Out of Nowhere

Summary

Johnny is stunned by some unexpected bad news, which he tries to deal with on his own.

Notes

Many many MANY years ago, I wrote Emergency! fanfic. They've always sat on my own web site, but I thought I'd bring them over here for posterity, too. I'm just copy/pasting them, so apologies for any formatting errors. I'm posting them here in the order in which they were written.
Chapter 1

Out of Nowhere

By dee_avy

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They belong to Mark VII Limited and Universal Television, not me.

Thanks: To Laurel for the encouragement, to Susan for the encouragement and a couple of good ideas, to Kenda for the encouragement, close beta, and the TITLE! And to Peggy for everything. I certainly know I can write a story without her, but I can’t imagine why I’d want to!

"Well I must say, Johnny, I half expected you not to show up. Have a seat." Kel patted the treatment table with his hand, and Gage hopped up.

"I'm telling you, Doc, it's nothing. Just some irritation from the fire at the plastics warehouse last shift." He coughed again, and began to unbutton his shirt in anticipation of the doctor's inevitable request.

"You're probably right, but you've been coughing for days now. How do you feel otherwise?"

"Perfectly fine. I’m telling you," he was cut off by the doctor, who raised a cautionary hand has he put his stethoscope on Johnny's chest.

"Take a deep breath for me."

Gage did, and coughed again, eliciting a frown from Kel. "Have you brought anything up when you cough?" Johnny shook his head. "No shortness of breath, or wheezing or anything like that?"

"Nope, nothing. Just the cough."

The doctor moved the stethoscope, and repeated the order. "Again." After doing it several more times, front and back, Brackett pulled the stethoscope from his ears. "Well, everything sounds fine, Johnny," he admitted. "Let me check your throat. Is it sore?" the paramedic just shook his head again.

After doing that, and taking a throat culture, the physician stepped back, crossed his arms, and furrowed his brow. "I want a chest x-ray."

"Awww, come on, Doc!"

Brackett grinned slightly. "Humor me, John. It's a slow morning."
The x-ray taken, Gage was sitting impatiently on the treatment table, swinging his legs back and forth like a child would do. He looked up when the door opened, and grinned when he saw Dixie enter the room.

"How are you feeling, Johnny?" She put an envelope on the cart next to the light box on the wall.

"I'm fine, Dix, totally fine. That my x-ray?"

"Sure is. Kel should be back in a few minutes to take a look at it, then I'm sure you'll be on your way."

"Good. I promised Roy I'd help him paint their sun porch today. If I don't get out of here soon, he'll probably have it done by the time I get there."

Dixie smiled. "And this would be a bad thing?"

Gage let out a laugh. "Nah, I guess it wouldn't be, would it."

At that moment the door swung open and Brackett breezed into the room. "Okay, let's get you out of here, Johnny." He flipped the light on, and stuck the x-ray onto the box.

The doctor's reaction was almost immediate. Though he couldn't see his face, Johnny saw the man's posture stiffen, and then Kel moved in, to study the image more closely. He pulled the x-ray down, held it close to his face and up to the ceiling light, then put it back up on the light box.

Johnny felt a chill run up his spine, and the hairs on his arms started to tingle. When he felt Dixie's hand rest on top of his own, he knew he wasn't just imagining things.

"Doc...?" he ventured apprehensively.

Kel shook his head and turned to face his patient. "It's probably nothing more than a shadow. We'll repeat the x-ray, and take a couple more views. Just to be safe."

Gage shivered once. "Yeah, okay," he agreed.

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Kel hurried up to the nurse's station, and before he could even ask, Dixie handed him the envelope. But rather than take them into the treatment room, the doctor turned toward his office. Dixie quickly found someone to cover the desk and followed. She didn't even knock, entering the room just as he was putting the first picture up on the wall.

"You didn't think it was just a shadow, did you?" she asked.

He didn't even turn around. "No, no I didn't. And this just confirms it."

"He has a tumor?" the nurse asked incredulously.

"Or a fungal infection, maybe early TB; any number of things. It's hard to tell from this."

"What are you going to do?"

Kel pulled the image down and turned. "Well, first thing we have to do is tell Johnny."

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John tried as hard as he could to pay attention to what Dr. Brackett was saying. But somehow he couldn't quite get past those first words. A "spot," he'd called it. On the upper lobe of his right lung. The other words drifted past.

Could be anything. Scar tissue. Infection. TB.

Try not to be alarmed until we know what it is.

Take some more tests here. Draw blood, sputum sample.

Refer you to a pulmonologist.

You okay?

The last words hit home just as Dr. Brackett was repeating them. "John? You okay?"

The paramedic shook his head in an attempt to clear it. "Yeah, yeah, I guess so. So what do I do now?"

Dixie smiled sympathetically at the confirmation that Johnny really hadn't been processing what was being said.

"Dixie's will draw some blood, and take a sputum sample," Brackett said as he was opening a drawer. He came back with a little plastic object in his hand. He unwrapped it as he spoke, and poked the tines into Johnny's upper arm, "and that's a TB test, though I don't recall you being exposed to TB."

John shook his head. "I wasn't. I haven't been."

"You may not have even known it," Dix said kindly as she tightened the tourniquet around his arm.

In no time the samples were collected, and Dr. Brackett was standing in front of his patient. "We should have all the results by tomorrow, and I'll show your x-rays to Dr. Miller. He's a lung specialist. I'll give you a call tomorrow, okay?"

Johnny was still stunned. It was all happening so fast; too fast. He shook his head.

"No, Doc, it's not okay. I don't get it. I just don't get it. I'm only 28 years old! I don't smoke. . . ."

"And that's precisely why you have every reason to think it's nothing serious. Think back, Johnny. You have had no other symptoms?"

Gage thought, and ended up shaking his head again. "No, I've been feeling really good."

"No fatigue, weakness?" Another head-shake. "How's your appetite been?"

That actually elicited a slight embarrassed grin. "Normal, for me," Johnny said.

"No chest pain, discomfort of any kind, malaise. Nothing."

The paramedic just kept shaking his head through the questioning. "Nothing, Doc. Just the cough." As if on cue, he coughed again.

"You haven't coughed up any blood?"

"NO!" Now Johnny was getting annoyed. "I keep telling you. I feel fine. That's why I don't get it."
"We'll get it figured out, John, I promise."

"So I can just leave now?"

"Don't see why not," the doctor allowed. "I'll call you tomorrow with the results of these tests, and I'll let you know if Dr. Miller wants to see you. I imagine he will." Brackett patted his paramedic on the thigh paternally before he left. "Try not to worry," he said on his way out.

"Easy for him to say," John mumbled as the door closed, but Dixie heard him.

"I'm going to go call Roy," she said.

"NO!" Johnny jumped off the table, still buttoning his shirt. "Don't, Dix, please. I don’t want him to know. I don't want anyone to know. Not yet, anyway. Not till I know what to tell them."

"Are you sure, Johnny? Roy's your friend. He'll want to know; he'll want to help."

"I... I'll tell him. But it's too soon. Let me get used to the idea first. Promise me, Dix, that you won't tell anyone."

The nurse looked at Johnny for a long moment. "Okay, if that's what you want. But I think you are making a mistake."

"No I'm not." John pulled off the cotton ball that Dix had taped into place over the site where she'd drawn blood, and tossed it in the trash before escaping the confines of the small room.

Once he was safely outside the building, Gage collapsed against the wall and took huge gulping breaths of air. What the hell was going on? How did this happen? He ran both hands through his hair before bending over and resting his hands on his knees, still trying to breathe deeply and calm himself. He didn't even hear the ambulance and squad back into place in front of him until the voice of Charlie Peters, one of the paramedics on Squad 8, was talking to him.

"Whatsamatter, Gage? Can't get enough of this place when you're on duty, you gotta visit on your day off?" His tone was teasing.

Johnny looked up blankly and started to walk toward his car without a word.

"What's with him?" the paramedic asked.

Dixie, outside to supervise the transfer of 8's patient into the hospital, watched her friend depart, with a concerned frown and a shake of her head. But she kept her word, and didn't say a thing.
"Treatment two, boys," she instructed the paramedics, stealing one last glance toward Gage as she went back through the ER doors.

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John actually made the turn for home before he remembered the sun porch and Roy. He pulled over and slammed his fists on the steering wheel in frustration. The last thing he wanted to do was see Roy, or anyone, right now. He just wanted to go home, pull the blinds closed, and sit in the dark to contemplate what he'd just learned.

But Roy knew Johnny had gone to the hospital after their shift; knew Brackett had insisted on checking him out. If he didn't show up at the DeSoto's, if he went home and called with some lame excuse, Roy would know something was up.
So what was he gonna do?

It didn’t take long to decide. He realized quickly enough that he couldn’t keep this from Roy. From the other guys, sure, until he knew more. But Roy? No way. He had to tell him, and tell him now. But if he played it right, he could probably downplay it; not worry them too much.

He turned the Rover around, and headed to his friend's house. While he drove, he psyched himself up as best he could, and forced a positive outlook on himself for when he told his partner the news. By the time he was ringing their bell, he had a phony smile plastered on his face.

"Hey, Jo," he greeted Roy's wife as he swept into the living room after she'd opened the door. "Sorry I'm late. Hope Roy left something for me to do!"

"Are you kidding?" the woman asked with a laugh, "he's barely got the windows taped off. Roy said you had to go to the doctor, Johnny; are you okay?"

"Umm, well, actually, I need to," he stopped speaking as Joanne suddenly raced into the kitchen.

"DAMN!" she shouted. "ROY! It’s the dishwasher again!"

John stood in the middle of the living room and watched his partner come in from the sun porch, wiping paint off his hands. "Hey, Johnny," he greeted as he passed. He entered the kitchen, and in short order Joanne came back in and ran upstairs.

In a minute she came back down, carrying her purse, and sporting a little lipstick. "I have to run. I have a conference at school about Chris. He’s been getting in trouble again, fighting with that Perkins boy."

Johnny watched her go, his resolve to tell his friends the news seeming to chase her out the door.

A moment later Roy came into the living room. "Something gets stuck in the dishwasher, and it overflows. We really need to get it fixed, but," he shrugged, "it’s not in this month’s budget. Maybe next month. Did Joanne leave?"

Johnny glanced back toward the front door. "Uhh, yeah, just now." He’d witnessed these types of domestic scenes countless times at the DeSoto’s. But he’d never really paid attention before, never noticed that the daily life of a family was filled with all sorts of stresses and problems. What right did he have to add to them?

"What did Doctor Brackett say?" Roy asked.

Here it was. Decision time. What was he going to say?

"Nuthin. I’m fine. Just some irritation." He’d done it. He’d lied. And it hadn’t even been all that difficult.

"That's all?"

"Yup." Johnny shed his coat and dropped it on a chair. "Let's get to work."

Johnny was indulging in precisely what he'd wanted to do the day before: sitting in his darkened apartment and brooding. After his last-second impulse not to tell Roy, being there yesterday had been pure torture. Roy had tried to start conversations: about work, about the Dodgers, about all sorts of...
stuff. But Gage couldn’t get into it, and his mood had progressively deteriorated as the day went on. He’d responded to his friend’s questions, and then let the threads of conversation die as quickly as he could. Finally Roy had given up. Even the color Joanne had chosen for the small room—a light but cheerful yellow—had depressed him.

Not until the kids had gotten home from school had his mood actually brightened a bit—it was impossible to stay somber around them. And seeing them all together, happy and content, laughing at the dinner table while teasing Jennifer about the Bay City Rollers posters that had recently started sprouting up on her walls, had all served to reinforce John’s feeling that this wasn’t the time to say anything. But his decision had been cemented when the dinner conversation turned serious, and Roy had a heart-to-heart with his son about the boy’s problems with the playground bully at school.

“You’ve got to learn how to control yourself, Chris,” the father had counseled. “You can’t just go off half-cocked whenever something or someone is bothering you. Try to take care of it reasonably, sensibly. Don’t make a bigger deal out of something than it has to be.”

Sitting there listening, Johnny had felt as if Roy was speaking to him. He became convinced that he shouldn’t make a big deal out of this for his friends. Not unless or until he absolutely had to. He’d left shortly after dinner, and had been sitting in his darkened living room ever since.

He jumped when the ringing of the phone broke into the quiet, but he answered on the first ring. He knew it could have been anyone, really—even Roy. But he thought it would be Brackett, and he was right.

“How are you doing, Johnny?” was the man’s first question.

“What did you find out?” was the paramedic’s response.

Kel sighed slightly. “Nothing, John. All the cultures and tests we took came back negative.”

“Is that good?”

“To a degree, yes. It’s an indication that whatever it is, it’s still localized to the lung.”

“But it doesn’t tell you what it is.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

It was Johnny’s turn to sigh. “So what do we do?”

“Well, I showed your x-rays to Dr. Miller, as I said I would, and he does want to see you. When do you work next?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Okay, then, I’ll arrange for you to see him first thing day after tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to. . . should I. . . .” Johnny wasn’t sure what he was trying to say. “I can call out if I have to,” he finally blurted out.

“There’s no need for that,” the doctor promised. “Not unless you want to. If you feel you’re too upset to work, then call out, and I’ll make the appointment for tomorrow. Dr. Miller will fit you in whenever, as a favor to me. It’s up to you.”

John thought for a minute. His nerves were frayed, he could think of nothing else, he hadn’t slept; he
was a nervous wreck, there was no doubt about that. He wanted to find out as soon as possible . . . and at the same time, he didn’t.

But he didn’t want to arouse suspicion at work, either. And it was this fact that prompted his decision. “No if it can wait, I want to go to work.”

“It can wait.”

Gage ran his hand through his hair. “Okay, thanks Doc.” Even he could hear the tremor in his voice, and he hated it.

“Are you going to be okay?” Brackett asked his patient.

“Yeah,” the paramedic promised. “Sure.” He didn’t sound convincing.

“I want you to stay positive, Johnny. There’s no cause for alarm yet.”

“Sure there is. I’ll see you tomorrow.” And with that Johnny hung up on the man. He wasn’t mad at Brackett for the silly platitudes; he knew he was only trying to help. But it didn’t. He knew there was cause for alarm—plenty of cause. He didn’t need a doctor to tell him that; and a doctor telling him there was no cause was just plain lying.

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Kel replaced the phone with a heavy sigh.

“What’d Johnny say?” Dixie asked. She'd been listening in on the doctor’s end of the conversation.

“It wasn’t so much what he said, but how he said it. I’m worried about him.”

“I am, too,” the nurse agreed. “Did you know he made me promise not to say anything to Roy?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Dix nodded. “He said he didn’t want anyone to know—yet, anyway. You haven’t told anyone, have you?”

Brackett shook his head. “I can’t do that, Dix. You know that.”

“I know, but Johnny’s family. I thought maybe you’d mentioned it to Joe or Mike.”

“I haven’t.”

“Well he was pretty adamant. He doesn’t want anyone to know. I think it’s a mistake, but what can we do?”

“We can abide by his wishes,” Brackett said.

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Gage arrived for work early. He’d spent most of the night trying to decide if it was better to get to the station before his shiftmates, or late, with only seconds to spare. He couldn’t decide which would make it less likely for his friends to suspect something was wrong, or ask a question he didn’t know how to answer. In the end it was the fact that he was wide awake with no chance of sleep at 4:30 in the morning that prompted him to be early.
He was completely dressed half an hour before shift-change, but he didn’t leave the locker room. He just sat there, staring blankly into the recesses of his locker. He didn’t want to go into the day room—that would mean being friendly and jovial with the guys from C shift. It was going to be hard enough to act normal around his own shift; he wasn’t sure he’d have the energy to do it with these guys, too.

“Wow, stop the presses, Gage is early!” Johnny looked up to see Harry Martin, C-Shift’s engineer, come in.

“I’m not always late,” John protested with a faint smile.

“No, but you’re never early!” Martin washed his hands and turned to leave. “Come on into the day room, Johnny. Ramirez just made a new pot of coffee, and I don’t know what he puts in there, but it’s good!”

Johnny smiled, then turned back to his locker. “In a minute,” he said, starting to rummage around in the mess on the locker’s floor. “I’m looking for something.” Another lie.

“Oh, but I’m not saving you any!”

The man left, and John collapsed with relief. Good God, how was he going to do this? How was he going to get through a 24-hour shift pretending nothing was wrong when EVERYTHING was wrong?

He just was, he decided after a minute. He had no other choice. He sat up straight, and started to clean his locker. If he was busy, maybe people would leave him alone. Wouldn’t get suspicious.

It was just his luck that Chet was the first of his shift to arrive.

“What happened, Gage, get thrown out of your apartment?” Johnny just shot the man a sour look in response. “Oooh, someone got up on the wrong side of the bed!” Kelly chided.

“Chet,” Gage warned, “not today. Please.”

“Geez,” the fireman muttered, but he did shut up, much to John’s relief. Mike and Roy arrived, and seemed content with nothing more than an exchange of greetings. But then Chet spoke up again.

“Watch out for Gage today, Roy,” he teased. “I think he got dumped again or something.”

Before he knew what he was doing, or could stop himself, John had shot to his feet. “Chet, you don’t know what you are talking about. I asked you once already. Please, please leave me alone today.” He was practically shouting, and definitely begging. He didn’t care.

He stepped over the bench, and shoved the locker room door open, practically smacking a startled Captain Stanley in the face. He gave his boss an apologetic look as he passed, and fled into the apparatus bay.

Stanley entered the room, all the while looking back in his fleeing paramedic’s direction. “What was that all about?” he asked. He looked right at Chet.

“Don’t look at me!” Chet protested, the picture of innocence. “I didn’t do anything!”

“But you said something,” Stoker said quietly.

“Oh?” the captain asked. “What was that?”

“Nothing, Cap, honest! I was just teasing him a little about being so early. I didn’t do anything!”
The captain turned his attention to his other paramedic. “Any idea what’s eating your partner, Roy?”

“Nope, Cap. He hasn’t said anything to me. I’ll talk to him, though.”

“Good,” Hank said. “Let me know if there’s a problem.” He turned his attention toward his erstwhile fireman. “And Chet, cut Johnny some slack today, got it?”

“Sure Cap.”

Roy found Johnny in the parking lot, sitting on the bumper of his Rover. He wandered over, and when Gage didn’t say anything, he sat down next to him.

“What was that in the locker room?” he asked simply.

Johnny shook his head. He was disgusted with himself. This was exactly what he’d wanted to avoid. Exactly what he’d promised himself he wouldn’t do. He promised himself he’d act normal, and that had been anything but normal.

“I dunno. Sometimes he’s just too much, you know?” He couldn’t even look at Roy.

“I know. But you never let him get under your skin.”

Johnny shrugged. “Guess I do now,” he said simply.

“Is there something you want to talk about?”

Gage let his body slump against the grill of his car and sighed. Was there ever.

“No,” he finally said. “I’m fine. Chet’s probably right. I just got up on the wrong side of the bed.” He stood and forced a grin. “Come on, I’m on time for a change--I don’t want to still miss roll call!”

After his outburst in the locker room, the guys did leave Johnny alone. And for his part, the paramedic kept to himself pretty much, doing his chores quickly and efficiently, and staying out of the typical station banter. In fact, he spent most of his free time lying on his bunk in the dorm, staring at the ceiling.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to keep this up indefinitely. It was torture for him, and not too pleasant for his friends, either, he was sure. But hopefully it would only be today. Hopefully he’d have some sort of answers after his appointment with the lung guy tomorrow.

“There you are, pal.”

John looked up to find his captain walking toward him. The man took a seat on Roy’s bunk.

“You okay?”

Man, he hated that question. “Yeah, Cap. I just have a lot on my mind, that’s all.” He wasn’t lying about that, anyway.

“Anything I can help you with?”

Gage shook his head. “Nah. Not yet anyway. I’ll be okay.”
The captain clapped his hands together in a familiar nervous habit. “Glad to hear it. But when I can help, you be sure to find me, okay?” John nodded. “And in the mean time, how’s about trying to lighten up around the guys? You’re kinda bringing everyone down with you.”

The paramedic forced yet another smile. “Sure Cap, sorry. I’ll try.”

As the man left, John sighed. He’d try, but there was no way in hell.

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It took all morning, but shortly before lunch the paramedics were called out on their first run of the day, necessitating a follow up to the hospital. John let Roy go in the ambulance, and actually took his time following in the squad.

Suddenly that place, Rampart, seemed sinister to him. Nothing good happened in there. It was the place you went and got bad news. Where out of nowhere everything changed in a split second. And it was the place where the two people who knew would be waiting for him. And he didn’t want to face them. Didn’t know if he could face them, especially in front of Roy.

But he didn’t have a choice, so he parked the squad and trudged through the doors. Roy was waiting at the desk with Dixie. The nurse lifted her head to watch his approach, a warm smile on her face.

“Hi Johnny. Nice to see you.”

The greeting seemed a bit off to John, but the tone was normal, and Roy seemed none the wiser, so he relaxed a tiny bit. “Hey, Dix,” he greeted.

“What took you so long?” his partner asked.

“Got stuck behind a garbage truck for five blocks, would you believe it?” As soon as the tall tale left his lips Johnny wanted to groan in dismay. No, he wouldn’t believe it. No one should believe it. It was ridiculous.

But Roy said nothing. Whether he bought it, or knew it was nonsense and chose not to say anything, Gage had no way of knowing.

“Johnny. Can I talk to you for a second?”

The sound of Kelly Brackett’s voice behind him sent a chill of alarm up John’s spine. He looked up quickly, and his eyes instantly met Dixie’s. Her expression was questioning, and she nodded slightly toward Roy, who was still unaware that something was amiss. She was asking if Roy knew. He shook his head slightly, urgently, and then spun around, putting his back to his partner in a move of self-preservation. “Yeah, sure, Doc. What’s up?” He tried to make his voice as casual as possible.

Brackett was standing by the door to treatment room one. He pushed it open and held it before he spoke. “Calm down, Johnny. Just tell Roy I wanted to check on your cough. Dixie is probably telling him that right now. How is it, by the way?”

Shit. Shit shit shit. Damn him. What was he gonna do now? How would he explain this to Roy? And what if Roy followed? He couldn’t risk that; couldn’t look at his partner for fear Roy would interpret that as an invitation. So he just walked toward the doctor and went into the room.

“Doc!!” he implored as soon as the door was closed behind them.

“Calm down, Johnny. Just tell Roy I wanted to check on your cough. Dixie is probably telling him that right now. How is it, by the way?”
“It’s better, actually. I think. To be honest, I haven’t been paying too much attention to it. Kinda had other things on my mind.”

