

Walk Hand in Hand

by [MJ Hajost](#)

"With a good heart walk hand in hand to face the future.

From this day on may we walk hand in hand."

---Frank Fools Crow

9/5/75 opening prayer for the U.S. Senate

"Mike," Dutch nodded to Stoker, setting down the drug box.

John Gage looked over at his partner, who for once was sitting on the passenger side of the squad instead of behind the wheel. "Bless you," he grinned.

"Thanks," Roy sniffled in reply as he glanced at his watch and jotted the time on the log sheet. Sitting back he reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small packet. Tearing the foil from the back, he shook out two small capsules and swallowed them--dry.

"What's that?" Johnny had caught the movement from the corner of his eye as he negotiated the left turn that would take them back to the station.

"Some new flu medicine Joanne picked up," answered the other, his voice catching slightly in his dry throat. The capsules sat there, halfway down and unmoving. He swallowed ineffectually.

"You really oughta go home, Roy," advised Johnny, his eyes on his partner rather than the road. "You look awful," he added.

"I feel awful," Roy agreed, sneezing again. "But there's no one to replace me if I leave. Would you watch the road?" he added as the squad drifted across the double yellow line.

Johnny jerked the wheel and the truck veered back into its own lane.

Roy was right--there was an extremely nasty strain of flu going around, and L.A.'s firefighters had not been immune. So many men were out sick that for the past two days the department had been operating skeleton shifts in most stations, even shutting down a couple of the smaller ones and sending the crews to help man the functioning ones.

Station 51, it seemed, was among the last to be affected, with most of the shifts still intact, though it now looked as if Roy DeSoto were going to be A-shift's first victim.

"Well..." began Johnny.

"I'm just gonna go to bed as soon as we get back," interrupted Roy, "and hope for the best."

John opened his mouth to argue, but he had reached the station by then and it took most of his concentration to back the squad in. By the time he had it parked, Roy was already out of the truck and heading to the dorm. Climbing out more slowly, Johnny felt a wave of fatigue wash over him. *Better write up the run in the log while the details are still fresh.* Half an hour later, his task complete, he rose, stretching kinked muscles as he made his way into the apparatus bay.

The low sounds of the television drew him to the squad room. Chet Kelly and Mike Stoker sat in the dark, watching an old Christmas movie. John rummaged in the refrigerator for some milk to heat up. "Where is everybody?" he asked, emptying the last of the milk into the pan and

tossing the carton into the trash. He set the pan on the burner.

"Cap and Marco hit the sack a while ago," answered Mike. "How's your heart attack victim?"

"Suffering from a bad case of hypochondria," Johnny replied disgustedly. "He doesn't even have the flu."

"Can't say the same for Cap or Marco," muttered Chet.

John raised his eyes as he stirred the milk in the pan. "They're sick, too?" That explained why they were in bed before ten o'clock.

"Whaddya mean, 'too'?" Mike demanded. "You sick?"

"Not me," Johnny answered, shaking his head. "Roy's pretty sick. He won't go home, though. Says there's no one to replace him." The milk warm, he poured it into a cup, set the pan in the sink, and leaned against the counter while he sipped.

"No one to replace Cap, either." Mike shook his head. "This is the worst epidemic I've ever seen."

"Maybe we should sleep in here so we don't run the risk of catching it from those three," suggested Chet.

Mike laughed. "You've been working alongside those guys all day, Chet," he chuckled. "If you haven't picked up their germs by now, you aren't going to."

"Yeah, well, you never know," Chet argued, reclining more comfortably in

his chair as the commercial ended and the movie continued. "Better safe than sorry."

Johnny drained the last of his milk. "Well, you can sleep in here if you want," he told Chet, "but I'm gonna go crawl into my own bunk right now. I'm beat." He set his mug in the sink and crossed the room. "'Night, folks."

Engrossed in their movie once more, the others mumbled good nights, barely noticing the other's departure.

The dorm was dark and quiet, and warm. *Those guys must be sick if Cap has the heater on!* thought John as he climbed into his bunk ten minutes later. At least Chet's snoring wouldn't keep him awake. Even Roy was asleep already.

John slid underneath the blanket and threw his arm over his eyes. In a few minutes he, too, was sound asleep.

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A dry throat and an inability to get comfortable finally drove John from his bed a little before midnight. He blinked wearily and, stifling a groan, slowly sat up and swung his legs over the edge of his bunk. He sat a moment, hands steadying himself on the mattress before he finally he pushed himself to his feet, noticing Roy's empty bunk as he passed by on his way to the locker room.

His partner stood before his open locker, rummaging among its contents, head not quite out of sight.

"You okay?" John called softly, stopping just in front of the row of basins that fronted the last bank of lockers.

Roy straightened with a sigh. "I think I should have gone home when I had the chance," he replied. He closed his locker door and approached the sinks with a tiny, foil-backed package.

Johnny gestured toward Roy's hand. "That helping?"

Roy glanced down, then back at Johnny's questioning, almost hopeful, look. "You, too?" he asked as he ran cold water into a glass and downed the tablets.

Johnny shrugged and turned to the sink, splashing his face with cool water and cupping his hands to drink. "It's just hot in the dorm," he answered.

Roy leaned over to press his hand on his partner's forehead. "Uh huh," he said, a lethargic smile flitting across his face. "You wanna try some of this stuff?"

"I'm not sick," said Johnny, drying his face with a couple of paper towels.

"Tell that to your fever," Roy smiled.

"I don't have a fever," Johnny insisted. "Cap's just got the heater turned up too high."

"The heater's not on, Johnny," Roy told him over his shoulder, moving back toward the dorm, "but I wish it was. I'm cold."

Johnny followed him out into the silent bunk room, feeling his own forehead. He dropped his hand and made a face. *I'm not sick. I can't be sick. I'm pulling a double shift...*

Then why did he feel so achy right now?

He flopped back into bed, tugged the blankets over his now-shivering body and huddled miserably. He looked toward Roy for a moment with the faint idea of getting himself some sympathy, but his partner's eyes were closed and his posture said that he was in no mood to talk. Johnny sighed and rolled over.

I'm not sick....

It was nearly three when he woke the second time.

He drifted from slumber slowly and unwillingly. There was no alarm, it was still dark...what was it that had interrupted his sleep? John opened his eyes and shifted them around the dim room. A quick glance at the empty bunk next to his told him that Roy was up again.

Then he heard the noise from the apparatus bay.

What the hell--? Johnny sat up.

The sound was repeated--like something hitting the floor. Lots of somethings hitting the floor.

Puzzlement creasing his features, Johnny climbed from his bunk, pulling on his bunker pants and crossed the room, shivering lightly. The others slumbered on undisturbed.

The sound was coming from the other side of the engine. Frowning with a vague sleepiness as well as bewildered curiosity, Johnny tiptoed to the

back of the big rig. Eyes widening at what he saw, he stepped forward slowly.

"Roy?"

