

Chapter 14

”Well, we’re here.”

“Yeah. We’re here.”

Roy:

We’re here.

Fantastic.

Just the two of us. Alone. For the next four days. Isolated. With no distractions, no interruptions.

And no place to escape to...

The reality of all this started seeping in when we got back to the station after that run with Little Eddie. It’d gotten steadily worse on the drive over and now it was solidly entrenched in my gut, churning like some evil concoction in Frankenstein’s lab. I couldn’t believe we were really going through with this and everything that’d happened up till now suddenly seemed absurd.

This is ridiculous. I mean, we’re two grown adults, aren’t we? There’s no reason we can’t just turn around and solve all of this on the way home. In fact, all we need to do is just agree ‘no more’. We’ll shake on it and go our separate ways until the next shift. Problem solved.

Yeah, I know. I wasn’t counting on that happening, either.

The butterflies had taken up fast and furious residence in my stomach, and I looked out at the surroundings to distract myself from their boisterous activity. The black oaks and a gray pine or two were sheltering the cabin as the sun started its slow slide westward and the bird calls seemed to fill the air under a peacefully blue sky.

It really is beautiful, here. I wonder what Joanne and the kids are doing..?

“Hey, look at that!” Johnny pointed to a hummingbird hovering and feeding on some flowers near one of the cabins.

It reminded me of that day at home when Johnny’d stop by for breakfast to warn me about Cap. I’d watched the cardinals in our backyard for a good portion of the morning, reflecting on the permanence and impermanence of things, of my life and what it would look like twenty years from now. I felt the serenity, that day, of a happy life and a life I was happy with and somehow, even considering any bumps in the road ahead, I felt like everything would turn out okay. Now, on the cusp of this trip, my feelings weren’t so certain, anymore.

My philosophical brother-in-law is fond of telling my son, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' I'm not sure it's quite the motivation my brother-in-law thinks it is, but it's about how I was feeling, right about then. Sure, once that first step is taken, it's easy. It's lifting your foot to *take* that step - that's the hard part and I knew this wasn't gonna be a walk in the park. I was stumbling along blindfolded with the very real possibility of plunging off a cliff. *How in the hell can anyone be expected to voluntarily walk toward disaster?*

I'd give my right arm to be a thousand miles from here.

From the entire situation.

Johnny:

We pulled up in my Rover to the pine green cabin with the white trim. According to the information I had on it, it was a cabin for four with one main room for sleeping and dining and a bathroom area. Not the most spacious place, but at least it got us away from home so we could concentrate on this one thing.

I looked around at all the mountains and the trees and hoped that we hadn't replaced one set of distractions with a whole other set.

If fact, what if...? *What if this didn't work?*

I thought of Gil Robinson when he said he felt like he had to have everything figured out before he went on a run. It'd suddenly occurred to me that...I'd been kinda thinkin' the same thing. About this thing between Roy and me and this whole trip; I was expecting us to be able to solve this in four days and that everything would be happy go-lucky between us by the time we left here. It never occurred to me that...maybe this *wouldn't* be solved. Our spending four days alone together might just make things worse between us or not do a damn bit of good.

Hell, what if...what if we...decided to just...hot-tail it to the Bahamas, or something? Or what if we hated each other so much that we'd have to transfer outta 51s? And what would we put as a reason? Or what if our requests for transfer got denied? Oh man, this whole thing could blow up in our face.

Maybe this wasn't such the good idea I'd had in my head....

Roy'd been kinda quiet on the drive up. After he called me to tell me how it'd gone with Joanne, we'd planned the trip kinda quick and I ran out and got some supplies. We'd decided after shift to take his car back to his place, grab his gear and then drive up in my Rover. But I think that thing with Melissa really dragged him down and he didn't really say much the whole ride over. I tried to get his mind off of it and talk about other stuff, but it was obvious his mind was somewhere else.

I looked back at the cabin and then at the map to make sure we were at the right one. "Well, according to the brochure, this is one of the more secluded areas, but it's away from the best fishing spots. Got a couple of decent hiking spots, though."

Roy:

So much for getting away from distractions. “Look, I know this is a nice serene area, but let’s not forget we’ve got a serious situation to deal with.”

“Yeah, I know I know. I haven’t forgotten. C’mon, let’s check it out.”

He got out and it was all I could do to drag myself out of the car and trudge in the muddy earth after him. He unlocked the cabin, opened the door and both of us about keeled over. Warm, humid air carrying the most pungent, mustiest odor of mold and mildew came outta that cabin and we had to take a few steps back.

“Oh, *man!*” He made a face and waved the air in front of him.

“That’s unlivable,” I said. “There’s no way we can stay in there.”

“What’re we gonna do?”

Collapse in relief. “Go home, I guess.”

He threw me a look like I’d told him I’d outright killed my dog.

“Well, what else can we do? It’s obvious we can’t stay in there and I would imagine all the other cabins are taken. Johnny, what’re you doing?”

He’d stepped up to the door to peer inside. “Don’t worry, I’m not goin’ in. I just want to see... Roy, lookit. There’s a coupla puddles on the floor.”

I came up right next to him and peered in. “Yeah. Probably a hole in the roof or something. C’mon, let’s get outta here.”

“Yeah, no argument from me.” He locked the door and started back toward the car. “Well I guess we need to go back to the ranger station.”

“What for?”

“Whaddya mean ‘what for?’ We need to report this.”

“How do you figure that?”

Yeah, I know, it was a stupid question. But I found myself blurting it out before I could stop myself. I mean, *of course* we had to report it. I was just worried that they’d find some other cabin to throw us in and we’d have to go through with this whole charade, anyway.

“Roy, how else are they gonna know it’s unusable? Obviously, the previous occupants never bothered to say anything about leaks or whatever’s gone wrong in there and no one’s checked it or else they woulda cordoned it off. Man, what is wrong with you today?”

I miss my kids, Johnny. And I don’t want to do this. I just don’t want to know the answers to all the questions that’ve been plaguing my brain since this whole thing started...

Johnny:

He just kinda stood there, lookin’ a little lost and not a little irritated. I couldn’t fathom what was goin’ on with him and, frankly, his silent treatment on the way over had kinda gotten under my skin. And now he was acting goofy. I wasn’t feeling real sympathetic so I just went back to the Rover. He caught up to me and got in the car lookin’ even more irritated.

Made two of us. This trip was lookin’ like it was about to end before it’d even started and we hadn’t even begun to work on settling this thing between us. I think the stress was starting to get to us.

We got to the ranger station and made our case with Ranger Nyquist and all of his 6’5” bulk – which looked even more imposing with his hat on.

“You say you’re Los Angeles County fire rescue men?”

“Yup,” I answered. “Outta Station 51. Carson.”

He checked our IDs. “You fellas do a lot of hiking, by chance?”

“I do. Belong to the mountain hiking club back home. Even brought some flags.”

“Can I see them?”

“Uh...yeah.” I glanced at Roy real quick as I dug into my knapsack, wondering what this was all about. All of a sudden I felt like I was in the principal’s office having to explain something that wasn’t my fault. “Figured I’d bring ‘em along, in case a flag or two were faded or somethin’, y’know? Habit, I guess. It’s not against federal law or nothin’, is it? I mean, I can leave ‘em here with you if –”

He held up a hand at me, scrutinized the flags, handed ‘em back and said, “Stay right here.”

He disappeared and was gone for about half an hour. Roy’s irritation started steadily climbing with each passing minute. Don’t get me wrong, so was mine, but I knew he was still upset about Melissa and I knew that’s what was driving his mood.

After sighing, pacing and rubbing his hands together he finally turned to me, “Why don’t we just go home. This was entirely unnecessary.”

“Aw c’mon, Roy, we came this far. He could come out of there any minute now and give us some good news.”

“With the house empty, we coulda just done this at home.”

“Uh-uh. No way.”

“What do you mean ‘uh-uh’?”

“Roy, we came here to get away from distractions, right?”

“Right. And right now my distractions are all camping.”

“No.”

“No?” He leaned in and threw me a suspicious look and growled at me. “You mind telling me what you did with my family?”

“Roy, your *family’s* camping. The *distractions* aren’t gone. Somebody woulda called askin’ you to sub. Or that new neighbor o’ yours you’re always complaining about woulda found some excuse to stop by.”

“Everett?”

“Yeah. Him.”

“Yeah. I know,” he said resigned. “He means well, you know. He’s just lonely.”

“Sure, he’s lonely. But why can’t he join a church or some social club instead of buggin’ you and Joanne about every little thing and trying to insinuate himself into your lives?” Of course, Roy did have a point. “Then again, you might be on to something. We coulda done this at my place.”

“Uh-uh. No way.”

“Why not?”

“Need I remind you of how much I enjoyed the last visit. Speaking of neighbors who are helpless and mean well...”

“Yeah. I remember. Which leaves us with no choice. Meaning we don’t have a lot of choice.”

Finally, Ranger Nyquist returned. “Gentlemen, I’ve been ordered to ask you to direct me to the cabin in question.”

Roy’s face dropped. “You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me! Now look, we didn’t have anything to do with the current state of that cabin, alright? All we wanted to do is report it because it seemed pretty obvious that it’d gotten trashed somehow before we got here. In fact, I’m pretty sure our job here is done. I think we’re just gonna go home, right now –”

I grabbed his arm. “Roy. Roy! Take it easy, alright?”

“I don’t want to take it easy, Johnny. I’m tired, I’m irritated, and I don’t appreciate being accused of lying –“

“He’s not accusing us—! Look, he’s not accusing us of lying about the cabin. He probably has to check it out and sign it off so we can get our money back. He’s just doing his job, okay? The man’s just doing his job. Let’s just go with him, get this out of the way and then we’ll be on *our* way. Alright? I mean, what choice do we have anyhow?”

I felt the tension ease out of his arm, “Fine.” Roy turned to Nyquist, “You know, I’m pretty sure the number of the cabin is on the permit, there – ”

“*Roy*,” I growled a warning at him to just cool it.

I turned back to Nyquist and frankly, I couldn’t tell if he had super-patient genes or had tuned us out. He had to be one of the most stoic-faced people I’d ever come across. “Uh, sorry about that. He didn’t mean it. It’s just been kinda rough, lately.”

“I understand. You gentleman ready?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah. You ready?” I asked Roy.

“Yeah, I’m ready. *Of course* I’m ready. *Been* ready for the past half hour! Why would I not be ready?”

“Okay, okay! I was just askin’! You don’t have to bite my head off.”

So we hopped back in the car and led Ranger Nyquist to our favorite cabin. He had the same reaction to the mold we’d had so he roped off the place, put up warning signs and wrote up his report. Then he proceeded to drop a bombshell on us.

The good Ranger was a former LA City rescue firefighter. While he had needed to inspect the cabin, his primary purpose for this little side trip was to get us out of public earshot. You can imagine that tidbit had us entirely confused and not a little wary. He asked us to follow him from the moldy cabin and he drove us to another area way out of the way to an unused ranger’s cabin. They’d built a new one further down the road but kept this one for back-ups and emergencies.

Since I’d brought my trail-marking flags and us bein’ rescue men, he’d unofficially cleared it with his boss that they’d allow us the unofficial use of the cabin if we agreed to stay low, keep quiet about it and re-flag at least one of the trails. The flags had gotten so faded that they’d had to close the trails, but none of the rangers had had a chance to re-flag them. Oh, and to be ready for any possible but improbable drop-in by a ranger or two in case of an emergency. We’re firemen - we’re trained to be ready for anything in case of an emergency so that was obviously not a big problem for us. He gave us the grand tour and we agreed to take the cabin.

Finally! Something good was coming our way and I could tell it had brightened Roy's mood a little. We took the offer and Nyquist finally smiled and apologized for coming across before like a goal post; he had to keep up appearances at the ranger station. Roy apologized to him, he handed us the information on the trails that were closed, gave us the keys and more instructions and was on his way.

I rubbed my hands on my jeans as I looked at our incredible digs for the next few days. "Well, let's get our stuff and go check it out."

We grabbed our bags and started to move in.

Unlike the cabin Carl had rented, this cabin was pretty rustic and built like a log cabin. It had a stone chimney on the outside and a flagless flagpole. The best part was that it had electricity, a fridge, a two-burner stove, two bedrooms, a living area, an open porch that looked out upon the forest, a proper bathroom and a stone fireplace.

"Well this beats roughing it in a cabin for four days!"

Roy seemed distracted as we each grabbed one end of the box of lamps and flashlights and set it down in the living room. "Roy, you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm just..." He sighed and rubbed his forehead.

Roy:

No, I'm not alright.

I honestly couldn't have told you why at the time, but even though the move to the ranger cabin was more physically comfortable and gave us more space between us, it ramped up my anxiety even more. This whole trip was getting worse for me by the minute and all I could think about was how to get us out of this and just go home.

I saw Johnny move to take something small out of a box and he placed it on the wooden coffee table. I couldn't believe my eyes. "You brought a portable TV?"

"Yeah. It's Marco's brother's TV." He started for the door.

I was flabbergasted. "Why'd you bring that for?"

His eyes narrowed. "To watch it!"

"I thought the whole point of this was to figure things out between us?"

"Roy, we've got *four days*. Now, I don't know about you, but odds are, we're gonna need a break here and there and in case one of those breaks happens at twelve midnight, *I'm* not planning on goin' out there," he thumbed outside.

“Alright. I understand your point. I just feel like...we’re making this out to be some kind of...vacation.”

“Well? And so what if we were?”

Because it’s my head on Joanne’s mother’s very shiny, silver platter if word of this ever gets out. “I...”

“What?”

“Well it’s just... Look, I told Joanne this wasn’t exactly gonna be fun for us, y’know?”

“So what? Now you’re feeling guilty because we might watch *television*?”

I’m not sure when he plans it, but every so often Johnny has a tendency to make something sound sensible. “You’re right. It is kinda stupid.”

“Roy. I get why we’re here. Besides, this *was* my idea, remember?”

“Yeah...” *And why the hell did I let you talk me into it?*

“We’re already gonna be uncomfortable. I’m just trying to make an uncomfortable situation a little more comfortable.”

“I understand. Sorry. Guess I’m a little anxious about all of this.”

“Yeah, well, that makes two of us.”

Well, so much for sorting this out between us. We were off to a fantastic start. If this is how it’s gonna be for the next few days, maybe we oughta just cut our losses and go home. Then again, maybe if can somehow manage to hate each other by the end of this, that’ll have solved the whole problem...

That little argument got me more wound up. And when I get wound up, I wanna relax. When I want to relax, I eat. Johnny followed me into the galley-style kitchen, taking out the supplies and getting ready to transfer our stuff from the cooler to the fridge. I grabbed the bag of snacks I’d brought with me., except the chips I wanted were at the bottom, so I had to dig through all of that.

“You’re not really gonna dig in there and make that racket all day, are ya?”

“I’m just looking for a bag of chips, do you mind? I mean, can’t a guy just look for a bag of chips in peace?”

“Not with all that racket you’re makin’,” he growled under his breath. I think he thought *I* thought he was trying not to say it too loud, but I know for a fact he knew perfectly well he was saying it loud enough for me to hear it.

“I heard that.”

Suddenly, he was right next to me, lookin' at me with pure astonishment on his face. "You're actually gonna *eat* all that? In four days?"

"Well, yeah! You know how I am, I like to snack when I go to bed."

"Don't I know it... You know, they do have a mini-mart near the park entrance. I mean, we're not landing ourselves in jail, you know."

"Yeah, I know, I know! You don't have to worry, I'm not gonna force ya to have any of this if you don't want any! In fact, I'll be so quiet, you'll never know I brought any!"

Johnny:

Oh man... This was not going well at all. I huffed back to check the fridge to see how cold it was and realized...it wasn't. Dang it, I'd forgotten that Nyquist told us to clear out all the food and turn the fridge off when we left. Hadn't stopped to think that it'd *be* off when we came in.

I heard the rummaging stop.

"Hey, Roy?" I looked over and he was pondering a bag of chips. Then he just tossed it onto the counter and put his hands on his hips with a big sigh.

"Yeah?"

"We've got a bit of a problem, here."

He turned with defeat all over his face. "Now what?"

"The fridge isn't cold. It wasn't even turned on when we came in. It's gonna take awhile for it to cool down."

He rolled his eyes and reached to grab the chips and just stood there staring at it. I went over to him, sensing that both of us were ready to call a truce. "Listen, I think it's pretty obvious this isn't startin' off real well. Why don't we finish bringin' the rest of the stuff in here and then we'll get outta here for awhile? Walk around and check the place out before it gets dark."

"Yeah. Okay. Guess we're not doin' ourselves any favors, right now. Maybe some fresh air'll do us good."

It was already late afternoon and it didn't take us long to get all our gear out of the Rover. We finally grabbed our jackets and headed out to give the fridge time to get cold.

There was a small dirt path that led out from the porch that paralleled the nearby forest with a whole buncha smaller trails heading into the trees. We just kinda strolled along the main path, real quiet, each of us in our own thoughts, checkin' everything out. It almost seemed like the oaks were sneaking up on the ranger cabin and I could see the sun peeking through the treetops as we wandered down the path. The peace of the whole place started easin' my mood down and I finally started to feel a bit calmer about this whole thing.

Roy:

It felt good to be outside, get away from the confinement of four walls. My mother used to tell me to go outside whenever I started feeling down about things; always made my problems seem kinda miniscule compared to the world at large.

He walked ahead of me while I hung back a little. Somehow it seemed easier, gave us some extra space, I guess. From what, though, I wasn't sure. We just kinda wandered along like that for a while, not really walking together even though the path was wide enough, but not able to really separate ourselves from each other, either. Like somehow we found both anxiety and comfort in each other's presence.

"Hey, Roy?" Johnny's voice sounded small amid all the trees as he kicked a small rock along with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Yeah?"

"You, uh...you give any thought to how we should, uh, how we should do this?"

I had to laugh a little. Strangely, even through all my worrying about it, that truly hadn't occurred to me. "Not really, to be honest. It's funny you mention it; I honestly hadn't considered it."

It was a valid question. About knocked me off my feet, as a matter of fact.

Out of all the conversations I'd kicked around in my head the past couple of days imagining how all of this was gonna go down, it hadn't entered my mind – not once - about how it'd even get started; how we'd even get around to approaching it. Guess I'd assumed it'd take care of itself.

Remember what I said before about lifting your foot to take that first step? That was Johnny's way of bringing it up, I guess. The big question was, whose foot was it gonna be and where was it going to land?

Johnny heard some water trickling off to our left and we headed down. There was a nice stream running along with some rocks we could sit on.

Johnny:

We sat next to each other on two separate rocks and just sat in silence for awhile listening to the gurgling of the stream and the birds in the trees. A gentle breeze blew through the oaks and the yews. I looked over at him, staring at the water. “You’ve been, uh, awfully quiet all day, Roy. You’ve been re-thinking this whole thing, haven’t you?”

He didn’t say anything for a while. It was okay; wasn’t in any hurry, I guess.

He finally straightened up, rubbing his hands on his jeans, like he was nervous. “Yeah.” He sounded almost regretful, then a smile lit up his face just for a second, like he was apologizing. “That obvious, huh?”

“No, not really. I just know you, I guess.”

“Yeah,” he breathed. He settled back with his elbows on his knees again, and started ripping some poor innocent leaf to shreds while he stared at whatever was in his head. “I’m sorry, Johnny, for being outta sorts this whole trip. Guess I’m...guess I’m sad ‘cause I miss my kids.”

I knew he was sad about his kids, but I had to wonder if he wasn’t something else, too. Took me a few minutes to get up the nerve to ask.

“Are ya mad at me?”

He looked at me real surprised. “No, Johnny. Why would I be mad at ya?”

I saw some poor little bug on a leaf struggling to right itself. So I picked up the leaf to see if I could help it out. I *am* a rescue guy, after all. “‘Cause you’re here instead of being with your kids. I don’t know, maybe you blame me for this whole thing.”

Roy:

Where does he get these ideas?

“No – God, Johnny, no, I don’t – I’m not mad at ya and I don’t...I don’t blame you for anything.”

He wasn’t looking convinced, even as he played with the bug on the leaf. “I don’t blame you for any of this, alright? You understand? I don’t blame you, Johnny.”

Satisfied with the bug, he finally put the leaf down.

Johnny:

“Yeah, okay. I understand.”

The silence just kinda settled between us again for a long time, both of us staring at the stream. I grabbed a few rocks and tried to bounce 'em off the surface of the water. I kept thinking of something else to say, but nothing came to mind. I couldn't believe it! Roy and I are best friends! We've known each other...how many years? Been through thick and thin and yet we couldn't come up with not two words to say to each other over something we left home for!

"God, Roy, what the hell are we so afraid of? I mean, we've run into burning buildings...a thousand times! We've had the responsibility of how many patients?"

"Yeah. But we've never had to deal with anything like this."

"Well it can't be that difficult."

He laughed. "Well then, be my guest, if you've got it all figured out."

I grabbed another rock and toyed with it, annoyed with myself. "No. I don't." Then I whipped it into the water. "Dammit, Roy, why are we making this so much harder than it is?"

"Maybe we're afraid of the consequences."

"But what would those even be? I mean, we've agreed that we don't even know what this is."

"Maybe we do, but we just don't want to be the first one to say it."

"Would you quit answering my questions and be as confused as I am?"

At least he had the decency to look abashed. "Sorry. I'll try to be less informative."

"I'd appreciate it."

I looked at him again. He still had his elbows on his knees and the little bits of leaf he'd torn up fell like snowflakes onto the mossy rocks as he put his face in his hands.

I was a little bit worried for him. "What's wrong?"

