the top of his leg. I knew that wasn't the only injury. "Where do you hurt?"

Johnny put his head back, blinking. "My . . . hip . . . my back . . . my leg." He groaned, then lost consciousness.

I sat back and looked over at Cap, wondering if he'd called it in, yet. He had, I just hadn't heard it. "Somebody get a soft collar on him." The "Paramedic" seemed to be in control of talking. Maybe that was why the voice coming out of my mouth didn't sound like mine.

The drug box had been knocked out of Johnny's hand. The contents were scattered all over the pavement around us. Most of the I.V. solution bags were busted. No telling where the set-ups were. A couple of days from now, some junkie would probably find 'em and think he'd hit the mother lode.

"We'll have to wrap and run." I leaned over Johnny and put my hand on his chest. "Johnny, can you hear me?"

Johnny groaned and tried to open his eyes. "Wha?"

I got my own voice back. "The bad news is the drug box is in worse shape than you are. The good news is you won't have any needles until you get to Rampart."

Johnny smiled. "Good." I wondered who was trying to assure who.

Thank God the engine crew didn't need me to direct this rescue. We would've been in pretty sorry shape if they had. We've worked together long enough that everybody knows their job and they do it. Mike appeared with the backboard and Chet, Marco and Cap helped me roll Johnny onto his right side. Johnny gasped as we set him down, and I wished the MS wasn't two blocks away. Screw regulations and treatment protocol! My friend was in pain and I wanted nothing more than to stop it.

I checked Johnny's right arm from the shoulder to the wrist. There weren't any fractures, or dislocations. He groaned once, but I didn't think it had anything to do with what I was doing. "No fractures on the right arm. Mike?" Somehow I just knew Mike had checked Johnny's left arm.

Mike didn't fail me. "No fractures on the left arm."

"Chet, can you help me get his turnout coat off?" I noticed then that Chet's eyes were wide, and his hands were shaking.

I was about to turn to Mike when Chet nodded. "Yeah, sure."

"I'll give you a hand, Roy." Cap knelt between Marco and Chet.

I handed Marco my bandage scissors, and he started cutting. Cap and I pulled away the pieces and tossed them behind us.

John shivered, then groaned. "Cold."

"We'll have you bundled up in a minute." I tore open the blanket pack, bundling Johnny up with Mike's help. I thought I heard the ambulance siren getting closer. I wanted to be out of there as fast as we could. I closed the trauma box as the ambulance drove past us.

While I got the biophone from the hood of the squad, Cap and the guys were getting ready to transfer Johnny to the gurney. "Can you guys make it okay, there?" They lifted the backboard and set it on the gurney. "I'm gonna put this stuff in."

I put the biophone into the ambulance, leaning on it as I set it on the seat. I had to keep it together. Johnny was going to be fine. I just had to keep telling myself that. I took a deep breath. It didn't help as much as I hoped, but I didn't have time to try again. I had to get back to Johnny. I went back to the gurney. The attendants were getting ready to move it into the ambulance. I looked down at Johnny. "How you feeling?"

"Ummm . . . trying to think of something funny, but I hurt too much." The attendants turned the gurney and Johnny groaned again.

"All right. Well. Take it easy. Hang in there." The standard response just came out. The Paramedic was still doing the talking. Then again, anything else would've scared Johnny.

I climbed into the ambulance behind the gurney, and pulled off my turnout coat. I had to force myself not to think of Johnny as a friend. I was stunned enough for that to work pretty easily. I opened the biophone and handed the antenna to the ambulance attendant. While he secured it to the roof of the ambulance, I got the blood pressure cuff and a stethoscope from the trauma box.

"Roy?" I almost didn't hear Johnny over the engine of the ambulance.

"Right here, Johnny." I had to unwrap his left arm to get the pressure cuff around it. "I'm gonna take your blood pressure. Okay?"

Johnny groaned. "Hurts."

"You'll be at Rampart in a couple minutes." The "Paramedic" again. There wasn't anything the "Friend" could do about the pain. I put the earpieces in and inflated the b.p. cuff, then listened to the pulse beats while watching the dial. "110/80," I informed the attendant. After taking Johnny's pulse and measuring his respirations, I put his arm back beneath the blanket. "I'm gonna check your pupils."

In spite of the warning, Johnny flinched and groaned, trying to pull his head away. I sat back on the bench seat and picked up the handset. "Rampart, this is County 51. Do you read?"

The ambulance pulled out, and I heard Johnny groan, in spite of the siren.

"Go ahead 51," Dr. Joe Early's voice responded.