The doctor nodded appreciatively. “I bet,” he said. Then he reached out and pushed John’s sleeve up. “I really just wanted to get a look at your TB test.” He inspected the spot for just a second. “No reaction.”

“No. That’s good, right?”

“It eliminates one possibility,” the doctor said.

“Which is bad.”

“You want TB?” Kel asked incredulously.

John shrugged. “At least I’d know what it is, and what to do about it,” he admitted with a hint of bitterness in his tone. He took a step toward the door. “That it?”

“That’s it.” Johnny had his hand on the door and was about to pull it open when the doctor suddenly started to speak again.

“John, I think you should tell Roy,” he blurted out. “There’s no way you can hide this from him. Not for long, anyway.” The paramedic let go of the handle and closed his eyes wearily. “And,” the doctor continued, “no one should go through something like this alone.”

Gage didn’t turn to face the physician. “I appreciate your concern, Doc, I do. But I’ll be okay. I don’t want to drag him into this; he has enough on his plate with his family and stuff. Maybe he will have to know eventually. If so, I’ll tell him—when the time’s right. But it’s not right. Not now, anyway.” At that he did lock eyes with Kel. “And you can’t say anything,” he reminded him.

“No, I can’t.” Brackett admitted. “And I won’t, you have my word. But I’ll go on record as saying I think you’re making a mistake.”

Johnny grinned dispiritedly. “Wouldn’t be my first one. I gotta go.” He actually did start to pull the door open, and had to stop when, again, Brackett spoke.

“What do you want me to try and arrange to be with you tomorrow morning for your appointment with Dr. Miller?”

The door closed. Johnny didn’t know what to make of this offer. On the one hand it was damn nice of the doctor. On the other, it was alarming—what did Brackett expect John to learn the next day, if he was so adamant that the paramedic shouldn’t be alone?

Whatever it was, Gage knew he didn’t want to hear it in front of anyone. Brackett would find out soon enough—he was his doctor, after all. He didn’t need to watch John getting the bad news, too.

Johnny didn’t need anyone seeing that.

“Thanks, Doc, but no,” he said emphatically. “I’ll be okay.”

He pulled the door open quickly and fled before Brackett had a chance to catch him again.

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Kel approached the nurse’s station with a shake of his head.
“How’d it go?” Dix asked.

“It didn’t,” the doctor admitted. “He won’t tell Roy. Won’t tell anyone. I ended up offering to go with him tomorrow to see Dr. Miller.”

“What did he say?”

Brackett snorted incredulously. “What do you think he said? He said no.”

Dixie slammed the charts in her hand down in frustration. “It’s not right, Kel. It’s just not right.”

“No, probably not. But that’s the way he wants it.”

“I don’t just mean that part. The whole thing isn’t right. Johnny’s so young and vital. This shouldn’t be happening to him. He’s never smoked a cigarette in his life, I bet.”

Brackett nodded. “Probably not. But his profession puts him at risk, Dix. Who knows what sorts of things he’s breathed in over the years. Not to mention asbestos exposure—we’re only just beginning to understand the dangers of that stuff. And he’s been exposed to radiation, too. Don’t forget that.”

The nurse frowned and shook her head. “I don’t care about that. It may well explain how it could be happening to him. But it still doesn’t make it right.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Kel agreed. “But when is it? Besides, you’re getting ahead of yourself here. We don’t know anything yet, really.”

“I guess not. But whatever it is, it can’t be good.” Dixie thought for a minute, then pulled out the nursing schedule. “Maybe Betty can stay a little late,” she mumbled to herself.

“What are you doing, Dix?”

“Trying to figure out how I can be free tomorrow morning. Johnny doesn’t want us to tell anyone, so we won’t. But that doesn’t mean he has to go through this by himself.”

Brackett put his hand on top of the schedule, covering it. “No, Dix, don’t. Leave him alone. If he wanted someone to be with him, he’d make arrangements for it. Don’t force him.”

Dixie’s brow furrowed into a deep scowl. “You men and your stupid pride,” she declared.

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Roy lay in bed and listened to his partner toss and turn. Half a dozen times he wanted to say something, to ask his partner if he was all right. But he’d already asked, more than once, and Johnny had put him off. He just had to accept that whatever it was, Gage just wasn't ready to tell him.

When John finally rose, put on his bunker pants, and left the dorm, Roy followed. He found him out back again, leaning against the wall of the station, and staring up at the sky.

Roy stood and watched his friend silently for a long moment. He wanted to see what Johnny would do; see if he would say anything. But he didn’t—he didn’t even seem to be aware of Roy's presence.

"You know," DeSoto started quietly. He waited for a reaction from John, and continued when he noticed the man glance toward him silently. "You're going to tell me eventually. Why not just get it out of the way now?"

John turned his gaze from the sky to his partner. "I would, Roy, but I just can't. I'm sorry."
"I don't think I've ever seen you this upset before."

Gage smiled, but Roy could tell that it wasn't genuine. It didn't reach his eyes. "I'll be okay," he told his friend. "Always am."

"Is it a girl, Johnny?"

A mirthless laugh was Roy's answer. "I wish," the troubled man said. "I wish that's all it was."

Roy was getting more anxious all the time, and an uneasiness settled into his gut. This wasn't the way Johnny normally reacted to problems. Whatever it was, Roy was more convinced than ever that it was big. But big by whose standards? He doubted his were the same as his partner's.

"So tell me what it is, Johnny," he implored. "What's the matter?"

Gage stood up away from the wall. "That's the whole problem, Roy. I don't know. I don't know what's the matter."

He turned and went back inside, leaving Roy more confused than ever.

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Gage was pacing. But he couldn't help himself. Dr. Miller had examined him, and sent him for still more x-rays, and now he was told to wait. The exam room was tiny--so small that John could cover the width in two paces. But he shortened his gait in order to make it three.

He was startled by a knock on the door. "Yeah?" he asked.

An attractive young woman popped her head in. "Oh, good, you're already dressed. Dr. Miller would like to see you in his office."

Johnny wiped his sweaty palms on the thighs of his jeans, and followed the woman down the hall.

The doctor's office was ten times the size of the other room, with a large window looking over the parking lot. It was furnished rather sparsely, though with nice stuff. But there were no touches: nothing to personalize the place, to identify it as belonging to someone specific. This didn't really surprise the paramedic, given the first impression he'd gotten of the guy while he'd performed his examination.

The other thing the office was, was vacant. "He'll be right in," the girl promised before she left him.

John went to the window and looked down. He found his car, just because he could, then turned his back to the view. It was at that moment that the door opened, and Dr. Miller entered.

"Have a seat, Mr. Gage," the man said.

Johnny rankled at the physician's no-nonsense demeanor, but did as asked. He faced the doctor, but said nothing as the man took a seat behind his desk. John couldn't help thinking that Dr. Brackett, gruff as he could be, would have sat closer--on the edge of his desk, maybe--in order to deliver bad news.

"There's no doubt there's a lesion on the upper lobe of your right lung," the man stated simply.

Johnny swallowed hard and remained mute. Here we go.

"I'd estimate it to be about two centimeters." The doctor held up his hand and showed the size
between two fingers. "That's fairly sizable, but it doesn't allow us to rule out anything based on size."

Johnny nodded.

"Based on the x-ray images themselves, I also cannot rule anything out. These types of masses are virtually impossible to properly diagnose without a biopsy."

Biopsy.

John's mouth was dry, and he suddenly felt just the slightest bit lightheaded. "Oh . . . okay," he managed to sputter. "How do you do that?"

“I wanted the additional x-rays to try and determine if I could reach the lesion with a bronchoscope. I believe I can. You know about bronchoscopy?"

Yes, dammit, he knew about it. But that wasn’t fair. He didn’t want this guy to get out of explaining stuff just because Johnny had some medical training. “A little,” he decided to say. “I’ve seen one. But I don’t know how it works.”

Dr. Miller proceeded to explain the procedure with all the tact and sensitivity of a medical textbook. John followed along, cringing at the notion of having anesthetic sprayed down his throat, of being sedated, of having a tube stuck into his lungs.

“As for obtaining the biopsy sample, we can either flush the area with saline and recollect it, testing what we collect for malignant cells; we can use a brush to remove some cells from the mass, or we can snip out a tiny sample to test for malignancy.”

Mass, lesion, tumor, biopsy, malignancy. It was suddenly clear that there was one word absolutely no one had used.

“Doc, do you think I have cancer?” Johnny blurted out. It was a blunt question, but this was a blunt guy. And Johnny needed to know--needed to hear someone say it.

“You may, yes.”

John left the office sure that his world had just ended.

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“Oh, Jesus, Carl, you said WHAT?” Kel Brackett was raving at his colleague by now. But the pulmonologist remained maddeningly composed, sitting behind his desk.

“He asked a straight question. I gave him a straight answer.”

“Oh bullshit! You gave him HALF of a straight answer.”

“I did not tell him he had cancer.”

Kel snorted in disgust. “You may as well have. I know John Gage; know him well. And I think I know exactly how he’s reacting to the news you gave him, the way you gave it to him.”

“Look, Kel,” Miller said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his desk--his only indication that he might be getting upset, “I deal with cancer patients on a daily basis. It is my experience that the truth is the way to go. Be straight with them.”

“But you’re forgetting one important thing,” the ER physician spat out. “Johnny is NOT a cancer
patient. Not yet, anyway. Don’t treat him like one until you know for sure. There’s a chance that lesion
is benign, and you pretty much pulled that hope right out from underneath him.”

Dr. Miller sat back in his chair. “Fair enough. I’ll be more careful next time.”

Brackett settled down as well. “I appreciate that, Carl. I just hope it’s not too late.”

Johnny was tying his shoes when Roy entered the locker room. He looked up, but didn’t say anything.

"I tried calling you yesterday. A couple of times. Where were you?"

John knew this. He’d listened to the rings, and then the messages his friends had left. Roy, twice. Dixie, once. Brackett, three times. Even Chet had called. His phone had rung all day; he’d never answered it.

"Out."

“Ohhhkayyy,” Roy drew out, making no effort to hide his annoyance.

Johnny sighed. He was doing it again, and he’d sworn that he wouldn’t. He’d promised himself that it had been the not knowing that was responsible for his foul mood. Now he knew, more or less. It was what it was; there was no point in taking it out on his friends.

“Sorry,” he told his partner. “I went to the beach.” He shook his head. He didn’t understand why he was even lying about stuff he didn’t have to now. He hated it. Hated himself for doing it. But he kept at it. Soon he wouldn’t be able to tell the lies from the truth any more.

They didn’t even get roll call started before they got their first call. Car over the cliff. The squad and engine rolled, arriving quickly at the scene. It wasn’t exactly a cliff; more like a very steep hill. Roy went to get the safety belts and lines, and was shocked to see his partner sliding down the slope with no protective equipment at all.

Cap ran to the edge of the hill. “Gage, what the HELL are you doing?” he shouted down.

Gage ignored the admonishment. “We got two victims, Cap,” he shouted up. “We’re gonna need two stokes.”

The captain looked toward his other paramedic. Roy had put on his belt, and was securing lines to the bumper of the engine. “Go on down, Roy, and bring that partner of yours his belt.”

DeSoto did go down, and handed the belt to John. “Better put that on. Cap’s really frosted at you.”

Johnny took the belt with a shrug. “The man looks like he has a broken femur. The woman, possible concussion and broken arm.”

With the help of Marco and Chet, the two victims were soon topside and loaded into the ambulance. Again, Johnny let Roy ride in. He was packing away their equipment when Cap came up to him.

“What was that, John? You know better.”

Again, Johnny shrugged. “It wasn’t that steep,” he offered as explanation.

Cap shook his head and walked away.
Gage backed the squad into place at Rampart, and for a second he seriously considered staying in the vehicle until Roy came back out. There was no rule that said he had to go in there; that he had to face Brackett and Dix.

Because, of course, surely they knew by now.

Nevertheless, Johnny entered the hospital. Dixie was at her desk, and Roy was nowhere to be seen. The nurse looked up and smiled at him. It was a sympathetic smile, and Johnny instantly hated it. He didn’t greet her.

“Where’s Roy?”

“He’s in the lounge, waiting for you. I convinced him to go sit down while he waited so you could talk to Kel. He’s waiting for you in his office.”

“I don’t need to talk to him,” John protested.

Dix came around the desk and hooked her arm around his. “Oh yes you do,” she answered, and delivered him to the office.

“Sit down, Johnny.”

“I’ll stand.” John leaned against the wall next to the door, and crossed his arms on his chest. Brackett got up from behind his desk and came around, leaning back against it, in front of his patient. Johnny couldn’t help but grin, just a little. It was exactly how he’d predicted this doctor would behave.

“Dr. Miller told me what he told you.”

Johnny nodded.

“And I’m telling you he was way out of line.”

Johnny arched an eyebrow. “How’s that?”

“There is a good chance this lesion is benign. I don’t think he made that clear to you.”

“No, no he didn’t. And I bet he didn’t for good reason,” Gage countered.

Brackett shook his head and sighed. “I knew you’d react this way.”

John snorted with derisive laughter. “And what way is that?”

“I get the feeling that you are already writing your epitaph here. But please, Johnny, just wait until after your bronchoscopy. Give yourself a chance. You don’t know if you have a malignancy yet.”

Johnny had had enough. “A malignancy? What is WRONG with you people? How come no one says the word? Why won’t you say it? Because saying it might somehow be acknowledging the truth? Well let me spare you the trouble.” He took a deep breath, squared himself, and looked his doctor in the eye.

“I have cancer.”

He turned and grabbed the door handle, and had pulled it open about six inches when it was shoved closed with an incredible force, ripping the handle from John’s grip. He turned angrily to find himself
face-to-face with Dr. Brackett.

“You might have cancer. But more importantly, you might NOT. And that’s what I don’t want you to lose sight of.”

“That’s just semantics, Doc,” Johnny said. He pulled the door open again, and was relieved when the doctor let him go.

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Roy pulled up to the stoplight and eased to a halt. He looked over at his partner, and found him with his elbow on the windowsill, resting his chin in his hand and staring out the side window. But not staring at anything; just staring.

“You okay, Johnny?” It was only the tenth time he’d asked; or at least it felt that way.

Gage took his arm down and looked at his friend. He looked at him for a long moment. “Roy,” he started quietly.

DeSoto shifted in anticipation. Finally, finally, he was going to find out what was happening with his partner.

“You ever think about,” at that moment a car horn coming from behind startled them both. The light had turned green.

Roy hit the gas, and they started to move. “Think about what?” he asked as casually as he could.

When John didn’t answer immediately, Roy glanced over. Gage had resumed his earlier posture, and was staring outside again. The moment was gone.

“What?” he asked again.

“Nothing, never mind.”

The older paramedic sighed in frustration. But they were almost back at the station anyway. “This conversation isn’t over, Johnny,” he promised.

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It was the worst kind of fire: one of those old wooden buildings that had been converted into several apartments. You didn’t know where one unit began or the next one ended, and there were any number of odd turns and small places to get lost. Add to that the heat and the dense smoke, and Roy and Johnny were in a hellhole.

They’d swept the fourth floor, which had taken far longer than they’d anticipated, and were making their way, door to door, through the third when their HT squawked to life. Roy answered, put the radio up to his ear and listened, then responded.

When he turned around, he was surprised that Johnny wasn’t standing next to him, where he should have been. But after a second he appeared through the door they’d been standing next to. He’d obviously decided to check it out while Roy was talking to Cap.

“We’re being pulled out!” he shouted at his partner. “Cap says we’ve got a patient! And besides, we’re almost out of air!”

Johnny nodded. Roy turned and headed toward the stairwell. Johnny clapped him once on the back,
an indication that he was right behind.

As they walked they hit a narrow hallway that they hadn’t checked. Johnny paused, thought for half a second about stopping Roy, but didn’t. He left his partner, and went to check the hallway alone.

As Roy reached the bottom of the stairs the first alarm on his air tank went off. He turned to comment to his partner about their perfect timing, but he wasn’t there. The paramedic took the stairs three at a time up to the second floor, but John was nowhere to be seen. Roy knew that if he kept going up, he’d run out of air and they’d end up needing to rescue both of them. So he raced out of the building.

“CAP!” he screamed as soon as he’d ripped the air mask off his face. “Johnny’s still in there!”

“What?” the incredulous captain asked.

“He was right behind me. I got to the bottom of the stairs and he wasn’t there. I went back up to the second floor landing, but he wasn’t there, either. He must still be up on the third floor.”

“You sure he got my order to pull out?”

“I’m sure, Cap. He started to follow me out. I’m sure of it.”

“Well then what the hell is he doing?”

Roy was starting to replace his air tank. “I dunno, Cap. I want to go back in after him.”

“No, Roy, you’re needed out here. Chet’s got something in his eye, and it looks like Nestor from 45s may have a sprained ankle. I’ll send someone in.” He turned and shouted. “MARCO!”

The second alarm on his tank went off, signaling that he was out of air, and John knew he had to get out now. He raced back to the stairs, his ability to remember floor plans by feel serving him well. He couldn’t breathe, there was no air, but he knew that he didn’t want to remove his mask and breathe in the smoke, either. So he held his breath, and raced down the stairs.

By the time he reached the bottom his lungs were screaming for oxygen, and he knew he was about to pass out. Desperation forced him to yank the mask from his face, and he was greeted with a lungful of acrid smoke instead of the fresh air he craved. He stumbled forward, found the door with his hands, and literally fell through it.

Much to his shock, hands caught him. “I GOT HIM!” a voice screamed. It was Marco, he thought.

“Come on, John, I gotcha,” the voice told him. He still couldn’t breathe, couldn’t get his lungs full of air, but he was able to stumble along with his friend.

“Put him down here.” It was Roy.

Then he was sitting. Hands were removing his SCBA and turnout coat. An oxygen mask, a blessed oxygen mask, was fitted around his face and set to full blast. He gulped the air as quickly as he could.

“Calm down, Johnny. You’re okay.” Roy again.

By the time his partner was fitting the BP cuff around his arm, his head had pretty much cleared. He tried to push the cuff away. “I’m okay, Roy. I’m okay.”
“I know,” Roy allowed. But he inflated it anyway, and Johnny sighed.

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“OWWWWW! DIX!” Johnny protested from under his oxygen mask.

“Hold still,” the nurse admonished. She held his wrist in her vice-like grip and hit her mark, withdrawing the ordered arterial blood. She pulled the needle and quickly covered the spot with gauze, then picked up Johnny’s other hand, and put it over the bandage. “Hold pressure on that,” she instructed.

“I want to repeat the arterial blood gasses in an hour,” Brackett instructed.

“I have to stay?”

“For a little while.”

Kel made eye contact with Dixie, and she immediately understood what he was asking. “Come on, Roy,” she said cheerily, “no sense in you standing around in here. I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”

She led the other paramedic out the door, and the second it closed Brackett turned to face Gage. “What the hell were you doing, trying to kill yourself?”

John was taken aback. Normally that question was rhetorical, and an exaggeration. But it didn’t look or sound like the doctor was joking.

“Ahhh, geez, Doc!” he protested. “I . . . I just . . .” He had to pause. What HAD he been doing? Why HAD he stayed in the building?

He honestly didn’t know.

“I just lost track of time in there,” he lied. “That’s all. Honest.”

“Well, I put a call in to Dr. Miller. What you may have done is caused your bronchoscopy to be postponed. Is that what you wanted to do? Prolong this? Because you may have.”

The phone rang, and Johnny listened as one doctor described his bonehead move to another.

Had he? Had he been trying to hurt himself, without even realizing it? No, he wouldn’t even let himself consider it.

Brackett ended the call and came over to John. He removed the oxygen. “Miller thinks it will be okay, since you didn’t take in much smoke. He says if your repeat ABG on room air is fine, he’ll go ahead as planned tomorrow.”

John nodded.

“So you just relax here, and we’ll be back in an hour.”

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“I don’t know what’s wrong with him, Dixie,” Roy said into his coffee cup, not even trying to hide the worry from his voice. “He won’t talk to me, and now this is twice today that he’s been really reckless at work.” He looked up at the nurse. “But he won’t tell me anything.”

Dix’s heart broke for the man in front of her, and she almost--almost--told him what was happening.
As far as she was concerned, John was being a fool. And it just wasn’t fair to Roy to keep him in the
dark like this.

But she couldn’t tell him, and she knew it.

“Keep at him, Roy,” she encouraged. “Don’t give up on him. Make him tell you if you have to.” The
nurse suddenly realized her tone might reveal that she knew something, so she hastily added,
“whatever it is, get it out of him.”

Johnny slid slowly into the seat of the squad. He could feel Roy’s concerned gaze on his back, so he
repessed the urge to cough, and waited until his partner had closed his door and was walking around
the back of the truck to rub his sore wrists. He laid his head back wearily. He was so damn tired.

He flinched when Roy pulled his door shut, and he waited for the inevitable start of the engine, but it
didn’t come.

“You have to tell me what’s going on, Johnny,” he heard his partner say quietly.

John opened his eyes and looked to his left. He expected to find Roy staring at him. Expected him to
be angry, even. But he wasn’t. He was looking straight ahead, and his voice was more worried and
upset than angry. He actually sounded almost as tired as Johnny felt. Gage turned his head, and
matched Roy’s forward gaze.

“Roy,” he started quietly, “you ever think about dying?”

“What?” That wasn’t what he was expecting.

“Dying. When, how, what it’ll feel like. You know.”

“What are you talking about, Johnny?”

“I never really did before,” John continued. It was as if he was speaking to himself. “Funny, huh? A
guy doing what we do, and never thinking about biting it.”

There was an awkward pause, and Roy suddenly felt a pressing need to fill it. “I, uhhh, I don’t think
we can think about it, Johnny. If we do, we wouldn’t go to work in the morning.”

“So you never thought about it either?”

“I wouldn’t say never. With Jo and the kids, it’s crossed my mind sometimes. You know, wanting to
make sure they’re taken care of.”

Johnny nodded. “Yeah, I guess that makes it different, huh.” Of course it did. A family made all the
difference.

Roy was scrambling for a reason for this discussion. “Did something happen in that building,
Johnny? Something you’re not telling me?”

“Nah, Roy, not really. I just . . . I dunno. I guess I always just figured it would happen on the job,
that’s all.”

“Gage, how are you feeling?” Cap had to fight very hard to keep his fury in check.
“Fine.”

“Roy?”

“He checked out fine, Cap,” Roy confirmed.

“Good,” the captain spat out, “then I’d like to speak to you in my office, John. NOW.”

Johnny figured he’d be in for it, and he solemnly passed his superior, and entered the office. He wasn’t expecting the door to be slammed.

