

Wowacintanka

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Marco knew he'd never forget the taste of the mud: earth, ashes, lime -- like his grandmother's tortillas -- and death. It was in his hair, blending with the sweat on his back, blinding his eyes, clogging his ears, nose and mouth. He had been in this hole forever. It somewhere between the tenth and ten millionth pocket in rubble of the pancaked building into which he had crawled following Johnny. He no longer knew how many these muddy, cold, and dangerous holes he had searched. They differed only in the shattered debris of the former occupants' lives, which lay like broken toys around him: in one apartment, wedding photos; in another, clothes; in this one, broken china littered the ground. And, everywhere, icy yellow mud.

Marco was jammed against Johnny's knees, which dug painfully into his shoulder as Gage worked the porta-power into place. He grimaced as Johnny inched a little further forward, increasing the pressure on his limb. Rain seeped through the wreckage, dripping down the back of his neck and running into his turnout coat. The cold water was soaking into his shirt, chilling him. Shivering, Marco pressed tighter against the ground, every inch of his body alert to the shifting and settling, waiting for the shaking that would indicate further collapse. Twice already, he had pulled Johnny out when the debris rumbled beneath them. He felt like the needle on the seismograph displayed in the window of the Cal Tech geology building. "Hurry up, Gage!" he shouted.

Johnny grunted around the small flashlight he held between his teeth. The porta-power hissed again as he squeezed the lever. Bits of concrete and stucco fell, rattling like old bones. The man pinned beneath the debris cried out.

"Just hold on, we'll have you out in a few minutes," said Marco.

Johnny reached back, making grabbing motions with his hand. "More wood, Marco," his words muffled by the flashlight.

He gritted his teeth and slid Gage another short length of wood to shore up the wreckage. While he passed the paramedic cribbing, he wistfully imagined feigning claustrophobia so Kelly would be forced to following Gage into the next hole.

Roy double-checked the boy's IV line after they had transferred him to the gurney. "Hang in there," he said to the frightened child, "we'll have you to the hospital soon. They'll fix you up." He stood and nodded to Brice who was going to ride in with this latest group of patients. They loaded the boy in the ambulance.

Roy shut the doors. As the vehicle pulled away, he closed his eyes and let his shoulders slump.

An early morning collapse of a rain-soaked hillside had turned the four-story apartment building into a one-story pile of broken wood and concrete, jack-knifed half way down a slick hillside. Four people were still missing and presumed trapped within the structure. People in mud-stained and rain-soaked nightclothes still wandered dazedly behind the police line the cordoned off the rescue scene, gaping at the wreckage of their homes. Those, whose relatives who had not yet been located, either stood weeping in the arms of a bystander or staring up at the firefighters in stony silence. Vince Howard slowly worked his way along the yellow police line tape, gently discouraging the distraught or curious from getting too close. Volunteers from the Red Cross clustered next to the disaster relief van, taking names, passing out blankets, and organizing emergency aid. The bright flood lamps of Light 103 cast a harsh glare over the scene cutting the darkness into sharp, surrealistic shadows. Beside the squad, an elderly Cambodian woman keened for her missing son, an eerie wail that penetrated straight to Roy's breastbone. He shuttered.

DeSoto straightened, squared his shoulders and opened his eyes. The gray clouds along the eastern horizon had lightened; he could now see the outlines of the buildings on the ridge above the apartment. Only a couple of walking wounded and those still being pulled from beneath the rubble

required his attention. He put on his 'game face' and turned back to the triage area. A large tarp had been stretched between the engine and the squad to provide some shelter from the rain. Discarded wrappers from medical supplies littered the ground between the two vehicles, soaking up cold water.

A thin oriental woman knelt on the ground, cradling her obviously broken wrist in her lap. Blood from a gash on her forehead mingled with rainwater dripping from her sodden hair. Roy squatted beside the woman. She stared fixedly at the wreckage behind him.

DeSoto checked her vitals. She glanced at the paramedic briefly, then returned her attention to the rescue efforts, while Roy gently wrapped a splint around her broken limb. "Ma'am," he started, "When the ambulance returns, we'll need to get you to the hospital."

She turned her head toward Roy in alarm. The elderly woman stopped wailing and, in a voice distorted by emotion, spoke rapidly to her. The injured woman replied in reassuring tones while patting the old woman's arm. "Please, no," she said to Roy.

"Ma'am, a doctor needs to take care of that arm. It may be broken."

"No, her son -- my husband -- he's trapped in there." She pointed to the wreckage. Her eyes pleaded with him. "Please," she begged, struggling to her feet.

"Ok," he said, restraining her. She was stable and it would be significantly less stressful for her to wait, he decided.

She settled back on her knees, relaxing beneath his hands. She exchanged a few quick words with the old woman. "He survived the Khmer Rouge...," she began.

DeSoto raised his head sharply.

"Only to be killed when his apartment fell on him." Her voice bespoke utter desolation.

Roy soothingly wiped away the blood on her forehead. "My partner is in there. Johnny's the best." He gave the woman a reassuring smile as he bandaged the wound. "He'll get your husband out."

Alive, he added silently. Taking her good arm, he helped the woman to her feet and seated her on the rear bumper of the engine. He unwrapped a yellow emergency blanket and spread it over her shoulders.

"Roy," called Captain Stanley, working his way down the slippery hillside. Carefully, he picked his way from the debris pile to the parking lot. Rain soaked his dark hair and dirt streaked his face. As he approached, he pulled the handy-talkie from the pocket of his turnout coat. "LA, this is HT 51."

"Go ahead, HT 51," replied the dispatcher.

"What is the ETA on the ambulance?" he asked

"ETA ten minutes, 51. LA out."

"HT 51, out." He slid the radio back into his pocket and steered Roy away from the two women. "They almost have him free. He's in pretty bad shape. Johnny says he has a flailed chest ." Stanley sighed. "We'll need a backboard, c-collar and sandbags."

Roy grabbed the requested equipment and followed the Cap up the hill, skidding slightly on the slick surface.

Marco was on all fours, his head sticking out of a hole in the crumpled apartment. A beam from the floodlights illuminated his tired face. DeSoto smiled grimly, shaking his head. Marco had never been fond of confined space work. Piling the supplies on top of the backboard, DeSoto slid it across the wreckage to Lopez. Marco backed slowly into the fissure, dragging the board. Roy could hear heavy breathing and the crackling of shifting rubble as Lopez and Gage worked the victim onto the backboard, securing him tightly.

Marco handed the O₂ bottle out to Chet. "Careful," he warned, as the tubing stretched taut.

Roy stepped forward with Mike and Captain Stanley to take hold of the stretcher. He looked at the pale, drawn face of a middle-aged oriental man -- the woman's husband. As the rescue team cleared the hole, cheering started among the spectators.

Johnny scrambled clear of the wreckage, blinking in the bright glare of 103's lights. His face was smeared with pale yellow mud, making him look like he was wearing a ghastly mask. He trotted down the hill after the men with the stretcher, slipping as he went.

"Gage," called the Cap, "Slow down before we have another casualty."

"OK, Cap," he said, dropping to a walk. "Roy, he was pinned across the chest, and hips."

Johnny traced the pattern of pressure points on his body.

Roy nodded.

"His pulse is 110 and respirations are 24 and shallow. I think he's got a flail chest. The light was real bad in there, but I'm pretty sure I saw paradoxical breathing. There's also a probable fracture of the right leg."

The elderly woman rushed toward the injured man, calling to him. Johnny gently caught her shoulders, stopping her. "We're going to take good care of him." He steered her back to the engine.

After they set the man down, Roy began a quick head to toe check. He relayed his findings to Bellingham, who called them into Rampart. While he and Johnny worked quickly to stabilize the man, Roy could sense his partner's excitement. Johnny had been chafing under a string of shifts featuring nothing more challenging than mild diabetic complications and asthma attacks, and absolutely no rescue work.

Roy finished preparing the patient for transport. "I'll ride in with him," offered DeSoto, hoisting the IV bag above his head.

"OK," replied Johnny, glancing gratefully at Roy.

"Johnny," called engineer Mike Stoker. He waved a damp rag at Gage and mimed washing his face. "You'll give the department a bad name."

Johnny caught the rag Stoker tossed him and scrubbed at the mud covering his face.

"That's better," said Marco. "Now at least you look human."

Stanley gave the two firefighters a critical appraisal. Without its coating of mud, Johnny's face was gray with exhaustion and Marco had dark circles under his eyes. None of his men had gotten more than a couple hours of sleep that night, but these two had been working non-stop on the collapse for the past four hours. "Gage, Lopez, take five," he ordered.

"OK," agreed Gage.

"Thanks, Cap," replied Marco, shrugging off his wet turnout coat. He settled on the running board of the engine.

Johnny wasn't quite so picky. He dropped onto the tarp in the triage area and, balancing his helmet on his knees, he leaned his head back against the squad. He closed his eyes, hoping to steal a brief nap. He dozed off, jerking awake to the smell of coffee.

Brice walked around the back of the squad. He was holding a box of medical supplies and a Styrofoam cup of coffee that he had grabbed in the Rampart cafeteria, while his supply request was filled. He watched both men inhale deeply. Somehow, he doubted either would pay much attention to his objections about how unhygienic it would be to drink after him.

Lopez was openly staring. "Coffee? Where did you get coffee?" he asked.

"Rampart."

"And you didn't bring any for us!" exclaimed Marco.

"I'm sure it's against the reg's," mumbled Johnny.

Brice decided to ignore them and began to replenish the drug box. He continued working, carefully refilling the compartments until he sensed Gage's eyes on him, making him feel like he was still seven years old and waiting for the school bully to call him four-eyes, bloody his nose and steal his lunch money.

"Gage, Lopez," called the Cap.

"Thank God," whispered Brice under his breath, as the two men scrambled to their feet.

"Here we go again," muttered Marco. He was cheek to jowl with Johnny in yet another hole. Johnny had removed his turnout coat, using it to cover the jagged remains of a sliding glass door, and was struggling to free a man pinned within the wreckage. Marco reached forward over the coat, wincing as the fasteners dug into his skin. He grabbed the man's shoulder and tugged. The awkward angle at which Lopez was jammed into the fissure gave him virtually maneuvering room. Gasping, he stopped pulling.

Johnny reached into the crevice in which the victim lay, feeling for the possible obstruction. "I don't feel anything resting on him. But he's really stuck in there."

"I can't get enough leverage to do a damn thing," said Marco.

Johnny pushed his arm past the mattress pinned against the man's side. The victim moaned slightly. "Sorry," grunted Gage. His hand encountered a sheet wrapped around the victim's legs. He removed his right glove, pulled the scissors from his belt and made a few cuts. Reaching in with his other arm, he ripped the tough fabric. He paused, taking a deep breath. His eyes went wide. Gas! Gage sniffed again, quickly reevaluating his plans.

"Johnny?" asked Marco, as John wriggled rapidly backwards, squeezing by Lopez's legs.

"Marco." Gage gestured for him to follow. "Cap," he called, crawling clear of the rubble.

Stanley walked over. The minute his saw Johnny's face, he knew there was trouble.

"Cap, I smell gas."

Stanley gave Johnny a quizzical look. He pointed with his thumb back over his shoulder toward the top of the hill. The remains of the foundation still dropped the occasional piece of concrete onto the eroded hillside. "The mains are up there and they've been shut off."

"I know, but I smell gas. Propane, I think."

"Marco?" asked Stanley turning toward him.

Marco gave a congested snuffle. "Sorry, Cap, I haven't been able to smell anything since I first went under the mud. There might be a bottle of LP gas in there. I've seen at least one barbecue grill in the wreckage."

Cap nodded tiredly. Having a grill on an apartment balcony was a violation of county fire codes. "Damn fools," he cursed under his breath.

"Look, we need to get him out, now," said Johnny. "He's in shock and has been goin' down hill since I got to him. I don't think we can afford to wait for things to air out." He paused for a moment watching the Cap's face. "I'm going to need a backboard and some help." Johnny waited for Stanley to reply.

"Go ahead," Hank decided. "Lopez get the backboard. Kelly get a line off and have Stoker stand-by." As Chet and Marco headed back to the engine, Stanley pulled out his radio. "Engine 51 to all units, we have a possible propane gas leak. Evacuate all personnel." Hank scanned the surrounding crews. "Engines 10 and 36, lay lines and be prepared to knock down a possible fire."

Johnny crawled back into the hole.

Marco clambered over a pile of broken lumber on his way back to the shaft. He lost his footing and caught himself with the backboard, barely remaining on his feet.

