Things Aren't Always What They Seem

by Piscean6724

Summary

Station 51 responds to an unusual number of arson fires. Could Johnny's new flame hold the key?
Chapter 1

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Warning: contains depictions of abuse

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

Summer 1963
The hot July sun was beating down on Toby as he peddled his bike along the dirt path towards his target. Although he was only 14 years old he was already nearly six feet tall and somewhat clumsy. Determination colored his face and anger took root in his feet and legs as he peddled faster; replaying the harsh words his father seemed to enjoy spewing at him.
Disappointed
Not a man
Wimp
He reached up to wipe the sweat off his brow then grabbed the handlebar with both hands as he coasted down the dirt hill. The wind had picked up some which was perfect for what he had planned. His breaths came in short spurts though not from exertion. An anticipatory grin spread over his face; knowing he was about to satisfy a need he didn’t fully understand.

The sound of the alarm brought the firemen of the small station running. They climbed on board the big red engine and rushed to the scene of the brush fire. Wind carried the thick smoke in the direction of the arriving crew, burning their eyes and eliciting a few coughs. Pulling to a stop, Fireman Owens exited the engine and began following his Captain’s orders. He was a tall man of six feet four inches and he was usually the first to attack a fire. He hadn’t always seemed so aggressive but he was no longer as careful since becoming a widower two years ago. The crew battled the blaze for over an hour before it finally succumbed to their efforts. Fortunately, it had not caused any serious damage.
The problem was that this area was fairly remote so the chances of this being an accidental fire were slim to none. Also, the location was close enough to his home to give him a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Fireman Owens walked around the perimeter of the burned out vegetation ensuring that no hotspots remained. While scanning the area, he saw a couple of things that made his soul quake. Bicycle tracks and size 11 shoe prints were still evident in a few spots. No one else noticed and he deliberately walked with a shuffling motion over them so as to obliterate the evidence. He recognized the shoe pattern and he would take care of this latest episode in his own way……as soon as he got home.

Two days later, Toby couldn’t sleep. His back was still striped from his father’s belt and the pain woke him each time he rolled over. He lay awake in the early morning hours thinking about what his father had said to him when he had returned from the station after the brush fire. He had walked into Toby’s room with fire-red eyes and slammed the door.

“Take off your shirt and face the wall.”
Toby had been here before so he knew what was coming. He removed his shirt and placed both hands in front of him, leaning against the wall. He gritted his teeth and waited.
“So you still want to be a firebug, huh?” (thwack) “Damn you, Toby Owens!” (thwack) “I ought to lock you in a shed” (thwack) “and set it” (thwack) “on fire so you’ll know how it feels.” (thwack)

I hate you, you bastard! Toby didn’t dare say the words out loud. The punishment he was getting was bad enough. If he said what he really wanted to say then he’d get more for sure. You can’t stop me but one day, I’ll stop you. I swear I’ll make you pay!

Spring 1967
The engine pulled up to the scene of a warehouse fire. Fireman Owens, as always, was the first to enter carrying the hose on his shoulder with his crewmates following close behind. Smoke billowed out of the old building and it creaked and groaned as if protesting the agony. As Owens burst through the entrance he tripped and fell through the collapsed floor; plummeting into a pit of burning debris twelve feet below. Owens shift mates managed to stop before they too fell. There was neither time nor reason to attempt a rescue. This fire would be Owen’s last.

Standing among the crowd that had gathered, Toby stood in astonishment. It had worked. He felt a sudden rush of euphoria as he watched his tormentor perish. He felt no remorse. Nothing but a sense of elation at least a hundred times the feeling of power he’d felt when he set his first fire six years earlier. He smiled as he turned and walked away from the rubble; pride, strength and pure ecstasy coursing through his body as he lumbered home. Over the next few days and weeks he’d show the appropriate amount of grief for his now deceased father, at least publically. But it wouldn’t be long before his insatiable appetite for the exhilaration he had felt would return and he would be compelled to feed it.

1975
“Ooohh…owie…..Ouch, Dix!”

Dixie exhaled audibly, “Johnny, this little sting doesn’t hurt as bad as the injury itself. You of all people should know that by now. So, lie back down and zip it!”

John Gage was one of the best rescue men and paramedics in the county, maybe even the state of California, but he did not handle pain inflicted during medical treatment well at all. He especially hated needles and was happy that this particular injury didn’t require a shot.

The door opened and a young nurse stood halfway in the room. “Ms. McCall, Dr. Early needs you in treatment 3 as soon as possible.”

Johnny turned to see the source of the angelic voice he heard and a huge grin spread across his face. He bent his right elbow above and behind his head and rested his head in his hand; the pain from a moment ago all but forgotten. His actions did not go unnoticed by Dixie and she rolled her eyes at the grinning paramedic.

“Thank you, Elaine. Will you finish up here please?”

Dixie gave a slight wink to John as she turned to leave the room. “I’ll be in 3 if you need anything….oh and he’s free to go when you get his arm bandaged.”

“Yes, Ms. McCall.”
Elaine was a very pretty petite brunette with stunning sea foam green eyes. But a shadow seemed to cloud those eyes and Johnny assumed he must be the cause. Elaine made no attempt to carry on small talk during the few minutes it took to finish bandaging him up. Her touch was gentle and Johnny felt a flush spread upwards from his chest to his face as her graceful hands began wrapping his forearm; she was both beautiful and mysterious. He glanced at her left hand and noted she wore no jewelry; specifically no wedding band and no engagement ring.

“Hi, I’m John Gage.”

Elaine glanced up briefly and gave a timid smile before returning to the job at hand. “Elaine,” was all she offered as she finished securing the bandage.

Johnny looked down at the floor and exhaled. He knew rejection and he could tell that she was not the least bit interested in him.

“All done.” She said turning toward the treatment room door.

He gave a quick negative shake of his head while a somewhat sarcastic grin replaced the formerly flirtatious one. He jumped off the gurney and walked silently behind her towards the exit.

Elaine opened the door without making eye contact with him but as he exited she said, barely above a whisper, “You can call me Lainie.”

The remark caught him off guard and he couldn’t stop his crooked grin from spreading across his handsome face. “Ok, thanks for the bandage. Maybe I’ll …ah…see you around….Lainie.”

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Ready to roll, Junior?"

Roy was accustomed to waiting patiently for his partner to be treated in the ER of Rampart. Johnny was the best rescue man he knew and because of that, he often had to be treated for injuries sustained during a run. Although this episode did not involve a rescue, it was work related. They had been toned out to a structure fire. As it turned out the house was abandoned so there were no victims to be saved. Roy and Johnny were on hoses when the younger paramedic had stumbled over some old broken pieces of furniture and received a painful abrasion and burn. It wasn’t enough to have him sent home but it did need to be looked at by a doctor so he could be cleared to work the rest of the shift. And now Roy had the unenviable task of telling him the suspected cause of the fire that got him injured.

The two paramedics slammed their doors simultaneously and Johnny reached, instinctively with his left hand, for the microphone to notify dispatch that they were available. He winced slightly as he stretched his arm out completely.

“Squad 51 available.” He then guardedly replaced the microphone.

“Johnny, you’re not gonna like what I’m about to tell you.” Roy started the conversation as he pulled away from the ER entrance heading back to the station.

“Huh? About what?” Johnny genuinely had no idea where this conversation was going.

“About that fire. Marco found a new partially filled can of lighter fluid in the back of the house. The house hasn’t had electricity connected in a couple of years so you know what that means.”

“Aw, hell.” Johnny looked out his window and let the wind rustle through his hair before he
continued. “You know, Roy, I don’t mind getting hurt on a fire or rescue call that’s legitimate. But it really pisses me off to know that somebody did that – deliberately – and I got hurt. I mean, it ain’t bad, I know, but what if it had been? I mean, what if one of us had been hurt so badly he couldn’t go back to work…..or worse.”

He looked again at the white bandage on his arm and just shook his head in frustration.

“I know, I know” Roy lamented. “I’m with you on that. Plus, it’s the second one in that area in the last couple of weeks on OUR shift. Who knows, maybe there have been others when the other guys were on shift. It’s just ridiculous.”

“Yea,” was all Johnny could manage as he stared out the windshield; his mind already drifting back to Lainie. Maybe she’s just shy or something…..hmmm…………she did tell me I could call her by her nickname so that’s a good sign. But why did she seem so distant? Man, I could stare into those eyes for….

(Wham)

Roy’s slamming door brought him back to the present and he realized he was sitting alone in the squad inside the apparatus bay daydreaming. Shit, hope Chet didn’t see that, he thought to himself as he exited the squad and headed toward the dayroom.

“Arm ok, John?” Cap was in his office working on the paper work from their last run. Johnny was thankful his captain had saved him from facing Chet – in case Chet had seen him sitting in the squad alone with his own thoughts.

“Yea, Cap, it’s fine. I’m just sore about the whole thing.” He stood leaning against the door frame looking down at Hank; arms crossed in front of him.

Captain Stanley leaned back in his chair and placed his right hand on the armrest as he looked up at John. “So, Roy told you what Marco found, huh?”

“Yea, that’s two for our shift in that area recently. Any of the other shifts had any?”

Hank blew out a sigh. He hadn’t realized anyone in his crew had caught on to the similarity between the call today and the one a few shifts ago.

“C-shift had one a about a week ago. Same thing……unoccupied dwelling…..lighter fluid for an accelerant.”

Johnny let out a low whistle. “Something’s up, Cap.”

“Yea, John. I have that same feeling.”
Chapter 2

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

2

Dixie opened the door to the staff lounge and found Elaine sitting alone drinking a cup of coffee with a faraway look in her eyes.

Perfect opportunity, Dixie thought to herself. “Mind if I join you?”

“Oh, of course not Ms. McCall. Please have a seat.”

Dixie poured herself a cup of coffee and took the seat across from her newest ER nurse. She noticed some slight bruising along her wrist and felt a certain uneasiness in the pit of her stomach. “So, you finally met the notorious John Gage.”

Elaine blushed slightly and nodded as she brought the cup to her mouth for another sip.

“Well, get used to it. That young man is almost a permanent fixture in this ER…….and not always to bring in a patient.” She chuckled to herself and watched for a reaction from Elaine. Again, she saw a smile but the younger nurse offered nothing else.

“So, Elaine, did that bruise happen here? You know I need to complete an incident report if it did.”

She was hoping Elaine would take the bait but she skillfully evaded the question.

“Oh, no ma’am. It’s nothing. I know to report on the job incidents to you immediately.”

Dixie gave her a motherly smile. “Good girl.” She was now even more concerned than before she had asked the question.

After a moment of silence, Elaine spoke. “Ms. McCall, may I ask you something?”

“Of course you can. Anything.” Dixie hoped she was about to learn something about the mysterious Elaine Hickson.

“Well,” Elaine bit her bottom lip as she set her coffee cup down on the table. She hesitated a moment before continuing. “I know I’ve only been here for two weeks but, well…. I really love it here……so ah, well, if you see anything that I need to do differently or anything that I do that I shouldn’t ….or that I don’t do that I should…..”

Dixie grinned while holding up her hand to stop the younger woman from rambling on and on. “Elaine, you’re a good nurse. I’ve watched you and you have excellent skills. And I promise that if I see anything that needs changing I’ll let you know….fair enough?”

Elaine looked back down at her coffee. “Yes ma’am. I really appreciate that. I just don’t want anything to go wrong you know? And thank you so much for hiring me. I just feel so lucky.”

“Well, you’re welcome. And, for your information, I think that Rampart is lucky to have you.”

Dixie watched as Elaine’s cheeks turned rosy while she cast her eyes downward to the cup in her hands. The young nurse must not have received many compliments before. What a shame to be so
good at your job and still feel inadequate for some reason……..kind of like someone else I know.

Johnny finished polishing the chrome bumper on the front of the squad and then straightened back up to look at his partner. “Roy, what do you think makes this guy tick?”

Roy finished cleaning the windshield and then turned back to see his partner leaning on the hood of the squad staring at his bandage.

“I don’t know, Junior. Mike thinks it some punk kid hired by some crummy landlord to torch his rundown units so he can collect on insurance money.” Roy stepped off the running board of the squad and turned to face his partner.

“Huh, yea could be.” Johnny didn’t seem to be buying that idea though. He seemed to be considering something a little more sinister.

Roy brought him out of his reverie. “Johnny, it’s hard to put yourself in someone else’s shoes when they are all about destroying things and we’re all about saving them.”

“Yea, I guess you’re right. It just really bugs me that…..”

The conversation was interrupted by the klaxons.

Squad 51…..possible heart attack…..20402 South Alameda Apartment 3…..that’s 2-0-4-0-2 South Alameda apartment 3. Cross Street East Carson. Time out 1804.

Captain Stanley acknowledged the call while writing down the information.

“10-4, KMG365”

Roy and Johnny were already in the squad when Hank handed Roy the slip of paper with the address scribbled on it. Roy passed it over to Johnny as the bay door rose. With lights and sirens blaring they headed toward the apartment complex.

A little over an hour later the duo were standing at the nurse’s station in the ER restocking their supplies. Dixie was retrieving the items from the cabinet while Roy filled out the paper work. Johnny was trying not to look conspicuous as he looked down the hallway every few seconds.

Dixie noticed his behavior and knew what he was doing. “She’s already clocked out, John.”

“Huh? Who?”

“You know who….Elaine. I saw how you looked at her this morning. She normally works seven to three so she’s already clocked out.”

“Oh, ok.” Johnny looked down at the box of supplies; pretending he was checking the contents.

“Better make us available, Junior.” Roy grinned as he picked up the box of supplies and turned to walk down the hallway. “See ya, Dix.”

“See you boys later.” She smiled to herself as she pulled another metal chart out of the rack and began looking it over.
Roy pulled out of the parking space at Rampart and headed back to the station. He decided to give Johnny exactly one minute to explain before he started asking questions.

Within 30 seconds John began spilling it. “So I guess you’re wondering who Elaine is, huh?”

“Yep”

Johnny rubbed his jaw and chin with his thumb and index finger as a smile lit up his face. “Well, she’s a goddess, Roy. I mean, she’s petite, brunette and she has these gorgeous eyes.” He closed his eyes for a moment as he remembered the color of her eyes. “And she’s pretty and she uh, she gave me this.” He held up his left arm. “I mean, she didn’t give it to me because you were with me so you know how it happened and all but she…..”

Roy cut him off by holding up his hand and laughing. “Junior, I get it ok. She dressed your wound. So she’s a nurse?”

Johnny chuckled with the realization of how he was behaving.

“So, did you ask her out?”

“Uh well, not yet. I mean, she’s kinda shy but,” he leaned forward and turned slightly to face Roy. “She did tell me that I could call her Lainie. Now, what does that tell ya, huh? Huh?” He leaned back with his left arm draped on the back of the seat and a smug look on his face.

“Well, it tells me that her name is Elaine and people call her Lainie.” Roy cut his eyes at his partner.

“Oh, har har, Roy.” Johnny was still grinning. But the next time I see her I will ask her out.

Elaine entered her little loft apartment, kicked off her shoes and sank into her loveseat. With the exception of her bed it was the only furniture she had at the moment. She blew out a breath and felt her entire body relax. The emptiness of the apartment might be depressing to some but to Elaine it was heaven. Her break up had been extremely difficult but also extremely necessary. The last several weeks had been nothing short of pure hell; as had the entire relationship. How he managed to have so much power over her, she didn’t know. She looked despondently down at the bruise on her right wrist. Why did I let it go on for so long? One thing she did know with absolute certainty: Never again would a man have a hold on her the way Oto had, never.

The ringing of the phone brought her out of her forlorn reverie.

“Hello.” She offered her unknown caller her most cheerful albeit fatigued voice.

“Lainie?”

Her pulse quickened and she bit her lower lip. She knew she needed to hang up; not acknowledge his voice but she was unable to loosen her grip on the receiver. She sucked in a quick breath and closed her eyes as visions of him forced themselves inside her memory.

“Lainie……..are you there?”

She could hear the desperation in his voice. She imagined him sitting in the dimly lit apartment;
sucking a long drag from a freshly lit cigarette; pulling the tab off a beer and gulping half the can before setting it down and beginning the conversation.

“Lainie….I can hear you breathing. I know you’re there. It’s time to come on back home, Honey.”

She heard shuffling as he moved around. Then the click signaling he’d said all he intended to say to her. She exhaled slowly and closed her eyes as she returned the phone to the floor. She walked quickly across the floor to double, no triple check the locks on her door before retiring to her bed. She lay down curled into a fetal position clutching a pillow and tried her best to get some rest.