“What the HELL happened out there today?” Stanley raged. He didn’t even sit, or offer John a seat, choosing instead to stand and tower over the paramedic.

Johnny shrugged. “There was a part of the floor we didn’t check,” he said.

Hank turned his back on his paramedic in disgust, but after a second spun back. “Did I, or did I not, order you to evacuate the building?” John didn’t respond at first. “WELL?”

“Yeah, you did,” Gage admitted.

“Was there any part of that order that was unclear to you? Did Roy fail to pass it along to you?”

“No, sir,” Johnny interjected quickly. “Roy told me. It wasn’t Roy. He didn’t do anything, Cap.”

“I know that. It was you, and only you. And it was the second time today you pulled a stunt like that. Did you know I was sending Marco in after you? If you hadn’t come out when you did, I would have had to send someone in AFTER YOU! For no reason at all, other than because you screwed up!”

Johnny dropped his head and studied his shoes. He hadn’t thought about that; hadn’t considered that his actions had put others at risk. God, what was his problem? How could he do that? For a second he was tempted to tell Cap everything, as a way of explaining how he could have been so thoughtless. So selfish. So stupid.

But he just couldn’t.

“It won’t happen again,” he promised feebly.

“DAMN STRAIGHT IT WON’T!” Cap was still seething, but with that outburst, he seemed to calm a bit. He stared silently at Gage until the paramedic became uncomfortable under the scrutiny, and looked away.

“Look, John,” Cap finally said, his voice calmer. “I know something’s been eating at you lately, pal. But if whatever it is means you can’t keep your head in the game, then it makes you a liability to yourself and to the rest of us, and I want you to go home.”

It was a fair request, Gage knew. Could he keep it together? He’d been doing a shitty job of it so far. But he didn’t want to go home. He’d go insane staring at the four walls of his apartment all the time. He couldn’t do that.

“No Cap, I can stay. It won’t happen again. That’s a promise.”

Cap nodded silently. “You can go,” he said, slumping into his chair.

Johnny reached the door and turned back before he left. “I am sorry, Cap,” he said.
He was sorry about so many things.

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“How about breakfast?” Roy asked as he was putting on his shirt.

Their shift was over. On the one night Johnny had wished to be kept busy all night long, there hadn’t been a single call. Not one. He’d had nothing to do but wander the station in the middle of the night while his colleagues had slept. He didn’t sleep any more, and he couldn’t eat—food and drink being forbidden for twelve hours before his test.

But it didn’t matter. His stomach was a bundle of knots from the nerves. The thought of food made him queasy.

“Can’t. I have an appointment.”

“Oh yeah? Where?” John could tell that Roy was trying to sound casual, but he knew his partner too well. He knew what he really was doing was prying. Not that he could blame him, though, given how he’d been behaving.

“It’s not important.”

“What about tomorrow? It’s Saturday, and the kids would love to see you.”

“Can’t, I’m busy. Sorry.”

Johnny fled the room before Roy could ask another question.

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When he entered the waiting room John was surprised to find Dixie sitting there. “It’s gonna be hours, Dix,” he chided her. They’d wanted him to spend the night in the hospital, but he’d begged to be able to go home. Finally it was decided that after recovering for a few hours they’d let him go, provided someone could drive him home and get him settled. That someone proved to be Dixie, who’d immediately volunteered.

“I know,” the woman smiled, “but I’m on my lunch break.”

“At nine in the morning?”

Dix shrugged. “One of the perks of being in charge. I just wanted to pop in and see how you’re doing. You look tired, Johnny. Didn’t you get any sleep?”

Gage shrugged. “Some,” he lied.

“Bet you’re hungry, though!”

Johnny wanted to appreciate Dixie’s efforts to be chipper and upbeat, but the fact was her demeanor totally grated on his nerves. It wasn’t helping at all. “Nah, not really,” he finally answered. “Look, Dix, you don’t have to stay here with me.”

The woman smiled again. “And I can’t; I have to get back to work soon. But I will stay until they take you in and get you started, okay?”

The door opened and a nurse stuck her head out. “Mr. Gage? You can come in now,” she instructed. John knew he hadn’t answered his friend yet, so he looked at Dix and shrugged, leaving it up to her.
She followed him inside.

The nurse handed Johnny a hospital gown, and directed him to a small changing room. “We need you to strip to your underwear and put this on,” she instructed. Johnny did, and was quickly back out in the hall, where he was led into the room.

It looked almost like an operating room, complete with heart monitor and respirator and a narrow table in the middle covered in a stark white sheet. The actual scope was lying on a tray at the head of the bed.

“First we’re going to give you a shot of atropine and Demerol,” the nurse informed him. So why don’t you lie down and get comfortable.” She wasn’t unpleasant, there wasn’t anything gruff about her bedside manner, but just like the doctor she worked for, this woman was all business.

“Can’t I sit up for a while?” Johnny asked. He knew he’d have to wait for the shot to take effect, and then wait some more while the topical anesthetic that they’d spray down his throat did the same.

The nurse looked surprised, as if no one had ever made this request before. “Well, I don’t know,” she ventured.

“It’s okay,” Dix suddenly chimed in. “I’ll stay with him until you return. He won’t fall out of bed or anything.”

“Oh, okay!” the woman replied with a smile. “In that case!” She procured the hypodermic and pinched the deltoïd muscle on John’s upper arm. “This will make you drowsy,” she promised, “so you’ll probably want to lay down in a little while anyway.” She administered the injection. “You relax and we’ll be back in about 15 minutes to start an IV on you.”

The minutes passed slowly, and silently. John did get drowsy, but he steadfastly remained upright. Dixie stayed, but to her credit didn’t force any conversation. She was just there.

That is, until the doctor arrived and told her she had to go. “My shift is over at three, Johnny,” was the last thing she told him before departing. “The deal is you’ll rest here until then, and I’ll take you home. Okay?”

“Oh, okay,” Dix suddenly chimed in. “I’ll stay with him until you return. He won’t fall out of bed or anything.”

That is, until the doctor arrived and told her she had to go. “My shift is over at three, Johnny,” was the last thing she told him before departing. “The deal is you’ll rest here until then, and I’ll take you home. Okay?”

“How long had he been there?

John sat up at the edge of his bed, and had to stop to get his breath. His throat was killing him, his stomach was queasy, and he felt more than a little lightheaded. What had happened? He realized that he had very little memory of what had gone on. The last thing he really remembered was gagging on the disgusting taste of the lidocaine that had been sprayed down his throat. It was a taste that lingered in his mouth even still and he’d have loved to spit it out, but his mouth was too dry.

Where was Dixie? Where were his clothes? Where was the light switch? The questions came easily to his sleep- and medication-addled brain, but the answers were stubbornly elusive. He was just sitting there, propping himself up with his arms, trying to decide what to do, when the door opened.

He looked up, and had to squint at the bright light shining in through the door before he could make out the outline of a nurse in the doorway. “You’re awake!” she greeted him.
“Uhh,” it was the first time he’d tried to speak, and it didn’t seem to be working. He swallowed, trying to generate some saliva to soothe his throat, and was only marginally successful. “Uh huh,” he finally managed to croak out. “What time is it?” His voice was hoarse and barely more than a whisper.

The woman flipped on the overhead light as she entered, and again Johnny found himself squinting. “It’s 10:30,” she told him. “You fell fast asleep after your test, and Dr. Miller and Dr. Brackett both decided it would be best to just let you sleep. Is your throat sore?”

10:30 at night? That meant. . . . Gage did the calculation. That meant he’d probably been asleep for ten hours or more. And yet he was still exhausted.

He suddenly realized that he’d not answered the nurse’s question. “Yeah, yeah it is. Where’s,” again he had to stop and swallow before continuing. “Where’s Dixie McCall? She was gonna take me home.”

The girl laughed. “She was here, Mr. Gage. She waited until, oh, 7:30 or 8. Finally Dr. Brackett convinced her to go home. There was no waking you up!”

Johnny scrubbed his face with his hands. This was just great. Now what was he gonna do? “Where are my clothes? I need to go home.”

“Oh I don’t think so! It’s too late to release you now, and even if it wasn’t, there’s no one here to take you home. You just climb back into bed, and I’ll go and get some ice for your throat.”

She left him then, and John tried to assess his options. They were few, he realized. Rather than go back to bed, he got up and slowly made his way into the bathroom. He studied his face in the mirror; his lips were dried and cracked, and his jaw ached terribly. Nevertheless, he opened his mouth and flexed it, checking the joints, and then peered down his throat. There was no visual evidence of what he’d gone through, of what had gone down there.

“How are you feeling?” the doctor asked.

Johnny cleared his throat with a wince. “Throat hurts,” he reported as he again sat on the edge of his bed.

“That’s normal,” Kel replied, crossing his arms on his chest.

The nurse entered with a cup of ice and a pitcher of water. Gage gratefully accepted both, and the relief they brought. He could finally talk again. His voice was still a hoarse croak, but it was easier.

“How’d it go?” he asked simply. He knew Brackett would know.

“The procedure went fine, John,” Kel started. “As you can see, there were no complications or side effects, aside from perhaps a little sensitivity to the sedation.” He grinned at that, but continued; “though I suspect that had more to do with the patient than the drugs.”

“What,” John was frustrated. That wasn’t what he’d been asking. “What about the results? What’d he find?”
Brackett actually sat on the bed beside Johnny, instantly alarming him. “Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to reach the lesion. He tried for an hour, John, but couldn’t get there. He did a lavage anyway, but we don’t expect to find anything from that.”

“So what does that mean? We’re back at square one?” John couldn’t believe it. He’d gone through this for _nothing_?

“Pretty much, yes. We’re no closer to arriving at a definitive diagnosis than we were this morning.”

Gage slumped forward, and covered his face with his hands for a moment. “I don’t believe this, Doc. I felt fine a week ago. Perfect. Just a little cough, that’s all. And then out of nowhere this happens, and now I feel like crap! And you still don’t know what’s wrong?”

“Johnny,” the physician started, and John could see the man getting slightly indignant. “We’re doing the best that we can. It’s just.”

Gage stopped him with a wave of his hand. “I know, I know, Doc. I didn’t mean it. It’s just,” he paused. “I’m frustrated, that’s all. And a little . . . a little . . .

He couldn’t finish the thought. He was scared. Terrified. Petrified. Take your pick.

“I know, Johnny,” Kel confirmed. There was no need to say it out loud.

“Can I go home?”

“You could, but there’s no way to get you there. It’s already after 11, why don’t you just sleep here and I’ll drive you home in the morning.”

“I don’t want to stay!”

“Well I’m on until 7. I won’t let you call Dixie back here--she spent enough time here today; I think she made out the ER nursing schedule for the next six months while she waited for you to wake up. And we’re the only ones who know you’re even here. If you want to go now, then call Roy. I’m sure he’ll be happy to come and get you.”

Johnny scowled at his doctor. He was licked, and he knew it. “Okay,” he acquiesced, “but you’ll drive me home in the morning?”

“Be happy to.” Brackett thought the conversation was over, and stood to leave. But he was wrong.

“Doc, what comes next?”

Kel sat again. “I was talking to Carl, Dr. Miller, about that this afternoon. There’s a new type of x-ray available, called a CT scanner. UCLA has one, and Miller is a Fellow there. I want to send you over there for a needle biopsy. Here we’d use the fluoroscope to guide the needle, and we have pretty good success with it. But with this new scan, the chances of missing the tumor are greatly reduced.”

Johnny nodded. “When?”

“Whenever you’re ready, John. It’s up to you.”

“I’m working Sunday. How about Monday?”

Brackett grinned. “I’ll set it up.” He got up to leave, and remembered one more thing.
“Oh, and John? That cough that started this whole thing? Unrelated. Dr. Miller noted some minor chemical irritation of your bronchi, just like you predicted.”

When Johnny arrived at work on Sunday morning he still wasn’t sure how to explain his hoarse, scratchy voice. The soreness was much better, but he still had a pretty bad case of laryngitis.

“What happened to your voice?” a concerned Roy asked as soon as John tried to speak.

Johnny shrugged. “Don’t know. Woke up this way.”

In a flash Roy had his penlight out of his pocket. “Lemme look. Is it sore?”

Gage swatted the light away. “No, it’s not sore. I’m just a little hoarse.”

At roll call it was no different. “What happened to you?” Cap asked.

“Lost my voice.”

The captain turned his attention to Roy. “Did you take a look?”

“No one needs to take a look, Cap!” and exasperated Johnny declared. “It’s just a little laryngitis. I’ll stay off the radio, and I’ll be fine!”

“Okay pal, if you say so.”

One thing Johnny noticed was that with everyone focusing on his voice, they weren’t wondering what else was bugging him. And he had an excuse to keep to himself.

It was a blessing in disguise.

“Hey, Dixie, are there any doctors available?”

The nurse smiled until she saw the look of alarm on Gage’s face. “Sure, Roy, why?” she asked hesitantly.

“It’s Johnny. Notice how quiet he is? He woke up this morning with laryngitis. I was thinking maybe someone could take a second to look down his throat.”

John could see the reproachful look on the nurse’s face. “Do you have a sore throat, Johnny?” she asked. Her voice oozed false concern.

“No, I don’t,” the paramedic croaked out, while shooting a lethal look toward his partner. “I’m fine.”

“I just figured it wouldn’t hurt to have someone take a look,” DeSoto added.

“Nooo,” Dix drew out. “I suppose not. Let me see who I can find.”

She walked away and went straight into treatment two, where she knew Kel Brackett was working. He was putting a bandage on a forearm he’d just sutured, and was about to send the patient on his way. The nurse waited until he did so before speaking.

“You won’t believe this,” she said first.
“What?”

“Roy is outside, worried about his partner, who ‘woke up’ with laryngitis this morning, and hoping someone could take a look. He still hasn’t told him!”

The corner of Brackett’s mouth twitched in displeasure. “Send Johnny in here. And see if you can occupy Roy. If you can’t, we’ll just have to play it out, I suppose.”

“This is ridiculous,” Dixie muttered as she left, and Brackett was inclined to agree.

“Dr. Brackett’s waiting for you in two,” the nurse told John as she returned to her desk. She sported a sickly-sweet and completely disingenuous smile, and Gage was sure she was making Roy suspicious.

He rolled his eyes and headed toward the room. He could feel Roy following, but didn’t know what to do about it, until he again heard Dix speak up. “Oh no you don’t, Roy. I’ve been waiting for someone to buy me a cup of coffee all morning. We’ll be in the lounge, Johnny!” And then his partner was gone.

“Sorry, Doc,” the paramedic said as soon as he entered the treatment room.

“Johnny, this is getting completely out of hand. I don’t understand why you haven’t told Roy what’s going on. I suppose that is your prerogative, but not when it means drawing Dixie and me into your deception.”

“I know, I know. I . . . .” John didn’t know what to say, really. He wanted to tell Roy ten times every day, and twice that many when they were working. He’d tell himself that this would be the time, and then Roy would tell him about his mother-in-law troubles, or about the leak in the garage, or how proud he’d been at Chris’s Little League game, and he wouldn’t be able to do it. “I just can’t tell him yet, Doc,” he finally admitted.

“Why, Johnny? I’ve told you from the beginning that you should have the help and support of your friends during this time. It’ll help you.”

“I have you and Dix,” he said with a grateful smile.

“Yes, you do. But I’m not just talking about rides home, Johnny. There’s more to this than that, and I think you know it.”

The smile left John’s face. “I know that, Doctor Brackett,” he said with complete seriousness. “Believe me, I know that. And that’s exactly why I can’t tell anyone.” He looked at his watch to predicate his departure. “We really need to get back on duty. Thanks again, Doc.”

“Wait a minute Johnny,” Brackett called out as Gage was about to leave. “I said I was going to take a look at your throat, and I intend to do exactly that. Get over here.”

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“Gage, phone.” Mike held the receiver out toward the paramedic.

“Who is it?”

Stoker scowled and shrugged. He hadn’t asked.

“Hello, this is John Gage.” Johnny listened for a second, and then spoke again. “Okay, look, can you
hang on for a second? I need to switch phones.” He held the receiver back toward Mike, silently asking him to hang up when he’d picked up in the other room. Mike nodded.

“Who is it, Johnny?” Roy asked before his partner could leave.

“No one,” Johnny answered hurriedly as he ran to the dorm.

He looked around quickly, saw that the room was empty, and picked up the phone. “GOT IT!” he yelled as best he could, and then listened for the ‘click’ of Mike hanging up before he spoke again. “Okay, thanks,” he told the woman on the line. “Can you start again?”

“Sure, Mr. Gage,” the pleasant voice said. “My name is Mindy, and I’m calling from the diagnostic radiology department at UCLA Medical Center. You have an appointment with us tomorrow morning at ten?” Her tone was as if she was scheduling a haircut.

“Uhhh, yeah, that’s right.”

“Well, I was just calling to confirm, and to give you some instructions.”

“Oh. What are they?” Johnny wasn’t sure he liked the sound of this.

“Nothing really major. You were told not to eat anything after midnight, correct?”

“Yeah,” Johnny sighed. “Again.” It’s not that he even wanted to eat, really–he’d probably lost weight in the last week if anything. It was just the matter of not being allowed that grated on him.

“Okay, good. And we have your blood work on file already, Rampart send that over today.” The woman was clearly reading a chart as she spoke. “Did Dr. Miller explain the possible complications of the procedure?”

He had, before releasing Johnny from Rampart after the bronchoscopy. Miller had gone through what would happen in excruciating, and dispassionate, detail. But Gage had found that he was getting used to the guy’s manner. Nevertheless, the mere mention of the word “complications” was enough to send a shockwave of nervousness through his system.

“Yeah, he did,” he croaked out.

“Okay,” the girl chirped on, “so you know that there is a possibility you will need to be admitted.”

“But Dr. Miller said. . . .” Johnny started; he’d said the chances of that were very remote.

“Oh, I know,” Mindy laughed. Johnny was glad she could take this so lightly. But then, she wasn’t going to be having a biopsy in the morning, was she? She continued, “it’ll be fine. But just in case, you should bring an overnight bag. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“Oh. Okay.” John derived no comfort from that suggestion at all. “I will.”

“Your time in the scan room is scheduled to begin at ten, so you should be here by 9:15 if you can. Will that be a problem?”

“Uhh, no, it shouldn’t be.” As long as he took his toiletries from his locker, that was. He wouldn’t have time to run home to pack a bag. But he didn’t want to get into that with this woman. He just wanted her off the phone.

“Okay, great!” Johnny rolled his eyes. There was nothing ‘great’ about this. Nothing at all. “We’ll see you tomorrow. Do you have any questions?”
“Ummm, Dr. Miller will be there when I arrive?”

“He should be. Hard to tell with him, he’s always coming and going. If he’s not, he’ll be on his way. Anything else?”

“No, I guess that’s it.”

“Great,” the annoying girl repeated. “We’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Yeah. Tomorrow.”

The woman hung up, and John did the same with a heavy sigh. He allowed himself a second to rest his elbows on the table and drop his head into his hands. He dreaded tomorrow probably more than any other day in his life. It was the day he would Find Out For Sure. Just a formality, he was sure, but still. Who in their right mind would actually want confirmation of something like this? He sometimes wondered if he wouldn’t be better off if Brackett had never taken that x-ray.

But that was stupid, he knew. That thing in his lung wasn’t going anywhere, and they would have found it sooner or later. And if that was the case, sooner had to be better, right?

Right. And what was done was done. Nothing he could do about it except keep going forward. So he sat up straight, pulled himself together, and left the dorm.

He didn’t see Chet standing by the door to the latrine.

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“How about this morning, Johnny?” Roy asked. “I bet I can get Joanne to make blueberry pancakes!” The paramedic was desperate to get some time with John away from the station so maybe he could really talk to him, and get him to open up about what had been bothering him this last week or so. And breakfast at his house after a shift was a good enticement, he knew.

Johnny looked at him with a weary grin, and Roy suddenly noticed how tired his partner looked. Was he still not sleeping?

“That sounds really good, Roy, but I can’t. Wish I could.” The dark-haired man stood and picked up a duffel bag that he kept stashed in his locker. It had stuff in it, but Roy had no idea what. “I’ll see ya in a couple of days,” he added, and he left.

Roy shook his head in defeat and started to button his shirt.

“Roy,” Chet asked from the other side of the room, “what’s wrong with Johnny?”

The paramedic looked at his friend and shrugged. “Wish I knew,” he admitted. “He’s not talking. To me, anyway.”

“Is he sick or something?”

“No, Dr. Brackett looked at his throat yesterday and said it was fine.”

“That’s not what I meant,” the fireman said enigmatically. But he didn’t continue immediately.

“Then what did you mean?” DeSoto finally asked.

“It’s just that I walked in on him in the dorm yesterday; he was on the phone. And I coulda sworn he was making a doctor’s appointment or something. He said something about a Dr. Miller, and that
he’d see them tomorrow.” Chet shrugged. “I dunno.”

Roy sat down hard on the bench behind him. Was that it? Was he sick? The paramedic couldn’t accept that. Surely Johnny would have told him that. And he wouldn’t be able to work if he was sick. And Brackett had said his throat was fine, and before that his cough was fine.

It couldn’t be it. Chet must have misunderstood, that’s all.

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“Okay, Mr. Gage, I’m about ready to insert the biopsy needle. Are you ready?”

No, he wasn’t. And yes he was. He’d been lying in this enormous contraption of a machine for what seemed like hours, though he knew it wasn’t nearly that long. But his arms had been over his head for so long they were both falling asleep. And the walls of it were too close to his body, and more than once he’d thanked his lucky stars that he wasn’t claustrophobic. There was no way, he was sure, that someone who was would be able to stand this newfangled machine.

“Uhh, I guess,” he answered.

“Thanks to the local, you shouldn’t feel any pain, just pressure. I’ll start by making a small incision in the skin,” as he said it, the surgeon did it, and Johnny felt his skin give. But it didn’t hurt, as promised. “It is imperative that you do not move at all, Mr. Gage. We’ve done a good job of localizing the lesion, but if you move we’ll have to start all over again. Can you stay still?”

The way the physician asked the question annoyed Johnny. It was as if he was admonishing a small child in advance of him doing something bad. As if he was already sure Johnny would not be able to remain motionless. Why hadn’t he changed doctors again?

“Of course,” he answered, letting his annoyance show. “Just get on with it. My arms are asleep.”

And with that Dr. Miller proceeded. Johnny felt the pressure, and it was quite uncomfortable even if it wasn’t actually painful. But the paramedic remained silent and stoic, until it did hurt. Something happened, the needle hit a spot, and it sent a shooting pain through John’s chest, causing him to gasp. But he didn’t move.