"Rampart, we have a male, age 30, victim of a hit and run. Vitals are b.p. 110/80, pulse 120 and thready, respirations 22. Patient has a fracture, possibly right tibia and fibula. Pupils are equal and reactive." I paused, trying to hold on to professional detachment. "Patient is being transported with full spinal precautions and the fracture has been splinted."

"10-4, 51. Start an I.V. Lactated Ringers," Dr. Early ordered.

"Negative, Rampart." The detachment got away from me. "It's John . . . the drug box is gone." My voice was shaking again.

"Copy, 51. What's your ETA?"

I turned to the attendant. "ETA?"

The attendant leaned into the cab, then leaned back. "3-5 minutes."

"3-5 minutes," I informed Dr. Early.

"10-4, 51. Continue monitoring b.p. *en route*."

"Continue monitoring b.p." I repeated the order, then set the handset down. It killed me that there wasn't more I could do for him. "You still with me, Johnny?"

I thought I saw Johnny's eyes move, but they didn't open. "I . . . I . . ."

"I'm gonna take your b.p. again. Okay?" I pulled his left arm out of the blanket, and inflated the pressure cuff. I didn't like what I saw on the dial. Johnny's pressure had dropped to 100/70 in minutes. Pain had the opposite effect on people - that meant Johnny probably had internal injuries

In less than 3 minutes, the ambulance reached Rampart. Dr. Early and Dr. Mike Morton were there when the rear doors opened. The driver and an orderly pulled the gurney out, and I heard Johnny groan when the wheels were released.

"What happened, Roy?" Dr. Early asked me as I jumped down from the ambulance.

I'd given up on getting the detachment back. "A car came out of nowhere. Johnny tried to turn and get out of the way. It caught him on his left side." I followed the gurney as the attendant and the orderly wheeled it through the ER doors.

Dr. Early frowned. "High? Low?"

"Abdomen. About here." I gestured, moving my hand between my hip and the bottom of my rib cage.

"John, can you hear me?" Dr. Early bent close to Johnny while still moving along beside the gurney.

We reached the treatment room and Dr. Early pulled away long enough for the attendants to get the gurney through the door. A nurse was there, waiting while the attendants and I transferred Johnny to the exam bed.

"Start an I.V. Ringers, wide open." Dr. Early bent over Johnny again. "Johnny? It's Dr. Early, can you hear me?"

Johnny groaned, but didn't try to answer. The nurse pulled the disposable blanket away, and got the I.V. started. When she started cutting Johnny's turnout pants away, I stepped in to help her. Instead of the blanket, she covered Johnny's waist and legs with a thin sheet. I wanted to give him back the yellow blanket. At least it was lined.

I didn't interfere, though. I stepped back from the gurney to let the nurse and doctors work. The first thing I learned in paramedic training was, "Thou Shalt Not Get in the Way of the Staff." Those were the exact words of the head nurse at Harbor General. They were the first words our class of 6 heard. And they've stayed with me.

Dr. Early was checking Johnny's pupils when the nurse finished drawing blood. "Type and cross, hematocrit and CBC. And find out where the x-ray unit is." I didn't think I'd ever heard Dr. Early use that tone of voice with the staff. I was shocked because it wasn't like him to snap at anybody for anything. Dr. Brackett was the grizzly on the staff.

"Mike, you see this bruise?" I leaned forward to see what Dr. Early was talking about.

Dr. Morton was inflating the b.p. cuff. He paused and looked at Johnny's abdomen. He muttered something, then re-inflated the cuff to get Johnny's pressure.

Dr. Early leaned over Johnny. "Johnny? Johnny? Can you hear me?"

Johnny's head moved. "I . . . uh . . . I . . . I . . ."

Dr. Early leaned closer. "Johnny? Johnny, can you hear me?"

"I . . . I didn't . . ."

Dr. Morton looked up from the gauge. "B.p.'s down. 90/60. He's gonna go out on us."

"Piggy back a plasma unit," Dr. Early ordered.

The nurse wasn't there, so I stepped forward and raised my hand. "I'll do it." Then realized I didn't know where the plasma was!

I must've looked lost, because Dr. Morton pointed to the cart next to the door. "Right over there."

I went to the cart, found a unit of plasma and returned to the right side of the gurney. Dr. Early was checking Johnny's abdomen and I heard him groan. I concentrated on setting up the plasma.

"That hurt?" I heard Dr. Early ask.

Johnny groaned again. When I finished, Dr. Morton was checking the reflexes in Johnny's left leg.

Dr. Early palpitated the left side of Johnny's abdomen. I heard Johnny groan again.

"Johnny!" Dr. Early's voice was sharper this time.

"Uhhh . . . uhhh." Johnny's eyes opened and closed, "Wha?"

"Does your right shoulder hurt?" Dr. Early asked.