He sat in the glow of the old worn out lamp in the apartment he used to share with Elaine. The apartment he was determined to share with her again; one way or another. He could almost feel her heartbeat through the phone line. She had no idea how he’d found her phone number. Now all he needed was her street address; which he’d get in due time. He finished his cigarette and crushed it into the ashtray already filled with butts. He returned the receiver to the cradle; slowly allowing his fingers to slide along the length of the phone feeling the hard coolness beneath his touch. He closed his eyes and leaned back into the sofa; enjoying the momentary release his early morning activities had provided.
Chapter 3

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

3

Hank Stanley sat at his desk reviewing the report he had just received from Headquarters. He shook his head in disbelief before leaning back in his chair. Footsteps echoed in the apparatus bay and he could tell by the sound that his second in command had arrived; and was headed to the kitchen to make coffee. He decided to join him and discuss the report before the rest of the crew arrived.

“Mornin’ Mike.”

“Mornin’, Cap. Just put the coffee on so it’ll be a few minutes,” Mike said as he placed the pot on the stove and turned around leaning into the cabinet while facing his captain. Mike had worked with Hank Stanley long enough to know his early morning routine and moods; today, he needed to get something off his chest. “Something wrong?”

Hank straightened his shoulders and placed both hands on his hips. “I’m thinking there just might be, Mike.” He glanced down at the table for a moment then looked back up at Mike who was patiently waiting for the explanation he knew was coming. “I got a report from HQ on the suspected arson case we had a few weeks ago. Well, the confirmed arson case I should say. Anyway,” he sat down before continuing. “Turns out that the owner of the property didn’t have the place torched after all.”

“Are they sure?” Mike Stoker had an unusual sixth sense when it came to suspicious fires and he had felt certain this was a landlord trying to collect insurance money.

“Oh, there’s no doubt, Mike……he’s been dead for over two years. The county just hadn’t gotten around to pursuing the taxes owed on it yet.”

Mike crossed his arms as he carefully debated the other reasons why someone might deliberately burn down an old house.

“Well, Cap. Insurance fraud is the usual reason we see this kind of thing so I’m puzzled. I mean, there were no bodies so it wasn’t to destroy evidence of a murder or anything. Think it was just some kids playing around or something?” Mike noticed the worried look on his superior’s face.

“Well, that’s always a possibility, Mike but I’m just not sure on this one. It happened awfully early in the morning for most youngsters. I guess we’ll know more when the reports from the other two arrive.” Hank stood up to get a mug now that the coffee had finished percolating.

“Other two? Wow, I knew the one we had last shift was similar but I didn’t know there was another one.” Mike picked up his own mug and poured himself a cup of coffee and passed the pot over to Hank.

“Yea, C shift a couple of weeks ago; not long after our first one.” Hank blew on his coffee and watched the curl of steam waft upwards. “I just don’t want any of us getting hurt on nonsense like this.”

“I know what you mean.”
“Well, the others should be here soon. I better get back to my office and finish up. Looks like C shift had a long night so they’ll be grateful for the coffee. See ya at roll call, Mike.”

“See ya, Cap.”

----------------------------------------

Her morning was passing by slowly; especially for an emergency room in a large urban area. Elaine had assisted with stitches when a young woman had lost the battle to bathe her Siamese cat, restocked all the treatment rooms and had helped to calm down an expectant father whose wife was brought in by ambulance in labor. She also couldn’t help but notice the blush that set her face glowing when she saw which paramedic had brought the woman in. She watched, with a sense of melancholy as the young man walked beside the gurney of his laboring wife. He so lovingly held her hand in support as they entered the elevator on their way to Labor & Delivery. Lucky woman…..and lucky kid. While she longed to experience the joys of motherhood she was also somewhat fearful that it might never happen. Even so, she was still thankful that her relationship with Oto had not resulted in a pregnancy.

“Mornin’”

Elaine nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of a male voice so close behind her. She spun around to see John Gage rocking on his heels.

“Oh, ah…Lainie, gee I’m sorry. I mean, I didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

She regained her composure and felt the color return to her cheeks. She gave him an embarrassed smile before offering an apologetic shake of her head. “Um, how’s your arm?”

John lifted up his left forearm to reveal a large adhesive bandage covering the nearly healed site. “Almost good as new……thanks to some expert nursing care.”

“I’ll be sure and let Ms. McCall know that.” She flashed a quick smile, surprised at her own witiness.

“Naw, Dixie just got the process started…..you finished the job.” He said with a quick wink and grin.

She felt the heat of her blush and had to look away. Johnny was intrigued by her reaction and then noted the time on the wall clock.

“Say, uh, I know it’s kinda early for lunch but how about we get a cup of coffee in the staff lounge?”

“I, uh, I don’t know…. I” She was stammering while her heart pounded inside her chest from the surprisingly nice young man who was now standing before her.

Dixie was walking down the hallway and was just close enough to overhear part of the conversation. She never missed a beat as she walked past them and said matter of factly, “Roy isn’t here yet so why don’t you two grab some fresh coffee……just made it myself.” Dixie looked slyly at the two of them and nodded in the direction of the lounge. “It’s quiet and you haven’t taken a break yet, Elaine.”
Johnny’s face broke out in one of the biggest smiles Dixie had ever seen.

“Now, both of you…..scoot!” She waved them off with a swat of her hand and returned to her perch on the stool behind the nurse’s station. “I’ll direct Roy in there when he arrives.”

“Thanks, Dix.” Johnny yelled as he opened the lounge door for Elaine.

Dixie just shook her head and smiled as Dr. Brackett walked up to the desk.

“What’s got you so cheery this morning?”

“Oh, just a couple of young folks with some definite chemistry, Kel.” She mused staring at the closing lounge door………and secretly wishing she could be a fly on the wall in that room right about now.

“Hey Roy,” Dr. Brackett said diverting Dixie’s gaze away from the lounge door. “Johnny just stepped into the lounge for a ……”

“For a break and you are NOT to disturb him for at least,” Dixie hesitated looking at her watch before continuing, “oh say 12 minutes or so.” The sparkle in her eyes gave her away.

“Uh-oh, what’s he up to now?”

“Roy,” Kel began in a sarcastic tone of voice, “what makes you think he’s up to something?” He accentuated his question with an amicable slap on Roy’s back.

“Because he’s breathing, Doc.”

The trio erupted in laughter and continued on with light conversation; each taking a turn glancing in the direction of the lounge door for the next few minutes.
Roy kept a close check on his watch while enjoying the light-hearted conversation. Within ten minutes of his arrival the lounge door opened and Elaine exited making a swift right turn and heading down the hall; without even acknowledging the three of them. Three sets of eyes were glued to the lounge door anticipating a dejected Gage to walk out. Before anyone could speak, Johnny pulled the door open and headed toward the water fountain.

“Ready when you are.” He sputtered as he passed Roy at the nurse’s station.

Roy opened his mouth to answer him but instead simply gave a negative nod. John had not waited for his answer. He simply bent down; gulped a few sips of water and then turned to exit the ER doors.

“Oh boy,” Roy said as he waved good-bye to Dixie and Dr. Brackett.

“See ya, Roy.” Dixie said and gave Kel a questioning look.

Elaine didn’t know where she was going. She really was just walking off some nervous energy. She was appalled by what she’d just done. He had seemed like a nice enough fellow. She had started to actually enjoy sitting there with him listening to him talk about his work when he mentioned going out for drinks; and something deep inside her recoiled at the suggestion. All she could say was ‘no’. She gave him no explanation; just stood up and walked out. Now, she was silently chastising herself. Why did she react so harshly towards him? She walked into the women’s restroom so no one would see her. She didn’t want Dixie asking questions right now and she certainly didn’t want to run into John. She was embarrassed by her behavior and just couldn’t face him. Oh God, what will I say when I see him again? He and Roy are probably getting a good laugh out of this right now.

Outside, Roy found John sitting in the cab of the squad. He opened the driver’s side door just as Johnny reached for the microphone.

“Squad 51 available.”

He replaced the microphone and placed his elbow out the window as Roy cranked up the squad and began pulling away from Rampart.

The two rode in uneasy silence. Roy knew his partner well and he knew not to ever push Johnny to talk until he was ready. He also knew that Johnny couldn’t keep quiet for long. Sure enough, before
they reached the station Johnny turned his attention to Roy.

“Well, aren’t cha gonna ask me what happened?” Johnny’s voice was filled with tension and Roy knew that no matter what he said to Johnny, it would not be the right thing.

“Well, Johnny, you didn’t seem too excited when you came out so I just assumed it didn’t go the way you had hoped.” What else could he say? He was tip-toeing on eggshells.

“I don’t get her, Roy. I mean, I’m a nice guy right?”

Roy was thankful that John didn’t hesitate long enough for an answer.

“What was the question?”

Johnny almost glared at his partner. “What was the ques…..Are you kidding me?”

“Do you wanna know what she said to me Roy?

“I, uh”

“I mean, do you really want to know? She said ‘no.’ That’s what she said, Roy. Just like that – no.”

“John, what was the question?”

Johnny didn’t let him finish his thought. “What I might have said?” Johnny’s eyes were bulging as he turned to face Roy while splaying his open hand on his own chest.

“Well, yea,” Roy knew he was in a no-win situation and he desperately wanted out.

“Roy, I asked her if she’d like to go out sometime.”

“Whoa, whoa, wait. You asked her out to a bar on a first date?” Roy couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I might have suggested it. Why? What’s wrong with that?” Johnny’s feelings were getting hurt. Just because he wasn’t married didn’t mean he didn’t know a thing or two about women.

“Well, for starters she might have thought you were going to get her tipsy and ask for a little more than just her company.” Roy shook his head in disbelief.

“What? Roy, you make it sound like I was gonna get drunk and rip her clothes off or something.”

Roy could only snicker as he glanced over at his frustrated partner. “Johnny, you already said she was shy and then you invite her out to a bar for drinks? What did you think she was gonna say?”

“Aww damn it, Roy. Come on….you know me better than that.” Johnny’s face was turning red.

“Yea, Junior. I know you better than that….but she doesn’t.”

Johnny let Roy’s words sink in. He looked out the window and then ran his fingers through his mussed up hair. After a few agonizing moments he finally spoke in a much calmer voice. “I really blew it.”
Now Roy was feeling sorry for him. John Gage had a heart of gold and any woman would be lucky to have him by her side. The problem was, he sometimes came on a little too strong; primarily because he was insecure. It was ironic really. Johnny was a great guy and a damn fine fireman/paramedic and yet he never felt quite good enough. Roy couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps he’d simply tried too hard to impress Elaine.

“Johnny, just let her get to know you better.”

“Huh,” he muttered in a voice filled with morose. If she gets to know me she’ll sure as hell say no.

E!

After dinner was eaten and the kitchen cleaned up, Hank Stanley called an impromptu meeting of his crew. He had learned over the years to pay very close attention to his keen since of foreboding and right now he was feeling very unsettled.

“Fella’s, you know we’ve had a few unusual calls in this area recently and the last one got John hurt.”

“Cap, it’s nothin’, really, I….” John was cut off by his Captain.

“John, I know…..but next time that might not be the case. Anyway, I want you all to be really careful and keep your eyes and ears open for anything unusual…and, uh……look out for each other, ok?”

There was a chorus of “sure, Cap”, “yea” and “no problem.” He dismissed them and they all headed toward the dorm as it was nearly time for ‘lights out’. But one man remained. Hank was leaning over staring at the floor with his elbows on his knees when he realized that someone was still there. Looking up, he looked into the eyes of his older lineman.

“Marco, pal….you ok?”

“Yes, Cap. I just wanted to make sure that you were. We’ve worked together long enough for me to know when something is wrong and I can tell that something’s bothering you.”

Hank inhaled deeply then stood up. “Marco, sometimes I wonder if I am ok. I just have this feeling of dred that I….ah.” He reached a hand around to rub the tension from the back of his neck.

“That you can’t explain or get rid of…. And you feel it in your spine right, Cap?”

Hank looked up at Marco and drew his eyebrows together. “Yea, Marco, how’d you know?”

Marco stuck his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor for a moment before he looked back at his Captain. “Because I’m feeling it too, Cap.”
Chapter 5

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

5

Warning: strong language.

He walked to the corner convenience store to buy another pack of Lucky Strikes. He’d been smoking them since he was just a kid. Somehow they seemed to offer him a bit of consolation when his world started to spiral out of control. The jingle of the sleigh bells grated on his nerves as he entered and his first thought was to snatch them off the door handle and throw them at the cashier. Somehow, he managed to subdue the urge and instead made his purchase and exited. As he stood waiting to cross the street, he opened the pack and lit one up. He inhaled the noxious fumes and held them in his lungs enjoying the burn. Slowly and deliberately he blew the smoke out and began to feel a little more relaxed.

He continued to meander down the street. He had no job for the time being, since he’d been fired for excessive absenteeism from his last job. Fuck’em. He’d find something when he needed more cash. He was fine for now. When he got to his street he took a left instead of a right towards his apartment building. He hadn’t been down that street in ages and was pleasantly surprised to see a new body art shop had just opened up in a tiny ‘hole in the wall’ spot. He stared momentarily at one of the images on the door and his face released a morbid grin. He knew immediately he had to have it. He crushed the butt of his cigarette beneath the ball of his foot and pushed open the door.

E!

Elaine was pleased to have worked six shifts without an encounter with John. Their schedules had been out of sync for nearly a week. She knew that she’d have to face him soon and she prayed he’d be a gentleman about it. Lainie, you have got to get it together. Just apologize and be done with it. Apologizing came easy for her anyway. She’d pretty much spent her entire life apologizing for something she’d done wrong – whether real or imagined.

Fortunately for her, and unfortunately for others, it had been a busy morning in the emergency room of Rampart Hospital. The place resembled a beehive with everyone seemingly moving in multiple directions and yet getting their jobs done. She was walking down the hall toward the lounge when she heard a call coming into the base station. No one else was around so she quickened her steps to take the call.

“Unit calling in repeat.”

“Rampart this is squad 51. How do you read?”

Her mouth went dry at the sound of his voice but now was not the time to get caught up in her thoughts of him.

“Loud and clear 51. Go ahead.” She scanned the hall looking for an ER physician and caught a
glimpse of Dr. Morton. She frantically waved him over as she prepared to take down the notes John was about to give her.

E!

Johnny recognized her voice and a part of him desperately wanted to hand the biophone over to Roy to talk to her. However, he was ever the professional and his own feelings didn’t matter when someone’s life was on the line. He glanced down at his notes and began.

“Rampart we have a male, approximately 16 years old, victim of a street fight. Vitals are BP 84/58, pulse 120, respirations 30 shallow and labored. He has multiple stab wounds to the abdominal cavity with significant blood loss. He was semi-conscious upon arrival but has since lost consciousness. We have him on O2 and ambulance is at scene. Request permission to start an IV with lactated Ringer’s.”

E!

Thankfully, Elaine didn’t have to speak to him anymore as Dr. Morton was there for the last part of John’s transmission. He quickly scanned Elaine’s notes and then ordered two IV’s with lactated Ringer’s. Before he could finish his order for medication both he and Elaine stood frozen at the noises that came over the biophone.

E!

Roy and Johnny instinctively covered their unconscious patient as the sound of gunshots rang out. Police were on the scene and within a couple of minutes subdued a young man just a few yards from where the paramedics were positioned with their dying patient. Unfortunately for their victim, those extra minutes of delay might well cost him his life.

E!

“Squad 51 do you read? Come in 51.” Mike Morton was horrified at what he’d heard. When neither paramedic answered him he became concerned for their welfare as well as their patient’s.

Elaine was holding her breath and could feel the tendrils of fear crawling up her spine. While she had not wanted to face John she certainly didn’t want anything to happen to him.

“Squad 51 do you read?” Mike continued repeating his call.

“Rampart this is squad 51. Scene is now secure and we’re ready to transport as soon as we get the IV’s established. Repeat meds please.”

Dr. Morton recited his orders for the medications as Elaine tried to focus on her task of taking notes.

“10-4 Rampart. We’re ready to transport. ETA 6 minutes.” John’s voice sounded strained but Elaine found herself relieved to hear it.

She turned to Dr. Morton and told him that treatment room 1 was ready.

“Thank you, Elaine. Please try to get Kel on stand-by.” Mike found himself needing just a minute to calm down before this patient arrived. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t have much of a break. The base station soon came alive again with the frantic voice of Johnny.

“Rampart this is squad 51. Victim is in full arrest. Starting CPR.”
“10-4 51.” Dr. Morton rushed to treatment room 1 making sure there was a crash cart there.

After alerting Dr. Brackett of the situation, Elaine kept an eye out for the ambulance to back up to the ER doors. She had not heard John’s latest transmission and was stunned to see the back doors open and John being rushed through them on a gurney. He was obviously struggling to perform one man CPR.