He sighed, wrapped his palm around his fist and settled his chin on his hands, "Guess I'm just...*real nervous.*"

Roy:

He looked back at me with an awfully sad expression...and then that frown of his morphed into a grin underneath that cagey twinkle in his eye. That's never a good combination and I immediately got suspicious. "What?"

His grin got wider. "You've got, um..." he gestured to his cheek. "You've got a buncha leaf...things..."

Fantastic. Here we are, trying to have a serious conversation and he gets comedic on me... I wiped my face and looked back at him.

“Other side.”

Naturally. I wiped the other side and turned my head so he could see.

His grin got wider and he laughed and shook his head. “Nope.”

Wiseguy. I tried again. Still nothin’.

“No, there’s still a few left. Here...” He shifted on his rock to sit square with me. He leaned in and reached up. I felt his hand on my face, real gentle and a warmth flooded right through me at his touch. Warmth and...a kind of calm, I guess. All the anxiety I’d been keeping pent up just...disappeared the moment we made physical contact.

I’d been trying to convince myself all day that this was all a waste of time, but that went right out the window the moment he touched me.

I watched him trying to pick at leaf remnants on my face. His eyes were inches from mine and I flashed back to the cliff..

...I knew I was digging my fingers into him but I couldn't help it.

I was thankful to have something solid to hold onto. I hoped it would anchor me and ease this agitation I was feeling. But being up close to Johnny wasn't doing my body any favors. In fact...it was amplifying whatever it was that just kick started every nerve to come alive at once.

Holding onto him, feeling him against me, I was aware of him. How warm his body felt, his arm around me, mine around him. I could feel every point of contact our bodies made. Could feel his heartbeat, feel him breathing.

I'd never been aware of him, before.

Not like this...

I’d lost a bit of memory of that rescue, but some of what I did recall flashed through my head. I remembered being hauled up over the top of the cliff – feeling cold when Johnny handed me off to our brothers – and seeing them hovering over me: Mike getting my blood pressure, Marco my pulse and respirations, Chet was readying the bandages while Cap administered the O2.

I realized with a sense of shame that we really did need to deal with this.

Johnny:

He reached up and gently grabbed my hand. My heart about beat outta my chest, though I wasn't sure if it was from surprise or the contact. I could feel his eyes on me and I knew I had to keep focused on what I was doing. *I'd better get these last coupla leaves or we could be in for a whole lotta trouble... Got 'em!*

I showed 'em to him like they were trophies. He smiled a little bit but it was obvious something else was going on behind those blue eyes o' his that were lookin' right through me. I had a funny feeling that we were both feeling the same thing. *Man, this trip really wasn't the good idea I'd had in my head...*

I turned my hand inside of his and placed the leaves into his palm and curled his fingers closed. He opened his hand to look but the leaves fell out.

"Oh well," he shrugged as he moved his leg to look for 'em.

I shrugged at him. "No big deal. They're just going back to where they came from."

"Yeah," he chuckled. "Thanks."

Another breeze blew through the oaks and a flock of birds flew overhead, squawking kinda loud. We both looked up to track them.

"Looks like it'll start getting dark soon," Roy said and rubbed his hands on his jeans. "C'mon, let's get back to the cabin before *we* become chow for all the nocturnal predators."

"It's not *that* late."

"Yeah, I know. But I also forgot we'd skipped lunch; I'm starving."

He shouldn't have mentioned 'nocturnal predators' 'cause it got my brain thinking. He offered me a hand up and we got back on the path and headed back to the cabin.

I stopped and pretended to tie my shoe so he would walk in front of me. I watched...calculated...I tiptoed to catch up to him and let out my best bear yell, "Yaaargh!" and bear-hugged him. 'Cept he'd heard me at the last second and jumped to side-step me, so I caught him from his right side instead of from behind.

I wasn't sure if he yelped back out of surprise or fear, but the look on his face had me in stitches! All wide-eyed in shock, his hair practically standing on end. He tried to wriggle out of my grasp, but I kept my hold on him. As it turned out that wasn't the best idea 'cause he swiveled and got me in a head-lock and gave me a sternum rub right on the top of my head! Ouch!

"Damn, Roy! That hurts!" I finally wriggled out of his grasp and rubbed my head, surprised and happy that he'd actually played along 'cause he doesn't always.

“Well that oughta teach you to scare your partner half to death.”

Roy:

A surprised, triumphant glee lit up his face. “Did I really scare you?”

“Yeah, you scared me. I almost had a heart attack. What’d you go and do that for, anyway?”

He splayed out his claws and wild eyes and whispered, “Night predators.” Then he laughed, pleased as punch with himself. “Man, I can’t believe that really worked! You know, for a second there, I thought you were on to me, ‘cause I knew you’d heard me.”

“I *did* hear you. I was trying to figure out why you were about to run into me, which is why I moved.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured.”

“I hadn’t counted on being attacked.”

He laughed. “Oh, man, just the expression on your face was worth it. Wished I had a camera, that was an excellent look on her face, pally, you shoulda seen it.”

“Fantastic. I’m glad you thought it was swell. Are you happy now?”

“I’m very happy, pardner-o-mine, very happy. Man I can’t wait to tell Chet—“

He stopped in the middle of the dirt path, his hands on his hips. The trees towered over him and his face was in shadow with the sun behind him. I started to get a little worried as his expression shifted with all the thousand thoughts going through his head.

“What is it?”

He looked up at me with sadness, hurt and anger in his watering eyes. That got my alarm bells going off.

He put up his hands, backed away from me and shook his head. “I can’t— I can’t do this, Roy. I can’t do it.” He took another step back and high-tailed it to the cabin.

“Johnny?” No answer. “Johnny!”

He was walking so fast I practically had to jog to catch up with him. I laid a hand on his elbow to slow him down, but he gently twisted out of my grasp, hands up, and continued on. “I’m not— I can’t do it, Roy. I can’t.”

I could barely keep pace with him. “Why not?”

“Because, Roy, there’s just... There’s just no point, a’right?”

He broke away from me and hotfooted it up the trail. The irony of this wasn't lost on me, the fact that we'd each done a one-eighty from where we were just this morning. Somehow, I was gonna have to swing him back another one-eighty and get us both on the same page or the entire point of this trip would become moot. I could just see the look on Joanne's face if all I told her was that it'd taken four days for Johnny and I just to decide to talk about it. Did I mention my mother-in-law's very shiny, silver platter with my head squarely on it...?

I reached the cabin and stopped on the steps; I could hear him rummaging inside. Then he walked out with a couple of the lanterns.

"What're you doing?"

"Packing up, Roy. Going home," he answered as he skipped past me down the steps, whipped out his keys and headed down the opposite path to where the Rover was parked.

I followed after him. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden? We came all the way over here to talk about this and now you wanna just forget about it?"

He stopped on a dime on the dirt path, the rocks crunching under his feet as he spun around to face me. "Yeah, Roy. Because there's nothing to talk about."

He got to the Rover and dumped the lanterns inside.

I blocked his path as he turned back toward the cabin. "Now look, we've got a serious situation on our hands. We can't afford to act like this is some kind of a joke."

"You see me laughing, Roy? I wish to hell it were a joke."

He tried to stalk off again, but I grabbed his arm and held him in place. "I don't understand you. You harp on me all day about needing to settle this thing between us and now you do a one-eighty –"

"Fine! You wanna settle this? Then let's *settle* this! How do you feel, Roy? Can you answer me that? How do you *feel*?"

His pure vehemence stunned me for a moment. "I—I don't know, Johnny –"

"Well I don't know, either! I don't know how I feel! So we're even. Neither of us knows how we feel about something we can't even put our finger on! Clearly, there is nothin' to talk about, so I don't see any reason we can't just skedaddle outta here and go home!"

"Look, it's not that I don't know where you're coming from, but we can't do that."

"Well why the hell not? Look, it's real simple, Roy. We say 'enough' and voila! Done! That's it! Everything's *aalllll* settled." He slid his hands across himself like a hula dancer.

"You know full well that's not gonna happen."

He wagged a finger at me. “We just get Chet to help us out with one of his crazy philosophy books and we’re good as new.”

“And how’re you gonna explain to him why we need one of his crazy philosophy books?”

He opened his mouth but if there was a thought in his head it never made it out of his mouth. He frowned and his hands started to wave around a little. “Well... I mean...it’s not like we’d have to...say...anything...”

“Uh huh.”

His eyes darted around, trying to come up with another angle. But I think he felt cornered ‘cause his anger returned; I could see it clouding his face. “Fine! I know you’re right...” He fidgeted and huffed a few breaths, sure signs that his anger was still smoldering. “*Shit*, Roy. I *don’t* want to do this!”

“I know you don’t. I don’t either, but we don’t have a choice.”

“Look, all we gotta do—”

I stepped close to him. “Can you turn your feelings on and off? Just like that?” I snapped my fingers.

“Well, we’re just gonna *have* to, Roy.”

Uh huh. I reached for the top button on his button-down shirt and started to undo it. He involuntarily took a step back and breathed a sharp intake of breath, his hand on mine, as if in defense. His eyes snapped shut and his voice was a shaky whisper. “Roy...?”

I let go of him and smoothed his shirt to let him know it was okay. He took a deep breath and visibly relaxed before looking at me with an expression I couldn’t read. Relief? Disappointment? Or something else, I couldn’t tell.

“That was pretty extreme, granted. But I wasn’t trying to freak you out or come onto ya. I just needed you to understand. Were you in control just then? Can you guarantee that you can keep your feelings under control, keep ‘em locked away, day in and day out, shift after shift, in every situation—?”

“Alright! You made your point,” he muttered. He turned away with his face in his hands and put his head against them on the Rover. “Dammit, Roy, this whole thing’s got me turned upside down.”

“It has me turned upside down, too. But, you were right and you’ve been right all along. We need to figure this out, because the not knowing is gonna drive us to the funny farm. It’s already wreaking havoc and we haven’t even gotten started yet. But the most important reason we have to consider is that it could very easily make our job that much more dangerous. If it was just you and me and we were a coupla CPA’s, that might be one thing. But what if Chet or Marco gets hurt because neither of us was paying attention? Or Mike? Or Cap? I don’t think either of us are willing to deal with the consequences.”

He straightened up, looking defeated, then leaned back on the Rover, looking at his fingernails.
“Yeah... You’re right. I just...”

“What?”

He opened his mouth, but for once in his life, was silent. He warily glanced at me then shook his head.
“Naw...”

In the expression he threw me, I realized what had stopped us – had stopped me was more like it – from being able to start this conversation this whole time; to even consider how it would start. “Look, why don’t we make this the first rule: no judgments. We’re each allowed to say what we need to say without recrimination. We need to be able to be honest with one another or this isn’t gonna fly. Deal?”

He nodded then let out a long breath, like he’d been weighed down by thirty air packs.

“Deal. *Definitely* a deal.”

“Alright. So what were you gonna say? You can take your time, by the way, I mean, it’s not like we’re going anywhere.”

“Just that...” he sighed, again. “Look, maybe we oughta figure out what this is, first, y’know? ‘Cause maybe, if it’s nothin’ then we wouldn’t have a problem, right?”

I considered that. “Yeah. Okay. I guess I can see your point. You first, though.”

The look he threw me was total indignation. “Whaddya mean ‘me first’? Why me?”

“It was your idea.”

His face screwed up and he skewered me with a *look*. “Fine. Be that way. Okay. All right. Here we go...” Resignation crossed his face then he planted his feet, preparing to make his charge. His eyes flickered at me every so often as if gauging he was on the right track. “Okay. So. We’ve got this...thing, right? I mean, we’ve got this...thing between us. You and...me....Me ‘n’...you –”

Oh brother...

“—We’ve got this...like how I was saying, we’ve got this....”

“—thing—“

“—thing—“

“...between us, this...yeah, like you just said, this...thing... that we have between us...”

“I assumed when you proposed your idea that we’d agree on it sometime before Christmas.”

“I’m gettin’ to it. Don’t...rush me.”

“I have to. We only have three more days.”

His hands waved around. “I’m just tryin’ to find the right...words....tryin’ to....build up to it, y’know?”

“You might wanna try building faster.”

“Alright! Alright. Boy, you can be real pushy sometimes.”

“By the time you get to it, Johnny, there won’t *be* anything between us. Although maybe I’m beginning to see the wisdom in your strategy.”

“Alright. Okay.” He took a deep breath and tried a different approach. “A’right, look, you and me...that is....you and I....have this...kind of....*thing* going on between us that I think...maybe we might both acknowledge, y’know, as actually...*happening* between the two of us...in maybe a sort of way that you and I, that *we*, might maybe agree, perhaps is really...y’know, going on—”

This is going nowhere... “Let’s just say it. We’re attracted to each other.”

He whipped his head at me in complete, utter astonishment.

Johnny:

I couldn’t...!...believe he’d—!

I had to turn away ‘cause I couldn’t look him in the eye.

Hearing it aloud all of a sudden brought this intense feeling over me and I was completely overwhelmed. I was still feelin’ kinda heady from when he’d reached over to my shirt and what he’d said just now kinda sent me over the edge.

His voice sounded funny to my ears, like he was *real* far away... “I’m sorry to be so blunt about it, but if we’re gonna start bein’ honest then we need to be honest. Y’know, *before* we actually leave here...”

I had to stop and put a hand out ‘cause I was feeling dizzy. “Whoa...”

“What’s wrong?”

I wavered a bit. “...kinda dizzy...”

Roy:

I grabbed him and sat him down on the rear bumper. “Siddown. You alright?”

He put a hand to his head and just sat there, breathing pretty shallow.

“Johnny?” I put my hand on his back and kept one on his shoulder and held him steady. “Here, just breathe, okay? Nice and easy. Take slow, deep breaths for me, alright?”

He sat still, trying to control his breathing for a couple minutes.

“You alright?”

He nodded. He turned to look at me then turned quickly away, again, and huffed a breath. “I can’t even look at you.”

“Then don’t try to.”

“Hell, Roy. That’s a helluva reaction, don’tcha think? I’m supposed to be attracted to you and I can’t even look at you?”

“’S okay. How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve been hit by a ton of bricks.” He took a few breaths, winding himself up. “I mean, I suppose it was obvious, but...hearing it out loud just...man, that about knocked me over!”

Johnny:

“I noticed. Look, I knew what you were trying to say and I had a feeling that if we spent the whole time tripping over ourselves, we’d never get around to it.” He sighed. “One of us had to say it. I mean, it had to come out at some point,” he sounded resigned.

“Yeah, I hear ya. Guess I just didn’t expect it so soon. And so....”

We looked at each other.

“Direct?”

“Yeah. Man, you can’t get anymore direct than that, I’ll tell you.”

“Can you stand? We should be getting back inside.”

I was still feelin’ kinda heady. “Give me a sec.”

I closed my eyes to level my head. And then my whole world turned upside down. Literally. In the span of about five seconds I went from sitting on my car to bein’ yanked forward and lifted up in the air. “Whoa! Hey! Roy!”

All I could see was Roy’s arm and feet below my head and my own feet dangling on the other side of him as he walked back to the cabin. I had to admit, even though I was still upset, it was kinda fun, once I got over the initial shock, but there was no way in hell I was ever gonna tell *him* that. “Roy!”

“Maybe that’ll teach you not to scare your partner half to death.”

Besides, I swear he had that evil grin on his face.

Roy:

I carried him back to the cabin. He protested all the way, but his enthusiasm seemed to wane with each passing step. I finally let him down near the bottom of the steps and he hung onto me as he slid off me. His hand lingered at the back of my neck and it sent a warm shiver right through me.

Johnny:

A joke came into my head about all this, but I think we were both still reeling from that admission and I was afraid the humor would get lost and he’d get angry and we’d start in on all the arguing, again. I was just too tired and too wired to deal with anything like that, so I let it go.

I think, in another time and place it might’ve been pretty funny, but I realized just then how much our relationship had changed.

And that made me real sad.

Roy:

His hand slid off my shoulder and he trudged up the steps like he’d done ten hours of overhaul; a bit of a drastic change from his enthusiastic griping from just a moment ago. *Now what is he upset about?*

He was worrying me with his abrupt mood changes. Johnny’s not like that and the only thing I could think of was that this whole thing was weighing on him a lot more than he was letting on. I couldn’t allow that to continue; I had to find a way to keep him talking.

I traipsed after him and followed him into the kitchen, where he was unloading the kitchen supplies. We worked in silence for a bit while I waited for hm to get things off his chest. He usually does that on his own, but it was clear this time he was in need of a prodding by Yours Truly.

I grabbed the bag of plates and napkins he handed me. “You want to tell me what’s eating at you?”

“What? Oh. Nothing.” He dug into the box and brought out a couple of pots.

This has to stop here and now... “Johnny, listen, we can’t afford to be side-stepping anything. We’ve only got three more days and I guarantee you they’re gonna go by awfully fast. We need to be totally honest with each other; get everything out in the open so there’s no ‘what ifs’ by the time we leave here. If there’s something on your mind, I’d like you to feel comfortable enough to tell me. We decided no judgments, right?”

He stopped, hands over the box. “Right.”

“Okay. No judgments. Scout’s honor.”

He looked at me with a wary eye. “Okay...” He breathed out. “I guess I’m just... I hadn’t realized until just now how much...how much our relationship has changed since...this whole thing started. Just made me sad, that’s all.”

“What do you mean it’s changed? I mean, in what way, specifically, are you thinking of that’s got you down all of a sudden?”

His shoulders sagged and he laid his hands across the open flaps of the box. “It’s just... Okay, right now, when we came back...” he sighed, defeated. “Naw, this is stupid,” he waved it off.

“No, it’s not. None of this is stupid. Look, everything has to come out into the open, Johnny. We won’t be able to deal with this, otherwise. I’d like to hear it.”

“It’s just... When we came back just now, I was gonna say somethin’ to you. A joke, you know? But I stopped myself ‘cause I was afraid you might take it the wrong way or get mad or somethin’ and then we’d end up arguin’ about it and I just... it just seemed like, *before*, you know, I could joke around with you and you’d know it was a joke. But now, I feel like...like I gotta be careful about what I say because it could be taken as innuendo or...misconstrued in a particular way that I didn’t mean, at all. It just... it just complicates the *hell* out of what used to be so damned *simple*, y’know?”

I could see his point, but I needed to know what’d made him think of it in the first place. “I’m not sure I follow you. But you’ve definitely got me curious about what you were gonna say.”

He waved me off and dug into the box, again. “Forget it.”

“No, I wanna hear it.”

He turned to me with a softness in his eyes, then his eyes dropped and he got uncharacteristically shy all of a sudden. “I was gonna make a crack about you carrying me over the threshold.”

Despite himself, a glimmer of a smile appeared on his face.

It was pretty infectious. “I didn’t think you’d want someone peeking under your dress like that—”

He laughed, still looking sheepish and his eyes brightened. “No. *Definitely* no.”

I reached out and my hand slid down his arm to reassure him. “There. See? Nothing’s changed.”

He flicked his eyes at me and his smile was tinged with sadness. He gently grabbed my fingers and rubbed them and my heart leaped a little at that simple touch. But I could see that it triggered a wave of emotion in him. His eyes teared up, his face darkened and he leaned his other elbow on the counter to shade his face with his hand.

Almost instinctively, I moved closer to him...to...what? I wasn't sure. I could hear his breathing, a little ragged and erratic and it saddened me to wonder what he was feeling, right then. I suppose it might've seemed like I should've done something...held him or said something. But nothing seemed right. In fact, it seemed just enough that we stayed the way we were. So we stood like that for a time, him holding my fingers loosely in his as I just stood and watched him. All I could do was wait patiently for him, let him know I was around if he needed me. I rubbed his fingers a little to reassure him again.

After awhile, he rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and then rested his hand again over his mouth, tears still lingering in his eyes.

“You want to talk about it?”

He shook his head, eyes fixated somewhere on the wall.

Johnny:

I know what he said about gettin' everything out in the open, but I couldn't do it just then, or I would've started in right then and there and not been able to stop.

Dammit! I wanted to...pound something or...punch a hole n the wall or...*something!* It just felt *nice* to feel his touch and I really, finally had to admit that to myself. But I didn't understand why! I mean...*why* after all these years? I felt confused as hell and I didn't understand why this was happening. And the worst thing was, neither of us could ever *say* anything; could ever *do* anything about it!

God! I hate this! I felt like we were losing something we'd barely had a chance to have at all. *Why does this all have to be so damned complicated?*

“Are you okay?”

No, Roy, I am not okay! I nodded and let go of his hand. “Let me, uh...look, can we talk about this tomorrow? I don't think I'm up for tackling it tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah, we can do that. I think we've been through enough for one day.”

Roy:

We made quick work of loading the fridge, picking our rooms and unpacking our gear. We planned out our hike for the next day during dinner, prepared our gear afterwards, and hit the sack.

I'm not sure about Johnny but it took me quite a while to fall asleep. Johnny's words kept haunting me, I guess maybe because some it was stuff I'd already thought of and it just validated the reality of it all now that he'd considered it, too. I tried to calm myself by thinking about Joanne and the kids but that just made me depressed.

The only thing that seemed to settle me down was thinking about his fingers holding mine...

“Mornin’!”

“Mornin’!”

“You sleep okay?”

“Yeah. Slept right through the night. You?”

“Same here.”

Johnny:

Yeah, well, so much for bein’ honest with each other...

The black oaks were giving way to the grey pines, big leaf maples and the tanoaks so I knew we’d gone up a couple thousand feet.

I looked up at him walking ahead of me on the trail in his khaki shorts, white shirt and brown, new hiking boots, handkerchief around his neck and straw hat. I had to squint in the sunlight, even with my shades on and wipe the sweat off my forehead.