Roy paced near the back of the squad, dressed in tee-shirt and bunker pants, bare feet padding silently around the vehicle. Scattered on the floor behind the squad lay various contents of the rescue vehicle--drug and trauma boxes, oxygen cylinders, defibrillator--even the stokes. A couple of blanket packs lay near the right rear wheel.

Where the hell are his boots? Johnny couldn't imagine why Roy had removed his boots.

"Where the hell is it?" Roy was muttering, repeating it like a mantra as he tossed aside bits and pieces of his trade.

"Roy?" Johnny repeated, carefully skirting the debris as he moved toward his partner.

Roy didn't appear to hear him. He slid around to the driver's side of the squad and opened a compartment door. "It's gotta be here somewhere. I've gotta find it." His voice was higher-pitched than normal and quite strained, and he tossed the SCBA aside as if it were made of balsa wood.

Johnny followed Roy around the truck. "What in the world are you doing?" he demanded, a half laugh escaping from his throat. He reached out as if to stop his partner before he hurt himself, touching him lightly on the shoulder.

With uncharacteristic speed and viciousness, Roy spun away. "Get away

from me!" he cried, his face a bizarre mixture of unreasoning fear and intense concentration.

"Wha--?" John's mouth dropped open. "Roy, it's me," he protested.

Roy, however, had jumped to the truck and grabbed the prybar from its narrow compartment on that side. In one smooth motion he swung it out and up toward his partner's head. At the last second John ducked and raised a hand to defend himself, but the tool still caught him a stunning blow on his left arm. "Get back!" Roy shouted, lunging forward and striking Johnny again with the prybar.

Johnny was too shocked to even cry out. His left arm now numb from the elbow down, he took an involuntary step backwards, tipping into the side of the squad as Roy moved toward him.

"What do you want from me? Where did you put it?" Roy dropped the prybar and, grabbing Johnny's shoulders, slammed him roughly against the squad.

Johnny's head banged unmercifully against the back corner and his world greyed at the edges as an explosion of both light and pain took the center. His wits dulled by sleep and perhaps the onset of the flu, his reactions were frighteningly slow. He lifted his right hand weakly in defense this time, but Roy was already shoving him again. Johnny stumbled anew as his head once more connected with the unyielding side of the squad.

By now reeling giddily, Johnny barely had the presence of mind to shout for help. "Cap!" he screamed. "Chet! Somebody...."

Johnny heard Roy swing around the truck and scramble somewhere behind

the squad. He spun dizzily toward Roy and started to again shout for help. As he opened his mouth, he felt a piercing pain in his left side. He brought up suddenly against the squad, breathless without knowing why. Instead of calling to his crewmates, all Johnny could do was emit a feeble, strangled gasp.

"That oughta stop you!"

And, then, Chet flew into the fray, catching Roy in the chest as Marco hit him in the legs, and together they brought him down in a thrashing heap. Stoker and Stanley were right behind them, staring in bewilderment.

"Roy!" Chet shouted. "What the hell are you doing?" Roy's only response was to continue to struggle.

Johnny seemed unaware of the others. He stared at the screwdriver protruding from his side as if in a trance. Roy...? He looked at his downed partner in fascination, then started to slide slowly to the floor. Mike caught him as he dropped and set him carefully against the side of the squad. Hank vaulted over them to the dispatch station to call for help.

"Johnny?" Mike asked quietly, trying to instill some sense of order in the chaos that surrounded them. It was hard to keep the tremor from his voice--his entire body shook with uncontrolled adrenaline.

John's mouth opened. "He..." he gasped.

"Johnny, tell me what to do." Mike's voice became more determined.

Johnny's face was turning an odd shade of grey.

"Johnny!" insisted Mike, holding John's face in his hands and trying to force him to focus. "You need to tell me what to do!"

Roy, meanwhile, continued to struggle underneath his co-workers, who sat on him for all they were worth. "Get--off--me!" he shouted. Marco muttered replies in Spanish and held firm. Chet for once was speechless.

"Johnny, should I keep you upright or lay you down? Help me out here, man!"

"Down..." Johnny whispered finally.

Stoker jumped up and grabbed one of the open blanket packs from the other side of the truck and spread it on the floor near Gage. Gently, taking great care to avoid moving the screwdriver lodged in John's side, Mike lowered him to the floor. "What next?" Stoker demanded.

Johnny's field of vision was shrinking rapidly. "O...O2," he whispered. "High...flow..." His breath was coming in short, quick gasps and his face registered the pain permeating his side.

Hank grabbed the oxygen tank and dropped to Mike's side with the non-rebreather. Mike pulled the mask over Johnny's head and tightened the strap as Hank adjusted the flow.

"Cap, gimme some compresses," ordered Mike. "He's bleeding here." A stream of blood flowed from a gash just behind Johnny's left ear.

Roy's exertions seemed to be easing up some. Chet stole a quick glance over his shoulder at the man underneath him, startled to see Roy gazing at him with undisguised fear. "I've gotta find it before he gets it!" Roy

screamed, renewing his struggles. Then, abruptly, the expression vanished, and Roy's eyes rolled back and his body became limp. Chet and Marco remained firmly in place.

"You two okay over there?" Cap glanced up briefly as he scattered contents of the trauma box looking for the compresses.

"Yeah, Cap," Chet grunted. "I think he's calmed down a bit."

Johnny's eyes closed and gasped as pain began to engulf him.

"John, don't go out on us, pal," warned Hank. He tossed the bandages to Mike and jumped up. "I'm gonna grab some extra blankets," he said. He was gone and back within thirty seconds, and he helped Mike cover John before he turned to the others.

Hank knelt at Roy's side and stared dumbly at his senior paramedic. "What the hell got into you, DeSoto?" he asked softly as he spread a blanket across Roy's shoulders--about the only part of him visible underneath the other two firefighters. Chet cautiously released his hold on the paramedic, remaining close and pulling the blanket down a little to cover more of Roy's torso. Marco stayed put--he was obviously taking no chances.

Marco continued to murmur in Spanish. Hank realized after a moment that Lopez was praying. He glanced back at Gage.

Johnny's eyes were open again but appeared glazed. He stared unblinkingly at the bright lights that now shone high overhead, swallowing convulsively. A light sheen of sweat covered his face, and even from where he squatted Hank could see the shivering that shook the paramedic's body.

"Johnny," Mike was saying, "what else should I be doing?"

Hank realized that Mike was insisting Johnny give him instructions as much to help stabilize him as to help keep Gage conscious as long as possible. He watched the engineer lean forward to hear Johnny's reply through the non-rebreather.

This was not how I had hoped to finish this shift, Hank decided. He sat down weakly on the floor between the two downed men and dropped his head into his hands. The flu had him well in its grips now, and for one long minute he thought he was going to lose the battle with his stomach.

Mike was saying something. "Don't worry about Roy, Johnny. Just try to relax, okay? Help's on the way."