“Treatment room 1.” She blurted then grabbed an ambu-bag and began assisting with respirations allowing John to focus on chest compressions as the orderlies rushed the patient into the treatment room.

“What have you got Johnny?” Kelly Brackett had been alerted to be on stand-by but when he saw the flurry of activity in the hallway he knew he would be needed. He was following Elaine closely as the group entered the treatment room. Elaine quickly spoke up. She knew that John was out of breath from performing CPR and had not yet been ordered to discontinue. Sweat was pouring off his face and dripping from his chin. At second glance, Elaine wasn’t sure that all the moisture was actually perspiration.

Roy rushed into the treatment room then. He had heard Johnny’s last transmission and knew his partner probably needed him to take over compressions.

He stepped up on the side rail of the gurney for leverage.

“Switch on 3. One, two, three.” Roy took over the compressions on 4 as John took a step back out of the way of the others.

Johnny grabbed a paper towel to wipe the sweat from his brow. He stood with aching arms as he watched the efforts of the ER staff trying to save the young life. His eyes wandered from his victim to the pretty young nurse who was trying just as hard to save the young man as John had. He also listened as she spoke to the unconscious patient. No one else seemed to notice or care but he couldn’t help but watch and listen to her.

“Come on, honey. You aren’t alone. Don’t give up. Fight. We’re here for you but you’ve got to help us. Don’t leave us ok?”

He noticed a film of perspiration on her pretty face. Her hair was coming undone underneath her cap and was beginning to fall haphazardly in her face. Yet, she never wavered from the task at hand. Not until Johnny heard Dr. Morton call it half an hour later. Even then, she held the young man’s hand for a moment as if she wanted to assure him that he had not died alone and uncared for.

Johnny leaned back against the wall and exhaled while staring at the ceiling before closing his eyes. He hated these runs. Roy was about to speak to him when he realized that only he, John and Elaine remained in the room. He decided that a quick exit was in order.

“I’ll meet you in the lounge.” Johnny nodded his understanding without opening his eyes. Elaine hesitated for a moment; she wanted to say something even if it was only to acknowledge her admiration for his efforts but self-doubt stole her voice and so she headed for the door. She was walking past him when he opened his eyes and spoke.

“Lainie, I’m sorry.”

She could feel John’s eyes on her but couldn’t bring herself to meet his gaze. “You did your best, John.”

“I’m not apologizing for losing a patient.” He wanted to reach out to her. To somehow make
physical contact but he didn’t dare.

Finally, she got up the nerve to look at him.

“I’m apologizing for being a jerk in the staff lounge last week. I really am sorry that I offended you. I never meant to, honestly I didn’t.”

Elaine didn’t know what to say. She had gotten herself worked up to apologize for storming out on him and before she could, he had apologized to her. Say something Lainie! He’s waiting, for heaven’s sake!

“John, I ..uh, over-reacted. Can we, um, maybe start over?”

Johnny was exhausted; physically, mentally and emotionally. He knew that Lainie was too.

“Tell you what.” He said in a subdued voice “Next time I come in here, I’ll reintroduce myself and we’ll take it from there. How’s that?” He was just too worn out to start anything now and he wanted to be clear-headed for their next conversation.

“I’d really like that, John. I really would.” She gave him a smile that never quite reached her eyes but it was a smile none the less. He held the door open for her and they each went their separate ways down the hallway.

E!
Chapter 6

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

6

Mrs. Stanley looked at her husband with great concern. Dark circles had been growing underneath his eyes as worry lines seemed to etch themselves deeper into his forehead. She had no idea what was going on at the station but she recognized the signs of stress in her man.

“Honey, why don’t you let me give you a neck rub?”

Hank Stanley looked lovingly at his wife. He appreciated her offer and he knew he needed to relax. He’d been keyed up for the last several shifts and things weren’t getting any better.

“Sweetheart, you are just too good to me.” He leaned over towards her and planted a kiss on her feather-soft lips.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’ then.” She grinned as she stood up reaching her hand down to pull Hank up off their sofa. “To the bedroom, Hank.” She playfully ordered.

“Yes ma’am.” He replied with an expectant grin. He stood and followed her up the stairs to the master bedroom. The kids were not expected home for at least a couple of hours. He closed their bedroom door behind him and turned into her full embrace. Her lips sought out his and again they kissed; with passion this time.

When their lips finally parted he looked into the eyes of the woman he had pledged to love forever.

“You know, this isn’t helping me relax.”

“I know,” she said rather seductively. “But it will.”

Hank gave her a deep smile as she guided him towards their queen sized bed. He removed his shirt and she pushed down gently on his shoulders encouraging him to sit on the edge while she crawled onto her knees behind him and began kneading away the knots in his neck and shoulders. A few minutes later, her hands were moving across his bare chest while her lips kissed away the final traces of tension in his neck. Hank closed his eyes and for the next forty-five minutes he never once thought about his station, his crew or his sense of foreboding.

E!

Thursday morning, Elaine packed up a small tote bag with a few basic toiletries and an extra nursing uniform complete with undergarments and shoes. After her last shift when the teenaged male had been brought in by John and she’d ended up covered in his blood and looking disheveled, she decided that she needed to take advantage of her locker at Rampart. She threw the bag onto her shoulders; grabbed her purse and headed out the door to the bus stop.

She hated using public transportation but until she could afford a car of her own, this was her only option. Over the last few weeks she’d managed to begin stocking her tiny apartment. It wasn’t much but at least it was starting to feel like home. She’d managed to pick up a few kitchen necessities at a discount store. She then started perusing second hand stores for furniture and accessories. She was beginning to feel a since of control over her life again; something she hadn’t felt in a long time – maybe never. She also was beginning to think that one day she might actually be happy. She
honestly couldn’t recall the last time she felt that way. The bus doors opened and she boarded; found her spot near the rear and planted herself beside the window. She had her purse draped on one shoulder and her tote bag on the other. The entire ride to Rampart took twenty-five minutes and she stepped off the bus at 1000 West Carson Street prepared to face her day; and secretly hoping a young paramedic would ‘reintroduce’ himself during this particular shift.

E!

Johnny donned his sunglasses as he backed the rover out of his apartment complex. This was one of those rare days when he wasn’t running late for work. Truth be told, he’d been ready to leave several minutes early and he wasn’t sure why. Well, maybe he did have an idea. Elaine had been on his mind since his last shift. They seemed to have connected when they were alone in the treatment room after efforts to save a young life had failed. She impressed him; there was just no denying it. She had been so considerate and thoughtful with a stranger who hadn’t even known how hard they’d worked to save him. Delicate. That’s the word he’d been searching for to describe her. She was sensitive, caring, beautiful and somewhat reserved. He smiled inwardly as he’d finally connected the dots that revealed his description of Lainie all summed up in one word.

E!

“Hey, coffee smells great, Mike.” Cap walked into the kitchen with a certain spring in his step that had been noticeably absent over the last few shifts. Mike and Chet exchanged glances and had to look away from each other to keep from laughing.

“Have a nice couple of days off, Cap?” Chet, always the clown in the group, just couldn’t resist and Mike nearly sprayed coffee all over him.

“Oh mighty fine, Kelley, mighty fine…..see you at roll call.” He blew on his coffee mug as he exited the kitchen back towards his office.

“Chet, you’re terrible.” Mike snickered.

“Oh you were thinkin’ it though, weren’t ya?” Chet asked.

“Thinking what?” Roy had walked in just as Cap walked out and was now pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“Roy, Cap’s in a REALLY good mood this morning.” Chet grinned opening up the newspaper.

“Oh, good for him……and Mrs. Stanley too.” A round of laughter ensued.

E!

Captain Stanley’s good mood turned sour when he received the memo about the suspected arson cases. They were now confirmed arson cases and that negative vibe that he and Marco had both experienced recently began to creep back in. He began making notes for Roll Call when the klaxons sounded.

Station 51, unknown type rescue……

Twenty minutes later, Cap was knocking on the door of a single family dwelling in a quiet
neighborhood. A small dog was barking from inside the residence but there was no activity outside. There was also no response to his repeated knocks on the door.

“Hey Cap, over here.” Marco was peering through a small window on the side of the residence. “I can see legs on the floor of the kitchen……and a pissed off Chihuahua.”

“Vince, we got an unconscious victim over here. Can you get us access?” He was glad to have a law enforcement officer on scene. Cap knew that in these situations anything could happen. It could be a simple case of syncope or a DOA.

Once Vince gained entrance to the residence, Roy and John went to work on the victim while Chet and Marco tried to corral the Chihuahua. She was territorial but she also sensed that these strangers were there to assist her owner. It wasn’t long before Marco came back into the kitchen with a happy long-haired dog in his arms whose tag indicated her name was Princess.

Johnny had been unable to get any response from their victim. He was busy obtaining vitals while Roy raised Rampart on the biophone.

“Go ahead 51.” Dixie was at the base station preparing to take notes as Dr. Early walked up behind her.

“We have a female, approximately 30 years old, unconscious with only limited response to pain stimuli.”

Dixie wrote down the vitals noting that the signs were dangerously low. Dr. Early began issuing orders as the ambulance siren could be heard in the distance.

“Cap, I found this on her bed.” Mike handed the note to Hank while Vince looked on.

“Suicide attempt?”

“Yea, Vince, looks like it.” Cap ordered his men to search the bathroom, nightstand and kitchen and collect all the medicine bottles they could find as he notified his paramedics of the note.

“Rampart” Roy began again, “we’ve found a suicide note. We’re searching the residence now for medications.”

“10-4 51. Has the victim vomited?” Even though the substance ingested was still unknown, Dr. Early needed to know if all of it remained in the victim’s stomach.

“Negative.”

“This might be it, guys.” Chet came running in with an empty bottle of meperidine. It was an old prescription for 20 pills. He handed it to Roy.

“Rampart, we’ve found an empty bottle of meperidine. Twenty pills prescribed nearly a year ago.”

“10-4 51. Check vitals every 3 minutes, be prepared for forced ventilation and transport as soon as possible.”

Dixie knew the routine. Unfortunately, she’d seen her share of suicide attempts……….and too many of them had been successful.

“Joe, Treatment 4’s ready.”

E!
Roy was still in treatment 4 when Johnny arrived with the squad. He scanned the waiting area and nurse’s station without seeing his partner. He also didn’t see Lainie. He decided to wait for Roy in the staff lounge; he desperately needed some caffeine. He pushed through the lounge door and grinned from ear to ear. There sat Lainie at the table sipping a cup of coffee and giving him a bright smile.

“My name is Elaine Hickson but you can call me Lainie.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Lainie. My name is John Gage but you can call me Johnny.”

“Nice to meet you, Johnny. Join me for coffee?” This time, making direct eye contact was much easier for her.

How could he resist those eyes? “Love to, Lainie. Thanks.”

Ten minutes later the lounge doors opened and Roy stuck his head in looking for Johnny. “Ready to…oh..uh, you ready Johnny?” He was a bit surprised to find Lainie and Johnny sitting at the table actually talking to each other and smiling while doing so.

“How is she?” Johnny asked referring to the victim of their most recent run.

“Dr. Early thinks we got her here in time.” Roy said, still a little taken aback by the scene in front of him.

John returned his gaze to Lainie. “So, I’ll see you tomorrow night?” John asked standing up from the table.

“I’ll be there.” She smiled at him again. “Oh, and I’ll wash your cup.”

Johnny smiled again and turned to walk out the door; slapping Roy on the back as they walked side by side down the hallway.

“Well, Junior,” Roy began. “Looks like that went better the second time around.”

“That it did, Roy. That it did.”
The victim of the suicide attempt was finally stabilized enough to be moved to ICU. Apparently she had not ingested the entire prescription. She had also changed her mind as the medication began to take effect and while still somewhat lucid was able to dial the phone enough to call for help.

Dr. Early had been summoned to another treatment room on a new case while Dixie waited for housekeeping to get this room cleaned up. She decided to get a cup of coffee while housekeeping did their thing and afterwards she’d restock the room for the next crisis.

She entered the lounge as Elaine was gathering up two coffee cups and heading to the sink.

“Uh-oh. Who was it this time, Elaine?”

“Umm, I’m not sure I understand, Ms. McCall.” She was terrified she’d made a mistake on something but she had no idea what it might be.

“Well, I’m sure you didn’t drink coffee out of two cups just now so who was it? I’ll straighten him out; we are not their mothers, you know.” She had seen more than one man leave his dirty coffee mug on the table for one of the ladies to wash and she knew how to ensure that it didn’t happen a second time.

“Oh, this?” Elaine looked down at the two mugs in her hands and a definite blush colored her young face. “Johnny and I were having a cup of coffee while he waited on Roy. Roy came to get him a couple of minutes ago and I told him I’d wash his mug.” She turned her attention to the sink and began the task.

Dixie stood in front of the coffee pot- mug in hand- but not moving. She stared at her young nurse for just a moment and a sneaky smile crept across her face.

“Well…..so he’s Johnny now – not just John, huh?”

“Yes, ma’am.” It was the only response she could offer. She had a beautiful smile that lit up her entire face as she continued to wash the mugs; a lot longer than was actually necessary. She was just too embarrassed to look her boss in the eyes.

“Johnny is a really nice guy, Elaine. He can be a little goofy at times but underneath that façade is a genuine knight in shining armor.” She watched as Elaine dried the mugs and replaced them on the shelf.

“Yes, ma’am.” Again, Elaine was at a loss for words and Dixie felt her discomfort.

“Just remember one thing, ok?” Dixie placed her arm around Elaine’s shoulders as Elaine looked at her expectantly. “His ego is very fragile so be gentle with him.” Dixie gave her a playful wink and
Elaine finally relaxed enough to offer her own meek smile.

E!

Roy backed the squad into the bay and watched as his young partner literally bounced out of the squad. Man, even Chet couldn’t crush him right now. He smiled to himself and exited the apparatus bay into the dayroom.

“Hey Marco, what’d you do with Princess?” Johnny asked.

“Oh, the victim’s neighbor came over and said she’d take care of her while our victim is hospitalized.”

“Oh, good. She was a cute little thing.” Johnny’s smile had everyone wondering what had happened to him.

Chet just couldn’t let the moment pass. “Yea, Gage, she was your type huh?”

“Chet, you can’t get to me today no matter what you say or do.” Johnny’s trademark grin was plastered, seemingly permanently, on his face; leaving Chet absolutely speechless.

E!

The sun forced its way into his dim and dingy apartment. He lay semi-clothed and sprawled out on his bed; face down enjoying the last few moments of precious sleep. He was becoming more and more nocturnal. His anxiety had risen to a new level and he knew he couldn’t take much more without some type of release. It wasn’t just the fact that Lainie had not come home; there was more to his angst than just some chick. It was happening again. Desire was beginning to heat up his blood. And when it reached the boiling point it would bring hell with it.

E!

Elaine was showered and had finished her make-up and hair but she stood staring into her sparse closet. What do I wear? She hadn’t been on a real date since before nursing school. Butterflies were churning in her stomach and for a brief moment she thought she might be sick. Lainie, you are being totally ridiculous! She finally settled on a pair of jeans, sapphire blue halter top and sweater in case the night turned chilly.

E!

Johnny sat in his Rover with his sunglasses on staring out the windshield. He couldn’t wait to spend some time with her; more than just a coffee break at least. She was so beautiful and….delicate. She really seemed out of his league but Roy and Dixie both seemed to think they would make a good couple so he was willing to give it a shot. He just hoped he didn’t do something stupid to goof it up. He’d already upset her once and wanted to make sure that never happened again. Finally, he backed out of the parking space and headed for the little diner they had agreed on. He felt a little awkward not picking her up but this was how she wanted their first date to be; no expectations and nothing uncomfortable. If the date didn’t go well then they would just part company. If it did go
Riley’s Diner was an old fashioned place filled with booths and lots of nostalgia. It was nothing fancy but that was what she wanted. She wanted it to be real; to get to know the real John Gage and that would only happen if they were comfortable. Plus, he had reluctantly agreed to go Dutch and money was still a little tight for her. She was grateful he had agreed to that as she could not handle any feelings resembling indebtedness at this point.

The bus pulled to a stop and she exited and began the two block walk towards the diner. A shiver ran down her spine and she was glad she’d brought her sweater even though she didn’t think the temperature had anything to do with her sudden chill. She rounded the corner towards the front entrance and what she saw took her breath away.