I’d tried at various times all through the hike to...see my partner differently. I mean, we’re supposed to be attracted to each other, right? And it’s not like we’ve never seen each other. I mean, all these years as partners and gettin’ grimy and dirty and spending 24 hours at a time on shift, I mean, you’re bound to see each other, else you’d have to shower with your clothes on! Like it or not, that’s life in the fire department – it ain’t for the squeamish or the faint of heart or the shy, if you know what I mean. So, okay. I tried being attracted to him. I looked at him every so often, you know, the way a guy would check out a girl; tried to, well, you know, think about stuff. I was definitely feeling something for ‘im, but, at the same time, I wasn’t.

I’d gotten almost no sleep with everything goin’ through my head all night. I’d thought about what had happened between us the day before, especially when Roy’d said we were – damn, but I was still havin’ a hard time with that word – when he said we were attracted to each other. But despite that he’d claimed that nothing had changed, I still *felt* like things had changed between us and, frankly, how could they not have? Whatever it was, I felt like it might somehow ruin our friendship; like we’d no longer be able relate to each other the way we had all along. I was worried it might ruin our partnership, too.

We'd started hiking around 7, hoping to get as much of the hike as possible under our belts before noon. The trail was a little over twelve miles round-trip. Figured it'd take us most of the day, if we kinda took our time and stopped for lunch. But Ranger Nyquist wasn't kidding when he said most of the flags were faded. Roy and I damn near started down the wrong way more than a few times and that slowed us down quite a bit. It was taking more concentration to stay on the trail and clear a couple portions of it that we hadn't really had much chance to talk. We'd kinda talked about other stuff and rehashed a few things here and there, but we just hadn't been able to focus enough to really get into things.

We were heading up the ridge at about a 30-degree angle. We'd come out of a shady part of the trail and were now into a fairly long stretch that was wide open and full of ground cover and grasses without a tree in sight for about 100 yards. The sun was beatin' down awful fierce and I was glad we'd both brought extra sunscreen and canteens. At least there was a steady breeze.

Roy'd taken the lead for this part of the trail and I could see he was having a bit of a time; he was breathing kinda hard. I think he wasn't in near the shape he thought he was.

"Roy?"

He stopped, wiped the sweat off his face with the sleeve of his shirt and leaned on the makeshift walking stick we'd made earlier to look back at me, catching his breath.

"Can I ask you some'in'?"

He absently waved a hand. "You can ask me anything. No judgments, remember?"

"Yeah. I remember."

He started up again. "Go ahead."

"Did you really sleep all night?"

He stopped and turned to me and made a face. "No..." he breathed out and started climbing again. "Barely slept a wink, as a matter of fact. You?"

"Barely slept a wink. Mind if I ask you some'in' else?"

"Yeah." 'Cept he didn't sound like he really wanted to be asked anything else.

"What were you thinking about?"

I saw his steps kinda slow down, like he was surprised by the question and he stopped. "My wife. My kids." He started up again. "You. Me. Us. What about you?"

"Oh, I dunno. You. Me. Us."

He stopped and nabbed a sip out of the canteen. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and re-adjusted the canteen strap over his shoulder. “Boy, after yesterday’s bombshells, we’re certainly making progress today, huh?”

I caught up to him and grabbed a sip out of my canteen. “You can say that again. All this yakkin’ is making me thirsty.”

He smiled and stuck his makeshift walking stick in the ground and wiped his forehead, again. “You know we can’t keep stalling like this.”

“What’re you talking about? I’ve been waitin’ for *you*,” I joked.

He did a double-take. “Why me?”

“You’re the senior medic.”

“Fantastic.” He grabbed his stick and started along the trail.

“You know, Roy, if we can’t even get started talking about this, how’re we gonna discuss our wedding plans?” I took a big swing of water in preparation for startin’ after him.

“We’ll get Mike to organize it,” he called back. “We could ask Chet, but I’d rather not have a lot of fuss.”

I spewed out all my water. I could just *see* what a wedding planned by *Chet* would look like and I had to work at not choking on the water while I tried not to laugh drinking it.

It did remind me about a few things, though...

“You alright?” I heard him call from ahead.

“Yeah! Just quit tryin’ to make me laugh when I’m drinkin’!”

Roy:

Despite my reassurances to him the night before, I knew that things weren’t the same between us. How could they be, really? But we’d both been having a pretty rough time trying to sort this out between us and I didn’t want to add anymore to the pot that was already brewing.

It was reassuring to know that we *could* still joke around the way we used to. I guess maybe it was all finally sinking in and we were relaxing enough to finally have some fun with each other.

Except, of course, my partner was choking.

“Am I gonna have to do mouth to mouth?”

He snorted a chuckle in between coughs, which made him cough even more. "I thought we were saving each other for our wedding night?"

"Not if Chet's planning prowess has anything to say about it."

Johnny:

And that got me thinking again about what I'd just been thinkin' about along with everything else I'd thought about before.

What if things *really were* gettin' serious between us? We've already figured out that we're attracted to each other, we're jokin' about wedding plans...and that whole thing between us, last night. A big portion of my sleepless night was thinkin' about what'd happened in the kitchen...his hand in mine...how it felt...that *connection* between us that...I was feeling right now, too.

I mean...if we were attracted to each other and...I was feelin'...like how I was last night with...two of us...standin' there like that...then...maybe...what if...we really were...are...?

Admittedly, it'd...crossed my mind in between my fifteen minutes of dozing every five hours during the night, but I was hoping I'd wake up this morning and everything that'd happened...the day before'd happened all in my head 'cause I couldn't fathom having to wallow through everything we were lookin' at havin' to wallow through.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, just...give me a minute."

He backtracked to me and patted my back. Not that I needed it, I felt perfectly okay. But I didn't feel like arguin', either. "This isn't helping my love of water rescues, I'll have you know that."

"Well if I'd known you had a drinking problem, I'd've offered to carry your canteen for ya."

"Ha ha."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. I am now. No thanks to you."

"C'mon, let's crest this ridge and hope for a view in the shade and grab some lunch. I'm starving."

"Lead on, pally."

We made it up to the top of that ridge and found a shady spot overlooking the canyon. A few clouds were up and the sunlight and the breeze were holding steady. We nestled in, got our lunch and watched the birds.

Roy:

I looked over at my partner and thought about what'd happened the day before; what prompted him to suddenly turn tail after he'd scared me.

“So...Johnny, uh, can I ask you something?”

“Yeah. Go right ahead.”

“Can I ask you what got you so down yesterday?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“After your little stint playing practical joker. One minute you're trying to scare me half to death and the next you're goin' off half-cocked, obviously upset about something. You never told me what was eatin' at ya.”

“I guess my mood change musta seemed kinda strange, huh?”

“Not that it's not understandable considering the circumstances but I was just curious if it was something I did or said or...what was it, exactly, that set you off?”

He took a bite then took a deep breath. “It's just that...when I thought about tellin' Chet about that look on your face I remembered that no one's supposed to know we're here. That got me back to thinkin' about... what if...what if things really *did* get serious between us? I mean...no one could *know* about it, Roy. *Ever!* Our lives would end up bein' a whole *secret!* And then we'd, we'd have to invent *lies* to back-up all the *other* lies and secrets and...I mean, it goes on and on and on! Forever! I mean...I can't imagine *living* like that. I can't imagine *anyone* having to live like that!”

“Got under your skin, huh?”

“You're damn right it got under my skin! How could it not, Roy? I mean, doesn't the whole idea of that *bother you?* People havin' to...live a lie just for *show?* So that *everybody else* can be *comfortable?* I mean that's just *crazy!* Don't you think that's *crazy?*”

“Yeah, I think it's crazy. And yeah, it bothers me. It bothers me a lot.” *Maybe that's why I hadn't been wanting to do this in the first place...*

“It really makes you wonder! I mean, I wonder how many guys in the Department got married just 'cause they couldn't stand the thought of people knowing who they really were? Can you imagine the backlash if it got out that anyone in the Department was queer? Makes me kinda curious about all those divorce statistics with people claiming ‘irreconcilable differences’. Maybe they're *not all about* the wives not bein' able to deal with the job.”

“Yeah. You may very well have a point.”

“A lot of my friends growing up had parents who were divorced; I saw first-hand what that can do to kids. Some were okay, sure. But to upend people’s lives because everyone’s decided you’re not right, is just...well, it’s just not right!”

‘*To upend people’s lives...*’ That’s exactly what I’d been afraid of, this whole time. I just couldn’t stomach the thought of bouncing Chris and Jenny between Joanne and I, engaging in custody battles and all of that sort of thing. I couldn’t imagine any parent *willingly* putting their kids through that unless they really felt it was best for the kids; unless they were abjectly miserable with their lives. In the end, no matter what the reason, there is no way that’s an easy decision. “I think most of them simply don’t have a choice.”

“Exactly! And that’s what I’m sayin’, Roy. There’s no *choice*, in it! None! It’s taken away from you by people who know *nothing* about you! All the, the in-laws, the kids, you, the wife... *Ten* lives all in a jumbled mess because *one* person decided you weren’t fit to be called a human being! That’s just crazy! Don’t tell me that’s not crazy!”

“I agree with you! It’s crazy!”

“I mean, I just... Man, what the hell kind of world do we live in?” We sat in silence for awhile; I had a feeling he wasn’t finished. He started picking at his fingernails and his voice got real soft. “You know, there are some tribes who revere homosexuality.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because they embody both the male and the female. They consider that to be a higher level of spiritual existence.”

“What about your tribe?”

He took a bite of his pastrami sandwich. “I have no idea. We lost a lot of our heritage. I have no idea what they might’ve traditionally thought about...that kinda stuff.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not firemen on tribal land. Considering the history of almost any fire department, you’re right to be worried about it.”

“I think anyone in their right mind would be worried about it. All I know, is I can’t imagine having to spend my life hiding like that. Really makes me respect any of the guys in the Department who might have to act otherwise.” He inhaled slowly and let out a breath. “And...” He absently rotated his sandwich around in his hands, as if trying to pinpoint the precise location of where to take the next bite.

“And what?”

“Just that...what if...this whole thing between us means...we’re not...who we think we are?”

“You mean what if we’re gay?”

His head whipped ‘round at me, his eyes narrowed.

“Look, if we’re gonna be honest, we might as well be honest.”

Johnny:

Man, sometimes my partner doesn’t pull any punches. I had to take a deep breath to let the consequences of all that sink in for a bit. *Here we go again...* Guess it was time to take the plunge into Revelation #2 on this trip.

“Okay. Since we’re, uh, aimin’ for the ‘direct method’, lemme ask you. You, uh, you ever feel this way about another guy before?”

Roy:

That was the question I’d been asking myself since this whole thing started. It’d even kept me up a night or two. The day Johnny’d stopped by the house after shift to warn me about Cap, I sat and watched the cardinals out in the backyard; thought about my life. That question came at me and I initially rejected it as being nonsense. But this thing with Johnny intruded in and I was forced to confront it; forced into considering all the guys I knew growing up, the gang I knew in high school, in the army, and the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

My feelings about my partner made me re-evaluate every relationship I’d had and have – including and especially - the one with my wife. They made me take a hard look at myself and the people I’ve cared about the most.

But more than that, they’d confused the hell out of me and while I kept revisiting the question and coming to the same conclusion, I was still left with a lot of unanswered questions. I could only hope I could leave here with those answers.

“Take your time, Roy. I mean it. I mean, this is the one question that’s at the crux of this whole thing between us and this isn’t the time to be dodgin’ bullets just for the sake of the comfort of the other person. In fact, why don’t we make that the second rule: No pressure.”

“Okay. Second rule: No pressure. Deal.”

“Okay, so take your time.”

“Well, I’ve already got my answer.”

Johnny:

I had to admit, my heart was in my throat with every scenario goin’ at a thousand miles an hour through my head: *What if him, but not me? / What if me, not him? / What if both? / What about Joanne and the kids? / What about the guys at the station? / What about the Department? / What about the paramedic program? / The gang at Rampart? / Friends? / Families? / What if neither? / What if...?*

And if it's neither...than what the hell's goin' on between us?

I put my sandwich down and gave him my full attention. “Okay, shoot. But before you say anything, Roy, I just want you to know you have my full support. No matter what, I’m always gonna be here for ya.”

“Thanks, Johnny. That means a lot. Really. But...the answer is no. I have never had these kinds of feelings for another male, despite Chet’s insistence on it the other day. Now it’s your turn. And just so you know, I’m always gonna stick with ya, no matter what your answer.”

Roy:

He took another bite of his sandwich before he said anything. I suspect he does that as a way of hiding, sometimes. “No, I never have, either.”

Well that settled it, then. For me, anyway. Clearly, this was something just between the two of us; an isolated incident, if you will. I suppose that might’ve been obvious but at least it was all on the table. That still left only two questions answered of about a hundred thousand, however.

‘A journey of a thousand miles...’

That saying was really starting to get on my nerves.

He was munching on the subsequent bite he’d taken and tried to stuff the pastrami back between the bread slices. “So whaddya think this means?”

Means we’re back at square one and I haven’t got a clue yet as to where to go from here... “It means I’ve got a hankering for some of those oranges. Hand me one, will ya?”

He stared at me in mid-chew looking a little stunned. “I don’t have ‘em. I thought you brought ‘em.”

“Well I saw you put a bag of them on the counter before we left this morning, so I’d assumed you’d brought them.”

“No, I never grabbed ‘em. I thought *you* had.”

“No, I didn’t. Beautiful.” I slapped the walking stick in irritation and got myself on the wrist with my own watch. “Ow.” It did make me think about checking the time. “Hey, listen, we’d better get a move on if we’re gonna finish this and get back before dark.”

Johnny checked his watch and promptly stuffed the rest of his sandwich in his mouth accompanied by a, “Rrghmff.”

We gathered our stuff and hit the trail.

[20 minutes later]

“Uh...I’m not so sure this is the right way, Johnny.”

“You’re not seein’ anything, either, huh?”

“No. In fact I haven’t seen even a *remnant* of a flag for the last 25 yards.”

“Yeah, same here. Shit. Better remember to tell Nyquist that his map is a little funky. Alright, let’s head back. I guess tail’s won it, trail’s gotta be to the right.”

Johnny:

That was the second wrong turn we’d made in almost the last half hour. We weren’t even to the end of the trail and it was already afternoon; we still had to get back! Though, in theory, it’d be faster and easier heading back with the flags actually visible.

We got back to the fork and started down the right head of the trail. But I was noticing that Roy’d kinda slowed down a little and he clutched his stomach. *Uh-oh*. Anyway you turn it, that’s bad. And on a lone ridge several thousand feet up with no one knowing we’re up here – it’s even worse. My heart sank; my partner was in trouble.

“Roy? You alright?” I held my breath...

“Not really.”

Shit. “What’s wrong?”

He was holding his side. “Got a side stitch. Think I’m dehydrated or we started hiking too soon after lunch. Gettin’ leg cramps, too. And my feet are killing me.”

“Shoes?”

“Yeah. You know I bought these to go hiking with the kids. I’d broken ‘em in, but not enough for this kind of a hike.”

I considered things for a bit. “Okay, look, there’s only about a mile and a half left until the end of the trail. Why don’t I go on ahead and finish flagging it and you can rest up?”

He looked at me with a bit of a sad expression while the wheels turned in his head.

“It’s only about a mile and a half. I’ll be back before you know it.”

He nodded. "I'm not sure I like it, but it's probably best. Okay. Let's make sure the HT's are working."

We checked the HT's – our Radio Shack™ walkie-talkies, that is - and swapped out a couple of things.

He held onto his hat against a sudden kick in the breeze, "I'll wait for you back at the lunch spot, alright?"

"Yeah, good idea, it's got all that shade. You need help gettin' back over there?"

"No. Go on ahead. I'll manage."

All of a sudden, watching him leave, knowing I was leaving him behind kinda ramped up my anxiety. I grabbed his shoulder as he started back. "Hey, you sure you're gonna be okay?"

Roy:

I felt his hand on my shoulder and I turned back to him. His light grip evoked a nice warm feeling in my chest, but didn't match the intense look of worry on his face.

"I'll be fine," I tried to reassure him. "You'd better hurry so we can get back down before dark."

"Okay. Be careful."

"I thought that was my line."

He flashed a sad smile and his eyes followed as his hand slid down my arm. His fingers nearly reached mine, but his face scrunched up in anger and he brusquely yanked his hand away.

"What? What is it?"

"Nothin'," he said sourly and made to go back up the mountain.

I grabbed his arm and held onto him. "It's not nothing. Now we've been over this. This is real and it's affecting us and we've gotta get to the bottom of this. But we can't do that if you won't be straight with me."

He about put me under the table with a *look*.

"Okay. Bad choice of words. But ya gotta trust me, Johnny, alright? I wanna know what's eating at ya."

"Fine! Look, we're supposed to be *attracted* to each other, right?"

His anger was coming out again and I thought it best to keep as calm as possible. "Yeah. As best as we understand it –"

“But we’re not queer?” He said it like he was double-checking that that’s what we’d decided on.

“Not unless we’re lying about it—”

“Then why do I...?” He fidgeted again, not knowing what to do with himself until he finally threw his hands in the air. “Gaaaahh!” He spun away from me as he yelled in frustration. “It’s so *stupid*, Roy! It’s just so damned stupid! After two days of, of doin’ *nothin’* but *talk* about this and, and thinkin’ we’re makin’ all these *strides* and *progress*, we’re back to square one! We’re no closer to figuring this out than when we started! I mean, how can we be attracted to each other if we’re not gay? Does that make any sense to you?”

“No. At least not at the mom—“

“Then where is this *coming* from, Roy? Where is this *coming* from?”

“I don’t know —”

“I mean, I don’t get it! Do *you*? How does that *happen*, Roy? How does this kind of thing *happen*?”

He was getting himself worked up, again, and as much as we needed to have this conversation, unfortunately, now was not the time.

“Hey,” I gently grabbed his right hand. He must’ve felt that same electric jolt that I had ‘cause he abruptly ceased his diatribe, stepped closer to me and we stood together shoulder to opposite shoulder, him in seething silence. Then with another guttural yell of frustration, he curled himself around me, lay his left arm across my right shoulder and put his head down on his arm.

“I fucking hate this, Roy,” he muttered after awhile, fingers rubbing mine.

I rubbed them back. “I know. This isn’t any picnic for me, either. I don’t have any answers, Johnny, at least...not here standing at the edge of a cliff. But...look, maybe we need to just allow our feelings to be what they are; let them happen instead of suppressing them. We’ve already decided we weren’t going to make judgments about each other so maybe we need to turn that upon ourselves and not judge what we’re feeling or assume that we’re supposed to feel a certain way. We feel what we feel. Maybe we need to just...go with that. Maybe that’ll give us the answers.”

He took in a deep breath and let it out. He straightened up and rubbed my shoulder. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. It’s about all I could think of, ‘cause, frankly, I’m fresh out of ideas.”

He smiled. “Yeah, well, it’s a better idea than I had. Which was none at all.” He looked up toward the trail and let out a breath, “Guess I’d better finish this thing, huh? Don’t really want to, though.”

“I know. But listen, maybe some space between us is just the thing. Give us time to figure things out on our own. Who knows? Maybe lightning will strike one of us while we’re up here and everything will be solved.”

He leaned in and put a hand on my chest, “Uh, Roy, that’s probably not the kind of thing you wanna wish for, right now.”

I looked skyward. “Relax. There’s nothing but blue sky and a steady breeze.”

“You’ll be sorry when you have to come and get me, pally, in the howling wind and beating rain. The mountain hears you, y’know. ‘Course, you had all that practice carryin’ me around, yesterday, so I expect full, professional service from a Los Angeles County Rescue Fireman.”

“Oh, you’ll get full, professional service, I guarantee it. I’ll even supply a band-aid for you.”

“Awww, gee thanks, Roy,” he patted my shoulder. “You’re the best partner a guy can count on.”

“I aim to please. Now beat it before I wrap gauze around your mouth as a preventative measure from driving me crazy.”

He adjusted his gear before setting off. “Roy, I’ll never forget this. Your caring and concern for me just...makes me want to hurl.”

I about laughed out loud. “Fine. Just do it downwind, alright?”

“Which direction was that again?” He proceeded to pretend to throw up right next to me and I had to do some fancy footwork to avoid him. I gently shoved him toward the trail, but he regained his footing and came at me again with a couple more fake heaving motions before he finally took off up the trail, sniggering.

Wise guy. I turned to head back down to the lunch spot.

“Hey, Roy?”

“Yeah?”

“You sure you’re gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. See you in a bit.”

“Yeah.” Then he was gone, swallowed by the pines and brush, and I felt a tinge of sadness at finding myself alone.

I figured he'd be back inside of an hour but I took it easy heading back. That break helped ease my side stitch, but it wasn't long 'till my sides started to hurt again and I was having a hard time keeping air in my lungs. I had to stop every so often and try to take a deep breath in slow, pain-tinged stages.

My feet weren't faring much better. I could feel what probably amounted to maybe two blisters forming on my left foot, which left me at least one good foot to make it down the mountain with. So far, anyway. The sun was beating down pretty good but the breeze was holding steady, so I at least had that working for me.

After hobbling down the trail for awhile, I stopped at the lengthy scenic section of the trail we'd simply walked through on the way up. The trail was awfully narrow, walled in on one side by the east slope of the canyon and topped by a row of tanoaks but open and darn near treacherous on the west side of the trail, though it did offer an open view of the rest of the canyon. Fortunately, this particular portion of the trail wasn't too bad as far as vertical ascent. Part of the reason Johnny and I had simply walked through here on the way up was while the trail itself only ran up about 30 degrees, the open west-facing embankment netted about a 60 or 70 degree incline. The path, itself, is certainly doable, but a mis-step along that open west embankment could take you down pretty far and fast, depending on where you took a dive.