Hank made a mental note to put Stoker's cool-headed reactions into the incident report. He realized that the bay door was still down, and scrambled up to raise it for the squad and ambulance. His brain illogically wondered what was taking so long for a response, knowing at the same time that scant minutes had passed since they had even discovered the wayward Roy in the bay.

Hank's gaze traveled back to his fallen men. While Roy remained quiet and still, Johnny seemed to be in great distress now. His chest rose and fell erratically with every frantic breath, periodic grunts punctuating the obvious discomfort. His face glistened in the glare of the station lights. Hank caught Stoker's worried eye and turned back helplessly toward the street.

It was another nearly silent--and agonizing--ten minutes before he heard the steady approach of a siren. Seconds later, the rescue squad from Station 26 squealed into the driveway, followed closely by an ambulance.

Dutch Masters jumped from the truck, his face grim and pale in the backwash of light from Station 51's vast garage.

"Captain Stanley," he murmured as he trotted around the other side of the squad to help carry in equipment. Gary Chambers had already vaulted from the driver's seat and grabbed the biophone and trauma box. Dutch didn't bother to ask who was down--he and Gary wouldn't be there if either of 51's paramedics were on his feet. And, from the look on Hank Stanley's face, what they were about to find would not be two men felled by the flu.

Accompanied by the ambulance attendants with the gurney, Dutch and Gary followed Hank into the station and to the back of the squad. By unspoken agreement, Dutch dropped to Johnny's side while his partner attended to Roy.

Johnny opened his eyes at the sound of his friend's voice. "Aw, man...." he mumbled, "couldn't they...have sent a...*real*...paramedic...?"

Dutch, however, had caught sight of the screwdriver sticking out of Johnny's side. "*Jesus!*" he breathed softly. He turned wide eyes to Stoker, then swung around and grabbed the biophone and trauma box from Chambers. "What the hell happened?"

Stoker shook his head. "Don't know," he replied succinctly.

"Contact Rampart," ordered Dutch tersely, handing him the phone. He turned to Hank. "Put your hand on his chest and count his respirations." He yanked the BP cuff and a stethoscope from their compartments and bent over Johnny. "You get yourself in the damnedest scrapes," he muttered.

Johnny didn't bother to reply. Fierce pain pulsed in his abdomen and lower back now, and he was finding it very difficult to resist the temptation to pull out the screwdriver. His professional side knew how wrong that would be, but his non-paramedic half was the one dominated by fear and confusion right now, and the stronger emotions were threatening to overcome the rational. It took every ounce of concentration he could muster to force himself to let the others take care of him.

Dutch glanced up at Hank. "Was this an intruder?"

Hank rubbed his face with a hand, shaking his head and gesturing weakly at Roy. "I guess DeSoto went a little crazy and attacked him. I have no idea what set him off," he added quickly as Dutch opened his mouth to speak. "We came in on the tail end of things--enough to see Roy plunge that--" his eyes found the screwdriver and darted away "--into Gage."

"Rampart, this is Squad fif--26," Mike was saying.

There was a short pause, then Dixie McCall's tired-sounding voice came over the speaker. "Go ahead, 26." If she didn't recognize the voice speaking, she gave no indication that anything might be amiss.

"Rampart, we have a 28-year-old firefighter who's been stabbed with a screwdriver. The blade has penetrated his left side below the ribcage, approximately halfway between the victim's navel and his side . It is still in place. Stand by for vitals."

"Respiration is 20," reported Hank, his voice sounding slightly surprised. Surely Johnny had been breathing faster than that.

"BP is 100 over 60," announced Dutch, grabbing Johnny's left wrist and counting the pulse rate. "Pulse is 120. Johnny, no--" Dutch reached out and yanked back the wrist he'd just dropped and held it away from Johnny's side. "No, John, don't move. Just hold still."

"...hurts..." Johnny tugged feebly against Dutch's grip, fingers reaching for the handle of the weapon.

"I know, John, but you can't move it, you know that." Dutch continued to hold determinedly onto the other's arm, directing Cap to hold Johnny's other arm in case he tried to reach the screwdriver from that side.

"Rampart, vitals are: BP is 100 over 60, pulse is 120, respirations are 20." Mike had watched John and Roy enough to know they recorded the information, so he grabbed Dutch's pen to do so.

"26, be sure to stabilize that screwdriver before you transport." Dixie's voice had been replaced by Kelly Brackett's worried tones. "Are there any other injuries?"

"Rampart, it looks like he received a couple of blows to the head as well, and was bleeding from a wound just behind his left ear." As Mike spoke, Dutch leaned over and peered at the bandage protecting the head wound, his perplexity increasing. "The bleeding from that wound appears to be under control, although he is bleeding slightly from the stabbing injury. Rampart," Mike added, almost hesitantly, "the victim is John Gage." There was a slight pause at the other end.

"26, is he conscious?"

"That's affirmative, Rampart. He appears slightly groggy due to the blows

to his head, but he is oriented. We have him on O2, full flow. Rampart," he hastened to add as Johnny suddenly drew in a sharp breath, "the victim is in considerable pain."

"10-4, 26. Start an IV, Ringers, TKO. Monitor the vitals, and transport as soon as possible."

"10-4, Rampart. Standby for transmission on a second victim."

Mike handed the biophone to Chambers and turned to help Dutch as he packed the screwdriver with sterile dressings and tape to prevent it from slipping.

"Rampart," Chambers was saying behind Mike's back, "the second victim is Roy DeSoto. He unconscious, cause unknown. There are no signs of injury. Patient is reported to have appeared delusional prior to losing consciousness and was extremely violent. His vitals are: BP is 190/110, pulse is 120 and irregular, respirations 25 and shallow. His axillary temperature is 100.3."

"26, can you send us a strip?"

"10-4, Rampart." Gary twisted around. "Chet, can you hand me the Datascope there?" He pointed to the big white case, and Chet climbed over the litter and lugged it to the paramedic's side. Gary rapidly set the leads in place and flipped the monitor on.

"Rampart, sending now."

He bent forward and watched the screen with narrowed eyes.

"26," came Brackett's voice after a pause, "I read sinus tachycardia. Start an IV with D5W; continue monitoring vitals and transport as soon as possible."

Chet and Marco had, by now, eased up on Roy, though they maintained a close reach in case he started to come around. Chet helped Gary with the meds, and in a few minutes Roy, too, was ready to be transported. "You might wanna restrain him," suggested Chet.

Gary looked at him sideways and was about to utter a wisecrack, but Stanley interrupted him before he could open his mouth.

"I think that'd be wise," he agreed. He narrowed his eyes at Gary's uncertain expression. "You didn't see him try to kill his partner," he said flatly.

Gary finally nodded, and Roy's arms and legs were tethered to the stretcher.

"Captain Stanley," Gary said as he gathered the trauma box and biophone, "maybe one of your men should come along and describe Roy's actions to the doctors."

Hank nodded and jerked his head at Stoker. "Mike, drive their squad in, huh?"