There he stood, leaning over the hood of his Rover. His hands were clasped together in front of him as he seemed to be surveying the parking lot. He was exquisite; from his dark hair blowing in the breeze to his muscular tanned arms attached to his slim but athletic frame and anchored by his taut perfect jean clad…..Geesh, Lainie stop it! He was gorgeous; of that there was no doubt. Now she felt completely out of place; even in an old diner. What had she been thinking to agree to this? He was a class act and she was just a nobody. Oh God, this is gonna be awful. But, she was a woman of her word so she headed on over to him. It would be over soon enough and he’d move on to someone more his type.

He glanced down at his watch noting that it was exactly seven o’clock. She’ll be here soon, he thought, trying to calm his nerves at least a little. He turned his face to his left briefly and there she was; walking towards him. Her hair was flowing softly behind her shoulders and a bashful grin was beginning to show on her face.

“Hi,” she said softly quickly diverting her gaze from his captivating brown eyes.

“Hey, you look very pretty tonight. I mean, you always look pretty but I’m just not used to seeing you in clothes and….arrrgh.” Oh damn it, Gage! He screwed his eyes up tightly at the blunder and turned away from her, hands on his hips, exhaling hard.

“Lainie, that did NOT come out right.”

She laughed so hard at his faux pas that her former nervousness seemed to disappear. Suddenly, she was much more at ease. “Oh Johnny, that was just too funny but I know what you mean. I’m not used to seeing you in STREET clothes either, remember?”

“Yea, street clothes…..but clothes.” They both laughed again and the crimson color that had suddenly over taken his cheeks began to fade.

“Shall we?” He asked as he gestured toward the door staying half a step behind her.

“Sure, I’m getting hungry.” She grinned and reached out for the door handle.

His strong arm beat her to it and he held the door open for her. She was completely taken by surprise at his chivalry.
“Well, I was hungry too” he began sheepishly, “until I ate my foot just now.” He hung his head and she laughed again feeling almost giddy as they stepped inside and were ushered to a quiet booth in the back.
Chapter 8

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

8

“May I take some of these plates away?” An older lady in a pale blue uniform asked.

Up until then, Lainie hadn’t noticed the mountain of empty plates and glasses scattered on the table between them. Johnny had a very healthy appetite; how do you manage to stay so slim? Now they were continuing to enjoy their conversation over the remnants of a couple of cups of coffee.

“Oh Geez, I didn’t realize it was so late.” Lainie looked up at Johnny with worried eyes.

“It’s ok, it’s an all-night diner.” He was having a marvelous time just chatting with her and he didn’t want that feeling to end.

“Oh, Johnny I know but if I don’t hurry, I’ll miss the last bus.” She bit her bottom lip in frustration.

“Oh, whew, so it isn’t the company you’re trying to get away from then huh?” His tone was flirtatious.

She batted her lashes as she curled a few stray hairs behind her left ear. “Never…..but I really must go.”

“I understand……or I could always take you home.” Suddenly he threw both hands up palms facing out. “Just to drop you off, that’s all.” His smile was sincere and she knew it. She was beginning to trust him.

“I appreciate the offer and all but……not this time, ok?”

He felt a little defeated but something in her tone made his ears perk up. “Not this time……but maybe next time?”

“Sure, I’d like that.”

His trademark grin over took his face again and he was momentarily lost in those sea foam eyes. She pulled some tip money out of her purse and headed to the cash register to pay. Johnny hated that. He wanted so badly to pick up her check; in fact it was a little demasculinizing to have his date pay for her own dinner. But, after spending some time with her, he was just beginning to understand why she wanted tonight to happen the way that it did. He wouldn’t push her; they’d take it at her pace. He could already tell that she was worth it.

E!

In the predawn hours as most of the city slept, a young man walked nonchalantly down the street of his neighborhood. He passed the corner store where he purchased his beer and cigarettes. He continued past the shop where he’d gotten his latest tattoo. He continued into the blackness to the more rundown section. There, he found an old abandoned three-story store. Most of the glass had been broken out and the remaining contents decayed. The roof was barely intact on the top floor
which was originally used as a residence. The remaining two floors were in a little better shape and on rainy nights offered a little shelter for some of the homeless in the area. He looked up and down the street in both directions before climbing through the broken window.

Once inside, he opened up his jacket and began pulling out several pieces of old clothing and a fresh can of lighter fluid. He made short work of piling the clothing up in a corner in the back of the building; away from the street and any on-lookers. He saturated the pile with most of the lighter fluid and then snaked a trail along the edge of the wall close to a small ally door he’d found. This would allow him time for his escape. He tossed the now empty can into the pile of clothing as he stood in the back doorway and lit his cigarette. He needed to smell the smoke and watch how he controlled the burn of the cigarette. He took a long drag enjoying how the rolling paper and tobacco turned to ash by the speed at which he inhaled. Finally, he could stand it no more. He inhaled one last deep drag and then dropped the cigarette down at the beginning of the length of lighter fluid. He released an evil grin as he blew the smoke out of his lungs at the same time as the lighter fluid ignited. It was as if he had become the fire-breathing dragon he now had so prominently displayed on the left side of his chest.

He didn’t wait to watch the building burn. He began the long walk back to his apartment. He had not yet made it half-way when he heard the sirens wailing as they headed in his direction. He stood at the corner and waited as the engine and squad with the number ‘51’ on the sides passed by him; none of the firefighters had any idea that the young man standing at the intersection had deliberately started the fire they were now racing to contain.

“Have fun, fellas,” he spoke into the night as he watched the emergency vehicles make one final turn before coming face to face with another blaze.

E!

The captain of ‘B’ shift at Station 51 began issuing orders as soon as the vehicles came to a stop. The three story structure was fully involved. He considered requesting assistance but decided against it. The structures on either side of the now burning one were nothing but brick shells now anyway. Time had taken its toll on the old buildings in this part of the city. His men could handle it; especially since there was nothing to save and no one to be rescued. Law enforcement officers were on scene to keep bystanders from becoming victims. There were very few of them anyway.

By the time the last of the flames were out and overhaul had begun, the former structure was nothing but a smoldering heap. All three floors had collapsed. It was easy to see that the fire had ignited in the back of the building. It was also easy to determine that there was no usual source of accidental ignition. Once again, this fire was a deliberate act much like the others. However, this fire would be different in a significant way.

During overhaul, one of the crewmen had found what was left of a small metal can. Although the
outside was completely charred it was obvious that it was a lighter fluid can. One other important item was also discovered during overhaul that had everyone on ‘B’ shift alarmed.

Paramedic Bellingham was working as a linesmen again on this call since it didn’t involve a rescue. “Cap, over here!” He called out in a distressed voice that brought the rest of his crewmates running. The ashen appearance of his smut covered face told his Captain that something was terribly wrong. Looking down, the older man nearly gagged at the site of charred human remains.
Johnny looked at the folded up napkin he had removed from his shirt pocket. He felt a warmth spread up his chest and turn his face pink. Her phone number was written down on the napkin. She wanted him to call her. He placed the napkin down on his bedside table beside his phone. It would be the first thing he saw in the morning. She was so different than the other ladies he’d been out with. There was an innocence about her; not naivety but just honest simplicity. The night had been a truly refreshing change for him. He stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt before climbing into bed. He lay on his back, arm draped across his face, and waited to drift off into sweet slumber.

E!

She pulled her sweater around her shoulders a little tighter as the chill in the night air grew. She had made it to the bus stop just in time to catch the last one and was now walking the block or so home after exiting. She knew she shouldn’t be out this time of night alone and now she wished she had accepted Johnny’s offer of a ride home. She finally reached the stairway of her loft apartment and nervously pulled out her keys. The jingling sound obviously alarmed a stray cat that screeched into the night and frightened her out of her wits. Her voice caught in her throat. Damn it! Calm down. He isn’t here. Finally, she turned the lock with her key and entered her apartment.

She had left her lamp on so that she wouldn’t walk into a darkened apartment. She hadn’t seen Oto in nearly 3 months now; hadn’t heard his voice in over six weeks. But the goose bumps on her arms and the shaking in her hands reminded her that his memories were still lurking in the shadows of her mind.

She quickly drank a glass of water trying to wet her suddenly dry mouth before turning in for bed. She was swallowing the last few drops when suddenly her phone rang. No one called her at this time of the night; for that matter, no one called her ever. She was so startled by the sound that she nearly dropped her empty glass in the sink. She stood for a moment staring at the black rotary dial box now perched on an end table beside her loveseat. From somewhere deep inside her she summoned the strength to pick up the receiver; but she couldn’t find her voice.

E!

He heard nothing but silence on the other end. He’d been calling non-stop for the last ten minutes and now she, or someone, had answered the phone. He could hear breathing but no one spoke. Alarm filled his veins with ice and he nearly shouted into his own phone.

“Lainie….you there? You ok?”

“Jo-Johnny?”

“Yea, it’s me. I just couldn’t sleep until I knew you had made it home safely……..are you sure you’re alright?”

She willed her voice to return from its hiding place and finally steadied herself enough to complete a sentence.
“Yea, I’m fine. Thank you for checking on me. I…uh…I heard a cat scream when I was walking up the steps and it kinda scared me. Then the phone rang and……well… I’m sorry. I’m just being stupid.” She was embarrassed by how she’d reacted; she didn’t want him to know how upset she felt.

“You aren’t being stupid, Lainie. Don’t say that. I’m just glad to know you’re ok….well, I won’t keep you….I …uh…just needed to know you made it safely, that’s all. I’ll …uh, I’ll call you tomorrow night….um, if that’s ok, I mean.” He rushed through the last part of his statement; feeling like she might need her space.

“Ok, I’m…ah…I’m really looking forward to it. Good night, Johnny.”

“Good night, Lainie.”

E!

Captain Stanley sat in the Captain’s office being briefed by ‘C’ shifts captain. They had had a slow shift but he went on to tell Hank about the most recent suspected arson case; as well as the body that Bellingham had uncovered during overhaul.

Hank let out a long slow whistle.

“Yea, I agree Hank.”

“What the hell is going on out there?” Hank didn’t really expect an answer to his rhetorical question.

“Hank, I know this sounds cold” the younger captain began, “but I sure hope that body belonged to the fellow who’s been starting these fires.”

“Well, I know exactly what you mean. Besides, better him than one of ours, you know?” Hank couldn’t believe he’d actually said those words but it was truly how he felt. He was angry….as well as worried. That sense of foreboding wasn’t going away yet.

E!

“Sonofabitch.” Chet mumbled as Hank relayed the newest arson details to his men during roll call.

“Cap, could the decedent be the suspect?”

Johnny snickered and cut his eyes at his crewmate. “Where the hell did you learn to talk like that, Marco?”

“Dragnet.” Marco said with a smile.

A round of laughter erupted and Captain Stanley pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger while trying his best to stifle a grin.

“You twits!” Cap tried to act frustrated but he had to admit, the light-hearted banter was refreshing.

Roll call seemed to set the tone for the rest of the day. A couple of minor runs for the station was all that happened by the time the crew began preparing for dinner. Mike was cooking while the others watched T.V. drooling as the smells of fried chicken drifted underneath their noses. One man was noticeably absent from the scene.

“Hey, Lainie, how’s your day been?” Johnny was alone in the dorm where he could have a more private conversation.
“Oh Johnny, it was really nice….” And so the conversation continued; each one enjoying hearing the voice of the other even if nothing significant was discussed. Plans were made for a second date the next time Elaine had a day off. The conversation was winding down when Johnny remembered to share the latest news around the station with her.

“Oh, Lainie, I almost forgot. Did I mention we seem to have a serial arsonist in this area?”

“What? Johnny that sounds awful.”

“Yea, frustrating more than anything really. I mean, there are people who really need us and we’re off on some shi...ah...crap call like that; plus, someone could get hurt.” That comment brought a smile to his face as he continued. “Actually, we have him to thank for us meeting.”

“I don’t follow you there, Johnny.”

“Remember, you bandaged my arm that first day we met? That fire was his handy work.”

“Oh, ouch....sorry...”

“Well, I’m not.” Cheesy, Gage, real cheesy. He rolled his eyes at himself. Why did he say the dumbest things when he was talking to her?

“Aww, that’s really sweet of you. I’m glad too; not that you got hurt but that I got to treat you that day.”

Johnny thought back to the way her touch had felt on his injured arm. He hoped he’d get to feel her touch again – soon.

He relayed to her how the fires seemed to have been started. “And, the fire was just like his others. See, he uses lighter fluid as an accelerant on a small pile of clothing and he leaves the can in the building. It’s like he wants everyone to know it was intentional or something. But he might have done himself in this time though because ‘B’ shift found human remains at the last one.”

Johnny kept talking but Elaine was no longer hearing the details. The similarities were uncanny; no they weren’t uncanny, they were unmistakable. He was doing it again.

“Uh, Johnny, I really need to go ok? I’m sorry, I just have a headache.” She lied, hoping he didn’t hear the concern in her voice.

“Oh, Lainie, are you sure you’re ok?” What the hell did I say wrong?

“Yea, Johnny, I am. I just get these sometimes and I need to just close my eyes for a few minutes. I’ll be fine.”

“Ok, well, uh...” he had no idea where to go from here.

Elaine sensed his apprehension and, remembering Dixie’s warning to her about his fragile ego, she decided to answer the question he wasn’t asking.

“Johnny, I’ll give you directions to my apartment next time you come in Rampart, ok?”

Relief flooded his soul and he spoke again with more confidence this time. “Sounds great; hope you feel better and I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye, Johnny.”
“Good night, Elaine. Sweet dreams.”

Johnny whistled a light hearted tune as he headed back to the kitchen to have dinner with the rest of his shift mates.

Elaine clutched a pillow to her chest trying hard to squelch the rising bile she felt in the back of her throat. Tears threatened to fall and she realized she had to let go of one or the other. She rushed to the bathroom as her stomach lurched and she lost the dinner she had just eaten; because she had promised herself he’d never make her cry again.
“How’s your headache?” Gage stood leaning on the counter at the nurse’s station while Elaine reached inside the supply cabinet to fill his requests for restocking the squad. An early morning run had brought he and Roy by Rampart before shift change.

“My what?” She turned around glancing up briefly at the grin on the young paramedic’s face.

“Your headache…..last night you said you had a headache.”

“Oh, yea,” She looked rather sheepishly at him before continuing. “It’s better….I think I just ate something that didn’t agree with me. I got kinda nauseated for a while. I’m better now though, thanks.”

Johnny gave her a thoughtful nod but he couldn’t help but notice the dark circles under her eyes. Must have kept you up for a while, too.

Elaine finished filling the small box and then reached into her pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper. She discreetly slipped it into the palm of his hand; he almost jumped at the feel of her warm hand in his. He gave her a slight wink and then headed out to the squad, supplies under his arm, to meet his partner.

“Squad 51 returning to quarters.” This time it was Roy who called it in while Johnny sat mesmerized by the note he’d just received.

“What’ve you got there, Junior?” Roy glanced at the passenger’s seat waiting for a smart aleck comment from Johnny.

“Ohhh, this Roy……” He held up the folded piece of paper. “Directions to Lainie’s apartment.” He refolded the slip of paper and stuck it into his shirt pocket. “This time, I’m picking her up at her place.”

“Really? What time’s her curfew?” Roy snickered. He couldn’t help but tease his young partner.

“Oh, real funny, Pally.” He smiled; he couldn’t be mad at Roy. “I know it seems really old fashioned but I’m ok with it.”

“Nothing wrong with that, Junior. Nothing wrong with that.” Roy had seen his share of ‘loose’ women come and go in Johnny’s life. Seeing him fall for someone more conservative was refreshing. He just hoped Gage wasn’t setting himself up for future heartache.

E!

“Bellingham, you alright man?” Roy and Johnny were changing out of their uniforms and back into their street clothes when the ‘B’ shift paramedic walked into the locker room.

“Yea, why?”

“Well, we heard about the body you found in that arson fire last shift.” This time the explanation came from Johnny.

“Oh, yea, that.” Bellingham threw his small bag into his locker before turning around to face the duo
from ‘A’ shift.

“Well, it was pretty gruesome, I’ll admit that but yea, I’m fine. It just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“Yea, I can understand that.” Roy conceded.

“Any idea if the body is the guy who started the fire?” This time Johnny asked the question; deciding to use his own words and not Marco’s.

“Don’t know, Gage. I could see bones in places and I really don’t think that fire got hot enough to do that to the guy. I’m thinkin’ maybe he was one of those street guys from down near that overpass. Think maybe he had been dead for a while, ya know?”

“Yea,” Johnny acknowledged. “Guess the coroner or medical examiner will let us know, huh?”

“Yea, guess so.” Bellingham said with a bit of a sigh. “You guys have a good couple of days off.”

“Thanks and ….uh….be careful on overhaul, ok?” Johnny grinned; only half kidding.