Suddenly, everything went white. Lopez tumbled backwards and the backboard slammed into his forehead. Over the ringing in his ears, he heard someone yell '*charge the lines*' then a stinging spray of water pounded him as he struggled to his feet. Kelly and Stanley passed him, directing the spray onto the burning wreckage. The burly Jesus Martinez of 36's grabbed Marco's shoulders firmly, steadying him. "I'm OK," mumbled Marco, still dazed.

In one terrifying moment his head cleared. "Johnny!" Lopez yelled, breaking Martinez's grasp. He dove through the spray, slipping on the slick wood. He dug frantically at the blackened boards. Splinters penetrated the gap between his gloves and his sleeves, embedding themselves in his wrists. Some rational corner of his brain meticulously noted most of the wood was covered with soot and not charred. The fire had flared quickly and died just as quickly, possibly permitting Gage to survive.

Chet joined Marco's efforts. "Johnny," he roared. Kelly felt the lumber quake beneath his feet. He looked down at the rain-soaked earth, now overloaded with the flow from the hoses, watching it split. The fissure spread in slow motion before his eyes. "Marco," Chet yelled, seizing him around the shoulders and hauling him backwards.

Marco cried out in agony as the shifting wood closed on his ankle.

Underneath Chet's feet the ground slipped away. He threw himself flat, still holding Marco. He could hear the bones in Lopez's foot snap in a sickening string of pops. He seized Marco, bracing him as the building slid the rest of the way down the hill.

"Gage!" bellowed Stanley.

In the aftermath everyone was silent. Despite the rain, a cloud of white dust spread over the hillside. Kelly, still clutching Lopez in his arms, imagined he could hear every particle fall to earth. He looked down at Marco, who was ashen and shaking.

"Johnny," whispered Lopez.

Then the radios burst to life.

Joanne started to clear the breakfast dishes from the kitchen table; abruptly she sat down. She had not been at all certain she was going to succeed in getting the kids out the door this morning. Chris had mislaid his coat and Jennifer had forgotten that she needed four different plant leaves for science class, despite having walked past the garden the night before when she was taking out the trash. Mornings like this she missed Roy, particularly his sixth sense about the location of missing garments. Smiling, she remembered him claiming to have developed the talent helping Chet find missing pieces of his uniform. She rinsed the last cereal bowl under the tap. As Joanne stacked it in the dish drainer, she let the sound of the morning news program wash over her.

A local reporter cut in over the gush of self-congratulatory chatter between the morning show hosts. "We have further developments at the scene of the collapsed apartment complex...." The set showed a replay of the remains of a crumbled building sliding to the base of hill, as the man ad-libbed a blow by blow of the collapse.

"Ghouls," she mumbled, reaching for the switch. Her hand froze as she saw the tarpaulin-covered space between a squad and an engine. It was 51's, she realized. She didn't see Roy; instead Brice's partner, The Animal -- Bob Bellingham, she corrected herself sternly -- was standing next to the squad. The faces of men she knew appeared on the screen as the camera panned across the scene. Joanne felt her blood grow cold when on each face she saw the solemn expressions which accompanied a code I. On an impulse she turned up the volume, hoping to overhear one of the radios.

"Roy," she whispered. She looked at the phone by the refrigerator, willing it not to ring. The only thing that would be worse would be to see Chief Houts' car pulling into the driveway. Joanne closed her eyes and tried to pray, but instead found herself thinking about Mattie Duntley and Molly, Dick's wife.

Bellingham met DeSoto at the door as he climbed out of the back of the returning ambulance. As Roy leaned in to retrieve the biophone and drug box, the metal shook beneath his hand with the concussion of an explosion. His ears rang. For a split second he ducked his head, then spun to stare at the collapsed building. "What the hell happened?" he asked Bellingham as a cloud of black smoke blossomed above the southeastern corner of the rubble.

"There was a gas leak," said Bellingham, "Must've blown."

Within seconds, water from a half a dozen hoses joined the steadily falling rain in dousing the smoldering remains. Silhouetted against the spray, Roy could see two firemen digging at the rubble. There must still be a victim trapped, he realized. Before DeSoto could ask Bellingham anything further, a second rumble shook the air. The soaked earth let go, tumbling the apartment down the hill.

"Shit!" exclaimed Bellingham.

Roy tightened his grip on the drug box and sprinted toward the collapsed building. As he scrambled over the wet earth, the radio in his pocket came to life.

Stanley's voice crackled, "We have a code I, times two. One man down, one trapped. I need a paramedic."

On the ground, Roy could see Chet and Marco. He dropped to his knees next to the firefighters and began his assessment. Lopez's face was gray and diaphoretic. Kelly seemed more stunned than injured. "Chet," he began, easing Marco into a prone position, "are you OK?"

"Roy," said Chet, putting his hand on DeSoto's arm, "Johnny was in there."

Roy looked at Marco for confirmation.

Marco pursed his lips and slowly nodded.

Stunned, Roy looked over his shoulder at the splintered wreckage. "Cap," he called.

Hank held up his hand to silence the younger man. He shifted the handy-talkie closer to his mouth talking to 36's captain. "Gage was working in the southeast corner, James." Concern carved deep lines in his face as he listened. "10-4," he replied.

DeSoto forced his attention back to Lopez. *Don't think; just do your job*, he commanded himself. "Marco," he started, taking a quick history.

Hank watched Roy's examination of Marco, listening to radio while 36's captain outlined search plans. Stanley had always perceived DeSoto as the steadier of his two paramedics, his quiet competence often overshadowed by Johnny's more volatile nature. "10-4," he repeated, "HT 51 out." He walked over to where his men waited. He knew they needed his reassurance, but he also knew all too well the lessons of fifteen years of firefighting. Explosions and collapsed buildings leave behind mangled bodies or, what was sometimes worse, frightfully maimed survivors. He nodded toward Marco, "How is he?"

"Fine, Cap," replied Lopez through gritted teeth.

"He has multiple fractures of the right foot and ankle, and a possible concussion." Roy shot Marco a firm look. "He needs to go to the hospital, now."

Stanley did not miss the silent exchange between the two men. "Chet, go get a stokes. Marco..."

"But..."

"Marco," he continued, drowning out the firefighter's objections. He wagged his finger at Lopez. "No, I'm sure Roy has explained all the medical reasons to you." He understood the young man's need to see this through, but he needed his remaining men focused on their tasks. "This is an order. Don't make me write you up." He stood silent as DeSoto, Bellingham, and Kelly loaded Lopez on the stretcher. "We'll call the hospital as soon as we know anything."

"Roy," said Bellingham, "I'll ride in with him."

Roy nodded appreciatively.

Hank and Roy watched as Marco was carried to the ambulance.

Roy closed his eyes. "Have they found him?" he asked quietly.

Stanley shook his head. "James Valentini is coordinating the search. There are still two residents missing as well. Gage was in the process of extricating one of the victims when the explosion occurred. He thought smelled propane, but the victim was going sour. We had to get him out or lose him," his voice trailed off. Stanley sighed. "The water from the hoses was too much. The building slid the rest of the way down the hill." He put his hand on Roy's shoulder. "We have requested a canine search team from Search and Rescue; they should be here any minute."

Roy looked Stanley in the eyes. "Cap, I've got to get down there."

Hank nodded.

Johnny gave up clawing at the edge of the chunk of sheetrock beneath his legs. Pinned as he was, it was a useless effort, which just sapped his strength. He had quit calling for help a few minutes earlier. His throat already ached and shouting made it worse. *Besides, no one can hear me.* At a distance, he could hear the indistinct voices from his radio. *If only I could reach it,* he thought, pounding his fist on the ground. He was trapped under a piece of one of the floors. The pile from the long shag carpeting brushed his forehead every time he moved, muffling his cries. His shoulders and back lay in mud, but his legs were pinned awkwardly between the sheetrock and the overlaying debris. He thought he could dig away some of the soft earth and slide his legs free. But, the unyielding surface beneath his legs refused to shift and his efforts only succeeded in settling his head and shoulders even lower in the dirt.

He lay in the darkness thinking. *I hope my cousins will be able to help mom out. With dad gone, the ranch is too much for her. Well, Dwayne is this what you felt like as you lay dying in the back of that police car?* Johnny shook his head, trying to clear away thoughts about the dead, but he kept remembering his dad or Dwayne. A tremor ran through his body as he recalled what he had been told about seeing the spirits of the dead just before you died. *You're fine as long as Dwayne does not answer you.* He gave a wry smile and then closed his eyes, concentrating on ways to free his legs. *Roy, I'd be really glad to see you right about now.*

Rain filtered down through the ruined building and ran in streams over him, pooling under his shoulders and back. The icy water stung every place it touched. *I'm so cold,* he thought, shivering. The charred remnants of his T-shirt provided no protection. *Gage, you're in trouble.* He knew he was burned, probably badly, in view of the condition of his shirt. He gritted his teeth. *The pain is a good sign,* he reminded himself. *It means I still have some skin left.*

Bits of plaster rattled down on the boards above his head. A groan emanated from a beam somewhere above him. He braced for a final crush of wood and plaster. "Buried under ugly carpeting, what a way to go," he muttered. A dog whined. *Search and Rescue finally got here,* he thought. "Come here boy," called Johnny. The dog's nails scratched on the wood over his face. He took a deep breath, coughing a little, and began yelling the first thing that came into his head.

Roy rose slowly from the hole by which he had been kneeling. The cold rain had long ago soaked through to his skin, leaving him chilled, weary and desperate. Eyes burning from lack of sleep, he clutched Gage's turnout coat tighter. The soot covering the garment blackened his hands. He had been carrying it with him ever since the Search and Rescue dog handler had pulled it from a nest of charred boards and handed it to him. He glanced at his watch, it was taking too long to locate the paramedic. DeSoto clung to the tough leather as though hanging onto Johnny's very life.

Now, the dog and her handler were working their way slowly across another segment of the wreckage. They had already found the corpse of one of the victims. He looked up at the dog, a dark shape against the steel sky. It vanished down a hole and barked. When the dogs found a dead body, they just whined a little. Suddenly, he thought he heard something else, a very faint repeating sound. Coughing.

"Shh," he yelled. Chet froze, staring at him. Roy closed his eyes and listened. The sound was repeated but before he could identify it or locate the source, LA dispatch crackled over someone's handy-talkie. "Squad 26, man down. 5555 Zuni SE...."

"Turn off the damn radio!" he bellowed. Silence fell. Roy clambered up the ruined roof to the cleft into which the dog had disappeared. He thrust his head into the gap. DeSoto could hear crackling and rattling from the settling wreckage, the echo of traffic on the street, and then very, very faintly...

"Chet, tell your girlfriend she needs to trim her toenails."

Roy lay belly down on a layer of crushed plaster, stucco and wood, staring at Craig Brice's boots. A child's mangled toy lay in his path. He ducked his head lower as his helmet bumped against an overhanging piece of twisted pipe. Roy again cursed under his breath, remembering the weight of Stanley's hand on his shoulder as he held DeSoto back to allow Brice to crawl into the wreckage first. He understood that the station officer was trying to spare him, but Stanley had failed to consider the awful images of Johnny's fate Roy saw every time he closed his eyes.

Brice was proceeding at a snail's pace while threading his way through the wreckage and from his position behind Craig's feet, Roy couldn't ascertain the cause for the delay. "Hurry up, Brice," he snapped.

"Take it easy, DeSoto," instructed Brice. "I am moving as rapidly as is prudent."

Roy clenched his jaw, crushing a fold of skin between his teeth, visualizing Brice's expression at his unprofessional outburst. He closed his eyes in aggravation, opening them when punished with another image of Johnny pierced and bleeding beneath a mound of debris. He swallowed a retort, getting Brice irritated would not make him move any faster.

The soles of Brice's boots slipped suddenly from his view. A void in the rubble opened in front of Roy. The beam from his flashlight illuminated a cleft formed between two layers of the collapsed building. The wreckage was a crazy quilt of burned and unburned material. The other paramedic had crawled down onto the floor and was hunched over, peering through a crack between sheets of plasterboard. The dog was scratching frantically at the blackened boards. Even before he emerged from the passageway, Roy could smell burnt flesh. He couldn't see Gage anywhere. "Johnny!" he called, slithering through the opening.

"Roy," answered Johnny, his voice muffled by the intervening layers. The dog barked in response to his voice.