Miller stopped. “Okay, Mr. Gage, I’m sorry about that. The needle has advanced beyond the depth of the local. The pain should be temporary. Calm down; breathe through your nose. Use the oxygen. I’ll wait.”

After a moment of deep breathing through the nasal cannula, the pain did dissipate. In the mean time the doctor had checked the position of the needle, and deemed it satisfactory. He advanced it slightly more, checked again, and decided it was time to remove a sample of the tumor.

Claiming he wanted to be sure to get a good sample, Dr. Miller retracted and re-advanced the needle two more times. By the time the whole thing was done, Johnny was miserable.

“I’ll need a chest x-ray,” he heard the doctor tell someone. Then he was talking to him. “We’ll need to watch you closely for several hours.”

Gage knew why—in case his lung collapsed. “Uh huh.”

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John was lying in his bed in the observation unit, trying to get comfortable. The right side of his chest
ached, and the people at UCLA’s idea of pain relief were a couple of Tylenol, which hadn’t kicked in yet. He kept shifting, and every time he did, it hurt more. Finally he gave up, and found the bed’s controls to sit himself up.

He was surprised when Dr. Miller came in. It had only been about an hour since they’d finished the test, only a few minutes since they’d taken the chest x-ray, and he hadn’t expected to see the doctor so soon.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Gage?” he asked.

“A little sore.” For some reason, Miller’s expression alarmed Gage. “Why? What’s the matter? What’d you find out?”

“The biopsy samples are in pathology now. We don’t know anything yet, and the complete biopsy won’t be finished for a couple of days. But I can tell you preliminarily that it looks like we didn’t miss the lesion. That’s good news.”

John nodded mutely.

“Can I take a listen?” the physician asked, pulling his stethoscope from its place around his neck. The paramedic sat up straight, and the doctor proceeded to listen to his right lung very carefully.

“Do I have a pneumothorax?” Johnny guessed. Collapsed lung was the most common side effect, after all.

The doctor stepped back from the bed before answering. “Maybe. The x-ray indicated that there might be a little bit of air in your chest cavity. Any pain?”

“Well, yeah, it’s sore where you went in. Doesn’t hurt to breathe, though.”

Miller nodded. “That’s good. I suspect what you have is what you’ll get. We’ll repeat the chest x-rays periodically, get a blood gas on you, and see.”

“If it doesn’t get worse, can I still go home this afternoon?”

“If it doesn’t get worse,” the doctor repeated, “I don’t see why not.”

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It didn’t get worse, and after five hours of observation, during most of which he managed to sleep, Johnny was sent home. The only problem was that Miller insisted he take the next shift off. “We invaded your chest cavity,” he’d admonished, “any strenuous activity before it has a chance to heal could cause bleeding, or a worsening of the pneumothorax.”

John had agreed and gone home, with an appointment to see Miller at Rampart in two days for another chest x-ray and the biopsy results, and instructions to call immediately if he felt any increased discomfort, or had difficulty breathing.

He hadn’t, and made it through the second day with no problem other than a little soreness, and stiff shoulders from holding his arms above his head for what had seemed like hours. He was even answering his phone, and had already assured Dixie he was doing okay when he got another call. Roy was inviting him to dinner. Again.

“I can’t, Roy, but thanks anyway.”
“We haven’t seen you in ages, Johnny.”

“What are you talking about? You see me at work all the time.”

Roy’s voice sounded perturbed. “That’s not what I mean. The kids miss you.”

John sort of chuckled at that. His partner always played the “kid card” when he wanted him to do something at the DeSoto home, knowing Gage was a sucker for those kids.

But Johnny wouldn’t let it work this time. “I can’t, Roy. I, ummm, I’m busy, if you know what I mean.” Gage spoke as provocatively as possible, hoping Roy would jump to his own conclusions about what he meant.

Because after all, his partner actually had no idea what he meant.

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“No, huh?” Joanne asked her husband as he hung up the phone.

“No,” Roy admitted with a heavy sigh. “He says he has a date. I just don’t know, Joanne. I’m worried about him. He hasn’t been over in what? Two weeks?”

“I think that’s about right,” Jo agreed. “Not since you painted the sun room, and even then he was late because he had that doctor’s appointment, and he didn’t even stay for dessert.” The woman stopped speaking, and thought for a moment. “Come to think of it,” she finally said, “he really didn’t seem like himself that day, either.”

“My God, Jo, you’re right!” Roy exclaimed. “He was quiet, seemed kinda down, didn’t he?” His wife nodded her agreement. The paramedic sat heavily in a kitchen chair. “What if Chet was right?” he mused aloud.

“Chet? Right about what?”

“He said yesterday morning after shift that he’d overheard Johnny on the phone making a doctor’s appointment. I just chalked it up to Chet being Chet, but what if what he heard was right? What if there’s something wrong? This whole thing started right after he saw Doctor Brackett that morning. I’m sure of it. And a couple of times when we were at the hospital Brackett saw Johnny, but I thought they were just talking, and . . .” He stopped, it all suddenly starting to come together. “And Dixie, Joanne. Dixie kept taking me to the lounge for coffee and stuff. What if she was getting rid of me?” Roy shook his head. “How could I have missed this?”

“Wait a minute honey,” Joanne said, trying to calm her increasingly agitated husband. “Don’t you think you’re jumping to conclusions here? If there were something wrong with Johnny, he’d tell us. He wouldn’t hide something like that.”

“Normally I’d think you’re right. But he’s been acting so strange lately.”

“And another thing,” the undaunted wife continued, “if he was sick, how could he still be working? He’s been okay at work, hasn’t he?”

“Well,” Roy admitted, “yeah. Except that day he had laryngitis, yeah, he’s been okay.” He picked up the phone. “I’m still gonna call him.”

Joanne put her hand over her husband’s, and put the phone back in place. “He said he had a date, honey. Leave him alone. You can talk to him at work tomorrow.”
It was late, almost nine at night, and John was staring at his phone. He needed to call Cap and tell him he wouldn’t be in the next day. But what to tell him?

It was tempting to just tell him everything. The next morning Gage would get the confirmation he’d been seeking for the last ten days, and then he’d have to tell Cap. A guy getting treatment for lung cancer couldn’t be a fireman. Johnny was sure of that.

But something still held him back. He didn’t want to tell Cap. Didn’t want to tell anyone until he heard the words himself. So he lied. Again.

“I dunno, Cap,” he told him. “Must be some sort of 24-hour stomach virus. Can’t keep anything down.”

“Sorry to hear it, pal.”

“I’ll be okay,” the paramedic promised. Another lie.

“Glad to hear it. But boy, John, with that cough and losing your voice and now your stomach, this hasn’t been your week, has it?”

Johnny actually chuckled at how unbelievably true those words were. It hadn’t been his week at all. And he was sure that, come morning, it was only going to get worse.

"He's what?" an incredulous Roy DeSoto asked his captain. "What exactly did he say?"

"He said he wasn't feeling well. Some sort of stomach bug. Thanks, Dwyer, by the way, for agreeing to work a double."

"I don't believe this. He told me he," Roy suddenly realized what he was saying, and that he was dangerously close to getting his partner in serious trouble, so he stopped.

"What'd he tell you, pal?" Cap asked curiously.

"Nothing, Cap, nothing. I just talked to him yesterday afternoon, and he didn't say anything to me. That's all."

"Well, these things can come up on you rather suddenly, can't they?"

"Yeah, they can."

The minute roll call was over Roy headed toward the dorm and called Johnny. He had to find out what was going on, and if what he was thinking was crazy, or was right.

There was no answer.

John entered Rampart through the front doors, rather than the more familiar ER entrance. He didn't want to run into anyone he knew, if he could help it. He especially didn't want to see Brackett or Dixie. He'd gotten used to brushing off people who didn't know, but those two... He couldn't stand the pity. And even though he knew he'd probably have to get used to the sympathetic looks and condolences, he'd put it off as long as possible.
The repeat x-ray only took a minute, and the tech developed it while John waited, so he could bring it up to Dr. Miller's with him. The news was good--the guy told him he didn't see air any more, and Johnny knew that most of the guys in x-ray could read films as well as any doctor.

Of course, that "spot," as Brackett had annoyingly labeled it on day one, was still there. Johnny didn't need any help finding that.

As he left the radiology department with x-ray in-hand, he was confronted in the waiting area by Dixie, arms crossed on her chest and looking perturbed.

John matched her mood, and tried to walk past. "Hey, Dix," he said, hoping he'd be able to make a clean escape.

He should have known better. "Where do you think you're going?" she asked him. She sounded like she was scolding a child, and Johnny couldn't help feeling he'd been getting altogether too much of that attitude lately.

"Got an appointment with Miller," he said, making another unsuccessful attempt to get away from his friend.

"Not for almost an hour, Johnny. Did you honestly think you could make an appointment in my hospital without me knowing about it?" The woman literally clucked with disapproval, but then the stern look on her face melted away into a smile. "Come on. Let's get some coffee. You've got time."

Thankfully, Dix didn't try to take him to the ER doctor's lounge, opting instead for the nearly deserted cafeteria.

"How have you been doing?" the nurse asked as soon as they sat down.


"You look tired."

Gage shrugged. "I've been sleeping okay these last couple of nights. It's weird, but I've kinda gotten used to it, you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean." She paused a minute before continuing. "How'd the biopsy go? The board is lobbying to get one of those scanners over here. We'll see."

"You claustrophobic?" John asked with a slight grin. "Cuz if you are, you're in big trouble. Picture spending an hour in a pipe. It's like that."

"But they say the pictures they produce are amazing."

"I wouldn't know, I didn't see them."

The nurse nodded. "You're here to get the results," she said simply.

Gage tried to keep the flash of worry from running across his face. He could tell from his friend's concerned expression that he'd failed. "Yeah," he admitted. It came out as almost a whisper.

"Do you want company? Someone for moral support?" The small talk and banter was over; Dixie had gotten to the point.

"No, Dix, but thanks."
The nurse shook her head. "You still haven't told anyone, have you?"

"Nah."

"Why not, Johnny? This is crazy. No matter what you find out upstairs, some course of action will need to be taken. People will need to be told. Did you think you could keep this a secret forever?"

The woman was clearly upset.

"No, no, I didn't think that," Johnny said apologetically. He truly was sorry for the stress he'd put on Dixie and Dr. Brackett as a result of the way he'd handled this.

"I don't know, Dix," he finally said, his voice filled with resignation. "It didn't seem like the right time at first. So I thought I'd wait and find out exactly what was going on before I told anyone. And then it went on and on." He allowed another slight smile and shook his head. "I never thought it would drag on this long. Honest."

"Well, that's true, this has taken longer than expected," the nurse allowed. "But Johnny, you shouldn't go in to see Dr. Miller alone. I feel strongly about this. Whether it's good news or bad, you should have someone with you. This isn't something you should hear alone. I can get Betty to cover the desk for me."

Johnny had started shaking his head "no" the minute Dix had started. By the time she was done, he was shaking it vigorously.

"No, Dix, no. You don't get it. Even if I'd told everyone everything I wouldn't want anyone with me today." It was Johnny's turn to get upset; he had to make her understand this, but he wasn't all that sure he understood it himself. "I wouldn't want anyone with me when . . . when I find out. I couldn't. . . I can't." He gave up in frustration with a disgusted wave of his hand. "Oh, I don't know how to explain it."

"I do," Dixie ventured, and Johnny looked at her expectantly. "It’s pride, Johnny. Stupid male pride. And it’s wrong. There’s nothing wrong with leaning on your friends a little during hard times.”

"I’ve done that plenty of times,” Gage protested.

“What? When you’re laid up from an injury at work? Sure, you let people do some shopping for you, or drive you to doctor’s appointments. But that’s not what I’m talking about and you know it.”

Johnny let out a mirthless laugh.

“What?”

“You sound just like Dr. Brackett.”

Dixie smiled. “Well, Dr. Brackett is a wise man. You should listen to him.”

“Except,” Johnny said with a slight smile, “when he said it I thought he sounded just like you. And now I know I was right.”

“I’m just worried about you, Johnny.”

“I know. And I appreciate it.” Johnny nervously checked his watch. “I should get upstairs.”

“Are you sure you won’t let me come with you?”

“I’m sure, Dix.”
The nurse sighed. “Okay. But promise me you’ll come downstairs and let me and Kel know what the results were.”

“I can’t promise that.” Dix started to protest, but Johnny stopped her. “But I’ll let Dr. Miller tell you. Heck, Brackett probably already knows by now.”

“I don’t think so, Johnny.”


Dixie stood, too. “Walk me back to the ER?”

“What if one of the guys, what if Roy is there? I better not.”

“You’ll be able to see if he is long before we get down the hall. If someone’s there, I’ll let you run and hide. Don’t you worry.” She had a teasing grin on her face. “Come on.”

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Dixie had secretly been hoping someone would be in the ER when they got there, but the area was maddeningly free of paramedics. She’d put Johnny in the elevator, holding up her crossed fingers for him as the door closed. He’d smiled, but looked totally resigned to the notion that the news would be bad.

As luck would have it, just as she turned around she saw Roy bringing in a patient at the other end of the hallway. Betty seemed to have it well in-hand, so Dixie returned to her post at the base station.

“Hey, Dix,” Roy greeted her as soon as he’d delivered his victim to Morton. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, Roy, what’s on your mind?”

“I want you to tell me what’s going on with Johnny.”

The nurse was startled. Dumbstruck. This wasn’t what she’d been expecting at all. “What...,” she had to force herself to keep from stammering in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“All those meetings Johnny kept having with Doctor Brackett, while you,” he stressed the word a bit menacingly, “dragged me off to get coffee. And you encouraging me to force Johnny to talk. You knew something then, didn’t you? He started acting strange right after he saw Doctor Brackett for that cough. Something’s the matter with him, isn’t it? Is he sick?”

The nurse’s mind was reeling; she had no idea what to say. She couldn’t deny it, he was absolutely right. But at the same time, she couldn’t divulge Johnny’s medical condition, no matter how much she wanted to. More than anything, she wished Kel would show up at that moment, so she could defer to him.

“I don’t know what to say, Roy,” she admitted honestly. “I can’t say anything. You know that.” She knew that even by saying that much she was, in effect, confirming the worried paramedic’s suspicions.

She watched in dismay as Roy made that very connection, and his face fell with concern. “Wow,” he admitted. “I was kinda hoping you would tell me I was out of my mind.”

Dixie shook her head sadly. “You’re not.”
“Umm, where . . . .” Roy stopped after a second, appearing to recollect his thoughts. “Johnny didn’t come in today. Do you know where he is? I tried to call him, but he wasn’t home.”

The ER nurse looked at the elevator doors for a long moment, wishing they’d open and Johnny would be on the other side so Roy would have the answer to his question, but knowing they wouldn’t. Then she had an idea.

“Roy,” she started. “When you came in, you saw Johnny get on that elevator, didn’t you?”


“DIDN’T you?” she stressed with a conspiratorial grin. “Because if you did, I suppose I could tell you which floor he got off.”

A slow smile crept across DeSoto’s face. “Yeah, Dix, I saw him. Any idea where he got off?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. That would be the eighth floor.”

Roy headed toward the elevator and pushed the call button before turning back. “Dr. Miller’s office?” he asked.

Once more, Dixie was stunned by how much Roy knew. “How did you?” she started, but stopped because the doors had opened and Roy was getting in.

“I’ll tell ya later. Thanks, Dix,” he said as the doors closed.

The nurse watched the numbers climb on the elevator’s floor indicator, and hoped that some day Johnny would forgive her for what she’d just done.

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As the elevator rose, Roy realized that he had no idea where on the eighth floor this Dr. Miller’s office was. He wasn’t even entirely sure what was on the floor--he’d never been up there before.

His answer came the minute the door opened, and he was greeted by the sign. Surgical Oncology.

Johnny had cancer?

The door started to close, so he quickly jumped out. But he never took his eyes off the sign. He physically shook himself. No way. It couldn't be that. He’d figured out it was something, but not that.

No wonder Johnny’d been acting so strange. But why hadn’t he _told_ anyone?

"Can I help you?" Roy's reverie was interrupted by the voice of a woman, a nurse, who was looking at him inquisitively. "You look lost," she said kindly.

"Oh, no, not really. I'm trying to find my friend . . . . Do you know where Dr. Miller's office is?"

"That depends. Which Dr. Miller? There's Dr. Nathan Miller, he's in gynecology in the east wing."

Roy stopped her. "No, no, it's a guy; My friend. He's a man."

"Oh," the woman chuckled. "Then you probably are looking for Carl Miller. He's a thoracic surgeon. Mostly lungs. His office is down there," she said, pointing through the doors that led to the west wing. "I think it's 812, but the name's on the door."
"Uhhh, okay. Thanks."

The woman walked off, and Roy was left to digest yet another piece of information.

Lung cancer? No way. Johnny didn't even smoke.

In short order the paramedic roused himself and decided he'd been kept in the dark long enough. There was only one way to find out what exactly was going on with his partner, and he purposefully went in search of Carl Miller's office.

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Johnny was sitting nervously in the waiting room, trying to quell his urge to jump up and pace in the small room. He knew Dr. Miller's receptionist Sandy--he'd talked to her so many times over the past two weeks that they were on a first-name basis--wouldn't mind if he literally climbed the walls, but he still didn’t want to disturb her. So he stayed in his place.

“He should be here in a few minutes, Johnny,” the young woman told him with a warm smile, apparently able to read his uneasiness from the way he was fidgeting.

“Uhh, I know. You told me. Thanks.” John leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, taking a moment to study the carpet between his feet.

He was still looking downward when he heard the door opening. He resisted the urge to jump to his feet in anticipation of it being the doctor, and instead just looked up. He was not expecting what he saw.

Roy.

Gage was on his feet in an instant. “Roy! What are you . . . how did you . . . ? What are you doing here?”

Roy moved toward him, and spoke in low, though urgent, tones. “Me? Geez, Johnny, why didn’t you tell me? Are you okay?”

“How did you know where I am?” Johnny asked, though he had a good idea, and after the talk they’d just had, he was mad. “Dixie told you,” he decided for himself.

“No, she didn’t,” Roy protested, still whispering and glancing over at Sandy, who was trying not to listen. He took hold of Johnny’s arm, and sat him back down, taking the next chair for himself. “I figured it out on my own, more or less. HOW could you not tell me? What’s going on?”

“It’s none of your business, Roy!” Johnny snapped--and he instantly regretted it. He was mad--at Dixie and most of all at himself. But he wasn’t mad at his partner.

He regretted it even more when Roy sprang up and started to shout. “How DARE you say that!” he yelled, casting one sideways glance at Sandy, who was trying not to listen. He took hold of Johnny’s arm, and sat him back down, taking the next chair for himself. “I figured it out on my own, more or less. HOW could you not tell me? What’s going on?”

Johnny buried his head in his hands. How could he have, indeed? What had he been thinking? At that moment he couldn’t even remember any more. The only thing he was sure of was that he couldn’t have made a bigger mess of this whole thing if he’d tried.
When he looked up Roy was sitting next to him again. He made eye contact with Sandy, and she grinned sympathetically before pretending to read a paper on her desk. She’d probably seen and heard much worse than this before, John realized sadly.

When Johnny looked at his partner finally, he was surprised that he didn’t see anger in Roy’s eyes. A second ago he’d been raving, with good cause. But now he looked. . . . John didn’t know. He couldn’t place it.


“We should talk about all that later,” Roy advised. He was calm now; back to himself. “I don’t even know what’s going on.”

Johnny shrugged. “Don’t really know,” he admitted. “They did a biopsy on Monday. I’m here for the results.”

“Biopsy of what? Do you have. . . .” Gage almost smiled at the realization that Roy couldn't say the word, either--just like everyone else.

“Cancer? Do I have cancer?” Johnny amazed himself at how easily he could say the word no one else wanted to. "Yeah, probably. In my lung. Brackett saw something on my x-ray. Remember that cough I had two weeks ago?"

“Probably?” Roy asked hopefully. “So there’s a chance you don’t?”

“I guess so. But the doctor seemed to think I did. And he should know.”

Roy sat in stunned silence, and John just watched him. He didn’t know what to say, and he was betting neither did Roy.

But both men were granted a reprieve when Dr. Miller swept into the room. “Mr. Gage,” he greeted. “Give me two minutes and come on in,” he instructed as he went into his office, snatching John's x-ray on his way by the reception desk.

Gage stood. “I gotta,” he glanced at the office door then back at Roy. “I gotta go in.”

Roy nodded, and rose also. “I’ll go with you,” he offered.

Johnny closed his eyes and slumped his shoulders in dismay. This was precisely the moment he wanted--needed--to face alone. “No, Roy,” he said, shaking his head. “Please. I have to do this by myself. I’ll tell you what I find out. I’ll tell you everything, I promise.” He looked again at the door. “But I hafta go in there alone.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Johnny said, nodding his head emphatically. “I’m sure.”

“Okay. But I’ll stay here and wait . . . as long as we don’t get a run, that is. Is that all right?”

Gage smiled. “Yeah, I’d like that. Thanks.”

Roy sat back down and Johnny turned toward the office, knowing that his entire future depended on what he found out on the other side of the door.
And he walked through alone.

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“Have a seat,” Carl Miller offered. Johnny was confused. The doctor wasn’t his normal, all-business self. He seemed almost . . . upbeat.

The paramedic sat, and was stunned when Miller came around from behind the desk to lean on its front, closer to John than he’d ever been during their many consultations. Then the man smiled. Widely.

“Benign,” he said simply. “It was entirely benign, John.”

Johnny literally felt for a second as if someone had pushed all the air out of his lungs. “Wha . . . WHAT?”

The doctor chuckled. “You heard me. Two of the three biopsy sites yielded good tumor samples. Pathology looked at every damn cell, and found no malignancy. None.”

The paramedic could not believe what he was hearing. “But I was so sure,” he sputtered. “You seemed so sure!”

“I probably shouldn’t have been so blunt with you in our earlier meetings, and for that I apologize,” Miller admitted. He stood and returned to his familiar place sitting behind his desk. “But the size of the lesion, your not insignificant risk factors, the other results—if asked to give odds, I would have said there was a 75 to 80 percent chance the lesion was malignant.” He grinned again. “I love it when I’m wrong.”

Johnny let out a laugh. “YOU do? So do I!” He was feeling giddy, euphoric. He didn’t want to sit still, didn’t know what to do with himself. He jumped to his feet and turned his back on the doctor. Two weeks ago he’d had his whole life pulled out from under him in a second. And now, just as quickly, it seemed as if it was being given back.