E!

He didn’t normally read newspapers but when he overheard the clerk at his usual convenience store discussing the body in the burned out building, he suddenly felt a desire to read the article himself. He fished into his jeans pocket for the coins required and made his purchase. He folded it under his arm and headed home.

He spread it out on the table of his desolate apartment; turning and scanning the pages until he found the article. ‘Unidentified Remains Found in Burned Out Building’ the headlines read. He scanned the article and felt a sense of accomplishment overwhelm him. It had been so long since he’d felt this powerful, this strong, this competent. The feelings that accompanied this achievement aroused him. He scrambled through one of the kitchen drawers until he found an old pair of scissors. He carefully clipped the article and attached it to the center of his bedroom mirror; between his other two souvenirs. On the left side hung his father’s Fire Department badge; damaged from his final fire. On the right hung the necklace his mother was wearing the day she died. No one except his father knew how she had succumbed to smoke inhalation inside their burning garage during her fifth month of pregnancy. A garage with a door that was open when the fire department arrived.

He stepped back and admired his accomplishments now prominently displayed in his bedroom. He felt a sense of satiation; even though he knew it would only be temporary.

E!

Johnny looked down at the paper with directions to Lainie’s apartment written on it. He was accustomed to following directions but normally Roy was driving. Now, he had to do both and he hoped he wasn’t missing a turn somewhere. Finally, he arrived at the building with a stairway going up the side ending at a black door. He glanced down at the paper once more and confirmed that the gold numbers on the door matched the ones in Lainie’s handwriting. Well, Ms. Hickson….your chariot has arrived.

E!

Elaine gave herself one final glance in her bathroom mirror. She was actually nervous and she didn’t know why. She’d known Johnny for several weeks now and he seemed like a nice enough guy; of
course, so had Oto in the beginning. She shook the thought of Oto from her head and turned off her bathroom light. Just as she was sitting down to wait for Johnny she heard a knock at the door. She glanced at her wall clock and grinned. Right on time, Johnny.

She looked out of her tiny peep hole in her front door and caught sight of the most handsome profile she’d ever seen. Her heart leaped in her chest as she unlocked the door and opened it for him.

“Hey Lainie, you, uh, ready to go?”

“Sure, come on in and I’ll just get my purse.”

She walked over to the bar that separated her tiny kitchen area from the rest of the room and pulled her hobo style purse onto her shoulder. She then crossed over to her night stand beside her bed and turned on the lamp.

“I don’t like coming home to a dark apartment.” She explained heading towards him while he stood just inside her doorway.

“I don’t blame you.” He smiled as she neared him. His heart raced at the sight of her and he wanted to reach out and pull her into an embrace. He stepped aside and allowed her to walk out first; catching a whiff of her scent as she waltzed past him. She wasn’t the type to wear heavy perfumes and he appreciated that in her. She was a natural beauty so the soft scent of her shampoo wafting just underneath his nose suited her perfectly. He breathed it in and smiled as he flipped up the lock on the inside of her door and pulled it closed.

“Ah, ah…….I’ll get that.” He rushed to the passsenger’s side of his vehicle so that he could open her door for her. He could tell she wasn’t accustomed to this kind of behavior but he also sensed that she appreciated it.

“Thank you, Johnny.” Her blush gave her cheeks a slight hint of color.

When he had joined her in the Rover he cranked it up and then turned to face her. “So, where would you like to go?”

“Oh, I don’t care, really. You pick.” She just assumed he’d already made the decision. She’d reluctantly agreed to let him pay so there was no way she was going to suggest something.

A couple of minutes later, a slightly frustrated Johnny backed the Rover out of the parking lot across from her apartment. She seemed happy enough but he didn’t understand why she wouldn’t pick a place to eat. The weather was beautiful; perfect temperature and only a slight breeze. He had an idea and he hoped she’d like it too.

“Say, are you up for a beach picnic?”

She turned to face him and he watched a huge smile spread across her face. “Oh, Johnny, I’d really like that. Sounds like fun.”

E!

They sat together in companionable silence facing the ocean. The gentle breezes blowing their hair back away from their faces as the sound of the waves seemed to lull them into a hypnotic trance. Johnny closed his eyes; enjoying the peacefulness of the night and the joy of the woman sharing the picnic table with him.

Johnny snickered as he glanced at Lainie. “Cap would kill me if he could see me right now.”
Lainie opened her eyes and turned to face him. “Why, ’cause you’re out with somebody like me?”

Johnny immediately felt the sting of her words but had no idea what she meant. “Huh, what do you mean?”

She looked back at the waves without answering him.

“No, I mean, he yells at me all the time when I sit on the back of a chair with my feet in the seat. Now, here I am, out with a beautiful young lady, and he’d be appalled that I’m sitting here on top of the picnic table with my feet on the seat.”

“Oh, that.” She laughed then and Johnny felt relief wash over him. He decided to push her just a little bit about her last comment. And when he did, they both ended up sharing more than they ever intended to so early in their relationship.

E!

Three hours later, Johnny shifted his Rover into park and turned off the lights. He turned to Lainie and noticed her mascara had smudged a little through her tears. “Mind if I walk you to your door? Don’t want any stray cats frightening you this time.”

“Sure you still want to…..after all this?” She asked pointing to her tear-stained cheeks and smeared make-up.

“Especially now.” He looked sincerely into her eyes. She had allowed herself to become vulnerable in his presence and he would not use the information against her.

“Ok, thanks, Johnny.” She watched as he got out of his door and walked around to her side to open the door for her. It was hard to allow him to do that since she had a fiercely independent streak in her but he seemed to enjoy it…… and she certainly enjoyed him.

They reached her door, without the screeching of stray cats, and she quickly unlocked it and took a step inside. Johnny stood at the doorway, not sure whether she would invite him in or not.

“Johnny, thank you for a truly wonderful evening.” She hesitated to look at him; wondering what he really thought of her now. He was fairly sure he knew what she was thinking and wanted to abate her growing concerns.

“Lainie, I had a great time too. And, uh, I want to thank you for not judging me for my past. I broke all my own rules tonight. I normally keep all that stuff to myself but I just felt so comfortable talking to you that it all just seemed to come out so easy. “

“Johnny, I could never think negatively of you; for any reason but certainly not for the circumstances around your growing up. I guess, we really have a lot in common, don’t we? Neither one of us was raised by our parents; you by your aunt and me by the foster care system. How we were brought up wasn’t our fault and neither of us should be ashamed by it. We can only control who we are and where we go from here. “ She saw a glint in his brown eyes and thought for a moment that he might tear up.

“Lainie, you are one smart cookie.” She blushed at his comment. Then looked up again and felt herself leaning in slightly.

He saw her leaning towards him and he met her half way. Her lips were just as soft as he’d imagined. Their kiss was intoxicating for them both and even though it was just a quick kiss, they both parted with smiles. He waited to hear her door lock so he’d know she was safe and sound.
before he returned to his rover and drove home.

She changed into her t-shirt and shorts she normally slept in and crawled into bed. Oh Johnny, I wish I could have told you everything my past. She clutched her spare pillow and held it to her chest as she began to cry again; but this time she didn’t have Johnny there to wipe away her tears.
Johnny opened his refrigerator and pulled out a beer. He needed to relax after the emotional experience he and Lainie had just shared. Damn, can’t believe I told her about growing up on the reservation and being raised by my aunt. He normally didn’t share that until he got to know someone better; but this relationship wasn’t like his other ones. Lainie was special.

He also knew now why she was so reserved; and he appreciated it. Their lives had run a parallel course all leading them to each other. He smiled to himself at that thought. Even with all her struggles of being shuffled from home to home she still managed to go to nursing school. If I’d been moved from home to home I doubt I’d ever trust anybody. That made their conversation tonight even more special. But, he also knew that she didn’t share everything. He knew she was holding something back and he sensed it had to do with her ex-boyfriend. She had told him that she was previously in a long-term relationship that hadn’t been very good but she didn’t elaborate; and he didn’t press her for information. But, he had noticed a shadow cross her face when she mentioned Oto and he wished he knew why.

E!

Roy and Johnny finished changing back into their street clothes and finalized their breakfast plans.

“Joanne’s cooking pancakes for us, Junior.”

“Sounds great.” Johnny lacked his usual charisma for Joanne’s pancakes. Roy knew that something had been bothering him for the last couple of shifts and he was thankful his partner had accepted his breakfast offer. Joanne had several errands to run afterwards so they’d be sure to have some time alone to discuss whatever the troublesome issue might be.

“Oh, Jo that was fantastic.” Johnny said pushing back from the table and rubbing his now stuffed belly.

“Well, Johnny, glad you enjoyed it. It’s been a while since you’ve shared our breakfast table.” Joanne always thought of Johnny as a little brother and since Lainie had come into his life she was seeing far less of him. She was happy he’d found someone; he seemed extremely happy and she was happy for him.

“I’m heading out, guys.” She kissed Roy on the top of his head and then turned to grab her purse and keys. “Coffee’s ready. See you later, Johnny.”

“Bye Honey.”

“Bye Jo. Thanks again for breakfast.”

“Well, shall we pour us some coffee and then talk?”

Johnny nodded his agreement and in a short time they were each seated in the DeSoto living room each enjoying a fresh cup of coffee.

“So, what’s on your mind, John?”
Johnny stared into the blackness of his coffee momentarily before he spoke.

“Roy, I’m not sure where to start.”

Roy had learned a few years ago that any time John started a conversation with those words, that he really did know where to start and all Roy had to do was give him a little time to put his thoughts into words and Johnny would begin.

“Roy, uh, I’m seeing some behaviors in Lainie that have me worried.”

“Oh, Johnny, I’m sorry. Sounds as if things might not be working out as well as you’d hoped.”

Johnny hesitated for a minute letting Roy’s words sink in. Then he shook his head as though he’d just connected the dots.

“Oh, no Roy, it isn’t like that. I mean, well, you won’t say anything will ya?”

“No, of course not, Johnny. What’s going on?”

“Well, on our second date she, uh, well she shared some stuff with me, in confidence of course. I hope you understand.” Roy acknowledged that he did and Johnny continued. “Well, let’s just say we grew up under very similar circumstances. A few weeks before she and I met, she ended a long term relationship with her ex-boyfriend. They even shared an apartment for a year.”

Johnny hesitated again and took a sip of his coffee. He never looked at Roy and Roy never prodded him to continue.

“Well, see, she said that the relationship wasn’t good for her but that’s all she said. Anyway, last week I was over at her place and we were cooking dinner. I, uh, well, we were talking and I was holding the salad tongs. I turned toward her kinda quickly and she flinched, Roy. I mean, not just a little bit but she even raised up her hand like she was blocking a punch or something.”

Johnny took another sip and then set his coffee down on the coaster on the coffee table. He rested his elbows on his knees and slowly looked over at Roy.

“Don’t try to read more into it than there is, Johnny.”

“I know but then a couple of nights ago, we were sitting on her love seat holding hands and, uh, well you know.”

Roy grinned as he took a sip of his cooled off coffee. “Yea, Johnny, I get the idea.” He gave Johnny a knowing wink.

“Oh, no, Roy – not that. Anyway, we’re……ugh, I can’t believe I’m discussing this with you……so we’re kissing and when I put my hand around the back of her head she kinda freaked out on me.”

“Like how?” Roy thought he knew where this conversation was going.

“Like, she froze. Um, she put her hands on my chest like she was gonna push me away or something.”

Johnny looked at his partner with a serious look on his face. Roy was glad because if he hadn’t then Roy would have thought he was making a joke.

“John, either of those situations could mean almost anything but……” He wasn’t sure how much he
should say.

“…but when I put them together then it makes me feel like maybe she was mistreated or something.” Johnny finished Roy’s sentence.

“You mean like a battered woman or something?” Roy needed to clarify that he and Johnny were thinking along the same lines.

“Yea, do you think I’m crazy? Am I reading too much into this?” John respected Roy and his knowledge of human behavior. He was much more keen than John tended to be so he knew that if Roy thought there might be something to it then there must be.

Roy thought for a few moments before speaking; he knew Johnny was waiting on an answer and he needed to give him the best one he could.

“No, Johnny, I’m thinking you may be on to something. I’m not suggesting that she needs any help or anything like that. But, if you care about her and it sure seems like you do then just be supportive. She isn’t in that relationship any more so even if it was abusive at least it’s over.”

“Yea, I guess you’re right. Just makes me kinda nervous. I don’t want to do something wrong; something that might make her think I’m like Oto.”

The duo finished their coffee with small talk and then Johnny left for his apartment. He needed a long nap before he picked up Lainie.

E!

Oto drove his old crown Victoria around the block for the third time while watching the black door at the top of the stairs. He’d gotten her address from an acquaintance who was a career criminal but he had no reason to think it wasn’t the correct one. Finally, he pulled into the parking lot of an old semi-abandoned strip mall. He’d wait here. He had a lot of patience when it came to getting what he wanted.
A/N: Depictions of violence in this chapter but nothing that would go beyond the teen rating.

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

12

He leaned his head back against the headrest with his eyes closed allowing the cool breeze to drift inside his car. He had gone through seven cigarettes so far as evidenced by the pile of butts now accumulating on the broken asphalt beneath his window. He let number eight smolder for a minute while he continued replaying his fantasy in his head; breaking every few minutes to glance at her apartment to see if there was any sign of her. He knew she was dating again; he’d seen her with a fireman – at least he assumed he was a fireman by the sticker on his vehicle - and that thought enraged him. He hated firefighters and he knew she was doing it just to piss him off. But, he would have the last laugh. You’re gonna regret this, Lainie.

E!

John stood at the counter of one of his favorite stores and retrieved his billfold from his back pocket. He had noticed how the dark circles beneath Lainie’s eyes seemed to be growing in recent days. He knew she must not be sleeping well even though he hadn’t asked her about it. Something was definitely bothering her; he just hoped it had nothing to do with him. When he got back inside his rover he opened up the glove compartment and placed the small paper bag inside. He’d give this to her tonight and explain its purpose. She knew enough about him to understand why he chose this item for her. He then pulled out of the parking lot and headed to pick her up.

E!

Laine stood in front of her mirror applying extra make-up trying to cover up the dark circles beneath her eyes while also trying to will herself not to vomit again. Oto had called her four times since she moved out; the last two times making threats. She wanted to tell Johnny but she knew that he’d just suggest she go to the police. She knew she should but she also knew that there was no way to prove what he was doing. The last thing she wanted to do was make him angry; she knew what he was capable of. She also knew that this had to end somehow. Oh Johnny, maybe I should talk to you about all this. Maybe you can help me.

E!

He flicked number eight out the window and reached for another when he saw it. A white land rover with a California Firefighters sticker on the windshield turned into her apartment driveway. He’d recognize that sticker anywhere. He watched as a tall dark haired man got out and bounded up the stairs. His mouth grew dry when she opened the door and smiled at him. Two-timing whore. His mind took him to places he didn’t want to go and he gripped the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles turned white. She closed the door behind her and the two of them walked happily down the stairway. He watched as the firefighter opened her door for her and then walked around to the driver’s side to get in. What a fuckin’ wimp he is – opening her door like that. He sat motionless as the brake lights lit up and the rover backed out into the street and drove away. He cranked up his crown Victoria and headed to his favorite corner store. He needed to replenish his supply of smokes while he waited for their return. And he definitely wanted a couple of six packs – he had no idea how long he’d be waiting.
Johnny watched as Lainie used her fork to move her food around on her plate. She hadn’t eaten much even though she seemed to be trying to make it appear as though she had.

“Lainie, are you feeling alright?”

She looked up and smiled at him; a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Yes, why do you ask?”

“Well, you just haven’t eaten much, that’s all.” He said while he took a forkful from his own plate.

“I don’t know. Guess I wasn’t quite as hungry as I thought.” She looked back down at her plate before continuing. “I’m sorry, Johnny. I’ll pay this time.”

“You will not.” He said with a half-smile. “I wasn’t complaining, Lainie. I was just making sure you were ok.”

Tell him, Lainie. Now’s your chance. Say something!

“I’m fine. I promise.” She lied; and she knew her opportunity was gone.

A couple of hours later Johnny pulled up to her apartment. She hadn’t said much on the way home. He turned off the rover but didn’t make a move to get out.

“Lainie, have I done something wrong?” His old inferior-feeling self was whispering to him from his past.

She looked up into his warm, and worried, brown eyes and reached her hand out to softly caress his cheek. “No, Johnny; of course not.”

Her touch sent a quiver through his spine and he held his breath until she pulled it away; leaving a warmth where her hand had been.

“Well, uh, mind if I give you something?”