Mike nodded and trotted to the locker room to put on some clothes. Until now, he hadn't realized how chilly it was in the apparatus bay. Sitting around in his boxers and tee-shirt couldn't have helped any, either. He pulled pants and socks from his locker and rapidly slid into them. He slipped into his shoes, grabbed his jacket and hurried back out.

Hank Stanley followed the stretcher out to the ambulance and watched as it was loaded. Dutch glanced at his anxious face and paused as he prepared to climb in alongside Gary. "Yeah," he nodded, "it's as bad as it seems, Cap. I'll call you from the hospital." He jumped up and Hank slammed the doors after him, watching miserably as the vehicle pulled away.

Dutch released the BP cuff and gently pulled it away from Johnny's arm. *BP's holding, at least.* Johnny had been uncharacteristically quiet. Dutch rested a hand lightly on the older man's shoulder.

"Not long now, John," he murmured.

Johnny tried to say something. Dutch leaned forward and lifted the oxygen mask slightly.

"...didn't...mean to..." Johnny whispered, his tortured eyes searching Dutch's face carefully.

"I know, John, I know," Dutch agreed. "Take it easy, huh?" He settled the mask back over Johnny's nose.

"Roy..." Johnny's voice was more urgent, his eyes fearful. He tried to swallow. "He...didn't..."

"Johnny, easy, easy," Dutch soothed. He fought to keep back the tears. Whether or not Roy had meant to do this to Johnny, Dutch was now watching his friend battle for every breath. "Easy..." he repeated.

Johnny cried out as the ambulance lurched around a corner, his body

stiffening and his eyes closing as he tried to shut out the pain and nausea.

"A few more minutes," Dutch repeated softly. He checked Johnny's pulse and stared impotently through the narrow window to the cab as if his gaze could make the ambulance move faster.

"Cap? You all right?"

"No, Marco, I am not all right!" Hank rubbed a weary hand across his forehead and let out his breath. "Sorry," he added contritely, looking up at the equally shaken faces of the two remaining members of his crew.

"That's all right, Cap." Marco tried a small smile. It failed wretchedly.

Chet looked up briefly, then bent back to cleaning up the mess surrounding the squad. Their captain perched on the rear bumper of the vehicle, looking years older than he had when the shift had begun, and far paler than he ought.

Hank dropped his head into his hands and sat silently for a few minutes while Marco helped Chet. "What the hell *happened?*" he asked suddenly, lifting his head.

"He looked like he was on something," suggested Chet.

Marco nodded in agreement. "He was pretty crazy, that's for sure."

Stanley shook his head and pushed himself to his feet. "I'll be in my office," he sighed.

Gary Chambers lifted the handset on the biophone. "Rampart, this is Squad 26."

After a short silence the radio hissed. "Go ahead, 26."

"Rampart, victim #2 is becoming agitated, with marked tremors in his hands."

"26, administer 5 milligrams diazepam. What's your ETA?"

"Rampart, 5 milligrams diazepam. ETA is--" Chambers shouted through the window into the cab. "What's the ETA?"

"About five minutes."

Dutch had grabbed the diazepam and prepared the syringe as Gary relayed the information to the hospital. "Easy, easy," he muttered to the restless DeSoto as he pushed the drug.

The tremors and restlessness slowed, though they didn't cease.

"Not long now." Chambers verbally echoed Dutch's silent words.

And people thought only Gage and DeSoto thought in such synchronous fashion.

"Three," said Dixie tightly as Johnny's gurney dropped from the ambulance. "Take Roy into Four," she called back as she followed the first stretcher. Dutch raced alongside the attendants into the surgical emergency room, holding aloft the IV bag and glancing anxiously at Johnny as the gurney jolted him forward.

Johnny's yell as they shifted him to the examining table startled even Joe Early.

"Sorry, Johnny," he apologized.

Gage's response was a rapid blinking of his watering eyes and a sharp increase in his respiration rate.

Dutch hung the IV bag and connected the oxygen flow to the room's supply, while Joe peeled back the blanket and carefully studied the stab wound. Dixie busied herself getting a fresh set of vitals.

"Johnny," Joe said, bending over the paramedic, "we're gonna get to surgery as quickly as we can. Try to relax for a few more minutes, okay?"

"...back...hurts..." Johnny whispered, swallowing hard.

"I'm sure it does, but we'll take care of it just as soon as we have you stabilized." Early rested a hand briefly on Johnny's shoulder. He lifted his eyebrows at Dutch, and the fair-haired paramedic followed the neurosurgeon into the hall as Dixie prepared to draw blood for the work-up.

"I don't know what happened, Doc," said Dutch before Early could ask.

"Evidently Roy went berserk and attacked him." He looked back at the closed door. "Is he gonna be okay?"

Early followed his gaze. "There's the potential for a lot of damage with a wound like that," he sighed. "But, I'd be more concerned about his mental state. It's not every day your best friend takes a screwdriver to you."

Under other circumstances, the words might have sounded amusing.

"Mike?" Brackett looked expectantly at Stoker on the opposite side of the examining table on which Roy now lay. Roy's blood sample was on its way to the lab, and he seemed stable enough. At least he was quiet. Now Brackett could concentrate on delving into the cause.

Briefly, the engineer described the pandemonium that had assaulted Station 51, sounding, not surprisingly, still quite agitated.

Brackett's frown deepened as Stoker finished his tale. "Any idea what might have brought this on?" he asked, studying Roy's face.

Mike shook his head. "We were all asleep," he explained. "He seemed really out of it when we got out to the bay. I thought--" He stopped.

"What?" Brackett encouraged.

Mike shrugged. "I thought he was sleepwalking or something."

Brackett glanced at Roy's still form on the examining table. "It just seems so strange..."

"Johnny said Roy hadn't been feeling well," offered Mike.

Brackett's gaze sharpened on the taller man's features. "When was this?"

Mike tilted his head. "Around ten o'clock or so," he said after a moment's thought.

A certain understanding flashed in Brackett's eyes. "Was he taking any medication?" he asked.

Mike could only shrug again. "I don't know," he answered helplessly.

Brackett's lips tightened as he thought a moment. Then, he smiled grimly at Mike. "Okay, Mike, thanks. Maybe you could call the station and have them look, see if they can find anything."

Mike nodded, his eyes sliding to Roy and back to Brackett. "What about Johnny?" he asked.

Brackett shook his head. "No idea, but I'll find out for you. Gary, can you stay here a few minutes with Anne?"

Gary nodded. "Sure, Doc."

Mike followed Brackett from the room and down the hall. Brackett led him to his office and pointed to the phone. "Why don't you call the station from here while I check on John for you?"

Mike nodded and lifted the receiver.

Johnny shivered as Dixie finished cutting away his tee-shirt. "Dix..." he gasped. The oxygen mask muffled his voice.

"Johnny, you need to lie still, okay? We'll be taking you to surgery in a few minutes." Dixie tossed aside the ruined clothes and covered the injured man carefully, averting her eyes from the abomination that jutted from his side.