Johnny's eyes opened. "No."

"How about the other one?" Dr. Early asked.

Johnny blinked and his eyes tracked up and around the ceiling. "Yeah . . . ah . . . a little." He let his breath out. "My leg hurts."

Dr. Early turned to me. "If he'd ruptured his liver or spleen, he'd be experiencing pain right in this area here. In the collarbone." He ran his right hand along his left collarbone, then turned back to Johnny. "Blunt trauma to the abdomen, it could be either."

I moved around Dr. Early to hang the plasma. The door opened and the nurse entered, followed by a tech. pushing the x-ray unit.

"Get a film of the pelvis, tibia, chest films, abdominal, skull series and lateral c-spine." He turned to Morton. "Let's go, Mike."

I stepped into the hall behind Dr. Early, who said something to Chet I didn't hear. The door closed behind me and I watched Dr. Early disappear down the hall.

I heard Chet take a deep breath, then he touched my arm. "Hey, he's gonna be all right. Nuthin' can hurt Johnny."

I looked down at the floor, then back at Chet. "Yeah."

"But what a dumb way for it to happen. Ya know? Getting' a call out into the middle of the night for some spaced-out dame." Chet had a point. But we couldn't change things now.

I smiled. "He's gonna be all right." I tried to make my voice sound confident. At least it was my voice again.

Chet smiled and nodded. Then blinked several times. His eyes were still the size of saucers.

I thought I heard Johnny yell at one point while I stood in the hall with Chet. I hoped it was just my imagination. I'm sure Chet would've reacted if he'd heard it. So maybe it was my imagination.

When Dr. Early and Dr. Morton came back, I followed them back into the treatment room. I took my place behind the exam bed, where I could see Johnny without getting in the way. Dr. Morton checked Johnny's blood pressure again. He might've checked Johnny's reflexes too. The only sound from Johnny was another groan when Dr. Early checked the left side of his abdomen.

I was always pretty observant. I'd never been comfortable in the middle of things. That was one of the ways that Johnny and I differed. If he wasn't pulled into the middle of something, and he had an uncanny knack for getting pulled into the middle of things, he'd wade into them on his own. Often against my better judgment.

That night, though, my observations were pretty limited. For example, I never saw the tech. and the nurse leave the treatment room with the x-ray machine. At some point, I just noticed that the machine wasn't there.

I didn't miss Johnny coming around. He opened his eyes and blinked up at the light above him. The fluids and plasma had done their job. The rest was up to Dr. Morton and Dr. Early.

"Wha?" Even Johnny's voice sounded stronger.

"Johnny, it's Joe Early. Do you know what happened to you?"

Johnny mumbled and Dr. Early frowned. He and Dr. Morton exchanged a look, and Dr. Morton shook his head.

"Johnny?" Dr. Early repeated.

"Roy?" On second thought, Johnny's voice didn't sound quite right.

"He's right here." Dr. Early motioned me over.

"All . . . right?" Johnny mumbled.

"I'm fine." I responded. "You're the one on the exam bed."

"Dr . . . driver?" It sounded like Johnny was having trouble breathing.

"Don't worry about that, now." I didn't want to tell him the bastard got away.

"Sorry." Johnny groaned and closed his eyes.

"It's gonna be okay." I wanted to squeeze his shoulder, but I didn't. He'd said his left shoulder hurt earlier.

The nurse walked into the treatment room with a packet of x-rays. I followed Dr. Early to the viewer,



waiting as he pulled one after the other out, holding them up to the light until he found the two he wanted. He switched on the light, then put both onto the viewer.

The only sound in the room for a couple of minutes was Johnny's labored breathing. I started breathing again when Dr. Early leaned his elbows on the cart and looked over at me.

"Fractured tibia and fibula."

"Is it bad?" Bad enough to torpedo Johnny's career?

"Well, under the circumstances, it could be worse."

I thought, "That depends on your perspective, Dr. Early." But I didn't say it.

"It's a stable fracture." I guessed that was good news.

Dr. Early pushed away from the cart and walked over to the exam bed. I trailed along behind him, taking my place behind Johnny's left shoulder. Johnny was pale, and diaphoretic. In layman's terms, that meant he was sweating. He was going into shock.

Dr. Early leaned his hands on the exam bed and looked down at Johnny. "Johnny, you've got a fractured tibia and fibula."

"Doc . . ." I could hear how hard it was for Johnny to get that one word out. "My belly . . ." He gasped. ". . . is really start . . ." Another gasp. ". . . startin' to hurt me a lot."

"BP's 90/60. He's diaphoretic," Dr. Morton announced.

"It's really be . . ." Johnny paused and I heard a shiver in his voice. ". . . beginnin' to kill me."