She was a bit surprised but she quickly agreed. “Sure, what is it?”

“Let me see your keys ok?”

She reached inside her purse that was resting on the floor board near her feet and withdrew her key ring. She didn’t own a car so the only keys she had were her apartment key and the tiny key to her locker at Rampart. She handed them to him.

He reached inside the glove compartment and took out the tiny brown sack containing the purchase he’d made a few hours ago. It was colorful and she kept staring at it as he connected it to her key ring but she had no idea what it was.

“There.” He said holding up her newly adorned key ring.

“It’s beautiful……but, uh……what is it?” She could tell it was Native American and it piqued her interest.

“It’s a dreamcatcher. All you have to do is hang your keys up over your bed and the dreamcatcher will catch all the bad dreams and only let the good dreams through. You’ll sleep better.”
She knew that he had noticed the dark circles she had tried to hide….and he was concerned about her.

“Oh Johnny, it’s the nicest thing anybody’s ever done for me.” She leaned over the center console and brushed her own lips to his. “Thank you.” She felt herself getting teary-eyed. She was so tired and yet she felt somehow energized by being in his presence.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled and kissed her back a little longer this time. He parted his lips to take in the fullness of hers and she responded likewise. They pulled back then and opened their eyes; each looking longingly at the other. He spoke first.

“I just want the best for you, Lainie. I can see you aren’t sleeping well and I know this will help. Will you give it a chance?”

“Of course, I will.” She hadn’t tried to deny it. He already knew her nights were sleepless. She wanted him to ask her why but he never did.

“Let’s go put it up, ok?”

E!

He watched from across the street having long ago lost count of the butts outside his window. Now he was counting empty cans in the floor board of his back seat. Four lay on their sides crushed in various places. They had gone into her apartment a few minutes ago and now the images in his mind’s eye of the two of them intertwined were creating a rage within him that he hadn’t felt in a while; a need to control that which refused to be controlled; a thirst he recognized well …..and knew exactly how to quench.

E!

“Ok, now just hang your keys up here every night and you’ll have only good dreams.” He smiled over at her.

“Thank you, Johnny. I really do hope it works.” Please ask me why, PLEASE.

“Well, I’m gonna go and let you try it out, ok?” He headed to the door while she followed. They kissed once more in the open doorway before he turned to go. “I’ll see you tomorrow, ok?”

“K”

“Goodnight, Lainie.”

“Goodnight, Johnny.”

E!

He sat watching as the dark haired man left not long after he returned her home. Well, that didn’t take long, he thought to himself. Once the rover was gone, he exited the car, crossed the street and walked up the stairs to her front door.

Inside, Elaine stood staring at the dreamcatcher. The beautiful blues, reds and purples were so pretty and the fact that Johnny had given it to her made it even more special. “I sure hope you work tonight.” Her stomach and her head were hurting and she walked into her bathroom to find her aspirin bottle with only one left. She knew she needed two and remembered she had a small bottle she’d been carrying around in her purse. She walked out of her bathroom to the bar where she
normally left it; but found the bar empty. She looked at her loveseat; the second place she was likely to have placed it but again saw no purse. Panic almost took over as she began retracing her steps. She remembered having it at the restaurant and then…….damn it, I left it in Johnny’s car. He had asked her for her keys and they became so mesmerized talking about the dreamcatcher that she forgot her purse in the floor board of the passenger’s side. She picked up the phone to call him only to realize he hadn’t had time to make it home yet and hung the phone back up. A knock at the door startled her and a big grin stretched across her face. He had found it and was bringing it back. She bounded over to the door, unlocked the deadbolt and pulled it open with a sheepish grin.

“Oh Johnny, I’m such a…..”

E!

Johnny made the turn onto his street when it hit him. He had meant to stop for milk on his way home. There was a small market up ahead and he decided to run in there quickly for a quart carton; just enough to last him until he bought his usual supply of groceries. After making his purchase, he continued on his way home. When he arrived about ten minutes later and opened his car door, the light reflected off something in his floorboard. He leaned back to get a better look and then laughed out loud.

“Lainie, I bet you haven’t even realized you’re missing it have you?”

He closed his door planning to drive back over to her place but then thought better of it. She might be asleep by the time he got there and the last thing he wanted to do was to wake her up. Still, he knew how she was about worrying about things so he decided to just give her a quick call and let her know he’d found it and see if she wanted him to bring it to her tonight or tomorrow when he picked her up for their beach trip.

He unlocked his door while looking around to see if any of his neighbors were watching. He was a little self-conscious about being seen with a woman’s purse in his hand. He placed his milk in his refrigerator before sitting down by his phone and dialing her number.

E!

“Hello, Lainie, expecting someone else?” He stood in her doorway blocking her exit while holding his hand on the door to prevent her from closing it.

“Oto, wha..what are you doing here?”

The evilness in his smile was palpable and she unconsciously stepped backwards trying to distance herself from him. He followed her and closed the door behind him, listening for the click as his thumb flipped the lock into place. There was no reasoning with him. His eyes were glassed over and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what he wanted.

“So, I see you’re wearing whore-paint for him.” He reached out and brushed his rough thumb over her lips.

“Oto, it’s just a little make-up that’s all.”

“I never told you that you could wear that shit.” He said through gritted teeth.

I don’t have to ask you, asshole! “I’m sorry.” She whispered sounding as weak as she felt.

In one swift move he grabbed a handful of hair at the back of her head and jerked hard causing her knees to buckle beneath her. She wanted to cry out but there was no one close enough to hear her anyway. Besides, she had learned not to push him during one of his rampages. With his free hand he
withdraw his pack of cigarettes and tossed them on her coffee table. Then he fished inside his pants pocket for his lighter and flicked it on waving it near her eyes. She tried not to look at the flame but she couldn’t help it. She heard him snicker as he watched her pupils react to the light and again to the darkness as he released his thumb from the lighter. He dragged her by her hair toward the loveseat and threw her down on it. Her breath caught in her throat stifling her scream. He ordered her to look at him but she didn’t comply quickly enough. He reached down clenching her wrists in his hands and pressing his fingers into her flesh so hard she thought she was going to vomit. Pain and fear mingled with his stench of beer and cigarette smoke nauseating her.

Knowing that throwing up would evoke additional fury she somehow managed to force the contents of her stomach back down; for the time being anyway. Just as she lost all feeling in her hands, he released his grip and picked-up his cigarettes. He placed one inside her mouth; loving how it trembled between her painted lips. She was afraid of him; he felt powerful knowing that once again she was his.

Her phone began to ring and she quickly glanced at it, momentarily breaking his spell over her. She knew it was Johnny; no one else called. Please Johnny, PLEASE help me. I need you. PLEASE come back. Her staring at the ringing phone brought a crushing left hand to her throat. He squeezed hard as he used his right hand to pull her hair back away from her face near her forehead this time. Instinctively, her hands reached up landing on his arms but without the strength to pry herself loose from his maniacal grip.

“Uh-uh, you look at me.” She felt herself going limp as sparkles appeared in front of her eyes. When he released his hold on her throat, he knew the fight was over. Her arms lay motionless at her sides and the cigarette she somehow managed to still be holding in her mouth stopped shaking. Her eyes refocused on him as though in a hypnotic trance…..and he once again flashed his iniquitous smile.

E!

When she didn’t pick up by the tenth ring, he hung up and dialed again. Come on, Lainie. Please pick up the phone. He repeated his actions again but when she hadn’t picked up by the tenth ring for the third time, panic began to set in. He looked at his watch noting that he had dropped her off only half an hour ago. He also knew that she hadn’t been feeling well or sleeping well. The paramedic in him began formulating multiple scenarios that might prevent her from answering her phone; none of them pleasant. Something was wrong and he had to get to her quickly. He reached for his keys snagging her purse in his hand as he ran out of his apartment door. He would be there in fifteen minutes. Hold on sweetheart, I’m on my way.
Chapter 13

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

She hung up the phone and somehow managed to get to her bathroom just as her stomach lurches and she vomited into the porcelain bowl. Hang on, help is on the way. She was finally alone and as the reality of what had just happened sank in she vomited again; this time noticing some bright red blood in the toilet and knew she needed to get to the emergency room. A knock on her front door stunned her. She was able to stand holding onto the towel rack thinking for a moment that she might faint. Again, the knock was louder and she heard his voice. No, not now….please!

Johnny was high on adrenaline as he pounded on the door a second time. “Lainie, sweetheart, open the door please.”

“No! GO AWAY, JOHNNY!” Please go away, she thought and slide down the wall curling up into a tight ball on the floor.

"Oh, God!” Johnny couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Something was terribly wrong and he had to get inside her apartment. Still clutching her purse, he rammed his shoulder into the door trying to dislodge the lock. Oww, shit! He took a step back and kicked it near the locking mechanism. No, Johnny, please, no! “GO AWAY, JOHNNY! Please leave.” She inhaled deeply and felt a stabbing pain in her abdomen. She returned to the bathroom just as he gave another stiff kick to the door. She heard it rattle as she slammed her bathroom door shut and locked it. She fell to her knees and began gagging again; this time, there was more blood.

Johnny’s total concentration was on getting past her front door. He summoned all the strength he could muster and with one final kick, the lock was breached. He looked around frantically inside her apartment. Nothing seemed out of place but where was she? He saw the bathroom door closed and then heard the toilet flush. “Lainie, baby are you ok?”

She couldn’t answer him; she just wanted him to leave. “Please….Johnny…..go away…… please.” She sobbed; her voice barely a whisper. Johnny thought he heard her trying to talk but the sound was faint. He found her bathroom door was also locked so he slammed his shoulder into it. The sound brought a scream from inside the bathroom…………….and behind him a deep baritone voice yelled “FREEZE!”

E!

Immediately Johnny knew how the situation looked and he did exactly as he was told. He didn’t have to look around to know he had at least one gun pointed at him by at least one police officer. “Please help her. Something’s wrong. I’m a paramedic; I can help her but I…”

“On your knees and keep your hands up where I can see’em.”

Johnny kept his hands in the air – her purse still clutched in his right hand – as he kneeled down on her floor. He hung his head and felt sweat beads forming wet streaks down the side of his face. Quickly, he felt the purse being removed from his hand and cold handcuffs clicking around his wrists. “Please, please just help her, please. This isn’t what it looks like.”

“It never is, is it?” Came the gruff response. Two sets of hands reached down and helped Johnny up by his elbows. He was then pushed chest first against the wall opposite her bathroom as a large
officer stepped up behind. “Spread’em.” The same gruff voice said as he placed a large foot between Johnny’s feet pushing them apart.

Behind him, Johnny could hear soft knocking on Lainie’s bathroom door. “Miss, it’s ok I’m a police officer. My name is Officer Collin Keller. We’ve got him, Miss. He’s in handcuffs but I need you to open the door. Please open the door, Miss.

“Hickson……her name is Elaine Hickson.” Johnny had tears in his eyes. He needed to check on her but he was still facing the wall with a strange man’s hands roaming over his body searching for weapons. He felt his billfold being removed from his pocket and a moment later the same gruff voice again.

“Gage, John Gage.”

“Yes sir. I’m a paramedic with the Los Angeles County Fire Department at Station 51. Please, we’re dating. I need to check on her.”

“You need to keep your mouth shut, Mr. Gage.”

Johnny leaned his forehead against the wall.

“Now, turn around and sit down on the floor.”

Johnny turned around and allowed himself to slide down to the floor; legs extended in front of him. He had a better view now of the officer who was continuing to coax Lainie out of her bathroom.

Come on, Baby, open the door. You’re safe now. We’re here for you. Please.

Timidly, the bathroom door opened and he was able to see her. She was as pale as death and her make-up was smudged making the dark circles appear even worse. He could also tell she had been crying. Her eyes were swollen and red. She had both arms wrapped protectively around her abdomen and appeared to be in pain.

“Lainie, Oh God, Lainie what happened?”

“Shut up, Gage.” The gruff voice, which he now knew belonged to Officer Sampson, said again and Johnny leaned his head back against the wall. Hurry up, Lainie, please just tell them who I am. I want to help you.

“It’s alright, Miss. I’ve got you now.” Officer Keller had his arm around Elaine as though he was holding her upright. “Is he the one, Miss?”

“The one, what? Huh?” Johnny was filled with alarm. Was he actually being accused of something?

Elaine looked at him with haunted eyes. She mouthed the word ‘sorry’ and then looked up at Officer Keller.

“Yes.” She said and nodded her head. She couldn’t bring herself to look back at Johnny. She knew she’d just crushed him. Please Johnny, please don’t hate me. I have to. I swear, I have to.

Johnny felt like he’d just taken a swift kick in his gut. He couldn’t breathe; couldn’t even think straight.

“No, no wait. She’s in shock and she’s confused. She needs medical care. Get these fuckin’ things OFF ME NOW!!”

Elaine allowed herself to be pulled closer to Officer Keller while Johnny continued cursing and
thrashing about on the floor. She watched in horror as he was led away calling her name. As he was escorted out her door, the room began to grow darker and darker until only a small pin hole of light remained and the only sounds she could hear seemed to be miles away; then nothingness.

E!

“Sir, Officer Sampson, please, please listen to me. I didn’t hurt her!”

“John Gage, you have the right to remain silent. Anything…..” His voice trailed off in Johnny’s ears. Oh God! What happened to her? Who did…..” He couldn’t finish his thoughts; tears were flowing down his cheeks and his shoulders shook as sobs racked his body.

The officer shut the back door of his squad car; watching the young man now crying in his backseat. His behavior was unusual making the officer question momentarily if perhaps what he was saying was true.

A second patrol car pulled up and the officer stepped over to explain the situation to the new arrivals.

“She’s positively ID’d him. He’s cuffed and stuffed now. I’m gonna go ahead and take him in. You guys wait here and direct the squad and ambulance up those stairs, alright?” He was leaning on the hood of Johnny’s rover so that his back was to Johnny as he spoke.

“Will do.” One of the other two officers stated.

“Hey, uh, tell Keller I’ll pick’im up at Rampart. That’s the closest hospital.”

The others nodded in agreement.

E!

“Sir, please, please get her to a hospital. She needs medical care.” Johnny was trying with all his might to portray calmness and keep his temper in check.

“Mr. Gage, a squad and ambulance are on the way.”

Johnny exhaled loudly and leaned back in the seat. Whatever happened to him now really didn’t matter. She was going to get help; and that was the most important thing of all.

E!

She felt as if she were floating and completely weightless. Efforts to open her eyes failed beyond just the tiniest slits; enough to know she was in a brightly lit room with white figures moving around her. Voices were speaking in a language she couldn’t quite make out. She tried to move but her body wouldn’t cooperate. Then she heard it; a voice she recognized and a gentle hand brushing her hair away from her face.

“Elaine, you’re going to be alright. Don’t be afraid, dear. You’re at Rampart; Kel and I are here with you and we’re going to take very good care of you.”

“Ms. McCa..” she tried to call out to her nursing supervisor but she had no strength. She kept trying to open her eyes as the soothing voice continued.

“Sshhh, don’t try to talk, just try to relax. Everything’s going to be alright.” Dixie was completely broken hearted for the young nurse lying in treatment room two.
“Kel, she’s trying to come around.”

“Dix, try to keep her calm and let her know what we’re doing. I don’t want to cause any more emotional trauma than she’s already endured.” Dr. Brackett looked to the other nurses in the room and began spouting orders.

“I want a CBC and CMP. Let’s get these clothes off her and get her into a gown so I can examine her. Officer, will you wait in the hallway and I’ll speak to you when we’re done here.”

Officer Keller nodded his acknowledgement and turned to walk out the door.

“Elaine, honey we need to get you in a hospital gown, ok?” Dixie continued stroking her forehead trying to keep her calm and let her know she was safe.

“I…sorry,” she panted between words not able to fully communicate.

“Now, you don’t need to be sorry, Elaine. This isn’t your fault.”

They don’t know. They don’t know what I’ve done.

The scurry in the room continued. She felt a needle stick in her arm and knew blood was being drawn. She also felt her blood pressure being taken and a voice she didn’t recognize spoke. “BP is 84/52”

“Dix, get some oxygen on her, she’s going out on us again.” Dr. Brackett adjusted her IV fluids to increase the flow rate. He then took his stethoscope and placed it on her chest. He felt her wince at the cold. “I’m sorry, Elaine.”

She felt as though she were a mile away from the activity in the room. Voices seemed distant and the darkness was returning. Suddenly the queasiness from earlier was back and she felt her stomach begin to contract.

“Emesis basin, quick.” Dixie retrieved the basin as it was handed to her by another nurse and she and Kel gently tilted Elaine on her side slightly to prevent her from aspirating.