Roy sighed. "Thank God," Roy murmured, sighing with relief. "Cap, we're to him," he called over his shoulder. The handler recalled her dog. Roy could hear Chet scrambling into the building. DeSoto pointed his flashlight into gaps in the debris trying to spot Gage. "Keep talking, Johnny." He froze for a second as the beam struck the decapitated and blackened body of the last missing apartment resident.

"He's got to be underneath us," commented Brice, tapping on the floor of the chamber.

"Man, am I glad to hear you." John coughed. "Roy, there's another victim somewhere right around here."

DeSoto examined the surroundings, coming to the same conclusion Brice had already reached. Johnny had to be under the tangle of drywall, plywood, and lumber that formed the floor of the void.

"We found him." Roy reluctantly answered the expectant silence that greeted his statement. "He didn't make it."

"Oh." John paused. "Was Marco hurt?"

Roy finally pinpointed Gage's location. His voice came from under what appeared to have been a ceiling or a wall. "Just a broken foot and a bump on the head. Nothing serious," said Roy, grabbing the edge of the plasterboard and framing. He tried to lift it, grunting with the effort. It would not budge. Brice worked his way in next to Roy, assisting. The plasterboard snapped, knocking DeSoto off balance. Fragments of wood and plaster rained from the slabs cantilevered above them. The structure groaned ominously. "Brice!"

"Watch it," yelled Johnny.

Brice ducked his head. He glanced over at Roy who had flattened himself against the edge of the wall covering Gage. Craig rolled cautiously on to his side and stared upward, watching and waiting. The cascade of crumbled plaster slowed and then stopped. "It quit shifting," he whispered, listening to the ticking drip of rainwater.

Roy righted himself and leaned over the newly formed hole, expecting to see Johnny's face. Instead, a tangle of fiberglass insulation and Romex greeted him. Beneath that he could feel more framing and sheets of plywood. "Damn it," he exploded.

Brice was poking about, looking for an opening down to Gage. Roy watched him thread himself into an impossibly small gap between the remains of the floor and ceiling of an apartment. Craig carefully skirted the edges of the boards covering the trapped paramedic, probing with his gloved hand.

"How about you? Are you hurt?" Roy asked Johnny, struggling to keep the despair from his voice as he tried to reach under the splintered mass.

"Yeah," sighed Johnny, "both my legs are pinned tight, but I don't think they're broken. I can move my fingers and toes..." The rest of his reply was lost in a spasm of coughing. He lay panting for breath.

Roy looked at Brice. "Johnny, are you OK?"

"I ate some smoke," he said, clearing his throat. "Roy, I think I'm burned."

"How bad?" asked Roy frowning. He looked at his watch -- one hour and forty minutes since the explosion. Gage was probably going into shock.

"My back, chest, neck and arms. I can feel it so," John's voice trailed off. He blocked the professional parts of his mind, not daring to let himself think too much about his condition. "It's dark down here; not the best situation for a complete evaluation."

Mostly first or second-degree burns, guessed Roy, forcing himself to analyze what his partner told him. "Did you lose consciousness?"

"No." John closed his eyes and shivered. More cold rain was seeping in through the debris and soaking into his pants. "It was a hell of a ride down, though. I'm still not sure which way is up." His voice was very hoarse.

Brice pulled his hand out of yet another crevice. He pointed to his throat and mouthed, "Doesn't sound too good."

Roy nodded. He swallowed hard and asked, "Johnny, is your face burned?" He listened to the long silence, acutely aware Gage knew exactly why he asking.

"Some, I think," he finally answered.

Again, Roy looked at his watch.

"Gage," began Brice, "any trouble breathing?"

"Not yet," John's voice trembled slightly as he replied.

Roy bowed his head.

"I wish you guys could do something about the rain. It's awful wet down here," complained Johnny.

"That will teach you to take off your turnout," replied Brice never removing his eyes from his work. Inwardly, he winced as he realized Gage might not be so badly injured if he hadn't removed his coat.

Roy glared at Brice.

"Brice, go alphabetize the drug box or something," snapped Johnny.

"Patient is alert and oriented to person, place, and time," said Craig.

Roy heard John sputter beneath the rubble.

"Brice, was that a joke?" asked Gage incredulously.

Craig raised his eyebrows at Roy and listened to Johnny's voice, nodding slightly. There was nothing like a good distraction to decrease the cardiac load. "Just an observation, Gage."

"Good, because it was a bad one," commented Johnny.

Chet Kelly poked his head into the chamber. "Make room for the real firemen." He squirmed by Roy and whispered in his ear as he passed, "Cap wants to talk to you." Chet pointed his flashlight up toward the overhanging layers of the ruins, trying to determine the distribution of the load. "Oh, by the way Gage, at least I have a girlfriend," he said, reaching back to pull a pry bar and a sack of tools from the passageway. Chet began to question Johnny about the shape and structure of the space in which he was entombed.

Stanley grabbed DeSoto's arm as he crawled out, hauling him to his feet.

"Cap, you can cancel the rest of the search teams," said Roy. "The guy Johnny was working on didn't make it."

Stanley nodded. "Gage?" he asked. Mike Stoker stood next to him, eyes fixed expectantly on DeSoto. As Brice inched out of the fissure, Stoker helped him up and then slid in to give Chet a hand.

Roy scrubbed his hands across his face. "Not so good." He looked into Hank's eyes. "He's buried under a collapsed wall. Fallen debris's pinned his legs, but he says he doesn't think they're broken. He's burned and," Roy stopped, trying desperately to establish a level of professional detachment.

"And?" prompted the Cap.

"He's pretty hoarse and his face is burned." Roy avoided naming his fears, reluctant to give them voice making his partner's condition a reality.

"Meaning?" Hank's expression revealed that the station officer already understood the implications of the paramedic's symptoms, but was hoping he was wrong.

"Meaning," interrupted Brice, "He may have inhaled hot or toxic gases. Not unexpected, since he was in a confined space when the fire erupted." He pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. "In addition to shock and fluid loss from the burns, Gage could be experiencing the initial stages of edema of the upper airway and respiratory injuries."

Roy lost patience with Brice's lecturing. "We need to get him out -- quickly."

Hank nodded. "Chet!" he called down the tunnel.

"Yeah, Cap?"

"What's the situation in there?" He listened to Kelly crawling back up the passage. Stanley frowned realizing Kelly did not want Gage to overhear their conversation.

Sweat glistened on Kelly's brow. "Cap, it looks like the structure split when it slid down the hill. One corner rode up over another section and Johnny's in a hole beneath the two layers. It's covered by the remains of, at least, one story of the building. Johnny says, there's a large piece of another wall under his hips and legs, pinning him up against the flooring." Chet demonstrated, pressing upwards on

two fingers of one hand with the palm of the other. "Mike tried to get a look under there." Chet paused, remembering Stoker pushing his head into a tiny opening they were able to make in the rubble.

"Could he see Johnny?" asked Roy.

He shook his head and continued, "Not really." Chet turned to face Stanley. "The catch is: two or three stories worth of wreckage is being supported by the remains of some wall framing. That's all that's keeping the whole thing from collapsing and that framing is resting directly on top of the material covering Gage."

"So, we can't lift the debris off him." stated the Cap.

"No." Kelly looked over Stanley's shoulder at DeSoto. "We may be able to cut through with the K-12."

"I'll get it," said Roy, jogging toward the squad.

"Cap," began Chet, momentarily lowering his head, then raising it to look straight into Stanley's eyes. "If this comes down, Johnny's a goner."

"Make sure it doesn't, pal."

Roy sat in the mud. He was too tired to care about the dirt or the water. Hank had ordered him out while Chet and Mike worked. The rubble crackled as Brice scrambled out to join him. The thumping of Stoker and Stanley securing additional bracing punctuated the ticking of DeSoto's watch. He watched Brice pace next to the supply-laden backboard. The paramedic turned, walked two feet then turned back. Craig pivoted again, his boot squeaking in the mud. "Brice, please," pleaded Roy.

"Sorry," he said, standing still.

"How's Johnny?"

Brice squatted next to the backboard. "He's in pain and I think he's getting shocky, but he's hanging in there -- the infamous Gage indestructibility. They'll have him out in a couple minutes." A faint smile crossed his lips. "Doesn't he ever shut up?" he asked.

"No, it's a good sign, Brice."

"At least Bellingham is quiet." Brice took a deep breath. "Gage offered me Kelly's poker winnings, if I'd trade places with him for a while."

Roy snorted softly.

As the K-12 started, Brice looked toward the building. "DeSoto, about what I said to Gage in there. I -uh... I didn't mean it the way it sounded," he abruptly stopped as rumbling came from the wreckage.

Roy jumped to his feet as his partner screamed in pain. "Johnny!"

"DeSoto!" yelled Stanley, emerging from the tunnel.

As Roy crawled through the opening, he could see a cloud of plaster dust. A new layer of fragments covered the boards over Johnny. Papers spilling from one of the shattered apartments overhead rained down. Mike, his turnouts flecked with white powder, was on his hands and knees digging frantically at the edge of the wall covering Gage. Chet, holding the still running K-12, kept yelling John's name, his breath fogging the face shield he wore.

"Johnny?" called Roy, waving at Chet to be quiet. He could hear Johnny gasping in pain.

"Stop," hissed Gage. "Stop!"

"We've stopped." He gestured for Chet to cut the motor. "Are you all right?"

John struggled to slow his breathing and reply. When he spoke his voice shook with pain. "Something shifted. It's really bearing down on my hip and legs," he panted. "I heard bones break." Gage bit his lip as he began shivering uncontrollably.

Mike straightened. "Get a jack," he ordered, calling down the tunnel. "We need to support the broken beam and get the weight off him -- now." Outside, Brice acknowledged his request.

"OK, we're going to get you out." Roy bowed his head at the hollow sound of his reassurances. Roy pushed away his despair, forcing himself not to think of Gage dying by inches, not an arm's length away, and his inability to do anything to stop it. Instead, he focused on what he could do. "Just hang in there, Johnny." He checked the time; a little over two hours had elapsed since Gage had been trapped. "Chet, what the hell happened?" he demanded.

"As soon as I cut into the framing, one of the braces collapsed."

"Mike, can we lift it enough to get him clear?" Roy asked.

Mike shook his head. "No, we're going to have to dig under."

Chet crawled over to Roy. The left side of his face was covered with mud from wedging his head into a narrow gap under the edge of the boards. "He's laying on sheetrock; that stuff's pretty weak. If we remove the dirt from underneath, we should be able to break it and free his legs."

"It'll be awful rough on him," said Roy softly.

Stoker grabbed the jack from Brice, who must have violated several physical laws to get it so quickly, and slid it into the narrow gap he had dug. Mike shoved the jack into place and pumped the actuator.

Chet shrugged. "It's the only way, short of callin' out the heavy equipment and removing the overhanging debris."

"Johnny, doesn't have that much time," Roy said softly.

"We're gonna have to go in from the ends," directed Mike quietly. "It'll take more time, but the load is pulling that wall apart. Digging at the side will bring it down."

"In the meantime, we need to get some O₂ to him." DeSoto stared at the collapsed wall.

"Give me something to punch a hole through this," ordered Craig, pointing to the plasterboard.

"We'll run in an O₂ line."

"Guys, what's going on up there?" asked Johnny. He closed his eyes and listened to the long pause that greeted his question. His heart was racing. *Tachycardia, I'm going into shock*, he thought grimly. The panic lapping at the edge of his consciousness was becoming increasingly hard to hold at bay. *Don't baby me, Roy*. Thirst was tearing at his throat. He tried to swallow to ease the ache but failed. *Ok, I'm running out of time*, he realized. "You're going to have to dig down and pull me out." His voice cracked as he spoke.

Roy turned to Brice and looked into his eyes. "Yes," he agreed. "It's going to take some time."

"Don't take too long."

Brice looked away from the pain in Roy's eyes. "Gage, how are you holding up?" he asked, rolling out of the way as Kelly, Stoker and DeSoto began to dig. He could hear a faint high-pitched wheezing every time Johnny inhaled.

"I'll make a great case study for the next refresher course," he replied wearily. He lay in the mud, trying to resist the urge to keep his eyes closed and simply drift away. Now, he understood the desperation of the construction worker who had begged Roy to cut off his leg to free him. "I'm starting to go out." He paused to catch his breath.

Brice scrambled down the passageway. "I'll get the backboard, we'll need it to get him out," he called back.

"Roy, I don't want to...," Johnny stopped. It took his full concentration to form words. "...stay down here anymore."

Roy had an uncanny feeling he had been going to say die. "All right Johnny, we're gonna get you out just as fast as we can."

"Good," Gage replied almost inaudibly.

