

Chapter 8

Roy:

I really hate head injuries. Not just for the obvious head scrambling that can potentially take place but more for the subtle, little-realized consequence that nothing can be administered for the pain. There's something ironic about the fact that they want to see how lucid and alert you can be while you're head is being ripped open by a hot iron being deliberately inserted through each eye.

Someone really oughta invent something that can keep you alert but dull the splitting headache.

I'd better not suggest that to Johnny or he'll run off half-cocked with the idea and discover the secret only to find he's re-invented aspirin.

His hand was off me, then and I felt us make a hard turn.

... *'You need me?'* ...

I reached up and tried to adjust the oxygen mask 'cause it was pressing hard against my nasal bone. I felt movement near my face and creaked my eyes open, a little.

Johnny's blurred face was lookin' at me. At least, that's what I assumed he was doing. He caressed my face, "We're here, just hold on."

I felt the ambulance turn and pull forward then back up. Johnny moved away from me and turned to look out the back window, but his fingers lingered at my ear, brushed down my neck and rested on my chest, sending a warmth through me that tingled every nerve I had.

Oh, boy...

"Alright, be careful, be careful."

I heard his voice as I felt myself being lifted out of the ambulance, set down with a bit of a jolt and then it was off to the races.

I've lost count of how many patients I've rushed in to Rampart on these gurneys, over the years. And it's no secret that I've had my own share of *being* a patient. But I've never quite gotten used to the feeling of moving on one of these things while lying on my back. Not seeing where I'm going. Not having any control.

I should ask Johnny if he finds it as disorienting as I do.

Johnny...

I think of him now and...something happens to me.

No. I don't want to think about that.

I don't want to think about it.

But every nerve is singing. I can't not think about it.

That feeling... on the cliff...god, that...

...feeling...

No. I...can't... I don't...

No. No! No, I can't. I can't...say it. I can't think it.

I...don't...want it—

Alright. Stop it. Get a hold of yourself. Take deep breaths.....

OK, too painful. Forget the breathing.

Just...

'...I ain't lettin' go o' you...'

I could still feel him up against me.

His strength...

His heartbeat...

No! No, DeSoto, don't... Look, it's the concussion, you numbskull. It's a physiological, neurological response. Your brain's been scrambled. That's all it is.

It's fixable.

Everything's gonna be just fine.

Everything's gonna...

...be fine.

Just...fine...

It felt like his fingers were still lingering on my ear...

Alright, DeSoto, stop it... Everything's gonna...

...be...

I opened my eyes. The light stabbed into them and I winced at the lancing pain. Things were still a little blurry, but I guess my vision was improving 'cause things seemed to be less blurry than before. Past the oxygen mask, Dr. Early was standing over me talking to Nurse Carol.

I looked past him and saw Johnny at the foot of the exam table. At least, I assumed it was Johnny; it was definitely someone with dark hair in a fireman's blue uniform shirt, that much I could gauge. He came around and sidled up against me.

"Roy...?"

"Thanks for comin' back for me, partner."

"Thanks for—? Well I couldn't just leave you there, now, could I?"

I heard some commotion at the door, and then Dr. Early's voice. "Johnny, the X-Ray tech is here. Let's give him some room, okay?"

"Sure thing, doc. Roy, I'll be right outside, okay?"

"Can you call Joanne for me?" My voice sounded like I hadn't uttered a word in a year. Felt like it, too.

"Yeah, she's on her way. I'll be right outside."

His warm hand brushed my fingers as he left, stroking my nerves again. I squinted past that mammoth X-ray machine squeezing into the room; Johnny was standing inside, holding the door open. He moved to leave and looked at me. And he stayed there, even as the door swung closed.

Johnny:

God, I hate waiting rooms. They should be labeled something more active, like, Hang Out Rooms. Or better, yet, they should just have a gym or something. Even Reading Rooms would be better. Something that can make you feel like you're *doing* something and not actually *waiting*.

I wonder who's in charge of naming these things? I should send them a letter. Oh, wait. *I forgot*. It's a *Waiting* Room. I guess it would be outta the realm of hospital room naming regulations to put a typewriter or some writing implements in here that could be used to write up a letter to suggest puttin' things in here so as to call this place something else while we all sit in here doing *nothin'* in the *Waiting* Room.

I'm gonna drive myself *nuts*.

"I've already called Joanne," Dix had said when we brought Roy in. I was glad she'd had 'cause that is the one phone call that I need all my strength to make at a time when I have the least amount of energy to do it.

And right now, I'm about fresh out.

I was just glad this one didn't turn out too bad. 'Cause for a moment there, I was afraid I might've...

Fuck.

Twice. Can you believe it?

Twice in one week.

Twice in a fucking week I almost --

No! No. You didn't. You didn't.

OK? You didn't.

'Thanks for comin' back for me.'

Thanks for comin' back for me? What the hell did you think, Roy? I was just gonna leave you dangling off that damned cliff like that?

I told you, Roy. I told you, didn't I?

I meant what I said.

I meant what I said...

Roy:

I believe it's an institutional mandate, based upon some kind of inverse square law, involving human physiology, clothing design and molecular activity, that says, 'The thinner the hospital gown, the lower the temperature the hospital room must be.' I would imagine women came up with that rule, because I just don't see any male agreeing to that kind of a proposal.

"Roy?"

"Jo?"

She came up, leaned over me, smiled, at least that's what it kinda looked like, anyway, and caressed my face, my hair. She must've been doing the laundry when the call came 'cause her hands smelled like *Tide*TM. It was a nice reminder of 'home' and 'normalcy' on, what seemed to be turning into, an abnormal day.

But maybe with her here, I could shake off this weird state I was in and restore things back to the way they were...before the cliff. Before... I reached for her hand and held it like I never wanted her to leave me. She wriggled out of my grasp a little and I loosened my desperate hold on her. "Hon, are you OK? Dr. Early gave me the spiel. How're you feeling?"

"Better, now that my head and my stomach aren't at war."

"How're your eyes?"

"Improving."

"That's good." She brushed my hair back and it was nice to feel her touch.

"Yeah. It was a little scary, I don't mind tellin' ya."

"I'll bet."

"Where are Chris and Jenny?"

"With Corinne." She sighed, still caressing my hair. "Roy Patrick DeSoto, did you not hear me the other day when you got burned?"

"I did. I guess I just wasn't ready to listen."

"I guess." She kissed me. And it was nice, familiar, comforting. "I know you've been trying to impress me all week with your brave fireman and rescue antics, but, really, if this is your way of getting me to go on a date with you, all you had to do was ask."

"I tried asking your mother's permission, but, well, look what happened."

She huffed a little and backhanded a gentle swat on my shoulder.

"Ow!" *I guess now I've really done it...*

"Roy DeSoto, that didn't hurt and you should know better than that." I was hoping there was a smile that went with that swat, 'cause she usually does that when she's teasing, but I couldn't quite tell by her tone of voice alone whether she was kidding at all.

She sighed a little and her voice was gentle, "I know you both don't see eye to eye very often—"

"That's an understatement."

"Roy, she's my *mother*. She means well."

"Sure, Jo. She means to drive a wedge between the two of us so you can find someone better. She believes you're simply biding your time."

She laughed. “You know that’s not true.”

“She’s gonna use this as another excuse to criticize me, tell me for the thousandth time how selfish I am for choosing a career that puts other people before her daughter and could very well leave you a widow. Come to think of it, that’s probably what she’s counting on.”

“Roy, you’re exaggerating.”

“Then why does she treat me like the furniture delivery guy, and *not* her daughter’s *husband* and the father of her *grandchildren*? Eileen’s husband doesn’t have to sleep on the couch when she visits them, you know?”

“How would you know that?”

“Because I’ve *talked* to him, Jo—.” I’d gotten so worked up over this, I’d nearly forgotten I was injured. A wave of pain came over me, just then, when I tried to sit up and the rest my diatribe got lost when all I could manage was a groan.

“Honey? You want me to get Dr. Early?”

The pain eased up a little as I lay back down, but it was hard to catch my breath. “No, I’m alright, Jo. I’m sure he’ll be in soon with the test results, anyway. Ow...”

She caressed my hair again, “You sure you’re ok?”

No. “Yeah...” I wheezed.

“See what happens when you get agitated?” she whispered.

“Can’t help it. The very mention of your mother agitates me.”

She was silent for awhile, just brushing my hair.

“Sorry, Jo.”

She kissed me. “I guess that hang glider really did a number on you, huh?”

“Seems so.”

“Well, then, I guess I’ll just become a nurse since you seem eager to spend so much time here, lately. Or do you and Johnny have an office pool going?”

“Sorry.” *Again.*

She kissed me. “Don’t be sorry. Just be alive and okay.” She rubbed my arm and I grabbed her hand. It felt good to have her so close. “Dr. Early says they’re planning on keeping you here?”

“Coupla days, I think. Mostly for observation.”

“I hope it’s not more than that. I know Dixie has to sell it to help calm the families, but you know I’m not crazy about the coffee, here,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Yeah, I know.” It felt good to hold her, to touch her. Maybe this is just what I need. Maybe it’ll make me forget...

“Well, your partner is practically jumping out of his skin to see you. Honestly, I think he worries about you more than I do.” She brushed my hair back and kissed me again. “I’m gonna go check on the kids. Chris has been in a ‘I don’t want my little sister around me’ mode, today, leaving Jenny feeling a little unwanted.”

“He’s at that age, you know.”

“I know. I went through it and remember it well.” She moved away. “Johnny’s here. I’ll be right back.”

“Hey, Jo? Tell the kids I love ‘em and that I’ll see them real soon.”

“I will.”

Johnny:

She stopped me as I walked in. “Are you OK? You look a little worn around the edges for a guy who’s been doing nothing but hanging off a cliff all morning.”

“Yeah, well, you know, somebody’s gotta do it.”

She looked at me the way I’ve seen her look at the kids when they come home with dirt all over ‘em. “Your face looks all red this morning, Johnny. But I can’t tell if it’s just this light.”

I put on my best Tonto voice, “Mmm, me look like Red Indian.”

She gently jabbed a finger at me. “Stop that. But really, you look sunburned.”

“Nothin’ like a good wind-whippin’ to get you started in the morning.”

She smiled and hugged me. “Well, I’m glad you’re ok. He’s all yours. I’m just gonna check on the kids real quick. You need anything?”

“I should be askin’ you that.”

She gave me that ‘motherly’ look, “I’m not the one who was dangling a hundred feet up. You want anything?”

“Naw, I’m ok, Joanne. Thanks.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

She squeezed my arm and I watched her leave. ”You’re a lucky man, Roy.”

“Yeah.”

Well, for a guy who knew he was lucky, he sure didn’t sound convinced. And damn it, if I didn’t know better, I coulda sworn he had that weird look on his face, again. Or maybe he was lookin’ funny cause he was still in pain or he was uncomfortable or some’n’.

I looked at him lying on the hospital table. I thought about where we’d just been. Heard Cap’s voice, again, yellin’ for him like it was the one thing that’d keep Roy alive...and the fear came back.

Roy:

So much for my plan to erase what’d happened today. The minute he walked in, my heart leaped.

Lucky man. Oh sure. Bad luck, maybe. Lucky to have...to have gotten his head whacked so hard, it was spinning circles around his partner...

“You scared me, Roy,” he whispered. And he sounded it, too.

Boy, I gotta say, it was a little disconcerting to have heard him say that. Not what he said but the way he said it. And with Johnny, that’s usually the biggest clue to diagnosing his real feelings.

I had no way of knowing at the time, of course, how much that cliff rescue really had affected him. I know without a doubt how it’d affected me, I mean, there’s no gettin’ around it. But I wasn’t in any real condition at that moment to catch the clue he’d just dropped. Actually, the several clues he’d *been* dropping. He was doing it again, submerging like a submarine and ‘going quiet’. And you know what that means. And if I’d been in enough of a right mind to have really paid attention, I would have noticed it a whole lot sooner. And maybe – just maybe – this whole, entire thing could’ve all been avoided.

Although, like I said before, depending on your perspective, This Whole Entire Thing may have been a good thing. Which is fine, I guess, but it really would’ve been nice without all the theatrics and disquieting introspection.

“Yeah, I know. I scared me, too. But hey, I had nothin’ else to do while I was hangin’ around.” I tried to turn on the ole DeSoto charm to ease my partner’s fears and to attempt, again, to restore some sense of normalcy. *Well, it works on Jenny, anyway...*

Johnny:

“Oh, ha ha. You know how long it’ll be before a bed opens up?”

“Not sure. Dr. Early hasn’t come by, yet, with the test results.”

“Kay. Squad’s been stood down till they find a replacement for you. I told Cap that he’d better make sure it ain’t Dunning or they’d have to find a replacement for all *three* of us. I cannot believe I am hearing myself say this, but I would partner with *Brice* for a year ‘fore I *ever* do a shift with Dunning.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that.”

“No you’re not. No you’re not, ‘cause I would never agree to *do* a shift with Dunning.”

“You just said...”

“I know what I just said. But I didn’t mean what I just said, ‘cause what I meant was that I would never partner with Dunning in the first place and so I would have no need to partner with The Walking Rule Book for a year because it’s just not gonna happen. *That’s* what I meant.”

Roy:

He hasn’t figured out yet that I do that to him just to drive him nuts because he’s so easy to wind up. He thinks Chet’s the only one who plays practical jokes on him.

“What’re you smilin’ at?”

“Brice’s new partner.”

He groaned at me as his face scrunched up in disgust.

I guess it was the weird state I was in coupled with the meds they had me on, but I found myself starting to laugh. I was tryin’ not to, ‘cause it still hurt, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Johnny got all serious when I winced in pain. “Hey, hey, you alright?”

“Yeah. Just hurts to laugh, that’s all.”

“Serves you right.” But his hand was holding onto my arm. And I realized that it had been the whole time.

Chapter 9

Johnny:

'You scared me, Roy...'

'Johnny, where are we?'

I could still feel his hand in mine...

Could still see that look on his face in the ambulance, his eyes movin' around like he was tryin' to focus, like he was tryin' to find me.

'Johnny? Johnny, you here?'

I'm here, Roy. *'I'm right here.'*

Dunning! Ben...!

To think he went through that at that 3-alarm the other night and never got an answer...

That *fucking* son of a *bitch*...!

Man, I just couldn't hold still.

Ordinarily, with the rescue done and Roy outta danger I woulda started to relax about now. But this whole day was turnin' out to be anything *but* ordinary and the adrenaline, like every thought goin' through my head, was still high up on that cliff...

...my hand on the back of his head, him right up against me with the wind howlin' like hell-fury around us. I had him. He was safe and I could keep him that way.

...the way he was danglin' like a rag doll at the end of that line with that glider makin' a play for him like a puma toyin' with its food...

God...dammit!

Alright, alright, Gage, settle down, okay? Settle down. Just settle down, just calm down, calm down...that's it, keep it calm, keep it calm...

Shit.

I knew Roy was in good hands at Rampart. That Joanne was with him, but...

I'd felt some'in'. On that cliff...in the ambulance... With *him*. I'd *felt* something...

And I know he did, too, when he caught my fingers just as Early came back into the room.

...when he caressed the back of my neck, in the ambulance...

He *had* to have felt it; I'm *sure* of it.

In fact, it seemed stronger, now. Maybe cause he wasn't with me, I don't know. All I knew was, he was back there and I was here and I didn't like it.

'I would never leave you, Roy. I would never do that.'

I swear to God, Dunning, if you ever lay a foot near me, I will string you up that cliff and leave you for the vultures.

'We're here, just hold on.'

That familiar red brick with its familiar flagpole loomed in my vision and I suddenly realized that I had no memory of the entire drive back from Rampart.

I backed the Squad in and just sat there with my head back, tryin' to grab hold o' my senses again... feelin' Roy in that empty Squad. The adrenaline was just startin' to ease off and my body was beginning to realize just how much abuse it'd sustained after fightin' a tornado all mornin'.

Man, I was startin' to hurt all over.

Heard hands settle on the door. Forgot I had the window rolled all the way down. "John?"

I jerked upright, 'cause he'd kinda startled me a little bit. Guess that wasn't such a good idea, 'cause my muscles were startin' to stiffen up on me. And they *hurt*. Cap was leanin' against the door, just lookin' at me.

"Sorry, pal, wasn't trying to sneak up on you like that. You all right?"

"Yeah," I groaned and settled back against the seat.

"Finally comin' down off that adrenaline high, huh?"

"Yeah." *Unlike a few other things...*

"Well, come on outta there."

"Sure, Cap," I sighed. He pushed himself off the door and stepped away. I opened the door, slid off the seat and my foot slipped when I felt my legs give out from underneath me an' I about went straight down to the ground. Had to grab the door to keep from droppin' but my hand slipped and I ended up with my arm hangin' out the window as the top of the door caught me hard under the armpit. Now my shoulder, my chest and my entire upper left arm were killin' me.

Cap was right there, hand full of my uniform, haulin' me up. "You alright?"

"Yeah..." *Well that was just damned swell.* I was already miserable, I didn't need to feel like an idiot, on top of that. I got my feet under me and slammed the door shut just to punish *somethin'* for the way my day'd been goin'.

"Come on into my office, will you? I want to talk to you."

Great. Now I'm gonna get reamed for trying to destroy County property. Boy, Gage, your day is just goin' from worse to shitty. What next? I'll probably have to rescue Brice after Bellingham finally loses his mind and stuffs Craig into a used toilet bowl...

"Siddown," Cap gestured to his chair.

I saw him close the door and my heart skipped a beat. I massaged my arm and sat down real slow as I just looked at him. "Uh, what is it, Cap?"

Cap sat on the other desk. "Have Roy's replacement look at your arm when he gets here, alright?"