"He may have serious inter-abdominal bleeding. Looks like he's going into shock. Let's get him into a G-suit." He paused. "And alert OR for an emergency lap."

I watched Morton on the phone for a second, then turned back to Johnny. He was unconscious again. I thought he'd stopped breathing because I couldn't hear it. Then I saw his chest rising and falling.

I helped Dr. Morton with the G-suit once he finished the call to the OR. When we inflated the suit, it took some of the pressure off the broken right leg, as well as forcing blood from Johnny's lower body to his heart, lungs and brain, which needed it most.

Dr. Morton waited a couple of minutes, then inflated the pressure cuff around Johnny's left arm. I could tell that the suit was working. Some color was back in Johnny's face, his breathing had evened out a little and he'd opened his eyes.

"BP's 100/60," Dr. Morton announced

"6 units of blood. We'll get him up to the OR right away. Tell the nurse to make the arrangements. All right, Mike?" If Dr. Early hadn't managed all of that in one breath, he'd come pretty damn close.

"Uh-huh." Dr. Morton was a man of few words.

After Early left, I ventured over to the right side of the gurney. I almost knocked over the I.V. pole, and only avoided it by ducking my head at the last second. "Well . . . hang in there." I smiled, hoping to reassure Johnny. Or try to.

Johnny grinned. Not the full charm-the-socks-off-the-nurses crooked one. But it was pretty close. "Oh, yeah." He still sounded breathless. "Both hands." His eyes drifted closed, then opened. "Sorry . . . my fault . . ."

I was about to tell him it was the driver's fault when the door of the treatment room opened and a man in green scrubs walked in.

Dr. Morton came back to the exam bed. "Roy, why don't you step outside, now?"

I nodded. "Hang in there, Johnny."

Chet was still waiting by the door when I stepped into the hall. "How's Johnny?"

"He's bleeding internally. Dr. Morton and Dr. Early are getting ready to take him up to surgery." That was the bad news. "They've got him in a G-suit and his pressure came back up." I hoped that would reassure Chet more than it had me.

It must have, because Chet managed to smile. "That's good."

Two orderlies went around us into the treatment room.

"He's got a stable tib-fib fracture. No signs of a head injury. That's good. They'll have to watch him pretty close, though." It was probably more than Chet wanted to know, but I couldn't stop myself.

The door opened and the exam bed was wheeled into the hall.

"Hang in there, Johnny," Chet called as the exam bed passed us.

I heard Johnny mumble something. Probably the "both hands" line.

"We'll let you know as soon as we can." Dr. Early patted my shoulder, then followed Dr. Morton and the other doctor to the elevator.

I turned to Chet when the doctors and the gurney disappeared behind the elevator's closed door. "I was gonna go into the staff lounge and get some coffee."

"Coffee would be good." Chet agreed. I was starting to worry about Chet. He usually ragged the rest of us about how much coffee we drank.

I led the way to the staff lounge, then scrounged up two clean cups. "How about you?" I asked as I handed him a cup. "Are you okay?"

"I hope I never see or hear anything like it again. Even if it's somebody I don't know." Chet's voice shook a little.

"Yeah. I know what you mean." I took a sip of coffee. It tasted as thick as it looked.

"Are you okay?" Chet asked as we settled down at the table.

I wasn't, but I didn't want Chet to know that. I had enough to worry about with Johnny. I didn't want to get Chet started. I shrugged. "I'm okay." I couldn't lie to him. "Worried."

"Me, too." Chet sounded relieved to be able to say it.

If I told anybody that, Chet and Johnny would probably both have to kill me. After years of being adversaries, neither one wanted to admit he liked the other. I wasn't about to explore that with either of them, though. It was too twisted for anybody but them to understand anyway.

I looked over at Chet and saw that his face had started getting a little red like he was mad about something. Staying with me at the hospital probably wouldn't help. I nudged his arm. "You okay?"

He looked a little startled, then nodded.

"Why don't you go back to the station? It'll probably be a few hours before we know anything." I knew that wasn't what Chet wanted to do. But it was the best thing for him to do at that point.

"You'll need the squad to get back out . . ." Chet stopped and his face reddened a little more.

"LA put the squad out of service. I'll call Joanne when I'm ready to go home." Maybe I'd call her now. Just to hear her voice.

"You sure?" Chet asked. "Cause I can stay."

"Go back to the station and get some sleep." I had the feeling none of us would sleep tonight. "I don't wanna have to fight you for the couch." Just the thought made me grin. "I'll end up trying to sleep on the floor."

Chet was reluctant, but he finally nodded. "Okay. But you call as soon as you know anything."