A break in the clouds formed along the horizon and sunlight painted the buildings beneath the clearing skies with gold, mocking Roy's dishevelment. The cold had pulled his muscles into a tight ache and his legs were leaden beneath his mud-coated pants. He squeezed the biophone handset. "No, Rampart, we have not yet been able to start O₂ or establish the IV," he answered stiffly. "Please stand by." He resisted the urge to slam down the radio. From within the tunnel, he could hear the scraping sounds of continued digging. Roy yet again looked at his watch, commanding its hands to move more slowly, but it did not obey, adding another minute to the three hours and five minutes that had already ticked away. Time that was well outside Gage's golden hour. "Hang on, Johnny," DeSoto whispered.

"Roy," called Stanley, "we're through." He climbed clear of the wreckage, making room for the paramedic.

DeSoto crawled into the cleft, willing his eyes to adjust more quickly to the dimness. Chet and Mike were raking the last of the mud from under the sheetrock beneath Johnny's legs. "How long?" he asked.

"Four, maybe five minutes," replied Stoker.

Brice was lying on his stomach, his head and shoulders jammed into the channel they had dug to pull out Gage. Pale green oxygen tubing vanished under the edge of the fallen wall. "I have the O₂ started," Brice said, pushing his way out to get the c-collar and backboard. As he reached up, his eyes meet Roy's; Brice climbed out of the shallow trench, recognizing his colleague's need. "DeSoto, relieve me." He held out the c-collar.

Roy wriggled under the wall. The hole was barely large enough for him to raise his head. Brice had wedged a flashlight in the mud; it cast a harsh glare across injured firefighter's face. His eyes were closed. DeSoto pressed his fingers against Gage's carotid. John made a faint, confused mumbling noise when Roy's hands touched his neck. "Johnny, I'm going to put a collar on you. It's probably going to hurt some," he said, wrapping the c-collar around Gage's neck. "You'll be out of here in a couple minutes."

Johnny moaned and his lashes fluttered, but he didn't open his eyes.

Roy placed his hand on Gage's diaphragm, counting. He refused to react as he touched burnt fabric, which had become embedded in the wounds. Some distant corner of his mind acknowledged his numbness, while he continued the exam, consciously repeating the mnemonic touchstones of his profession in a way he had not done since his early months in the field. Sharp stones in the dirt scoured at his fingers as he tried to widen the gap beside Johnny. He managed to pull Gage's left arm awkwardly up to his side. Roy gently slid the wet glove off Johnny's hand and checked his radial pulse, estimating his blood pressure, all the while aware that Johnny was no longer moaning.

Roy pulled his head clear of the rubble. "Relay to Rampart: pulse 120 and thready; BP 80, palpated estimate; respirations 30 and labored." He listened to his voice -- a stranger's calm tones.

"Cap, Roy, we're ready," announced Chet.

"Stoker, come on out of there," said Stanley.

Roy took the backboard from Mike's hands and laid it in the trench. He flattened himself on the ground and positioned his hands on either side of Gage's head. Brice lay in the mud on the opposite side of the trench and hooked his hands beneath Johnny's armpits. DeSoto watched as Brice adjusted his grip and braced himself. "We'll take him straight back onto the board."

Brice nodded.

"On three, Chet," ordered Roy.

Kelly placed the end of the pry bar on the sheetrock. The sodden material was already sagging in places under Johnny's weight. "One... Two... Three." He shoved down on the metal bar snapping the sheetrock, dropping John's inert form a critical few inches.

Roy pulled with all his might, feeling the muscles in his back knot. "Watch his head," he commanded Brice, struggling to his knees and fighting to get enough leverage to pull Gage the rest of the way out. The injured paramedic was deadweight.

The low groan of overstressed wood filled the chamber. "Get out! The jack is slipping!" yelled Chet, clambering toward the opening.

Brice's hands flew as he strapped Johnny to the backboard. He scuttled backwards into the tunnel, dragging the backboard.

DeSoto shoved. In the timelessness of the crisis, he could see sweat beading on Brice's forehead. The groan became a rumbling squeal. "Get clear!" shouted Roy.

"Get out," bellowed Stanley.

Craig nearly tumbled backward as he burst from the tunnel, but Bellingham grabbed Brice's belt, keeping him from falling. Stanley and Stoker seized the handles on the sides on the backboard. They ran toward the triage area. Roy scrambled out of the wreckage and reached back, dragging Chet out of the passageway. A series of loud crunching and popping noises followed. The fissure collapsed, covering the firemen with a new layer of dust.

"I'm OK," gasped Kelly, still on his knees. "Go."

Roy ran.

Dixie McCall met the arriving ambulance at the door. "Treatment three." She nodded, listening to Brice give a synopsis of treatment rendered. She looked at Gage's wounds and Roy's mud-covered, drawn face. "No further, boys," she decreed at the exam room door, taking the IV bags from Craig and

pulling the MICU form out of DeSoto's hand. "Brice, take him to the waiting room," she directed, nodding toward Roy. "We'll take good care of Johnny." The cacophony of the E.R. team in full swing swelled behind her.

"Draw blood for CBC, SMA7, ABG, and carboxyhemoglobin. Get films of lateral C-spine, chest, pelvis, lower extremities," began a gowned and masked Dr. Morton, ordering X-rays and blood work.

Roy stared through the closing treatment room door. Johnny was conscious again and fighting the immobilizing restraints, trying to look out the corner of his eyes toward Roy. Despite the drugs, his pain was agonizingly clear. A pair of nurses DeSoto didn't recognize leaned over Gage, blocking DeSoto's view in the split second before the door swung shut. Roy could hear Dixie's soothing voice.

"DeSoto," said Brice, "come on."

"Marco. I need to check on Marco," said Roy, numbly following Craig down the hall.

"Sit down. I'll check." Frowning, he took Roy's elbow, steering him to a chair. Brice shot a worried glance at DeSoto before leaving.

Roy was staring into space when Craig returned. "Marco is being admitted. You can see him in a while." Brice sat in the chair beside him. "Roy..."

DeSoto met Brice's concerned gaze, startled by the unprecedented use of his first name.

"They will," Brice fell silent as the L.A. dispatch came over his radio, acknowledging Squad 51's removal from service. He saw DeSoto shudder at the sound of Sam Lanier's voice. "do everything they can for him."

"I know," sighed Roy.

"Brice," called Bellingham from the doorway of the waiting room. "Ten's on the way in with a possible MI -- one of the rubberneckers keeled over. They need us back at the scene."

Craig started to put his hand on Roy's shoulder but hesitated. Instead, he turned and sprinted after Bellingham.

Roy bowed his head and closed his eyes, reliving the morning's horrors. Raising his head, he met the curious gaze of a child in her mother's arms. She smiled shyly at the fireman and wiggled her fingers in a tentative greeting. He tried to return her smile but failed. Frightened by his lack of response she turned away. Roy fled.

Shaking, he slumped against the wall of a washroom stall. Since they had freed Gage, the morning's events had taken on a nightmarish distortion. He could vividly recall the procedures he had performed, wrapped in a narrowed tunnel vision that blurred everything else.

Roy dropped to his knees on the yellow tarp, stuffing his gloves into his pocket. Brice had already fitted the mask over Johnny's face and was assisting his respirations. "Hyperventilate him," Roy ordered, grabbing the intubation equipment. "Move over." He straddled Johnny's head. "Ok," he said. Craig pulled the mask out of the way and Roy inserted the scope. Concentrate, he commanded, struggling to maneuver the tube through the fast swelling tissues. Sweat pooled at the base of his spine. After a long minute, he finally thought he felt the tube slide past Gage's vocal cords and into the correct position. He rolled clear. Panting, DeSoto listened to Bob on the radio to Rampart, while Craig secured the airway and the mask. When Brice finished, he put the stethoscope in his ears and listened to Gage's chest and belly, checking the airway placement. "Ventilation is OK, but we have bilateral rales," he said, grimly.

"Wrap and run," asked Bellingham.

Roy nodded. "We'll start treatment en route."

In the harsh light of the ambulance, the full extent of Johnny's injuries was frighteningly apparent. While Brice started a large-bore IV, Roy cut away the fabric not embedded in the wounds and

covered the area with saline and a burn sheet. He could discern the too familiar pattern inflicted by burning clothing and a victim's efforts to extinguish the flames. The tough bunker pants kept jamming the scissor blades. Giving up, Brice cautiously pulled off the pants to expose Gage's discolored shins and the large bruise on his hip left by the broken beam.

Roy's hands moved unfalteringly until he began to unbuckle the watch from John's swollen wrist; he hesitated, unwilling to perform the final transformation from paramedic to victim.

"DeSoto," warned Brice as he slid the MAST suit into place, "he's coming around."

Gage's hand insistently pushed away Brice's fingers. Weak shivers shook his body. John began to gag.

"Easy, Johnny, you're going to pull out your IV." Roy held his wrist. "Get the Versed, Brice!"

Craig expelled the excess medication from the pre-fill and slowly injected the sedative.

For the first time he really let himself look at Johnny's face. Gage's dark eyes were unfocused and uncomprehending. "Lie still, buddy. We're almost done." Johnny wrapped his fingers around Roy's hand, holding on until his eyes closed and his muscles relaxed.

Roy drew a shuddering breath, wiping his eyes and pushed himself away from the wall and fumbled with the latch. Standing in front of the sink, he dropped his turnout coat to the floor and turned on the water. Slowly he bent over the basin washing his face and trying to rinse away his dark thoughts along with the mud.

Chet backed the squad into the bay. In the side mirror he could see Dwyer and a couple of the other guys from B-shift standing in the doorway of the squad room. He slid from the driver's seat, reaching back for Roy's helmet and gloves. The speculative murmuring stopped when he pulled Gage's blackened coat from the cab. Mike Stoker disappeared into the locker room. Only two weeks before he

had served as a pallbearer at a longtime friend and fellow engineer's funeral. Battalion Chief McConikee stood in the Captain's office door. "Hank," he said, gesturing toward the office.

Stanley walked stiffly toward his office. Inside he could hear Chief Houts' voice, "Marie Gage...." The vehicle bay was absolutely silent as he pulled the door shut.

Marie Gage drove into the teeth of a Dakota blizzard. She pulled on to 377 north of Red Shirt Table. Snow snaked in white streaks across the road and danced in blinding veils before the headlights. The jagged pillars of the Badlands were a muted gray against the swirling whiteness. Black glare ice reflected her headlights. She drove without brakes, downshifting into turns. In the swales and against the bluffs, only the orange sparkle of the mile markers gave an indication of the location of the road beneath drifts. The tire chains crunched on the gravel of the shoulder or rattled monotonously against the icy asphalt.

"Remember, O gracious Virgin Mary," she prayed. West of Red Shirt Creek, the truck began to fishtail. Marie stopped in the middle of the road and stepped out into the howling wind. She climbed into the back of the pickup, pulling the sacks of gravel that Lee had thrown into the bed back into place to weigh the down the rear wheels. The snow covering them burned her hands as it melted. Beyond the shifting white veils, she could see the ranks of star quilt-draped coffins that had in recent years sat within her living room. She threw back her head and yelled, "Roddy! Dwayne! J..." She choked back Johnny's name, not wanting her words to lend any more strength to the powers moving in the gathering darkness. "Tunkashila wamayanka ye. Ite otateya na hoyeya nawajin ksto. Unshimala ye!" she prayed. The bitter cold froze the tears on her lashes.

She climbed back into the cab of the truck and slipped it into gear. The harsh Canadian wind wailed with a thousand generations of Cree and Innu mourning songs. She tuned the radio to KILI, listening to the voices of the National Weather Service dissolve every time a gust rattled the tower on Hungry Butte. Even static was better than the mournful cries. Marie allowed her world to narrow, encompassing only the icy roadway to the Rapid City airport.

Marco lay in bed, staring his splinted leg. The throbbing in his foot had subsided, compliments of modern pharmaceuticals. Tomorrow, the orthopedic surgeon would pin together the broken bones. And Marco had beginning to suspect Chet was going to wait at his side until they came to sedate him. He again saw Chet swaying with exhaustion, nearly falling off the chair beside his bed. Finally, when Kelly had gone to use the washroom, Marco had called Chet's sister and persuaded her to come take him home.

A soft knock sounded on the door. "Come in," he whispered.

Joanne opened the door quietly.

Marco smiled and put his finger to his lips. He jerked his head toward Roy who was asleep in the chair beside his bed.