He turned back to face the specialist. “So that’s it? I’m okay? I’m fine?”

Miller’s happy expression tempered itself. “Well, yes and no. There’s still the matter of that tumor. It is there, after all, even if it isn’t cancerous.”

Johnny’s expression became similarly more serious, and he sat back down. “Do you still have to take it out?”

“No,” Dr. Miller said simply before continuing. “Not necessarily. You have two options here. Right now it’s asymptomatic. We can leave it alone and take regular x-rays, and maybe slide you back into the CT scanner at UCLA from time to time, and watch the growth of it. If it remains as-is you can live a perfectly normal, long, healthy life without giving it a second thought.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“If it starts to grow or change, or starts to cause you problems, we can take it out—which is your second option. We can just get it over with, surgically remove it now before it can cause any problems, and put this whole thing behind you once and for all.”

"But it might never cause any problems."

"Exactly."
It hadn’t taken much to get Johnny’s mind reeling again. He couldn’t process this, and didn’t know what to say, really. “So what would you do?” he asked, hoping for some guidance.

“I’m a surgeon, John,” Miller said with a smile. It wasn’t lost on the paramedic that all of a sudden the doctor was using his first name. “That should tell you my inclination right there. But it’s up to you. I would be perfectly content with either course of action. Lung surgery is no small deal, I know that. If you don’t want to do it, that’s perfectly understandable, and it’s fine with me. Let’s just be thankful that you have the choice, huh?” The man stood and came around the desk. “But it’s not something you have to decide now. You have time. Go home, think about it, talk to your family, and call if you have any questions.”

Johnny stood up, understanding that their meeting was over, and anxious to get out so he could talk to Roy. He thanked the doctor profusely, and left the office. But Roy was nowhere to be seen.

"He asked me to tell you he had a run," Sandy told him.

"Oh," the paramedic said, slightly crestfallen. But it didn't last long. He'd just see Roy later.

"Congratulations, Johnny," the receptionist said quietly.

Gage looked at her, surprised. "You know?"

"Sure," she let on. "I took the call from the pathology lab. It's good news."

John smiled. "Yeah, it is. Thanks." He paused for a moment, then plastered a mock-angry expression on his face. "You mean you let me sit there, going crazy, and you didn't say anything?"

Sandy shrugged with an innocent smile. She knew he was teasing. "I couldn't! Dr. Miller woulda fired me if I did!" Her expression turned more serious. "It's not that often he gets to deliver really good news like that, you know."

John hadn't thought of that. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He reached the door and turned back. "Thanks for everything Sandy," he said.

"Any time, Johnny. Call me any time. You know how to reach me," the woman added with a smile.

John was halfway down the hall before he realized that the girl had just invited him to ask her out. He chuckled at the realization. Maybe he would call her. Maybe he would.

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As the elevator descended down to the ER floor, Johnny was surprised to realize he was nervous. It was all good news, and yet he was actually nervous about delivering it to Dixie and, maybe, Brackett. It didn't make any sense to him.

The door opened, and as he exited he was immediately met by a penetrating look from Dix, though she remained at her post behind her desk. He approached, trying to keep his expression neutral, but he couldn't do it. As soon as he was next to her, he broke out into a huge grin.

"It's all benign, Dix," he said, almost whispering for fear someone would overhear. He didn't quite understand why he was still being secretive about it, either, yet here he was.

The paramedic’s thoughts were interrupted by the realization that he was being hugged. Dixie had wrapped her arms around him and was squeezing, so he moved his arms as well and made it a proper hug. It felt good.
"Oh, Johnny, thank God! I'm so happy for you. I'm so relieved," the nurse was exclaiming.

John quickly became embarrassed by the display, and stepped out of her embrace. "Yeah, me too."

"What's going on here?" Mike Morton asked as he approached. He'd obviously seen the embrace.

Johnny made eye contact with Dixie. He wasn't sure he wanted to tell the doctor. And Dixie seemed to understand.

"Johnny just got some really good news, that's all," she said.

"Oh. Glad to hear it." Mike was never one to pry, and John was glad he wasn't starting now. "Shouldn't you be on duty?" he asked.

"Well, yeah. I wasn't feeling so hot this morning. But I'm a whole lot better now."

Dixie laughed, and the physician obviously knew there was something more to it. "What am I missing here?"

Johnny grinned. "Dixie can tell you all about it." He looked at the nurse and asked, "Where's Brackett?"

"He's in his office. Waiting for you, I'd bet."

"Okay, I'll go talk to him." John started down the hall but then turned back. "Hey, Dix, has Roy called in?"

"No, Johnny. They were called out, but haven't called anything in. Must not be serious."

"Okay. But if he does come in, don't tell him, okay? I want to."

Dixie crossed her heart with her finger. "I promise."

John again started on his way to Dr. Brackett's office, but once more stopped and turned. "Oh and Dix?" he asked, only continuing his statement when he had her attention. "I haven't forgotten what you did this morning."

The nurse batted her eyelashes innocently. "Who me? I have no idea what you are talking about."

The paramedic grinned again. "Yeah, right," he said incredulously. "Anyway, thanks."

"Any time, Johnny, any time."

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"So what do you think I should do? What would you do?"

Brackett studied John's face for a moment, and marveled at how different--and better--the young man looked from the last time he'd seen him a few days earlier. He hadn't really allowed himself to notice how the weight of this scare had been affecting the paramedic. But that's exactly how John looked now: like an enormous weight had been removed from his shoulders.

Kel realized that he sort of felt the same way.

"It's up to you, Johnny, really. There are pros and cons with each approach." He knew John would ask, so he immediately elaborated. "Removing it now is major surgery, with all of its accompanying
risks and whatnot. But you know what those are. Leaving it lets you resume your normal life immediately."

"So you think I should forget about it."

Brackett chuckled. "That's not what I said, and there's no way you could 'forget' about it. You'd have to be very diligent about follow-ups. And in the end you may have to have it removed somewhere down the line anyway."

"So why prolong the inevitable? I should have it taken out now."

He chortled again. "That's not what I said either. Some benign tumors never grow. It could stay exactly the way it is right now, forever. Or, it could grow, or worse. There's no way to know for sure." The doctor leaned forward on his desk. "You need to decide what's best for you, and no one can decide for you. But you have time. There's no hurry any more."

He watched as Johnny relaxed back into his chair. "Yeah, I have time. That's what Dr. Miller said, too." He face broke into a wide grin. "It's a nice feeling."
Chapter 2

OUT OF NOWHERE part 2

by dee_ayy

Gage turned the corner and saw the station ahead. Again, he felt oddly nervous about what he was about to do. But it was time to level with his friends, especially since it was such good news. That, and he hoped to get a chance to tell Roy, too. Whatever run he’d been on had not required a trip to Rampart, so Johnny hadn’t seen him yet. The door was up, and the squad was still out; but the engine was there.

He pulled his Rover up to the curb next to the station. He wanted to talk to Cap first, and was hoping the man would be in his office, working on the mountains of paperwork that he always complained about.

Johnny peeked into the apparatus bay, and was relieved to find it empty. He took a deep breath and walked in, and was glad to find his captain right where he thought he’d be.

He rapped lightly on the doorjamb to get the man’s attention. “Hey Cap, you got a minute?” he asked as soon as his superior looked up.

Hank was surprised to see him, Johnny could tell. But why wouldn’t he? As far as he knew, Johnny was home with a stomach virus.

“Sure pal, come on in. What brings you here? I thought you weren’t feeling well?”

Gage entered, and closed the door behind him. He saw the surprise at the move register on the captain’s face. He sat.

“I’m feeling fine, Cap. I . . . .” Why was it so hard to tell people? How should he do this, and where should he start? “I lied about the stomach thing” is what eventually came out of his mouth, and Johnny instantly knew that was not the approach he wanted.

Captain Stanley’s eyebrows arched in surprise. “Oh?” he asked. “Is that something you want to be telling me?”

The paramedic shook his head. “That’s not what I wanted to say,” he admitted. “It was true that I couldn’t work today for a medical reason, but it wasn’t the stomach bug.”

“So why don’t you tell me what it was?” Cap suggested.

“Yeah, okay. It’s just that I’m not really sure where to start.”

“Well, pal,” the captain intoned. “I’m a big fan of the beginning.”

Johnny grinned slightly, took a deep breath, and started. At the beginning.

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“And that takes you right up to about an hour ago,” Johnny finished. Cap had sat silently through most of the story, only asking the occasional question, like when he connected the hoarse voice to the medical procedure John had undergone.

The paramedic waited for some sort of response from his boss, and was unnerved when none came immediately. Finally he had to ask. “So?”

Stanley leaned forward in his chair. “I think it’s my turn to not know where to start, John,” he admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m happy to hear that you’re okay. Or that you will be. Or whatever. That it’s not serious. Of course I’m happy for you. That’s great news.”

“Yeah,” Gage agreed.

“But at the same time I have to confess that I’m a little disturbed that you didn’t tell anyone--didn’t tell me--about this right away.”

Johnny stiffened at the reprimand that he knew was about to come his way.

“Not only are there perfectly valid and important reasons for me, as your captain, to be aware of any medical conditions that might affect your performance on the job,” Dr. Brackett said I was fine to work, Cap. I never would,” He cut himself off when he saw Hank shaking his head.

“Physically, perhaps you were okay to work. But emotionally? How many times did I have to speak to you these last two weeks about your emotional and psychological state? How many times did you tell me you were okay? How many times did you lie to me?”

Gage swallowed hard. He didn’t know. And when Cap put it that way, it sounded just awful. He almost wished his captain would get angry and yell at him, like he’d done a week earlier. But this . . . this disappointment he was getting was almost unbearable. “I . . . I’m sorry, Cap,” he stammered.

“Not only are there perfectly valid and important reasons for me, as your captain, to be aware of any medical conditions that might affect your performance on the job,”

“Dr. Brackett said I was fine to work, Cap. I never would,” He cut himself off when he saw Hank shaking his head.

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“I’m sure you are.” Hank’s voice softened as he continued. “And yes, there were professional reasons why you should have told me immediately, John. But what troubles me most is that you felt you had to face this alone. I actually thought I was more than just your captain. I thought we were friends.”

“Oh, no, Cap!” Gage protested quickly. “I mean, we are. Friends I mean. It wasn’t that. I didn’t tell anyone. Not even Roy.”

“Why not?”

Johnny sighed in defeat. “Looking back, I don’t know. Seemed like a good idea at the time?” He shook his head. It all seemed like such a stupid move now. “And then the more time passed, it just got harder and harder, you know?”

Captain Stanley nodded, then smiled. “I think I can understand that. But you’re going to be completely honest and upfront from now on, correct?”

The paramedic grinned. “Yes, sir,” he promised.
“Good. So what are you going to do now?”

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t know. I gotta decide.”

Cap reached forward and patted the paramedic on the arm. “Well just remember, John, whatever you do, if you need anything, just say the word.”

“I know. Thanks Cap.”

Hank stood. “I think you owe some people an explanation, don’t you?”

The rest of the engine crew. Of course he did. They’d borne more than the brunt of his worry. He stood up as Cap pulled his door open.

As the two men left the office, the squad backed into place in front of them. Johnny saw Roy’s alarmed face and turned to his captain. “Cap,” he asked, “can I talk to Roy first? He knows the bad news already, but not the good stuff.”

“Oh of course. Tell ya what,” Cap suggested, “I’ll go give the guys the basics while you talk to Roy, and then you can fill in any blanks I leave later. How’s that?”

John smiled gratefully. “That would be great, Cap. Thanks.”

As Roy backed the squad into place, he tried desperately to read his partner’s expression—but it was oddly neutral. Was he just trying to be tough? Why would he be here at all, if not to give Cap some bad news, to ask for a medical leave or something? The questions were coming fast and furious, and he couldn’t get out of the cab quick enough.

“Johnny?” he asked, just as his partner was asking permission to use Cap’s office. Oh, God, the news was bad. It had to be. But whatever it was, there was something he needed to say first. All through the two runs they’d had since he’d left Johnny, all he could think of was how he'd behaved in the doctor's office. It was inexcusable.

As soon as he followed his partner into the office, he spoke. "Johnny, I'm sorry for the way I yelled back at the hospital. I was way out of line."

"I don't have cancer, Roy."

Gage said it so quietly, with only the tiniest hint of a smile, that at first Roy wasn't sure he'd heard right. "You... don't have cancer?" he repeated numbly. "You DON'T?"

"Nope!" With that John's face broke into a wide grin.

"You DON'T!" Roy repeated, letting the words sink in. He had an incredible urge to hug someone, but settled for a hearty thump on Johnny's back. "That's great! Just great!"

“I know,” Johnny agreed, slumping into Cap’s chair. “I’m tellin’ ya, Roy. When I thought I had... I was really...” He didn’t finish, leaving Roy to guess what Gage wanted to say. But he had a good idea. Question was, should he say it for both of them?

Why not, he quickly decided.

"Scared?” Roy ventured.
John jumped a bit in his seat, a fleeting look of panic crossing his face. "No, no, not really," he objected quickly. "I was... I was worried, that's all." Roy could see his friend visibly relax at having come up with an alternative.

"Yeah," the older paramedic answered, sitting down as well. "Me too. I think that's why I yelled at you this morning. Because I was sca...." He caught himself with a little inward smile. "Because I was worried, too."

Johnny just nodded. They didn’t have to say any more than that, and shared a moment of companionable silence. But Roy did have one more question that needed an answer.

"So, partner, are you going to tell me why you kept this to yourself?"

Gage shrugged sheepishly. "It all started the day we painted the sunroom," he began, and proceeded to explain how something always seemed to come up with Roy’s family that kept Johnny from saying anything. "It just seemed like you had enough to worry about," he finished.

Roy had been trying really hard to see John’s logic through this explanation, but he couldn’t. He’d known Johnny for a long time, but this was too much, even for him. "So," he finally started, "you're saying you didn’t tell me right away because my dishwasher was broken?"

Johnny shrugged again.

Roy couldn’t believe it. "You know how dumb that sounds, don’t you?"

"Yeah, I think I do," John confessed. "But it made sense to me at the time. Plus I really didn’t think it would take two weeks to find out what was going on. I was gonna tell you as soon as I knew what I was up against, honest. But you beat me to it."

"Thank Chet for that. He heard you on the phone in the dorm one afternoon making a doctor’s appointment. Then I started putting the other pieces together."

"You mean Dixie really didn’t tell you?"

"Nah. Well, not really. I told her what I knew, and then she sorta helped me track you down at Rampart. That’s all."

Roy watched his friend smile. "I was sure she told you. I was really mad at her at first."

"Would you still be mad at her if she had?"


Roy smiled at that. His partner never could hold a grudge.

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Johnny could hear the noisy chatter coming from the day room as he approached, and he knew they’d be talking about him. Those suspicions were confirmed when he walked through the door and the banter came to an immediate halt.

"Hi guys," he said somewhat warily.

They were all silent for about three seconds too long before Marco finally spoke. "Hey Johnny," he said, "how ya feeling?"
"Ohhh, fine. I'm feeling fine." His wariness was spreading into his voice, too. Dwyer shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and Johnny instantly felt sorry for the poor guy, who was stuck in the middle of something that really had nothing to do with him.

The awkward silence resumed, and Johnny waited for someone to say something.

Finally someone did. Chet.

"Geez, Gage, you could have told us!"

And that opened the floodgates, as John's friends started deluging him with questions.

"He stuck a needle right into your lung?" Chet asked at one point. He was never known for subtlety.

"Yup," the paramedic confirmed. "Right here," he added, pointing to the spot on the right side of his chest, which still sported a bandage over the biopsy site that still sported two stitches. Johnny felt it with his finger, and shook his head. It already seemed like that was two months ago, not two days.

"That had to hurt."

"Nah, not really. It was uncomfortable, that's all. The bronchoscopy, though, that was the worst."

"So what are you going to do now, Johnny?" Mike asked quietly. It was the first time he'd had anything to say, and Johnny had to sigh. He was tired of the question already, as valid as it was. But he couldn't blame Mike for that.

"Well," Johnny started emphatically. "Right now I'm gonna go home and not think about it any more for at least a day." He started to smile. "Then I think I'm gonna see if I can get myself a date for tomorrow night."

Mike was smiling. "That's not what I meant," he said.

"I know," the paramedic admitted, his grin widening as he stood. "You fellas don't work too hard, okay?"

As he was making his way toward the front of the building, Roy ran out after him.

"Hey Johnny, how about coming over for dinner Friday night? The kids have missed you."

John stopped and thought about it for just a second. He'd missed them, too. And Joanne. And just about everything else he'd pushed out of his life in the last couple of weeks. "Sounds good, Roy."

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"Well, your appetite’s fine," Joanne said with a smile as she picked up the last of the dishes off the table.

"For your cooking? Always."

The woman smiled and went into the kitchen, returning quickly. "Okay, kids, let’s go. Christopher, you have homework, and Jen, it’s time to get in the bath."

"But mom," the young boy wailed. "It's Friday!"

"Do it now, and then it's done," the mother said simply. "Git."
The kids reluctantly got up and said good night to Johnny before heading up the stairs. “I’ll come up to say good night before I go home,” John promised.

Finally alone, Roy studied his friend for a moment. “Did you get that date last night?” he asked.

Gage grinned widely. “Yeah. Remember that girl in the doctor’s office? Sandy?”

“You went out with her?”

Johnny nodded “Uh huh. She’s incredible!”

“I’d have thought you wouldn’t want to go out with someone who . . . .” Roy had to stop, unsure if Johnny wanted to broach the subject. After what he’d been through, DeSoto wasn’t sure if his friend wanted to take a deserved break from all that. It hadn’t come up all evening.


“Well, yeah. I thought you didn’t want to talk about it for a while.”

John grinned slyly. “We didn’t talk about it. That’s what was so incredible. We didn’t do much talking at all--if you know what I mean.”

Roy knew, but that didn’t mean he wanted to hear about it. He did look at Johnny and let out a laugh, though.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just nice to have you back, that’s all.”

John blushed slightly. “Yeah, well, I’m sorry about that. I shoulda told you sooner.”

Roy shrugged. “Water under the bridge, Johnny,” he said.

“What’s water under the bridge?” Joanne entered from the living room. “Jenny said she wants you to tuck her in, Johnny. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Nah, I don’t mind.”

“Give her ten minutes,” Jo instructed. She headed into the kitchen, but raised her voice to repeat “So what’s water under the bridge?”

“Nothing,” Roy deflected.

Joanne returned with the coffee pot and three mugs. “You haven’t let him off the hook already, have you?” she asked her husband. She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Johnny with a disingenuous smile.

“Yup, he has,” John answered with a self-satisfied grin of his own.

By now the woman had placed coffee in front of her husband, and had poured her own cup and was sitting. “Well I don’t think I can let you off so easy, Johnny,” she chided.

“Joanne,” Roy urged quietly. He wasn’t sure this was wise.

“It’s okay, Roy, I can take it. I deserve it.”
“That’s right, young man, you do. What on earth were you thinking? Don’t you know that you can count on your friends whenever you need them, especially when something’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking, and I do know that. Especially now. And I’ve already said I’m sorry.”

“Won’t happen again, will it?” she asked pointedly.

“No, ma’am!” John promised.

“Good,” Joanne said with a satisfied nod. “Now that we’ve settled that, have you thought about what you’re going to do?”

Johnny swirled the coffee in his cup for a bit, staring at it. “I’m not sure yet.” He looked up at his friends. “What do you guys think?”

“I don’t think we should try and influence you, Johnny,” Roy admonished. “I think you should decide for yourself.”

“Man, Roy, that’s what everyone’s saying. And it ain’t helping, I tell ya. I’ll still decide for myself. But you wanna help, so help. What would you do if it was you?”

Roy thought about it for a long moment. Finally he had to admit. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t.”

Gage chuckled mirthlessly. “Me neither. I’m gonna go say good night to Jen.” He abandoned his coffee and ran upstairs.

“It’s quite a decision,” Joanne said quietly as soon as John had left.

“Yeah. I don’t know what to tell him.” He shook his head. “It’s funny, we keep telling him he shoulda told us so we could help him, and now we know, and we can’t help him.”

“Sure we can,” Jo told him. “By supporting whatever he does decide.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“And maybe,” the woman continued, clearly forming an idea, “some other way.” She went into the kitchen and came back with a large pad of paper and a marker. She made two columns on the paper, labeling one “pros” and the other “cons.”

“He’s not gonna go for that, Joanne,” Roy reproached. “This isn’t like deciding whether or not to buy a new car!”

“How do you know? Maybe he just needs help organizing his thoughts.”

Roy shrugged, and they waited for Johnny to return.

“What’s that?” he asked as soon as he did.

“I thought maybe it would help you decide what’s the best thing to do. Sometimes it’s easier if you make a list.”

Johnny just looked at his partner’s wife, completely incredulous.

“Hey,” the feisty woman said. “You wanted help, this is help. We’ll start with the pros and cons of having the surgery.”
Gage shook his head with a laugh. “Okay, I’ll play along.”

John looked at the two pieces of paper in his hand, his two pros-and-cons lists. It was nice to have it all spelled out for him, and Roy had even thought of a few things that he hadn’t. But there was still one problem.

“Sorry, Jo,” he said. “I still don’t know what to do.”

“Well you just keep those, Johnny,” the woman said. “Maybe they’ll help later.”

“Maybe.” Gage looked at his watch. “I’d better go. We have to work tomorrow.” He stood up and walked around the table to plant a kiss on Joanne’s cheek. “Thanks for dinner,” he said, “and for this,” he added, waving the papers slightly.

“My pleasure, Johnny. Don’t be a stranger, huh? And let me know if there’s anything else I can do.”

“I will.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Roy offered, and the two men went outside.

As he got to his car Johnny looked back at the DeSoto house. Chris’s light was still on, and the entire downstairs was warmly illuminated as well. He couldn’t help but smile wistfully.

“What?” Roy asked.

“Oh nuthin,” John tried to dismiss. But then he changed his mind. “I was just thinking that these last few weeks probably woulda been a lot easier if I’d told you right away.”

DeSoto let out a laugh and playfully jabbed his friend in the arm. “That’s what we’ve been telling you all night. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Johnny climbed in his car. “Yeah, Roy, see ya tomorrow.”

“Where is everyone else?” Johnny asked his partner as he was changing his shirt.

“Dunno. Already dressed, I guess.” Roy looked at his watch. “We better move it. Roll call in a couple of minutes.”