I was sweating quite a bit from the hot afternoon sun and the exertion and stopped to rest, grab some water and appreciate the view...

...and think about what Johnny'd said. Sometimes his perspective is just a little too fraught with twists and turns for my personal taste. Doesn't keep him from bringing up a good point, on occasion, though: *'Then where is this coming from, Roy?'* Not that that wasn't an obvious question, but, still, it needed to be asked.

All things being equal and if neither of us was lying to ourselves or each other, than why *were* we experiencing these intense feelings for each other? What exactly had brought them on and why?

A fire investigator determines the area of origin and pinpoints the ignition source. I think I knew, for myself, anyway, what the area of origin was; pinpointing the ignition source, however, was going to prove to be a lot harder.

I twisted the cap off the canteen and took a few sips, enjoying the sunlight highlighting all the foliage of the canyon wall on the opposite ridge.

A sudden commotion sounded in the tanoaks up behind me and the birds erupted out of the trees like bats outta hell. That'd startled me and I spun around to see what was happening, figuring there to be some kind of predator looking at me for its next meal. But my world turned upside down in a matter of moments. My foot slid off the loose rock I hadn't realized I was standing on, curled underneath me, causing my gear to shift, which threw me off-balance as I'd twisted around. I lost my footing and tumbled over the embankment - exactly the direction I didn't want to go in. I slid down the ridge in the loose dirt and grabbed at any tuft of grass I could get my hands on to stop my downward descent.

Wasn't sure how far I'd slid down. All I knew was that I was coughing from all the dust and that I'd landed right near a pair of poodle-dog bushes. *Fantastic. Just what I'd need on top of blisters.*

At least I'd stopped sliding. External physical assessment: I seemed to be okay, with the exception of major lacerations running up along the side of my left leg and arm, my hands, and what I was sure would be a hefty bruise or two on my shoulder and knees. Internally, nothing seemed to be broken, that I could detect, so far, anyway, but I had a feeling a few muscle groups were gonna be complaining rather loudly the moment I tried to move. At least the side pain was gone. For now.

Hauling myself back up to the trail was gonna be interesting.

I'd slid down on my left side, so I felt around the slope with my right foot and managed to find enough solid rock that I could put my weight against it and not slide further down. I gingerly grabbed my gear to situate it better and it was only then that I'd noticed I was wet. *Where did that come from?* I smelled my shirt – nothin'. Then my heart dropped when I realized the source – most of the water had spilled out of my canteen. *Son of a bitch...* Cap it, save what's left.

I got the gear balanced, tried to ignore the pain to situate myself, rechecked everything. I brushed off the loose dirt from the rock, grabbed two hand-holds in the rock, gritting my teeth against the pain in my shredded palms, eyed the next foot support, bounced on my right leg for a tic, and then took a deep breath and, with aching limbs, *heaved myself upwards...*

Johnny:

*Flag here, flag there
Climb a hill everywhere*

Okay, I never said poetry was my strong suit. But it was either that and keep my concentration on finishing this thing or...chuck the whole thing and get back to my partner.

Roy...

I turned to look back, half-expecting to see him behind me. Man, I just...couldn't shake it; this sense I was having that I didn't like leaving him behind.

Which, as you can imagine, was pretty dumb. I mean, it's not like he was climbing the mountain and I was goin' back to camp and leaving him to fend for himself. And it's not like he was *injured* and in need of a Stokes. He's a trained paramedic rescue firefighter, he knows how to take care of himself. Besides, all he was doin' was walking down a mountain for about twenty minutes.

But there was just something about this that I didn't like.

Took me a little longer to finish flagging the trail than I'd anticipated, mainly 'cause I didn't have Roy's extra pair of eyes to spot the flags. So many of them, especially at this far end of the trail, had completely faded out or they'd disappeared from view due to overgrowth or the branch they were tied to had grown out of the eye line or sometimes all three.

Alright, last flag and our commitment to Ranger Nyquist would be officially complete. I tied it off and transferred my pack of flags to my knapsack. This whole last trot took me the better part of an hour and I was more than ready to head back to the cabin. Chow was gonna be good tonight. Hell, even Chet's cooking woulda tasted fantastic after the hike, today. It'd been awhile since I'd had the chance to do this kind of hiking and it felt good, but exhausting.

I took a sip outta the canteen, got the rocks outta my shoes, repacked a few things in my gear and started down. Figured about a half hour to get to Roy and then we could head for home.

Roy:

I winced at the pain in my left leg and in my arms and shoulders and tried to breathe through it as I settled against the rock face. Sliding down on all that rock and loose dirt did a number on my leg and my whole left side. It looked like I was gonna have to haul myself up entirely on my right leg and with barely any water I was afraid my leg was gonna eventually cramp up with the exertion.

Maybe we could make some kind of stretcher out of branches that we could tie to Johnny and he could drag me down the mountain 'cause I have a feeling it's gonna come to that. Assuming I ever make it back up...

Exhale. Inhale. Go.

Grab another hand-hold, test the support of the rock under my foot, take a deep breath, bounce a little, grit teeth at bruised muscles flexing, *heave* up to the next foot support while involuntarily yelling in agony against the searing pain from the bleeding lacerations on my left side, step on rock, gingerly settle, rest.

Breathe.

Breathe...

Johnny...

My biggest concern was sliding back down and right into that pair of poodle-dog bushes. My training told me to look up and assess and calculate how much further I had to go, how long it'd take. My heart told me to ignore it and just concentrate on getting back up. I thought about calling Johnny on the HT, but without equipment or ropes, there wasn't much he could do. Besides, I didn't want to risk his falling off the edge and I needed both hands to cling to the rock face.

Boy, how am I gonna explain this to Joanne...? Guess I won't have to if I plummet to my death.

Okay. Look for foot support: check. Grab hand-hold, test the support of the rock under my foot, bounce a little, take a deep breath, grit teeth, *heave* up to the next foot support, groan in agony against the searing pain, gingerly settle, rest.

Rest.

Breathe...

Johnny:

I heard it before I saw anything. A sound I'd never heard before. Like a... helicopter or something, but it wasn't loud and seemed to be kinda intermittent. And it seemed to be coming from up ahead of me.

The trail at that point was riddled with a lot of scraggly trees and tall, dry grass, tall enough in some areas to block the view of where the path was headed if you were at a curved point on the trail. I could hear that weird noise, but couldn't see the trail. Figured I was hearing echoes of copter activity in some part of the canyon or something.

I rounded a curve...and about went into sinus tachycardia. A black bear was right smack in the middle of the trail. Not only was it a black bear, but a *Momma* black bear with two little ones and it was one of those little ones that was makin' that weird guttural helicopter sound.

Shit.

Fortunately, with it being afternoon, the winds had shifted so I was downwind. But that was the only good thing. Ordinarily, black bears aren't all that dangerous and will leave – as I've been told, anyway – if humans are around. But I wasn't about to take chances with a Momma bear. Not up here without equipment, without guarantee of emergency support in a timely manner, any real first aid and with a partner who's not as mobile as he might otherwise be without blisters and side pain. I had the HT, but I figured I'd use it only if things got too hairy; I didn't want to unnecessarily startle her with my voice.

I watched 'em for a bit, hoping they were just passin' through. But Momma decided now was rest time for her and play time for the kiddies. Great. *This forest is the size of Texas and you decide to take a nap on my trail? Ya couldn't have waited ten minutes until after I'd passed through?*

I found a spot where I could sit and watch 'em and still remain downwind and thought about ways of scarin' 'em off that didn't involve her charging at me.

Roy:

I had to wipe the sweat comin' down my forehead. My hat had gotten pretty smashed during the fall, but at least the string was tight enough around my neck that it hadn't gotten lost. Thankfully, it wasn't tight enough to strangle me, either.

I'd managed to haul myself up a bit more of the way with a few more heaves but my right leg was starting to shake with the exertion while the rest of me was feeling the effects of dehydration.

I really coulda used one of those oranges...

Johnny:

Momma Bear and the Goldilocks family still hadn't budged and didn't look like they were about to, either. They'd found a shady spot to keep out of the heat and the young uns were busy playing with each other and exploring, but they kept awful close to her, too. Figured they weren't too long outta the den, which probably would make Momma more defensive and more dangerous than if they were older.

It'd been nigh on twenty minutes already and I was worried Roy was gonna start wonderin' where I was pretty soon. If they stayed here much longer, I was gonna have to chance using the HT to contact him.

In the meantime, I was still trying to think of ways to scare 'em off that didn't involve maiming or death.

Namely mine.

Roy:

I finally chanced looking up to see how much farther I had to go. It didn't seem like I'd slid that far down, but I really wasn't sure – I was too busy trying to stop at the time.

From the looks of it, I only had another three or four heaves left to go. But my muscles were almost at their limit and after hiking up a mountain all day, so was I.

Alright, you can do this. You've been in tougher spots than this. You fought a hurricane on a 90 degree cliff, remember? And that was with a vic and her evil hang glider that was out for blood.

Namely mine, if I recall.

But she didn't make it...

Don't think about that. C'mon, deep breath. Let's go.

Next foot support: check. Grab hand-hold, bounce a little, take a deep breath, grit teeth, *heave*, groan in agony against the searing pain, gingerly settle settle settle, rest...

Rest.

Breathe...

I was close enough now to the top that I figured if Johnny was nearby he could help me up the rest of the way. Assuming he hadn't walked right by here on his way down to our lunch area. Never hurts to try.

I think I'll stop using that saying.

“Johnny!”

Johnny:

Oh for crying out loud...

Time to call Roy. Those three ain't plannin' on budgin' until I retire.

Roy:

I'd listened, but only the wind had answered.

I had to mentally revert back to those days working a couple of brush fires during my probie year. Some days you had no choice but to exceed your physical and mental limits. Up till then, I'd thought army basic training and the fire academy had been difficult, but those brush fires about did me in.

Deep breath, deep breath, *Dig deep*, deep breath, think of the kids...think of the kids...the kids...the kids...the kids...

Heeeaaave...!

Streeetch.... Reach-reach-reach...grab-grab...lose footing...stuck... *shit*...strength fading...breathing...*I can't do this...Listen, you numbskull, if you think this last one was hard, try re-doing the whole climb again...hands slipping...no no no... Johnny! Alright, alright, he's not here...He's not here...No no, don't think about that. Focus focus...I don't have the strength for this....Yes you do. Yes you do, now, come on. C'mon on! You've got a wife and kids and a partner who's counting on you. So c'mon dammit! Heave!... Heeeaaaave...!*

Chris! Jenny!

“Aaaaauughh!”

I fell to the ground in a heap, every ounce of energy sapped from me as my gear fell on top of me and around me. My muscles were searing, the lacerations were throbbing and it was then that I remembered what'd gotten me down the embankment in the first place.

I imagined some mountain lion, which had chased the birds from the trees, earlier, was now sitting on the trail, tail patiently twitching, waiting to finish me off.

I honestly didn't have the energy to care.

Johnny:

“Roy?” I whispered into the HT as loud as I dared and with the gain all the way up. I'd backtracked up the trail a bit to stay out of earshot of Momma and her cubs. Now they'd ALL decided to take a nap by some rocks right near the trail to sleep through the hottest part of the day. I suppose if I coulda run like Flash, I might've been able to slip right past 'em. Like I said, though, I couldn't take that chance; not up here.

But not gettin' a hold of Roy was really makin' me worried. It was the third time I'd tried and was getting nothing. Either he had his HT off or his battery had run out. Frankly, I couldn't see either scenario working 'cause I know Roy, remember? In a situation like this he'd never leave his HT off, on purpose. So either it clicked off without him knowing or his battery died – another unlikely scenario 'cause we'd both just checked 'em.

Or...he'd gotten eaten by a mountain lion.

Though I guess that'd be kinda ironic, wouldn't it? He gets eaten by a mountain lion and I get eaten by a bear.

On the upside, that'd certainly...solve our problem, I guess...

Roy:

I must've fallen asleep because I imagine it's impossible to wake up without actually having been asleep, first.

I just didn't remember falling asleep, but the fact that I was waking up told me that I hadn't gotten eaten by the mountain lion. Yet. My physical assessment told me that I was in the same position as when I'd hauled myself back up to the trail but a great weight was sitting pretty awkwardly on my back, holding me down. *Fantastic*. The mountain lion is sitting on me in triumph of the prize catch that'll feed him for a week.

I listened, but there was no sound other than the usual sounds of birds, wind and the occasional bug whizzing past. No panting breathing of large feline predators or movement indicating the washing of paws or flicking of tails. I cautiously moved, heard a small rustling sound and the large thing slid off my back and onto the ground with a *ffflunk*. I about jumped three feet in the air from a prone position until I realized it was my own knapsack.

Oh good grief...

Roy DeSoto: This is Your Life as Sketch Comedy.

Once I'd gotten my nerves back under control, I looked around at the sideways world for a bit, ensuring that I really was topside, not about to careen down the embankment, again, and free from being an imminent mountain lion meal. With that established and with, as you can imagine, an enormous amount of grunting and groaning, I finally made it to a vertical position and took stock of everything.

I'd been asleep for about twenty minutes and Johnny wasn't here, which meant he was either still on his way back or he'd walked right past me.

“Johnny! Johnny!”

Nothin'. *Well that's not a good sign. No matter which way you slice it, he oughta be within earshot; the lunch spot isn't all that far from here.*

“Johnny!”

Still nothin’. *Where the hell is he?*

I grabbed the HT and depressed the speaker button...only to realize it wasn’t on. *I know I left it on when Johnny and I split up...* Thumb the button to turn it on...and it was already in the ‘on’ position. *What the...?* Realization sank my heart down to my toes. *Son of a bitch...*

Okay. Okay, the battery died. Can’t do anything about it, so let’s just...try to figure this out.

Clearly, he’d’ve returned by now so odds are he walked right past me as I was trying to get back up.

I gathered all the gear and with a hobbling gait, took off as fast as I could to the lunch area, knowing that Johnny would stay there until I arrived.

If he was there.

Johnny:

Shit. Shit. Shit! Roy, why the hell aren’t you answering?

‘I would never leave you, Roy. I would never do that.’

Alright, time to stop playin’ around here. My patience about had it. Momma and the kids were snoozin’ slightly off the trail near some shaded rocks. I had to get out of there, but I just didn’t want to chance moving by, scarin’ Momma and have her chase after me.

I gathered all the small rocks I could find, set up camp where I could kinda see ‘em and started launching a, well, very light and small attack, one tiny pebble at a time. Hardly the best idea and even pretty risky, but it was all I had. Figured if I could just get them to think that the nice shady spot was actually kind of annoying, they might move on, preferably, away from *me*.

Roy:

“Johnny!”

I hobbled, limped and nearly ran over to the lunch area...and no Johnny. Not only was my partner not there, but there was no sign that he’d even been there. *The problem is, barring any problems, there is no way he’d not have been here, by now.*

Now I was starting to get worried.

Johnny:

Launch...*clack!*

Launch...*clack!*

Grunt. Annoyed growl.

Launch...*clack!*

I saw a paw wave in the air and then it was down again.

Oh for Pete's sake. Don't make me launch a full aerial assault...

Launch...*clack!*

A sharp grunt. A nose came up, sniffing the air. I ducked. *Oh yeah, real swift there, Gage. Duck behind the bush so it can't smell you. Crying out loud...*

The nose was down again.

Launch...*clack!*

A small yip. *Uh oh.* Hope I didn't hit one of the cubs.

Launch...*clack!* Nothin'. C'mon now! Don't tell me I got the most patient bear in all of Los Angeles?

Launch...*clack!*

Snuffly bear groan and no movement.

Hell, we're gonna be here all day...

Roy:

"Johnny! Johnny!"

Minutes of yelling up and down the trail yielded no sign of my partner. I equivocally assessed that he was nowhere within earshot.

A few other things crossed my mind, but I thought it best not to entertain any other notions, just yet.

First things first, assess provisions and tend to the wounds. I hunkered down to do just that and begin plans for a potential rescue operation.

Johnny:

Launch...*clack!*

There was a large groan – and I mean a large, pretty damned irritated groan - and then a paw went up, followed by a nose and Momma on her haunches lookin' around. I froze right then and there, convinced she was gonna sniff me out, charge full tilt and head-butt me right down the mountain.

I squatted down behind my bush and held my breath and watched and waited and tried to figure out whether I should launch another pebble or wait a little longer.

I saw Momma get up on her paws, step over to the trail and start sniffin'. *Oh, man. If she gets one whiff of me, I've had it.*

She grunted and pawed the kiddies awake – I held my breath - and moved on down the mountain. Away from the trail. Where I could finally make my escape.

Dynamite! I waited a few more minutes to really make sure they'd gone and launched a few more pebbles at the shady spot they'd just vacated just to convince her she'd made the right decision and then I took a chance and skedaddled the hell out of there to get to Roy.

Roy:

Well the good news was, I had water. The bad news was, I had about half a cup left and we still had about five or six miles ahead of us. Boy, I really coulda used those oranges, right about now.

Got the wounds cleaned out best I could and bandaged the worst of them and the two blisters. About all I could do now was wait and devise some kind of plan for going after Johnny if he didn't show up in the next half hour.

If he didn't show up...

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

Johnny, where the hell are you?

My muscles began to stiffen and cramp up so I hobbled up and down the trail a few times, calling out again. Still no answer.

'Benjamin! Benjamin!'

I peered as far up the trail as I could see. Nothin'. *Dammit, where could he be?*

I got to the landing of the main stairwell. No sign of him. "Dunning! Dunning! All clear on the west wing! We've gotta get outta here! That ceiling's gonna go any minute! Dunning!"

Maybe he's not done checking all the apartments...

I fished my HT out of my pocket to check on Dunning's status, but heard cracking above me. I looked up. Too late! All I saw was white ceiling and red embers coming straight for me. I rolled out of the way, but debris clipped my arm. The HT!

I got up, clutching my arm, to see if the rest of the ceiling was gonna come down on top of me. It seemed to be holding, so far. 110s called it right on the money...

But access to the main stairwell was blocked, which meant it was also blocked for Dunning. I searched around for the HT, hoping it'd landed somewhere close by, but nothing. Alright. Second-floor egress, it is. If I could get to a window, I could alert them downstairs to tell Dunning the stairwell was inaccessible. I turned to head back to the apartments I'd already checked – Son of a bitch. The far west wing was already fully involved.

And still no answer or word from Dunning.

Then my alarm went off.

Oh, for the love o' Mike...

One last try... I whipped my mask off, hoping he'd hear me, "Dunning! Main stairwell is blocked! Dunning! You hear me? Dunning!"

*I looked back down the far end of the wing. I couldn't wait any longer; she was coming awfully fast. I spun around to the one apartment I hadn't yet checked. Pull leg back – KICK! Regroup. **KICK!** The apartment door flung back and out came the Dragon. In the span of about twenty lifetimes, She came at me, crimson reds and burning oranges, angry and blazing hotter than the sun. She reared up on her hind legs, towering over me in an effort to put me in my place. Puny, fragile human daring to defy Her - Her heat overwhelmed and enveloped me like a glove, Her appetite devoured the very air to get at me, Her immortal, destructive power lunged at me like a god's fist.*

My desperate life in Her hands and She was about to eat me alive.

Chris! Jenny! Joanne!

My life flashed in front of me, but it wasn't the past that came to mind. It was the future I'd hoped for and envisioned but disappeared like a flame retracting: the kids' birthdays, graduations, watching them grow, being a part of their lives, the weddings, the grandkids, my life with Joanne, my life in the fire department, just... my life! My life that this Temptress was trying to ebb from me with Her evil fingers that one-by-one drew back in to Her outstretched hand...

Johnny... Help me...

Reflexes and training took over where my head had failed and I spun and ducked away from Her clutches. No. You will not take me. You will not deprive my kids of a father, you will not make a widow of my wife, you will not deprive me of my kids. This is my life and I'll be damned if you take it from me.

All she managed in Her roaring, hissing fury was to lick my face, Her heat and flames pressing like a brand, searing her vehemence upon my skin. She lay a mark on me in punishment for my defiance; a scarlet letter to remind me of my sins.

Now I'll never hear the end of it. Especially from Johnny.

My partner... I had to tell somebody and fast.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and saw a coupla black helmets coming up on the main stairwell.

I cupped my hands over my mouth, "Hey! Over here!"

A piercing whistle split the air. "Roy? Is that you?"

"Johnny? Johnny!"

Relief washed over me as I heard his voice, almost breathless, calling me from somewhere up the trail. I couldn't see him and with all this foliage I couldn't gauge where he was, but he sounded pretty far.

"Yeah, I'm comin'! Be there in a couple minutes! Just hang on!"

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

But Dunning did. That's exactly what he did. That sonofabitch, that's exactly what he did.

"Roy! We're here!"

Marco was waving at me from the stairs while Chet was trying to clear the stairwell of debris. "Are you alright?" Marco yelled, hands cupped around his mouth.

"Yeah! Listen! Dunning may be trapped in the east wing!" I pointed.

"No! He's not! He's downstairs!"

I blinked. Downstairs? When did he go downstairs? I don't remember him telling me he was going downstairs...

Marco continued. "He came down a few minutes ago. Told us you might still be up here."

I might still be up here? What the hell is going through Dunning's head?

"We tried to get you on the HT, but you didn't answer!"

I yelled back, "HT got lost!"

Marco waved back. "Okay! Hold tight, we're almost through!"