Now I have great respect for Cap. I really do! But with that 40-ton bull I wrestled this morning, exactly how did Cap expect my *temporary* partner to distinguish which pain in my arm was caused by the Squad and what was caused by that hellish rescue this morning? Besides, it's not like it'd matter, anyhow. One more bruise wasn't gonna make a bit of difference in how beat up I felt. "Cap, I'm OK."

"Hookrader needs someone to fill in for Charlie Wilson on C-shift next week. I'll go ahead and put your name in since you're obviously well enough to—"

"Uh, yes, sir. I'll have Roy's replacement...look at my arm when, uh, he, uh, comes in. Cap." *Damn that Cap. I'm tellin' ya, he's got every sly trick up his sleeve.*

"Mm-hm. Thought you might be persuaded to see things a little differently."

I threw him my best Gage Charm smile, "Well, you can be mighty persuasive, Cap. You know just how to motivate a guy."

"Years of experience, pal. Years of experience."

I was afraid to ask, but since I knew who it was gonna be, there was no way my day could get any worse by askin', "Do you know who, uh, who *is* my new, I mean, uh Roy's uh, well, you know—"

"No, not yet. I'm sure we'll find out soon enough. Any word on the pilot, by any chance?"

"Dr. Early said she'd slipped into a coma. They don't think her chances are too good."

"Hm. That's too bad," he said, lookin' pretty sad.

“Uh, Cap. Was that it?”

“No, John. Uh...” He looked at the floor, swallowed hard, clapped a hand on his thigh, looked right at me and sighed. “John...I’m not real sure how to ask this, so I’m just gonna come right out and ask. Now, I’m going to need you to be straight with me. Think you can you do that?”

That got my alarms ringin’ pretty loud. I sat up straighter. “Uh, yeah, Cap. What’s this about?”

“Now I know this is your first day back from vacation, but, um...have you noticed anything unusual about DeSoto, lately? Or maybe before you went on vacation?”

My heart just stopped. I was already havin’ a hard time with surprises today, I didn’t need any more and I couldn’t fathom why Cap would be askin’ somethin’ like that. *Had something else happened with Dunning that I wasn’t told about?* “Well, whaddya mean ‘unusual’?”

“I don’t know. Did he seem distracted, maybe, during the rescue this morning – anything like that?”

I thought about it, but... “No. Why?”

“Well, you gotta admit, it’s a little atypical for Roy to be injured this severely twice in the same week. I’m just trying to ascertain if there’s something going on with him that maybe has him distracted or if it just happens to be a coincidence.”

“Well, if there *is* something, Cap, I sure don’t know about it.”

“Nothing with Joanne or the kids that he’s talked to you about?”

“Not that he’s mentioned, no.” But just as I’d said that, I remembered that conversation in the ER:

‘You’re a lucky man, Roy.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, for a guy who knew he was lucky, he sure didn’t sound convinced.’

Maybe something *was* goin’ on between him and Joanne, but I decided I’d confront Roy before I mentioned it to Cap.

Thing is, even if he never talked about his fights with Joanne, he was always upset about it enough that I could tell *somethin’* was bothering him. But he hadn’t seemed that way at all. Then again, he did say Joanne’d gotten upset with him when he got burned. Maybe she’d reamed him a good one at the hospital, again, right before I came in.

“Well, I’ll have a talk with him when he returns. In the meantime, I’d like a full report on that rescue this morning before the end of shift, alright?”

“Sure thing, Cap. I’ll get started on it right away.” I turned to grab an incident report form from the filing cabinet.

“John?”

“Yeah?”

“I said the end of shift, not the end of the day. You’ve had a rough morning. Squad’s stood down until Roy’s replacement arrives. Why don’t you go get cleaned up and get some rest, first, okay?”

I was about to tell him ‘nevermind’, but I saw that no-nonsense look on his face that we’ve all learned means ‘Don’t argue with me’.

“Uh, okay. Thanks, Cap.”

He grabbed his coffee mug off the desk and left. I slid down and sprawled in his chair, too tired to go get cleaned up. But all I was doin’ was seein’ Roy danglin’ off that cliff and Marco’s voice sayin’ *“Dunning left Roy in a fire.”*

I bolted up, grabbed a form from Cap’s files and started in on that report ‘fore I stalked out to the bay just to slam the Squad door so hard it’d make the mirror fall off...

Roy:

I know what you’re thinking.

‘Cause I’d been thinking the same thing.

Now that I was in my own hospital room and away from the chaos of the ER, I was finally able to put things into their proper perspective.

How could my judgment have become clouded so completely? That was your question, right? Believe me, I know. Because that’s what I was asking myself. *Me*, who knows better. The Damsel in Distress phenomenon. Or, in my case, DeSoto in Distress. We even talked about that in paramedic training – how victims can sometimes develop a false sense of kinship with their rescuers. Johnny and I and a whole host of the other rescue guys have had our share of dealing with stuff like that. Especially single women. Johnny’s near-disaster with Valerie comes immediately to mind.

I know this. Have known this since I first began training in rescue work, and, like I said, the two times I went through the paramedic training course.

I have to admit, though, I never thought I’d find myself on that end of things. I mean, it’s not like I’ve never had to be rescued, before.

But I know what head injuries can do to people, too.

So, I knew full well that that must be the answer. Must be why I reactedto....my partner.....the way I.....(am) *No!* The way...I did. That's what'd been happening. I mean, of course it was. A sense of relief at being rescued that got turned upside down from disorientation and then scrambled, thanks to the concussion.

Boy, I was so relieved I'd realized what the problem was that I almost couldn't contain myself. But all of that was about to be behind me, now. My beautiful wife, Joanne was with me and I could finally concentrate on her and on getting out of here. I reveled in her touch and her presence and hung onto her like she was the last cactus in my own miserable desert.

I suppose plenty of people might've said something or done something, else.

And like I said, I admit I never thought I'd find myself on the opposite end of that whole transference concept. Guess that head injury really jolted somethin' loose in there. Well, with enough rest and quality time with Joanne, it'd get fixed in no time.

I had no doubt.

Johnny:

Clack clack-clack clack-clack-clack clack...

"I thought I told you to get some rest?" Cap scolded me as he came back into the office and saw me typing.

"Yeah, I know, Cap. Guess I'm just too wired."

"Well, alright. But Roy's replacement could come at any time and I want you *rested* before I put you back on duty. I'll make it an order if I have to."

"I...I understand, Cap. I'll type this up now and then add it to the log book later, how's that?"

He set his mug down, slid into his chair, and looked at me with that sidelong glance that means he's tryin' to come up with some counter-argument but failing. "Yeah, alright."

Clack clack-clack clack-clack-clack clack...

By the time I was done, I could tell the adrenaline had really dropped off and the fatigue was definitely startin' to settle in. But typing up that report was makin' my head spin with thoughts of my partner as we held on to each other in the wind and I had to really work at keeping that report sounding objective and professional.

I handed Cap the report just as Chet walked in. "Hey, Gage, Roy's replacement is here. He's in the kitchen."

"Who is it?" I asked, knowing full well I wasn't gonna like the answer.

“Come see for yourself.”

“Chet?” Damn it, if he didn’t just walk away. “Chet? Chet!”

“Just come on, Gage,” his voice sounded from the bay.

I huffed out of sheer exasperation and schlepped out of the office. I walked into the kitchen, bracing myself for one of Brice’s uppity, know-it-all comments before I’d even gotten two steps in. But I about fell over backwards at the tall, dark-haired, clean-shaven guy standing around, talkin’ to the guys.

“Gil?”

“Hiya Johnny! How are you?”

Well, wouldn’t you know it, ole Gil Robinson was assigned as Roy’s replacement for the rest of the shift! My day was finally turning around!

“Is that really you?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Well hell, I didn’t recognize you without the moustache! How’ve you been?”

“I’m good. Real good. How’s life been on your end?”

“Oh man, I’ve had better days, lemme tell ya. So what’re you doin’ here? Last time I talked to you, you were on A-shift at your station. Didn’t realize you could do overtime on your own shift,” I laughed, stealin’ a quick glance at Cap, who’d walked in and shook hands with Robinson.

“Boy, wouldn’t that be a time-saver,” Gil laughed, too. “No, you’re right, Johnny, I had. But that lasted until 4 months ago when O’Connors got his shoulder wrecked.”

“Oh, that’s right! From that skiing accident. Okay, now I always forget which one is which.”

“Jessup is the lineman over at 250s. Joey’s the rescue guy on our B-shift.”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s right. So he’s out permanently?”

“Unfortunately. He really did a number on his rotator cuff. So Chief moved me to B-shift while Ben breaks in a new paramedic.”

“Well that’s just a damned shame about Joey. He was a real nice guy. Well, when I remembered which brother he was. So does that mean you’re permanently on B-shift while—”

“Ahem!”

We both looked over to Cap, who was pullin' out a chair at the table, setting his coffee mug down and kinda glarin' at me. "I swear, I've never known anyone with as long a procrastination streak as you, Gage. Well, except maybe Kelly."

"What'd *I* do?" Chet complained, emptying out the dishrack.

"Nevermind, Kelly."

I was still confused as to where Cap was goin', "Uh...what'd I miss, Cap?"

"The mention of rotator cuffs shoulda clued you in," he gestured.

"What, something wrong with your shoulder?" Gil looked instantly worried.

Cap sat down and started sifting through some manila folders, "More with his head, I think."

"Hey, I was gonna say that," Chet said.

"Well aren't you glad I saved you the trouble," Cap countered, turning to steal a glance at him.

"You do something to your arm, Gage?" Gil asked.

"Aw, it's nothin', Gil," I threw Cap a disgusted look, but he just kept glarin' at me. *I mean, did he really have to bring that up in front of Chet?* "I just slipped and fell and my arm went through the window and the door—"

"The window!" He grabbed my hands and started lookin' for lacerations.

"No, no, it wasn't like that. The open window of the Squad. It was rolled down."

"Oh."

"But my hand slipped, my arm went through and the door caught me right up in here as I went down." I cupped the bottom of my left arm.

"When did this happen?"

"Mm, I don't know. 'Bout 30 minutes, maybe. I mean, it feels better now."

"He landed on it pretty hard, Gil," Cap confirmed.

"OK, well, let me take you into the locker room where I can get a better look."

"Wait a minute, you got injured gettin' out of the *Squad*?" Chet crowed. "After hangin' off a cliff for the last several hours, you nick a fingernail gettin' out of the *car*? Oh, that's gotta be your best one yet, Gage."

“Chet, lay off, will ya?” Marco complained.

“Hey, Gil, would you say an IV of normal saline or D5W oughta fix that right up?”

“Kelly, knock it off!” Cap had his hands out over the table and he sighed. “It’s been a helluva morning, alright? Look, since you think it’s so damned funny, Chet, you can take over lunch and dinner duties from John. Chow’s on you, today, pal.”

Chet opened his mouth, but one look from Cap shut him up real quick.

Gage 1, Kelly 0. I love it.

“Fellas,” Cap called us as we started to leave. “I’ve stood the Squad down till after lunch. So, John, just rest up, alright?”

“Okay. Thanks, Cap.” I threw Chet my victory grin. He stuck his tongue out at me. I suspect when all of this blows over, the Phantom will be called to duty. But that’s okay. I’ll be waitin’ for ‘im.

We got to the latrine and I nabbed a fresh shirt and took my old one off so Gil could look at my arm, better.

“What the hell happened to you?” Gil asked, starin’ at my left side.

I looked down and saw a coupla semi-bloody streaks. “Ah, yeah. That was from this morning with the hang-glider. The wing had shredded and wind-whipped me as I was tryin’ to secure it. Again. With all the worry over Roy, I completely forgot about it. Musta been the adrenaline.”

“Musta. Looks like you got clawed by some neighbor’s vicious cat. You have the docs take a look at it?”

“Naw. Like I said, I clean forgot about it.”

“Well let me do that much, at least.” He went and got the drug box and started cleanin’ the scratches.

And damn, it *stung!* Woulda been better of if he’d just left ‘em alone. “So how come you’re doin’ overtime? You’ve been a fully certified paramedic, for what, a year and a half now? You just need the extra pay or you’re wantin’ more experience?”

Gil started lookin’ over my arm for the Squad injury, palpating and watching for my reaction. “Eh, I just want more experience. I was really excited when they started the Paramedic Advisory Board and was hoping to be on it.”

I looked at him, feelin’ kinda sad. “But they wanted people with a minimum of three years’ experience,” I finished for him.

“Yup.”

“Well, I *was* pretty surprised when I didn’t see your name on it, I have to admit. But then I realized they hadn’t exactly asked everybody.”

“No, they hadn’t. I mean, it makes sense, Johnny. But now I feel like, somehow, if I work more overtime, it’ll make time go faster and I’ll have three years under my belt sooner so I can be on that Board. I know that’s kinda stupid, but...I just can’t help feeling that way. It’s also kinda put me into a bit of a vicious cycle.”

“Oh yeah? How’s that?”

“Well, the more experience I get, the less experience I feel I have. And so I keep looking for more. I feel like I’m training for the *one* run that’s gonna have every scenario, every injury and every kind of rescue we could ever see and do in our careers. Like some big Rescue Exam of the Universe is gonna tap me on the shoulder, next week, and I have to be ready to draw upon every single piece of paramedic knowledge and skill that exists to fix whatever it is that’s happened. Will happen. Whichever. Anyway, you know what I mean.”

He’d been palpating my arm the whole time, lookin’ for something broken and feelin’ the skin around the bruise underneath my arm.

And all I could think about was Roy, feelin’ him up against me, feelin’ his heartbeat, and tryin’ to keep him safe. From the wind, from that glider, from the rocks...from everything...

“Can you lift your arm, okay?”

I tried lifting it over my head real slow. It twinged a bit, but I could mostly do it if I didn’t rush it. With my arm up, Gil ducked down a bit and looked at the underside of my arm, brushing the skin lightly. “Yeah, looks like a bruise has already formed. Doesn’t feel like there’s anything broken, though. Ice it for awhile.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that? Thanks, Gil.”

“Not a problem. Sometimes, it’s the little things that get past us, I guess.”

Or get to us...

Like Roy’s fingers around mine, just before Early walked in...

I started buttoning up my shirt, “Boy, I know exactly what you mean. Been there, too, about feeling like you gotta have every line in all those medical books memorized and every rescue scenario planned from here until forever before you go on your first run. Kinda felt like that today, actually.”

“Yeah, I was talking to the guys a little bit when I came in. Sounded like it was a pretty rough morning.”

“Oh, man, if you only knew the half of it.”

“Well, listen, I’ll go get you some ice and then you can get some rest and you can tell me all about it at lunch. Deal?”

“Alright, deal. And, hey, Gil, it’s good to see you again! *Real* good.”

“You’re just happy I’m not Craig Brice.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll bet the only person who’s ever happy to see Craig Brice is his mother.”

“Ain’t that the sad truth? Anyway, it’s good to see you, too, Johnny. It’s nice to be back at my old stomping grounds. Well, let me go get you that ice.”

“Thanks, Gil.”

We caught up on other things as Gil iced me up. I finally laid down on my bunk and looked at Roy’s, knowin’ it was gonna be empty all night. I hadn’t realized I’d fallen asleep so it was a bit of a surprise when Mike woke me up to tell me lunch was ready...and my thoughts about my partner picked up right where they’d left off.

At lunch, I told Gil the whole story of that morning, along with Dunning’s famous disappearing act on Roy. I’m not one to gossip, like Chet is, but I figured Dunning’s suspension made the Firehouse Wireless faster than a match on gasoline.

"So Roy's doin' OK?" Robinson asked as we all patted our bellies from Chet’s fried chicken, which was really *my* fried chicken.

"He's gonna be OK, Gil, he's gonna be okay. They're keeping' him at Rampart for a couple days for observation. He's got a concussion and some blurred vision and some minor lacerations, but other than that, he'll be OK. Should be back next shift."

Cap pushed his chair back, “John, I’m gonna put the Squad back in service.”

“Go ahead, Cap.”

Cap went out to the call station and *just* as he walked back in, we got toned out. ”Not a moment too soon,” he muttered as he spun on his heel and we all scrambled out to the vehicles.

“Station 51. Traffic accident. At the intersection of May and Bloomdale. May and Bloomdale. Police and ambulance are responding. Time out: 1303.”

“You wanna drive?” Gil asked.

“Naw, you go ahead,” I told him, still not sure about my arm.

He hopped in and we waited for Cap to give us the sheet, “Thanks for not calling me ‘G’.”

“Why’s that?”

“On our shift, Ben and I are known as the Bee Gees.”

“The Bee Gees?”

“Yeah, you know, B for Ben, G for—“

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, now *that’s* pretty funny.”

“Now you know why I shaved off the moustache. I was getting tired of being compared with Barry.”

“Figures.”

And off we went. And I gotta say, everytime I looked over to that driver’s seat, a sense of shock went through me ‘cause I kept forgettin’ that it wasn’t Roy sittin’ there.

Well, maybe when we take any victims to Rampart, I’ll have time to go see ‘im. That made me feel a whole lot better.

Roy:

He grabbed my hand. ‘Roy, I’m right here.’

‘I’m ready to secure Roy to my line.’

Johnny...

I found myself wondering where he was, what he was doing. It’d been quite awhile, I was surprised he hadn’t stopped by. Surely, they’d’ve had a run, by now...

Dammit, I’m doing it again. Suddenly Joanne was looking at me.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said I’d’ve thought Friday and Saturday nights would be their busiest, but they seem to be hip deep in business, today.”

Who? 5Is? How would you know how busy they were...oh, you mean the hospital...

“And I brought you the ice water.”

“Oh. Thanks, honey.” I took the cup, sipped some water to wet my throat a little, and chewed on an ice chip. “They’re probably getting injuries related to all this windy weather.”
She gently caressed my forehead, “That must be it. You thinkin’ about the guys?”