I gave him the Boy Scout salute. "Scout's honor," I promised.

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I knew from experience that the couch wasn't a good place to sleep. Well, not if you wanted to continue walking upright. I must've dozed off sitting at the table, because I suddenly snapped awake to the sound of the car hitting Johnny. It wasn't a nice sound to wake up to, and for about 10 seconds, I thought I was gonna have a heart attack there in the staff lounge. Then I realized that it was just my body's delayed fight or flight reaction.

I went to the window and lifted the blinds. The sky was still dark, but the first hint of light had started to appear to the East. I thought about calling my wife, but didn't, since I hadn't had any word about Johnny. Joanne would've wanted to come to the hospital, too, and there wasn't any sense in both of us losing a night's sleep. Besides, even though the kids were technically old enough to be left at home alone, I wasn't comfortable doing it.

We'd had several smog-free days, so I stood at the window, trying to pick out the stars and constellations my dad had taught me when I was a kid. One of the biggest regrets of my life is that I never got to tell my Dad good-bye. I was away at camp when he was killed in a car accident. By the time my mother got me, even the funeral was over. She took me to the grave, but it wasn't the same. At 13, I became the man of the house. I guessed that was why I felt responsible for everyone and everything to this day.

That was one thing that Johnny and I had in common, even though we were opposite in every other way. We both lost a parent when we were in our teens. Sometimes I thought Johnny was the way he was with women and relationships because he was always trying to find his mom in one of them. Trouble was, he didn't remember his mom, or maybe he didn't know her well enough in the first place. From the little he'd said to me, I got the impression that his mom had a long history of health problems before she died.

Of course, Johnny wouldn't buy that theory. In fact, he'd tell me I was a nut to come up with it in the first place. If he liked being single so much, why did he try so hard? Besides that, my wife and my mother share some of the same qualities. Joanne would kill me for saying that, but it was true.

I wondered if Johnny would get a chance to impress the new nurse in Pediatrics. That was his latest . . . I didn't even know what to call her. Chet would call her "next victim." But that wasn't right either. Eight out of ten times, Johnny was the dumped, not the dumper. It wasn't a crush. Crushes were painful, as my daughter learned recently. Johnny never seemed to be hurt or even bothered when things didn't work out with a girl. Occasionally, he showed disappointment. Most of the time, he seemed relieved.

In the crazy way my mind worked under stress, I remembered that Dr. Early had said that Johnny's liver or spleen might be ruptured. If it was his spleen, they could remove it. If it was his liver, they would have to try to repair it. What if it was both? He would bleed out on them when they took the G-suit off. What if they couldn't get the bleeding stopped once they got him opened up?

Worrying about the what ifs wasn't doing me any good, so I tried not to think as I sat back down at the table. It had been more than 2 hours since Johnny had been taken to surgery. If something bad had happened, Early would've gotten word to me by now. That meant that the surgery was going fine and Johnny would be all right. I told myself that over and over again as I waited for Dr. Early.

That worked for about ten minutes. I decided to find something to do, starting with the coffee. I dumped the pot, washed it and started a fresh pot. While it brewed, I wiped the counter down and washed Chet's cup and the other cups in the sink. The coffee was ready by the time I finished.

I would've probably done the floor next, but there wasn't a mop in the lounge, and I was afraid I'd miss Dr. Early if I left to look for one. Instead, I poured myself a cup of fresh coffee and went back to the table. The door opened as I was trying to cool it down enough for my first sip.

Dr. Early walked into the lounge, and when I looked up, he was smiling.

"How is he?"

Dr. Early's smile broadened. "He looks good, Roy."

"Oh . . ." I was so relieved, that was all I could say.

Dr. Early crossed to the table and sat down.

"Here . . . some coffee." I slid the cup across to him. It was the least I could do.

"Thanks." Dr. Early picked the cup up and took a drink.

"I was really worried." I was pretty sure he knew that. I didn't care.

Dr. Early set the cup down and leaned on the table. "The orthopedist'll set his leg now. Then he's on his way to the Recovery Room."

"Hmmm . . ." Johnny's leg was broken. "How long is he gonna be laid up?"

"Well, in a week or so, we'll have him in a wheel chair." Dr. Early was still smiling, so that must've been good. "Then we'll try and get him on his feet."

"Hmmm . . ." I didn't know why I kept doing that. "I guess that could be close to about two weeks, then, huh?" I started to run my right hand through my hair and ended up nearly poking my eye out. My hand and my brain weren't speaking.

Dr. Early nodded. "Maybe."