"Roy?" Johnny ignored her orders, his eyes tracking across the ceiling restlessly, his hands, still tethered to the edges of the table, fluttering at his sides in agitation.

Dixie firmly took Johnny's left hand in her own and squeezed. "He's across the hall, John. Kel's taking good care of him."

Keeping a careful grip on his left hand, she managed to get a BP cuff around his arm and again measured his blood pressure and pulse. His respirations were uneven and shallow, his pulse was up, and his BP falling. She frowned worriedly.

The door opened and Joe Early stepped in, Brackett right behind him. "...afraid there may be kidney damage. We'll know more as soon as the lab report comes back."

"How's he doing, Dix?" Brackett stood back a step as Early approached the table.

"BP's 90 over 50, pulse is 130, respirations are 24 and shallow. Temperature's 100.6."

Early and Brackett both frowned at the news.

"I'm not sure he can wait, Joe," Brackett said quietly.

Early nodded and turned to Dixie. "I'll call the OR. We need to move now. Have the lab reports delivered there when they arrive."

Dixie's reply was a quick nod as she moved to the phone to call for the orderlies to take Johnny to the operating room.

Joe leaned over Johnny and tried to smile encouragingly. "Okay, John, we're going to move you upstairs now. You're going to be fine."

Not fine.... Johnny couldn't summon the energy to express the thought aloud. Sound and light faded away.

"BP and pulse are holding steady," Anne reported as Brackett took the chart from her and scanned the notations.

"Hm...temp's up half a degree," murmured the doctor almost absent-mindedly. He tapped the metal clipboard with a finger, seemingly lost in thought. After a moment he looked up at Roy. "What's gotten into you, Roy DeSoto?" he asked softly.

"Doc, you gonna need me any more?" Gary Chambers yawned mightily from his position against the counter, where he'd been resting when Brackett had returned to the room.

Brackett looked up and smiled apologetically. "No, Gary, thanks. You go on

back to the station and get some sleep."

Gary nodded and moved to the door, stopping halfway through it. "You'll call when you know anything?"

Brackett nodded. "Yeah, Gary, we'll keep you posted."

Gary gave him a brief nod. "Thanks, Doc. 'Night, Anne," he said, slipping into the hall.

"He's awfully worried, isn't he?" murmured the veteran nurse as Brackett replaced the chart.

"Not half as worried as his partner is," replied Brackett, recalling the agitation he had seen in Johnny's young friend. Dutch was much calmer now, but Brackett doubted that either of 26's paramedics would get much sleep during what was left of their shift. "I'll be in my office, Anne. Have the lab reports delivered there, will you? And let me know if anything changes here."

"Of course."

Brackett gave Roy one last, sad look before he left. Whatever the cause of Roy DeSoto's attack on John Gage, Brackett knew their nightmare was only just beginning.

Joanne DeSoto shifted restlessly for the last time and finally kicked the covers back in annoyance. Her stomach growled intensely. *Good thing Roy isn't here--I'd never hear the end of this!*

She stomped grouchily into the bathroom and rummaged for a minute in the medicine chest. *Damn it, I know I left those pills in here.* She tossed aside yet another container, then slammed the cabinet shut. *Maybe they're in my purse.*

She moved down the stairs more quietly. No sense in waking the kids up this early. They still had nearly another hour before she'd have to rouse them for school. *Might as well enjoy the peace while it lasts.*

She came up empty-handed from her purse, too. Joanne straightened and put her hands on her hips, frowning in concentration as she ran back the instant replay in her mind, struggling to recall where she had left the box of appetite suppressants she had bought yesterday. *Don't tell me they didn't pack them...* She was sure she had seen the bagger put them in one of the grocery bags. Had she unpacked them, or had Roy?

Flipping on the light as she entered the kitchen, she spotted almost instantly what she was looking for. Smiling grimly, she crossed the room. *I'd much rather have a doughnut.*

And, maybe she'd get that doughnut, too. The container was empty. *Oh, good grief, don't tell me I bought an empty box!* Heaving a loud, frustrated sigh, Joanne tossed the box back onto the counter in disgust. *Isn't that just my luck!*

Well, at least she could make some coffee. Turning to grab the coffeepot from the automatic coffee maker, another box on the counter caught her eye. Her brow furrowed again as she lifted the second container.

Suddenly, she found herself laughing, quietly at first, then louder, clapping a hand over her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle the giggling.

Oh, Lord, when Roy realizes he's been taking diet pills instead of flu tablets...

She almost couldn't wait to tell him.

Roy blinked at the bright light overhead. *Morning already? Funny...don't remember the bunk room lights being that bright.* He blinked a couple more times, slowly bringing his surroundings into focus.

Rampart? I'm at Rampart?

"Oh, you're awake!"

Roy found the owner of the voice as she stepped into his field of vision. He stared at her, bewildered. "Anne?"

"How are you feeling?"

Roy thought about that for a minute. Finally, he shrugged slightly. "Well, I'm a little confused," he answered slowly. "What happened? Why am I here?"

Anne smiled. "Tell you what, I'll page Dr. Brackett and he can fill you in."

"Okay," agreed Roy. Not that he had much choice.

Anne disappeared from view though not from the room. Roy heard her pick up the phone and speak quietly, then her footsteps as she returned to his side.

"He'll be here in a few minutes," she told Roy. "Meanwhile," she went on, pulling out a thermometer and placing it in his mouth, "I'm going to take another set of vitals. You just relax for a few minutes, okay?" Without waiting for his consent, she lifted his wrist to take his pulse, then wrapped a BP cuff around his arm to measure his blood pressure. She jotted her findings on the chart that lay on the nearby table, recording his temperature last. Just as she finished, the door opened and Kelly Brackett strode in, Dixie McCall close behind him.

"Hi, Roy," smiled Brackett, taking the chart from the nurse.

"Anne, would you go help Dr. Morton in Room 2?" asked Dixie quietly. Anne nodded wordlessly and slipped out of the room.

"How are you feeling?" Brackett asked, glancing at the chart and then at Roy.

"I'm a little confused," admitted Roy. "What happened?"

Brackett set the chart aside and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. "Tell me what you remember," he countered.

Roy's eyebrows drew together in a frown as he puzzled over Brackett's order. He started to object, then decided that there was probably a good reason for the question. *Did I hit my head somehow?* For a few silent minutes he struggled to recall what might have put him in the hospital, but the last thing he remembered was the end of that last run, when Johnny had suggested he go home. He had gone right to bed, and remembered nothing until a few minutes before when he had opened his eyes and found himself in an exam room at Rampart Hospital. He looked back at the

doctor, thoroughly mystified.

"The last thing I remember," he said slowly, "was going to bed back at the station."

Brackett's face remained impassive. "You weren't feeling well?"

Roy nodded. "That's right. I finally picked up that flu bug, I guess."

"Roy, did you take any medication? Something to relieve the symptoms?"