When we'd gotten downstairs, I got more of the story from Chet and Marco. My anger began to churn but I tried to hold off the boil until I'd gotten all the facts. I confronted Dunning about his side of the story. He made some flimsy excuse about Cap at 24s doing things differently and that he and his partner, Van Devere, worked independently, all of which I knew was a load of nonsense. I knew Cap Peters at 24s was a competent man and I knew Van Devere by reputation as a stickler for the rules. I firmly reminded Dunning about proper communications protocol and alerting one's partner to a change in plans and he shrugged me off like I'd told him my shoelaces were untied.

Now, my anger was boiling. There I was, left thinking my partner was trapped in the building when in fact he'd simply left me there because he was tired and lazy and hadn't bothered to tell me he was leaving the floor. Adding fuel to my inferno was complete indifference to the fact that I about left my wife a widow to raise our kids by herself. He had no business being in the Department.

I was seething. I was absolutely furious to a point I'd never experienced before. I was literally scared at how angry I was and I had no choice but to suppress it before I did some real damage. Mainly to my career after I'd finished pummeling Dunning to a pulp.

It's possible I'd just stumbled upon the point of origin.

"Roy? Roy! I'm almost there!"

I saw him come out of the turn in the trail. "Johnny! Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

I was relieved about as much as I've ever been, but being relieved meant that everything was okay, which allowed my residual anger to come to the forefront. "Good. Now where the hell've you been!" I couldn't help it. My fury over Dunning had been uncorked and there was no stuffing the genie back into the bottle.

Johnny:

"Where've I been? Shit, Roy! I've been tryin' to call you on the HT! Why the hell didn't you answer—?"

I entered the shady copse of trees where we'd had lunch at what seemed like three days ago. There he was, standin' there all dirty and unkempt with lacerations and bandages all over him and lookin' like he'd gotten into a fight with a badger.

All my anger just washed outta me, "What'n the hell *happened* to you?"

"Nothing. Can we just get out of here?" He picked up his knapsack.

It took me a second to recover from seeing my partner in a state worse than when I'd left him. "Now, wait a minute! What the hell's all this? Are you alright?"

He put his knapsack on and practically growled at me through gritted teeth, "I'm fine. C'mon, let's go."

What the hell's gotten *into* him? I stepped up to him, ready to inspect his injuries. "Hold it, Roy! Let me check you, first. Now...what'n the hell happened?"

He put a hand up to stop me. "I got it covered, Johnny. In case you hadn't noticed, I *am* a paramedic. I know how to care of wounds. Now, if you don't mind, we've got about five or six miles to cover before darkness falls and I have a funny feeling we're not gonna make it. So let's get a move on, alright?"

"Hold on –"

He snapped at like I was the most inept boot he'd ever come across. "What?"

I had to wonder if aliens had snatched my partner and left me with some kind of a clone with a short-circuit. "Hey! Now, don't start givin' me attitude, Roy. If you're angry with me just tell me. I can take it. Better'n I can take this crap you're handing out."

His eyes flashed. "You done?"

Okay. Now he was startin' to piss me off. "Hey, I'm not kidding. If you're pissed at me, be pissed at me, but at least give me the courtesy of telling me why. Otherwise, I don't have much of a problem puttin' in for a transfer when we get back on shift."

He put his hands on his hips, sighed real deep and rubbed his forehead. "No, Johnny. I'm not mad at ya."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Let's do this later, okay?"

"Well that's not fair."

"What now?"

"Hey, enough with the attitude, Roy. Now you're the one who's been telling me to spit out whatever's been bugging me so we air all this out. So what's it gonna be? You gonna take your own advice or are you gonna be a hypocrite?"

Roy:

Head, meet platter.

He was right, there was no doubt about that. Like I said, the genie had been let out and I couldn't seem to put a stop to the flood of rage that was pouring out of me.

I had to concentrate *real hard* at keeping my voice even. "I'm sorry, Johnny. It's not you, alright?"

He didn't say anything, but he looked kinda hurt.

"Look, I'm gonna need time to sort this out."

His expression of pure sympathy about broke my heart. "You sure you're okay?"

He was so genuinely concerned and it struck me so consciously at that moment how lucky I was to have a partner that cared so deeply. "No. Not really."

"You've got me worried, you know."

"Listen, let's do this later. We'd better move."

We filled each other in on our adventures and it helped distract me a little, but I couldn't ignore the rage over Dunning I'd unleashed and it hadn't really diminished much even when we finally got back to the cabin.

Johnny:

Oh man, I was beat! What a helluva day.

I checked Roy's injuries myself when we got back and made him shower to really irrigate the deepest lacerations. Man, he did a real job on his leg with that slide down the mountain. But while my silent and surly partner cleaned up, I unpacked our gear. I'd been as worried about Roy's dehydration as I was about his injuries and his state of mind. I guess that might explain why he was so combative when we finally hooked up at that lunch spot. Naturally, I gave him my canteen, but between us, it was barely adequate and we'd finished it up long before we got back down.

I started in on dinner to distract myself. Figured a coupla Gage Special hamburgers was in order.

Once Roy was out of the shower, I re-bandaged what he couldn't reach, and forced a glass of fresh water on him. I placed Marco's brother's portable TV on the coffee table and once the burgers were ready, we sat on the couch and watched the news.

I eyed him and hedged bringing it up. I bit into my burger, juices runnin' down my arm, "So, uh...you wanna tell me what happened? Up on that mountain?"

Roy:

The truth was, I wasn't ready to talk about it, yet. I was fuming all over again about what had happened that night with Dunning that I couldn't be rational about it. But Johnny was right, it wasn't fair that I'd gotten him talking and couldn't do the same. I guess that speaks volumes about how different we are. Johnny's an extrovert, he solves things by talking about it. Me, I introspect. I deal with things internally.

I took a deep breath before I bit into my burger, but I couldn't move to take a bite. I leaned back on the couch. "Dunning."

Johnny:

Now that was *not* what I'd expected to hear.

I mean, the way he spat out Dunning's name... I've known Roy a long time and I can tell you that I have never known Roy to hate anybody. Annoyed at or frustrated by, maybe. But not hate.

So havin' him spew that jackasses name out like that was a shock in and of itself.

But...why *Dunning*? I mean, I knew *why* Dunning, in fact, when Roy'd told me about his fall off the embankment, Dunning was what came to mind but...

All this time, I thought he'd put the whole thing behind him. I remembered wondering, while Chet and Marco were givin' me the spiel, why Roy wasn't more pissed about it. I guess there really had been something going on with Roy about that whole thing that I never knew about.

Roy:

I put the burger down 'cause my appetite was suddenly gone.

I looked over at him and he'd stopped in mid-chew and slowly put his burger down. The look on his face about matched what I was feeling. "You mean that no-good, lazy-ass, son of a bitch from 24s Dunning?"

"Yeah..."

Johnny:

Now I understood his mood.

I felt my rage ramping up again about how he'd left my partner to die in that building while I was on vacation. I was pissed as hell at Dunning. I felt like I'd abandoned Roy when Chet and Marco gave me the lowdown and I felt that same way when Roy'd told me on the way down what'd happened when he fell off the trail while I was held up by Momma and her cubs.

Shit. Shit shit shit!

My mind was whirling with that whole damned thing and I couldn't stop it long enough to form a coherent thought. Dunning just has this effect on me that the minute he pops into my head, rage fills me instantly and makes me wanna head over to 24s to beat that jackass to a pulp.

"...And in other news, the body of a young woman found in a concrete culvert in Carson, several days ago, has been positively identified as Melissa Taglieri..."

Roy:

I had to leave. I couldn't watch it. The whole damn thing was made worse because it was the same culvert we'd rescued her from.

I went into the kitchen and Early's words came back to me, socking me in the gut - *"Like she'd been trash that someone discarded."*

Johnny:

He'd dashed off so fast... So damn tragic and unnecessary! It wouldn't let him go and he couldn't let go of her. I listened for a few minutes, but didn't hear anything coming from the kitchen. That made me a little worried, so I went in after him.

I slowly made my way in; I didn't want to startle him. He was standing at the counter with his back to me, head bowed a little. I was about to say something, but...something made me hold off a little. So I just watched him. There was a cup near his hand but he wasn't moving. He breathed in real deep and let out a few breaths. He sniffed a few times. *Ah, Roy...*

My heart was breaking. I needed to draw him out before what'd happened to Melissa shut him down.

I stepped closer to him and put my hand on his left arm. "Roy?" I whispered.

He turned his head and glanced at my hand, but he didn't move otherwise. I rubbed his arm, let him know I was here if he needed me. But I think that kinda pushed him over the edge. He put a hand up to his eyes and I could feel his body shaking. *Shit, Roy...* In all the years I'd known him, I'd never seen him like that. I knew he was upset about Melissa, but there had to be something else going on and my guess was it had something to do with Dunning.

Not for the first time did I want to beat that son of a bitch to within an inch of his life.

I felt his body sag a little. *Oh no...* I turned him toward me a bit and reached to get my other arm around him; figured I'd steer him out the kitchen and onto the couch where he could sit down.

I heard the cup fall over; one of us musta knocked it down.

I felt his body trembling as I turned him then he leaned in and sagged against my left shoulder. *Aw, hell, Roy...*

I saw the cup on the counter start to roll toward the edge and I reached underneath Roy's arm to catch it...

I don't know who started it. I really don't.

Somehow...we each found the other. It'd shocked me, thought maybe I'd run into him or he'd run into me. We were both chapped from the hike and it physically felt kinda weird, but an intense feeling plunged down to my toes at the contact. Just a...feeling of love and caring, I guess; the magnitude of which I hadn't experienced before. Since we'd decided to let our feelings be our guide...I did... Gentle, at first. Then I felt the tears on his face and then they were on mine and I found myself wanting to steal them from him, everything they were, everything they were doing to him. I wanted them, instead, and I laid into him, deeper, coaxing them, drawing them out. I wanted them for myself, take every last drop, so I could take the fear that Dunning and Melissa had left in him and destroy the weight that'd settled between us. Inside both of us.

Neither of us could breathe, but I didn't care. I wanted - needed - to free him.

Us.

Me...

Suddenly, the pantry door was behind me and he bodily pressed against me and my mind was thrown back to that hang glider rescue on that cliff... *'On the other hand, a part of me...I had to be honest with myself...an incredibly selfish part of me, allowed myself to throw professionalism into all this wind and revel in how grateful I was to be able to hold him, finally. Keep him safe...'*

And then... he slipped away, like the whole thing'd been a dream. His body heat was gone, his weight was gone, he was gone. I turned toward the door and I was alone.

My body was shaking, trembling from the contact, the adrenaline...

I slid down to the floor and put my knees up. My mind and my body was in a limbo state, all gray and fuzzy and I couldn't even *begin* to process what the hell'd just happened. Whatever that was.

I heard a weird sound. The cup was on the floor, rolling back and forth by the sink.

I laid my head back against the cabinet door.

Shit.

Chapter 15

Johnny:

...*thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud*...

...*C'mon, little more, little more*...

...*huff, huff, breathe, breathe*...

...*thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud*...

Here we go, end point comin' up, so let's push it. C'mon, Gage, pump it, pump it! Faster, faster... Go, go, go, go!

“Aaaaaahhhh!”

FINISH!

Whew! Man! that felt good!

Huff, huff, breathe, breathe...

Nothin' like a nice peaceful run in the morning. Clean air, no one else around but the birds and the bees—

Okay, we'll forget about all that for the moment.

Suffice to say, it was nice to get in a good run at dawn. I walked around outside for awhile, hands on my hips, trying to get air back into my lungs. I checked my watch – 27 minutes. Well, not exactly, seven minutes a mile, but a three-mile jog in clean air and peace and quiet while watching the sunrise was never a bad thing, no matter how long it took.

Certainly beat tossing and turning all night. For the second night in a row.

You know, we're not normally touchy-feely guys. Even after all the years together as partners, we don't do a whole lot of back-slapping. We rub shoulders all the time when we're workin' and on occasion, if the situation is dire enough, we might grab each other to make sure the other's okay. But, other than that, we don't go out of our way to touch each other. Not that we try to avoid it, either. I mean, it's not something we think about it. It happens when it happens and it doesn't when it doesn't. It's just how it is.

But I think since this whole thing started between us and us touching each other the way we had been over the last coupla months somehow created this...static build-up, this anticipation that all came out in the intensity of...what'd happened.

And man, it packed a wallop. Shocked the hell out of us both, I think.

In fact, I couldn't shake it; felt it all night...still felt it. Could still feel him right up against me, could still...feel him....

“...Roy...?”

I'd stopped outside his room after I'd sat on the kitchen floor for...I don't know how long. I knew it was stupid – not like I really expected him to come out and we'd hash it all out and pretend it was nothing more than that we'd bumped into each other.

Guess I was kinda hoping to avoid everything being awkward this morning. Maybe 'cause I wasn't sure what'd triggered it. After this whole thing about us not bein' queer and...that happens.

Though I had to admit, it wasn't just that it happened...it *happened!* Right through my gut and down to my toes and left my whole body ringing like church bells at a wedding. I'd never felt that kinda thing so intensely, before. I mean, don't get me wrong, I've had dates that ended a lot happier than that, if you get my drift. But they hadn't started out so...*deep*.

I couldn't help but wonder...if he hadn't broken it off, how far would it have gone? I still had this warm feelin' snuggled in my chest. I liked it. A lot.

Made me pretty nervous about how we were gonna react to each other this morning.

I guess because...it kinda seemed for awhile there that...it might've gone farther than maybe we'd've thought possible. I mean, after all, *this whole thing* between us had gone farther than we'd thought possible! And last night? Man, if that didn't prove it, nothing would.

I just couldn't stop thinkin', though.... What would've happened if...? I mean, I had to admit, a part of me was kinda hoping we could...you know...try again. But another part of me was just so...damned weirded out.

I suppose tossing and turning all night and standing around thinking about it all by myself wasn't getting me anywhere.

I went back inside and looked around cautiously, like I was expecting the ceiling to come down – no sign of Roy. *Whew*. Part of me was sad and part of me was relieved; I half-imagined we would start up where we'd left off, but I could also see us spending the day huggin' the walls of the cabin trying to avoid each other. If he was feelin' the way I still was, it was a toss-up which way it'd go.

I had a feeling, though, that we were close to solving this. I just wondered what the puzzle was gonna look like when everything was all said and done.

Roy:

Transfer...transfer...

That's what I'll do. I'll put in for a transfer. I've gotta figure a reason to give Cap, though. Y'know, a good reason. Some kind of...decent...reason....

And Joanne. I've gotta come up with a reason to tell Joanne.

And the kids. I'd need to request the transfer to a station within the same school district. The kids like their school, they like their teachers. We like their teachers. Don't want to hafta pull them outta school just because...

I mean, they shouldn't have to pay for their father's...

Oh boy...

Cap, though. I've gotta think of a...oh yeah, I considered that already.

Okay, so Cap, first. Well, no, I should tell Joanne.

Yeah, Joanne first, dummy. Okay, Joanne, first, and then Cap. Or should I tell Joanne and the kids, and then Cap?

Joanne, Joanne, oh man, Joanne's gonna go ballistic on me if I get transferred out of the kids' school district. What am I gonna tell her? I guess I'll just tell her that we couldn't work things out between us. 'Course then she'll wonder why and I have no real good answer for her.

Maybe I'll tell her he shoved me down the mountain. At least maybe that'll explain the lacerations and provide compelling evidence that we can't work together, anymore.

Which would hardly be that far from the truth.

But it would start a whole series of lies, wouldn't it? Exactly the kind of thing Johnny'd talked about.

What I wouldn't give for a mountain lion, right about now...

I'd spent the entire night tossing and - well, I couldn't turn a whole lot, so I settled for punching my pillow - over what'd happened in the kitchen.

I'd heard the knock on my door, heard his voice. I'd thought about just confronting him and...explaining things. Don't get me wrong, I had no idea who'd started it or how it'd happened, really. But while I know I should've explained why I left so abruptly, a part of me was still reeling from it all and I needed time alone to deal with it.

Mostly 'cause I was afraid something might happen if I'd opened up that door...

Back when I'd finished rescue training, my partner, Ray Decambra – yeah, you can imagine the teasing we endured on account of our names – was on his way to being promoted to engineer while I was just starting out. We were on a run and a live wire came down and zapped the puddle he'd been standing in. He went up. His boots stayed in the puddle. He was okay, in the end, and went on to become captain, eventually.

What'd happened to me last night with Johnny was about what'd happened with Ray and that live wire. Threw me for one helluva loop. So much so, that...I had to end it or regret anything that might've come next 'cause I had a feeling things could've gotten out of hand. I'm not sure how it would've manifested but neither of us could really afford to find out. Things were complicated enough, as it was.

Damn it.

One...*tiny* move, one *negligible* mis-step and we were back at Square One. And the worst part was, I didn't know who to blame, him or me.

Because I wasn't sure why it'd happened, in the first place.

One small move and I was back on that cliff, feeling it all again...

...*feeling*...

Alright. Alright... We've gotta figure this out because we're running out of time and there's no way we can afford to have that happen again. Of all the Mistakes that plagued this whole thing since the beginning, I think that one last night blew the roof off the rest. Or maybe it was on par with No. 4 with that hang glider at Holy Crap Ascent. Boy, if anything had ever been aptly named...

I think I managed to narrow the point of origin to Dunning. I had a feeling part of this whole thing between Johnny and me stemmed from that, from how incensed I'd been about his cavalier attitude toward established rules and procedures, the job, and me, in particular.

No, there was more to it than that.

But...what? What am I feeling, exactly?

Am I angry about what happened last night?

I was almost afraid to ask myself that question, considering what I'd done about Dunning. But I wasn't angry. Or maybe I was. Angry with myself for...for what? *Allowing* it to happen? *Allowing* myself to get...caught up in it?

I was vaguely aware of a sound; I guess the cup had fallen over. Saw and felt Johnny reach under my arm to catch it...

I guess what'd happened with Johnny in the kitchen was inevitable, considering how things had been between us these last coupla months. But there was something about it, something different. I mean, yeah, of course it was different between Joanne and Johnny all the way around. But last night...there was something else, too. Like we were reaching out to each other, somehow. But why was the question.

It was gonna take some time for me to process it and deal with this sense of dread that'd settled over me.

The odors from the kitchen had awakened me. A comforting, pleasant smell that became my escape from the gut-wrenching dread and leaden anxiety of the dreams that had gripped me in the fifteen minutes of slumber I'd managed all night; dark visions of being buried in a ceiling collapse as I'd tried to get to Melissa...and then turning to see my family leaving me behind...

I had awakened groggy, thick-headed with sleep, and full of the kind of anxiety that sticks to you like peanut butter.

I'd considered staying in bed all day, closing the blinds and hunkering down under the covers to hide – chalk it up to injuries sustained from an uncontrolled descent down a steep decline.

Yeah, I knew he wasn't going to fall for it, either.

I guess the real reason was because I wasn't sure how we were gonna relate to each other. Not to mention...how he might've taken my abrupt departure. He might be upset or relieved, I had no real way of knowing and I wasn't entirely up to finding out. But I was gonna have to. Like I said, time was running out and we'd flown backwards right past Square One in spectacular fashion.

We had a lot of ground to cover if we were gonna solve this in the day and a half we had left. Despite, I would imagine, neither one of us wanting to confront the other this morning, it was gonna have to happen, sooner or later. Might as well be sooner and get it over with.

First things first, though. If I could manage to get my aching muscles and injured body out of bed, I might be able to get to the latrine. Then I guess I'd have no choice but to confront the inevitable.

Johnny:

I had everything about ready, which was a bit of a feat considering I'd showered and then fallen asleep on the couch. Half-expected to see him hovering over me when I awoke again, but either he'd gone back to hiding the moment he saw me or he hadn't gotten up yet. Figured I'd try to get as much done as I could before we confronted each other but I quietly just zipped through and he still hadn't gotten up. The hardest part was ensuring everything would keep since I had no idea how long it was gonna be. It was already pretty late; of course, he might've been up all night, too. But bladders and tummies don't like to be kept waitin' for long, so I knew he'd have to come out of his room, sometime.

I checked the oven and things looked okay. I took a sip of water and set the cup down on the counter. I don't have to tell you where my thoughts went to after that...

... 'I slid down to the floor and put my knees up. My mind and my body was in a limbo state, all gray and fuzzy and I couldn't even begin to process what the hell'd just happened. Whatever that was...'

I took another gulp of water...

'...Gentle, at first...'

It hadn't been my intention to do that when I walked in there. But when I saw him standing at the counter like that lookin' so...*alone*, something in me just broke apart. The vision of him dangling off that cliff was superimposed with that vision of loneliness of him just standin' there.

It'd suddenly felt like he was walkin' away from me and I needed to anchor him, keep him where he was so he didn't leave me behind.

Huh. Somethin' about that...

The more I thought about it, the more worried I got about that whole thing. Not worried, exactly, but... *Hell, I don't know what the word is.* It wasn't necessarily what'd...physically happened, but emotionally what'd happened, the intensity of it, I guess, that had my mind racing.

Something had triggered something pretty damn serious in both of us for us to have...done that. I mean, everything that had lead up to it was a part of it, but that couldn't have been the only factor, the only reason why we reacted so strongly, why it'd...been so intense.

And why it'd felt like I had to keep him grounded.

Roy:

I cautiously padded, or limped, rather, into the living room and looked around, like I was checking for a burglar; I was just real nervous about how this was gonna go between us this morning. There was no sign of my partner, which jacked up my anxiety, but I did see what he'd apparently been up to, all morning.

The 2-person dining table was set and laid out with bacon, a bowl each of grapes, a couple of those missing oranges, the bananas I'd brought, and orange juice.

Which meant he was most likely in the kitchen.

Of all places.

Leave it to my partner to make things more complicated.

I felt a warm sensation run through me at the memory of last night and wondered how I was going to react at seeing him.

And how he was going to react to me.