Johnny wasn't gonna like it. Two days in the hospital was too many for him. Two weeks . . . he was gonna go nuts. I didn't know why, but that struck me as funny. Heck, it was hilarious. It wouldn't be so

hilarious when he was bitching to me. But he wasn't bitching, yet. I rubbed the right side of my face to keep myself from laughing out loud.

"Look, we both know what kind of paramedic Johnny is." Dr. Early paused and laughed. "Now let's see what kind of patient he is."

I could've told him, but I didn't. To Johnny Gage, a patient was somebody else. The urge to laugh evaporated. "Johnny's really gonna be okay?" Not that I doubted Dr. Early. It had just been a really bad night.

Dr. Early smiled. "He is, but you won't believe that until you see him for yourself." He stood. "Once Johnny's in the Recovery Room, I'll send someone to bring you up to see him."

I managed my first real smile of the night then. "Thanks."

"Wait'll you get my bill." Dr. Early opened the door and left the lounge.

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The next 45 minutes passed slower than the previous hours. Finally, Dr. Morton walked into the lounge. I stood so fast, I almost knocked over the chair. Anxious would be putting it mildly.

"They should have John settled in by the time we get upstairs," he said as I followed him into the hall.

"Will Johnny go to SICU from Recovery?" As I understood it, that was the usual procedure. Visitation rules in ICU were strictly enforced. Ten minutes an hour between 8 and 12 and ten minutes an hour between 2 and 6.

"Right now, he'll be transferred to Orthopedics." We stepped into the elevator. "Barring complications."

"Complications." I repeated the word in a whisper.

Dr. Morton smiled. "When I left John to get you, he was just fine. He'd been extubated and he was breathing on his own." He paused. "He's even starting to come up from the anesthesia."

"That's good." The elevator doors opened and we stepped into a dimly lit hallway.

"Give me a minute to make sure John's settled in." Dr. Morton disappeared up the hall.

The silence as I stood in that hallway made me realize how tired I was. We were toned out on the run at 2 on Friday morning, which meant I'd gotten about three hours sleep. I'd been up since 6 on Thursday morning. When I was home, I liked getting up with my kids, having breakfast with them, then taking them to school. That gave Joanne a break; with my shift schedule, a lot of the time she ends up dealing with them without any help from me.

The next thing I knew, the wall was holding me up. A squeak on the tile brought my head up, and somehow I managed to stay standing without the wall's help.

"Just a couple minutes, okay, Roy?" Dr. Morton began.

I nodded and followed him back to the Recovery Room, which was more like a ward, with two dozens beds and patients in various stages of wakefulness. Johnny was in the middle of the row to the right. His heart monitor registered sinus rhythm. A nasal cannula delivering oxygen was the least offensive of the tubes and wires protruding from various body parts.

Johnny was pale from the blood loss. A unit of whole blood hung next to the bag of fluids on the I.V. pole. Dr. Morton said Johnny was starting to come out of the anesthesia, so I gently tapped his shoulder. I got a groan in response.

"C'mon, Gage." I was whispering so I wouldn't disturb any of the other patients. "No sleeping on duty. That's reserved for ranks above Captain."

Johnny muttered and his eyes twitched. Then somebody tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned to find a pretty, young nurse dressed in blue scrubs. Hey, I was married, not dead. "Time's up, Mr. DeSoto."

I nodded, then silently followed her to the desk, where Dr. Morton was sipping from a cup of coffee. The smell made me realize that I hadn't had a single cup of coffee all night. The first cup hadn't been drinkable. I gave my second cup to Dr. Early. And I hadn't gotten a third cup.

Dr. Morton slid a cup across the desk. "Recovery's got the best coffee in the hospital."

I took a sip, and burned my tongue. When I could taste again, Dr. Morton was right. It was the best coffee I'd ever had at Rampart. "How long do you think it'll be before he wakes up?" I kept my voice quiet, I guessed because of the other patients.

The pretty nurse who'd brought me to the desk checked her watch. "About an hour and a half, to two hours." She looked at Dr. Morton, who nodded.

I looked over at Dr. Morton. "Will he be able to have visitors, then?"

"He should. Once he's settled in a room." Dr. Morton checked his watch. "I'd better get back to the ER. I left Joe alone down there."

"Thanks." I smiled at the nurse, then followed Dr. Morton.

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"Mr. DeSoto." It was a woman's voice, but not my wife's. I was too tired to be curious, though. "Mr. DeSoto." A hand shook my shoulder.

And I startled awake. "Wha? Where?" I bolted up and looked around the lounge, finally turning to find another young, pretty nurse. This one was a red head, wearing a white uniform instead of scrubs. My next thought made my face turn red. "Sorry." I rubbed my face, hoping she didn't notice. Like I said, I'm married, not dead. Besides that, I was half-asleep.