"Just some flu medicine." He started to lift a hand. "What the--?" He tried to look down toward his hands, then stared at the pair standing over him. "Why am I restrained?" He was beginning to be frightened. *What the hell happened?*

"What kind of flu medicine?" Brackett persisted.

"I don't know...something new Joanne picked up. Doc, why am I in restraints?"

"We think," said Brackett slowly, "you might have taken some medication that caused some strange side-effects."

"Like passing out?"

Brackett hesitated.

"What?" Roy almost laughed, but he was too frightened now. "Doc..."

"Well, it was a good bit more serious than that, Roy. You became quite

violent..."

Roy stared. "You've gotta be kidding." But he knew Brackett wouldn't joke about something like that.

"I wish I were." Brackett's face was somber, very troubled. He took a breath. "There's no easy way to tell you this, Roy, but you attacked Johnny."

Roy blinked. *Johnny? Why would I attack Johnny?* "What'd I do?" he whispered, terrified of the answer.

"You stabbed him with a screwdriver."

"Right....Chet's on his way over with it now....Okay, Mike, call when you hear anything." Hank set down the phone and looked up.

"How is he?" Marco was as worried for his captain as for his crewmates.

Hank sighed. "He's quiet, but that's about all Stoker knows."

"Any word on Johnny?"

Hank shook his head. "They've just taken him to surgery." He glanced at the clock. Four-thirty. How radically their lives had changed in a brief hour and a half.

Marco dropped his head and, after a moment, Hank dropped his as well. There was a certain comfort in the old prayers.

"Preludin?" Brackett's head lifted from the toxicity report and he stared in surprise at Dixie McCall.

The nurse's eyes widened. "That's not usually found in flu medication," she protested.

"No, it's not," agreed Brackett. "You see it in diet pills."

"What would Roy DeSoto be doing with diet pills?" Dixie wondered.

Brackett shook his head. "I have no idea." His phone buzzed and he lifted the receiver.

"Dr. Brackett....Oh, good, I'll be right there." He dropped the phone on the hook and looked at Dixie. "Chet Kelly's here with what they think Roy was taking."

The pair jumped up and dashed out to meet him.

"How's that?" The masked face leaned closer.

Johnny tried again. "Cold..."

The mask backed up a bit and the head behind it bobbed, the blue eyes darting to something beyond Johnny's view. "I'm sure you are. We'll get you comfortable in another couple of minutes, okay?"

Hurry... Johnny didn't remember the ride up, but it seemed as if the number of people surrounding him had increased exponentially. He thought that if he tried to follow their movement he'd become severely dizzy and disoriented, so he concentrated instead on the bright lights overhead.

There was a strange noise and then voices filtered through the haze that surrounded him. Johnny realized that he must have drifted off.

"John?"

He blinked .

"John, we're going to give you something to help you relax. I want you to concentrate on the lights, and count backwards from 100, okay?"

Not sure I can do that.... The thought came sluggishly, as did the numbers.

He started to wonder if he were saying the numbers aloud, and then the lights went out and, mercifully, the pain with them.

Hank sat wearily at his desk and stared at the incident report form before him. *How the hell do I even begin?*

"Uh, Cap?"

Hank lifted his head and blinked at Chet.

"Chief Dirksen is here," Chet said.

"Thanks, Chet. Show him in, would you?" Hank didn't think he had the strength to walk to the squad room.

Dirksen waved him back into his seat as Hank rose when the man entered the small office. "Sit down, Hank," he insisted, "sit down."

Hank dropped back gratefully into his chair.

"Hank, get someone to drive you home," began Dirksen. "You're not fit to drive."

Hank struggled visibly to control his emotions. *Not fit to command, either....*

"Any word yet?" Dirksen asked softly after a minute's silence.

Hank shook his head, involuntarily looking at the clock. Nearly six o'clock. He was no closer to completing his incident report than he was two hours ago. "Not yet."

"You know the station has been stood down until the start of the next shift," Dirksen said.

"You and your...remaining...men should go home."

Hank pressed his fingertips to his lips and closed his eyes. After a long silence he finally murmured, "I need to notify DeSoto's wife."

Dirksen studied the man across from him. "Hank, this isn't your fault. Nothing you could have done--"

He was interrupted by Hank suddenly leaning over his trash can and vomiting. "Sorry," mumbled Hank as he righted himself again and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand.

"Go home, Hank."

Joanne picked up the syrup from the table and glanced at the kitchen clock. "Chris! Jen!" she shouted. "Come on, let's get going!" *What is it about children that takes them so long to get going in the morning?*

She sighed. *Who am I kidding? I don't know of too many adults who relish the thought of rising with the birds.*

She stared longingly at the remaining pancakes congealing in the center of the table. *Don't you dare, Joanne DeSoto! You've worked too hard to lose the few pounds you've taken off!*

"Mom! I can't find my gym shoes!"

"Christopher DeSoto, if I come up there and find those shoes under your bed, you are in big trouble, young man!"

She waited for an answering whine, but silence was the only thing she heard. *Let him go to school without his gym shoes--maybe he'll learn to put them in his closet, where they belong.*

"Mommy, where's my lunch?" Jennifer skipped into the kitchen and stood behind her mother, smiling primly.

Joanne tossed a quick look over her shoulder and returned to the dishes in

the sink. "In the fridge, and go brush your teeth, Miss."

"I already did." The simpering tone was unmistakable.

Joanne turned her head fully around this time and favored her daughter with a silent stare.

"Oh, all right!" Jennifer stomped out of the room and back up the stairs. Joanne could hear her grumbling halfway up.

You'd think their father was home, the way they're so disorganized this morning.

She stacked the last dish in the dish drain, rinsed and wiped out the sink, and slipped off the rubber gloves. She looked at the clock again.

"Chris! Jennifer! Come on! Mrs. Stapleton will be here any minute!"

The two children tumbled down the stairs, Chris toting his school books and Jennifer darting in front of him.

"Beat ya!" she called, running to the kitchen for her lunch.

Chris stuck his tongue out at her.

"Did you find your gym shoes?" asked Joanne.

Chris held them up wordlessly and followed his sister into the kitchen. A horn sounded outside.

"Let's go!" Joanne opened the front door, holding the screen as her children darted past with hasty good-byes. She watched them climb into

the car, waved, and thankfully slipped back into the house and closed the door behind her.

Someday, I know I'm gonna miss these days. But, right now, I'd give almost anything to have just one morning that doesn't involve rushing six ways from Sunday just to get out the door on time!

She moved up the stairs toward the kids' rooms. If she were lucky, she'd have the beds stripped of dirty linen and remade with fresh sheets, another load of laundry finished, and perhaps even the upstairs vacuumed before Roy got home from the station. If he were still feeling sick, she'd be finished with the upstairs chores and he'd be able to sleep undisturbed. And, she'd be able to cuddle him.