Joanne gazed at Roy, still shaky from having the fears of seventeen years of marriage to a fireman set free. DeSoto's hair was tousled and caked with dirt. Savoring the view, she watched him, slumped against the wall, exercising another skill the fire service had given him -- the ability when exhausted to sleep in any position no matter how uncomfortable. Slowly and carefully, she took his hand, not wanting to wake him before Stanley returned with some news.

"How are you doing, Marco?" she asked very softly.

"Ok," he nodded. "Have you heard anything about Johnny?"

Joanne had been unable to pry anything more than limited details from Dixie. The lack of information alone was indicative of the seriousness of his condition. She shook her head.

Hank Stanley, wearing rumpled civvies and a weary grim look, entered. Dr. Mike Morton followed. "Roy," she said, feeling the muscles in his hand tense as he awoke.

"How ya doing, pal?" Stanley asked Marco.

"I'm fine." Lopez turned to Morton and asked, "Doc, how's Johnny?"

Roy straightened in his chair. He stared intently at Morton, watching his face for subtle clues.

"He has bilateral tib-fib fractures, a stable fracture of the pelvis, second degree burns over forty percent of his body and inhalation injuries." Mike shook his head. Based on what Hank had just told him about the explosion and building collapse, he was amazed Gage hadn't been killed.

"Can I see him?" asked Roy.

Mike looked down at the young man. "No, Roy, not tonight. We have him heavily medicated. He is asleep." He paused. "Johnny was very lucky. The pelvic fracture didn't cause any internal injuries. It could have been much worse."

"Lucky?" Roy breathed, staring at Morton incredulously. He bit his lower lip. "It took us too long to get him here."

"You did your best, Roy," said Morton.

Hank nodded his agreement.

"It wasn't good enough. Johnny's critical." Joanne squeezed Roy's hand. He pulled away, refusing her comfort.

"I'm not going to pretend the delay in treatment hasn't been a complicating factor." Morton gestured toward DeSoto. "But, you've been doing this long enough to know that given the nature of his injuries, he would still be on the critical list -- even if you had gotten him here immediately."

"Roy, there was no faster way to free him. We did everything humanly possible," consoled Hank. "If you want to play the blame game: I'm the one who sent him back in."

DeSoto met Stanley's eyes. "Johnny had a victim."

"Exactly. He knew the risks and he made a decision. Just like we all have done."

Morton folded his arms across his chest. "Roy, you gave him the best chance he had under circumstances." His beeper buzzed. "I have to go."

Wearily, Hank moved a chair opposite Roy and sat scrubbing his hands over his burning eyes. "I called Johnny's mother after Chief Howells spoke with her. She didn't know exactly when she'd be able to get in. They're having bad weather up there."

Roy shook his head, trying to imagine the howling whiteness Johnny had described to him. A native southern Californian, he had taken almost as much delight in the ice chest full of snow Johnny had brought back from the mountains one winter as had his children. In a vague way, he knew winter up in the Dakotas was not all sled rides and snowmen, but could be life and death.

"I gave her my home phone number and yours... Hope you don't mind Joanne."

"Of course not."

"I told her to call one of us when she got here."

Roy nodded.

Stanley looked at DeSoto in the seat across from him. "Roy, go home," he said firmly. "There is nothing more you can do here tonight."

Jennifer DeSoto sat at the top of the stairs, hidden from her parents' view, scratching Muffin's chin and hoping he would not start meowing. She knew Dad would kill her if he caught her eavesdropping, but she also knew something was up. After all, Ellen Stanley did not normally 'just drop by', nor had she ever babysat Jennifer and Chris. And, her Dad had not been home when she got back

from school despite getting off-shift that morning. Her mother had reassured her that he was fine, but... She stifled a sigh. Muffin rolled on his back and gave Jennifer's fingers an experimental chew. She listened to the voices below.

"Roy, I'm going to warm up some soup."

"Joanne, I'm not hungry."

"You need to have a little something," said her mom in a tone of voice Jen knew all too well.

Roy dropped onto the couch, exhausted. It was too much effort to even turn on a lamp; besides, the soft glow leaking across the floor from the kitchen was all the illumination his tired eyes could tolerate. He lay in the darkened living room watching the shifting shadows cast by Joanne's movements as she warmed the soup.

She carried a cup of tomato soup and plate of crackers into the living room and set them on the coffee table. Joanne clung to the familiar domestic routines, using them as talismans against today's fears. Normally, she suppressed concerns about her husband's safety, comforting herself with the realization that Station 51 had lost only one man in nearly a decade of operation. Sitting on the floor beside the couch, she leaned back resting her head against his thigh while Roy sat and sipped his soup.

Roy set down the half-empty cup, settled back against the pillows, and threw his arm across his eyes. The muscles in his back ached from pulling Johnny from beneath the rubble. Sighing he reached for Joanne, but arm fell short leaving his hand dangling over the edge of sofa. "Hon," he murmured.

Joanne took his hand in hers, kissing his fingers. "Roy."

Roy winced as her lips touched his fingers. Slowly, he lifted his hand; the knuckles on three fingers were swollen. He stared at his black and blue fingers, his face a mask of mute horror.

Joanne looked at him with concern. "Roy?"

He shook his head. "I just hadn't noticed. I must have hurt them when," he stopped. Images of the narrow, grave-like channel and the sound of Gage's labored breathing filled his head.

Joanne frowned at Roy's expression. She changed the subject. "I think Marie should stay with us. I don't like the idea of her in a hotel or all alone at Johnny's place."

He nodded.

"I can't imagine what she's going through. If anything like this ever happened to one of the kids." She paused. "Roy, what went wrong?"

"Johnny was extricating a victim when there was an explosion. The water from knocking down the fire caused a second mudslide, which swept him along and buried him in the wreckage." DeSoto voice was bleakly matter-of-fact. "It took us over three hours to get to him." Anger tensed his muscles. "It was just like the bad old days, before the ALS program when all I could do was 'scoop and run'. I talked to him; listened to him describing his symptoms as his condition went right downhill."

Joanne turned, rising on her knees. "You did your best."

He shook his head. "You weren't there, Joanne. There had to be something else we could've done; I just couldn't think of it."

She lifted her head and looked him in the eye. "No, I wasn't there but, Hank was and, in this case, I trust his judgement more than yours."

Roy saw her purse her lips, just like she did before getting serious with the kids.

"Roy DeSoto, your guilt won't help Johnny," she said firmly. "We're all angry about what happened. But, you tell me: 'sometimes these things happen in the fire service and no one's to blame'." Joanne looked into his eyes and gently wrapped her arms around him.

"Joanne, I'm so angry." He pressed his face into her hair, shaking. "I'm afraid we're going to lose him this time."

She held him until the trembling passed.

On the stairs Jennifer slipped back to her room. She scooped up the cat and held him close, burying her face in his hair.

Roy carefully slid out of the bed, trying not to awaken Joanne. A streak of moonlight escaping the curtains cast a gentle glow across his wife's face. He stood in the darkness, memorizing the peaceful expression on her features. He walked to his dresser and picked up the small enigmatic pouch he had removed from the pocket of Johnny's turnout coat. He had kept it for safekeeping while they had searched the wreckage, intending to place it with the rest of Gage's personal property. DeSoto turned the bag in his palm. The moonlight reflected off the safety pin shoved through the buckskin. Gage normally carried it pinned inside his pants or turnout pocket and tolerated, as Chet had learned, absolutely no teasing about his 'lucky charm'.

A sound came from one of the kid's rooms. Roy set down the bag and quietly opened the bedroom door. A slash of light leaked under the door of Jennifer's room. "Roy?" asked Joanne sleepily.

"It's Jen. I'll go check on her," he said, grabbing his robe off the chair. "Go back to sleep."

Roy tapped softly on Jennifer's door. Inside he heard a rustle as his daughter threw herself into the bed. The light under the door disappeared. DeSoto knocked again whispering, "Jen?" as he opened the door.

Jennifer lay stiffly on the bed, her face pressed against her pillow.

"I saw your light. What's wrong?"

She shook her head, pushing her face further into the pillow. "Nothing."

Roy sat on the floor beside her bed and put a hand on her shoulder. "Kiddo?"

"I had a bad dream." Her voice caught.

"What about?" asked Roy. Beneath his hand he felt her shoulders twitch as she shrugged.

Jennifer turned to face him, unable to give voice to her dream about her father's death. "I heard you and mom talking about Uncle Johnny," she said slowly.

"Jennifer DeSoto, you never hear anything good when you eavesdrop," he said firmly.

"Is he going to be OK?"

"The doctors are taking good care of him."

"Can you stay with me awhile?" she asked quietly.

"A little while. Go to sleep, Jen." He leaned against the wall by the bed, resting his head against the headboard.

Roy walked toward the counter by the base station. Sheryl Dial of Squad 26 was bent over the counter filling out requisition forms, while her partner Calvin Reed double checked the order and chatted with Dixie. When the pair of medics saw Roy they fell silent. Sheryl opened her mouth. But before she could speak, the two beep alert tone sounded.

"Squad 26, stand-by for response," crackled LA dispatch over the radio.

"They're playing our song," apologized Reed, nodding sympathetically to DeSoto while scooping up the box of supplies.

"Roy, tell Johnny we're thinking of him," offered Dial, rapidly completing the forms.

"I will," began Roy.

The HT again activated, interrupting. "Squad 26, in place of Squad 18. Man trapped."

"Later, Dixie," called Sheryl over her shoulder, as she walked toward the ambulance entrance. The sound of the radio faded as Sheryl headed for the squad.

DeSoto leaned wearily against the nurse's station counter.

Dixie looked at Roy, taking in the dark circles under his eyes and slump of his shoulders. "Hi, Roy."

"Dix," he acknowledged, "How's Johnny?"

"He's still on the ventilator," she answered softly. "But, he's holding on."

Roy lowered his head, biting his lip. "Joanne's gone to LAX to meet his mother's flight. She should be here soon."

Dixie nodded. "Roy, Johnny's tough." Her words sounded hollow in her ears. She looked away.

Marie stood at the end of the hall, staring out the window into the darkness. Her brown eyes reflected the streetlights below. She searched the skies, knowing she should have been able to find the Hand or Dried Willow, unable to find any lights other than the moving streaks of planes and blinking of radio antennas. Only brightest stars were visible through the glare of the city lights. She heard footsteps approaching from behind.

"Marie," said Roy, leaning against the sill. He looked out at the sparkling array spreading from the hospital to the black bulk of the distant mountainside. Roy let his shoulders slump and sighed. The long-term substitute for Johnny had arrived from headquarters yesterday -- a solemn young medic named Tran Nguyen. His tense, 'first day on the job' meticulousness exhausted Roy.

"Johnny must hate it."

"Pardon?" asked Roy startled from his reverie by Marie's voice.

"Not being able to see the stars. He must hate it," she repeated.

Roy shrugged. "I guess. He gets out of the city whenever he can."

"When Johnny was little, he'd to sit on the hill behind the house and count the stars -- even though you're not supposed to," Marie continued, recalling those happier times.

Roy listened, trying to imagine his partner as a child, which was not much of a stretch. Roy remembered the very young and nearly silent Johnny in the training class. Gage had hidden behind a

quiet watchful demeanor and only his occasionally verbal sparring with Brackett had given DeSoto any hint as to his true nature.

"Our Elders teach that the movement of people on earth mirrors the movement of the stars," Marie suddenly interjected. "Sometimes, I wonder what errant star Johnny followed to this place."

Roy tipped his head, studying her face. Her lashes glistened with unshed tears. Turning away, Roy stared into the darkness beyond the window, hunting for a way to explain why any of them loved their dangerous occupation. "Johnny loves what he does. The more difficult the call, the more he likes it."

"Johnny was always testing his limits."

"He wouldn't be happy doing anything else." Roy stopped for moment, staring out the window. "It may not be much of a consolation right now, but there are more than a few people in this city who owe their lives to Johnny. He's very good at what he does."

"Would it shock you if I said, right now, I'd trade all of those stranger's lives for my son?"

He bowed his head. All the standard lines of reassurance, which had crossed his lips maybe ten thousand times, flashed through his mind. He again saw the muddy wounds and smelled the burnt flesh, a vision that left him mute. Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the small buckskin pouch. "Marie," he said handing her the sack, "this is...." He stopped, feeling foolish trying to explain to her something he himself did not understand. "Johnny carries this in his pocket. It got left in his turnouts. I was going to give it to Dix, but Johnny has always been kind of..." He paused, searching for the right word to describe Johnny's behavior.