The two men finished changing and made it into the apparatus bay just as Cap was calling them to line up.

Gage could feel his captain sizing him up as he took his place in line. “Welcome back, John. Feeling okay?”

Johnny cocked his head slightly in confusion. Hadn’t he told Cap last shift that he felt fine? “Yeah, Cap,” he replied. “100%.”

“Good, glad to hear it.” Cap proceeded to make his few department announcements, and dole out the chores. Everyone was given something, except Johnny.

“Cap?” the puzzled paramedic asked.
“Oh, I have something in mind for you, John, don’t worry. Why don’t you drop by my office after you and Roy have checked out the squad.”

“Yeah, okay.”

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“What do you think that was about?” Johnny asked as they sorted through the drug box. “It was my turn for latrine duty, you know.”

Roy looked up with an amused half-grin. “You want the latrines? I’m sure Marco will be happy to trade!”

“Well, no, that’s not it!” John protested. “It was just strange, that’s all.”

Roy returned his attention to counting bags of D5W. “Don’t worry about it,” he advised.

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The squad’s supplies in order, Johnny made his way to Cap’s office. “We’re all set,” he told his superior. “What is it you want me to do?”

Stanley banged his hand down on a huge pile of paperwork. “See this?” he said. “Incident reports. They all need to be put in chronological order.”

John’s mouth gaped open in surprise. “There have to be at least a year’s worth there, Cap!”

“Uh huh. Exactly one year, as a matter of fact. But you can take your time. There’s no hurry.”

“Ummm, Cap,” Johnny ventured, getting suspicious. “Can I ask how they got OUT of order?”

Hank shrugged. “You know how it is, John. Three men sharing an office, things get misplaced, piles get knocked over.”

“Uh huhhh. Sure thing, Cap.”

John took the pile of paper into the kitchen and dropped it unceremoniously on the table, then went in search of Roy. He found him changing beds in the dorm.

“Roy, Cap’s got me pushing paper!”

“So?” The elder paramedic didn’t even stop making the bed he was working on.

“Don’t you think that’s a little suspicious?”

DeSoto stopped what he was doing and stood up straight. “Why would I think that?”

“You know,” Gage said with an impatient wave of his hand, “all that stuff I told him last shift. With my . . .” He didn’t finish the sentence, but pointed to his chest instead.

Roy resumed his chore. “I think you’re being paranoid, Johnny. It was just your turn to get the paperwork, that’s all.”

John left, not buying it for a second.

+ + + + +
The morning was a slow one, affording John lots of time to sort paper. He was actually relieved when the tones went off for a jackknifed tanker truck and chemical spill.

Unsure at first of what had been in the tanker, Cap ordered everyone in SCBAs. There were no injuries, so John and Roy found themselves on a hose line, helping to wash down the chemical, which proved to be a horrid-smelling, but relatively harmless all-natural insecticide.

As they worked Johnny couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being watched, and closely. But every time he tried to catch one of them, they’d be looking somewhere else. Was Roy right? Was he being paranoid?

“You guys need help?” Johnny asked Mike and Marco, who were pulling the used hose off the engine to hang out back. It hadn’t taken long to wash down the area and they’d quickly returned to the station.

“Nope, we’re fine Johnny,” Marco promised with smile.

“You sure?” No one ever refused help hanging hose.

“Uh huh. We got it,”

John shook his head and returned to the squad. He could replace the air tanks they’d used with fresh ones, anyway. No one would stop him from doing that. He disconnected the two used ones, and put them aside to be refilled later. Then he hopped in the back of the squad and disconnected two fresh tanks. He moved the first to the edge and hopped down to the ground. But before he could pick it up, Chet was by his side.

“I got it,” Chet said, practically pulling the tank out of John’s hand and lowering it to the ground.

“Chet,” Gage started to admonish, but Kelly had jumped onto the squad to get the second bottle. Johnny set to reconnecting the one tank he had until his friend got down with the second.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he finally asked once Chet had reached the floor and was connecting the second apparatus.

“What?” Chet asked, oozing innocence. “A guy can’t lend a hand?”

“You? No.” Johnny picked up his SCBA and returned it to its compartment. The fireman soon followed with the second, allowing Gage to continue. “I’m fine, Chet. Stop acting all . . . weird.”

“Johnny my friend, you’re losing it! I don’t know what you are talking about!” Though the teasing tone was in Chet’s voice, the mischievous look was missing from his face. He was lying.

But before John could take it any further, the klaxons went off.

“Station 51, Station 36. Structure Fire. 1429 18th St. 1-4-2-9 18th. Cross street Manor. Time out 11:27.”

The paramedic latched the compartment and jumped in the squad.

It was getting smoky up on the 3rd floor, but wasn’t too hot yet. Nevertheless, the man in front of Johnny wouldn’t move. He wasn’t injured, wasn’t sick. He was just . . . paralyzed with fear.
“Look, buddy!” he screamed through his air mask. “We gotta get out of here!! Follow me and I’ll lead you out. Can you do that?”

Nothing.

“WE GOTTA MOVE! NOW!”


With a resigned sigh, the paramedic hoisted the man on his shoulders, and started carrying him to safety. How come the ones who froze were always over 300 pounds?

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Gage was relieved to see that Squad 36 was set up for injuries. He lugged his charge over there, and carefully put the man down. He was winded. Severely.

“What’s the matter?” one of the paramedics, John didn’t catch which one, asked.

“Ahhhh, he’s okay. Hit him with ammonia, and he’ll be fine, I bet. Just scared.”

Gage trudged toward the squad, wearily pulling off his gear and trying to catch his own breath.

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Roy was just leaving the building after sweeping the second floor when he was startled by an urgent tap on his shoulder. It was Chet.

“What?” he asked.

“You’d better come. It’s Johnny.”

He ran around the corner of the burning building, hot on Chet’s heels. He could see Cap and Marco standing by John, who was sitting on the bumper of the squad, bent over at the waist.

“Johnny? What’s the matter?” he asked as soon as he arrived.

John sat up. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“I dunno, pal,” Cap chimed in. “Maybe a ride into Rampart wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“He’s having trouble breathing,” Chet claimed.

“I am NOT!” Johnny stood up suddenly, startling all four men around him.

Roy didn’t know what was going on, or what to make of this. “What happened?” he asked.

“I’ll show you what happened,” Johnny said, making no effort to hide the aggravation in his voice. “See that guy over there with 36s?” He pointed toward their triage area.

Roy looked. “The big guy?”

“Yeah, the 350-pound big guy. You carry that down three flights of stairs without getting a little out of breath.” With that Johnny walked away, ostensibly to put his SCBA away.

“What do you think, Roy?” Captain Stanley asked quietly as soon as John was out of earshot.
Roy looked back at his captain. “Did he really carry that man down?”

Hank shrugged. “I guess so.”

DeSoto didn’t really know what to do. Johnny was winded, that much was obvious. But if he had carried that man out, then he had good reason to be, and that’s what he told his boss.

Cap shook his head pensively. “Things are under control here. Why don’t you pack up and run to Rampart for your supplies,” he suggested. But Roy clearly knew that wasn’t why he wanted the paramedics to go to the hospital.

“Yes sir,” he said, and Roy went to join his partner in packing up their tanks.

“I’m not being paranoid, Roy,” Johnny hissed. “They’re acting like I’m gonna break or something.” As he spoke Gage was twisting his torso and bending over toward his left side.

“You hurt yourself?” Roy asked simply, noting his partner’s movements.

“Stitch in my side,” Gage answered simply.

“Oh. Cap wants us to go pick up our supplies now.”

Johnny snorted with disgust. He knew what that meant, too. “I’m okay, Roy,” he promised as he climbed in the squad.

“Yeah, I know,” Roy sighed.

Dixie looked up and saw two sweaty, sooty paramedics coming her way. “What are you boys doing here?” she asked. They almost never came in looking like this unless something was wrong. “Everyone okay?”

Johnny sort of chuckled. “Yeah, we’re fine. Supplies.” He handed her their list, and she turned around and started to fill the order.

“Is Doctor Brackett in today?” Roy asked.

Johnny immediately hissed “Royyyyyyyy!” And Dix knew that something was up. She turned.

“You know him. He’s here every day, almost. He’s in three. Why?”

“I thought we decided,” John started, but was stopped when Roy started to speak over him.

“I know we did. But I was thinking maybe we could talk to him, find out what you can tell the guys. You know.”

Gage sighed loudly and rolled his eyes, and Dix allowed her bemused grin to grow. Whatever it was, she didn’t want to miss it. “Come on,” she ordered, and led the two men to Dr. Brackett.

Kel’s reaction was much like Dix’s had been. He looked up and immediately asked, “Who’s hurt?”

“No one,” Roy offered. Then he looked at his partner. “Tell him,” he instructed.

Dixie looked at Johnny. His very posture oozed annoyance. “Tell him what?” he asked stubbornly.
Roy didn’t take it any further than that with his partner, and instead turned his attention back to the physician. “Johnny thinks that the guys at the station are . . . I don’t know how to put this. That they are babying him.”

“Not babying, Roy!” John interjected.

“Then what?”

Gage took it from there. “They keep watching me, like they think I’m gonna pass out any second. Chet wouldn’t let me lift air bottles off the squad. And then a little while ago, at this fire we were at . . . .” He stopped.

“What happened at the fire?” Brackett asked after a moment of awkward silence.

Johnny’s stance turned indignant. “I had to carry a 350-pound guy down three flights of stairs. When I got him out I was a little winded. Of course I was out of breath. But Chet saw me and he went nuts, and he told Cap, and Cap sent for Roy, and . . . .” Again he trailed off in frustration.

“And they all thought it had something to do with your lung.”

“Well yeah,” Johnny allowed. “All but Roy, here.”

“Did you think it had something to do with your lung?” the doctor asked his patient.

“I know it didn’t.”

“You should be flattered, Johnny,” Dixie told him. “They care about you, that’s all.”

“Right,” Johnny dismissed. “This is why I didn’t tell anyone,” he muttered derisively.

“I don’t know, Johnny,” Doctor Brackett said. “Maybe if you’d been upfront with the guys from the beginning, they wouldn’t be doubting your word now.”

Gage was thoroughly disgusted by now. “Do we have to go into that again?”

“No, I suppose not.”

Roy finally reentered the conversation. “Doc, there are no restrictions on what he can do, are there?”

Dix almost laughed at the outraged look Johnny shot at his partner, and at the innocent shrug Roy gave in reply.

“None, Roy. John’s lung capacity and pulmonary function tests are all excellent. He’s fine. In fact,” Kel turned his attention to John. “I’d be happy to call Captain Stanley and tell him exactly that if you think it will help.”

John had calmed slightly, and Dix marveled again at how mercurial this man’s emotions were. “Nah, Doc, not yet. Let me talk to him. If I need you to call him later, I’ll let ya know.”

“Okay, John. Just say the word.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Roy said as the two paramedics started to leave the room.

“Hey, Johnny,” Brackett called out before they left. “Have you reached a decision yet?”

John looked back. “Nope. But when I do, you’ll be the first to know.”
“Well I was talking to Dr. Miller, and he wants a follow up in a couple of weeks. That would be a month after we found the lesion.”

“So soon?”

“I’m sure he’s just being cautious; it won’t be every month, Johnny. If you decide not to have surgery, it’ll probably be every three after this one for a while, then every six. You get the idea.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll make an appointment.”

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As the squad turned to back into the station Johnny was still unsure as to how to handle the problem with the rest of the crew. He was angry, annoyed, frustrated, all those things. But what Dix had said to him also had an impact. They’d probably talked about it, about him, before John had even arrived that morning, and had decided to go easy on him. They were just concerned for him.

Misplaced concern manifested in wild over-reactions, sure. But still, knowing that tempered the anger somewhat.

“I think I’m just gonna talk to Cap,” he decided aloud.

“Want me to come?” Roy offered.

“Nah.” John hopped out of the cab and headed toward the office. But it was empty. He went to check the day room, and found the entire crew, Roy included, in there.

“You okay, Johnny?” Marco asked.

Gage ignored the question. “Cap, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure, pal, what’s up?”

“Privately.”

The captain got up, and the two men went into the office. John didn’t bother closing the door before he spoke. “Look, Cap, what happened at the scene back there. It can’t happen again.”

Cap cocked his head, raised an incredulous eyebrow, crossed his arms, and said absolutely nothing.

Suddenly scrambling, John continued. “I figure you guys think you are just looking out for me, and I appreciate it, I guess. But I can do my job, and I don’t want to be treated any different. I’m okay. I’m fine. Honest.”

Stanley uncrossed his arms and rubbed his jaw pensively. “You’ll forgive me for being a little doubtful of your word where this situation is concerned.”

Gage sighed with frustration. This again. “What do you want, a note from my doctor?”

Cap smiled slightly. “Wouldn’t hurt, pal,” he said. But his voice had a slight teasing tone, and Johnny relaxed slightly.

“Dr. Brackett offered to give you a call if I wanted him to. I told him I wanted to try and take care of it myself. But if you want to call him, go ahead. He’ll tell you. I’m 100%.”

“I might do that, I just might,” Stanley allowed. “And in the mean time you have my word, John.
“Business as usual from now on.”

Johnny felt the relief rush over him. “Thanks, Cap.”

“And you can start with helping Marco finish the latrine after lunch. It was supposed to be your turn, you know.”

John smiled. That actually sounded pretty good.

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“Hey, Sandy, it’s John Gage.” It was Monday morning, and Johnny had decided to make his follow up appointment with Miller right away. Once he had squared things with the guys during their Saturday shift things had settled back to normal for the most part—all except that Brackett’s mention of the need for a follow up had kept popping up in his head. And it had gotten worse on Sunday, so that by the end of the evening he was wishing for morning, when he could finally make the appointment and get it out of his mind again for two weeks.

“Hey, Johnny!” the girl answered brightly. “I had a great time last week,” she added somewhat seductively.

“Yeah, umm, me too.” John was too distracted to flirt.

“I was kinda hoping we could do it again some time,” Sandy said. “Soon,” she added.

“Yeah, sure. Look, Sandy, I’m calling to make an appointment with Dr. Miller.”

“Oh!” She was clearly surprised, and John finally realized that she’d thought he was calling for another date. “Anything the matter?” the receptionist asked.

“Nah. I guess I’m supposed to make an appointment for a follow up in about two weeks. Thought I’d just get it out of the way.”

“I see. Hang on a sec.” Johnny heard the unceremonious ‘thud’ as the phone was dropped on the desk. She hadn’t even put him on hold. But she was only gone for a couple of minutes.

“I just talked to the doctor, Johnny. What you really need is an appointment in radiology for more x-rays. I’ll make it for you. Then Dr. Miller will look at the pictures and give you a call with the results. That way you won’t have to schlep up here if there’s no need. Okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you say.”

“Ummmm,” the young woman drew out as she clearly consulted a schedule or calendar. “How’s about two weeks from today at 9? Are you working that day?”

John counted his schedule forward. “Nope, I’ll have just gotten off. That’s perfect.”

“Great. I’ll put you in. Oh, hang on a sec.”

Johnny heard muffled voices, and then Dr. Miller himself was on the phone.

“Do I gather you’ve decided on the conservative approach, John?” he asked.

Johnny let out a breath. Truth was, he hadn’t really decided anything yet. “For now, I guess so. I haven’t decided, to be honest.”
“That’s fine, I was just curious. Again, if you have any questions or concerns, just give me a call.”
“I will, thanks.”

“Not a problem. I’ll give you back to Sandy now.”

The line was silent for a moment before the receptionist returned. “He’s gone, Johnny,” she told him. “So you wanna get together? Maybe tomorrow night?”

The paramedic smiled. “Yeah, sure, why not. How about a movie?”

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The next ten days passed quickly and uneventfully. If the guys hadn’t actually forgotten about Johnny’s “problem,” they had done a good job of pretending that they had. Things at work had been totally normal. Even John himself had done a fairly decent job of putting it out of his own mind.

When he’d left the station on Friday morning, he’d bid his friends a good weekend, and had driven away whistling. He had another date with Sandy on Saturday night, and nothing to do until then but enjoy the beautiful weather. All in all, he’d been in a great mood.

It hadn’t lasted long.

He’d been in the kitchen, getting a glass of orange juice shortly after arriving home, and he happened to glance at the calendar. Monday was circled—in black, not in red, but circled all the same. “Ramp. Rad. 9am” he’d written in his chicken-scratch shorthand.

His follow up at the radiology department.

John hadn’t forgotten all about it, of course. Not totally. But he had managed to convince himself that it was still far off in the future. But there it was, in black ink. It wasn’t far off, not at all. It was on Monday.

And seeing that notice there had been like planting a seed in his brain, which spent the weekend germinating so it was in full bloom by the time he showed up for his next shift on Sunday morning.

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Roy noticed it right away. Johnny looked tired, distant, distracted—exactly like he had a month earlier. The older paramedic sighed, wondering what the problem was, and how hard he should push.

“What’s the matter, Johnny?” he asked, silently praying that his partner would level with him.

Gage smiled. “Nothing. It’s stupid.”

Stupid. Well, that was a relief. “Stupid” was usually a girl. “Didn’t you have a date with Sandy last night?” he ventured.


“Why’d you do that?”

“Wasn’t in a date kinda mood, I guess.” Johnny definitely seemed down.

Roy’s anxiety was escalating. “Is something the matter?”
John looked around the locker room, and only sat when he was confident they were alone in the room. “I have my follow up tomorrow morning, that’s all.” Off Roy’s relieved expression, Gage added, “I told you it was stupid.”

“It’s not stupid, Johnny,” DeSoto told his friend. “I can see why you’d be nervous. But it’s gonna be fine.”

Johnny shrugged. “I know.”

Roy suddenly realized the date. “Do you still want to help me tune up the station wagon tomorrow afternoon? I can do it myself, or we can do it some other time.”

Gage considered it for a minute before answering. “You know what? No, I’ll still come over after the appointment. It’s just a couple of x-rays. I’ll give Dr. Miller your number and he can call me at your place to tell me everything’s okay.” John stood and finished tucking in his shirt. “Yeah,” he decided aloud, “that’s exactly what I’ll do. Thanks Roy!”

The younger paramedic left then, and left Roy wondering what exactly he’d done to improve his partner’s mood. It didn’t matter, he decided, as long as Johnny was feeling better.

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But John’s improved mood proved fleeting. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake the worry from his head. He’d tell himself he’d be fine. He knew everything would be fine. He was sure of it. He’d reason with himself, scold himself, give himself pep talks.

But none of it worked. As soon as he was done with his latest internal monologue, his thoughts would be replaced with a series of nagging “what ifs.”

What if it had gotten bigger?

What if it was changing, as he sat there, into cancer?

What if it hadn’t changed this time, but would before the next set of x-rays?

What if he breathed something in at a fire or something, and it made the thing go crazy and double in size in a week?

What if it started to affect his ability to breathe?

What if?

His concern didn’t affect his performance on the job--he’d learned that lesson well a month ago, and made sure of it. But in all the down time that Sunday afternoon he steered clear of his shift mates, preferring solitude instead. And mercifully, they all seemed to sense his mood and gave him his space.

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Johnny was walking by Cap’s office when his boss called out to him. The paramedic backed up and peeked in. “Got a second?” Stanley asked

“Sure Cap,” Gage said, and he entered the small room. “What’s up?”

“That’s exactly what I was wondering. Are you okay? You seem a little down, kinda distracted, too. There isn’t another problem brewing, is there?”

Johnny shifted uncomfortably. His first instinct, of course, was to claim that he was fine. It was tempting because he knew he should be fine, and that getting worked up about a stupid follow up was a waste. But he also knew that he had no choice but to be completely straight with his captain from here on out. Cap deserved it.

“I have this follow up with the hospital about my lung tomorrow, and it’s on my mind. That’s all, Cap,” he let out in a rush.

“That’s all?” the captain asked incredulously. “That’s something. Should you be expecting a problem?”

“No, not at all. I’m sure it’ll be fine.” John shrugged again. “It’s just that it’s the first one.”

“I understand. Do you want to be relieved of duty? I can call in a replacement; it wouldn’t be a problem at all.”

“No, don’t do that!” Johnny said quickly. “I need to stay at work. I need to keep busy. Believe it or not, it keeps my mind off it.” Gage immediately realized the falsity of his words and grinned sheepishly. “Most of the time. When we get a call, anyway,” he added.

Stanley nodded. “Okay. I know you’ll keep your mind on the job. Have you decided for sure not to have the surgery?”

“I don’t know, Cap. I haven’t decided. Maybe after tomorrow I won’t have a choice any more.”

“That sounds rather defeatist, pal,” Cap said with a smile.

John sort of grinned at that. He was right.

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Johnny was just starting to change into his civilian clothes. Rampart was only five minutes away, and his appointment wasn’t for almost an hour, so he was in no particular hurry. By the time he’d entered the locker room, most of his crewmates were almost ready to go.

He was sitting in front of his locker and concentrating on taking off his boots when he was startled by a pat on his back. Mike said “Good luck today, Johnny,” and by the time the paramedic looked up, the engineer was almost out the door.

“Uhhh, thanks,” he mumbled. How had he known?

Then it was Marco’s turn. “Yeah, Johnny, hope everything turns out all right,” he said as he was leaving.

Johnny shot a confused look at his partner, and Roy merely shrugged. But Gage knew his friend would never tell anyone without his permission. And neither would Cap. That left one person, who was standing at the sinks and seemed fascinated with his mustache.

“Chetttt?” John drew out, looking over at the fireman.

Kelly met his gaze through the reflection in the mirror. “Why do you always think it’s me?” he asked.

“Maybe because it always IS you?” Roy provided.

Chet turned. “I resent that,” he said with mock indignation.
“How’d you know?” Johnny asked.

“I heard you telling Cap yesterday. And the other guys, they were wondering what was bothering you, so I told ‘em.” Chet sounded defiant at first, but as he spoke that changed to apologetic. “Don’t be mad at them, they were just worried about you, that’s all.”

“I’m not mad at them,” Johnny said. “You, however. . . .” He didn’t finish.

“Hey, I was too!” Chet protested.

“Was what?” Roy asked. He seemed to be enjoying this. “Worried?”

“Well, concerned. I was concerned. You’re not fair game when you’re down in the dumps, you know.”

Johnny grinned. He wasn’t mad at Chet, actually. Not at all, and that sort of surprised him. He wasn’t upset that everyone knew, and apparently had for much of the shift. They hadn’t treated him differently, they’d respected his desire for space. And he had to admit that knowing they were thinking about him was a good feeling. He was actually glad they knew.