Joanne smiled at the thought. It made her heart skip a beat, even after all these years, to think of taking care of Roy. Like most men, he was helpless when he was sick, and as cranky as he might get with a cold or sore throat, she loved bringing him chicken soup and hot tea.

A giggle stole from her throat as she recalled the missing diet pills. Roy had been so appreciative of her attempt to help relieve his flu symptoms. She wondered how his appetite would be when he returned home.

She started in Jennifer's room on the assumption that she would be finished in there easily. Jennifer tended to be much neater than her brother, so Joanne seldom had to wade through piles of toys and scattered clothes to get to the bed. She had just finished removing the bottom sheet when a sound outside the window caught her attention.

It was the sound of a car door opening. *Hm...wonder who forgot what?* She stepped to the window. The sight on the driveway made her knees go weak.

The dark red sedan of the Fire Chief was parked in front of her garage. And Hank Stanley was slowly crossing the walk toward the front door.

"I know, Johnny, I know it hurts." Ellen Grey held his head as his stomach heaved yet again, his body shuddering with every spasm. This time the episode lasted only a minute, though. She helped him to rinse his mouth and to lay back again, wiping his face and neck gently with a cool, damp cloth.

"What day is it?" he whispered. Her white nurse's uniform barely registered on him.

"It's Tuesday," she answered, turning the cloth over and placing the thermometer under his tongue.

Tuesday? What happened to Monday?

Ellen noticed the confusion on his face. "You've been pretty out of it, Johnny," she told him. He was still a bit "out of it."

Johnny didn't seem to be paying much attention. "...killing me..." He began to choke as his stomach once more lurched. The thermometer dropped from his mouth, shattering on the floor unnoticed. Ellen held him once more as he began to heave again.

"What do you mean, I can't see him?"

Joanne flinched at the volume of her husband's voice and gripped his hand all the harder. He seemed unaware of it, all of his attention focused on the

doctor standing in front of him.

"Roy--"

"Doc, I can't let him think I don't want to see him!" Roy managed to lower his voice a fraction.

"It's not that, Roy," insisted Brackett. "No one can see him right now. He's restricted from visitors--completely."

Roy stared at him, anger vanishing slowly. "Why?" He wasn't sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

Brackett hesitated. Joanne's grasp remained unwaveringly tight.

"Roy," Brackett told him quietly, "Johnny's developed some serious complications. He's fighting a massive infection, and right now he needs all of his strength just for that. We just can't take the chance of anyone passing along something else."

Roy looked at his wife. "Have you been to see him?"

Joanne shook her head. "Honey, they won't let anyone near him. I saw him through the window in the ICU isolation room, but that's all." Her lower lip trembled at the memory of all the tubes and wires wrapped around Johnny. He had looked very vulnerable...and very alone.

"Why can't I at least do that?" Roy demanded. There was something they weren't telling him.

Brackett's forehead creased with uncertainty. He wasn't sure that it was a good idea that Roy see the extent of the damage he had unwittingly caused.

"Doc..." Roy cleared his throat. "I need to see him...."

Brackett at last nodded. "I still have reservations," he said, "but I'll make arrangements."

Roy stared through the glass, his fingers touching the window, nearly holding him up.

Dear God....

Brackett had explained in detail what Roy would see, but the sight was still an almost physical shock.

About the only positive thing he could think of was that Johnny was not, at the moment, feeling any pain. Tubes and wires sprouted from almost every other part of his body, though, and myriad machines blinked and hissed around him. Johnny lay frighteningly motionless, his face white and gaunt against the pillow.

At the moment, a gowned and masked nurse was drawing a blood sample.

Roy turned to Brackett. "Is that a--?" He could barely get the question out.

Brackett nodded reluctantly. "Part of that infection includes the kidney.

He's on dialysis right now." He watched as the nurse completed her work and rested her hand a moment on Johnny's. From where he and Roy stood it was impossible to tell, but he suspected that she was talking to the sleeping man.

Roy returned his gaze to his partner. "Is he going to lose it?"

Brackett took a breath. "We're trying very hard to prevent that from happening, Roy. But, yes, there's a good likelihood that he's going to lose it."

And all that's happened to me is that I'll never work with him again....

Johnny slept on.

"I'm sorry, Hank."

Hank Stanley pounded a fist lightly on the arm of the chair, blew out a breath, and finally returned his gaze to the doctor. "Has anyone told Roy?"

Brackett shook his head. "Not yet."

Hank's gaze didn't waver. "Let me tell him, then," he suggested.

Brackett narrowed his eyes a moment. "I suspect it will be more difficult to tell him than it was telling Johnny." He studied the captain. "How are the rest of you holding up?"

Hank shrugged, his expression growing sad. "It's better than having them die in a fire," he admitted. "But not much." There was a short silence. "Can

he have any visitors yet?"

Brackett nodded. "For a few minutes at a time. He's still in quite a lot of pain, but if he's awake he'd appreciate the company."

Hank nodded and rose, extending his hand to Brackett, who also stood. "Thanks for everything, Doc."

"Hank," Brackett said, stopping at his office door, "Johnny won't have to leave the department, will he?"

Hank sighed. "No. He'll probably be offered a desk job. Or maybe some sort of training position with the paramedic program." He shook his head. "But, he'll never have a station job again."

"Dix?"

Dixie turned back. Johnny still looked exhausted, even though he claimed to be feeling much better today. "What is it, Johnny?"

He hesitated, looked away a moment, studied his hands. Dixie waited patiently. At last he looked up again, mouth twisting into a shy smile but eyes serious. "Dix, why hasn't Roy come to see me?"

Dixie returned to his side and took one of his hands in hers. "Well, there are lots of reasons, I suppose," she began, settling herself carefully on the edge of his bed. "For one thing, you weren't allowed visitors for the first five days you were here." She smiled faintly. "You were pretty sick."

Johnny shook his head. "It's all kinda blurry," he told her.

She nodded. "It was pretty scary for a while," she agreed. Johnny was, to her knowledge, in no way religious. She wondered idly how he would react if he knew he'd been given the Last Rites twice during those five days.

A gentle squeeze on her hand brought her back, and she smiled. "And, for another, Roy wasn't...quite himself for a while." Johnny would never find out from any of the hospital staff about the suicide watch under which Roy had spent the first two days. It had been just a precaution, but the thought of a suicidal Roy would certainly shake his partner to his core.

"Does he not want to see me?"

Why, he's really frightened! "Johnny," she said carefully, "I think that, more than anything, Roy would like to see you."

"Then, why doesn't he?" Johnny pulled his hand away agitatedly.

"Because he's afraid."

Johnny looked at her sharply. "Afraid?" he scoffed. "Of what?"

"Of you. Of himself. Of the entire situation."

Johnny digested this silently. *Yeah, well, I'm afraid, too, and I need my best friend to make everything all right again.* At last, he whispered plaintively, "I miss him..."

Dixie watched a single tear trickle down Johnny's cheek. "Johnny, would you like me to arrange for you to talk to Jim Powers?" she asked softly.