“Kel.” Dixie’s voice held alarm as Dr. Brackett saw the contents in the basin. She used a cold wet cloth to wipe Elaine’s mouth and gently let her lie back down.

Dr. Brackett ordered a bolus of anti-nausea medications to be administered. “She’s going to need a gastroscopy, Dix. We’ve got to find the source of the bleeding and stop it.” He continued his exam making his way down to her abdomen and noticing a definitive wince from his young patient as he pressed on her upper abdomen. There was bruising around her wrists in the shape of finger prints. She also had bruising around her throat; it looked like the source of the bruising there was a left hand. He noted a distinct thumb print on the left side of her throat and multiple smaller prints on the right.

“All she’s said is that she was assaulted, right?” Dr. Brackett was looking at Dixie for a response.

“Yea, Kel. Paramedics and police officers said she never clearly said whether this was a mugging, an attempted rape or”

“Or a completed one, huh?” Dr. Brackett finished her sentence. “Sally set up for a pelvic, please.”

Sally began the preparations. “Dixie, try to keep her as calm as you can. This isn’t going to be easy.”
Dixie nodded and once again began using her calmest voice to soothe her young patient. As she brushed away her bangs again, she noticed severe bruising along her hairline on her scalp. “Kel, take a look at this.”

Dr. Brackett, stepped up to Elaine’s left side near her head and Dixie saw his face twitch. “Only a very violent hair pull could cause that kind of bruising,” Dixie nodded. “Let me know if you see anything else, Dix.”

Dixie continued whispering to Elaine explaining everything that was happening. She kept her left hand on Elaine’s forehead caressing her while she used her right hand to hold onto Elaine’s right hand. She knew exactly when Kel began the exam because Elaine flinched; her respirations increased and she squeezed Dixie hand. “Sssh, Elaine, it’ll be over in just a minute. He’s almost done. He’s not going to hurt you, sweetie. You’re safe here. We’ve got you.” She watched as the tension in Elaine’s body eased off and saw Kel pull the sheet back down over her knees.

“C..cold” she again panted.

“Dix, let’s get some heated blankets on her.”

“Right, Kel……Elaine, I’m going to get you a couple of heated blankets to warm you up now. I’ll be right back.” A slight nod was all she got.

“Elaine,” Dr. Brackett began, “I need to remove the bandage from your left shoulder. I’m going to try not to pull it too hard. The paramedics said it looked like burns. Can you tell me what happened?”

He got no answer from her but realized that the heated blankets were relaxing her and helping to keep her calm. He pulled back on the tape from the small bandage just below her left collarbone. What he saw was definitely a burn in perfect circular patterns. Unfortunately, he’d seen the pattern before, though usually on child abuse victims. He covered the burns back up and looked up at Dixie.

“Three matching cigarette burns.”

Dixie diverted her gaze away from Kel and back to Elaine.

“Who’s on call for GI?” Dr. Brackett asked Dixie.

“Marks, I believe.”

“Well, let’s get him in here and see if we can find the source of that blood she’s vomiting. Then hopefully we can move her to a room and let her rest.”

Dixie looked up at him. “Was she?”

He knew what she was asking and he had to use an answer he didn’t often use. “I can’t be sure, Dix. There was no bruising or tearing but there did appear to be recent sexual activity. We’ll know more when the labs come back.” He hesitated for a moment. “Dixie, she has no family right?”

“No, Kel.”

“Then why don’t you stay with her and I’ll contact Marks and talk to the officer.”

“Thanks, Kel. I’m glad we both agreed to sub tonight.” She was brushing Elaine’s bangs again while looking at her now resting patient.

“Yea, me too.” He turned to leave when she called out to him again.
“Kel, Johnny’s going to want to know but I know I can’t tell him so I’ll just wait until she wakes up again and I’ll ask her if I should call him.”

“Good plan, Dixie. She’ll need his help to get through this.” He turned and exited the treatment room heading toward his office to fill Office Keller in on his exam findings.
Chapter 14

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

The clanging of the steel cage doors echoed in the recesses of Johnny’s mind. He sat down on the bunk with his head in his hands. This isn’t happening. It can’t be happening. Lainie, what’s going on?

He didn’t have long to sit and think before Officer Sampson returned. “Mr. Gage? Do you want to give us a statement?”

Johnny wasn’t thinking clearly. Somewhere in his mind he thought he needed an attorney present with him but at the moment all he cared about was Lainie. “How’s Lainie?” he whispered as he looked up at the officer.

Officer Sampson again found his behavior unusual. Something about the situation wasn’t making sense but he still couldn’t quite put his finger on it. “Mr. Gage, my partner is still with her at the hospital. I’m going over there to pick him up after he gets the information he needs for our report. That’s all I can tell you right now.”

Johnny nodded slowly returning his gaze to the gray chipping paint on the cell floor. “I, uh….. yea, I’ll give you a statement. I have nothing to hide Officer Sampson.” He looked up then directly into the older man’s eyes. “I really don’t have anything to hide.”

E!

“Have a seat, Officer Keller.” Dr. Brackett gestured toward the chairs situated across from his desk.

“Thanks, Dr. Brackett.” The young officer sat down, crossed one leg over his other knee and pulled out his note pad.

Oh, before I forget, I have her purse and I found her key ring hanging on a hook on her wall. I have both in my possession. I’d like to turn them over to someone here at the hospital before I leave please.”

“That won’t be a problem. We’ll keep them safe for her. I assume you’ll need a statement from me?” Dr. Brackett asked.

“Yes, I’d like to know exactly what to charge our suspect with. At this point, all I can charge him with are somewhat minor charges like misdemeanor assault, breaking & entering and attempted robbery.”

Dr. Brackett drew his eyebrows together with a questioning look. “I’m not able to give you specifics without Ms. Hickson’s permission but her injuries are not what we normally see with an attempted robbery.”

Now it was Officer Keller’s turn to give a questioning look. “I don’t understand. We drove up just as her assailant kicked in her door and he was trying to get into her bathroom, where she was hiding, when we apprehended him. From what she was able to tell us and based on what we witnessed, it sounded like he assaulted her, left the scene and then returned a few minutes later.”

“I see.” Dr. Brackett leaned forward with his elbows on his desk. “Kind of risky behavior on his part isn’t it?”
“Yes, Doctor. I’ve been trying to make it make sense in my head as well. It sounds as if the assault was his primary intention and stealing her purse was just an afterthought.”

Neither man spoke for a moment as they each tried to put the pieces together. Finally, Officer Keller broke the silence. “Dr. Brackett, will her injuries result in a hospital stay?”

“Yes, I’m admitting her.”

“Well, then that will up the charges for sure. Um, can you tell me if there was a sexual assault?”

Dr. Brackett cleared his throat. “No, I cannot answer that question with certainty.”

Officer Keller understood what he meant. He’d worked enough of these crimes to know that in some cases the physical evidence didn’t prove that the sexual contact was non-consensual. It could be a case of ‘he said/she said’ and he hated those situations. “We’ll have to wait and get a statement from her. Any idea when she might be able to speak with us?”

“Perhaps tomorrow….certainly not tonight. She’s going to have to have a procedure done under anesthesia so her statement wouldn’t stand up in court.”

Officer Keller nodded his head as he wrote that information down. “Related to the assault?”

“I doubt it but we’ll know more afterwards.”

Then the officer looked up at the doctor hesitantly. “May I ask you one more question?”

“If course.” Dr. Brackett clasped his hands together.

“What is her relationship like with John Gage?”

Dr. Brackett was stunned. Where is he going with this? He’s one of our best paramedics and they’ve been dating for a couple of months now, I guess. Don’t quote me on that time line. May I ask why that information is relevant?”

Officer Keller closed his notebook and looked back at Dr. Brackett. As he stood up to leave he said the words that nearly caused Kel to lose his breath. “Dr. Brackett, he’s the one who’s under arrest for her assault. She positively identified him.”

E!

Johnny was back in his cell after giving his statement and Officer Sampson was reviewing it. He could find nothing out of place; nothing that would indicate that his suspect was lying. He put it away and headed out to his patrol car. He needed to go get his partner from Rampart; hopefully, he’d have more information on the case.

He entered through the doors of the emergency room at Rampart and after a brief search, found his partner talking with a young man with auburn colored hair. He was taking down notes and Officer Sampson wondered what the connection might be to the Hickson case.

“Oh, hey Wil,” his partner said looking up at him. “Roy DeSoto, I’d like for you to meet my partner, Officer Wilton Sampson.”

Roy stood and extended his hand. “I was, uh, just telling your partner that I really think there’s been a big misunderstanding here. I mean, I’m Johnny’s partner; have been for over three years now and
this just doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, Mr. DeSoto,”

“Oh, please call me Roy.”

“Ok, Roy, I have Mr. Gage’s statement already and I’ve talked with him at length. Some things don’t add up; that much is clear. But, we still have a victim who has positively identified him as her assailant. We can’t overlook that either.” He looked at his partner who was standing with his mouth agape.

Will, you mean he didn’t lawyer-up?” Officer Keller was stunned.

“No Collin, he didn’t. He just seems really worried about our victim. It could be remorse, I guess but I gotta tell ya. It’s the damnedest thing I’ve ever encountered. He didn’t even call an attorney. He said he called his friend instead.” Both sets of eyes were now aimed at Roy.

“That’s true, fellas. He called me and explained what he’d found when he went back to her apartment and wanted me to come down here and check on her. I’m hoping I can give him a good report on how she’s doing. He’s really shook up right now; or at least that’s how he seems to me.”

Wil Sampson found himself between a rock and a hard place. He couldn’t allow any visitors to see John Gage tonight but he did seem to understand his need to know how Ms. Hickson was doing. Something just isn’t right. “Tell you what, Roy. Find out what you can; maybe even visit with her if they’ll allow it. I can’t let you visit with Mr. Gage tonight but if you give me the information then I can relay it to him. I’m not supposed to do that but I don’t think Collin will rat me out.” He glanced at his younger partner who was shaking his head. He owed Sampson a favor and he’d let him cash it in tonight.

“Thank you. Thank you both.” Roy shook hands with both officers. Officer Sampson gave him a business card. Just call this number and leave me a call back number. They’ll radio me and I’ll call you.”

“Thanks again. I’ll help in any way I can officers. They are both my friends.” Roy turned away then to go to the staff lounge. He knew this was likely going to be a long night so he might as well get some caffeine in his system.

E!

Roy, Dixie and Dr. Brackett were sitting in silence in the staff lounge; no one knew what to say so they said nothing. The door opened and Dr. Marks, the gastroenterologist on call, entered.

“So, how is she?” Dixie asked.

Dr. Marks looked at Roy with concern in his eyes but Dr. Brackett read his mind. “Just don’t say her name and you won’t break any rules of confidentiality.”

Dr. Marks nodded in agreement. “Well, she has a gastric ulcer that is bleeding but it isn’t bad enough to operate on. We can treat it with medications. It does look like she’s been vomiting frequently though because her esophagus is inflamed and bleeding too. Is she by any chance bulimic?”

The three friends looked at each other. Dixie had more contact with her than anyone. “I’ve never seen anything to indicate that. I guess Johnny would know more than I would.” She looked down
into her coffee cup. Kel and Roy had already told her the situation with Johnny and she was shocked that he was accused of this crime. Wrongly accused, she clarified to herself.

“I’ll try to ask, Johnny if it’ll help you know what’s going on.” Roy hoped he could count on Officer Sampson to help.

“Well, that would definitely help with knowing how to treat her.” Dr. Marks could feel the concern in the room for his patient. “She’s in recovery now, if you want to see her. She should be ready to move to a room within the hour.”

“Thanks.” The trio said in unison.

“Doc, Dixie? I’d like to actually see her before I try to contact Johnny. He’s desperate for information but I think he’d feel better if I could tell him I visited with her. I know if it was Jo, that’d make me feel better.”

“I agree, Roy.” Dr. Brackett stood up from his chair. “Let’s go see her shall we?”

The three of them walked back to Recovery and found Elaine unconscious with an oxygen mask on her face. She was beginning to move around some and when Dixie called her name she began to open her eyes.

“Elaine, can you hear me?”

Elaine turned her head in the direction of Dixie’s voice and opened her eyes halfway.

“Ms. McCall?” She responded to her supervisor’s voice and gentle squeeze of her hand.

“Yes, I’m here sweetie. Kel and Roy are here too.”

She looked around weakly but managed to see the two of them. Her voice was raspy but her words were distinguishable.

“I…sorry. I had ….to. I’m…so…sor.” She began to sob again.

“Sshhh, Elaine, don’t try to talk ok? Just rest.” Kel could see her struggling to keep her emotions in check. He was struggling with his own too.

“Lainie, it’s Roy. I’m here for you alright. Anything you need I’m right here.” He didn’t know what else to say. He thought maybe his presence was upsetting her until she called his name again.

“R..oy?”

“Yea”

“Jo…hnny ….in jail?” Her eyes were closed but she was waiting for an answer.

He looked from Dr. Brackett to Dixie before answering. “Yea, Lainie. He’s in jail. I, uh…I don’t know when he’ll get out.” Roy had never felt so torn in his life.

“Go..od.” With that final statement she lost her battle to remain alert. She felt Dixie give her hand a good-bye squeeze.

Dr. Brackett and Dixie walked out of the Recovery room with Roy between them. Dr. Brackett kept a supportive hand on Roy’s shoulder but Dixie was the one who spoke.
“Kel, do you think she’s in some kind of emotional shock? I mean, she must really think that Johnny did this but we all know he wouldn’t. How do you explain it?”

“Well, they had been out together so maybe the shock of the situation has her memories jumbled up. Perhaps she can’t place these snapshots, if you will, in the correct order so she really believes he did it. I don’t know; that’s the only thing I can come up with.”

“Yea Doc, but where does that leave Johnny?” Besides in jail. “All the evidence is overwhelming. Officers saw him kick in the door. His foot prints are on it too. He was caught with her purse in his hand banging on her bathroom door and she told the police he assaulted her. Doc, that sounds like an open and shut case.” Roy could feel himself losing hope.

“Then we’ve got to figure out how to resolve this, guys.” Dixie was adamant. “Now, they’re both our friends. I know, we’ve known Johnny longer but right now what we know is one friend is in jail for assaulting another friend. We know he didn’t do it but in her mind she’s just as certain that he did. And right now, they are both hurting.”

Dixie continued walking with both hands in her pockets. “Somehow, we’ve got to figure out not only what happened but who did it.” She stopped to look at both men. “Because whoever he is, he’s still out there……and he might do a better job next time.”
chapter 15

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

15

He returned to his apartment, showered and walked into his bedroom. With a grin of satisfaction he stared into his mirror where his trophies now hung in silent testament; the one where soon he would proudly display an artifact from his next conquest. Feeling relaxed and completely satiated, he lay down and quickly drifted off to sleep.

E!

Roy hung up the phone after talking to Officer Sampson; feeling a bit of relief that the older man seemed equally concerned about both Elaine and Johnny. He knew his next phone call would be his most difficult one yet. He was grateful that Dr. Brackett had allowed him to use his office to make the calls instead of using the pay phone. This call would’ve cost me a small fortune at a pay phone.

When the ringing began, Roy pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger while squeezing his eyes closed. On the third ring a male voice answered.

“Hello.”

“Uh, Cap this is Roy. I hate to bother you in the middle of the night but…”

Roy struggled to fill his Captain in on what he knew – which frankly wasn’t much. He had no idea when Johnny would be arraigned but figured it wouldn’t happen before Monday since it was Friday night; or rather Saturday morning. He knew Captain Stanley would need to call in a substitute for Johnny’s next regular shift on Sunday. Beyond that, well, he just didn’t know.

“Yea, Cap I’ll keep you posted as I learn more, thanks.”

Roy sat staring at the phone; thinking how helpless – and worried – his partner must be feeling right now. His thoughts were interrupted by Dr. Brackett entering his office.

“Oh, sorry Doc. I guess I got caught up in my own thoughts there for a minute.”

“No problem. Stick around for a few minutes and we’ll go get some breakfast.”

“I don’t even know if I feel like eating.” Roy stood to stretch his back.

“Yea, Roy, I know what you mean.” Kel looked at his friend with concern.

“I’ve got Elaine’s labs here. Give me a minute to review them and then maybe we can go up to check on her before we both go home for a nap.”

“Yea, that’d be good. Maybe I can give Johnny an update later. I’m gonna go over there this afternoon and see if they’ll let me see him.”

When Roy got no response, he looked up to find Dr. Brackett deep in thought. There was also another look on his face that Roy hardly ever saw – confusion.

“Is it bad, Doc?”
“Oh, ah, she’s terribly anemic most likely from the blood loss. Her white blood cell count is elevated and she’s definitely dehydrated.”