But still, this was Chet.

“You shoulda talked to me first,” he scolded, and he left it at that.

“Yeah, okay,” Kelly allowed, then adding, “And what Mike and Marco said? It goes for me too.”

Johnny just had to smile. When he left the station he was feeling a lot better about things, and he had to confess that having people in your corner did make things easier to take.

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The x-rays had been a breeze, of course, and John headed up to Dr. Miller’s office to give them Roy’s number so the doctor could reach him with the results. He opened the door and was slightly chagrined by the cold, polite smile the receptionist gave him. Sandy was mad, and Johnny had to admit she had good reason to be. He’d cancelled their date on a Saturday night with only an hour’s notice.

“Hey, Sandy,” he said tentatively.

“Johnny,” she responded curtly.

Business first. “I, uhhh, just had my x-rays taken, and I’m not gonna be home this afternoon, so I wanted to leave you the number where Dr. Miller can reach me.”

The girl didn’t even look up. She just picked up a pen and poised it over a pad of paper. “Shoot,” she directed.

The paramedic gave her Roy’s number, then stood there silently for a second. He looked around. There was one person sitting quietly in the corner, clearly paying no attention whatsoever to the little drama playing out at the reception desk.

“Look, Sandy,” he started hesitantly. The woman looked at him expectantly, her lips pursed into a thin straight line. “I’m sorry about Saturday.”

“You should be!” she said forcefully. “Look, I know we’ve only dated half a dozen times and stuff, but you don’t just call and cancel and not give a reason like that! It’s rude!”
She was absolutely right. It had been rude, and stupid, too. Sandy was a great girl, really pretty, fun to be with. Once upon a time he’d have said that nothing could possibly make him want to cancel a date with a girl like her. But he had let something make him want to, and something stupid at that. And then he’d made it worse by not leveling with her.

But he could rectify that last part right now. “You’re right, and I’m sorry. It’s just that,” Johnny paused, frustrated that yet again that he was having so much trouble being straight with people. “It’s just that I was thinking about this, the follow up, and I knew I just wouldn’t be very good company.”

Sandy’s terse expression melted away into a gorgeous smile. “Well why didn’t you just say so, silly! I would have understood that!” Then she winked. "And I bet I woulda kept your mind off of it," she added.

Gage returned her grin. “Yeah, I bet you would have.” He looked at his watch. He was gonna be late for Roy’s. “Look, I gotta go. You’ll make sure the doc gets that number?”

“I’ll make sure, Johnny.” She jotted some words on the note, pulled it off the pad, and placed it in the doctor’s “in” box.

“And I want a raincheck!” the girl said after him as Gage was leaving the office, but he barely noticed.

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"So I was driving over here thinking 'this is really dumb,' you know, Roy? Really really dumb. I mean, I'm gonna have to be having these follow ups all the time. I can't be letting them get me all worked up every time. I'll drive myself crazy!" Johnny was speaking from underneath the DeSoto station wagon, and Roy was listening from his place buried under the hood.

"All the time?" Roy asked. "Does that mean you're not gonna have the operation?" The older paramedic was glad Johnny had brought this up, giving Roy a chance to find out where his partner's head was.

John pushed himself out from under the car, and Roy stood to look down at him. "That's just it, Roy. I thought I had. I thought I had decided not to do it. I mean, who wants to have an operation if they don't absolutely have to? Why look for trouble like that, right?"

Roy nodded silently, sure Gage was nowhere near finished.

"But then this past weekend, man, I don't mind admitting I was a wreck, all over again! I canceled a date! What did I do that for?"

Roy shrugged. He knew it was best not to try and say anything until Johnny was done.

"So now I don't know again. I mean, I still don't want to have surgery. But can I stand not knowing, and always wondering, and it getting worse every time I have to go back in for an x-ray?"

"Don't you think you'd get used to that eventually, though, Johnny?"

Gage shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe. Probably. But what if I don't? And what if now I start thinking about how many days to go until it's time to start thinking about it again?"

DeSoto was totally confused. He had no idea what his partner had just said. Thankfully, Joanne opened the door to the garage.
"Johnny, telephone," she said simply.

Roy looked down at his partner. Johnny took a deep breath and hopped up from the creeper. "Be right back," he said. He grabbed a rag and left the garage, wiping grease off his hands as he went.

Johnny saw the phone sitting on the kitchen counter and picked it up.

"This is John Gage," he said.

"Hi, Johnny, it's Sandy."

The paramedic was surprised. He was expecting the doctor. "Oh, hi."

"Hi," the girl repeated. "Um, Johnny, Dr. Miller wanted me to call and see if you could come in."

There was a stool sitting under the wall phone, and John felt a sudden need to use it. "Why?" he asked.

"I don't know," the receptionist told him.

"Come on, Sandy, you know everything. Is it bad news?" Johnny registered motion in his peripheral vision, but didn't actually notice Joanne walking past him and to the garage.

"I honestly don't know, Johnny. I was at lunch and when I came back there was a note on my chair from Dr. Miller, asking me to call you and see if you could come in at four."

Roy was leaning casually against the family car, waiting for Johnny to return. He was mulling whether or not they should just quit with the car and relax for a bit when Joanne came back to the doorway. Her expression immediately caused him to stand up straight with alarm.

"You'd better come in," is all she said.

By the time he reached the kitchen Johnny was saying goodbye and hanging up the phone. He looked blankly at the couple for a moment, clearly stunned.

"I," he started. "I have to go in. At four."

Joanne reached out and touched Johnny's hand, which was resting on the counter.

Roy consulted his watch. It was only 1:45. "Did he say why?" he asked.

"It wasn't . . . it wasn't the doctor. It was Sandy. She didn't know why."

"Who's Sandy?" his wife asked, and Roy quieted her by simply saying "receptionist."

"I'm sure it's nothing, Johnny," DeSoto soothed. "He probably just wants to see if you've reached a decision about what to do long-term. Don't you think?"

Gage was shaking his head. "When I made the appointment Dr. Miller set it up this way specifically so I wouldn't have to go into the office. Not if everything was okay, that is."

Roy couldn't argue with that. "So what do you want to do?" he asked. "There's almost two hours
before you have to go."

Johnny was studying his still-greasy fingernails. "Let's finish the car," he said quietly.

"Oh, Johnny, forget the car!" Joanne exclaimed.

But Roy understood. Keep busy, keep your hands busy, keep moving, keep your mind off it. "No, Jo, it's a good idea. You can't drive it like it is. We at least need to put it back together." He clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Let's go finish up."

As the two men made their way back to the garage, Roy spoke again. "I'm coming with you this time. No arguments."

Johnny just looked at him and nodded.

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"I'll drive," John heard his friend say, and he nodded mutely. They'd finished tuning up the car in silence, Gage because he couldn't stop running through the possibilities in his head, and Roy, Johnny was sure, because he didn't know what to say.

The two paramedics climbed into Roy's Porsche and made the short trip to Rampart. Silently.

Roy led Johnny toward the Emergency entrance, and John didn't even bother to stop him and say he'd rather go around front. It didn't matter, anyway. They walked down the corridor toward the elevator, and its doors opened as they approached, so they headed straight in. Johnny noticed the baffled and concerned look on Dixie's face as they passed, but neither of them stopped to explain. She'd find out soon enough, anyway.

When they entered the waiting area Johnny was immediately met with Sandy's sympathetic smile. She probably knew by now, and the look on her face told him all he needed to know. He didn't say anything to her, and wandered over to the corner and faced it, crossing his arms on his chest to keep his hands from shaking.

"John Gage is here," he heard Sandy say quietly into the phone. He could feel Roy's presence behind him, but not too close.

"You can go in, Johnny," the young receptionist told him, so he turned and faced the door.

"Johnny?" Roy asked quietly. "What do you want me to do?"

He looked at his friend, momentarily puzzled.

"Do you want me to wait here?" he elaborated. "Or come in with you?"

John was sure he couldn't deal with telling people all over again. "Come in," he tried to say confidently, only it came out as a whisper.

As soon as they entered the office and Johnny saw Kelly Brackett standing behind Miller's desk, leaning against the windowsill with his arms crossed, the paramedic's first instinct was to turn tail and run. This was actually proving to be worse than the first time. He didn't say anything, and took a seat before Miller could even offer one. Roy, for his part, remained standing by the door.

"I know you haven't come to a definite decision about whether or not to have surgery, but I was discussing your case with a colleague," the surgeon started without prelude. "And he agreed with me
that you'd be a perfect candidate for a procedure that is far less invasive and has a much quicker recovery time. I thought I'd go over it with you, and see if this option is something that might interest you."

As the doctor spoke, Johnny's confusion only grew. What was he talking about? Options? He still had options? "Wait," he said suddenly, actually throwing his hand up lest the doctor try to continue. "Wait a minute. That's why you brought me in here? To tell me about another option?"

"Why, yes." It was the doctor's turn to be confused. Johnny could see it on his face.

"Not because the x-rays were bad, because something had changed, because I was worse?"

"Oh, no, not at all," the physician replied. "The x-rays were fine. There’s no change."

John's head was reeling. He felt sick and like the walls were closing in on him. He had to get out of there, and now, so he quickly stood up. "I'm sorry . . . I uhhh, I have to step outside for a minute."

And with that he fled the room.

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Roy watched his friend run out, and was tempted to follow, but thought better of it. He knew why he’d left, and figured it was better to give John a chance to pull himself together.

"What was that?" Brackett asked.

DeSoto looked at the two doctors. "Johnny was sure you were calling him in here to tell him he was worse. We both were, actually."

"It was just a routine follow up, Roy," Kel said. "What would give him that idea?"

The paramedic set his now-angry gaze on Dr. Miller. "Maybe because the arrangement was that he wouldn't have to come in to the office at all, unless something had changed? And this guy didn’t tell anyone why he wanted to see Johnny."

Roy watched the surgeon get his back up. “I'm sorry,” he said rather haughtily. “I don’t even know who you are.”

"This is Roy DeSoto, John’s partner in the fire department. And the closest thing he has to family in Los Angeles," Brackett supplied curtly. “Is what he says true, Carl?” he asked pointedly.

For his part the surgeon looked genuinely chagrined, but only for a moment. He quickly recovered. “That’s right. I did convey to him that the results would come by phone call,” he admitted. His voice, however, sounded like he’d merely forgotten to return a phone call rather than scared the life out of one of his patients, and it infuriated Roy so much he was speechless.

But Dr. Brackett wasn’t. “Carl, how could you be so thoughtless? Of course Johnny and Roy would think the worst, then! And then he walks in here and you don’t even talk about the results, and instead jump right into trying to talk him into a surgical procedure? What was he supposed to think? Have you no bedside manner at all?"

Roy almost choked when he heard that. Under any other circumstance he might have actually laughed, given that Brackett wasn’t exactly renowned for his bedside manner himself. But he was still too angry with the surgeon.
“Admittedly I could have handled this better,” Miller stated calmly. “And if you can find John, I’ll apologize.”

Kel was looking at Roy expectantly. “I think we should give him a minute,” the paramedic advised. “If I know Johnny, he’ll come back.”

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Gage was leaning heavily on the sink in the men’s room. He’d spent the first few minutes in the room pacing it furiously, practically raving, and not even caring if someone else came in. But luckily the room had remained empty.

He just needed time to calm down, to get his heart out of his throat, and to fight back the incredible urge to strangle Dr. Miller.

He had better be one damn good surgeon to make up for being such a first-class jerk.

As soon as that thought entered his mind, Johnny lifted his head and studied himself in the mirror. Just like that he was sure. Sure that he couldn’t possibly live one more month on this emotional roller coaster. Sure he couldn’t let this thing rule--and ruin--his life any more.

Sure he was going to find out what kind of surgeon Miller was.

He had to have it taken out, sooner rather than later. He couldn’t live like this any more. He just couldn’t.

He took a moment to splash some cold water on his face and then, filled with a new sense of resolve, Johnny headed back to the doctor’s office.

“I think you can go right in,” Sandy told him as soon as he opened the door. “No one’s left.”

He smiled sheepishly at her, and pulled the door to Miller’s office open.

Three heads looked up to meet his eyes, and Johnny walked in and sat down.

Dr. Miller was the first to speak. “I believe I owe you and apology, John,” he admitted.

“Forget that,” Gage said impatiently. It was suddenly urgent to get what he wanted to say out. “Look, I can’t stand this. I want you to take it out. As soon as possible. Get it out of me.”

Miller intertwined his fingers and leaned forward on his desk. “I’ll be glad to do whatever you want, John, but I don’t want you to make this decision impetuously, or as a result of something I did. Your condition is unchanged; you’re doing fine. There is no medical imperative for surgery at this time.”

“That’s not it; it’s not just you. It’s everything. Everyone who knows looks at me strange. My friends don’t know what to say to me, and I don’t know what to say to them, either. And I know I’m driving ‘em crazy.” John glanced apologetically at Roy as he said the last part, and almost smiled when he saw his partner disagree by shaking his head. He turned his attention back to Miller. “Every time I see you, too, I think about it—or Sandy out there.” He didn’t let on that he meant outside of the office. Then he looked at Dr. Brackett. “And you, too,” he said. “Every time I see you or you start to say something to me my first reaction is ‘What’s wrong now?’ And I see you all the time. That can’t keep happening.”

Johnny took a breath before continuing. “And it’s always there, in the back of my mind. I pretend it’s not, and sometimes I’ve even convinced myself that it’s not. But that’s a lie. It doesn’t take hardly
anything to put it right back, the only thing on my mind. Every time I cough, every time I eat a little smoke at a fire, I wonder if it means something, or what it’s gonna do to this thing in my lung.” Johnny stopped for a second, shaking his head. “Look, I don’t want you to cut me open, I don’t want to think about how much work I’m gonna miss, or what will happen if something goes wrong. But even more, I don’t want to live like this any more. It’s making me nuts. This has been the worst month of my life. You gotta take it out.”

Dr. Miller smiled warmly. “Okay then. I’ve suspected all along that you’d ultimately decide to be proactive, which is why I discussed your case with my colleague in the first place. Let me tell you about the procedure I brought you in here to talk about. It might just be the answer you’re looking for.”

Johnny nodded, then caught Kelly Brackett’s glance. “Can I ask a question first?” he directed at the ER doctor.

“Sure,” Kel answered.

“How come you’re here? When I saw you in here, man, I thought it was really bad news!”

Brackett gave a half-smile. “Just bad—or good, depending on how you look at it—timing. Carl here called me to discuss this new option for you as well, and I came up to talk about it just a few minutes before you were set to arrive. So I waited for you.”

“Oh.”

Dr. Miller shifted in his chair to draw attention to himself again. “Okay let’s get down to business,” he said matter-of-factly. “Why don’t you sit down, Mr. . . . DeSoto, was it?”

John nodded at his friend to indicate it was okay, and Roy sat.

“The plan here is to use a rigid bronchoscope as sort of a telescope into your chest cavity. Rather than do a thoracotomy, which would involve a large incision through the chest wall, and spreading the ribs apart and results in a very lengthy and painful recovery, we’d make two or three much smaller incisions, go between your ribs, and hopefully be able to remove the tumor through them. Since we know we’re not dealing with a malignancy, getting large and clear margins is less of a concern, so we feel this might be successful. Sound like something you might be interested in?”

“Definitely,” Johnny said. “Tell me more.”

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As the elevator descended back to the first floor, Kel Brackett looked across at Roy. Johnny was between them, but leaning against the back wall, and out of their line of sight. DeSoto glanced over, but the three men remained silent. It wasn’t until they had almost reached their destination that Gage stood up straight between them.

When the doors opened the young paramedic spoke. “Thanks for everything, Doc,” he said as he started to walk away. “I’ll be in touch about the details ‘n stuff.”

Roy just shrugged and followed his friend.

“What is going on, Kel?” Dixie asked as soon as he reached the base station.

Brackett was still watching the retreating men. “Johnny’s decided to have the surgery.”
“Well that doesn’t surprise me. But how come he looked so upset when he came in earlier?”

Brackett smiled slightly. “That’s a long story. But in the end it was what made our young friend finally make up his mind.”

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“So you’re absolutely sure about this?” Roy was driving them back to his house so Johnny could get his car. His partner hadn’t said two sentences since leaving the surgeon’s office, so Roy had his doubts.

John was nodding. “Yeah, I am. Not looking forward to it, but I’m sure.”

“Well, if they can do this other thing, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

Roy glanced over and his partner was grinning at him ruefully. “Easy for you to say,” he pointed out. “They’re not gonna do it to you.”

There was nothing DeSoto could say to rebut that. It was true.

“I just can’t stand the not knowing and stuff any more.”

“But Johnny,” Roy offered up, “if you’d just let people know how you’re feeling, and what’s going on, I don’t think it would be nearly as bad.”

“I know,” Gage admitted. “But that’s not fair to you guys. Dragging you down with me like that. Not when I can do something to avoid it.”

Roy sighed loudly. “I wish you’d stop worrying about your friends’ feelings, Johnny. Don’t worry about us. Worry about yourself.”

He was surprised when Johnny chuckled at that. “I am worrying about myself, Roy. All the time. Don’t want to keep doing that either.”

They were approaching a stop sign, and Roy took an extra moment there to look over at his friend. “Just so long as you’re sure, and you’re doing it because you want to. For yourself and no one else.”

Johnny met his gaze. “I am, Roy,” he said levelly. “I really am.”

DeSoto nodded and kept driving.

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Cap was just finishing roll call, and John found himself fidgeting. Before his superior released them, he spoke up.

"Uh, Cap? Can I say something?"

The captain cocked his head in surprise. "Sure, John," he answered.

Johnny took a deep breath and buried his hands in his pockets. He was nervous, and yet again he wasn’t sure why.

"I, uhhh, just wanted to let you guys know that in two weeks I’m gonna have this thing taken out of my lung."
Immediately the men broke their straight line formation and gathered around him, peppering him with concerned questions. Gage glanced over at Roy, who remained by his side, and silent.

After a moment Stanley silenced his men simply by raising a hand. "Is this because of your appointment on Monday?" he asked the paramedic.

"Well, yes and no," Johnny answered, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I don't have to have it done; nothing's changed there--physically, I mean." He could see the relief at that news on his friends' faces, and it made him smile slightly. "But I just don't like the not knowing. And I can't see as it's gonna get any better if I keep having to have these follow ups." Gage shook his head and sighed. "I mean, you guys saw it, saw how much I let it bug me."

"How long are you going to be out?" Mike asked.


“Well, we’ll sure miss you when you’re out,” Marco offered.

“Thanks, Marco,” the paramedic said with a grin. “But it’s not for another couple of weeks. That’s when it’s scheduled for, anyway.”

Cap clapped his hands together once to draw attention to himself. “Well, then, John, why don’t we go into my office and fill out your leave papers. Make sure everything’s in order and on time.”

“Yeah, sure, Cap,” and the men left.

Roy watched them go, anticipating what was to happen next. His friends didn’t disappoint.

“How come he decided to do it all of a sudden?” Chet asked.

“You heard him.”

“Well, yeah, but that sounded awfully lame. You sure he’s not worse or anything?” Try as he might, Kelly couldn’t hide the concern from his voice.

“Yeah, I’m sure, Chet,” DeSoto promised. “I went with him to his appointment on Monday. Heard it with my own ears.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” Mike offered. “Is there anything we can do for him, Roy?”

Roy shrugged helplessly. “I dunno. I figure the next couple of weeks aren’t gonna be any fun for him—or for the rest of us for that matter. Maybe just help him keep his mind off it for a while. Or give him some space if it seems like he’s in a bad mood.” The paramedic made a point of looking at Chet as he made the last point.

“That’s another thing,” Marco added. “If he decided to get it done, why wait two weeks?”

“It’s elective surgery, Marco. They have to schedule it. Two weeks was the first date that was available at Rampart when the doctor was also available. He’s lucky, though. It coulda been a longer wait.”

“It’s gonna be a long two weeks, I bet,” Chet muttered.

“Yeah, probably,” Roy agreed. “Most of all for Johnny.”
“Have a seat,” Cap offered as soon as Johnny had followed him into the office. The paramedic complied, and Stanley sat opposite him, behind his desk.

“You’re sure about this?”

John nodded. “Yeah. Absolutely. It’s the right thing to do.” He paused for a minute and allowed himself to grin. “I think,” he added, looking down at his feet.

Cap leaned forward. “What did the doctors say?”

Gage shrugged slightly. “Same thing. It’s up to me. But the surgeon’s wanted me to do it all along. I know that.”

“And Doctor Brackett?”

“He wouldn’t say anything one way or the other. But I think he thinks I’m doing the right thing.”

“Well, then, I guess it’s settled,” the captain said. “Now, for the paperwork.” He reached to his right, picked up a folder that was sitting on top of the desk, and opened it. “Now what’s the last shift you’ll be working?” he asked, pen in-hand and poised over the paper.

“Umm, on the 9th. It’s scheduled on the 12th.”

“Okay, good. Indefinite medical leave commencing on the 10th.” He jotted the date down and looked at John. “That ought to do it, then. Just needs your signature.”

With that Cap spun the folder around until the form was facing Johnny. The young man looked at it, and saw that it had been completely filled out some time ago, with only the dates left blank.

“Cap,” he started, “how did you know?”

Stanley chuckled. “Anticipation is a huge part of my job, pal. Most of the time I think I know what you guys are gonna do before you do!”

“So you always thought? . . . You always knew I’d . . . ?” Gage was stunned.

“I had a good idea, sure. You’re not the passive type, John. If there’s action to be taken, I can always count on you to take it.”

Johnny ducked his head to hide the blush that threatened to come to his cheeks. That was high praise coming from his captain, and it was a nice thing to hear. “Thanks, Cap,” he said as he took the pen and signed the form.

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In the end, Roy was wrong. John’s spirits remained high during the ensuing two weeks. If the guys realized that his constant requests for people to shoot hoops or play cards with were his attempts at distraction, they didn't say anything. But Johnny had no trouble rounding up participants, and for that he was grateful. He just kept busy, both on duty and off, where he found himself offering to help Roy around the DeSoto house.

“Geez Johnny, this operation is the best thing that ever happened for me!” Roy teased while the two men were on his roof replacing some shingles.
“Yeah, well, I don’t mind helping,” Johnny admitted. “Beats sitting around my apartment, anyway,” he added bashfully.

“What about Sandy? You still seeing her?”

“Nah, not really. It was just too awkward. Once I decided . . . I don’t know, it just felt weird, since she knows everything.”