Marie carefully took the small pouch from Roy's hand. She had not known Johnny carried a tunkan. "Thank you."

"May I ask what it is?"

"It has to do with Lakshota religion," she hesitated. "A wicasa wakan gives it to you to protect you."

"Didn't work very well." Roy choked back his words, wishing, when he saw a brief flash of anger cross Marie's face that he had never spoken.

"The building didn't crush him when it collapsed." Her voice broke as the tears spilled down her cheeks. She turned away from him.

"Marie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to criticize your beliefs. I'm just..." DeSoto hesitated, remembering the twisted fragments of a LP gas bottle the investigators had found in the wreckage. "This should never have happened." Awkwardly he put his hands on her shoulders, holding her as she wept. He felt her hand close over his.

Johnny floated on his back deep beneath the clear, cool water. The sky reflected and rippled on the ocean's surface. He rose slowly toward the shimmering light, unwilling to ascend, preferring the numbing depths. Halfway up the water turned hot -- so hot it burned. He struggled toward the sky and blessed oxygen, desperate to draw a breath. Even before his head broke the surface, he could hear the alarm.

He woke with a jerk. It felt as though he didn't wake up anymore but came to --abruptly. *Apropos, Gage thought, It's not like I sleep anymore. I just pass out from pain and exhaustion or drugs and exhaustion. But I don't sleep.* The vent alarm on the respirator was ringing; he tried not to fight the machine, hoping someone would shut it off before its shrieking blew off the top of his head. One of the meds left him nauseated and nursing a splitting headache. As a distraction, he reviewed the pharmacokinetics lectures from training, trying to determine which drug it might be, but a sickening fog filled his head, preventing him from thinking clearly. His entire upper body throbbed in time to the alarm. With his unburned hand he grabbed the bedrail, shaking it in frustration.

The ringing abruptly stopped. "Mr. Gage?" a woman's voice asked.

Johnny slowly opened his eyes; his swollen left lid refused to fully cooperate. A blurry figure appeared. He blinked a few times to clear his vision. A woman in white scrubs dotted with small green, smiling frogs, was reading the monitor above his bed. Her hazel eyes smiled over the top her mask. *Judy*, he recognized the charge nurse in burn unit ICU. *I swear, she was wearing pink daises, earlier.* But he couldn't remember.

"What's wrong?" Judy asked, running through a list of yes and no questions to which he could blink the answers. She performed a quick check to make sure he hadn't dislodged any of his catheters or wires. John counted as she ran through her examination, relieved that he had not acquired any new hardware while unconscious. Last time, he had awakened to discover he was on a ventilator. "I need to change your position, so you don't put pressure on the same spot all the time," she said, moving him as gently as she was able.

John tried to move himself, preferring his own incrementally inflicted pain. He rolled slightly on to one shoulder and reflexively attempted to gasp as the pain washed over him, setting off the vent alarm again. The effort exhausted him.

"Better?" Judy slid pillows under his arm and shoulder to hold him in place.

No, he thought as she reset the alarm. *Heck of a job -- head torturer in hell. I don't know how she does it.* He tapped his hand on the bed, grasping an imaginary pen.

Judy slid a child's erasable slate under his hand and placed the plastic stylus between his fingers.

"What day?" he wrote.

"Sunday, the twenty-fourth."

"Mama?" he wrote, the stylus slipping from his hand.

Judy caught the slate before it hit the floor. "She's waiting outside. Do you want to see her?"

Johnny started to nod, stopping when the tubes in his throat and nose moved, gagging him. He blinked twice.

Marie stood awkwardly outside Gage's curtained cubical, uncomfortable in the mask and gown she was required to wear. Lying helpless in the middle of the bed was her son. The doctors had told her what to expect, but her mind had refused to process anything beyond the first couple of words. Each time she saw him was a shock.

Roy watched Marie's face pale as she caught sight of Johnny's swollen features and the intimidating array of hardware. He grabbed her elbow, afraid she was going to faint. Marie was hidden from Johnny's view, but if he moved his head a fraction of inch he would see her stricken face. "Marie," whispered Roy, pulling her back a step.

"Just a couple of minutes," reminded Judy.

The muscles along Marie's jaw tightened as she took a deep breath. Drawing on reserves of willpower she had not previously known that she possessed, Marie forced herself to smile. Inclining her head toward DeSoto, she pulled her elbow from his hand and raised her arm, waving him away. "Johnny," she said, walking to the side of the bed.

Mama, Gage thought looking at Marie. *I'm scaring her to death*. He tried to smile around the ET tube.

"Junior," said Roy standing at the foot of the bed. "You behaving yourself?"

Cute, Roy. Johnny glared at his partner, strongly suspecting the effect was ruined by his swollen eye.

"Cinksi," said Marie. She held up the small pouch with his tukan. "Roy found it." Marie placed the bundle on top of the monitor over his head.

Johnny closed his eyes in relief.

DeSoto made a mental note to make sure the nurses didn't throw it away in the course of their efforts to keep the surroundings as antiseptic as possible. He turned away, studying the IV pump with mock intensity, giving Johnny and his mother a moment of privacy.

"Cinksi." Marie tentatively reached through the maze of tubes and stroked his hair. She dared not speak further.

Roy caught Judy's eye as the nurse entered the cubicle holding a tray with a syringe. "Time to wrap it up," she mouthed.

"Go to sleep, Johnny," instructed Roy.

He shook his head very slightly. *I can't*, pleaded his eyes.

Quietly, Marie started to sing, "Ah wey wey... Inila na ishtima bebe. Ishtima..."

Judy bent over Gage's IV line, injecting the medication. John felt his eyes began to close, shutting out the light, succumbing to the drugs that clouded his mind.

Chet Kelly and Sonny Gawhega of LAFD 15 tried to keep as far apart as possible for two people in a small room waiting for the same thing. Despite the current circumstances, Hank had to smile. Chet insisted the animosity was just a city/county firefighter thing, but he suspected that, in fact, the problem had been caused by Kelly's mouth. If humanly possible, Gawhega tolerated teasing even less than did Gage. A petite woman with long brown hair and beautiful dark face sat beside Sonny. She wore a bright green t-shirt proclaiming 'That the People May Live: 4th Annual Conference of American Indian Health Care Providers.'

"Sonny," the woman said, pointing with her chin at Roy who was coming through the waiting room door.

Kelly and Gawhega nearly collided as they both closed on the paramedic. Chet grabbed Roy's arm. "How's Johnny?"

He studied Chet's face, trying to decide how much to tell him. "He's pretty uncomfortable, I think. So far, he hasn't developed any of the complications that accompany serious burns. But, he is running a fever, which may mean he's developing an infection." He stopped, unable to forget the shocking mortality rates for burn victims. He turned away, unable to meet Kelly's eyes any longer. He sensed Sonny averting his face to grant Roy a moment of private grief.

Chet kicked the leg of a chair. "Cap, what are they going to do to the guy who owned the grill?" he demanded angrily.

"He didn't make it." Hank listened to the silence that greeted his reply, feeling Chet's directionless rage like the reflecting heat of a fire.

"Good," whispered Kelly.

Roy shook his head, knowing Chet didn't really mean what he said. Sonny slowly placed his hand on Chet's shoulder.

"Is Marie out in the hall?" asked the woman.

DeSoto nodded.

"Excuse me," she said standing up.

Hank gave Gawhega a quizzical look.

"Gage's girlfriend?" asked Chet watching the woman walk down the corridor.

"Dr. Sequatewa? No," answered Sonny. "She on the board of the Intertribal Friendship House." He shrugged. "We took a collection at the powwow on Saturday night to help out with travel expenses. Helen wants to let Marie know we're all praying for Johnny."

"I never figured Gage for a dancer," said the Cap.

"He isn't. He helped out in other ways. Johnny was the volunteer medic for our annual celebration."

DeSoto cringed at Gawhega's use of the past tense.

Sonny saw Roy's reaction. "DeSoto, he'll be all right. Those Sioux are tough bastards. Nearly five hundred years of genocide hasn't managed to kill them off. A little fire is nothing."

Roy smiled weakly, wishing he could believe Gawhega.

Tuesday 3-5-1980:

Johnny squeezed his eyes shut, blocking out the food on the spoon hovering in front of his face. His chest was still leaden, leaving him feeling he must consciously remember to breathe, transforming the act of falling asleep into a terrifying experience. The endotracheal tube had left his throat feeling abraded, and the morphine had reduced his appetite to a series of strange cravings: Mrs Lopez's tamales, limes, dark ripe Bing cherries, prairie turnips.... None of those things were on his tray.

"Come on," coaxed the student nurse, shifting the utensil closer to his lips. Her hand shook. Her very sick charge frightened her. She was now two hours into her clinical rotation on the burn ward and was failing in her first major patient care assignment.

Gage struggled not to explode. The splits, which stretched his injured joints to prevent the skin from tightening, and his weakness kept him from embarrassing himself by throwing his lunch. *Temper!* Everything was an irritant. His hair was wet and he imagined it smelled of vinegar from the daily scrubbing of his burns. The odor visited the whole experience on him again -- soft brushes and scissors rubbing and cutting away the scab-like crusts from his raw wounds while he prayed to pass out. *I'm never going to be able to enjoy Mike's homemade salad dressing again. I'll be lucky if I don't throw up from just the smell.* He desperately wanted to remove the nasal cannula and scratch his nose.

"Cinksi...." started Marie, leaning forward in her chair.

"I'm not hungry, Mama!" His voice was broken, weak and angry. He stopped, shamed by his tone.

Marie lowered her head, biting her lip and hiding her tears. "Mary, seat of wisdom and consoler of the afflicted," she whispered under her breath, covering her eyes, remembering.

Traffic had been horrible and Marie had been late, despite Joanne engaging in some of the most aggressive driving she had ever seen. The bed was empty when she arrived; Johnny had already been taken to the tub room. She had missed the few good hours he had each day. Marie sat staring at the smooth sheets of the freshly changed bed, imagining the process the doctors had described. She shuddered at the thought. Her son had come back from the morning's therapy sessions looking like he had been marched through the gates of Hell.

Johnny looked at the frightened student nurse and his mother's bowed head. Sighing, he wished the earth would open up and swallow him.

"We'll try something later." The nurse lifted the tray.

John looked at the young woman and tried for his best, Gage-charms-the-single-female-health-care-provider-voice. "I'm cold." His shortness of breath ruined the effect, instead of being charming, his inflection resembled that of a petulant child. "Can I have a blanket, a few extra feet of Kerlix? Something -- anything?" He closed his eyes in frustration.

"Ok, I'll get you something."

Slowly opening his eyes, Johnny gazed at his mother sitting in the chair. Deep, dark circles had appeared beneath her eyes. "Mama, go back to Roy's."

Marie surreptitiously wiped at the sweat running down her neck.

"They're just going to give me a shot and I'll sleep most of the afternoon," he rasped. "Barring visits from the breathe-deep-and-cough-police."

"I think the DeSoto's need a break from me."

The bone-deep weariness, revealed by the slump of her shoulders, broke his heart. "Do me a favor. Call a cab, go someplace and get a good meal --Dixie can recommend a restaurant." He stopped

to catch his breath. Drug induced sleep was overtaking him. "Go for a walk. Get out of the hospital for a little while."

"Johnny..."

Heavily weighted his eyelids slid shut. "Mama, I'm too tired to worry about your health. Please," he pleaded, softly.

Marie stood, reaching out and smoothing his hair. "Get some sleep."

Johnny nodded stiffly, falling asleep before he finished the movement.

Marie turned and sat back down on her chair, keeping watch over her sleeping son.

Thursday 5-17-1980:

The darkness closed over him like a velvet blanket. In the blackness someone was calling for help. It was becoming increasingly hard to breathe. He struggled like a limed bird to move, fighting the rising panic and hypoxia. Finally, no amount of effort would draw air into his lungs.

Johnny awoke, sitting upright gasping for air. The red numbers on his clock shone in the darkness. *Four hours of sleep -- a record.* He kicked away the tangled sheets and abandoned the bed. Limping, he stumbled into the bathroom. At the sink, he bent and awkwardly used his left hand to splash cold water on his face. The elastic bandage-like shirt and glove, that the doctors insisted would reduce scarring, clung to his skin, leaving him feeling feverish. Shuddering, he stripped off the compression garment. "Get a grip, Gage," he whispered. He opened the bathroom window, letting the cool night breeze flow over his chest, soothing his overheated skin.