I considered the table and my nervousness transmuted into worry. I knew he'd been into the bacon, I mean, you can smell the stuff a mile away. But I could tell he'd been cooking up a whole buffet if the scent of muffins was any indication.

Suddenly I wondered whether we'd each taken a different tack on what'd happened the night before.

This could turn out to be worse than I thought.

Johnny:

Figured I'd start in on the coffee. Even if he didn't want any, *I* certainly did. Hell, I'd already had two muffins waitin' for him to get up 'cause I was starving. Decided to spoon out eight cups just in case we were gonna need a full load. *Hell, if we'd had a bigger pot, woulda just done a full twelve—*

"Mornin'. Well, what there is left of it, anyway."

Roy's voice, real soft from the doorway about scared me half to death and I spun around 'cause I was so surprised I nearly dropped the coffee tin. *Shit. Smooth, Gage, real smooth.*

My partner was standing at the door in his sleeping shorts and a brown shirt and that warm feeling that'd been snuggled in my chest since last night got all excited again. "Mornin'," I replied back, trying to sound cheerful, but not enthusiastic, if you get my drift. *Well at least he wasn't comin' at me with a kitchen knife. That's a good sign, I guess.*

He just kinda stood there, hunched over a bit, lookin' kinda sleepy. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare ya."

"Uh...no, no. Just, uh, just kinda—I didn't—you're just quiet, is all."

"Looks like you've, uh, had yourself quite a morning," Roy observed, rubbing his eyes and thumbing out toward the living room.

"Yeah..." I cleared my throat, still feeling nervous. "Uh, well, you know, I was, I had, uh, I went, um, I went runnin' this morning. It was nice, it was real, uh, real nice, but, uh, you know how it is. I got, uh, I was starvin' when I got back and, I dunno, I guess I was struck by the chef bug, figured I'd make both of us a nice big breakfast. That is, uh, only if you're hungry. I mean, I don't want you to feel like you have to eat or nothin', but of course if you're hungry you should eat something. I mean, I dunno, maybe you're *not* hungry, although, considering neither of us ate much last night—" *Oh that was real swell, Gage, real swell. Shit...* His eyes had dropped to the floor and I about stuck my head in the blender. "But, uh, now that you're up, I can make you some eggs, if you want."

Roy:

It was clear I had to be the one to get the ball rolling. "Johnny."

He stopped short at the look on my face. His shoulders sagged and he looked like he was bracing himself for the worst news while he stared at the floor.

“Are you angry?”

Johnny snapped his head up at me a bit wide-eyed, his hand at his chest, “No. I’m...*I’m* not.” Cautiously, “Are you saying...y’are?”

I hesitated a little, searching my own feelings about it. “No. No, I’m not angry.”

Johnny:

“Okay...” *Whew! Okay. That’s good. He wasn’t mad. But that still didn’t mean he was happy about it.* “Are you...not-mad about it?”

Roy:

I wasn’t sure how to translate that into English. “No Johnny, I just said, I’m not angry about it.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I meant, are you...” He squirmed against the counter. “That is... What I, what I mean is... Shit,” he muttered and settled one leg against the counter with his shoulders down.

“You’re asking if I regret it, is that it?”

He rubbed his nose and flicked me a quick look before turning back to the stove and starting in on the eggs, “Yeah. That.”

I guess it really depended on the aftermath of all this. “I don’t know, yet.”

Johnny:

Well that didn’t make any sense. “Well...if you’re not *happy* about it, that must mean you’re angry about it. Or you at least hate me or blame me or something.”

“I told you, I’m not angry and I don’t blame you and I don’t hate you.”

I turned back to him, “Roy—“

“Johnny, look, it takes two to tango. Considering how it’s been between us the past couple of months, I guess it was inevitable, but only time will tell what the ramifications of all this is gonna be. But *I* need to know...do *you* regret it?”

Roy:

He grabbed another egg and bounced it over the side of the pan, thinking. “I guess I don’t know yet, either,” he muttered.

He finally cracked the egg but we both stood there, not quite knowing what to say next. “Roy, look, this is ridiculous. We’re best friends, we’re partners. We—”

“Are we something else, now, too?”

He shrugged. “Only if you want to be. I mean, that’s really kind of a loaded question, isn’t it?”

To put it mildly. “Yeah...”

“Look, Roy...something...happened to us last night. And...well, for me anyway, it was pretty special. But it doesn’t mean it has to go...beyond that if...if you don’t want it to.”

“Well, why is the impetus on me? This affects you, too, you know.”

“No, I know that. But you’ve got more at stake. And *I’m* certainly not in any position to dictate how you should decide. Nor do I want to be. But...I will tell you one thing. However you decide, I just want you to know, I’m not angry about it or nothin’. I’m not sure *what* I am, but I’m not...I’m not angry, if that’s what you might’ve been worried about.”

“I *was* worried about it. Worried about a lot of things.”

“Yeah. Makes two of us.” He stared at the frying pan. “Shit. I just made a bunch of eggs with no idea who they’re for or even if either of us wanted ‘em like this.”

I felt the electricity between us as I stepped next to him and saw three eggs sunny-side up in the pan. “I’ll take those if you don’t want ‘em.”

He shook his head and grabbed a plate. “Man, I can’t believe I just did that. My head’s somewhere else.”

“Makes two of us.”

He nodded in sympathy, seasoned the eggs and shook his head at himself as he handed me my plate.

Maybe there was hope in getting this figured out between us.

Johnny finished with his eggs, brought the muffins out and we settled in to the buffet my bachelor partner suspiciously spent all morning cooking.

“This is real good, Johnny.”

“Thanks.” He flicked nervous eyes up at me and continued digging a hole into his plate.

I grabbed a blueberry muffin. “You get these at Tandy’s?”

“Yeah. I just put ‘em in the oven to warm ‘em up. You know.”

“Yeah. Somehow, being up here in the mountains makes them taste better.”

Okay, I knew that was a stupid thing to say but I was feeling a little nervous. Small talk has never been my strong suit.

“Yeah,” he forced a smile. “Yeah, that it does.” He cleared his throat and stared at his plate, like he couldn’t decide what to eat next, his finger jackhammering the table. He finally shielded his face with one hand and sat there, rubbing his face a little.

“Okay, I’ll bite. What’s eating at ya?”

Johnny:

I couldn’t figure out if he was denying it or wondering what page I was on. I looked him square in the eye. “Roy. Don’t tell me you’re not still thinking about it. That you’re not still feeling it.”

He stared at me for a few moments with an incredibly intense expression and then he leaned back and looked at his plate. “I am,” he breathed, eyebrows spiking in resignation, fingers absently playing with the butt of his fork.

My mind, everything I felt was still wrapped up in last night...

I had to cover my eyes ‘cause I couldn’t look at him. I just felt...like I was being pulled toward him and I wasn’t sure why. Alright, that wasn’t entirely true. I *knew* why, I just didn’t...*understand* why.

He was...a part of me just wanted to... *Shit!* I couldn’t bring myself to say it much less think it. But I sure as hell couldn’t stop *feeling* it. *How the fuck did we get ourselves into this?*

“Johnny, are you all right? Johnny...” I felt him lightly touch my arm and I yanked it back like he’d been a hot iron. “Don’t. Roy. Just.....don’t.” I put my head in my hands and tried like hell to keep myself together.

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden—“

I abruptly stood up; the chair scraped real loud against the wooden floor and it kinda startled me. “I gotta get outta here.”

I was out the door in a flash and if I could've, I'd've kept goin' till I got home.

Roy:

I found him, finally, standing at the edge of the stream we'd found on our first day here, throwing rocks into the water. I'd taken my time finishing breakfast then put his food in the oven to keep warm and changed clothes before going out to look for him. I'd hoped that would have provided enough time for him to cool down. I remained on the path and just watched him for a while trying to gauge his mood. "You want some company or you wanna sulk all by yourself?"

He quickly turned at my voice, assessed me for several moments looking like he was about to say something, and then he turned back and whipped another rock across the stream. It skipped about five or six times and then disappeared below. "I've made a decision, Roy."

"Yeah?"

He skipped another rock across the mirrored surface. "I'm puttin' in for a transfer the minute we get back."

Are we back to this? I felt myself getting hot under the collar; I was getting tired of having to haul him back when he ran off. If this wasn't worth his time to figure out, then there was no point in me wasting mine. "Alright. What reason do you plan on giving?"

He shrugged and sent another rock to skip across the water. "We've all been at 51s for a long time, Roy. I think the chief would understand if I wanted a change to help advance my career."

Uh huh. "And you think that's really gonna solve things?"

"If we're not around each other, it'll solve things plenty, don't you think?"

My anger ramped up. *My selfish son of a bitch partner. No, make that ex-partner...* "Fine. You do that." I started to leave, but my fury demanded to be heard and I turned on him. "You selfish bastard."

He whipped his head at me in surprise and anger flashed in his eyes. "What did you call me?"

"You heard me. You're a selfish bastard, Johnny. A real coward. You're no better than Dunning. I only wish I'd noticed it a lot sooner." I headed back to the cabin to pack my gear.

"Hold on!" He scrambled up from the embankment and grabbed my arm to stop me. "Where the hell do you get off calling *me* selfish! You think I'm puttin' in for a transfer for just *my* sake? I'm doin' this for *both* of our sakes, Roy, *not* just mine! How dare you just assume I would—"

“And how dare you drag me out here for four days just so you can hide in the sand! I could’ve been with my *wife*, Johnny. My *wife* and my *kids*! I chose you over my family because I thought it was important enough to them, to me and to you, to take the time to work this out. But obviously I made the biggest mistake in believing you thought our friendship and working relationship was important enough to work out.”

“I never said it wasn’t important.”

“That’s not the picture I’m getting right now.”

He put his hands on his head and walked in circles and finally turned back to me, “I don’t know how else to *fix* this, Roy!”

“No one said you had to fix it alone, Johnny. Look, I know you’re upset about something. But I can’t help you if you don’t let me in on it.”

He rubbed his nose and toed the dirt. “Yeah, I know. You’re right. I’m sorry,” he absently waved.

“I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you to tell me what’s on your mind. What scared you so badly this morning that you just up and left?” Not unlike what I’d done the night before, I suppose. In that respect, I guess we were even.

“I think I’m just... I don’t know how to handle this. It’s kinda throwing me, you know?” His expression turned to one of anger and confusion and I could see tears welling.

I spun him back to the stream and plunked him down on one rock while I sat at the other. We sat knee to knee and I looked straight at him. “Would you talk to me? Please. I wanna help you but I can’t do that unless you tell me what’s going on.”

He was quiet for a long time while he scratched two rocks together. “You think it’ll happen again?”

“The plain and simple truth is that it *can*’t happen again.”

“That’s not what I’m askin’ you.”

I studied him. “Unless we get to the bottom of what this is between us...I think the potential for it will still be there.”

He absently threw the rocks away, rubbed his face and sighed deeply. “Fuck, Roy. I just feel so...fucking...*girly*.”

Ladies and gentlemen, my partner and his stereotypical presumptions.

His face scrunched up in irritation. “What are you laughing at?”

“What exactly do you find so ‘girly’ about this?”

He absently waved about. “Just...all this...*feeling* stuff.”

“You don’t have feelings?”

“I have feelings! *Of course* I have feelings!”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Roy. Men have feelings. Women— Look, do you and Joanne ever have these kinds of conversations?”

“Not all the time, no. But sometimes, yeah.”

“You guys sit around and talk about your feelings?”

“Sure. It didn’t happen overnight. I mean, it’s taken time for that to happen, but yeah, we talk about ‘em.”

“Yeah, and I’ll bet she started it, too.”

“Not sure if I really recall that, but, possibly, yeah.”

“See? And that’s what I’m saying, Roy. *Girls* do this kinda nonsense. We’re not girls. We don’t...do this kinda shit.”

Sometimes my partner confuses me. Most of the time, he baffles me completely. “Then do you mind telling me how it came to be *your* idea that we should stay here for four days to do what we’re doing?”

He looked at me with a shy expression.

“You done getting all that outta your system?”

He sniffed and rubbed his nose, flashed a half-smile and kept his head down.

“Are you ready to tell me what the real problem is?”

He played with his fingernails. “You want the truth?”

“Considering the revelations of the past coupla days, nothing would surprise me, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Johnny quickly glanced at me with a glint in his eye before he looked away. “I’m still buzzing from that kitchen fire we set last night.”

Buzzing, trembling and about shaking out of my boots. “Yeah. Me too.”

He was silent for a while. “Can I ask you some’in’?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask what...made you just...up and leave?”

Well, there it was. I’d been a little afraid that he’d ask the question, but I was also relieved he had. Figured it’d come up sooner or later and I’d rather it’d have been here and not at the station. “I guess I was afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Afraid of it...leading to something else. Of the consequences. Of you being angry. Of myself. It was kinda a whole lotta things, really.”

He looked straight at me. “I wasn’t angry. I was confused as hell, I *will* admit. But I wasn’t angry. Not about what happened, anyway.”

I wondered if he was satisfied with his delaying tactics or was trying to come up with new questions. Even though our time was running out, I let him work through it at his own pace. I was worried that if I pressed him too hard, he’d submerge and it’d take twice as much work to haul him back up again. I didn’t want to risk that happening. We were so close now, I could feel it.

The sound of the water and the birds filled the silence as Johnny’s emotions settled on his features. He shifted on the rock to face away from me, his head down and his elbows on his knees. “Something happened to me, Roy. Whatever it was that happened last night...woke something in me that I didn’t....Shit, I can’t do this—“

I held his arm. “Johnny....”

Johnny:

“No, I mean, I gotta get off this thing.” I had to get up off the rock ‘cause I was kinda sore from the hike and then the run this morning.

It was hopeless. I couldn’t be near him ‘cause everything was just makin’ me feel heady. I guess we were gonna have to solve this standin’ across the cabin, after all...

I helped him up then quickly started for the path, but he gently grabbed my right arm with his own to stop me as I tried to get around him. “Johnny, I need you to quit stalling. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

That physicality, bein’ that close to him in the state I was in – that I think we were both in – just ramped up everything inside of me.

I curled around him, unable to get away from him 'cause he was holdin' me fast. I clenched his shirt in my fist as our arms intertwined and I settled my head against his right shoulder, *needing* to be close to him, to feel him. "Dammit, Roy, I can't..."

"Tell me," he pleaded real soft.

All I could do was breathe into his shirt for awhile until I could get my voice under control. "I can't stop....feeling like I..."

'...On the other hand, a part of me...I had to be honest with myself...an incredibly selfish part of me, allowed myself to throw professionalism into all this wind and revel in how grateful I was to be able to hold him, finally. Keep him safe. I didn't move for a few moments, my hand gently keepin' his head against mine as the tornado howled like hell-fury around us...'

"...I wanna hold you."

Roy:

My breath caught as his hand unexpectedly trailed lightly across my hip as he moved around me and he ambled almost directionless back toward the cabin. I had to steady myself against the weakening feeling that plunged through me in the wake of his touch. We were quickly sliding backwards and the worst part was, it was getting a lot harder to fight.

But I had to.

I finally saw him up ahead as he reached the cabin. "Johnny? Talk to me. Why're you feeling—?"

"I don't *know*, dammit!" he growled, arms waving angrily. He slowed his climb up the porch steps and then, defeated, he turned and plunked himself down as if weary from a day's march.

He smacked the railing with his fist out of sheer frustration and his face twisted into agony as he shook his hand.

I started up the steps after him but he held up his hand. "Don't—! Roy... Just...don't."

I backed off to the bottom step and watched him shake off the pain and then lean against the railing to hide his face with his other hand, his throaty breathing rhythmic and deep.

Whatever it was that happened last night had catapulted our relationship to a whole different tier and shook the foundation of our friendship almost completely off its hinges. I guess the only hope we had of putting it back was to return to where this whole thing began to derail.

But we both needed some time to sift through the wreckage.

So I stood at the bottom of the steps and leaned against the end of the crude wooden railing to simply wait. Wait for him to work through this; for the ice to break between us. My blisters eventually made their presence known again and I cautiously climbed the steps and sat across from him. I think we each felt the need to be together but couldn't risk being any closer.

“Shit, I'm starving.”

I looked over at him. “You barely ate anything. I put your food in the oven.”

“Thanks.” He got up and went inside and I listened to the sounds of his rummaging. After a while he finally came back out and handed me a soda.

“Thanks.”

We sat in silence for a long time again.

“Roy?”

The ice crack cometh. “Yeah.”

“You think it's the...thrill of the chase or do you think we're *honestly* hoping that this'll...turn into something more.....settled?”

He was talking again. Now we can get back on track. “But, what're we chasing, exactly? Considering the consequences and our own admission yesterday, I'm not so sure I see any real future, despite the fact that...serious feelings may be involved.”

“*May* be involved?”

“Alright, there are. But I think, in light of everything, there's something else going on that's underlying this whole thing and we have to get to the bottom of it or it's gonna keep dragging us along.”

He rubbed his face and threw me a weary expression, his voice thick with emotion. “Well, I'm open to suggestions, 'cause quite frankly Roy, I'm tired of tryin' to understand this and havin' it bite us in the ass.”

Johnny:

I looked over at him when he didn't answer. He was starin' out to the trees and I could see the wheels turning in his head as he was thinking. Shit, he looked so tired. My heart went out to him, “How much sleep did you get last night?”

He threw a double-take at me, surprised at the off-topic question. Or maybe awakened by it, I wasn't sure which. “A lot. All...fifteen minutes of it.”

I couldn't help but smile at my partner's sarcasm. I got up and stepped over to him. "You want to get some sleep first?" He looked up at me with an unreadable expression and I had a bit of a heart attack and couldn't help but laugh. "Sorry. Wasn't an invitation."

"S'okay. I didn't take it as one." He rubbed his face. "To answer your question, no. If I sleep now, I won't wake up until tomorrow morning. I *do* think we need to go through the rations and determine what we need to use by tomorrow."

"Are you serious?"

"Well," he rubbed his eyes. "All the moving around will keep me awake. Besides, I don't mind being domestic for a while. The return to the real world won't seem so jarring."

"Well let's get to it, then. I feel like I'm gonna need time to...don gear before we head in. Well, hell, that came out wrong."

I offered a hand and hauled him up, but his foot slipped off the step and he started to stumble down and take me with him. "Whoa, whoa! Roy...!" Somehow, I managed to keep my balance long enough to get an arm around the other side of him and after a few hopping steps I grabbed the railing and about felt his full weight as I kept both of us from falling.

We kinda remained motionless like that for a minute, trying to get our bearings; me behind him with my arms practically around him while he was leaning into me and holding himself up with one hand grasping the railing. "Roy? You alright?"

Roy:

You mean aside from feeling like the biggest klutz of the year? "Yeah..."

I slipped off the stair, landed on a blister and that threw me completely off-balance and started the avalanche. It wasn't until that moment that I'd realized I'd kept hold of his other hand and now had it stretched across me. I felt a slight squeeze and heard him let out a breath and relax against me, a little.

A warmth and a weight settled in me and I wondered if he could feel me trembling. *Oh man.*

"Johnny..." I whispered. *We can't do this. Much as...dammit...much as...*

His hold finally relaxed and as he moved away, I was back on the cliff again...

'...As Johnny released me into the arms of our brothers topside, it seemed as if something warm was ebbing away from me and I felt icy cold. □□□□

His hand slid off my shoulder and he trudged over to the end of the porch.

We were going from bad to worse. We had to get to the bottom of this before something either drove us together or drove us apart.

I watched him, then rocked and hauled myself up and slowly walked over to stand next to him.

He was facing out toward where his Rover was parked, elbows on the rail. He didn't move but remained silent for a bit. "It's gettin' worse, Roy," he whispered. "And don't tell me you don't feel it." His voice was low and echoed the regret and sadness that had stayed with me when he'd moved away from me.

"Yeah..."

"We're riding high and I don't see any way for us to get down that isn't gonna land us and lot of other people in a world of hurt."

"I think there's going to be a lot of hurt no matter how this shakes out."

"So what do we do?"

There was only one thing *to* do. "We start from the beginning."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"We don't have a choice but to make it work."

"Well, we *have* a lot of choices. The question is, which choice can we live with."

You said it, partner. "Yeah." I'd remembered Ranger Nyquist mentioning a lookout area that the rangers use that overlooked the canyon. I eyed the sky. "It's a nice day. C'mon, let's take a walk."

He lightly grabbed hold of my fingers to stop me as I started toward the steps. "Blisters ain't gonna bother you?"

Johnny:

My fingers slipped from his as he lifted a foot and looked at it. "Long as I don't overdo it."

The sunlight was shining, the breeze was blowing and the birds were chirping in the nice, fresh mountain air. We headed down the trail that went past the Rover and along the other part of the forest and it was nice to just walk together.

Roy picked up some pebbles and just tossed them one-by-one along the path as we ambled past the oaks.

I'd felt him after he'd stumbled down the steps. Felt him trembling in my arms, his breathing shallow. I think maybe that's what'd escalated everything inside of me 'cause I could tell he was feelin' it, too.

'... You think it'll happen again?'

"The plain and simple truth is that it can't happen again..."

But it almost did, Roy, and the thing is, neither of us tried to stop what happened, in the first place. That means one thing, in my book.

“Roy, did you...did you *want it* to happen? I mean, were you...kinda hoping, somewhere along the way, that it would?”

He was quiet for awhile.

Roy:

“It was never a conscious thought.” And then a terrible feeling hit me and I worried that I’d taken what’d happened last night a little too lightly. “Were you hoping for that to...turn out differently, Johnny?”

I don’t think I’d ever seen him look so surprised and his hand flew to his chest. “No! No, I...*I* wasn’t hoping. Were you?”