“Yeah. They’re probably out on a run. Lunchtime’s usually pretty busy.” *Which means Johnny’ll stop by soon... No, stop it. Stop it. Just quit doing that, alright?*

“Listen, sweetie, I can’t stay all day like I thought I’d be able to. Corrine and Jack have to leave so I need to go pick up the kids.”

No...! Joanne, don’t leave me... “You really need to leave?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, babe. Donna and Ed are out of town and Cynthia is looking after her mom, today, so there’s no one else to look after Jen and Chris.”

“Yeah, I forgot about Cynthia’s mom.”

“I’m sorry, hon. I suppose it’s just as well. I really should go and let you rest. Besides, I need to get on Chris to finish that diorama that’s due tomorrow.”

“Can you stay for a little longer?” *Because I need you here. To distract me. Please. I keep slipping. I can’t keep doing that. Please...*

She combed her fingers through my hair, studying me. “Well. I can call Corinne and see.”

“I’d really like you to stay for as long as you can.”

She kissed me and smiled. “Okay. I’ll be right back.”

Her fingers slipped from mine and she looked back at me from the doorway. The way Johnny had before he left...

Jo. Hurry back...

Johnny:

The hydrant was spewing water everywhere like a boot manning a 2 and-a-half all by himself; the wind was just throwing the water around like crazy. The 2-door brown Buick Luxus looked like it had parked itself in the road at an odd angle. Roy and I always joke that hydrants should be called ‘car magnets’. All that space on the road and people still find ways to run into the hydrants.

I almost said something about that to Roy until I saw Gil open the door. *Dammit, I did it again!*

“Marco, check the hydrant, will ya?” Cap yelled over the noise.

Gil and I raced into the waterfall to check on the driver. Only to find the car empty. I ran over to the patrol officer, Bill Erskine, who was talkin’ to Cap, “Hey, Bill! Where’s the driver? Was he the only one in the car?”

“Oh, sorry, Johnny. Yeah, just the driver was involved. He managed to get himself out of the car, okay. He’s over by the side over there. In the brown jacket,” he pointed.

Sure enough, there he was, sittin’ on the curb. His jacket was about the same color as the car, too.
“Alright, thanks.”

Gil and I started to get our gear out. It was takin’ me a bit longer cause my arm was still kinda sore. We headed over, but the driver didn’t seem any worse for wear. He was sittin’ on the side, average-lookin’ guy, with sandy blond hair, head turned away from us, talking to one of the onlookers. If Bill hadn’t pointed him out, we woulda walked right past him.

“Hi, there,” Gil said. “I’m Gil, this here’s my partner, Johnny. We’re paramedics from the L.A. County Fire Department. Are you the driver of that vehicle?”

He turned around and I about had a heart attack. Same color hair as Roy’s and he almost coulda passed as a distant cousin. *Whoa, Gage, settle down, now, just settle down. Your partner’s at Rampart, remember?*

“Uh, yeah. Hell of a mess, huh?”

I set down the biophone, “Well, let’s not worry about that right now. What’s your name?”

“Panzer. Gary Panzer.”

“OK, Mr. Panzer. Uh, are you hurt anywhere?” I couldn’t help it, but somethin’ about him reminded me of Roy.

“Actually, no. More shook up, really. I mean, I was just driving along, and a huge gust came up and all of a sudden, this...thing came flying right at me from out of nowhere. I swerved to avoid it and, well, guess I found the hydrant to run into, instead. Sorry.”

I turned to look at the scene and noticed a bunch of kids on bikes, skateboards and roller skates, all watchin’ together, with a couple of ‘em tossin’ around a frisbee. *His unidentified flying object... He coulda run into those kids, too. A near miss.*

‘Backdraft? C’mon, Roy, you’re not that stupid!’

‘I was running out of air and I lost the HT...’

Dammit, Gage...

I told him, “Well, don’t worry about that. Mind if you we check you out? Make sure you’re OK?”

“Well, I suppose. There’s no real need to, though.”

“Just a precaution, Mr. Panzer.”

“Well, have at it, then.”

Gil and I got all the vitals and relayed them to Rampart. But Mr. Panzer seemed okay, just sore muscles, probably from when he tensed up and swerved right into the hydrant.

We tried to convince him that it'd really be best that he get checked out at the hospital, since an adrenaline rush can sometimes mask other injuries, but he refused. So he signed off, we sent the ambulance away and Cap dismissed us while the Engine crew did clean-up.

I was a little disappointed. Not that I wish anyone to get hurt, but I was kinda hopin' to have a chance to go to Rampart to see Roy. I know I coulda called, but...that just didn't seem right. Don't know why. I needed to...see him. Needed to...*feel* him, I guess. Not sure why just talkin' to him wouldn't have been enough, but...it just didn't seem like it would. Besides, I was sure Joanne was with him, it being a Sunday an' all. I just didn't feel right intruding on them, like that.

But I couldn't get that hope out of my mind...

Roy:

Joanne came back into the room and shook my foot gently as I did my best to snuggle in under the covers. Which, I've discovered, is a lot easier to do when your back hasn't been rubbed against a cheese grater.

“Corinne said she'll put off her grocery shopping till tomorrow, so she can watch the kids for another hour,” she caressed my hair again. “Said she'd rather help Chris with his project anyway. Sounded more fun.”

Thank God for Corinne. “No kiddin'. Tell her thanks from me when you talk to her again.”

“I will. Has Dr. Rees come in, yet?”

“No, not yet. You didn't see him out there?”

“No. Hopefully all he'll say is that you'll just need your rest.”

“Yeah, except there's not gonna be a whole lotta rest for me, tonight. It's gonna be an exciting extravaganza of the same questions over and over again, every hour on the hour.”

Boy, of all the times I really need to be unconscious. The one thing I need the most has to happen at the one time I can't get it.

“Then again, I doubt I'll be able to get any rest, even with all that. After that rescue this morning, I'm startin' to ache all over.”

“Your memory is coming back, then?”

“Most of it. I think. I don’t remember gettin’ hit by the glider. But I’m starting to remember most of the rest of it.”

Flashes of Johnny came at me.

Feeling him right up against me on that cliff...

His fingers brushing mine...

A warmth flooded right through me.

A little intense.

Johnny...

No no no, don't go there... Don't...don't...Damn it, DeSoto...

“Honey, are you alright?”

I flashed her a wide grin, “Yeah. Yeah, sure, honey. Why?”

“For a moment there, your breathing got a little funny.”

She started to caress my face with the back of her hand.

I felt Johnny’s caress, again, just like when we were in the ambulance, *‘We’re here, just hold on.’*

I made to grab her hand quickly, but winced as I stretched the lacerations on my back. “No no, I’m fine, Jo. Everything’s just fine. Great. Perfect. I’m here. You’re here. We’re both...you know...here.”

Her eyes twinkled and she just kinda laughed at me. “That concussion really did a number on ya, huh? Made my tiger all goofy,” she growled in that seductive voice she uses. Then she kissed me.

You have no idea, Jo. I held her hand. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Johnny:

Gil and I dried off and had just finished cleaning up the leftover remnants from lunch when we heard the Engine back in.

I don’t think Stoker’d even turned off the engine when the tones sounded.

“Station 51, vehicle accident. 4448 East Ironwood. 4-4-4-8 East Ironwood. Cross street Poplar. Police and ambulance have been dispatched. Time out: 1429.”

I went out to the call station to answer.

“Cap, I hate ta tell you this, but I really gotta pee,” I heard Chet complain.

“Engine crew, you’ve got 10 seconds,” Cap answered.

“Station 51, 10-4. KMG 365,” I confirmed to Dispatch and then watched as the entire Engine crew clambered off Big Red and made for the latrine.

“Cap! We’ll meet you there!” I yelled.

“Right behind ya,” he shouted back from inside.

Gil and I took off, him driving again.

“You don’t think Mr. Panzer ran into the coconut tree this time?”

Gil just laughed. “Not unless the whole tree threw its coconuts at him.”

Gil wasn’t too far off the mark. In this case, an *entire tree* threw itself at the vehicle. At least one that was in pieces, ‘cause there were tree parts scattered everywhere and the leaf piles were gettin’ whipped around in little tornadoes.

I knew exactly how they felt.

Officer Bill Erskine came over to us, “We gotta stop meetin’ like this, fellas.”

“Tell us about it. Whaddya got?” I asked, takin’ out the biophone while Gil grabbed the trauma and drug boxes.

“Looks like a yardman hadn’t secured the cuttings before hauling everything away. Leaves and everything started sailing out of the back of the truck from all this wind. One branch sailed right in front of her, she swerved to avoid it, and hit that guy’s wall, instead. She’s still in the car.”

“Just her?”

“Yep. Just her. She’s conscious, but I think she’s more shaken than anything else. She is a little stuck, though.”

“Okay, thanks, Bill.” Gil and I hurried over. “We can do an assessment until the Engine crew gets here.”

And they showed up, right then, Mike cuttin’ the siren as he pulled in behind the Squad. Bill filled Cap in as Gil and I got to work.

“Hi, there,” I said as I got to the driver-side window of the 2-door avocado green Mustang. It was sittin’ with its nose in some guy’s rock wall with a small dent in its hood.

She seemed a little bit freaked as she looked at me. “Hi,” she answered, wipin’ her brown bangs back from her pretty face then went back to grippin’ the steerin’ wheel like it was gonna bite her, or something.

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No, I...I don’t think so.”

“Are you stuck?” Gil asked from tiny open sliver of the passenger side window.

“Yeah. We can’t seem to get the doors open and the windows won’t roll down further than they are.”

“You sure you’re not hurt anywhere?” I asked again.

“I don’t think so. More shook up, I think. That branch just sailed outta that guy’s truck like a...a...well, like some kind of missile. I swerved when it hit the car and then I kinda ran into this poor guy’s wall.”

Gil and I both looked and saw a pretty hefty branch lying on the road. We tried both doors, and, sure enough, they were stuck, although the passenger door seemed a little more willing to budge.

“John?” Cap came over, lookin’ over the wreck with his hands on his hips.

“Well, Cap, looks like only the driver is involved. She claims not to be injured, but she is stuck. I think hittin’ the wall probably jammed the frame of the car, keepin’ the doors shut. We might be able to get *this* door open with the Halligan. Otherwise, we’ll have to use the jaws.”

“Alright. Marco, grab the Halligan, okay, pal?”

With the help of the Halligan and several of us pulling on the door, we managed to get the driver’s side open. She got out of the car okay and Gil and I checked her over. She’d probably end up with whiplash and like our first victim we tried to convince her to go to the hospital and get fully checked out. But she decided against it.

So déjà vu, we sent back the ambulance Bill had called for and left the Engine crew to do whatever clean up needed to be done and back to the station we went.

I was itchin’ to call Roy but...it still didn’t feel right. I felt like I needed to see him, to...be with him. Somehow, talkin’ on the phone just wasn’t gonna cut it.

Roy:

Dr. Rees set the clipboard against his stomach and leaned his crossed hands over the top. Then he looked at me out of the top of his glasses and I half-expected a scolding, the way he'd grunted and snorted as he'd read my chart, "Are you in a lot of pain, Mr. DeSoto?"

"I've got a fair headache, the lacerations on my back are stinging, the burns are a little sore from all the wind this morning and my entire body is really starting to feel it after that rescue, this morning. My wife being here is a nice distraction, though." *In more ways than one...*

Joanne squeezed my hand. "Not for long, I'm afraid," she said. "I'm going to have to go in a few minutes."

"Okay," I tried to sound neutral for her sake, but I was starting to miss her, already. And I mean *really* miss her.

"I wish I could give you something to make you more comfortable," Dr. Rees said. "But with you having loss of consciousness and some memory loss –"

"Yeah, I know. I'm lucky enough to get wakened every hour."

He actually had the decency to look genuinely sympathetic. "Sorry."

"It won't last forever, right?" That was about the only good news I had to hold onto.

"That it won't, Mr. DeSoto. If all goes well, we may be able to release you tomorrow."

"I'll tell ya one thing, Dr. Rees. I'm not looking forward to staying awake for the next 24 hours."

"Don't worry, Mr. DeSoto. It'll be all over before you know it."

Little did I realize, how entirely untrue that was going to be.

Johnny:

Can you believe it? Two TA's in a row and not *one* follow-up.

I had to admit, I was gettin' a little antsy. I hadn't seen Roy since taking him to Rampart in the morning.

We managed to return to quarters just long enough for Cap to start the knot-tying drill so that we'd get toned out again.

"Station 51, traffic accident, with a downed tree and power lines. 5337 Carbon Canyon Road. 5-3-3-7 Carbon Canyon. Cross street, Winslow Lane. Police and ambulance have been dispatched. Time out: 1548."

“Carbon Canyon, huh? Wanna bet a whole tree fell down on top of a car?” I said, mentally bracin’ myself for what the scene was gonna look like.

“Tree-lined country road, I take it?” Gil asked.

“You better believe it.”

I made Gil drive again, partly ‘cause my arm was still sore and partly to get his confidence level back up, make him feel like he was in control. Though I had to admit, it was far more control than *I* seemed to be havin’ all day.

If I’d had any doubts about there bein’ a follow-up to Rampart, they sure didn’t last too long. And my initial guess wasn’t too far off the mark: *two* of ‘em – and I hesitated to call ‘em *branches* ‘cause they coulda easily fit two men around ‘em each - had broken off from an even bigger tree and had fallen into the road. Right where the road curved, too. One of ‘em was obstructing most of the road probably right where it had fallen, and had brought down a power line right along with it. The other one had fallen exactly square on the car across the road...with another car jammed almost perpendicular right underneath it.

We pulled up and this time it was Vince who came over to give us the lowdown on this whole mess as Gil and I got our gear.

“Hey, Hank.”

“Hiya, Vince, whatcha got?”

“Well, it seems the wind knocked this monster down, first, bringing that power line down. The driver swerved to avoid it, but careened into the parked car, just in time for that second tree to fall down on top of *it*.”

“How many people in the car?” I asked.

“The driver and his teenage daughter. They’re both conscious and hurt. But between the parked car and that second tree, we can’t get them out.”

“Let’s go check it out,” Cap said and we all headed to the car. “Marco! Check for any gasoline leaks. Chet! Get that power line!”

In an odd twist of fate, it was actually pretty lucky that that driver hit that parked car. Mind you, it did crush the driver’s roof just a bit. But the driver’s car was a station wagon; the parked car was a jeep. If that station wagon had been higher than the jeep...

“No gasoline, Cap,” Marco reported.

The driver's side door was blocked in by the jeep and the driver's side back door wasn't budgin', either. I squeezed in between the station wagon and the jeep and tapped on the window, "LA County Fire Department! Just hold on, we're gonna get ya out real soon, okay?"

The father was leanin' back against the seat, breathin' kinda hard and wearin' some pretty nasty expressions so it was obvious he was in quite a bit of pain.

"Are we gonna have to get this tree off, first?" Cap asked.

"I don't think so," I said, takin' a good look at it.

"Either way, I don't like the idea of having this thing on top of you guys, like this. If it slips down on top of the car or another tree falls, you've had it. I want to secure this thing, first, before you guys go in, alright? I'll have to call in another company," Cap said and he got on the HT.

"Johnny," came Gil's voice, kinda quiet, from the other side of the car.

"Yeah?"

"Daughter's got lacerations all over her face and she's bleeding quite a bit. That officer was right, back door's jammed, too."

"Okay." A thought struck. "Hey, Gil, maybe we can get at 'em through the rear door then use the jaws to get 'em out through the passenger door."

"Let's do it."

Roy:

I never thought I'd ever wish for harm to come to any of my brothers, but I gotta tell ya, I've never wanted for Chet to be injured more than I did, right then.

I recounted the time I got tonsillitis – *again* – and had to share a room with him while he recovered from his shoulder injury. It was one of the most miserable times of my life. No rest for the weary *or* the post-operative. I'd realized then why Mike never said much. I mean, how could he? It was hard to get a word in edgewise when Chet got started.

But boy, that motor-mouth of his was the thing I needed most. Jo was gone, Dr. Rees had finished his rounds, I'd already read the paper and the nurse had left with her hourly neural check and nothin' and I mean *nothin'* was on the Tube.

I was tryin' everything I could think of to keep the day's events to the barest possible minimum of conscious thought. But I kept comin' back to Chet and that time he got on that meditation kick.

'Just relax and concentrate on the sound of one hand clapping.'

Now, I never told him this, but I couldn't fathom why anyone, even a Buddhist monk, would want to spend time considering such an impossible thing. I mean, who cares what the sound of one clapping would generate if such a sound were possible? How is that of any *real help* to anybody?

'Try to empty your mind. For you, Gage, that shouldn't be too hard...'

Well that, too was impossible. But I really had given it my best shot. Unfortunately, I found that the more I tried not to think about Something, the more Something kept entering my mind. I passed it off as a complete waste of time.

But I started to realize, just now, that I *had* learned something valuable from it.

Because it was happening again. And I was able to recognize the futility of what I was trying to do.

The more I tried not to think of Johnny...of that cliff, of...both of us...atop that cliff...

I felt his hands on my shoulders slide down my chest and I flinched a bit when this... feeling... cascaded all the way down inside of me and warmed me down to my toes. It didn't seem like much...but it grabbed a hold of me somethin' fierce and didn't let go...

Mistake No. 4... Dammit, Johnny, I should've listened to you.

'You want to sit this one out? Wait for another squad?'

I tried every distraction technique I could think of, but it had only worked for moments at a time. I was alone, now, with only me to keep me company. And the memory of something I...(didn't want to) *No!* couldn't stop...thinking about...

...that feeling from the cliff just wouldn't leave me alone...

'Roy, you need me?'

Johnny...

Johnny:

"Alright," Cap came running back over to us. "Getting another company up here is gonna take too long. So I'm gonna have Mike drive over and around to get on the other side of this tree so we can secure it with the Engine."

"How long's that gonna take?"