"Mr. Gage is settled in his room, if you'd like to see him." She was smiling. She must've seen me blush. I hoped she didn't read minds.

"Ahhh . . . yeah." I stood and followed her out of the lounge. If all the nurses on Johnny's floor were as pretty as this one, he'd want to stay in the hospital indefinitely.

"By the way, I'm Kate." The nurse informed me as we stepped into the elevator. She pressed the floor, then leaned against the wall.

I blushed again when I realized I was still wearing my turnout pants and an undershirt. I'd left my coat in the ambulance. I hoped somebody returned it to the station. "Nice to meet you, Kate." Change the subject. "How's Johnny doing?"

"He's dozing." The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Kate stepped out and waited for me in the hall. "His throat's still sore from the tube. I left some ice chips on the table. If you can get him to eat a few, it'll help his throat." She stopped at a door. "You probably know them, but I've gotta give you the rules," she began. "The rails stay up and the head and foot of the bed stay right where they are."

"I won't touch a thing," I promised.

"Good. I'd hate to have to punish you." She was grinning. Then she winked at me. I wished Johnny had seen it. "If you need anything, I'll be at the desk. The call button's on the rail."

"Thanks." I had to take a deep breath before I could actually go into Johnny's room. The heart monitor and the nasal cannula were gone. The I.V. wasn't. Among other things.

Johnny opened his eyes as I crossed the room to the chair. "Roy?" His voice was worse than scratchy.

"These stupid boots." I didn't know why, but I was whispering. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"S'okay." He tried to clear his throat.

"Here, the nurse left some ice chips." I picked up the cup and Johnny reached for it, then winced. "I'll get it." I told him, spooning a few chips out.

Johnny took the ice from the bowl of the spoon, held them in his mouth for a second, then swallowed. His eyes closed as I was sitting down in the chair next to the bed. After a minute, his eyes opened



again and tracked around the room. "Wha' happen'd?" Still scratchy.

"We were leaving a run and you were hit by a car." There wasn't any point in keeping it from him.

"You're okay?" Johnny worried about me as much as I worried about him. Maybe that was why we were friends.

"It took ten years off my life, but, other than that, I'm fine." I thought it would at least get a grin out of Johnny.

"Sorry." I didn't know whether he meant he was sorry for getting hit, or sorry it took ten years off my life.

"The important thing is you're gonna be okay." I informed him. "How're you doing?"

Johnny considered that for several minutes. "Hmmm . . . a little tired."

"Just a little, huh?" I teased him.

This time, he grinned. "A lot."

"You're not in any pain, though? I can call the nurse." I reached for the call button.

"Nope. No pain." He closed his eyes. "A car, huh?" I almost didn't hear him.

"A car." I nodded, even though his eyes were closed.

Johnny didn't say anything for several minutes, and I thought he'd gone back to sleep. I was about to leave and call Joanne when he sighed and opened his eyes.

"Car?" Johnny sounded confused.

"Don't worry about that now, Johnny." I had to change the subject. "Hey, what do you want from your house? I can stop and pick some stuff up on my way back this afternoon."

"Mmmmm." His eyes closed, then opened. "Pajamas . . . books." He paused and closed his eyes. "Magazines."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of your mail and everything," I promised.

"Thanks." His eyes stayed closed and, in a few minutes, his breathing deepened and I was sure this time that he'd gone to sleep.

I pulled off my boots before I got out of the chair. "I'll see you this afternoon." Then I crept out of the room.

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I didn't remember the trip home that day. It was after 7 when I called the station and then called Joanne. The next thing I knew it was 11:30 Sunday morning, which I didn't know until I picked up the morning paper from the breakfast room table.

The house had been empty and silent when I made my way downstairs. "Joanne!"

The back door opened and Joanne walked in, stripping her gardening gloves off and tossing them on the dryer inside the door. "It lives." She was laughing as she walked past me into the kitchen.

"Why'd you let me sleep so long?" I usually didn't yell at Joanne. She didn't like it.

Joanne washed her hands in the sink. "Every time I tried to wake you up, you growled at me." She laughed. "So, I let you sleep."

"I was supposed to go back to the hospital yesterday afternoon." Maybe I hadn't told her that. I felt silly for yelling at her in the first place.

"You were too tired." Joanne dried her hands and pulled a frying pan from under the stove. At first, I thought she was gonna use it on me. "Sit down and I'll fix you something to eat."

I had been pretty tired. Heck, I was still tired. I went to the fridge, poured myself a glass of orange juice and sat down at the table.