“No... Then again, I’m not sure *what* we were hoping for.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I’m not sure, yet.”

Maybe it was just an extension of the last coupla months, but it occurred to me as we headed for the scenic lookout that we hadn’t flinched from what’d happened last night. Then again, that was a whole lot different than what we’d been doing. But when you put it all together, there was no getting around it: *We hadn’t run from it*. Much as neither of us would want to admit it that had to account for something.

So why didn’t we run from it? Instead we...kept going. As if...we’d *needed* to? Maybe that wasn’t quite right.

It was obvious that what’d been going on between us these last few months had found another expression beyond just...touching one another. But last night, it seemed...more than that. As if we’d been aiming for it.

We were looking for something, yet I wasn’t convinced whether we’d actually found it.

Still...

How things could possibly return to the way they were seemed impossible, now. We were barely keeping our heads above water and sinking, fast. Unless we found a way to reestablish the foundation between us awfully quick, the riptide from last night was going to wash us right out to sea.

Johnny:

Wished we hadn't let this thing between us go on for so long. Though I guess it's not like we were deliberately doin' that. Then again, maybe we were. We allowed it because we liked it. I mean, I know I did. But I guess, too, we'd been trying to figure it out on our own and wondering if it was mutual and I guess once we figured that, we had to keep goin' to figure out what this was.

But now we were in this over our heads with only one option left. Then again, maybe it was always the only option and what we'd been hedging toward all this time. I suppose it's like emergency medicine. You do what you can with what you know until you get more information then you change the procedure.

We could only hope this was gonna work.

I looked up to the few clouds floatin' all lazy in the blue sky, felt the breeze blow by, heard the birdsong in the tall, green trees and the whispery swish of our footsteps in the grass. Felt the comfortable stillness of the mountains and my partner's presence. Like all of this was made just for this moment, just for us.

"When did it start for you?"

Roy:

We spotted the ranger's lookout area that had a scope and a bench. Johnny entertained himself with looking through the scope while I gingerly leaned against the hot metal railing and stared out across the landscape and the colorful, sun-drenched canyon wall, some areas easily approaching a 90-degree angle.

"The hang glider rescue over in Topanga Canyon. Yourself?"

He straightened up from the scope and crossed his arms on it. "You wanna know something funny? Did for me, too."

Johnny:

He curled around and threw me a look I couldn't read, but I could see the wheels turning in his head. He uncurled himself and leaned his back against the railing to face me, a frown on his face, "Do you remember when, exactly?"

"Yeah. In the ambulance, riding in with you to Rampart after you got creamed by that glider..."

'...He laid his fingers over mine on the mask and took it off again. "Sorry," he whispered.

"What for?"

He slowly reached up and caressed the back of my neck, fingers lingering on my shoulder where he'd grabbed me.

"S'okay."

I leaned over him as I put the mask back on him. We just looked at each other.

And then it hit me. Without warning. A hundred-pound weight sank in my chest threatening to take me down with it and I felt tears hit my eyes. I turned away from him cause I had to fight tooth and nail to keep it from gettin' a hold of me...'

'...He was lookin' sick, a little pale and his breathing was more rapid. He was clearly in a lot pain.

I leaned over him. "Head or ribs?"

He just nodded.

"Both?"

He nodded again, his face sweating from the pain he was in.

"Hey, we're almost there. Just hang on for me, alright? You're gonna be okay."

I grabbed his hand and felt something rush through me.

But I couldn't fathom for the life of me what it was...'

His eyes went distant.

"Well, what about you? Do you....remember exactly?" I asked him.

He looked at me, then he turned back to the railing again...

Roy:

'...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....'

"That's why you kept squirmin' away from me. Shit, Roy, I thought you were in serious pain!"

"Yeah. I know. I remember."

"Man, I was goin' crazy tryin' to figure out how to palpate without makin' it worse."

"Trust me. You didn't succeed."

"Hell, I guess not. So that's when it started for you."

“Yeah....”

“But you don’t know why?”

“No...and I was just thinking about that. What about you?”

“Me, neither. I mean, it’s good that we both know *when* it started, but none of this is helping us to figure out the ‘why’. I mean, you’ve been hurt before and I’d been worried, sure, but I never reacted like *that*.”

“But the fact that it started at the same time from the same incident has to mean something.”

“I’ll go along with that.”

He turned to face me, but his eyes were shifting as he was thinking. “Johnny, did it come on all of a sudden or had it been building up over time? Before the follow-up in the ambulance, I mean.”

I thought about that. “What happened in the ambulance kinda hit me square in the chest. Surprised the hell out of me, to be honest. What about you? Was it a sudden thing or...?”

His face screwed up a little as he sifted through memories. “Yeah. It hit me like a lightning bolt. I was totally unaware of feeling anything before that.”

“Huh. Well....doesn’t that seem a little odd to you? I mean, the fact that it was the same incident and it hit both of us like a ton of bricks. Ya gotta admit, that’s a little odd.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

A lot of scenarios went through my head. “We’re gonna have to backtrack everything that happened that day from that incident. Hell, Roy, this could stem from something you or I said...the day we met!”

“Yeah. But I doubt it goes back that far.”

“Well how do you figure that?”

“Because it probably would’ve happened sooner.”

“Well. Yeah. I guess so. Alright. So we backtrack starting from that day.”

“Yeah. It also means we may have to dig pretty deep about what brought this on and that’s gonna depend on whether we’re both ready to get into this for the long haul. I imagine we may not like some of what we find.”

“Not like we have much choice, I guess, but...yeah. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. I’m just not sure I wanna know what all has to be dug up.”

“You and me, both. Guess all we can do is walk through the fire.”

“You know, Roy, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d rather head into a 3-alarm without an attack line than go through this.”

“Yeah. But we started this fire. There’s no back-up on this one. It’s up to us to deal with it.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” I moved over to stand next to him at the railing and we just stood and watched the sunlight move across the landscape for a while.

Roy:

Johnny’s huffing and moaning was getting louder and the rocking was getting worse. He was also slowing down. “Goddammit, Roy!” he wheezed through clenched teeth.

“You’re almost there, Johnny.”

Each new breath brought a new curse word that got swallowed by heavy breathing. “Can you...fuck!...slip off...ssshhit...by yourself...?”

“Yeah. Just bend over a little.”

“Aaaughh!” he yelled and I half slipped, half fell off of my partner and hopped a few steps while he dumped himself on the grass next to the cabin, heaving every breath. “Whew! Man!”

I stood over him. “You alright?”

“Just give me a minute. *Maybe* I’ll recover,” he threw me a look. “*Shit* Roy, you have *got* to lose weight.”

“Yeah. I know. Joanne tells me that all the time. You did pretty well, there. I think that was almost 5 minutes.”

“Roy,” he huffed and puffed on the ground. “That was five minutes *without* turnouts or air bottles. There is *no way* that I’m gonna be able to do it for that long *with* PPE – yours *and* mine – and climb up...” he made a vague gesture “...thirty flights of stairs!”

“Thirty flights.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m afraid to.” I offered him a hand and yanked him up. “C’mon. We’ve still got breakfast to clean up and the rest of the rations to plan out.”

He stuck a finger in my chest. “Oh, no. *You*, pally, are never eating again.”

“Well, alright, if you wanna drag all that food back—“

“Uh-uh. No way. I’ve done enough hauling for a week. And, Roy?”

“Yeah?”

“No one at the station gets told about this.”

“Considering no one’s supposed to know we’re even here, I wasn’t really planning on mentioning it.”

“I know that. I meant...if it ever came up. You know.”

“Johnny, if you have to cart me up thirty flights of stairs when we get back on shift day after tomorrow, I think more than just our station’s gonna know about it.”

He threw me a withering look. “Boy, you have a real gift at kicking a guy when he’s down, you know that?”

Oh brother.

We headed inside and started to clean up from breakfast.

“Okay, so where were we?” Johnny asked. “When we arrived at the scene, right?”

“Right.”

“And what do we have, so far?”

“Well,” I answered as Johnny handed me the plates from the table. “You were worried about my head injury after that glider rammed into me. I think that made two of us.”

Johnny snorted a chuckle as he brought in some of the food plates. “Boy, I tell you, you weren’t lookin’ too hot.”

“Wasn’t feeling too hot, either.”

“I’ll bet. Okay, what else?” he asked, going back into the living room to retrieve more of the dishes.

I stopped to think for a moment and stepped into the kitchen doorway. “You said you started to feel helpless as we were heading down.”

Johnny stopped gathering the last of the dishes and leaned a hip against the table. “Yeah. I chalked it up to the assessment of the situation. High angle rescue, bad weather, all of that.”

“Was that it? I mean, were those the only things you were worried about or thinking about?”

Johnny:

I had to think back on it...

'... You remember that feeling I mentioned? That helpless one I felt when Roy fell through the space between the roof and the power line and all I could do was watch while he got electrocuted? It came back at me, again. It took every inch of my willpower to stuff it somewhere and concentrate on making sure we got down okay.

Mike and Marco needled me, one day, about how much of an adventure junkie I was, always gettin' in there, being the one to do the stunts while I left Roy on the ground. It's not that I'm necessarily into all that macho stuff. It's a high, I will admit. Especially when you've saved someone who's in serious trouble. But a big part of the truth is, I like to do the crazy stuff because it's harder for me to watch it when Roy does it. Because I can't control it, I can't control the circumstances. I can control me, when I'm doing it. But I can't control things when he's doing it.

It's not that I don't trust him, I mean far from it! I trust him with my life and I don't mean that casually. But it's not him I have the problem with. It's everything else around him. That's what I don't trust.

And that's why that feeling was comin' back at me, again. With the sun startin' to lay off those clouds to the east, the winds were pickin' up and we were headin' straight into the maelstrom. And him with those fresh burns on his face and his dislike of heights...

I felt worry settle into my gut and I had to bite down awfully damn hard against my instincts to signal to the Engine crew to lower us down further. Cause I wasn't likin' this. Not one damn bit...

“Yeah...there was something else.” The memory was coming back at me again. “I think the whole situation exacerbated how worried I was with those fresh burns on your face. Worried how it was gonna affect your range of vision, you know. Not to mention how much you love heights.”

“Yeah...”

“I mean, with that kind of rescue, there’s no room for error. Not one iota. And I was worried you were gonna get hurt because your abilities were compromised, even though I knew you’d never risk a patient or me because of that.” I grabbed the dishes and followed him back into the kitchen. “So I guess I spent a lot of that rescue worrying about you. But what about you? Still nothing?”

“I was concentrating on keeping the situation from getting out of hand. I wasn’t really thinking about anything else.”

We were done with cleaning and had started in on divvying up the rations. I handed Roy stuff from the fridge so we could see what we actually had left. “Okay, so let’s go back to where we just were. What about when we arrived?”

Roy:

'...Alright. You want to tie it off or you want me to do it?' Johnny asked as we started to put our belts on that Chet had brought us.

"No, uh, why don't you go ahead and tie-it off. The minute you've got it wrangled, I'll go in and check the victim. It looks like there's a pocket I can slip through between that bent section of the wing by the leading edge and the cliff face."

He sidled up right next to me. "Yeah, I see it."

"I don't think the glider will hold for much longer. It's possible her weight is helping to hold it down, but that may be less of a factor as the winds pick up. We just better be sure we both don't get knocked out by that thing or there'll be no one to rescue her."

I checked the buckle on the belt.

"Roy, you need me—?" Johnny started.

My head snapped up...'

Johnny was staring off into space, eyes narrowed. "Yeah...yeah I think I remember that. So you felt something when I asked you if you wanted me to make that pack for you?"

I shook my head. He was on to something but wasn't quite there, yet. "No, it was more than that. Something about the way you asked or how you asked is what set it off."

"Okay, so far, we have me being worried about you and you startin' to sense something when we got there."

"I guess that's about right."

"Well, I guess we keep goin' then."

We'd gone through the rations and finally decided on chicken kabobs for dinner. I saw Johnny wander over to the fireplace, contemplating. "Hey Roy, I was just thinkin', Nyquist didn't say we couldn't use the fireplace, right?"

"Not that I recall. Why?"

He walked over, crouched and looked up into the chimney. "Well, I'm kinda thinkin' we could."

"What for?"

"To build a *fire*, Roy. What else would you do with a fireplace?"

Oh brother. “Look, uh, you’re not thinking of cooking the kabobs in there, are ya?”

He threw me an indignant look that would make even Cap cringe. “No, I am not thinking about cooking the kabobs in here. I just figured ‘why not?’. Besides, we have the marshmallows,” he smiled conspiratorially.

I saw a small stash of firewood by the hearth. “Well, I suppose if you want to. I’m not sure there’s enough firewood, though, and I don’t think we should take the last of their stash.”

“Well, maybe there’s more out back. But if we’re gonna use it, I think maybe we oughta clean it, first.”

“Whaddya mean ‘we’?”

“*We!* C’mon, Roy. I mean, how often do we get to enjoy a nice evening by the fire?”

“Well how bad is it?”

He squinted up into the chimney, again. “There is a bit of creosote build-up; I can see it from in here, but it’s not bad at all, really.”

“Well, if there’s a ladder and brushes, you’re going up onto the roof.”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Already thought of that. But I don’t think it’s that bad. ‘Sides, it’s only for one night.”

I suppose he did have a point. Might lull me into actually sleeping, too. “Alright. Sounds like it might be workable.”

Johnny:

“Workable? Aw, this’ll be *great*, Roy! Just you wait.”

He threw that dubious smile at me, but I refused to be daunted by my partner’s lack of enthusiasm. Roy checked his watch and put his hands on hips. “Speaking of food, it’s still too early to start on dinner. You hungry at all?”

“Naw. ‘Course I ate after you did. You hungry?”

“Not really.” He stretched for a bit. “Whaddya say we take a break? Grab some chips and sit out on the porch.”

“Now *that* sounds like an excellent idea. You wanna beer?”

“Oh. Yeah. Boy, that’ll hit the spot. I put the cold ones in the front.”

The sun had started on its downhill climb as we settled on the porch. “Kinda feel like we’ve been chasing the sun all day.”

“Mm,” Roy acknowledged as he sipped his beer. “Yeah, that lookout spot is really quite spectacular. Especially at that time of day. Get a great view of the canyon.”

“Yeah. If anyone’s in trouble in that area, they can really pinpoint their location. Wish we had something like that for firefighting.” I scooted up with my back against the railing and crossed my feet along the porch to face Roy.

Roy swirled the beer in his bottle. “No kiddin’. Take out the scope and look for victims without wasting time searching every room and every floor. We could get in, get to them, get back out and get them treated that much faster.”

“Would be a lot safer, too. No more worrying about whether all the floors you gotta search are gonna go the minute you step onto ‘em. You just target the floor and the area you need to get to and get in and get out. And for us rescue guys, at least, we could conserve energy and oxygen by just goin’ straight to the victim. Be a lot less stress injuries and smoke inhalation problems for us.”

“I agree. Boy, that’d be a real time-saver and not only minimize the injuries but the severity.”

“That’d be a sweet deal.” We sat silent for a bit, lost in our own thoughts. “Maybe they could, uh, come up with some kind of device where you could keep track of your partner. Woulda come in real handy when Dunning just left you up there.” I looked straight at him as I sipped my beer.

Roy threw me a look that I couldn’t read, a flurry of emotions swirling in his eyes until they dropped to the floor. “Yeah...” he downed the rest of his beer in one long gulp. “C’mon, Junior. Let’s go see to that chimney of yours before we start in on dinner. It’s gonna take awhile to prep everything,” he said as he got up.

I just watched him head straight in, noticing he was extra careful not to look at me as he went inside.

“Roy...? We’re gonna have to talk about this,” I called after him but got no answer. ‘Course, I wasn’t sure he’d heard me, either.

I think I was beginning to see just how this whole thing had started.

Roy:

I think Johnny got a little too carried away with the whole scope idea, at least as far as my personal comfort was concerned.

He was right though. We were going to have to talk about it.

I guess I wasn't quite ready, just then. The conversation had been going in a nice leisurely direction until it ran right smack into Dunning and it caught me off-guard. I needed more time. More time at just the moment we were running out of it. Murphy's Law. I suppose I'd signed up for the long haul but...I just wasn't ready.

Give me more time. Just... give me more time...

Johnny:

We found more firewood out back and brought in enough for us and to restock what we'd planned on using, then got to cleaning the chimney. I kept an eye on him the whole time. Ever since I brought up Dunning he went quiet on me. It was just like the ride comin' over after we found out Melissa had died. Roy didn't say much if the conversation even remotely neared firefightin' and only said anything when spoken to.

I was gettin' that feeling, again, like he was leaving me behind, just like how it'd felt in the kitchen, last night. We were close to figuring this out I could feel it. But I had to keep it on the surface. I had to anchor him before he submerged everything again and we were back to square one.

We finally got the chimney flue lookin' brand spanking new, then got cleaned up and tackled the prep for dinner. I was trying to cut the stems off the mushrooms, but the knife I had just wasn't cuttin' it, no pun intended. "Hey, Roy, check in that drawer over there, see if there's another knife."

He did, there was and he handed it over and we stood together in the kitchen chopping vegetables.

"So, uh...I was thinkin' more about this thing as we were cleaning the chimney. About when this thing started happening between us." I stole a side-long glance at him to gauge his mood.

"Uh-huh," he muttered as he sliced up the tomatoes.

"So we pretty much figured that this...probably started after I came back from vacation."

He threw me a quick glance as he grabbed another tomato to work on. "Yeah. I guess so."

I tried to hide the seriousness of the question while I chopped the mushrooms. "Did anything happen while I was gone, maybe? That had to do with you, I mean, in relation to me that may have started this whole thing? With you, I mean?" *Oh yeah, that was real smooth, Gage...*

He got real quiet and he kept chopping like he hadn't heard me.

I kept chopping, too. "I mean, uh, was there anything that happened aside from Dunning and his glorified trip into stupidity?"

I heard Roy's chopping slow to a stop. I looked over at him and he was just standing there, eyes boring a hole into the backslash. Then he frowned, set the knife down on the cutting board and walked outside.

Well, shit...

I was all set to go after him, but decided at the last second to let him be. For the moment. That was the second time he'd done that in as many days. I had a feeling I had – *we had* – just kinda stumbled on to the root of this thing and if last night was any indication, it was deep enough for both of us that some space between us was a good idea.

Dunning, Dunning, Dunning....

My mind harped back to when I came back from vacation to hear Chet and Marco revel in the Nitwit of Idiocy that was the Great Dunning:

'...It's not like stupidity isn't unheard of among firefighters. But the incidents I know of usually stem from extreme job fatigue or a probie mistake.

But this...

There was no way...

I could not believe what I was hearing.

Madder 'n a mosquito in a mannequin factory doesn't even begin to cover how teed off I was. It just brought back everything that happened that time when Roy fell through the...

That sickening, helpless feeling that I vowed I would never go though again...'

That was it, wasn't it....? I never wanted to feel that way after watching Roy get electrocuted from that power line. Yet it *did* happen again. Thanks to that stupid sonofabitch. Only this time I wasn't there.

I wasn't there...

I went and looked out on the porch, but it was empty. I looked for him all around the cabin. I even went over to the lookout area, but there was no sign of my partner.

I guess maybe he needed some time alone, so I figured I'd finish the dinner prep and hope he comes home.

Even after all the vegetables were done, there was still no sign of Roy. I grabbed the hibachi out of the car and was easing it down in front of the porch when I heard gravel-crunching footsteps in front of me.

I straightened up and saw Roy comin' up the path. His eyes were kinda red. My heart went out to him, but I felt like I had to keep it low-key, for his sake. "Hey, partner. Where'd you go?"

He thumbed back behind him. "Down by the stream."

"You okay?"

“Yeah,” he breathed with a lopsided grin that quickly faded before he sniffed and wiped at his eye with his arm.

“Got kinda worried when I couldn’t find you.”

“Sorry,” he gestured vaguely.

“No. Wasn’t any trouble. I was just...worried, that’s all. The veggies are done. I was about to start on the chicken.”

“I’ll do the chicken if you wanna get the fire started,” he pointed at the hibachi. “Did you find the skewers?”

“Yeah, they’re on the counter.”

“Okay,” and he trudged up the steps inside.

That feeling came over me again, that same one from this morning. All I could do was plunk down on the steps and just kinda...calm the weight in my chest. I finally went and grabbed the bag of charcoal and the lighter fluid from the car and made a circular fire break around the hibachi with the gravel. But I was barely paying attention. I was mostly aware only of the emotions swirling around in my gut.

Roy:

It’s one thing to sign up for a deep-seated cleansing, but it’s another thing entirely to have to do it.

Johnny’s mention of Dunning had brought everything back to the surface, but I knew I couldn’t stay there. Maybe because of last night and the headspace I was in. Maybe because of all our revelations of the morning. Maybe because I’d barely had any sleep for three days.

Maybe because Johnny was right on target...

‘...Marco was waving at me from the stairs while Chet was trying to clear the stairwell of debris. "Are you alright?" Marco yelled, hands cupped around his mouth.

"Yeah! Listen! Dunning may be trapped in the east wing!" I pointed.

"No! He's not! He's downstairs!" ...’

The unmitigated nerve....the unmitigated *arrogance*. The sheer ineptitude... the...fucking *laziness*.

How could you do it? Knowing that 110s had declared the roof unsafe. To *leave* me there without so much as a, a ‘see ya’. How could you do it?

I’ve known *bricks* with more common sense. To leave your partner in there...if you were a recruit at the academy they’d’ve hauled you out of there so fast you wouldn’t have known what hit ya.

My wife...!

My kids. *God, my kids...my kids...*

'...they found her body early this morning...like trash that someone discarded...'

'...I looked back down the far end of the wing. I couldn't wait any longer; She was coming awfully fast...'