"The whole thing? Probably about 20 minutes. We've got the power company and a tree trimming company that's gonna come out and take care of the power line and this other tree, in the meantime."

“Cap, I’m not sure they’re gonna be able to wait twenty minutes. The daughter’s bleeding and the driver could have internal injuries,” Gil said.

Cap’s face darkened as he weighed safety with rescue. “Alright,” he acquiesced, but we knew he wasn’t likin’ it one bit. “But you go slow and no rockin’ the boat. One leaf on that tree moves and I’m haulin’ you guys outta there myself, you got me?”

“Aye, aye, Cap.”

“Mike! Marco! Bring the jaws and some blankets!” Cap ordered.

With both of us, Cap and Vince heavin’ on that rear door, we managed to get it open and Gil and I got inside to get to the victims. As Mike and the rest of the Engine crew secured the tree on top of us, we did our assessment and got their vitals and IVs started.

Cap called to us from the rear door, “Fellas, whatcha got?”

I crawled over the backseat to him, “The driver has whiplash, a broken ankle and severe bruising on the chest, most likely from the seat belt. He’s having a hard time breathing so we’ve got him on O2. The daughter’s bleedin’ real bad, Cap. Looks like she was holdin’ a glass bowl with some goldfish in it and it shattered all over her when the accident happened.”

He sighed, “Alright. We’ve got the jaws set up on our end so just give us the signal.”

“We’re ready Cap. Just give us a sec to get the blankets on ‘em.”

“You got it.”

Finally, with the help of the Engine crew and ambulance attendants, we extricated the victims. I had Gil ride in with ‘em while I followed in the Squad. Boy, can you believe it? Three one-car accidents. Figured if they’d all just run into each other at the same time, woulda saved us a whole lot of trouble havin’ to go back to quarters just to get called out again.

Finally, we got to Rampart and after makin’ sure our patients were in stable hands, my only thought was on the partner I’d left in here hours ago. “Gil, listen, I’m gonna go check on Roy.”

“Mind if I come with? I’d like to see how he’s doin’. Say hi.”

Well, actually... “Yeah, c’mon. I know he’d be happy to see ya.”

But Dispatch came over the HT, askin’ about our status. My heart dropped ‘cause we had to roll, again.

Roy:

The News.

60 Minutes.

Columbo.

Quincy.

Delvecchio.

The News.

I watched them all. And still no sign of or word from Johnny.

Jo had called in the meantime and I was able to talk to the kids. That brought a smile to my face and lightened my heart a lot.

But I couldn't talk to them forever.

I couldn't...seem to...shake this...*thing* with Johnny that had grabbed me by the throat, come completely out of left field. Or had it? I couldn't understand what was happening. Why it was happening. And what was I supposed to do about it...? And, really, how *could* I do anything about it? I had a wife whom I loved, I *adored*. Always had... I had children I was more in love with than Life, itself.

How could this be happening? What *is* it? Why am I...(feeling) *No!* reacting this way?

Had he...reacted the same way, too? Maybe he hadn't. But I knew that wasn't true. The way he'd...looked at me. Hadn't...batted an eye when I reached out to him, gently held on to his fingers before Dr. Early had come in with the test results. The way he looked at me before he left...

I'd considered asking a couple of the nurses if they'd mind sending a message down to the ER to give to my partner when he came by. But... I'd decided against it. They were all working, saving lives. I had no right to interfere with that because I was...what? *Lonely? No, that wasn't it.* Well, whatever it was, it was personal and the ER staff had more important things to do than play messenger. Based on Jo's observation earlier, and the fact that he hadn't shown up, I figured this crazy windy weather that landed me here in the first place was keeping all the rescue squads busy with a lot of rescues and a lot of injuries and were gonna be on high alert all night.

I comforted myself with that knowledge.

Because, in the end, I didn't really have a whole lotta choice but to believe, otherwise.

Johnny:

Unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable.

It had to be a record-breaking day of runs. Even with our follow-ups to Rampart, we never had time to check on Roy.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. We did have one run that did leave Gil and me some downtime. But I was just too damned tired and too sore to get up from the staff lounge. What might've been a simple walk to the elevator and a few flights up was about 10 miles of crawling, for me, right then.

There was no way I had enough energy to go see 'im, much as I wanted to. Besides, we still had the rest of the evening and the nighttime to get through. I had no choice but to reserve my energy for that or there was no way I was gonna get through it.

Roy:

“Sir...sir, wake up.”

For crying out loud, leave me alone...

“Sir, wake up.”

“I'm up, I'm up...” My voice sure wasn't though. I thought about opening my eyes, but the light was bright enough as it was, so I kept them closed.

“Can you tell me your full name?”

“Roy Patrick DeSoto.”

“Do you know your birthdate?”

“Novem... ahem. November 7.”

“Are you married?”

“Yes.”

“What is your wife's name?”

“Joanne.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Fireman.”

“What is your full name?”

“Believe me when I tell you it hasn’t changed since the last time you asked me.”

“Did I ask you that before?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Not two minutes ago.”

“Well, tell me again.”

“William Randolph Hearst.”

“Now, don’t give her grief, just answer her, nicely. She’s only doing her job.” *Johnny!* A warmth plunged through me at his voice. But...something wasn’t right. He sounded raspy and tired and I could smell diesel gasoline, smoke, sweat and blood. *This doesn’t bode well...*

“Sorry. I’m just a little weary of being awakened every hour.”

“I understand. So, one last time and then I’m gone. Your full name.”

“Roy Patrick DeSoto. My full name is Roy Patrick DeSoto.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll see you in an hour. And thank *you*.”

“Sure,” came that raspy voice.

Fantastic. Another hour. Again. I’ve lost track of how many times it’d been, already. Did I mention that I really hate head injuries? It’s one thing to know 24 hours is gonna feel like a week, but it’s an entirely different matter when it really *does* take a week.

“Well, now that wa’n’t so hard, was it?”

“Johnny? You here?”

“I’m right here, partner.”

I heard a small ‘click’ and then the room was dark again. I managed to open my eyes and I could see him by the light filtering in from the window. He was standing over me, lookin’ mighty sad. “What time is it?”

“Little after 5 am.”

“What is it? What’s wrong? Bad run?”

He just nodded, kept his head down. “Just wanted to stop by, see how you were doin’.”

“I’m fine. What happened?”

He shook his head then glanced at me. “You answered those questions pretty darn well. My guess is doc’ll let you outta here later today.”

“I hope so. It’s been real peachy not being able to just sleep through all the pain I’m in.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

Silence.

“What happened?”

“Nothin’, Roy – “

“Johnny, what happened?”

“Look, we were on a run and I just thought I’d stop by, see how you were doin’, finally, ‘cause, shit, Roy, we’d been so damn busy all day that I hadn’t had one chance to stop by and see —“

“John Roderick Gage, now I can smell the gasoline and the blood on ya. Hell, I can see it all over you.”

He looked down at his uniform and surprise lit his face, like he saw himself for the first time. “Heh. Thought I took my turnout coat off...”

“Johnny...”

He sauntered away and looked out the window then turned and sat on the ledge. “We got called out to a, um, to a TA. You know, it’s kinda funny. It’s about all we’ve had all day... Well, except for that cliff rescue. By the way, Dr. Early said she’d slipped into a coma. They don’t think her chances are very good.”

I thought about saying something, but I knew he’d just jump on it and use that as an excuse not to talk about it. And considering how much he was avoiding talking about it, I figured it must’ve been the worst kind of run there is. Which was even more reason for him to talk about it.

“Chet said that the Engine crew oughta get a rescue bonus in their paychecks for today for doin’ nothin’ but rescue support.” That smile swept across his face like a spring drizzle and then disappeared. But I knew that look on his face. *Dammit...*

“Kids...”

He nodded again and sniffed, swiped his eyes and rubbed his nose.

“Drunk driver?”

He traipsed back over to the side of my bed. “Would you believe it wasn’t? For once? The one run all day that wan’t even wind-related, either.” A kind of sickened huff of breath that was meant to be a sarcastic laugh came out of him. He came and stood next to the bed and started absently playing with the sheet. I could feel the electricity from him.

“Cab driver was taking a family to the airport. From how the wife described it, Gil and I figured the driver suffered a...MI right there on the road. Crossed the center line and plowed right into a...full tanker on its way to fill up the stations. Both the driver and the dad were killed almost instantly. Got the mom out. All three kids survived, but two were still unconscious when we got there. Got the one kid out – she was the conscious one and she was closest. But, uh...we just...we couldn’t...couldn’t get to the other two before.... And then we lost *her* on the way in. She just...bled out. Right there in the ambulance. I just...I couldn’t stop it, Roy.”

Jesus Christ...

He scratched his eyebrow with the back of his thumb. “Cap’s stood us down till the mornin’, but he said he’d extend it, depending on how we are when the wake-up tones go off. I don’t think any of us are gonna be gettin’ any sleep, anyhow.”

“Johnny, I’m sorry...” I wanted to reach out and grab his fingers, to touch him.

He looked up at me with sad eyes and flashed a reassuring smile that made his expression seem even sadder. “Not your fault.”

“Yeah, I know. I just wish...”

“What? That you were there? Hell, Roy, I wouldn’t wish that on anybody.”

“I wouldn’t wish it on you, either, partner.”

“Look, don’t worry about it, okay? I’m fine.”

“Uh huh.” I suddenly realized I had no idea who he’d been partnered with all day. If he’d said it, I missed it, entirely. Shared experience bonds people and when it’s tragic, like this one obviously, was, it’s usually your partner you turn to, first, to help start the healing process. I could only hope for Johnny’s sake... “How’s Brice dealing with it? Very precisely and by the book, no doubt.”

“Brice? What’re you talking about?”

“Oh. I’d assumed you gotten stuck with Brice, all day.”

A genuine smile finally brightened his face. “Oh, yeah, that’s right. You didn’t know. Well, of course, you didn’t know, we hadn’t had time to stop by all day.”

“So who’d you get teamed up with?”

“Gil Robinson, believe it or not!”

“No kiddin’!” I felt relieved. He’d be a good influence on my partner for a run like that. I suddenly felt like I could relax for the first time since the hang glider rescue, this morning, er, yesterday morning. *Was it almost 24 hours already?* My partner was in good hands and he was gonna be okay.

“He said to say ‘hi’. Said he’d try to come by if we get another run, tomorrow, er, today. He’s, uh, downstairs, stayin’ with the mom for awhile, until they can get a hold of someone to come stay with her.”

“That’s good...”

“Yeah, it’s gonna be real rough on her.”

“I’m glad Gil’s gonna stay with her. I mean, it’s good he’s doing that.”

“Yeah. She could really use a shoulder right now.”

We locked eyes.

I blinked, trying to keep my eyes open.

I felt it, then. His hand on my chest. Every nerve in my body jumped and left me trembling.

“Johnny...” I whispered.

“Ssshhh...” he whispered back. “Go back to sleep.”

“Johnny, I’m sorry...” *For...feeling like this. For not...being able to stay awake to help...*

His thumb moved gently, caressing me. I tried to move my hand to touch him, but my body felt leaden, sleep pulling at me.

“Roy, go back to sleep,” he said again.

And my mind obeyed, even while the rest of me was singing...

Chapter 10

“DeSoto residence.”

“Heeey, pardner! You made it home, finally.”

“Oh hi, Johnny. Yeah. Finally. Maybe now I can get some sleep.”

“Well at least until the kids get home from school.”

“No way. Joanne told me she gave them strict orders not even to whisper when they get home, today. She’s even makin’ me a surprise feast tonight for dinner.”

“Aw, that’s great, Roy! Um, listen, um...you uh, you gonna be home tomorrow morning, after shift?”

“Uh...yeah. Yeah, I should be. Why?”

“Um...well...I was kinda wonderin’, um...I know this sounds kinda intrusive, but, uh, can I, uh, can I come over? Tomorrow morning, I mean. There’s, uh, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Silence.

“Roy? You there?” More silence. “Roy?”

“Yeah...Johnny, I’m here. Sorry. Um...well, we’re on the phone right now. Can’t you just, you know, tell me now?”

“Uh, well, I’d...I’d like to...um, but I can’t.”

“Why not? You in the kitchen?”

“No, no, I’m in the dorm.”

“Well, you should have some privacy, then—“

“Roy, look, I know I’m inviting myself over, but I’d really rather talk to you at home.”

(pause) “Well, maybe we can meet early before next shift?”

“No, I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to wait that long.”

“Well...can you at least tell me what’s it about?”

“No, I don’t want to do that, either. Not over the phone.”

Silence.

“Roy...?”

“I was really kinda hoping to get some decent shut-eye.”

“I know...I know... Look, I’ll make it real quick, okay?”

“Well if you’re gonna make it fast, why can’t you just tell me now—?”

“Roy, I told you, I don’t want to do that. Not over the phone.”

Silence.

“I can bring breakfast for you and Joanne.”

Silence.

“Roy...?”

A sigh. “Yeah, alright. Fine. Joanne’s gonna be at her mother’s most of the morning. Just come on over after shift. I’ll...make us some breakfast.”

“You sure?”

“You’re not giving me a whole lotta choice.”

“Yeah...I know. Sorry. Okay, then, tomorrow morning.”

“Alright. ‘til then.”

Johnny:

I wasn’t entirely sure it was a good idea.

I mean, after that hang glider rescue, worryin’ about my partner, then that poor family in that cab yesterday morning, it was two days of the busiest shift I’ve ever done, and man, was I *beat*. All I wanted to do was go home and sleep.

But that’s not what I was thinkin’ about when I was thinkin’ it wasn’t a good idea.

I pulled up to Roy’s house, thinkin’ about...what’d happened on that cliff...my hand on his chest in the hospital yesterday morning and...how that’d felt. And wonderin’...how *he* felt about it.

See, all day yesterday, I’d been wafflin’ over whether it was just something *I* was feeling or whether it was mutual. I guess since *I* was feelin’ something that I was kinda hopin’ he was, too. But that didn’t mean it was true. I mean, I might’ve figured that something that I *thought* was between us was really *me* assuming there was something or misreading something, or... somethin’.

Or there really was something going on between us.

But I guess now wasn't the time to think about that. Two shitty days on shift and my brain just couldn't hold a thought together for more than two seconds.

Alright, look, just...concentrate on why you're here. Just don't think about anything else.

I wanted to warn Roy about Cap, that's why I'd stopped by. In light of our professional careers, I figured it was best to let him know before he came back on shift, just in case there really *was* something going on with him.

But whatever the case I guess I was about to find out.

I smelled that incredible smell of bacon fryin' and heard the doorbell sound inside the house, followed by a loud, girly yell, "I got it!"

"Jennifer DeSoto, what did I say about yelling?" Heh. Joanne.

"Sorry, Mom. I'll get it."

The door opened to a bright and shiny pony-tailed little miss dressed smartly, with a killer smile like her Momma. "Hi Uncle Johnny! Come in," she gestured.

"Well, thank you very much. And why aren't you in school, young lady?" I asked as I walked in, closed the door and inhaled the smell of bacon, again.

"Mom's about to take us. We were waiting for the bus but it never came. Mom found out it broke down and they'd sent another one but Mom's impatient."

"I'll say. School's started already."

"I don't mind."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Where's your dad?"

"In the kitchen."

"Okay." I bent down and held my hands out, "You want a ride?"

"I'm too old for that!"

"You're *eight*, you are *not* too old for a ride! C'mon, hop on." Not only does she look like her mother, but she gives *looks* like her mother. "Better take the opportunity before we *both* get too old to do this for much longer."

“Okay,” she smiled. I bent down and she clambered on. I groaned a bit as I stood up, realizing she was heavier than the last time we did this, and I piggy-backed her across the living room. “He’s here, Dad,” I heard her voice in my ear as we got to the kitchen.

Roy:

I kinda jumped a little bit when I heard Jenny say that.

Alright. That’s not entirely accurate. I mean, yeah, I did jump a little when I heard her voice, ‘cause I was holding the toaster over the sink, trying to empty out all the burnt pieces stuck inside of it and she’d kinda startled me a little.

But it wasn’t her voice that’d startled me.

I’d been home almost 24 hours, since Dr. Rees had released me late yesterday morning, and I’d tried to immerse myself in *real quality time* with my wife and my kids. Whatever the concussion had done, whatever the lack of sleep had exaggerated was out of my system and I was back to normal. At least that’s what I’d been hoping.

But ever since my phone conversation with Johnny, yesterday I dreaded his arrival. I mean, I couldn’t believe that whatever he had to tell me was so urgent that he couldn’t tell me on the phone or wait until I got back on shift. I tried to talk him out of it, but he was insistent on coming over. I figured it was best to let him have his way so we could get this over with. It wasn’t until after I’d talked to him that it occurred to me that I really wasn’t looking forward to him coming over...because of how much I really was.

I couldn’t help it.

I didn’t realize until I’d hung up that I’d been hip-deep in Mistake No. 5.

Or it might’ve been Mistake No. 27, by now...

After finally being home and fully recovered, I’d convinced myself that whatever I’d been experiencing, as far as Johnny was concerned, was entirely over.

What I dreaded was that it really wasn’t.

And I knew it.

I heard Jenny announce that he was here...and I turned around and about dropped the toaster onto the floor as they entered the kitchen.

I stared at my daughter hanging onto my partner's neck...

...and I was back on that cliff, again, holding on to him...as we dangled off the cliff...

...I felt him, his warmth, his heartbeat, his hand cradling the back of my head...

...his hand on my chest, lulling me to sleep...

My body tingled all over again.

Damn it... This can't be happening...

Johnny:

There was a weird look on Roy's face as we got into the kitchen. That same look I'd seen in the ambulance and at the hospital. I bent down to let Jenny down and didn't think about it until it was too late. She slid down my left side right across the lacerations that were still healing from that glider rescue. I flinched and grabbed her and held her away from me.

I guess Roy musta seen the look on *my* face because he dropped the toaster with a crash onto the counter and grabbed her from me.