Grabbing a clean sheet, Johnny hobbled into the living room. *No more of the damn rubber suit tonight,* he thought, turning on a small lamp. The light touched on the dozen EMT textbooks spread on the floor around the couch. He wrapped the sheet around his shoulders and leaned back against a stack

of pillows on the couch, settling into the spot where he had spent the night for the past two weeks. Gage selected a book at random and resumed studying for his eventual re-certification exam.

Friday 7-1-1980:

Johnny glared at his hand in frustration. He dropped the needle and massaged his fingers, pulling on the stiffening joints. He retrieved a fresh setup. Lowering the limb beneath the surface of the gurney, he swabbed the site. With his left thumb he put tension on the vein below the insertion site and slid the needle beneath the skin, carefully adjusting the angle. Gage felt a slight decrease in resistance as the point passed through the blood vessel wall.

The flashback chamber remained empty. "Damn it," he swore. The needle was not in the vein. It was as though nine years of experience had been erased, except that even in training it hadn't had been this difficult. Johnny stared at the patient's arm and sighed.

The mock patient, Bill Wallace, sat up and took Johnny's shaking wrist, pulling Gage's hand away from his forearm. Wallace had trained with Gage and was now an instructor with Valley's EMT program. He pulled the needle from his arm and pressed a fold of gauze over the puncture. "John, call it quits for today." Bill dropped the used needle into the sharps container. "You still taking the Atarax?"

Gage shook his head, rubbing his palm.

"Then let's go get a beer."

Johnny nodded, closing his eyes. "Nothing feels right anymore," he said. He flexed his burned fingers, placing them over the other hand, comparing the spread of the two sets of digits.

Wallace watched Gage wash his hands, slide the soft rubber orthotics between his fingers and pull on the elastic glove. "Do the doctors have an estimate for when sensation will return to normal?"

Johnny shrugged, grateful for Bill's clinical tone and for the opportunity to discuss the matter with someone who had no emotional investment in his recovery. He was getting tired of the Roy

DeSoto cheering section. "Probably never. But the hypersensitivity should disappear when the scar tissue matures."

"Give it time. You'll get it again."

Gage sighed. "I have to; I don't want to go back to hauling hose."

Saturday 8-28-1980:

Johnny bent double beneath the spray of warm water, touching the bottom of the shower. He had overslept. The water ran down his back, streaming through his hair and across his face. The heat helped loosen the tightness that settled into the newly healed skin across his chest and back, making him feel as though he had shrunk while he slept. *At least, I don't have to wear the damned compression garments anymore.* Gage straightened and turned, letting the water run over his arms. He slowly went through the series of stretching exercises he had learned in PT, trying to prepare himself to face his birthday party.

"Happy birthday, Gage," he whispered to the mirror, wiping away the steam. Reflected on the cleared surface were the still vivid scars on his chest and arms, scars that the doctors insisted would become less visible in time. He pushed back his wet hair and frowned at the half a dozen gray strands that had appeared by his temples over the past few months. *Get over it!* he ordered and threw the damp towel at the glass. *You got off easy,* he thought while recalling the terrible wounds of some of his fellow patients in the burn unit. *Everything is still there and works.* He grimaced, burning with shame over his own vanity. He pulled on a T-shirt and briefs and padded into the kitchen to make coffee, hoping the familiar morning ritual would drive away the poisonous combination of self-pity and guilt.

He leaned against the counter and sipped gingerly at the hot brew. *I'm not ready for a birthday,* he decided. Yesterday, when he had been at Rampart for his last session of PT, Dixie had reminded him of the upcoming event.

"Well, Johnny, what do you want for your birthday?" she asked, leaning forward to rest her elbows atop a stack of reports.

"How did you?" he asked, startled. "Need I ask? My mom?" During his stay, his mother must have occupied the time he was away in the tub room or at PT telling the staff embarrassing stories about his childhood exploits. *I dread to think what she might have told Chet.*

Dixie smiled sweetly as Johnny blushed.

"I'm going to have to transfer up to 128's just so I can go someplace where they haven't met my mother." His expression sobered as he thought about returning to work.

"You still haven't answered my question, Johnny." The merry tone faded from her voice as she watched his face.

He tipped back his head and closed his eyes. "Normalcy," said Gage quietly. *A nice day at work: a couple of MVA's, an OD or two, a victim of 'too-stupid-to-live' syndrome. That would be great right now.* He slowly opened his eyes.

Johnny shook his head, banishing the memory and trying to dispel his gloom. Sliding a cassette into the tape deck and turning up the volume, he listened to Ian Anderson sing about being too old to rock-n-roll while he finished his coffee.

Roy pulled into the drive in front of the old duplex where Johnny lived. He cringed as the bottom of his car scraped the uneven brick driveway. He would never understand his partner's penchant for moving. Every couple of years, John would borrow DeSoto's pickup, throw everything in the back, and move into another in a succession of ever-weirder dwellings. The only qualifying factor he seemed to use in selecting an apartment was the presence of an unobstructed view of the mountains. This place had come with a gorgeous view -- and mysterious psychedelic murals painted inside the closets.

Roy brushed past the huge oleander bush by the door. He could hear the stereo before he knocked. "Oh, no," he muttered. "He only listens to that junk when he's in a mood." DeSoto stood on the porch trying to banish feelings of impending doom. He had told Joanne that a party was not a good idea, but the children had been so eager to celebrate Johnny's birthday. Against his better judgement he had been persuaded to call Gage.

"Thanks, Roy, but..."

Roy covered the receiver with his hand and shook his head. "Joanne," he whispered, "when Johnny wants to be alone, it's best to leave him alone." He frowned, remembering Gage's request for solitude: 'Roy, I feel like I've been living under a microscope for months. Please just give me some space.'

"The kids haven't seen him since he was...", Joanne stopped, reconsidering her words. "...since before his accident."

He nodded. "Johnny, Chris and Jennifer want to see you." He listened to the long pause on the other end of the line.

"Roy..."

Joanne gestured at him to give her the phone. "Johnny, enough sitting alone sulking."

Roy took a deep breath, his eyes wide. Silence crackled over the line.

"You're not the only one this has affected. The kids have not seen you since before the accident. They have been worried."

"I know, Joanne, but...", started Gage.

"The least you can do is have the courtesy to eat lunch with them," interrupted Joanne.

"Ok," acquiesced Johnny in guilty voice. "I guess I have been pretty selfish."

"Yes, you have been," stated Joanne flatly.

DeSoto cringed.

"Roy will come by to pick you up at eleven," she continued.

The music stopped and the door abruptly opened as he knocked, nearly tumbling him onto the living room floor. "Hi, Roy," said John bounding out the door, brushing his shoulder and sending him reeling again.

Roy righted himself, gaining a confused impression of layers of EMT texts spreading around the couch and a sprawl of photographic equipment across the table; an unusual mess for Gage who was normally a careful housekeeper. "Happy Birthday," replied DeSoto. John bounced on the balls of his feet, waiting for Roy to move so he could lock the door. His face wore the distant, closed expression he usually reserved for the bodies of drunks who passed out on the tracks in railroad switching yards or the aftermath of hundred-mile-an-hour collisions with concrete abutments. *This is going to be loads of fun, Joanne*, Roy thought sourly.

Johnny sat on the swing in the shade under the Brazilian pepper tree, staring across the vacant lot into the canyon. This was the first time he had sat down since arriving. His usual relentless energy had taken on a manic edge as he ricocheted around the house and yard. Now, he sat swinging slightly, studying the dying brush along the top of the hillside.

Roy stood on the patio, in front of the grill, attempting to persuade the lumps of charcoal to ignite. He threw yet another match on the kerosene soaked briquettes, certain that the flammable charcoal had been replaced with black rocks.

"Good thing your job involves putting out fires and not starting them," commented Joanne, setting a platter full of burghers beside the grill.

"Very funny," said Roy, fanning the fading flames. The charcoal went out. He straightened and sighed.

Joanne wrapped her arm around his waist, giving him a quick squeeze. "Roy, let me. The kids are getting hungry," she teased, handing him a glass of iced tea. She lit a match and flipped it onto the opposite side of the pile of charcoal. Flames crept from the match up the stack of briquettes spreading over the pile.

Roy shook his head in disgust. Leaning forward, he kissed her hair.

Joanne tipped her head toward the swing. "He's doing much better than when I last saw him."

Roy looked at his partner. Johnny's hair was longer than he had ever seen it, spreading in a thick, unruly mass touching his shoulders. He was still too thin; although DeSoto suspected Gage would fill back out when he was no longer pushing so hard, trying to convince himself that he was fully recovered. He bore little resemblance to the very young, clean cut firefighter who had walked through the door of the conference room at headquarters many years ago. "Yeah," said Roy uncertainly. The long-lasting, dark mood riding Johnny was far from normal.

"Talk to him, if you're worried."

He shook his head. "I'm not sure I want to." He changed the subject. "Did you speak to Jennifer?" he asked, watching his daughter slowly approach the swing where Johnny sat.

Joanne nodded. "I'm not sure what got into her."

"I think all our talk of the past months scared her," said Roy remembering his daughter's earlier reaction. She had run down the drive to the car, poised to jump all over her Uncle Johnny. John had reached forward to grab her and tickle her, the first genuine smile Roy had seen in ages on his lips. As DeSoto decided maybe this party wasn't a mistake after all, Jennifer suddenly stopped, breaking the mood. Johnny had immediately withdrawn.

Jennifer stopped in front of the swing. Gage's back was to Roy so he couldn't see his partner's face as Jennifer spoke. But her words clearly took him by surprise. Abruptly, John turned to face Jennifer, meeting her gaze.

"Uncle Johnny, what's it like to be burned?" she asked again.

Johnny started to speak then closed his mouth, at a loss. He bowed his head and shrugged. "No fun, Jen." He took a deep breath, squinting at the distant horizon. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"I'm sorry about what I did earlier. I was just...," she stopped and shrugged awkwardly, unable to explain her response.

"It's OK," he sighed. Unconsciously, he stretched out his arm looking at the unevenly-colored blotches. "The scars scare people; they remind them that bad things could happen to themselves or their loved ones."

"My dad could have an accident like you did," she stated flatly.

Johnny stood up. He put his hands on the child's shoulders, and steered her on the swing. Behind the girl, he could see Roy and Joanne turning away, trying not to look as though they had not been watching. For a moment Johnny rejoiced, remembering that Chris was up in his room being too 'cool' to be involved in a birthday party for his father's 'dopey' friend. Kneeling on the ground in front of the swing, he looked into her eyes. "Jen, I'm not going to lie to you and say that nothing bad could ever happen to your father. But, LA County has the best protective gear and training available. As long as we follow safety protocols and are careful, we are reasonably safe."

She considered his words for a few minutes, tracing an arc in the grass with her toes. "But, you were hurt."

Johnny closed his eyes, listening to Brice's comment about his turnout coat echo through his mind for the millionth time. Every time the nurses had scrubbed the Silvadene from his burns he had heard the "walking rule book's" voice repeating like a broken record. He lifted his head forcing a wry smile. "I... I did something kinda dumb."

"What if my dad...," started Jennifer.

"Your father uses his head for other things besides just holding up his helmet," interrupted Johnny, paraphrasing a crack the Cap had made after another of his ill-considered moves. He watched her start to smile. "I promise, I will not let him do anything stupid."

Jennifer threw her arms around Johnny's neck. "Promise you won't do anything dumb either?"

"I'll try."

"Uncle Johnny," she said, brushing his hair away from her face and releasing him, "you need a haircut."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Jen," called Joanne, "come set the table."

"Chris, I'll get the dishes tonight. Why don't you go work on your scouting project," said Joanne, stacking the dirty plates by sink. "Jennifer, go ride your bike for awhile."

"Mom!" she objected.

"Come on, Jen," said Chris in a bored voice while heading out the kitchen door before his mother could change her mind about the dishes. "The grown-ups want to have a talk without us kids. They probably want to find out why Uncle Johnny is acting crazy."

"Chris," warned Roy, setting the leftover birthday cake on the kitchen table. "Mind your own business."

Joanne looked out the window over the sink. Johnny was again standing at the edge of the yard staring into the canyon. "Roy...", she started.

He grabbed the slim package containing Johnny's birthday present and jammed it into his back pocket. "I'll talk to him," he said.

Johnny tipped his head, looked over his shoulder and watched Roy approach. He frowned angrily, sensing they were about to discuss his accident. He turned back toward the canyon, waiting.

Roy stopped and stood quietly beside John, trying to respect his rigidly-posted personal space.

"Goin' to be a lot of brush fires this year," Gage said, squinting in the afternoon sunlight. "Too much rain this spring. Everything has grown up, and now with the dry season it is all dying."