'...Chris! Jenny! Joanne!...'

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

Johnny...

As the stream had bubbled and gurgled next to me, so did the anger and the fear that I'd bottled up that simply wouldn't be denied any longer and we soon mirrored one another as the water had flowed in the quiet of the shade of the trees.

Johnny:

"Set it down over here, Roy. Watch your step."

Roy brought the chicken out on a tray and set it down on a small stool I'd found inside the cabin.

I had the fire going real good on the grill and we set the chicken on the fire and listened to the sizzle.

"You know we're doing this kinda backwards," I laughed.

"Yeah. That did occur to me as I was chopping this up."

Roy settled himself on the bottom step while I separated the chicken pieces a little more on the grill then joined him.

I looked out at the sky. The clouds were getting a little thicker and the intense blue of the sky was fading as the sun continued to make its way west. I waved the smoke over to me and smelled the nice aroma of barbeque. "I think I'm finally gettin' hungry."

"Yeah, me too. Smells good, if I do say so ourselves."

I glanced at him and laughed a little. I poked a couple of the charcoal pieces with the tongs to get 'em goin'. "Sorry I wasn't around, earlier. I really was worried about you."

"Don't worry about it. Kinda needed to work things out on my own."

“Dunning?”

“Yeah....”

He looked kinda sad. *Man, talk about feeling clueless about what to say next!* I started to get up. “You wanna beer?”

He waved me back down. “I’ll wait till dinner. I should get another plate for the chicken and bring out the vegetables. Is there another stool inside?”

“Oh you know what? We should bring out the coffee table.”

After I turned the chicken over on the grill we set about gathering everything together for a nice fireside BBQ evening. We were starving by the time the chicken was done and cooled a little and we couldn’t get the kabobs skewered fast enough.

The sun was far below the trees and the twilight was hanging in the sky when we finally laid back against the steps and patted our bellies.

I glanced over at him with a happily satisfied grin. “Well that was one of the best camping meals I’ve ever had. Those kabobs were awfully good.”

Roy grinned back. “They did turn out pretty good, didn’t they? C’mon, let’s get this cleaned up before we fall asleep and find ourselves covered with ants.”

We cleared the coffee table and cleaned up the kitchen. We both decided to grab another beer and kick back on the porch.

Roy:

I noticed my partner standing next to me, hand out like he was waiting for me to fall, as I made my way down the steps. “You know, I can get down these steps quite well on my own,” I grumbled.

He answered me with a mischievous grin. “After that cliff, the hike and those steps earlier today, I feel like I’m gonna have to make a career out of catchin’ you.”

I stared him, dumbstruck.

‘...I was vaguely aware of a sound; I guess the cup had fallen over. Saw and felt Johnny reach under my arm to catch it...’

...Catch me...

That’s what this was all about, wasn’t it?

We hunkered down on the bottom step, again, watching the grill fire slowly die down, sipping our beer in the cool air and comfortable silence and looked out at the trees silhouetted against the fading light.

Everything swirled in my mind. It was all starting to come together.

Johnny:

I poked at the charcoal and watched them glow red. “You know, I was, uh, I was thinkin’ earlier about when I came back from vacation.”

Roy took a swig of his beer.

“When Chet and Marco gave me that cockamamie story about Dunning.”

I stole a side-glance at him, hedgin’ to see whether Roy was ready to talk about it, yet. Not sure he had much choice ‘cause our time was almost up. But I was tryin’ to figure what my options were, in case he wasn’t.

Roy:

“I remember. You stalked out of the kitchen. I went after you to find out what was going on...”

‘...I grabbed his arm as he started past me, "Who're you mad at, Johnny? Me or Benjamin?"

"I don't know....All I know is, I would never leave you, Roy. I would never do that.’

Now what was that supposed to mean?

But as I watched him head to the Squad with that weird comment floatin' around in my head, I...felt something move in me. Some kind of...emotion, I guess. I'd never felt it before. It was awfully brief, too quick for me to hold onto and figure it out. Didn't matter, we had to move and so I ran to join him...’

“I guess...I guess maybe that’s when it’d started.”

“When I said I would never leave you.”

“Yeah. At the time, I didn’t understand it, but now it’s all starting to make sense. And then Melissa. Only today did I make the connection.”

Johnny:

“I meant it, too, Roy. Man, I cannot tell you how scared I was listening to that bullshit story from Chet and Marco and having *that* in my head the whole time we were at that scene and then after you’d gotten beamed by that glider and I had to tie it off to get to you...”

‘... "ROY!"

I'd just gotten the IV instructions for the pilot from Rampart when I heard Cap yell like his life was at stake. I snapped my head up to see him with his hands cupped around his mouth yelling down the cliff face...'

“It was a good thing it'd been Cap who'd seen you get hit, Roy, 'cause I'd-a skedaddled down that cliff without a safety belt the minute I'd seen it happen. That just shook me to the core, seein' you danglin' like that.”

He was kinda hunched in on himself, like he was trying to keep out the cold. “Sorry.”

“Hell, Roy, it wasn't your fault. And don't get me wrong, under any circumstances I'd-a been on a line in half a heartbeat to get to you. But something about that whole rescue... something snapped in me when I'd heard Cap's voice yelling like the whole world needed rescue. I don't think I'll ever forget that as long as I live. I mean, my *hands* were shaking; I couldn't get that lifebelt on fast enough...!”

'...Cap whipped his head at me, "Is he still attached to the bolt?"

'Ah, shit, yeah, he might be...!'

“...I don't think I'd ever felt so...frazzled during a rescue, before. Maybe when I was first starting out, but I was always able to keep any kind panic from gettin' a hold of me. But, man, I couldn't move *fast* enough to get to you. Shit, I'd never felt so...*helpless!* So damned...*vulnerable.* So—“

'... "What'n the hell happened to you?" ...'

'...He left him. He walked out and left my partner. In a fire. That sonofabitch just left him. Without saying a fucking word; he just left him!...'

'...I had to get up and do something before I stalked over to 24s to beat Dunning to within an inch of his life...'

I wasn't there. Son of a bitch, I wasn't there. To help you, Roy. *Dunning left you there. We both trusted that son of a bitch...*

“Shit, Roy, I hadn't been there! My partner almost died and I couldn't do a damn thing about it.”

And I hadn't realized until just then how much that burned me.

Roy:

Johnny kept his head low, gently rocking his beer bottle between his hands. “This morning during breakfast when I just left...it’s occurred to me over the course of the day that I’ve been...real protective of you, lately. I think that’s why it started with me. After that bullshit with Dunning and then the glider...I think that’s what’s...been my problem. I told you I would never leave you and I realize I said it after the fact, but I wasn’t kidding. You mean a lot to me, Roy. I mean, hell, it’s *your* fault I became a paramedic! So I guess what I’m really trying to say is...you have only yourself to blame, for all of this,” he snorted a laugh.

“Thanks.”

He patted my knee. “Don’t mention it.”

We lapsed into a companionable silence for a bit.

“Seriously, Roy. I don’t think I ever realized how much we...” he huffed out a breath like he was angry, covered it with a cough and then started scratching at the spindle of the railing with his thumbnail. “How much we...cared about each other until this shit with Dunning went down...” his voice had faded into a whisper. “You know what I mean?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“So, back to my earlier question which we never really answered. You think it’s the...thrill of the chase or are we *hoping* for something more...settled?”

“Well – to answer your question – I’m convinced this isn’t quite the deal we’d been worried about.”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess it was something I realized down by the stream earlier today. I can care about you and I can love you. But I’m not *in* love. At least, I guess, not in that way. And I don’t want to saddle anyone with that kind of doubt. I know we love each other, but I guess not in that way. I suppose it’s a different thing between us. Maybe there’s no real definition. So if this was ever hedging toward ‘something more settled’... Sorry Johnny, it was never my intent to hurt you.”

“S’okay. I’m fine, Roy. Really. I’m not offended, at all. I mean, I wasn’t necessarily expecting anything. I’m not sure *what* I was expecting. I guess I was just...wondering where this was all going. But if it’s not about *being* in love, I can accept that. I just want to know what we’re doing, that’s all.”

I gave him a dubious look, worried that he was simply trying to spare my feelings.

“Honest! Look, I love you, you’re my best friend, we know beyond every possible doubt that we trust each other. You and I have been partners longer than all the other paramedic teams out there. And we’re not just paramedics, but firemen, which comes with a whole host of dangers and situations most people don’t face. We both know how that can forge bonds that run pretty deep.”

“I was thinking about that. Remember when you said to me you’d never leave me after the Dunning incident, back at the station? At the time, I thought it was a weird thing to say, but I wasn’t sure if it was *because* you said it or the *way* you said it. But something about that...did something to me. I couldn’t put my finger on it at the time. And then, when Early told us they’d found Melissa in the ravine... He said it was like she’d been discarded. And that whole idea’s been rattling around in my brain, ever since.”

”Being discarded?”

“Yeah.”

Johnny:

It all clicked together, for me, right then. What he’d gone through and what he’d been reacting to all this time. “Cause that was how you felt after Dunning left you in there.”

“Yeah. I finally figured that out. And Melissa’s case just...kinda drove it in, I guess. Feeling discarded. And by the *one* person who’s supposed to have your back. Well that’s my excuse, what’s yours?”

I figured Melissa’s case had to factor in somehow. Did something to him, to us. Didn’t know why, though. All I knew was, it’d seemed to make us need to connect to each other, verify that bond between us. Like we were trying to make up for something that she never had. Something she never gave herself the chance to have.

“Because you’re my best friend, Roy. You’re my partner. We count on each other to be at our best in the worst situations. We have a level of trust that is beyond the norm because of that. I can be dealing with a patient with *hellfire* going on around me and *know*, without *any* shadow of a doubt, that I’ll be perfectly okay because you have my back. And *you* know I have yours. And that’s the thing, Roy, there are no *maybes* between us. But Dunning fucked all that up when he callously left you behind. He left you in there to *die*, Roy! He left my *partner*, my *best friend*. I *entrusted* him to watch your back and he treated both of us like we were a damned inconvenience. I almost *lost* you because of that. I am so *pissed* about that, Roy, I can’t even be *rational* about it. And I think he shook you up more than you even realized and I am goddamn pissed as fuck at him for putting you in that position! In one fell swoop, I felt like he messed with the trust between us. And maybe it wasn’t your take on it or intent, I don’t know, but when you started treatin’ me like Dunning, it just took my rage to a whole new level—“

“Wait a minute, hold on. What do you mean I started treating you like Dunning?”

“You hid those burns from me, Roy. You wandered around all over the station tryin’ to *hide* it. From *me!* That whole mornin’! Like I was never gonna find out... And then after that hang glider rescue? When we got you to Rampart? Do you remember what you said? What you told me?”

Roy:

I think I about laughed. “I had a concussion. There were a lot of things I said, Johnny.”

“Uh huh. One *specific* thing you said to me. You said thanks for comin’ back for me. I couldn’t believe you’d said that! After what I told you that same morning after Chet and Marco went off on that stupid stunt that Dunning pulled. What did I tell you, Roy? What did I say to you?”

I stared at the floor because I couldn’t look him in the eye. I could hear his voice telling me that and I felt that same warm feeling course through me again. “That you would never leave me.”

“That’s right. And I wasn’t kidding. And now, all of a sudden, you’re tellin’ me you didn’t expect me to come back for you. Hell, Roy, I felt like you were treating me like that sorry sonofabitch, like you didn’t trust me, like *I* was Dunning. Well I am not Dunning. And I was damned if I was gonna let him get away with messing with something that both of us need from each other, that we depend on, day in and day out.”

I tried to come up with an explanation for him. I mean, there was an explanation. I hadn’t told him about the burns because I didn’t want another lecture. And I thanked him for comin’ back for me as kind of a joke, because I knew he would. But in light of Dunning’s actions and how it ended up affecting us...I could see how he’d taken it the way he had.

It would never have occurred to me not to trust him. But I had come to realize that I think he understood, far better than I had and a whole lot sooner, that trust had been what this was all about. When I got jealous of Gil and then that structure fire at the brewery. I hadn’t trusted Joanne enough to brush off her mother’s criticisms of me like she’d already been doing all these years. And just as important – to me, anyway – the trust I had in my partner. I guess I figured I could trust any firefighter. I may not get along with all of them, but I was certain I could trust them. Had before and they’d never let me down.

Until Dunning.

And then everything snowballed after that and I just didn’t realize... how deep my feelings really were. About everything. Remember at the beginning of all this when I said it might’ve been a mistake that I hadn’t allowed myself to get upset about Dunning? Had I just given over to sheer rage at the time, none of this would’ve happened. But I shoved it aside when it got too much and I see, now, how that messed everything up. Or not. Like I said, depends on your perspective.

“I apologize, Johnny. I didn’t mean for any of that to come across that way. The only reason I didn’t tell you was because I knew you’d go ballistic on me. I’d already gotten the lectures from Cap and Dixie and Joanne and the rest of the engine crew. I wasn’t up to hearing it from you, too. I did it out of self-preservation. It wasn’t meant as a comment about you.”

“Yeah, well...thanks. For the apology, I mean. I guess I took it too personally.”

“You do have a tendency to do that, sometimes.”

Johnny:

“Yeah, I know. You don’t have to rub it in. I think I was just...feelin’ so damned helpless about it all. I mean, I can’t tell you what it’s like, Roy, to come back from fun in the sun and see my partner, my best friend with second-degree burns on his face! And while I’m trying to deal with Chet and Marco’s tall tales of Dunning’s Incredible Stupidity, my partner gets beamed by some hang glider and left with some possible serious head injuries and it takes me half a day to get to ‘im. I just...and then I couldn’t help that girl in the ambulance when she bled out on me and... *Shit*, Roy, it was like the worst twenty-four hours of my life. All the...training and know-how and it all came down to not being able to do a damned thing when it counted. I’ve been so damned angry about all of that that I just kinda buried it because I didn’t want to deal with it. I dunno, I guess maybe the same thing happened with you.”

“That’s about the conclusion I came, to, as well. You’re right, about Dunning. I had rationalized it away without confronting how I really felt about it. I think because I was afraid of how angry I really was. I suppose the whole thing’s entirely my fault. You and I have worked so long together that we know what the other’s going to do. I mean, we barely have to say anything, any more. And I think I kinda took that for granted, assuming Dunning was gonna do the same thing. I mean, those times when I’ve partnered with Brice or Dwyer, while it wasn’t the same as working with you, we got the job done. I felt I could trust them and they never let me down. But I think Dunning so threw me for a loop, I almost didn’t know how to react. I think my faith really kinda took a bit of a beating, thanks to him.”

”You know, this whole thing kinda reminds of Mrs. Miyako.”

“Who?”

“Mrs. Miyako. Remember? She and her husband had just moved here and she was undergoing false labor at the gas station...”

“...”My mother expects my baby to carry a name that’s been passed down in her family for the last six generations. At first I was proud to do that. Then I found out what it meant.” Her face screwed up like she was about to puke.

I was afraid to ask. “What?”

*“Bad smell’. Do you really expect me to give my child that name?”
I about cracked up!*

“Well did it get passed on to you?”

“Fortunately, no. My sister, got it, though.” She shuddered. “I think my mother is trying to punish me for marrying an Okinawan.”

I had to admit, I had no idea what that meant. “Well...aren’t you, uh, Okinawan, too?”

“Japanese. We’re supposed to hate each other. But that’s my parents’ generation. I don’t care what Ronald is. He loves me, I love him. I trust him. That’s what’s supposed to matter, right...?”

Roy's eyes lit up. "Oh yeah. Boy, she was a real kick in the pants."

"Yeah, she was a trip. And she was right. It doesn't matter who or what. What matters is that we trust each other. And I guess that's the crux of this whole thing, isn't it? I mean, if you ask me, I think this whole thing's been all about trust. You were in serious trouble on that cliff and it made you feel *incredibly* vulnerable. Maybe more so than you've ever felt in your life. Now, under normal circumstances it might not ever have affected you the way it did. But it did this time because it came off the heels of Dunning. And after seeing what he did to you, I felt so...damned helpless. Gettin' you off that cliff was the only way I could do anything about it. Made me realize how I really felt about...things. Maybe, somehow, at that moment, when I came back for you, how we feel about each other became transmuted into...whatever it was we experienced. 'Cause maybe that's what we needed. Maybe we were tryin' to...reconnect."

"You may be on to something, Junior."

"Yeah. Or, I could be dead wrong, Roy. Maybe we'll never know what it was. Maybe we'll realize it at dinner, tomorrow night, I don't know. But, I do know one thing – I'm sure as hell glad Dunning ain't my partner."

"That goes for both of us."

I glanced at him. "We still partners?"

"If you want. I...don't know if it'll quite be the way it was before. But maybe that's okay."

"I think we have a more solid friendship than we did before."

"I'll go along with that."

"You know, I *was* surprised to see you. Figured Cap'd call in another rescue unit."

"He did. You were in one hell of a spot on that cliff, Roy."

"So you came and got me."

Bright smile. "You're my partner. I told you I wasn't gonna leave you. C'mon, let's get the marshmallows out. I've been itching to get that fireplace going."

Roy:

We got the fireplace going and grabbed the marshmallows and had us a real campfire treat. Afterwards, Johnny wanted to set up Marco's brother's portable TV, since he'd gone through all the trouble of bringing it.

I'd about had it by that time, so I got ready for bed and looked forward to a night of uninterrupted, blissful sleep. But as I headed for my room, I smelled popcorn and heard Johnny laughing at whatever he was watching on the television.

I traipsed out to the dark living room to see my partner bundled up on the couch with a bowl of popcorn, the light from the TV and the fire bouncing on his features.

“Whatcha watchin’?”

“Barney Miller. You goin’ to bed?” he asked, almost sounding regretful.

I suddenly felt alone and didn't feel like sleeping alone, either. After revealing so much to one another the last few days – weeks, even – somehow it seemed...empty, I guess, dismissive, even, to just turn our backs and call it a night. “I *was*. Barney Miller's a good show.”

“Aw, it's great. Come watch with me. Plenty room,” he waggled his foot under the covers.

“Yeah. Okay.” I settled onto the couch, opposite Johnny. We divvied up the popcorn and whiled away the night watching television by the fire.

Johnny:

The next morning, after eating the last of the eggs, we loaded everything up into the Rover and made quick work of cleaning the cabin and gathering up all the trash. Then we strolled down to the ranger's lookout and just hung out for a bit, letting the landscape and the mountain just...settle into our being for awhile.

I saw some kind of bug land on the back of Roy's shoulder and I stepped behind him to shoo it off.

I looked at him...leaning on the rail and looking out into the canyon. All these months all these moments all this...stuff between us. I got up right behind him and put my hands on his shoulders. He turned his head to me and smiled, but didn't move, otherwise.

“We gonna be okay, partner?” I whispered into his ear.

He nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so. You okay?”

I stepped back next to him. My hand lingered on the back of his neck for a few moments. “Yeah. I'm fine.” I looked at my watch. “Guess we'd better get going.”

Roy sighed and took one long last look at the canyon. I hooked his fingers into mine. He patted the railing, the regret clear on his features. “Wish we could take this view home with us.”

“Yeah. Wouldn't that be a sweet deal?” I gave him a bit of a tug. “C'mon, partner...”

I started down the path and he let me gently tug him along. He finally started to follow of his own volition and we ambled back to the cabin with our hands in our pockets and Roy lookin' around, tryin' to soak up as much of the place as he could. For someone who seemed like he had to be dragged here kickin' and screamin', he sure didn't want to leave.

Couldn't blame him.

Satisfied that the cabin was tip-top ranger ready, we piled into the Rover and headed for home. I turned the radio on as we pulled out onto the road and some pop song was playing. I moved to turn it off, again, knowing how Roy felt about rock music.

"Turn it up, Johnny."

"I thought you didn't like rock-n-roll?"

"Just...turn it up."

O-kay...

*"...And if I'm feelin' good to you
And you're feelin' good to me
There ain't nothin' we can't do or say
Feelin' good,
Feeling fine
Whoa, baby, let the music play..."**

I drummed on the steering wheel and he leaned an arm on the open window and his hand kept the beat against the door while the wind whipped our hair around. We looked at each other and smiled, feeling more secure in our friendship than we ever had and we made for home.

"Whoa, listen to the music.

*Whoa, listen to the music.
Whoa, listen to the music..."*

* *"Let the Music Play,"* by the Doobie Bros.

finis

A/N: It is very often (if not mostly) the case – if not traditional – for slash fic to contain graphic scenes of intimacy and I daresay there may be readers for whom the absence of such a scene in this story is a disappointment. I don't shy away from a well-written graphic scene and enjoy them as both a reader and an author. However, as stated in my opening note at the very beginning of this story, I wanted to take a different approach to slash.

I wanted, on the surface, to traverse that feathery boundary between bromance/slash as the characters find themselves suddenly confronted with a 'what if?' and must reexamine themselves and their relationships. But beneath that, is the deeper exploration of the impact and sensuousness of a simple touch and the sense of intimacy, deep caring, affection it can convey. In our darkest moments, it's what we instinctively crave; what we need. A simple, gentle touch from someone we trust can strengthen bonds, affirm connections, or make us weak with acceptance. It can also stoke a fire or tame one. A simple, loving touch can also be few and far between; yet in its rarity is contained one of the most powerful and healing things in the world.

I do not know who originally created this two-character format in fanfic writing, but I came across this style in an exquisitely written Miami Vice slash fic, "24/7" by elfin. I have, in no way, matched her incredible talent in this piece, but this particular story seemed the perfect opportunity to try my hand at this style. I can only hope it conveyed Roy's and Johnny's journey with passion, affection and emotion.

Thank you for reading.