"Johnny, you okay?"

"Yeah," I hissed, holding my left side.

"Sorry, Uncle Johnny," I heard that sad little voice.

"Oh, honey, no, it's not your fault. It's really not, okay?" I looked her right in the eye so she'd understand that it really wasn't her fault.

"Uncle Johnny's a little sore from a rescue, that's all," Roy answered. "Listen, go upstairs and tell Mom that Uncle Johnny's here, okay?"

"kay." She looked at me for a bit and then off she went.

I hiked my shirt up to check the injuries and felt Roy grab my shirt and my shoulder. "Here, let me take a look."

I felt somethin' go through me at how gentle his voice and his hands were. I looked at him but he was already hunched down peering at the wounds. His fingers graced my skin around the lacerations and I flinched. Damn, if he didn't just launch my body into overdrive.

"Sorry."

Jesus, Roy... "No, no. My fault. Just a little tender, I guess."

A look of worry crossed his face then he eyed the kitchen light above the table.

"Here, why don't you take your shirt off? It's getting in the way of the light."

I shucked my shirt and he palpated my injuries again and the thought that I had been thinkin' right as I was drivin' up ripped through my mind, again: maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Now, mind you, there's really no reason that his checkin' me shoulda been a bad idea. I mean, he *is* my partner and we *are* paramedics. We've gotten into and seen each other outta all *kinds* of scrapes. It's natural that we'd check up on each other. I mean, we always do, anyhow. This was really no different.

Yet it was...but I couldn't fathom *why* it was – *how* it got to be different. What happened on that cliff that...seemed to have changed everything?

His eyes roamed up. He saw my arm and his face scrunched up, "Hey, what is this?"

"What?" I asked, twisting my arm tryin' to look at where he was lookin'.

"How'd you get this bruise? This wasn't from the hang glider rescue, was it?" he stood up and twisted my arm up so that my elbow was up in the air and he gingerly palpated around the bruise on my triceps.

"Oh, that. Yeah. Did that at the station after I left you at Rampart the other day. Tried to get out of the Squad and about hit the floor, instead. My hand slipped when I tried to grab the door and my hand went right through the window. Door caught me right up in here."

"You have Gil or the docs at Rampart take a look at you?" he brought my arm back down, but he started pokin' around the deltoids and my shoulder.

"Yeah, Gil took a look. I iced it and it's all okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, Roy."

"You can move okay? You're not—?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay, Roy. It was stiff for awhile, but I can move it." I moved my arm around to prove I could.

"Okay..."

I still felt his fingers on my arm and I looked down. I saw him gently caressing my shoulder, down my biceps, like he was trying to heal the bruise with a tender touch. I looked at him. He was looking at my arm, a frown on his face.

Our eyes met. His fingers slipped off my arm.

We just looked at each other...

Joanne's voice cut sharply across Chris and Jenny's arguing upstairs and I was suddenly aware of where I was. I looked away from him, feelin'...like I'd been caught smokin' behind the school or something.

I put my shirt back on and Roy went to rescue the toaster. But when I looked over at him, he was just holding it. He wasn't moving.

"Roy?"

He blinked, looked at me with his eyes kinda blank and he wavered. "What?"

I took the toaster from him, grabbed him by the arm and steered him to the chair. "Siddown. Are you okay?"

Roy:

No... "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay."

"You get dizzy or something?"

Sure. Okay. I'll go along with that. "Yeah, just a little. I think I turned too fast."

I'm not entirely sure why I touched him like that. It just seemed a natural extension of the examination. But seeing that bruise on his arm and thinking back to that cliff rescue just brought forth something in me...I really cared about my partner.

I guess more than I thought I did.

"Okay, well, just sit here and let me finish what you were doin' 'fore I got here."

"Okay."

Ordinarily, I would protest that idea, but I had to admit, it just wasn't a good idea for me to be around a hot stove, just then. I think, for once, I managed to avoid an actual Mistake by doing that. Although, I suppose it didn't need to be said that I'd just tumbled headlong into Mistake No. 6.

Johnny looked around the stove and the counter and then turned back to me, "Okay, uh, what exactly were you doin'?"

"Uh... Oh, I was about to set the table for us before I got sidetracked with the toaster. Bacon's done. Coffee's done. Poured a cup for you, already. I was just about to get to the eggs and toast."

And then maybe go see a shrink. I hadn't expected that simply touching him was gonna knock me over. Although, how was I supposed to know? I mean, it's not like we don't ever examine each other. We do that a fair bit on the job. But I gotta tell ya, it wasn't unlike that moment on the top of the cliff when he'd asked if I needed him to make that pack for me - I was afraid I was gonna topple right off the cliff. And that's about the same position I felt like I was in, right then, too.
Holy Hannah...

Johnny:

I set the plates down for us. "Okay, well, uh let me do 'em. You just stay right there, okay? You want two? Scrambled or over-easy?"

"Uh...two, yeah. Over-easy sounds good."

"Alright." I started gettin' the eggs on for us and dunked the bread in the toaster.

I had to really concentrate on what I was doin' just to keep from gettin' bogged down in thinkin' 'bout what'd just happened.

Grab the plates. Set the plates down on the table. Grab the eggs. What was it he wanted again? That's right, over-easy. Oh man! Keep your head on, Gage. Alright, crack the egg. Put the shells in the rubbish. Crack the second egg. Put the shells in the rubbish...

I had to do it exactly like that 'cause I was afraid to allow myself to think about his fingers on my shoulder. Hell, I could still feel him. Just...real gentle... *Shit, Roy... Alright, quit it, Gage, or you're gonna be in serious trouble! Okay, now look, just grab the pepper. Grab the spatula. Scoot the eggs off the bottom to keep 'em from stickin'...*

We heard the herd of footsteps clunking down the stairs, and, I swear, I'd never been so happy at a distraction in all my life. Joanne was lookin' a bit worried at me while she corralled the kids in front of her, "Hey, there Johnny, how are you doing?"

"Oh, hey Joanne, I'm okay, I'm okay."

We both eyed the kids as they fussed with puttin' their sandwiches into their lunchboxes. She grabbed my hand, smiled and squeezed, "I'm glad to hear it." Then she turned her attention to Roy with an irritated look on her face, "Roy, why are you making him cook?"

"I'm...I'm not!" His hands spread out in self-defense. "He just walked in and took over."

"Uh huh." She grimaced at me, "If you're worried about the concussion, I think he's fine. Don't let him pull the 'poor me' routine on you, okay?"

I about laughed. "I think he only does that to you, Joanne. Between the both of us, I think you're the one with that 'special touch'.

Roy:

I about spewed my coffee everywhere.

She made circles on my back as I coughed, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Just took a bigger sip than I meant to, I guess.” I was trying not to blush as I cleaned myself up.

“Okay. You need anything else from the store?”

Dammit. Joanne, how is it you always seem to end up leaving when I need you the most...?

“No. No, honey.”

She grabbed the grocery list. “Okay. Don’t forget, I’ll be at Mom’s all day after I drop off the kids so I’ll see you later this afternoon. Oh, and were you gonna call those contractors about the roof?”

“The roof?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah. All that wind the other day ripped off a bunch of shingles. I need to call around and see about getting them fixed.”

Joanne gave my partner a kiss on the cheek, “Johnny, you take care, alright? Kids, say good-bye to your father and your uncle Johnny.”

Jenny and Chris, more Jenny than Chris, gave me a hug and a good-bye kiss, my wife kissed me and I made sure I let it linger for as long as I could manage without perking up her ears. She thumbed her lipstick off my mouth and they were gone.

And I was alone.

With my partner.

Fantastic...

Alright, the only way to counteract this emotional crisis I seemed to be stuck in was logic. Nothing ever went wrong by following logic and sticking with the facts, so I decided to do just that.

“So what’d you need to see me about that couldn’t wait till I got back to work?”

Little did I realize at that moment how much weight that question packed.

Johnny:

I finished up his eggs and toast, handed ‘em over then started on mine.

“Well, it may very well be nothing. But I didn’t want to take a chance on that in case it really was something. Not that I want to get you all worked up over anything in the event that it really is nothing.”

Roy:

I froze in mid-bite and my heart about beat straight out of my chest. In retrospect, he could’ve been talking about the weather or even Marco’s bald spot. But considering where my head had been at for the past couple of days – or, at least, where I was trying to keep it from - I started to feel a kind of panic rising in my gut.

I wasn’t sure I was gonna be able to handle the next bite of my breakfast, what with all the butterflies in my stomach all of a sudden.

“Okay... Well, uh, I guess just start when you’re ready.”

Better yet, let me get drunk and pass out and then you can tell me...

Johnny:

I put my eggs on my plate, turned off the stove, grabbed my toast out of the toaster and sat down at the table.

“Okay, so yesterday...” I stopped and thought about it. “No, the day before yesterday, when I got back to the station after leaving you at Rampart, Cap asked me something.”

Roy:

He started to chow down, full throttle.

I couldn’t believe it.

He does this to drive me crazy.

He starts off with this announcement that always comes across as dire and imminent and then he stops to stuff his mouth.

One of these days, right before we get four days off, I’m gonna tell him that I’m thinking of doing something *really* important that will affect him. And then I’ll get in my car and drive off.

Johnny:

These eggs aren't half bad if I do say so myself...!

He grimaced at me, "Well, what'd he ask you?"

"I'm gettin' to it! I'm gettin' to it! I *am* starvin', you know."

"I noticed."

I guess there was no more puttin' it off. I really wasn't comfortable asking him this, but, like I said, I didn't want him to get blindsided by Cap, either. Only problem was, the very act of telling him might make the whole thing seem bigger than it really was. But *not* saying something might make it seem like it's nothing when it really could be something. I figured I'd rather chance it that it might be big and hope it really was somethin' small. "Alright. He asked if I thought there was something 'unusual' going on with you."

He stopped in mid-bite and looked at me kinda worried. "What do you mean 'something unusual going on with me'?"

"That's what *I* wondered. You got any juice?"

"Yeah, there's some fresh OJ in the fridge."

I grabbed the pitcher and poured us both a glass.

"So what'd he say?"

"Well, I asked what he meant by 'unusual'. He said he wasn't sure, but he was askin' because he thought it was kinda weird that you'd gotten injured as badly as you did twice in the same week. Thought maybe somethin' was goin' on here at home maybe with Joanne or the kids."

Roy:

That was it? That was the big mystery? I felt a wave of relief, like the time I found my wedding ring after a week without telling Joanne I'd lost it. That seemed like a fairly easy remedy compared to what I was worried Johnny was gonna tell me. "What'd you tell him?"

Johnny:

"I said I didn't think so. I mean, it's not like I expect you to tell me everything and I suspect you prob'ly don't, especially when it involves Joanne or the kids. But sometimes I can tell when something's bothering you, *especially* if it involves Joanne or the kids, even if you don't tell me outright. But you never told me anything like that and you didn't seem bothered by anything at all when I came back from vacation."

Roy:

I wasn't sure I followed all of that but I think it made sense. "Yeah."

"Yeah', what?"

"I mean, yeah, you're right. I don't always divulge every little thing."

"And I don't expect you to. I mean, *I* don't. We may be best friends and all but I don't tell you everything that goes on in my life and I don't expect you to tell me everything that goes on in yours, either. But I just wanted to warn you in case something *was* going on with you, or you and Joanne, or you and the kids, or you, Joanne *and* the kids—"

"I get it."

"You know what I mean. I mean, Cap doesn't miss much, you know. He may not say anything, but he doesn't miss much."

"Yeah, I know."

I finished eating, pushed my plate away and settled back against the chair. "Well, then...let me ask you...as your partner... 'cause I have to admit, Roy, I guess Cap does kinda have a point."

"Why? Because I turned into you for a week?"

That didn't come out right. He scowled at me and he looked a little hurt and, well, frankly, I didn't blame him.

"Sorry, Johnny, that didn't come out the way I meant it. I wasn't suggesting that you—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he sighed.

"Johnny—"

"Yeah, I know, Roy, I'm an accident waiting to happen." He rubbed his forehead and leaned his elbows on the table.

It hurt me to know that he might assume that that's how I think of him. It's not. "I didn't say that."

"Didn't have to," he said softly.

Shit. "Johnny, look at me."

It took him a moment, but he finally did.

“That’s not what I said and that’s not what I meant. Okay, sure, maybe you are a little accident-prone but it’s not because you’re stupid or clumsy or what have you. You’re a helluva rescue fireman and one helluva paramedic. You get in there and get the job done. You get hurt a lot because you risk a lot to help *other people*. And you’re damned good at it. The helping part, I mean.”

He snorted a laugh and actually managed to look sheepish, “Yeah, I...I get it.”

“Look, I’ll make you a deal. You don’t put words in my mouth and I’ll stop landing in the hospital. Okay?”

He smiled, “Okay. Deal.”

“Now as far as Cap is concerned, those incidents were pretty unusual in and of themselves, don’t you think? I mean, how many high angle hang glider rescues do we do in a week? And no one expects their partner to just up and—“

A thought flashed through my head, right then. But it was too fast, too quick for me to grasp onto and hold it long enough for me to remember it. *Something...about that...*

Johnny reached over, grabbed a banana, and started peeling. “Well, you’re right about that. I mean, I’m glad Cap put Dunning on suspension, ‘cause I’ll tell you one thing - that was entirely inexcusable, what he did. You know, it makes me wonder whether his shiftmates were at all surprised that he’d gotten suspended. I mean, I wonder, were they ever worried about whether he had their backs?”

“Yeah...does make you wonder...” I’d only half-heard what Johnny’d said. I was trying to recreate my thought process in the hopes that that lightning bolt of a thought would return, but I couldn’t conjure it up again.

The conversation lulled for a bit. I guess both of us were lost in our own thoughts.

“Roy?” he finally said, real quiet and he waited until I looked at him. “*Is there somethin’ else that happened with Dunning that I don’t know about?*”

I stopped in mid-thought, not sure what he was getting at, although I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was trying to get at *something*. Or maybe he just thought there was something to get at.

“No— No, nothing else happened with Dunning,” I said, trying to sound definitive to erase the doubt in his voice. “The Marco and Chet Tennis Match Commentary was pretty much on the ball.”

He nodded slowly. “And there’s....nothin’ going on?” he said quietly.

He didn’t look at me when he asked and that about told me what he was really asking. I think I about fainted. My vision started swimming. I felt my whole body start to buzz a little. I couldn’t look him in the eye.

He rotated his glass of orange juice, staring at it without really seeing it, “I mean, like I said, it’s not like you have to tell me, if you don’t want to –”

“No...Johnny. There’s...there’s nothing going on.”

...between me, Joanne, or the kids...that is...

Johnny:

“Are you sure?”

And to be completely truthful, I wasn’t sure I knew what I was asking.

“Yeah, I’m...I’m sure.”

Well, for two people who were awfully damn sure about something, we certainly tried *real hard* not to look each other in the eye about it. Oh, don’t get me wrong, we sat there eyein’ each other to see if the other one was gonna look directly at the other one, which neither one of us did.

“Okay, well, um...look, I just wanted to kinda forewarn you about Cap.”

He smiled. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

A full breakfast on top of bein’ sleepy wasn’t helpin’ me stay awake by a long shot. I stretched and yawned and realized I’d better move ‘fore I fell asleep right there in the kitchen. I grabbed the dishes, set them in the sink, then grabbed the dish sponge, but he was on top of me in a flash.

“Johnny, you don’t have to do that. I’ll get it. Don’t worry about it.”

“Well I don’t wanna just the leave this whole mess for you to clean up –“

“It’s all right. I’ve got the house to myself with no plans for the day. It’ll give me something to do.”

I stretched and yawned, again. “Okay, if you’re sure. I’ve done my proverbial duty. I guess I really have to get home and get to sleep. I think that breakfast did me in.”

Roy:

“Well, listen, are you sure you’re okay enough to drive?”

“No.” He got up and started to fish in his pocket for his keys.

“Johnny, look, why don’t you just sleep here. I mean Joanne and the kids’ll be gone for the next several hours. You can take a nap, here, then head home.”

“I’m okay, Roy, I’m okay.”

“You just told me you don’t feel okay enough to drive. And, frankly, I’m not so sure I want Brice as my partner while you recover from plowing your car into a tree. C’mon, you can sleep on the couch.”

“No, no, I’m okay, Roy. I’m awake just enough to get home. Besides,” he continued, holding up a hand as I made to grab his arm to haul him to the couch, “the coffee’ll keep me awake the rest of the morning, anyway.”

I looked at him dubiously. “Alright. But you call me when you get home. If that phone doesn’t ring, I’m calling you until you answer. You are going straight home, right?”

“Yep. Straight home.” We started walking toward the door.

“No stops to the store or nothin’? You don’t have to get gas? Pick up your dry cleaning?”

He smiled a little, “Roy, I’m not gonna stop anywhere, okay? Would you quit worryin’?”

“Just lookin’ out for my partner.”

He stepped out the door, looked at me, and a lopsided smile spread across his features. I wasn’t altogether sure what that look on his face meant.

Alright, truth be told, I knew exactly what it meant. That one look from him seemed somehow to confirm what I’d been hoping up till now was the result of ‘concussive delusion’. But I guess it wasn’t a delusion. Whatever had happened in the ambulance, or maybe even up on that cliff, really had happened...

...and it wasn’t one-sided...

“Thanks for the warning about Cap.”

“Hopefully, he won’t make nothin’ of it.” He headed to his car.

“Guess I’ll find out in a couple of days. See you on shift. And call me when you get home.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” he looked a little sheepish, donned his shades then slid into the driver’s seat.

I watched him drive off and closed the door feeling...*what?* That sensation I’d felt at the hospital when I hadn’t seen him all day was back. It wasn’t loneliness. Not exactly. But I couldn’t put my finger on it... I cleaned up the kitchen while I waited for him to call, which he did about 15 minutes later. I felt like I needed to keep him on the line for as long as I could, make it...count for something. That seemed ridiculous, so I kept it short for his sake.