"I don't need a shrink, Dix," he told her, annoyed at her for her perception and at himself for showing her his weakness.

"That's where you're wrong, young man," she argued.

"I'm the victim, remember?" he said angrily. "I'm the one who--" He stopped.

"Who what, Johnny?" Dixie gazed at him compassionately, speaking gently. "Who's lost a kidney, and can never be a firefighter again?"

Johnny squeezed his eyes shut against the tears, but they slipped through anyway. "I've lost my whole life," he whispered.

"No, you haven't, John. You've only changed its direction."

"I sure as hell don't like this new route," he muttered bitterly.

"Oh, I don't know. You might find some pretty scenery along the way." Dixie offered him a smile, but Johnny didn't bother to return it.

"It's a lonesome road," he whispered, turning his head.

Dixie reached out and brushed at the tears on his face. His skin was warm to the touch, his fever spiking again. She left his side long enough to dampen a cloth, and returned to lay it across his brow.

"Shh," she soothed. "Try to get some sleep, Johnny."

She stayed with him until the steady, even rhythm of his breathing told

her that he was asleep, then left his room to find a phone.

"No--don't get up." Mike Stoker smiled his gentle smile as he held out his hand toward John. "How you doin'?"

Johnny settled back into his chaise and nodded, smiling tiredly. "Ah'm doin' all right." He shrugged a little. "Thought I'd get a little fresh air."

Stoker sat down in the only other chair on Johnny's deck and set down the foil-covered plate he held. He smiled at Johnny's curious look. "Thought you might want something to eat besides hamburgers and hot dogs," he said. "Brought you some fried chicken."

Johnny's expression brightened. "Oh, yeah?" He sounded pleased, but he left the plate untouched.

Mike looked around. It was a beautiful day--unusually clear and cloudless and, for mid-January, also unusually warm. Johnny wore a heavy sweater, though, and a jacket over it, though his yard was sheltered and flooded with sunshine.

"Can I get you a drink or something?" Johnny offered.

Mike shook his head. "Thanks, anyway." He studied John a minute. "You're looking pretty good, John." It was a lie, of course.

Johnny laughed. "For a skeleton," he replied.

Mike grinned. "Well, I guess you couldn't get much skinnier, no," he agreed.

In truth, Mike had expected John to look more rested than he did. *Must still be having nightmares.*

"I'm still tryin' to make up for lost time," Johnny smiled, swallowing a mouthful from the glass of juice he held, "but I guess I'm not makin' too much headway."

"Well, I imagine you'll get your appetite back soon enough."

Johnny's glance fell on the plate. "That oughta help it along," he opined.

"Had to practically take it out of Chet's mouth," Mike told him dryly.

Johnny's expression lost a shade of its humor, but only for a moment. "How's ol' Chet doin'?" he asked.

"The same as always. Said to tell you he and Marco are coming out tomorrow to check up on you, if that's all right." He waited, but Johnny didn't object. "I said I'd let him know if you'd rather they didn't."

"No, it's okay." Johnny shifted in his chair and looked across his yard to the distant, hazy mountains. He'd been pretty much ignoring the phone since he'd been home. In the hospital, he had to put up with visitors. At home, he didn't have to do anything he didn't want to do.

"Cap said he was out last week, too."

Suddenly, Johnny knew what was coming. He continued to direct his gaze to the distance, waiting in silence.

"Have you talked to Roy at all?" Mike tried to make the question sound

casual, Johnny thought, failing miserably.

Johnny's eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. For a long silence he stared across the yard, his breath going in and out slowly and with a forced evenness. Mike waited patiently. "He's here, isn't he?" Johnny's voice was soft and full of sadness.

"John, he's your best friend."

Johnny took a breath and held it, closing his eyes. "Mike," he whispered, "you know I don't blame him for this."

"I know that, Johnny, but Roy doesn't."

"Mike, I'm not sure I'm ready to face him...."

"Johnny," Mike started softly.

Johnny held up a hand. "Mike, please." He shifted on the seat, rising cautiously and stepping to the edge of the deck. He studied the distant view a few minutes. "I wouldn't know what to say," he said at last.

"Tell him you're still his friend."

Johnny tilted his head and looked sideways at the other. *Yeah, I'm still his friend. But can he still be mine?* "He never came to see me. Not once." His voice was emotionless, carefully in check.

Mike shook his head. "He was there every day, John." He lifted troubled blue eyes to meet Johnny's dark ones. "Every day," he repeated.

Johnny's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" He turned to face Mike.

"You think he tried to kill you on purpose?" Mike stood and stepped across the deck to stand at Johnny's side.

"Of course not--"

"Johnny, he doesn't remember anything about that night, except coming back from that last run and going to bed."

"Yeah, well, I remember *everything* about that night!" His finger nearly jabbed Mike in the chest. "And, I remember every single minute of pain after that." He took a shaky breath, trying unsuccessfully to still his raging emotions. "But nowhere in any of that do I remember Roy DeSoto being there!"

"Johnny," asked Mike carefully, "did you even want to see him in the hospital?"

"Of course, I did! Why wouldn't I?" Johnny blinked in surprise.

"Then, why don't you want to see him now?"

"Because I'm scared!"

This answer startled both of them. Mike took an involuntary step backwards. Johnny's eyes widened and he slowly leaned against the railing, holding his breath and then letting it out with a shaky sob. "I'm scared...."

"I'm sorry, Johnny."

Johnny closed his eyes and remained absolutely still.

"I should never have let you think I meant to hurt you."

"Roy...." The name came out in a strangled syllable.

"Junior...."

He turned as if in a dream, lifted his eyes, still holding his breath. Roy stood uncertainly at the bottom of the steps on the far side of the deck. Johnny's former partner looked ten years older than when Johnny had last seen him. Dark circles outlined his eyes, and his clothes hung loosely on a frame carrying at least twenty fewer pounds than Johnny remembered.

Roy slowly climbed the steps and stood at the top, his expression more afraid than hopeful.

Mike took another step backwards, his eyes darting back and forth nervously between the two other men. Neither even seemed aware of his presence.

"I'll leave if that's what you want," Roy stated softly. "I'm hoping it's not."

Johnny's eyes filled. "Pally...." he whispered.

Author's note: This was the hardest story yet for me to write--it was just

so difficult to make Roy do this to Johnny! I guess that's why they call it a challenge. I can't possibly thank my beta readers enough for their support, badgering--er, encouragement, and even expressing an interest in what I was writing. Theresa, Tig, and my very own Pally, Melissa--late nights will never be quiet as long as you three are up and willing to talk. And, a very special Thank You to Pat Embury for her boundless patience in answering my never-ending questions, and for the many improvements she made to my story. And, Pat, I think the average time between sequels runs what, about two years? Mine ought to be ready about then. Hope yours comes out first.

February 2004: Much thanks to CJ for offering this story a new home with the shutting down of Code Red!

May 2010: Many thanks to Linda for this latest home!