Roy had nodded. “I kinda figured that would happen. She seemed nice, though, Johnny. Maybe you should call her again after it’s over and you’re feeling better.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“I’m still taking you to the hospital tomorrow, right?”

Johnny nodded. “If you don’t mind. I know you have that thing for Jen, so if you don’t have time I can ask Chet or Marco.”

“It’s no problem. I just won’t be able to stay, that’s all.”

“That’s okay,” Johnny said. “Thanks.”

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Johnny was sitting on his bed, bored out of his mind. Because his surgery was scheduled for first thing in the morning, he’d been admitted the evening before. He couldn’t help chuckling at the irony. Here he was, in a hospital bed, and he wasn’t sick or hurt. It was a new situation for him.

He had already inspected the offerings on all six TV channels and decided they were terrible, and had just started to wish he had some company to make the time pass quicker when the door burst open. In came Mike, Marco, and Chet, together.

“Hi, guys!” Gage welcomed enthusiastically. “What are you doing here?”

“Well we knew Roy had his daughter’s tap recital tonight, so we thought you might like some company,” Marco explained.

“That’s great! Just great!” The paramedic made no effort to hide how happy he was to see them.

“We figured we could,” Chet started, reaching into his pocket, “play a little cards!” he finished, brandishing a deck.

Johnny looked around his room. They were one short. “Someone go get another chair. Let’s play. Anyone bring the poker chips?”

“Nah,” Mike dismissed as Kelly left in search of more seating. “Just for fun this time. No money.”

“But what if I kick Chet’s butt? I’ll have nothing to show for it!”

“If that happens,” Lopez promised, “Mike and I will vouch for you. Promise.”

Chet returned with a chair, the men arranged themselves around the bed and Johnny, sitting cross-legged on top, dealt the cards. “Five card draw,” he instructed. “Deuces wild.”

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They were well into the game, and Johnny was winning more hands than anyone else, when the
door opened and Dixie came in.

“Good lord, boys, visiting hours ended an hour ago! What are you doing here?”

“Playing cards?” Chet answered helpfully.

“I see that, but you’ve got to go now. Johnny has a busy day tomorrow. He needs his rest!”

“Do not, Dix. I’ll be asleep during the operation, remember? Let ‘em stay. I’m winning!”

The nurse simply cocked her head and crossed her arms. The firemen got the message, and quickly
packed up the cards and pushed their chairs back to the corners of the room.

“We’re working tomorrow, Johnny,” Mike reminded him, “but Roy will keep us up to date on how
you’re doing. Take it easy.” He held out his hand, and Johnny shook it.

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Yeah, Johnny,” Marco added. “I’ll come by to see ya after shift on Thursday, okay?” He patted the
paramedic on the back.

“Yeah, that’ll be great, Marco.”

“I was letting you win, you know,” Chet said.

Johnny let out a laugh. “You wish. I’ll see ya later, Kelly.”

“Yeah, later, Gage.”

The men left, and Dixie watched the door click shut before turning toward the patient. “You’ve got
some good friends there,” she pointed out.

“You’ve been admitted for surgery, Johnny.”

Johnny took a deep breath. “What’s this?”

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Johnny let out a laugh. “You wish. I’ll see ya later, Kelly.”

“Yeah, later, Gage.”

The man stared at the small white tablet for a moment, then made his decision. “I’d rather not,” he
declared, handing the cup back to his friend. “But thanks anyway.”

Dix took the pill with a resigned sigh. “When you can’t sleep in the middle of the night, just ring the call bell. You can still take it later. Have a good night’s sleep and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Johnny tossed and turned for the 400th time, and again cursed Dixie for being right, as usual. He turned on the light over his bed so he could see the clock. It was 1:14am. Only 26 minutes since the last time he’d checked. This wasn’t working.

He picked up the call button and pushed it with a resigned sigh.

After just a moment the door opened and a nurse walked in. She was carrying a small tray with a little cup sitting on it.

“Nurse McCall told us you’d ring,” she said with a kind smile.

“No, not there,” John told the nurse impatiently. “There. That’s a better vein right there.”

“Telling our nurses what to do?” Kelly Brackett asked with a smile as he entered the room.

Gage shrugged, wincing as he felt the IV needle enter his arm.

“How are you this morning, Johnny? Ready to get this taken care of once and for all?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” His voice wavered ever-so-slightly, but John couldn’t stop it.

“Nervous?”

“Maybe a little. This is all kinda new.”

“I imagine it is. But Carl Miller is the best lung surgeon I know. I wouldn’t have referred you to him otherwise.”

“I know, Dr. Brackett, and I appreciate all your help. I really do.” All of a sudden a strange feeling washed over John. “Whoa,” he muttered, lifting his hand to his head.

“The sedative she just gave you is taking effect, Johnny. They’ll be in to take you up to surgery in just a few minutes.” The doctor rested his hand on his friend’s forearm and gave it a slight squeeze. “You just relax. In a few hours this will all be behind you.”

“Mmmm hmmm,” was about all the paramedic could muster in response. He laid his head heavily on the pillow, and watched the doctor leave the room.

Roy pushed the gurney impatiently through the ER doors. As it moved down the corridor the paramedic scanned the faces for two people in particular, but saw neither. He wheeled his patient into exam 2 and left him in Dr. Morton’s care as quickly as he could, then went straight to the base station. Dixie was on the phone.

“Perfect timing, Roy,” she said as soon as she hung up. “That was the OR. They just finished on Johnny and Dr. Miller is on his way down to talk to Kel.”
“Did they say how it went?”

“Said it went well, but didn’t give any specifics. Why don’t you wait for the doctor to come down. I’ll go find Kel.” DeSoto nodded as the nurse walked away.

After a few moments the elevator doors opened and Dr. Miller, still wearing his surgical scrubs and cap, stepped out. He didn’t see Roy, but did apparently see Dr. Brackett, and moved directly toward the ER head’s office.

It briefly occurred to Roy that he shouldn’t follow, or wouldn’t be allowed in even if he did. But he discarded the notion; he had to try.

And it was immediately apparent that he didn’t have to worry. Brackett held the door open until Roy reached him, and had also joined Miller and Dix in the office, before entering himself.

“How’d it go?” Kel asked with no greeting.

“Fairly well,” the surgeon responded. “Had a little trouble with bleeding, so I had to make one of the incisions larger than I wanted, and he’s got a chest tube in now, but we got the entire lesion.”

“How’d it look?”

“Looked okay to me, nothing immediately alarming about it. We sent it to pathology, of course. They should confirm that it was benign.”

“But you didn’t have to do a full-fledged thoracotomy?”

“No, not at all. It was more involved that we originally hoped, but nothing at all like it could have been.”

Roy was quietly watching the two doctors banter like it was a tennis match, his attention switching from on to another and back again. He was waiting for them to get around to the part he was interested in, but apparently Dix wasn’t willing to wait, and she spoke up.

“Am I the only one who’s wondering how Johnny’s doing?” she asked. Her tone was chiding, and she shot a little smug grin toward Roy after she’d spoken. Roy nodded back at her. No, she wasn’t the only one.

“He’s in recovery. Probably asleep. We’ve got him on some serious pain medication for the time being. But he did well in surgery.”

“How long do you anticipate he’ll need the chest tube?” Brackett asked, returning the conversation to medical specifics.

“Hard to say. We’ll monitor the output. He lost a fair amount of blood into the chest cavity. Not too much, but a fairly significant amount. A couple of days, I’d guess.”

“Where will you send him from recovery? ICU?”

“For a bit. I want his breathing monitored closely.”

Dixie had started moving, and it caught Roy’s attention. She cocked her head toward the door, indicating that they should slip out. DeSoto was torn. Part of him thought he should stay and watch the two surgeons discuss the specifics of John’s case, but at the same time he didn’t want to know all the little details. After a second of indecision, he followed the nurse.
It turned out to be a good decision when she spoke conspiratorially as soon as the door closed and they were safely in the hall. “Let’s go check on your partner,” she whispered.

The first thing Roy noticed was Johnny’s breathing. Even though his partner was asleep, it was coming in short puffs under the full oxygen mask, almost like he was panting. He turned to ask Dixie if that was normal, and was surprised to find that she was no longer next to him. She was on the other side of the room, talking to a nurse.

Gage’s hands stirred and he moaned, and Roy approached the bedside. “Johnny?” he asked quietly, “you awake?” John moaned again, but the older paramedic had no way of knowing if it was a response, or a coincidence. His partner’s eyes remained closed.

“Nurse Davis said his breathing is nothing to be concerned about this early. Once the anesthesia has worn off, and he’s more awake, they’ll start pushing him to breathe more deeply,” Dixie offered as she returned to Roy’s side.

“Thanks, I was wondering.”

“He’s asleep?” the nurse asked.

“Yeah, I think so. He moaned a little, but I don’t think he’s awake.”

“Well, then,” Dixie counseled, “we should probably let him be.”

“Yeah,” Roy agreed, unable to take his eyes off his partner. “He looks terrible,” he blurted out after a second.

He felt Dixie’s warm hand on his arm. “Of course he does, Roy. He just had surgery. He’ll look better later today, I’d bet. And even better tomorrow. He’ll be fine.”

Roy actually shuddered, and felt a sudden, urgent need to leave the recovery room. “Yeah, I guess so,” he agreed quickly. “I’d better get back to work.”

He turned and started to leave, but then turned back. “You’ll call if anything changes?” he asked the nurse.

“Of course I will, Roy. You don’t have to ask that.”

In the end, she didn’t have to call. Roy managed to visit John a couple more times as their shift wore on, and each time his partner was a little more aware, but he was either heavily medicated, or virtually incoherent because of the pain. Despite assurances that he was doing well, Roy hated seeing Johnny that way.

Their release from duty was imminent, and the B-shift paramedics were already in, so Roy was changing. He planned to go home for a bit and update Joanne on his partner’s condition, and head back to the hospital for a visit later in the day.

“You gonna head over to see Johnny now?” Chet asked him as he entered the locker room.

“Nah, I’m gonna head home for a bit first, and go over later on.”

“You think it would be okay if I went straight over?” the fireman asked a bit apprehensively.
Roy couldn’t help but smile. Despite his penchant for tormenting Johnny, Kelly was always ready to come through for him in a pinch.

“Visiting hours don’t start until nine, but I bet you could find someone to stretch the rules for you a bit,” DeSoto advised.

“Great. I’ll go on over, then.”

“Tell him I’ll be by later.”

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The pain was excruciating, unlike anything he’d ever experienced. Every breath, no matter how shallow, was torture. He couldn’t not breathe—as tempting as that was—so there was no respite, either. No way he could move to relieve an ache, no area he could avoid touching to avoid a pain. He was trapped, in agony, and without any options other than to gut it out.

He tried, truly he did. But it was so bad he was almost in tears, and was reaching for the call button when Chet entered his room. Johnny dropped the button and tried to smile. It was weak at best.

“Hey, Chet,” he managed to whisper.

“Hey, Johnny, how ya doing?”

John took a breath that was slightly too deep, and the pain was exquisite. He stopped in mid-inhale, grimaced, and slowly let the air back out into his oxygen mask. He took a couple of seconds to compose himself before answering, “I’m doing okay. Not too bad.”

Chet didn’t answer, and when Johnny looked at him, he had a puzzled look on his face. “Glad to hear it,” he said distractedly. “Bet it hurts, huh?” he asked.


“He went home for a bit to see Jo. Wanted me to tell you he’ll be by later. I think Mike and Marco are planning on coming in today, too. If they can.”

“That’s nice. It’ll be good to see them, and I really appreciate . . . .” John was forced to stop talking. He’d expended what air he had in his lungs, and needed to breathe in again, which was the really hard part. He settled for several shallow breaths rather than the deep one he craved.

He didn’t realize that he’d closed his eyes in order to concentrate on his breathing. When he opened them, Chet was staring down at him.

“You’re in a lot of pain, Johnny,” he stated simply.

“No,” John protested halfheartedly. “’m okay. Sit down.”

Chet’s expression turned stern and almost angry. “Geezus Gage, didn’t you learn anything in the last month? Why can’t you be straight with me? You think I’ve never seen you hurting before? I know what it looks like, you know. Don’t try to be tough here. You’re in agony, and you want something for the pain, and you’d rather I went away.” He was staring at Johnny, and when John didn’t immediately respond, he added “Right or wrong?”

“Right,” John agreed meekly. “Except the part about you leaving.”
Chet grinned victoriously. “I’ll be right back.” He left, and returned shortly with a nurse who was carrying a syringe full of relief. She injected it into his IV, and Johnny immediately relaxed, just knowing that in a few minutes he’d be feeling better.

“Really, Gage, what’s wrong with admitting you’re in pain?” Chet chided after the woman had left. “You had some guy poking around in your lung yesterday!”

“Sorry,” Johnny whispered. “I just don’t like,” he stopped and gasped when he took too deep a breath, but eventually finished. “I don’t like you guys seeing me like this.”

Kelly chuckled. “Like what? In a hospital bed? Forget it Johnny, we’ve seen it before. Plenty of times.” He pulled a chair over to John’s bedside and sat down. “So,” he started, “we had the most amazing trash fire yesterday.”

Chet was still talking exuberantly when fatigue and the medicine got the best of Johnny, and he drifted off to sleep.

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Kelly Brackett rooted around in the storage space and pulled what he needed from within. He closed the drawer a little too forcefully, and then headed off to see his patient. It wasn’t uncommon for people recovering from surgery to be uncooperative, but it was usually because they didn’t know what was at stake. And once you explained it, everything was fine and they got to work.

But Johnny? He knew exactly what he needed to do. And yet according to the phone call Kel had just gotten from respiratory therapy, he wasn’t doing it.

He rounded to corner that would take him to Gage’s room, and almost ran full-tilt into Hank Stanley. But both men stopped in time to avoid a collision.

"Sorry," the doctor said. "I was on my way to see Johnny."

"Me too," Hank said. "You seem to be in a hurry. Something the matter with John?"

Brackett paused for a moment before answering, but then decided to just tell Hank. Maybe he could help. "Yes and no. He's recovering well from the surgery--so far, anyway. But it's time for him to start working those lungs of his, to get his strength and lung volume back, and I'm told he's not exactly being cooperative."

"Johnny?" the captain asked incredulously. "I find that hard to believe."

Kel nodded. "So do I. But he apparently got rather belligerent with the therapist who tried to work with him this morning. We gave him a bit of a break yesterday, seeing as it was the day after surgery, but no more."

"Can't give him another day, huh?" Hank asked.

"No, absolutely not. If he doesn't get to work he could get pneumonia, or he could form scar tissue in his lung that could permanently impair his breathing capacity."

Stanley scratched his head pensively. "Has anyone explained this to John?"

Brackett nodded. "The therapist did. Or at least she tried. I was on my way to see if maybe I'd have more success."
"Tell you what," Cap suggested. "Why don't you let me try. What is it he needs to do?"

Kel chuckled mirthlessly. "Basically just breathe in deeply. Deeply and often. This," he held up the plastic contraption in his hand, "is called an incentive spirometer. It helps to gauge how he's doing, if his breaths are getting deeper. Apparently our young friend broke the one the therapist brought to him."

Hank shook his head. "That doesn't sound so difficult. I wonder what John's problem is."

"Oh that's easy, Hank," the doctor advised.

"Pain."

John was sitting propped upright in bed, trying hard not to count the minutes until his next dose of pain medicine, when the door opened. Cap stuck his head in, and Johnny instinctually shifted, trying to sit up even straighter. The effort left him gasping and grimacing in pain, but he made no effort to hide it. He supported his right side with his left hand, squeezed his eyes shut tightly, and rode it out.

When he looked again, Hank was standing beside his bed. "How ya doing this morning, pal?" he asked.

"I'm okay, I'm doing all ri..." Suddenly John stopped, remembering Chet's words from the day before. "Well, to be honest, Cap," he amended. "It hurts."

The captain smiled warmly. "So I hear," he said. "But you look better than you did yesterday." He looked down to the space beside the bed. "That thing is gone."

Johnny nodded. "Yeah, they took the chest tube out this morning. That's really good. And I just need this," he continued, fingering the nasal cannula which had replaced the full oxygen mask. "So I guess I'm making progress."

"Except," Hank said. John looked at him, puzzled. He didn't know what his boss was getting at, but then the man lifted his arm and silently placed a spirometer, still in its plastic packaging, on the bed table.

Gage rolled his eyes and let his head flop back on his pillows. "Oh, man!" he grumbled.

"What's the problem, John? You know how important using this thing is, don't you?"

"You don't understand, Cap," the paramedic protested plaintively.

"So why don't you explain it to me."

John looked down at his hands. For some reason he couldn't make eye contact with his friend. "It hurts," he finally said, though very quietly.

"So?" Hank asked. "You've been in pain before, pal. I've seen it. You've never let it stop you before."

"No," Gage protested. "I mean it really hurts. Other times I've been hurt I've been able to do something to keep the pain down. Don't move a certain way, whatever. But this?" He had to stop for a moment to regain his breath.

"I can't not breathe, Cap," he finally finished.
The captain actually chuckled at that. "No, you can't, thank God," he said.

"I mean," Johnny continued, undaunted. "Every breath, no matter how little or shallow, hurts like hell. But that thing," he pointed to the plastic contraption, "is just pure torture."

Stanley picked up the spirometer and started to open it. "I imagine it is, Johnny. I'm not gonna argue with you on that. But you know how important it is, don't you? Dr. Brackett says you could get pneumonia if you don't use it. Or worse, you could permanently damage your lung." By now he was lightly passing the simple plastic device from hand to hand. "You could lose your career over a little pain? I'd hate to see that happen."

John looked at his friend for a long moment. "It's not a little pain, Cap."

Hank actually smiled. "All right, over a lot of pain. I'd still hate to see that happen. We'd miss you, pal." He tossed the spirometer in the air and caught it. "What do you say. Give it a try. I bet it'll get a little easier every time. Isn't that the way these things work?"

Gage didn't smile, didn't say anything. But he took the thing from his captain's hand, and fitted the tube into his mouth. He closed his eyes, and inhaled as deeply as he could. He saw stars behind his eyelids as the pain immediately flared to an unbearable level. It felt like it lasted forever, but John knew it was less than a second before he had to let the air back out. He opened his eyes.

"Not bad, John. The ball went half way up on your first try. Now do it again."

Gage sighed, but he did it again. This time tears came to his eyes, it hurt so bad. But thankfully they didn't spill over.

"Good," Hank encouraged. "Three more times then you don't have to worry about it for another hour. That's what they told me, anyway. Five times an hour."

Johnny looked at Captain Stanley and tried to get angry at him, like he had at the therapist. He wanted to tell Cap to mind his own business, and leave him the hell alone. But he couldn't. This was his boss, and his friend, and he was doing this for John's own good; Johnny knew it was true. He knew Cap was right about everything, and he also knew Cap wouldn't think less of him for having had a moment of weakness.

He did it three more times.

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Johnny slowly did up the buttons on his shirt. He felt like he was about 75 years old, but he figured that was gonna get better soon. At least he could finally breathe normally without too much pain, though deep breaths still made him want to cry.

"Ready to go home?" Gage had been so engrossed in his thoughts that he hadn't heard Dr. Miller come in.

"Yeah, almost."

"Good. You're coming along nicely, John. But I want you to take it really easy at home. No lifting, no strenuous activity of any kind, and no high altitudes, either. Got it?"

Johnny nodded.

"And keep with the breathing exercises they gave you. That's the most important thing at this point."
I'm giving you a prescription for some pain medication. Use it as you need it. If your exercises are too painful, take a pill first. And of course, if you have any questions or concerns, call me immediately."

"Okay, Doc, I will. Thanks."

"No thanks are necessary, I'm just doing my job here. I'm glad it worked out so well for you, though."

"Yeah, me too." John extended his hand, and the doctor shook it.

"Oh, and I almost forgot. The final pathology report came back this morning. It confirmed that the tumor was entirely benign, just as we suspected."

John sighed with relief. He'd known it was benign for a while now, but he hadn't realized until right this second how much he'd needed to hear it once and for all. "Phew," he let out with a grin.

"Exactly. On rare occasions these things can recur, so annual chest x-rays are going to be a part of your life from now on, but I cannot stress enough that I do not believe you have anything to worry about."

Johnny couldn’t help but grin. He knew exactly why his surgeon was being so emphatic about this, and he couldn’t blame the man. But those x-rays would be different. It was gone now. "It's okay, Doc. I think I can deal with that."

"Good," the doctor said, allowing a rare smile. "Let me go and sign your final release papers, then. Normally I'd be able to tell you the date and time for your follow up with me, but Sandy asked me to tell you to call her and set it up, so I guess you should do that in the next day or two--I want to see you in a week. I'm not sure what's going on with her there."

Johnny smiled and tried not to blush. He knew exactly what was going on. "I'll call her," he promised. "Tell her I'll call her."

The doctor nodded. "Okay, then. Go home, and take it easy."

Miller opened the door just as Roy was about to enter. "Mr. DeSoto," he greeted curtly as he passed.

Roy entered, shaking his head. "Friendly guy," he dismissed.

"He's okay," John argued. "Good doctor, anyway."

Roy nodded. "You ready to go?"

"You bet. A week in here is a week too long."

"Hey, are you criticizing our hospital?" Dixie asked playfully as she, too, entered his room.

John's smile widened. "Only a little bit."

"Well I only have a second--I need to get back downstairs. I just wanted to pop in and say goodbye. You take care of yourself and give me a call if you need anything, okay?"

"Okay, Dix, I will."

The nurse was almost through the door when Johnny called her back.
"Hey Dix, thanks for everything you did the last couple of months," he managed to get out before suddenly getting embarrassed and ducking his head bashfully. Nevertheless, he continued. "I know I was a pain sometimes, but you stuck by me and I appreciate it."

The nurse smiled warmly, approached John, and planted a kiss on his cheek. "It was my pleasure, Johnny," she said. "That's what friends are for."

She started to leave again, but turned back at the door. "But you were a pain more than just 'sometimes!'" she teased, and left before anyone could respond.

Johnny started to laugh, then immediately stopped himself when the pain in his side flared. He reached over and clutched it with his left hand.

"Still hurts, huh?" Roy asked.

Johnny nodded, then smiled. "Only when I," he started.

"Laugh," Roy finished.

"Yeah."

Gage turned serious. "What I said to Dix, it goes for you, too, you know. I couldn't have gotten through this without you. You and the rest of the guys."

Roy shook his head. "Sure you could have, Johnny," he disagreed. "You almost did. But the point is you didn't have to. You never have to. Remember that, okay?"

"I know, Roy, I know. And I won't forget again."

THE END

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