I finally settled in my recliner to read the paper. That lasted about half a minute.

There was something in the air – a sense of exhilaration, a kind of...buzzing underneath the stillness and the quiet.

The neighborhood was real quiet. Even that prop plane that usually flies around this time of the morning hadn't come around.

I heard a loud, piercing chirping coming from the backyard. It seemed extra loud in the quiet and I found I couldn't ignore it.

I finally put the paper down and got up to go to the back room to see if I could find the source. Chris and Jenny had asked for a birdbath to be put in the backyard a few years ago and recently, there'd been a pair of cardinals that loved to perch on the rim or hang out in the avocado tree and warble. There it was, the male, perched on the rim, chirping away. I just sat there and watched it take a dip in the bath, hop back up, flutter its feathers and then wipe its beak on the rim. It was like those days in the Fall that I remember when Joanne and I were kids. A thousand thoughts started going through my head - of lazy summer days, all those adventures down by the stream with my pals, hanging out at the arcade with Joanne.

The fierce Santa Ana winds had died down considerably, but there was still quite a breeze out there. I peered up to check the weather. The gray sky muted the light everywhere. The female cardinal arrived to the bath where she took her turn. Then the male flew up to the neighbor's tree while she stayed at the bath. The breeze kicked up, leaves falling around like rain, driven by the light wind. The quiet of the house seemed to mirror the peace outside.

A sense of nostalgia came over me, but...it was different than other times I've experienced it. I was unsure whether I was feeling a sense of loss or anticipation for the future.

A hundred memories and thoughts of the future all collapsed in on each other - of Joanne and how we grew up together; memories of old friends and times gone by; life in the Army that seemed a thousand lifetimes ago; the guys at the Station and how much like a family we'd all become; and Johnny and the thousand situations we've been through together...and all the future ones yet to come.

The breeze had calmed for a moment and the leaves were no longer falling from the tree.

Falling...

That rescue under the bridge came back to me, when Johnny crawled along to get to the frightened epileptic boy who was too scared to come down. The boy'd gone into a seizure and he and Johnny fell. If I hadn't secured him...

I wonder what made me think of that?

Then the sun broke through the gray sky and I could see a shaft of sunlight coming into the yard. But the cardinals were gone.

I padded back to the living room, sat in my chair and picked up the paper again.

The house was quiet. The street was quiet.

I tried to read where I'd left off but my mind was still reeling with that buzzing excitement. Whatever was in the air was still there.

He stepped out the door, looked at me, and a lopsided smile spread across his features.

I couldn't wait to get back on shift.

[Two days later]

Roy:

I'd found myself thinking about Johnny the rest of the days off. Not just thinking about him, wanting to be around him.

I put the coffee pot on the stove and turned to head to the locker room to change into my uniform when Cap walked in, "Mornin', Cap."

"Mornin', Roy." He shoved his hands in his pockets, "Listen, uh, can I talk to you? In the office?"

My stomach churned for a second. "Yeah. Sure, Cap." I guess Johnny was right and I was suddenly glad he'd insisted on coming over to the house that morning. I followed Cap to the office.

"Shut the door, will you?"

Uh oh. I hope this isn't worse than what Johnny was lead to believe... I shut the door and he gestured for me to sit in his chair while he sat on the corner of the other desk.

"How's, uh, how's the concussion? All better?"

I snapped my fingers and stood up. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good to go. I got Dr. Rees' follow-up note in my locker, I can go get it—"

"Later, Roy," he gestured for me to sit, so I did. "And the, uh, the burns?"

"Oh, they're healing okay."

"Good, good... You're all healed up from that hang glider rescue? Lacerations on your back are healing okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, Cap, everything's healing just fine. I'm good to go for duty."

"That's good, that's good."

The silence stretched and I fidgeted in my chair, knowing full well he wasn't finished but hoping like hell he was. "Uh, Cap, was...was that it?"

“Uh, no, Roy.”

He rubbed the side of his nose, a gesture he makes sometimes when he needs to bring something up that he’s not all that comfortable with.

“Roy, can I ask you a personal question?”

I shifted in my seat. I know Johnny warned me that this was coming, but I still felt a jolt of panic at the question. “Uh...yeah, sure Cap.”

“Is there, uh, anything going on with you lately? Anything at home or on the job, maybe, that’s been distracting you, at all?” He put his hands up just as I was about to answer. “Before you say anything, I’m only asking because I’m a little concerned at the injuries you’ve sustained this past week. If it were Gage, I’d consider it par for the course. But it’s unlike you to follow in your partner’s footsteps and I just thought I’d ask if everything was okay up in your neck of the woods.”

“Oh, yeah, Cap. Everything’s fine. Just a string of unusual incidents, I guess.”

“You sure?”

I almost laughed with relief. “Yeah, I’m...I’m sure, Cap.”

“Okay. You know you can come to me at any time with *anything*. I mean that.”

He looked pointedly at me and I felt a genuine concern from him. “I know, Cap. Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Okay. Roll call in five, okay?”

“Okay, Cap.”

I headed across the bay to the locker room with the echoes of that conversation bouncing around in my head.

Johnny:

I’d spent the last coupla days tryin’ to keep busy, tryin’ to keep from thinkin’ about Roy.

I went with Marco to help him look for a new car and I hung out with a coupla the other rescue guys – Reid Zimmer from 24s and my ole rescue partner, Tony Freeman over at 10s - for a day of rock climbing. Yeah, I know, not the best thing after what Roy and I went through, but I was outvoted.

Thing was, I couldn’t be busy like that 24 hours a day. Don’t get me wrong. I had great fun with those guys! But I really missed my partner.

I started puttin' my stuff in my locker, still feelin' his fingers trailin' down my shoulder...wantin' to feel it again...

Roy:

There he was, at his locker. Boy, the moment I walked in and saw him, my heart leaped.

“Well, welcome back, partner!” He was grinning from ear to ear, he was so excited to see me. Then he cleared his throat and looked at the ground, as if he was embarrassed at how excited he was. Especially since it'd only been two days since we saw each other.

He couldn't keep that grin off his face, though.

And that made me smile even more. I was happy to see him, too. Happy and...nervous. When I'd mentioned there was something in the air after he left – that feeling stayed with me in the intervening days. I just couldn't shake it. Wasn't sure I really wanted to...

His having stopped by the house seemed to have...shifted our relationship, a little.

That, maybe, was the wrong thing to wonder about because the flustered state I was in propelled me straight into Mistake No. 7...

We were putting our uniforms on. I looked over at him and he had this dopey grin on his face. Somehow, it made me feel goofier than I kinda already did.

I watched him doing up the buttons on his shirt and noticed they were all off by one.

Johnny:

I couldn't tell you why, but man, I was giddy seein' Roy again.

I guess it's because after almost *two weeks*, everything was *finally* gettin' back to normal. There was my 10-day vacation then I came back only to watch my partner get his head cracked open by a hang glider and then those two harrowing days on shift, that, I swear, felt like a month. But, now, finally, my partner, my best friend, was okay, everything was behind us and things were back to normal.

Well...sort of...

I looked over at him – I just couldn't keep the grin off my face. He smiled and then...

...he stepped over to me and, without saying a word, he started undoing the buttons that I'd just finished buttoning.

I froze. I felt this electricity from him. “Uh...Roy...” I tried to keep my voice down as I looked at him, inches away from me. My whole body was tingling with how close he was and what he was doing. I smelled his aftershave, could feel his body heat.

“Your buttons are off,” he whispered.

His voice in my ear nearly buckled my knees. “Oh...” I looked down and...felt woozy as this feelin’ rushed through me – watchin’ him unbutton my shirt.

Roy:

I noticed his breathing had gotten deeper and measured. Then I realized, so had mine. He was trembling and his hands lightly cupped my arms as I worked on the buttons. I knew he was looking at me, waiting, hoping for eye contact. I have no idea what had possessed me to be doing this. I deliberately kept my eyes on the buttons because I was worried about what would happen if I looked at him.

I got to the last button. At the bottom of his shirt.

I took my time, tried to make it seem like it was difficult to unbutton it. But I could only hold off the inevitable for so long.

My eyes met his.

Something passed between us.

“Hey, guys? Roll call!” came Chet’s voice from the dorm.

We both jumped. Whatever...connection, I guess you could call it, that seemed to have passed between us was severed. I looked at my fingers holding on to the button on Johnny’s shirt and realized that I’d just felt our partnership not only shift, but I think it had just jumped the tracks.

“Roy...” his voice whispered. Right in my ear.

I looked down and let go of his shirt, feeling myself trembling. I had to get out of there... “We’d better get to it.”

Johnny:

And he walked off. Just like that.

Jesus...Christ, Roy.

I couldn’t move... I felt dizzy...

I sat down hard on the inside of my locker and tried to catch my breath. But I had to get to roll call. I leaned forward to haul myself up, but I...I just...I just couldn’t do it. I leaned my head against the locker wall and tried to slow my breathing down ‘fore I was gonna need a paper bag. But with the way

the electricity was joltin' through my body, right then, it was gonna be awhile 'fore I could get my feet movin' so I could walk straight.

“John? Hey, John?” Marco. Comin' in from the dorm. I heard the door swing open and he appeared, lookin' at me with a frown on his face. “Hey, c'mon! Roll call. Cap's waitin'. Though I suppose there's no rush now, cause he's already given you latrine duty....”

I didn't move 'cept to look at him out of the corner of my eye.

The frown on his face darkened into worry, “Hey, are you okay?”

He didn't wait for an answer. He crossed to the door and held it open to the bay, “Cap! I think there's something wrong with John.”

In the span of about half a breath, Cap's face was in front of mine and we were surrounded by the rest of the station. “John? You alright, pal? What's the matter?”

“Cap. Cap, I'm okay.”

“Should we call in a still alarm – ?”

“You feelin' dizzy, John – ?”

“Maybe he tied his shoelaces too tight. Blood couldn't get to his brain—”

“Guys! I'm fine.”

“Roy, you want to take a look at your partner?”

No! “No! No, Cap, I'm fine. Really. Honest!”

“Who saw him last – ?”

“I'm fine. Really!”

“I'll get the drug box – “

“I don't need the damn drug box. Now, will you guys – ? Look! Guys. Guys! I'm okay. I'm alright. I'm fine. I just got dizzy, is all.”

“Well, what happened?”

“It was nothin', Cap.”

“Nothin', my foot, John. I took one look at you and you were *pale*,” Marco insisted.

“I was not – Look, I just went to tie my shoes –“

“I told you the shoelaces were too tight – ”

“Shut up, Chet,” I said.

Cap threw Kelly a look of annoyance, “Go on, John.”

“Well, like I said, Cap, I just went to tie my shoes and I guess I just got up too fast an’ I got dizzy, that’s all.”

I sought out Roy, who was standin’ behind everybody lookin’ at the ground.

“Okay, alright, everybody. Clear out and give him some air. Roy, check him out. I want to be sure you’re both up for duty.”

Roy:

“Okay, Cap. Uh, Johnny, wait here.” I went out to get the trauma box feeling like I got caught stealin’ from the cookie jar. The Engine crew were gettin’ all lined up again and I just tried to make it seem like business as usual.

“Roy?”

“Yeah, Cap.”

“You take him to Rampart if you think anything’s off. That’s an order.”

“Uh, yeah, Cap. Okay.”

I got back to the locker room and found Johnny still sittin’ in his locker, but with his shirt buttoned up. I tried to avoid looking at him and concentrated on getting his BP.

I tried to keep my eyes down as he rolled up his sleeve. I put the cuff on him and started to get his vitals. It didn’t escape my notice that he was trying not to look at me in the same way that I was avoiding looking at him.

‘You take him to Rampart if you think anything’s off. That’s an order.’

Cap’s order reminded me, like a kick to the head, of my talk with him in the office that morning. That whole conversation with Cap now had me rattled a little. I hadn’t really expected it to affect me, especially with Johnny having given me fair warning. Although, maybe because of Johnny’s warning, it’d gotten my mind racing in a thousand directions.

I guess what was bothering me was that if Cap thought that something was off on my end, when there honestly wasn’t, what would he say if he found out I was...reacting to my partner the way I had been? Johnny was right on the money – Cap doesn’t miss much, if anything at all. He can’t afford to. He has

to be on top of the physical and mental condition of his crew at all times or there could be serious consequences. He can't afford to take anything lightly.

And that's what had me rattled. If he makes the assumption that something's up at a time when it's not then for sure he's not gonna miss anything when something really is.

Clearly – something was happening between Johnny and me and if my perception was anything to go by, it was getting worse. Well, maybe 'worse' wasn't quite the word. Suffice to say, it was getting stronger and I was having doubts about our ability to work with each other if it continued in this direction.

I had to find a way to stop feeling like this and I had to do it now.

Johnny:

The minute I had the locker room all to myself, I did my shirt up as fast as I could get my fingers to work, let out a long breath and just sat there with my head in my hands. *What the hell just happened!*

I wasn't sure I wanted to think about what would've happened if Chet hadn't interrupted us. Which I guess is kinda silly, considerin' we seemed to be hedgin' toward *somethin'*. I guess something really was going on between us and it definitely wasn't one-sided. But even for all my thinkin' about Roy the last coupla days, that whole thing with my shirt just now caught me way off-guard.

I had to get my body calmed down, I could still feel myself trembling. *Alright, let's go over IV's in alphabetical order:*

Atropine.

No, no, uh...hell, what's that one called...?

Adenosine. *That's it. Adenosine. Okay, what's next?*

Amiodarone.

Atropine.

Calcium chloride.

D5W.

Diazepam.

Diphenhydramine.

Dopamine. *Aw hell. Man, I wish there was a way to get it all sucked outta my head, right about now... Alright, think! Think! What else?*

Epinephrine.

Okay...F...F...oh man, think, dammit! C'mon, F! F!

Furosemide.

Furosemide. Good. Okay, uh....what else? G, H, I, J, K, L...L! Okay, there's a few that start with L...

Lactated ringers.

Okay, that's good. Lactated ringers, lactated ringers, what's after lactated ringers...?

Lidocaine...

He walked back in. I shoulda told him to bring the drug box and hit me up with the lidocaine to knock me out from how embarrassed I felt.

“How're you feeling?”

I glanced at him but he was rummaging through the trauma box for the stethoscope and I wondered if he was askin' as Roy or as a paramedic.

“Okay. I guess.”

We both tried real hard not to look at each other. At least he could pretend to be busy with the vitals. I mean, he had *that* to hide behind. Me - I had to just *sit* there and act like I wasn't *bothered* by anything. He wrapped the BP cuff kinda slow, lookin' like he was thinkin' hard about something. He took my pulse then wiped his hands on his shirt and fidgeted a bit before tacklin' the last of the vitals. I was glad he'd gotten my pulse before the respirations, 'cause he woulda noticed my pulse had gone up the minute he laid his hand on my chest.

Though I knew he'd already figured that out.

He had his back to me as he put everything away. “Cap wanted to make sure I took you to Rampart if anything was off. Your vitals are fine, but if you feel like you need to go to Rampart...”

“No. No, I'm okay. Like I said, I think I just...moved too fast.” I'd thought about bein' honest with him, that it really wasn't my shoes that had knocked me over, even though I knew he knew that.

He was tryin' to keep his distance - we both were. I think we both knew we almost crossed a line.

He nodded, stepped over the bench and grabbed the trauma box. “Okay. Well, then, I guess we'd better get to roll call.”

“Okay.” I got up, tucked my shirt in, closed my locker door, and followed my partner out to the bay.

Roy:

The Engine crew was still lined up. I put the trauma box away and stood on the opposite end of the line from my partner, which, fortunately, just so happened to be the end nearest the Squad.

“Everything okay, John?”

“I’m fine, Cap. I’m good to go.”

“Glad to hear it. Now, if my paramedic team could stay out of medical trouble for the next 24 hours, you’ll make your Captain a happy man.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” Johnny answered, amid snickering from the Engine crew. I had a feeling my partner looked right at me, but I kept my eyes on Cap. I’d already decided that I would put in for vacation to get the roof done and planned, right then, to tell Cap as soon as roll was over.

“Now, can someone fill in John and Roy on the chores?”

“I’ll do it, Cap.”

“Thank you, Mike. I waited to read off the announcements until everyone was here. First off and most important, due to budget constraints that I know you’re all aware of, HQ has decided to institute a hiring freeze and will not accept paid vacation or overtime requests for the next six months, effective immediately.”

Fantastic.

Mistake No. 7 was gonna hurtle me into a world of trouble...

Chapter 11

Roy:

After Cap dismissed us, the Engine crew fell out of line and started for the kitchen to finish their coffees. It was kind of nice to have them as a buffer between Johnny and me during roll. I mean, considering what'd just happened...

Mike stayed behind to relay our chore assignments.

Johnny sauntered up closer to us and I did my best not to look at him. Frankly, I was dreading what our assigned chores for the day were going to be. Cap usually pairs us up, but as you can imagine, that probably wasn't the best thing to do, right now.

I was really hoping to get away from Johnny so that maybe whatever happened in the locker room could just cool down.

Johnny:

"Alright, Mike. Lay it on us."

I was afraid Cap was gonna pair us up with dorm and latrine duty. I'm not so sure that would've been a good idea. Two of us? At one end of the station from everybody else? Alone? Nuh-uh. No way was that a good idea.

And from the way Roy was tryin' so hard not to look at me, I could tell he was worried about the same thing. I started thinkin' up tunes I could whistle while I did the chores so everybody would know just where I was at all times. Figured that'd keep me out of trouble.

Roy:

"Okay, Roy, you have the dorms..."

Fantastic. Exactly the assignment I was dreading, knowing what the other end of that was going to be.