Joanne went to the fridge, got two eggs and bacon and took them back to the stove. "I know you wanted to see Johnny yesterday." She pulled strips of bacon away and laid them in the pan. "And I really did try to wake you up." She moved the bacon around with a fork, then cracked the eggs and dropped them into the pan. "I called the hospital yesterday afternoon to check on him for you. I talked to a really nice nurse named Kate."

I was in the middle of sipping orange juice when she said the name. Orange juice through your nose sure stings. Joanne was looking at me as I wiped juice from my face. I coughed. "Went down the wrong way," I muttered.

Joanne snickered, then turned back to the stove. "Some of the guys from the station were in during the afternoon." She turned the bacon. "Johnny was in some pain, but after he had his meds, he slept through the rest of the day." She pulled the bacon from the pan and laid it on a paper plate, then turned the eggs. "No complications, and nothing for you to worry about."

I went into the kitchen, put my arms around my wife's waist and kissed her neck. "Sorry I yelled."

Joanne laughed. "You're forgiven." She turned the stove off. "Now, get yourself a plate and eat your breakfast."

If I hadn't been so tired, I would've skipped breakfast. Tired or not, the kids would definitely be going to the movies in the afternoon.

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I got to the hospital just after two in the afternoon. I'd promised to stop at Johnny's and pick up pajamas, books and magazines for him. Johnny's place is clean, but not exactly organized.

The door to Johnny's room was open, and I was about to walk in, when I heard him talking to somebody. I didn't want to interrupt, so I waited in the hall. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but Johnny wasn't exactly whispering.

". . . it's cold and it smells funny." Johnny's voice sounded stronger than it had yesterday. And not quite as scratchy.

"What about the jello?" I recognized Kate's voice.

"It's green." I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing out loud. Johnny was a lot of things. A picky eater wasn't one of them. He'd eat anything that didn't fight back, or run away from him first. Taste didn't seem to be much of an issue, although it gave him something to complain about later.

"John, if you don't eat, you won't be able to get rid of the I.V." He hadn't started trying Kate's patience. Yet. "Okay. Okay." Johnny must've turned on what Joanne called the "puppy dog eyes." Guaranteed to melt the heart of every woman within a ten mile radius. "Do you like orange jello?" Yep, he'd used the puppy dog eyes on her.

"It's my favorite." Like I said, Johnny wasn't a picky eater. As far as I knew, he liked any color or kind of jello.

"I'll take this." A brief pause. "And I'll bring you a fresh tray with orange jello, instead of green."

"Thanks, Kate."

I chose that moment to make my entrance. I stepped in the door and knocked on the frame. "You up for a visitor, John?"

Johnny laughed, then winced and clutched his side. "Come on in, Roy."

Kate walked toward me, carrying the tray. "Hi, Roy."

I smiled. "He's not giving you too much trouble, is he?"

Kate winked. "I've got a whip and a chair at the desk, just in case." She laughed and walked out of the room.

Compared to yesterday, Johnny looked great. He was still a little pale, but he was sitting up, with a grin plastered across his face. The nurse in Pediatrics had missed her chance. Johnny had moved on to Kate.

"Since when did you become a picky eater?" I teased him as I set the gym bag I was carrying on the empty second bed, then sat in the chair next to Johnny's bed.

He didn't even bother to try to look guilty. "Well, I gotta spend two weeks in here." He scooted down in the bed a little, pulling the sheet and blanket up almost to his chin. "At least it'll be pleasant."

I was grinning, too. "Yes, it will." I stood, opened the gym bag and pulled out the books and magazines. "As promised." I set them on the tray table. "Those ought'a keep you busy for a while."

Johnny smiled. "Thanks."

I closed the gym bag, set it on the floor and sat back down. "You know, Johnny, what happened wasn't your fault." Maybe I should've waited, but I didn't want to let him go on thinking getting hit was his fault.

"Oh, I know that." It was just like Johnny to get me worried about something, then figure it out on his own.

"But, yesterday, you said . . ."

Johnny grinned at me. "Settle down, Roy. Cap was here yesterday morning. He told me it wasn't my fault."

"Oh . . . that's good." My eyes were drawn to a wilted plant in a ladder truck planter.

Johnny looked over at the plant and laughed, wincing and clutching his side again. "Mike, Marco and Chet brought that yesterday. I think it looked better then. But I'm not sure."

"The planter's nice." It was the nicest thing I could think of.

"For a ladder truck," Johnny joked.

"Yeah, for a ladder truck," I agreed.

It felt good to be able to finally stop worrying about Johnny. He was alive and joking around with me. He had a pretty nurse to flirt with while he was in the hospital, and he'd chase her until she let him catch her. I'd have to break in a new partner, but only temporarily. How bad could it be? I'm a nice guy, and I can get along with anybody. Things were definitely looking up.