"Yeah," nodded Roy. He stood inspecting Johnny's profile. "Want to go for a walk?" he asked, pointing to the canyon.

Gage moved rapidly down the narrow path, pushing past a stand of wild licorice, heading for the gravel covered wash. The smell from the wilted leaves filled the hot, still air reminding him of his Auntie's home remedy for colds and flu. One dose of the bitter tea she brewed from the roots had proved a lifelong cure from his childhood taste for licorice candy. The trail emerged from the brush, opening out onto a spit of gravel and dried silt. Johnny paused in the shadow of a manzanita bush, getting his bearings. Flood run-off from last spring's heavy rains had swept through the canyon, dropping new tangles of dead brush and moving even the large boulders. The wash had been almost completely transformed since the last time he had been down here. *I should have expected this. Changed like everything else in my life.* He turned, walking upstream toward the tree where last summer he, Roy and the kids had watched the red tail hawks.

Roy trotted after Johnny, slipping a little on the ruts made by children's bikes. When he saw where Gage was headed he smiled. Last summer in the shade of that Palo Verde, he had watched John covertly make an offering to a pair of nesting hawks.

Johnny settled himself on a smooth patch of ground in the shade. *No more running. We are going to have to have this out.* Absently he rubbed his shoulder; the skin was still hypersensitive and itched maddeningly in hot weather.

Brushing the loose gravel from the top a nearby boulder, Roy sat down. "Your little talk with Jen, what was that all about?" he asked nonchalantly.

Like you don't know, thought Johnny. He stretched out his legs and leaned back on his elbows, studying the dappled pattern made by the sunlight filtering through the leaves. "She was making me promise we would follow departmental safety procedures. Jen's been worrying about you."

"Yeah, she been going through a kind of anxious phase lately. Joanne and I have both talked to her." He watched Gage's face, knowing he was adding Jen's worries to the other baggage that he was carrying. "Johnny, you...,"

"How do you like working with the junior Brice?" he said drowning out Roy's words.

"Huh?" he asked, confused.

"The guy who has been going on runs with you for the past six months, remember?"

Roy stopped, letting Johnny evade this issue. "Oh, Tran."

"Brice was worrying about the 'deleterious effect'," said John gesturing, sketching quotes in the air around Brice's words, "Station 51 might have on a promising young firefighter."

Roy shrugged. "He's a good paramedic -- sort of quiet." He leaned back. "But, he's more talkative than you've been."

"Leave it alone," Gage warned, standing up.

He took a deep breath sitting back up. "Johnny, I am worried about you. I think you need to get some things off your chest."

"It's bad enough that my body has been public domain for the past six months. Now, everyone seems to think they have a right to my thoughts as well." He scooped up a handful of gravel and flung it into the brush in frustration. "Between the department's counselor and the burn unit's shrink, I have had enough people picking apart my head." He turned his back on Roy.

"Johnny, we're just trying to help."

"Here we go again. Mr. Empathy, out to solve the world's problems." Gage's voice dripped sarcasm. He felt the months of pain, fear and worry erupt within him, loosing a black storm of anger. "Did it ever occur to you that the best help might be no help? Leave me alone!"

Roy clenched his teeth, raking his fingers across the rough surface of the boulder and struggling for calm. He waited, letting Gage rant, understanding his partner wanted to make him angry so he would drop the topic. "I can't do that," he said emphatically. "You're tearing yourself apart over something. What is it?"

Whirling to face Roy, Johnny exploded, "What do you want to know? That I screamed and cried in pain in front of total strangers? That I'm more vain than I had ever expected? What it's like to have nightmares every night for weeks on end?" His face was flushed with rage.

Roy snapped his head back, both stung and embarrassed by Gage's words. "I want to know whether or not I can count on my partner." His words hung in the hot afternoon air.

"How dare you presume to know what sort of demons this has loosed in my life? I don't even know..." Johnny suddenly stopped speaking, his face draining of color so quickly that Roy leapt to his feet prepared to catch him if he fainted. *Betrayed by my own words*, Johnny thought. Weakly, he waved DeSoto away.

"Johnny?" Roy watched Gage turn and walk a few steps away, waiting for him to collect his thoughts. A gust of hot wind blew through the canyon, swirling dust around Roy's ankles. "Johnny?" he repeated.

I desperately need some return to routine. I never expected I'd want to have Chet harass me, Johnny thought, bowing his head. "All I have wanted since I got hurt was to get back to work." His voice shook slightly. "What... What if I have lost it?"

Roy walked over to stand behind his partner. He knew John had spent endless hours on exercises to restore the agility of his burned hand and had conned Bill Wallace, one of the EMT

instructors at Valley, into giving him access to their procedures lab. DeSoto suspected Gage had started more IV's in the past month than he had in the past two years in the field. "Why would you think that?" he asked.

He shrugged. "Everything will be going along fine, and I'll begin to believe that I can put all this behind me, that the whole thing is over." He kicked at the ground. "Then something happens -- like that incident with Jen -- and I realize it's not. Sometimes, I think I'll never be the same again."

Roy took a deep breath. "You will never be. Johnny, you can't expect to get through something like this unscathed."

"And, when it happens on a call?"

He met John's eyes and remained quiet for a few minutes, trying to determine the depth of the Johnny's invisible wounds. Roy decided. "You'll do your job." He smiled. "As I recall you're none too fond of snakes. That has never stopped you."

John shrugged again. "I hope you're right."

"I am," he stated, watching Johnny's shoulders slowly relax.

"Roy, about what I said earlier -- I'm sorry," he said in a voice barely above a whisper. "I've been terrible to you."

"Forget it," interrupted Roy, pulling the small package from his back pocket. "Happy birthday, Johnny," he said handing him the box. "Open it. You'll need it next week."

He slid his thumb beneath the tape, opening the wrappings. Inside was a wristwatch. He glanced at his bare wrist; his watch had disappeared after his trip down the muddy hillside, so many months ago. "Roy, thanks."

"Put it on," prompted DeSoto.

He fastened the band around his wrist.

"Johnny." Roy twitched nervously. "You really scared me this time."

"I scared me," replied Johnny softly. "Roy, I couldn't have made it through this without you. Thanks for -- well -- for everything you've done, and for putting up with me. I never even thanked you for getting me out of that hole."

Roy looked away. "I took too long," he stated flatly.

"For what?"

"I should have been able to get you out faster." His face burned with shame as he recalled his performance.

"Roy, you're incredible," said Johnny in something approaching his normal manner. "You did the best you or anyone else could have under the circumstances and still you're beating yourself up." He sighed and looked at Roy with a slight smile on his lips. "Ya know, though, you and Brice make a good team."

Roy rolled his eyes. "I think we need to get you out of the sun; you're delirious." Smiling he closed his eyes and listened to his partner laugh. It had been too long.

Roy walked through the squad room on the way to his locker. Henry lifted his head and gave him the 'greet the arriving firefighter' yawn and tail wag. Shifting his clean uniform shirts to his other hand, DeSoto gave him a quick scratch behind the ears. "Mornin', Henry." The vehicle bay was empty. C shift was on a run. At the locker room door he stopped. This morning, for the first time in what seemed like ages, he had parked next to Johnny's Land Rover. Despite the reassurances he had given Gage, he was still nervous. Still worried, Roy pushed open the door.

"Morning, Roy," said Johnny. He pulled on his shirt, aware of Marco's and Chet's furtive glances. He had been so successful in conveying his desire to be left alone, that neither had seen him in months.

"Good to have you back, Johnny." Roy began stowing his gear, as he watched Chet with mounting unease, knowing the fireman would not be long able to resist commenting. In the vehicle bay he could hear the engine backing in.

Johnny closed his locker and headed for the sinks. To avoid being caught staring, Chet turned away so fast he hit his head on the locker door. At the hollow sound Johnny pursed his lips, preparing to speak.

The sound of the squad backing in and the voices of the engine crew came from the bay. "Come on guys," whispered Roy, wishing that C-shift would walk through the door. The pain was apparently moving Chet to words. Roy watched his lips part. He gave Kelly a warning glare of sufficient intensity that it caused Marco, standing next to Chet, to cringe.

"Hi, Roy," called Charlie Mills, C-shift's engineer. "Johnny, good to see you, man." Johnny turned to greet Charlie.

DeSoto finished buttoning his shirt, sighing with relief. As Gage, Lopez and Kelly headed into the vehicle bay for roll call, Roy grabbed Chet's arm, pulling him back.

"Roy?" he asked.

"Chet, leave him alone. Or you'll be needing his services."

"But, Roy, a little teasing is just what Johnny needs to snap him out his mood."

"No," he said shaking his head. "Leave him alone."

"Kelly," said the Cap from the doorway, "leave Gage alone. Roll call..." His words were interrupted by the bebop sounding.

"Squad 51, child injured at 810 East 220 th, cross street Martin, time out 9:02."

The controlled frenzy of a response swept them along.

Roy stole another glance at Johnny as he turned off the squad's engine. Gage was staring into space, his eyes focused on something he didn't really want to see. With a rapid shake of the head, John climbed out of the squad. The run had clearly brought back memories. Johnny disappeared back into the locker room.

"Roy," called the Cap from his office door, "a minute, please."

He entered the office, sensing Stanley had been waiting for his return. "Cap?"

"How did he do?" he asked staring out the window, watching traffic.

DeSoto remembered the scene at the house. The hysterical mother constantly interfering in her terror, the toddler screaming in agony, and over it all the smell of garlic. He had had his hands full with the mother, leaving Johnny to handle the child. Pediatric cases were never Gage's strong suit; successful communication with kids more than occasionally eluded him. But, Roy suspected that dealing with a pediatric burn victim had been especially difficult. Johnny had performed by the book; only DeSoto had been able to tell his calm had been forced. "It was a bad scene. A kid overturned a huge pot of hot pasta sauce all over himself."

"Hell of a first call," Hank interrupted.

Roy nodded. "Yeah. He was a professional -- a little stiff, maybe. It shook him but I really think he has it under control."

"His hand?"

Roy laughed weakly. "I'm going to need to put in a little more practice to keep this a two man team." He bowed his head for a moment, then looked up and met Stanley's eyes. "He's back."

Stanley nodded, clearly relieved. "Well, if you think this is going to get the two of you out of housekeeping, you're mistaken." Hank smiled at Roy and headed toward the locker room.

Roy could hear the voices before he got all the way across the bay. Stanley had stopped by the door and was holding the wooden panel slightly ajar, shamelessly eavesdropping

"Why, Johnny, I do believe you've gotten gray," said Chet.

Roy groaned. Chet couldn't even wait for John to complete his first day back and given Gage's current mood, Kelly may have just transferred to the fire station in the sky. But when no screams came from behind the door, Roy closed his eyes, imagining Chet reaching out and pulling at Johnny's hair. Gage would then push away his hands, ducking out of range.

"No, I'm not. Keep your hands to yourself, ya freak."

Roy bit his lower lip, choking back laughter. It had been too long. He didn't dare meet Hank's eyes.

"Yes, you are."

"Am not."

Marco will now try to make peace, predicted Roy.

"Chet, there's nothing wrong with getting older, particularly considering the alternative," said Marco.

"The children are at it again," whispered Stanley.

"Sounds wonderful," replied DeSoto.

"Gage, keep denying reality like that and you'll be wearing one of those turnouts that tie in the back," said Chet.

"And even if I am getting gray -- which I'm not -- it would be a result of working with you."

"That's gratitude for you, Marco. Teach a man everything you know..."

"Time to break it up," said Hank to Roy, swallowing a wide grin and putting on his most serious expression. He pushed open the door.

Roy walked through the door in time to see Johnny's mock slap at the back of Chet's head connect. Kelly never took into account Gage's catlike swiftness.

"Ow!" exclaimed Chet.

"Gage, is there a problem?" asked Stanley.

Johnny turned slowly around, favoring Chet with a last aggrieved glare. "No, Cap. Not at all," he stood looking solemnly at Stanley. Suddenly he ducked his head; Roy could see him hiding a broad grin.

Hank sighed and lifted his clipboard. "Gentlemen, we have a fire station to run." The door swung shut behind him. "Oh, and Kelly," he called from the vehicle bay, running a hand over his own head, "gray hair is a mark of virility."

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Translations: wicasa wakan -- holy man; yun -- expression of shock; Inila na ishtima bebe --Be still and sleep, little one; cinksi -- parental kinship term for son; wowacintanka -- endurance, one the principle virtues of Lakhota manhood.