"...and Gage, you've got the apparatus bay and the storage areas. The Engine crew is on clean-up and I need to flush out the pumps, so we're putting Big Red in the driveway."

Talk about missing a bullet... I smiled just to keep the sense of relief off my face.

Despite the hiccup of the morning, I was beginning to feel better about the rest of the day. And hoping that what'd happened between Johnny and me this morning was going to be the only thing to happen.

Johnny:

Whew! The day was lookin' better, already.

I immediately made for the Squad to move her out of the bay while Roy went in to the dorm.

At first, I'd kinda envied Roy gettin' dorm duty. I wouldn't have minded that, myself. Away from the guys, time and space to get my thoughts together, maybe try to figure out what was *really* goin' on with me 'n Roy.

But as I was moppin' the bay, I got to watch the Engine crew tidy up Big Red, watch Stoker run the pumps and get her in tip-top shape. It was nice to have that distraction; have somethin' else besides the worries over my partner bouncin' around in my head, for a change.

Made me kinda dread havin' that alarm go off at any minute. 'Cause then we'd be alone, again. And who knows what'll happen when *that* happens.

Roy:

At first, I kind of envied Johnny's chore assignment – being able to be out there with all the guys and having that distraction.

But as I went through the dorm, changing all the bedding and doing the general clean-up, I was glad to have some time to myself and maybe try to figure out what to do, since taking time off was out of the question. Leave it to HQ to know exactly when and how to make my life miserable.

I'd remembered that something had crossed my mind back when Johnny stopped by the house to warn me about Cap, but I still couldn't remember what it was.

I backtracked over all the events of the last week – hoping it would trigger it back, but it still eluded me.

And I supposed I was going to have to let it continue to do so because the klaxons went off, just then.

“Squad 51, child down. Roseview Park. 1121 Roseview St. 1-1-2-1 Roseview. Cross street Clemson. Time out: 0914.”

“Squad 51, 10-4. KMG-365.”

Oh no. When I heard it was a child down, my heart immediately stopped. Considering what'd happened the last shift with Johnny losing that kid in the ambulance, I was a little worried for him.

As I left the dorm, I saw Cap hand Johnny the call slip.

“Thankfully, it's right down the street.”

“Don't I know it,” he said and off we went.

Johnny:

I had to admit, my heart kinda leaped into my throat when I heard Dispatch say ‘child down’. A part of me was still reelin’ from that run last shift with that family in the cab. When that young girl bled out on me...

After I’d left Roy that mornin’, I met up with Gil, who was still sittin’ with the mother until someone from her family arrived.

We spent some time talkin’ and we talked about that kid he’d been helping when I first introduced him to Roy; that poor little kid who was waitin’ for a kidney transplant. Gil and I talked about how hard it is when it’s kids facing a life or death situation. It was good to talk to him about that and I think we kinda bonded in a way that we hadn’t when he was training with us. Not that Roy wouldn’t understand, I mean, he’s got two kids of his own. But Gil said some things that kinda made me feel better after having lost that girl in the ambulance.

When the mother’s sister had finally arrived, Gil and I returned to the station and the Engine crew was lookin’ as shitty as we felt. Not one of us slept. Cap’d called for a debriefing but we’d all just kinda sat there in shock for a while and then, I guess, the conversation happened so gradually that we didn’t know we were talkin’ about it until we were talkin’ about it. I don’t think any of us realized that it was almost noon before we were all talked out and feelin’ like we could face another day.

Roy:

His hands were gripping the wheel pretty tight. His lips were pressed into a thin line and his eyes were absolutely focused straight ahead, unblinking. Which pretty much told me he was looking at what was in his head and not the road.

“Johnny? Johnny!”

Blink. “What?”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

Uh-huh.

Any sort of 'person down' call is awfully tough to plan for. In fact, they're downright impossible. It could be anything from hyperventilation to a subdural hematoma. And with kids, sometimes it's even harder to guess. How old is the kid? What were they playing? Did they get hit by something? Did they get into something they weren't supposed to? Did they ingest something? Are they gonna be able to articulate any information to us? Is it some kind of undiagnosed congenital condition? Are they with a group of other kids who aren't gonna tell us anything because they're afraid of getting into trouble or are they with their families? Are the parents or guardians at the scene? Are they going to be hysterical or so in shock that they're calm but unable to communicate effectively? Are we going to be able to start an IV? And what if we can't and it's a critical situation? I think there are, literally, a thousand things that could bring a person down and an equal number of unknown factors that could be there, waiting for us. Trying to draw up a pre-plan on the way over is futile. You just have to wait to get there to figure it out as you go. But sometimes, there just isn't time to play detective, despite the very real fact that you don't have a choice not to.

Sometimes, though, even if you *feel* you're okay, there's always the risk of having your own trauma being unexpectedly triggered by something at scene that can throw you off and even paralyze you. With this kind of open-ended, anything-goes type of call, there's just no room for personal issues. No matter what the reason.

"Why don't you let me take lead on this one?"

"Now, Roy—" he started, a finger in the air.

His expression was pretty angry as he looked at me. But as he turned back to the road, his face screwed up and his eyes bounced a little between his window and the road. He sighed. "Yeah, okay."

Uh oh. An immediately submissive Johnny is not generally a good sign and I was glad I'd made the suggestion. Although, truth be told, if he'd started to fight me on it, I was prepared to make it an order.

As we drove up to the scene, we could see a crowd had gathered. There were kids in school uniform along with several teachers that were crowded around the pitcher's mound of the baseball diamond. One of the women – parent or teacher, I couldn't tell – had been waving at us frantically as we drove up. As we grabbed our gear she started yelling, her face flushed in a red-faced panic. "Help him! Oh my god, he's not breathing! Hurry!"

"Is it your son, ma'am?" I asked as we ran over.

"No! We've been trying to locate his parents. Hurry!"

A boy of about 10 from the small Catholic school across the street was on the ground. One of the adults was giving him CPR.

"What happened?" Johnny asked as he checked the pulse and I got the resuscitator on the boy.

“We were playing baseball. Nick, here, was pitching. He pitched the ball, Evan hit it and it struck poor Nick square in the chest and he dropped like a stone. At first it’d just seemed like he’d gotten the wind knocked out of him but then he just stopped moving. We called you guys right away.”

“I’m not gettin’ a pulse,” Johnny reported as he took over CPR from the civilian.

I grabbed the paddles and laid them on the boy’s chest.

“Johnny, he’s in v-fib.” I readied the paddles. “Clear!” Johnny moved and the poor kid’s body launched itself off the ground. I think a couple of the women screamed.

I checked the scope: sinus rhythm.

Thank goodness...

“Are his parents here, yet?” Johnny asked, laying the leads on the boy’s chest and monitoring his vitals.

“They’re on their way,” someone answered.

“Here, can you hold this on him?” I asked the officer who’d just arrived and indicated the resuscitator. I grabbed the biophone, “Rampart, this is County 51.”

“Go head, 51.” Dr. Allen.

“We have a male child, approximately 10 years old, about 60 pounds. He was hit in the chest by a batted baseball. He was in respiratory and cardiac arrest when we arrived. We defibrillated successfully times one and he is currently in sinus rhythm. We have him on 4 liters of O2. His parents are not on scene but they are on their way. We are ready to send a transmission, lead 2. Standby for vitals.”

“Standing by, 51.”

“Roy, pulse is 150, respirations are 26 and shallow. BP is 90 over 70.”

I relayed the vitals. But we still had a problem...

“Rampart, the parents still haven’t arrived, but the police are trying to get a hold of them. Ambulance is on scene.”

“Okay, 51. Bring him in, stat.”

“10-4, Rampart.”

We got him packed and ready to go. “I’ll ride in with him,” Johnny said, but I grabbed his arm as he started to follow the gurney into the ambulance.

“Johnny, I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“I got it,” Johnny said, and clambered in. I hesitated, still not convinced it was a smart idea. No matter how many kids he ever treats, he’ll never be able to bring back that girl. But I knew that look on his face - he’d save that boy with his dying breath if he had to. Granted, if I hadn’t been able to convert him from v-fib, I would’ve made it an order. If he could just keep him stable on the way to Rampart...
“Johnny, hold on.”

“Roy...!”

I grabbed the HT out of the Squad and handed it to him. “Take this. If the parents arrive, I’ll let you know.”

I could see his shoulders give a little. “Thanks.”

I let him go.

So much for my taking the lead on the case.

The ambulance moved off and I was about to follow in the Squad.

“Roy?”

I turned to see the officer with a stricken and harried-looking couple with him.

“This here’s Mr. and Mrs. Donald Selby. Their son, Nick, is the one you treated.”

I quickly explained the situation, relayed their approval for IVs to Johnny in the ambulance and told them to meet us at Rampart General.

Johnny:

“Treatment 3,” Dixie said as we wheeled the kid in.

We moved him in and then onto the bed. Drs. Allen and Morton were waitin’ for ‘im.

I stood by in case there was anything more I could do. Something was buzzing in my ear and I waved it away.

“Hey,” I heard Roy’s voice whisperin’ in my ear. “Didn’t you hear Dr. Allen? He said we can go.”

“Oh. He did?”

“Yeah. He did. C’mon. Let’s get some coffee.”

But I couldn't take my eyes off the kid. Next thing I knew, Roy was grabbin' my arm and leading me out of the treatment room and over to Dixie's Bar. That's what we call that little corner of her world. Well, that's what Dwyer started callin' it and the name kinda stuck, but she does kinda seem like a bartender, at the neighborhood watering hole, y'know? She's got customers who come in with all kind of stories; she hears everything, sees everything, and knows when to dole out that sage advice o' hers and when a drink is what somebody needs most. Though I guess in her case, coffee's the poison of choice. I noticed she was talkin' to a couple of frantic parent-types further down the hall so Roy plunked me down on Dixie's chair.

I thought I heard the sound of coffee mugs or...something, but all I was seein' was that girl in the ambulance from the other day, bleedin' out on me... *Dammit!*

"Hey, hey..." I heard Roy's voice again, soft, in my ear. "Yeah, you're right. This isn't very good. Maybe the lounge is better," he said pretty loud and then his hand was on my arm and I was bein' hauled down the hall.

Right? Right about what? What about the lounge? What're you talkin' about? An' where're we goin'? *Funny, I don't remember hearin' the tones over the HT...* "We get a run?"

"Not exactly."

Next thing I knew, we were in the lounge and Roy steered me to the table and headed for the coffee maker.

"Why'd we come in here?"

"Cause you were scaring the parents."

"What parents? What're you talking about?"

Roy slid into the seat next to me and laid down a mug of coffee in front of me. "When you slammed your fist onto the counter."

"Slammed my fist onto the counter? When did I do that?"

Roy put his mug down real slow and leaned over and looked at me. "Just now. You don't remember?"

It was only then that I'd realized my hand *was* kinda sore. "I guess I did."

"You were thinkin' about that girl bleedin' out on you the other night, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I...I guess I was." And then I remembered seein' Dixie in the hallway talkin' to those folks. "Oh man...Dixie was talking to the parents of that boy, wasn't she?"

“Yeah. She was. They looked up when you hit the counter. There was no way they were gonna know you were thinkin’ about another patient, so—”

“Ah, shit, Roy...”

Roy:

He laid his head down on the table and I figured it was best to just wait for a few moments.

“Dammit, Roy,” his voice was muffled being under the table. “I thought I got it all outta my system.”

“What do you mean?”

He brought his head up and I could see his nose was red and his face was a little flushed. “Gil and I talked about it a little. You remember when I first introduced you to him, he was talking to that kid?”

“Yeah. He was waiting for a kidney transplant, right?”

“Yeah. We talked about him for awhile and about that girl bleedin’ out on me. Kinda helped me through that rough spot. But I guess hangin’ around him for a day and a half kinda got me a bit rattled before that and I wondered if, maybe, that’s why I’d allowed myself to get all worked up over losin’ her.”

That sent a bizarre combination of hope and worry stabbing right through me. “What do you mean?”

“See, he’d been kinda having a hard time, ever since they started the Paramedic Advisory Board. He’s been doing that inadequate thing again, feeling like he’s not qualified enough to be out in the field.”

“And that terrible run at five in the morning last shift made you feel the same way.”

“I guess it did. I guess listening to him go on about it kinda got *me* thinkin’ about it.”

“I can imagine it was hard not to. After a call like that – who wouldn’t feel helpless?”

“That’s exactly it, Roy. I couldn’t *help* her. She was the only one of those kids to survive and I couldn’t save her. It was my *job* and I couldn’t do it. All the years of experience, all the training, the certifications, the re-training and I couldn’t *stop it*. And I was so afraid that same kinda thing was gonna happen again with that kid, this morning...”

Before I’d realized it, I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed a little. “Johnny, stop it. Look, I knew you were gonna be worried about it. But you did everything you could, right?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Right?”

Sigh. "Yeah."

"Okay, then. Look, I know that sounds trite and useless, but you did. I know you did. And I know you know that. But you've gotta start believing it or you really won't be of any help to anybody."

Johnny:

"I know that. Like I said, I thought it was all out of my system after I talked to Gil. I guess that kid this morning brought it all back. But now, I can't seem to shake it."

It had been nice to feel his touch, again. His thumb was kinda rubbing me a little.

But his hand slid off my arm and he started drinking his coffee when I mentioned Gil's name.

And he wasn't lookin' at me.

He put his cup down, eyes starin' in it like he'd lost something in there and stood up. "C'mon, Junior. We'd better make ourselves available."

"I'm not through, yet."

"You can pick up where you left off at the station." And he was out the door.

What has gotten into him all of a sudden?

Roy:

Dix was back at her usual spot, nose in a chart, and I saw the mother huddled into herself in a corner of the waiting room. I was a little concerned that she seemed to be by herself and felt an urge to keep her company, but then I saw the father at the public telephone. *Oh, okay. Good.*

Johnny appeared at the ER base station and angled an irritated look at me. "Hey, Dix, uh, any word on the kid?"

"Well, it appears you both got to him in time. It's still a bit early, but they think he'll pull through."

Johnny stepped back, leaned against the counter, arms outstretched, and let out a long, slow breath, head down. I'm not sure either of us realized we were even holding our breath.

Johnny:

"That is one hell of a relief," I said, straightening back up.

"You're telling me. The parents are doing everything they can to keep it together," Dixie said, lookin' down toward the waiting room. Then she looked at my partner. "Well, Roy, it's nice to see you back on your feet again."

“Good to *be* back on my feet again.”

“I’ll bet. Although, you know – and, don’t take this the wrong way, Roy - it *was* good to see Gil, again. The circumstances were lousy, but it was good to see him. Especially since his station works out of Harbor General, we rarely cross paths. He’s really turned into a great paramedic.”

Roy nodded a little and then he turned away from us, looking down toward the waiting room.

“Yeah, he has. I think it just took awhile for him to get used to how much responsibility he had. But he’s finally come into his own. He’s really got a knack for it, although he’s startin’ in on his doubts again. But I swear, if he ever decides he wants to stop bein’ a fireman paramedic, I think he’d make a great shrink.”

“You know, I think you’re right, Johnny. What do you think, Roy?”

He looked at us like we were both crazy, “I think we’d better start getting back. See you later.”

Dix’s eyebrow rose, “Bye.” She looked at me and cocked her head at him. “What’s eating him?”

“Beats me. But he’s got the keys, so I’d better skedaddle. See ya.”

“See ya.”

I ran after my partner and caught up with him, all irritated again. “*Now* what is your problem?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well I don’t know, Roy, you tell me. Every time somebody mentions Gil’s name, you act like...you act like...”

Roy:

Now I was getting irritated. I stopped and looked at him, “I act like what?”

“Like you’re irritated or something.”

Oh brother. I started for the entrance, “I’m going back to the Squad.”

“Well there you go. You’re doin’ it again!”

“Doin’ what, Johnny?”

“Leaving! Like I said, every time his name gets mentioned you get irritated.”

“Why would I get irritated?” I was kinda hoping the ER doors would close on him. Unfortunately, I was having no such luck.

“How should I know? *You’re* the one who’s irritated!”

Here we go... “I am not irritated. I like Gil. Why would I be irritated by him?”

He grabbed my arm just as I was about to get in. “Hold on. Are you...are you *jealous* of Gil?”

I couldn’t believe he asked me that question. “No! I’m not...” I stopped and looked him square in the eye. “No, I am not jealous of Gil.”

He turned and headed for the passenger side. “Well, you keep gettin’ this weird look on your face every time I mention him.”

I peered over the roof, “Why would I be jeal— Look, I’m not so sure I want to dignify your accusation with an answer.”

“Okay. Alright, fine. You’re not jealous of him. Fine!”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

We rode back to the station in silence.

I wasn’t jealous of Gil.

At least...I didn’t think I was.

Johnny’s perceptivity kinda unhinged me a little. I’d spent the last several years being bewildered by how his brain’s logic circuits function. Suddenly, his analytical skills had made a straight line instead of their usual rollercoaster route and it caught me a little off-guard that he’d zeroed in on my problem.

Sorta.

But if I wasn’t jealous, then...what was I...?

I really was glad that Gil was there for my partner. After a run like that, it would get to anybody. Including Brice, I have no doubt, whether he’d ever admit it to anyone or not.

Gil was a good guy and I liked him a lot. Kept his head on his shoulders and saved my eyesight after I’d gotten sprayed in the eyes by that spitting cobra coupla years back.

And if Cap extended 51s debriefing until lunch, he obviously felt they’d need it. I’m glad they were all there for each other...

I wasn’t feeling jealous.

I was feeling left out.

Like I'd let him down. Like I'd let them all down.

And I was feeling more than a little angry with myself.

Mistake No. 4... I'd allowed my ego to get in the way of my judgment. Had I listened to Johnny at the top of that cliff and called in another rescue squad to take over, I wouldn't have ended up in the hospital with a concussion. Johnny wouldn't have had to rescue me and I wouldn't have ended up feeling...everything...on that cliff. I wouldn't have ended up missing out on that run and I woulda been there for Johnny and the rest of the guys.

Instead, it was Gil.

And Gil whom Johnny would turn to because I couldn't be there.

But what bothered me more was...why it bothered me so much.

[after dinner]

Johnny:

It'd been a pretty average day, so far. During chow, Roy and I had figured we'd get a run or two after lights out, maybe a call for the Engine. But right now, with Cap's clam chowder makin' us all feel pretty full, the guys were about to settle in for a movie on the tube. All except Roy, who I didn't see anywhere.

Ever since we'd gotten back from Rampart after I'd accused him of bein' jealous of Gil, we hadn't talked much. Now, that's not necessarily anything unusual. There've been a number of times in the past where, for whatever reason, we both ended up just kinda not sayin' much to each other all shift. Not that we were mad or anything it's just...I guess we'll have spent so much time together before that that we'd kinda talked ourselves out of stuff to talk about and so we'd find ourselves hanging around the Engine crew.

But this hadn't been that kind of day. We'd been civil to each other since that first run and still worked together just fine on a run, but I kinda sensed he was avoiding me on purpose.

And I wasn't liking it. Not just the avoidance thing, of course, but I felt like, well, I'm not real sure quite how to put it, exactly. I felt like I was losing him. Forget all the stuff that'd been goin' on between us lately – I felt like this thing with Gil had driven a wedge between us and...well, I dunno, like our friendship was at stake. Something had rattled him and I wanted to figure it out before the end of shift. 'Cause I had this weird feelin' that if we didn't fix this now, Roy and I were lookin' at the eventual end of our partnership.

I finally found him in Cap's office, sittin' on the side chair, adding all our runs to the log book. I knocked and walked in. "Hey there, partner."

"Hey there, yourself," he answered, his nose still in the book.

"They're gettin' ready to watch 'Smokey and the Bandit'. You comin'?' Marco made popcorn."

"No, I've already seen it with the kids, thanks."

"Okay." I leaned against the desk, grabbed the stack of slips and forms he was workin' out of. "You want me to finish writin' all this in?"

He just looked up at me at the top of his eyes, "No, I got it. Thanks."

"Ohh-kaaaay." I handed him back the stack and he kept writin' in the book. I finally just gave up. "Well, see ya."

"Yeah. See ya."

Roy:

I dropped the book down on the desk after he left. *Shit. Well, you about messed that up but good, Roy Patrick DeSoto.*

I really hadn't meant to give him the cold shoulder, but I guess I wasn't up to forgiving him, just then.

No...

No, the truth of the matter was I wasn't up to forgiving myself.

I guess I still had some things to sort out between Gil Robinson and my stupidity. I grabbed the log book again and picked up where I'd left off, hoping I'd be able to concentrate long enough to finish it before the wake-up tones tomorrow morning.

[two hours later]

Johnny:

I'd looked everywhere for him after the movie was done. Finally found him out back, leanin' on his car, scratchin' his neck, watchin' the 405 and lookin' kinda lonely, actually.

I didn't want to startle him so I just walked on over, real casual-like. I kicked a rock in his direction to let him know, except, I think it actually hit the car. I guess, maybe, that wasn't the best idea...

He musta heard me comin', 'cause he turned around as I got close. "Hey there."

“Hey there.”

“Nice night, isn’t it?” He looked up. Scratched again.

I looked up. Clear sky with a couple of stars out, now that twilight was finally gone. “Yeah. Real nice.” I walked closer. “Listen, uh, Cap says lights out in twenty.”

“Oh. Okay. That late already, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I went and leaned on my Rover since we were parked next to each other. “You, uh, you been out here all night?”

“No, I finished off the reports little while ago and then just came out here to enjoy the evening.”

“Oh.”

“How was the movie?”

“Uh...good. Good. Real, uh...it was good.” *Actually, I have no idea. I’d barely paid attention to it ‘cause all I was thinkin’ about was you.*

“That’s uh...that’s good.”

We watched the 405 for awhile.

“Listen, Roy—“

“Johnny, look—“

“Aw hell... You...go ahead.”

“Naw, you started first —“

“It’s okay, Roy, you...you go ahead—“

“No, that wouldn’t be fair—“

“Oh for Heaven’s sakes, listen to us. We can’t even get an argument started.”

He nodded and laughed. “Yeah, we’re pretty hopeless, huh?”

“Yeah,” I laughed and looked at him. His eyes were dancing with the lights of the city reflected in ‘em. One of the security lights from next door happened to be right behind him and it gave him a kind of soft, portrait glow around him. I didn’t want to lose my best friend. “Look, uh...I shouldn’t have said anything. About Gil, I mean. I was reaching and that was just not a nice thing to say, I guess.”

“Well,” he looked at me. “You may have been reaching but, truth be told, Johnny, you weren’t that far off the mark. I mean, I’m not jealous, I just want to make that clear.”

“Oh, yeah, no, I...I understand.”

“Guess I was more angry at myself for not being there for you guys. On that run, I mean.”

Leave it to Roy to leave me confused. “Whaddya mean you were angry at yourself? You’d just done ten rounds with a hang glider off a cliff, Roy! Did you really expect to come out of it with just a scratch?”

“I shouldn’t have been there in the first place. I should’ve listened to you when you asked whether I wanted another Squad to take over.”

“Oh, for crying out loud. Roy, listen. We do our jobs at the time to the best of our ability. Do you sit around on every run wondering how it’s going to affect the next one?”

“Well...no.”

“Then why are you making it an issue with the hang glider incident? Dammit, Roy, just let it go. You did what you did, what happened happened and you move on to the next one! I swear, you drive me crazy, sometimes.”

“Have you moved on from that girl in the ambulance?”

I opened my mouth to respond but...I couldn’t think of anything to say. Damn, if, well...he didn’t have a point. “Yeah, yeah, alright. You win.”

He had that coy smile on his face, “Wasn’t trying to make it a competition, Johnny.”

“Yeah, I know, I know...”

“I just feel like...I wanted to be there with you guys, that’s all. I mean, you’re my partner. I just feel like...I let you down, y’know?”

He started scratching the right side of his neck, again.

“Why do you keep scratchin’ for?”

He held his hands out, “It’s itchy. Why do you think?”

“Lemme take a look.”

“What for?”

“I dunno, maybe you picked up some horrible rash at Rampart that’s now metastasized to your brain.” I grinned at him.

“No doubt I caught it from you.”

“Very funny. Now let me look.”

He cocked his neck to the left and I grabbed my pen light and peered close at where he’d been scratching. I used one hand to keep his shirt collar out of the way and palpated real gentle with my other fingers. “This is where you got burned.”

“Yeah.”

I could see and feel that his skin was startin’ to peel.

And my own was startin’ to buzz, again, with how close we were to each other. I could hear his breathing, real close, could feel how warm he was against the light breeze.

“Skin’s startin’ to peel.”

“Yeah, I gathered.”

I placed his shirt collar back over him and rubbed him a little. I felt like our conversation wasn’t entirely finished. “About earlier. What we were talkin’ about?”

His breathing was deep. It took him a coupla moments to answer and he swallowed hard. “Yeah. What about it?” His voice was soft and a little ragged.

“You could never let me down, Roy. You’re my partner.”

Roy:

He moved around to my right and his hand tenderly squeezed my shoulder, then slid down my back and slipped off me as he headed back inside.

A warmth pulsed through me, right then; almost like how it felt on the cliff and I could still feel where his fingers had lightly touched the skin on my neck. It seemed like almost a full minute before I could take a breath, again.

I felt a sense of relief and terror at Johnny’s reassurance and...what I’d hedged was...permission.

Every logical argument I've made to myself against this was yelling at me inside my head. I wanted to keep fighting it. *No, that's not it.* No, I wanted to *want to* keep fighting it. But I...didn't really want to. I'd been fighting it for the better part of a week and it hadn't gone away, despite every point of debate I'd thrown at it.

Something about this...something about what was happening between us felt...right.

I suppose some would argue that my next decision was Mistake No. 8. And that very well may be the case.

In the end, I couldn't ignore my reaction to Johnny's 'invitation' any more than I could ignore the points of reason that demanded all rejection of how I felt.

But maybe there was a way that I could listen to both.

After all, we had all the time in the world...

Johnny:

I think that conversation in the parking lot kinda led to this "permission" we gave ourselves to just see what would happen. To not fight it, anymore; whatever "it" was supposed to be. I know, for myself, I got tired of tryin' to figure it out and figured that, well, since it keeps happening, maybe it's supposed to be a good thing.

Don't get me wrong – I was pretty scared! I really had no idea if I was gonna wake up one day and find that the feelin' had gotten stronger, or I was gonna find myself hating him, or suddenly not caring anymore and having everything go back to the way things were before all this happened without any explanation.

Which kinda seems like that's how all this started: with no explanation.

A few weeks of shifts went by and that whole time we found ourselves coming up with excuses to be around each other, to touch each other...

The Engine was out on a run as we got back to the station.

I got out before he did and started for the dayroom. He closed the Squad door, "Ow!"

I walked over and smiled at him, "You did it again, didn't you? You oughta have somebody take a look at that."

He threw me a knowing smile back and started for the kitchen, forcin' me to walk backward. "I did. It'll work itself out."

“I meant you should have a professional look at it.”

“Uh huh. You saying I’m not a professional?”

I stopped before we got to the kitchen, “No, I’m not saying that at all.” I lightly grabbed his fingers and brought them up, rubbing them a little as I just looked at him. “I’m just saying, you should have a professional take a look at it.”

“Uh huh.” He watched me examine his finger, that smile never leavin’ his face. I know ‘cause I kept checking.

Sure enough, that splinter in his index finger was long and wedged in there, but I was gonna need some help. I wasn’t all that sure about doin’ it – figured he’d pull back or something – but, still holding onto ‘im, I walked backward back to the port-side compartments to grab the tweezers out of the trauma box. He had this kinda shy look on his face the whole time. Took a coupla tries but I managed to relieve my long-suffering partner of his painful, traumatic impalement.

“There. That’ll teach you to grab the wooden slats of the gate instead of the handle.” I rubbed his finger where the splinter had been. He didn’t try to wriggle out of my grasp.

“Well we had to get inside pretty quick, didn’t we?”

“Uh huh.”

He looked down at my hand holding his fingers. “You know, I *was* gonna wait till I got to the locker room to take care of that.”

“And prolong your pain and suffering? As your partner, I couldn’t just let that happen, now, could I?”

Roy:

We kept brushing up against each other or our hands would linger on each other’s arm or shoulder when we were trying to get past each other on a run. I guess things between us had been slowly building since our conversation in the parking lot. I realized that I must have changed, too, because I did something I never thought I’d ever do.

We'd been at a 3-alarm and spent most of that time in the inevitable controlled chaos of the triage area we'd set up. With everybody tripping over each other and grabbing whoever was closest to assist, we found ourselves trading partners with the guys from 110s and 24s. And I gotta tell ya, Johnny and I about stopped in our tracks when we heard 24s was called in; thought as I gonna have to restrain Johnny or put him under if Dunning showed up. Fortunately for Dunning, he was still on suspension. Johnny and I'd barely seen each other the whole time as we got to treating a fair number of our brothers for smoke inhalation and a couple of minor and major fractures and burns. Johnny and I had a last-minute follow up to Rampart – respiratory distress cases from a couple of the guys who weren't wearing their masks doing overhaul. We argued the entire way back to the station about whether we should've stopped in the cafeteria to eat – which we didn't - or wait till we got back to the station for Mike Stoker's spaghetti – which we did.

Which led me straight to Mistake No. 9. Although I imagine it was No. 212 by this time...

I stopped in disbelief in the kitchen doorway to see the Engine crew draped over all the furniture.

And no spaghetti.

I started to feel a bit miffed, thinking they'd already cooked, eaten and cleaned up while we were gone and left nothing for Johnny and me.

Apparently, my partner had the same thought because he ran right into me and then stared over my shoulder at the empty, foodless kitchen. "Well...don't tell me you guys ate and cleaned up everything already?"

"Nope," Cap replied from the recliner, sounding pretty tired and disconsolate, fingers tapping the armrest.

"John? Roy? Tell me you brought food? I'm starving! I could eat a horse!" Chet grumbled from the couch, then plopped his head over the backrest.

"I could eat a horse *and* a cow. And maybe even a coupla chickens," Marco added wearily from the other end of the couch.

"Forget the horse and the cow, *I* could eat a whole whale! You mean you guys haven't even started dinner, yet? You left before we did!" Johnny said. His hand brushed along my hip before he scooted past me and headed straight for the cookie jars.

"Stoker claims that there's not enough time to make spaghetti," Cap answered with chagrin and an annoyed glance at Mike, who was sitting with his head down at the table. "Unless we want to eat at 10 O'clock. Frankly, we've just been too damned tired to get up and make something else."

I looked around at this stalwart crew of firemen – my intrepid brothers – soundly beaten by a lack of spaghetti.

I knew exactly how they felt.

It did surprise me, though, that no one remembered the marinated chicken that Charlie Wilson from C-shift had left in the fridge. I was about to mention it when Johnny handed me a couple of ginger cookies and he brushed past me to get to the bay. I guess he, too, had missed the physicality we seemed to have routinely settled into, of late.

So did I.

And before I knew it, a devious plot formed in my head.

“I have an idea, Cap. Since Johnny and I are the only ones left standing, why don’t we go grab something from the store?”

Cap, beaming, looked over at me and clapped his hands. “Great! What’re we having?”

“Great that Roy’s cooking?” Chet asked. “You really *are* starving.”

“No, it’s just great that it’s not *me* doing the cooking. What’re we having, Roy?”

Oh. Actually, I...hadn’t thought that far. “Ah...it’s a surprise. But we need to go grab some supplies.”

Cap threw me a desperate look, “At Rampart? Now?”

He must’ve really been in distress because I’ve rarely, if ever, heard him put us before the job.

“Yeah, weren’t you guys just there?” Marco asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Relax. I meant grocery supplies.”

Cap deflated, “Oh, right. Well, hurry back, alright? If we get another call before dinner, I’m giving you chow duties for the next month.” Somehow he managed to conjure up the energy to raise himself out of the chair and drag himself across the floor to the cookie jar.

“No problem, Cap,” I grabbed my partner and we hurried out of there.

It felt good for us to be alone. After the chaos of the day, it was nice to have some peace and quiet; for us to just be in the Squad together without doing anything urgent. It doesn’t happen very often. But it’s a nice time when it does. We didn’t say much the whole ride over. I guess we didn’t need to. Just being in our little hangout together was enough.

We pulled up to the store.

Johnny shifted in his seat, “Wait a second – didn’t Charlie leave that chicken in the fridge?”

Oops. “Uh...yeah, he did.” I turned to find a parking stall closer to the front entrance.

“Aw man, we coulda saved ourselves a whole trip! Now why didn’t someone remember that earlier?”

“Dunno. Guess everybody forgot.”

I pulled into a parking space, took the keys out and Johnny laid a hand on my arm, looking at me trying to hide my smile. “Why, you sly devil, you,” he grinned. “Well, you know *somebody’s* gonna remember. By the time we get back, it’ll all be cooked and we *still* woulda made this trip for nothin’.”

I felt a little bit crushed, at that.

Johnny:

I got out of the Squad and went to grab a cart. I could not *believe* my partner! I tell you, Roy’s got a sly side but he doesn’t show it very often. Trust him to come up with an excuse for us to be alone for a little while. Such a sly devil!

I grabbed an empty cart and looked around to find him so we could go in. He was walkin’ kinda slow, like he was deep in thought or sad or somethin’.

“What’s the matter? What’s wrong?”

He looked up at me, lookin’ real shy, “Even if the Engine crew remembers that chicken in the fridge, I still wouldn’t have considered this a wasted trip.”

Roy:

Puzzlement swept across his face and his mouth opened to say something. Then his confusion turned into a genuine Gage smile, “You know, you’re right. So! Pardner o’ mine!” he drummed on the cart handle. “What’re you making?”

“I have no idea. Maybe there’ll be a recipe on the side of the box.”

“What box?”

“Whatever we come across.”

We roamed the isles together until Shake’N’Bake™ jumped out at me and we both jumped at *it*.

Obviously, it would’ve gone faster and been more practical to divide the duties in gathering all the rest of the fixings for dinner, but we couldn’t seem to be bothered to do that. We hung around the basket and kept brushing past each other to reach for something or to get around one another. I think we just relished the proximity of each other.

It was quick work to find the rest of the ingredients and, I have to say, for a meal that that was conjured up last minute out of a box, it was one of the best meals we’d had in a long time.

And I was hoping no one really noticed how close Johnny and I sat next to each other at the table.

Johnny:

We kept maneuvering around each other, watching each other, checking our accumulated scrapes and cuts that we inevitably get on the job. I even had to wonder if sometimes we were doin' it on purpose, just so that we could have the other one check us out. I mean, I wasn't aware of *me* doing stuff like that on purpose, but maybe something unconscious was going on that even *I* wasn't aware of.

I noticed, too, that Roy stopped flinching from me every time I checked the burns on his face. Of course, I tried to come up with an excuse to check them often. He is my partner, after all. I do have an obligation to keep an eye on him. If...you know what I mean.

Roy:

Things remained on the surface like that for several weeks, becoming pretty routine between us. I don't know what was going through his mind, but, I had to admit, deep down...I kind of enjoyed it, that physical camaraderie between us, for lack of calling it anything else.

It was hard to know what...this meant for us. Whether we'd be able to continue as partners or even as friends. I was afraid that at some point, one of us, for whatever reason, was going to want a change. And whatever that entailed, however that manifested, it was going to change our relationship in a way that maybe we weren't ready for, that we hadn't anticipated.

And then a call came in that left me reeling in its wake, not unlike the way that incident with Dunning had rattled Johnny...