“From the vomiting?”

“Yea, I’d say so....but...”

Roy waited for him to finish but when he didn’t Roy pushed him. “But....what Doc?”

“This.” He shoved a piece of paper across the desk to Roy.

“Roy, I’m not trying to pry but has Johnny ever mentioned anything like that to you?”

Roy knew exactly where Kel’s line of questioning was headed. “No, no he hasn’t but then again he’s really private about......well, that sort of thing.”

“We need to talk to him, Roy – soon. But remember, you can’t breathe a word of this to anyone, not even the police, until we know for sure.”

E!

Officer Sampson walked down the corridor of cells until he reached the one holding John Gage. It was very early in the morning but he doubted the young man was asleep.

“Mr. Gage?”

Sure enough, Johnny was lying on his back staring at the ceiling. At the sound of his name he got up and walked over to the officer. “Yes, sir?”

“I have some information for you but I’d rather talk in private. Will you walk with me peacefully to the interrogation room; without being handcuffed?”

“Yes, sir. Of course. Is it about Lainie?” John hoped she was alright. Maybe she’d even exonerated him once she settled down.

“Yea, son. Come with me, alright?” The cell door opened and Johnny exited with Officer Sampson behind him directing him.

Once seated in the privacy of the interrogation room, Johnny could restrain himself no longer.

“Sir, is she gonna be ok?”

The older man exhaled audibly. “Son, I’ve never trusted a prisoner in my entire career but for some reason I’m gonna trust you. Don’t let me down, alright?”

“No sir. You have my word, for what that’s worth right now.”

Officer Sampson continued. “Here’s what I’ve been able to find out. She’s gonna be fine but she is in the hospital. She’s got some very minor injuries; nothing that would require a hospital stay. But, there’s one thing the doctors need to know and that’s why I’m here with you now.”

Johnny looked at the officer holding his breath. He had no idea what was coming.
“Son, do you know if Ms. Hickson has been sick recently? The doctors want to know if she’s been vomiting a lot?”

Johnny sat back in his chair searching his memory for anything that might help him answer this question.

“Uh, tonight when we were eating dinner she just moved food around on her plate. Said she wasn’t hungry. She’s been having a lot of headaches recently too. She takes aspirin pretty much every day, I think. But, she’s never mentioned vomiting. What’s going on?” Johnny’s anxiety level was rising.

“Well, I’m not supposed to tell you this, son so please help me help you ok?”

Johnny understood the message. He’d keep getting reports on Lainie as long as he didn’t tell anyone that Officer Sampson was providing him with the information.

“When she got to the hospital, she vomited blood. The doctors did some kind of gastro-something where they could see and she has a bleeding ulcer and her throat is raw and bleeding too. They were wondering if she was making herself throw-up or something.”

Johnny’s Adam’s apple moved as he swallowed the bile rising up in the back of his throat. Lainie, please don’t be hurting yourself.

E!

Elaine sat up in bed picking at the food on her breakfast tray. She was afraid that if she ate anything she’d throw-up. Even Dixie’s motherly tone wasn’t enough to convince her to eat. Dixie got a good look at the bruises around her wrists. They were eerily similar to the bruises she’d noticed in the staff lounge that morning – the same morning that Elaine had first met John Gage. She filed that tidbit away in her mind and continued her efforts with Elaine.

“Just a few bites of dry toast and some milk please? You know we can’t discontinue your IV until you’re eating and drinking.”

Elaine gingerly took a few sips of milk but that was all. “Thank you, Ms. McCall.”

“For what, dear?”

“For staying with me. You didn’t have to; especially under the circumstances but….“ She didn’t finish her thought but began picking at the sheet and blanket covering her legs.

Dixie sensed that she was struggling. “Elaine, I’m so sorry for what happened but you’ve got friends who are here for you – including me. Now, I’m not going to ask you any questions but if you want to talk…or just cry for a while, I’m here for you.”

Elaine only nodded her head affirmatively. No tears, Lainie. There can be no tears.

“Ms. McCall…I don’t remember what all I told the police. I hope I didn’t say the wrong thing.”

“Now, now….you didn’t say much at all last night. Kel wouldn’t let them talk to you but someone will be by this afternoon to take your statement. Just tell them the truth, Elaine.

Don’t be nervous. Just tell them everything you remember.” Especially who it really was.

“Can you stay with me while they ask me questions? I don’t mean to be a bother, I really don’t and I’ll understand if you say ‘no’ and all…..”
“Elaine, sshhhh honey.” Dixie’s heart broke as she pulled Elaine into a sideways hug and once again stroked her ebony locks. She seemed more like a scared little girl than the grown woman she actually was. “Of course, I will.”

A knock interrupted the moment and Dr. Brackett and Roy walked in.

“Well, you’re looking a little better this morning.” Dr. Brackett looked to Dixie for confirmation of his assessment. She cast a glance at the untouched breakfast tray and he caught her meaning.

“Not hungry, huh?” Roy asked.

“Not really.” Elaine refused to make eye contact with him. After all, he was Johnny’s partner and she had an idea of how he felt towards her right now.

“Elaine, how’s your abdomen? Still tender?”

“Not so much.”

Kel was concerned by her lack of response but he didn’t let on. “Well, we’re going to give you some medication that should help with all that.”

“Uh, Doc, I’ll step out to give you some privacy ok?” Roy hoped his absence would allow her to feel more at ease and talkative.

“Thanks, Roy. Elaine, you are very anemic so we’re going to start you on some iron as well as some medication to help your throat and ulcer heal. Now, be honest with me. How long have you been vomiting up blood?”

Elaine was embarrassed but knew she needed to tell the truth. “Couple of weeks.” Again, she picked at her blanket.

“Well, I’m not gonna be hard on you about that. You know how dangerous this can be and I’m sure you have a good reason for trying to hide it. I need to ask you a very personal question though Elaine.

Oh God, here it comes.

“Elaine, when I examined you last night there was evidence of recent sexual activity. I need to know if it was consentual.” Flames of embarrassment rose up her face and she felt herself flushing.

“Elaine, I’m trying to find out so that I can write up my report…and make sure you get the help you deserve if this wasn’t by choice.” She was expecting this question from the police but not from Dr. Brackett.

“I didn’t want to.” She explained in a voice barely audible.

Kel and Dixie exchanged worrisome glances; both knowing this would not bode well for Johnny. “Elaine, I’m very sorry. Please remember, you did nothing to provoke this and it isn’t your fault.”

She could hear his voice trailing off and knew he was talking about counseling and needing her permission to discuss his findings with law enforcement officials. But the voice of her conscience was louder. Yea, you did bring it on yourself, Lainie. This is all your fault.

E!

Roy was waiting outside her room when Kel and Dixie appeared.
“Anything?” Roy hoped she started talking when he left.

“Nothing good, Roy. She confirmed to us that she didn’t consent.”

“Kel, something’s bothering me and I’ve got to just spit it out.”

Dr. Brackett knew this tone of voice well and he knew whatever she was about to say was going to be important. “Sure Dix, what is it?”

“Well, right after Elaine started to work here; in fact it was the day she first met Johnny, she had a bruise on her wrist the looked very much like the ones she has now. It was only on one side though not like now but, Johnny couldn’t have done that. When I asked her about it she basically brushed off my question.”

“One day, funny you should mention that because a few weeks ago, Johnny asked me about some behaviors he was noticing in Elaine that had him worried that she might have been battered in her former relationship. Ah, something about her putting her arms up like she was blocking a punch when he made a sudden move and there was something else…..I can’t remember now but he was worried about her.”

“Hey fellas, you don’t think maybe her ex….?” Dixie didn’t have to finish her sentence.

“Makes a hell of a lot more sense than Johnny doing it.” Roy was beginning to grow very defensive now as thoughts of deliberate deceit on Elaine’s part began to filter into his mind. He felt his fists clenching and unclenching while his jaw muscles flexed in frustration. “Doc, I think it’s time we spoke to Johnny.”

“Well, I’m gonna go home and freshen up. She wants me here when the police come this afternoon so I’ll be back in a few hours.” Dixie’s countenance was gloomy.

“Good plan, Dix.” Kel watched as his head nurse walked toward the elevator.

“Roy, I’m ready when you are? I’ve got one critical question and I’m 99% sure that Johnny has the answer that will get him out of this mess.”
Chapter 16

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

Roy and Kel waited in a small room as the warden went to retrieve John. Officers Sampson and Keller were not due back on shift until late afternoon. Luckily, Dr. Brackett was able to pull some strings so that they could visit with him for a few minutes. The door opened and a very exhausted looking Johnny walked in.

“Hey fellas. Thanks for coming. Doc, how’s Lainie?”

“She’s going to be fine, Johnny. Try not to worry about her ok?” Kel hoped he didn’t sound harsh. He didn’t want to make Johnny defensive.

Roy was silently seething at how caring Johnny was while knowing that Lainie was still accusing Johnny of assaulting her.

“John, we don’t have very long so I need to get to the point quickly. I need to ask you some extremely personal questions but please answer me honestly ok?”

Johnny sat in stunned silence. He had no idea what he was about to be asked. He swallowed hard and then voiced his confirmation. “Yea, sure no problem, Doc.”

“Johnny, I’ll just step outside and give you and Kel some privacy.”

“No, no Roy I’d like for you to stay. I have nothing to hide; I swear.”

Roy and Kel looked at each other and then back at John.

“Johnny, I don’t know how much you’ve been told about Lainie’s condition and I wouldn’t ask these questions if it wasn’t relevant.” Dr. Brackett was trying to ease into the questions but he could tell he was only making Johnny even more anxious.

“Yea, Doc, that's fine so just ask away.”

Dr. Brackett’s mouth twitched as his discomfort level rose. “John, when was the last time you and Elaine had sexual intercourse?”

Johnny’s eyes widened and he gulped before he answered. “Doc, I know this kinda goes against my reputation and all but….well,…we haven’t.”

“Never?”

“No Doc. Not ever. I mean, sure I was kinda hopin’ ya know but, I don’t know. She…ah….” He couldn’t finish his thought as the realization hit him as to why he was being asked that question.

“Doc?” His eyes were beginning to grow watery. “She was….” His breaths became shallow and rapid.

“Johnny, she says she was. I examined her and I didn’t find the usual evidence ok?” Dr. Brackett placed a hand on his young friend’s shoulder offering what comfort he could.
Johnny covered his face with his hands trying to gather his wits about him. When he was finally able to speak again his voice was shaky. “She…uh, is she blaming me?”

“Yea, Junior, she is.” Roy hated to be the one to tell Johnny that but he also knew that John probably already knew but was just hoping it wasn’t true.

“How, I mean…..Oh God!” Johnny was breathing too rapidly now.

“Johnny, you’re gonna hyperventilate. Slow down your breathing ok. We’re gonna help you fight this alright?” Dr. Brackett knew this wasn’t going to be pleasant but he wasn’t expecting a reaction quite this strong. Of course, John was shocked by the whole thing; and he hadn’t slept either.

“Fight it? How? It’s my word against hers?” Johnny’s brown eyes were dark pools of desperation. “Please believe me. I’d never ever do anything like that – not to anyone.”

“We know, John, we know. Listen to me, I have one more question to ask you, alright?” He watched as John nodded. “Johnny, have you had a vasectomy or ever had a reason to have your sperm count checked?”

Johnny couldn’t believe his ears. “Doc, I’m not even thirty years old yet. No, I haven’t why?”

“Johnny, the lab found no sperm cells in the swab I took. This man, whoever he may be, has either had a vasectomy or has azoospermia.”

“I don’t know what that means, Doc?”

“Johnny, it means that the man whose semen was tested by our lab has an extremely low sperm count.” Dr. Brackett hoped his young friend was beginning to understand where he was going with his line of questioning.

Suddenly, Johnny looked up; realization on his face. “So, if my sperm count is normal then that’ll prove it wasn’t me.”

“That’s right, Junior.” Roy placed a reassuring hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Then, let’s do it. Can you get them to let me go to Rampart for the test?”

“Well, John, I think I can. Let me go see what I can do.” Dr. Brackett stood up and knocked on the door. He heard the clicking sound to indicate the door was unlocked and Roy and Johnny watched him leave.

“Roy, I uh, I’m sorry to mess up your off time.”

“Hey, you’d’ve done it for me, right? Listen, I uh, I went ahead and called Cap so he’d know.”

“Yea, guess I won’t make it to shift tomorrow.”

“I kinda figured that. I hope you aren’t mad that I told him.”

“No, Roy, he had to know and well,” Johnny gestured at the room he was in. “I already used my one phone call, ya know.”

Roy tried to smile but it looked more like a grimace. “I’m glad you used it to call me.”

Each man was reading the thoughts of the other. Their friendship was valued on both sides. More than once they had each saved the other’s life and they knew that as long as they were partners, it
would probably happen again. They didn’t need to say it out loud but they truly loved each other with a brotherly love; and when one hurt so did the other. They sat in companionable silence for a moment waiting on Dr. Brackett to return. Finally, they heard the clicking sound of the door being unlocked again and Dr. Brackett and a young uniformed officer walked in.

“Mr. Gage, I’m Officer Franklin and I’ll be escorting you to Rampart for your medical treatment. Do I need handcuffs?”

Treatment? What’d you tell’em, Doc? Johnny looked at the Officer whose uniform sleeves were so tight he thought the material might split open from his bulging muscles. Even if Johnny was prone to violence or elopement, he knew he would be no match for this hulk of a man. “Uh, no, no sir you don’t have to do that.”

The officer seemed pleased by Johnny’s reaction. “Then let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later, Dr. Brackett handed Johnny a cup, a small tube of K-Y jelly and directed him to a private restroom.

“Huh?...... Ooohhh, I get it now, Doc. Geez Gage, it ain’t like you’ve never done this before......just not in a cup. Several minutes later, and he hoped not too quickly, he returned with his sample.

“Sit tight, John. I’ll be right back.” Dr. Brackett left him alone with his ‘body guard’ outside his door. When he returned, the look on his face gave him away. “Johnny, you have a vast army of healthy soldiers.”

Johnny hung his head in a sheepish grin. Now at least they’ll know it wasn’t me.

“Doc, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, John. Now, let’s get this information to the investigating officers, shall we?”
Chapter 17

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

The ride back to the jail was made in silence as Johnny reviewed the information he had been given. Was it possible that Lainie had misidentified him intentionally? Maybe you really are too good to be true. His somber emotions lingered even after he was returned to his jail cell. Dear God, please let it just be a mistake. I can forgive a mistake like this especially after being traumatized; but not if she’s set me up. He replayed what seemed like every encounter the two of them had since they first met. At some point, fatigue won the race with worry and he fell into a deep slumber.

E!

Kel placed the note in Dixie’s mail box at Rampart. He knew she’d check it for messages before she returned to Elaine’s room later on this afternoon. Dixie had agreed to remain with her for moral support while she gave her statement to the investigators. He hoped that since she’d had time to recuperate a little that her memories would be clearer and she’d realize that Johnny had not been her attacker. The note asked Dixie to bring the investigators to his office before they left the hospital. He also added that it was urgent. But for now, he was approaching thirty-eight hours with no sleep and he needed to catch a nap. He was no longer on shift but he didn’t dare go home until he’d had the chance to clear Johnny’s name and reputation. He returned to his office and turned off the lights. His body sank into the cushions and within two minutes the only sound in the room was a very light snore.

E!

She tried to rest knowing that she’d be facing a difficult interview in a few hours. Were the answers she was planning on giving the correct ones? Doubt, fear, aversion, and anxiety seemed to be approaching her like the four horsemen of the apocalypse; charging at her from every direction. There was truly no escape from her circumstance. Joy and happiness had been right at her fingertips when she suddenly slipped away. No, she didn’t slip away, she was dragged away. Her thoughts turned to Johnny and what he must be feeling. Why did this have to happen? Why? She looked down at the back of her hand where the IV entered her vein. She followed the tubing up along her arm and noted how it draped over the bedrail as it continued to rise up to the bag hanging on the IV pole. Her thoughts grew darker as she began to imagine the bag being filled with morphine rather than normal saline. How easy it would be to allow the MS to flow into her veins and cease her beating heart; end her suffering and the pain her existence had brought to others. She closed her eyes fighting the tears that she resolutely refused to allow to fall. She was so caught up in her macabre thought processes that she didn’t hear Dixie when she came in.

Dixie thought Elaine was finally able to get some rest so she tried to walk quietly over to the chair where she’d spent the night before. The squeaking sound it made when Dixie sat startled Elaine making her jump as she sucked in a quick breath.

“Oh, Elaine, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you up. Try to go back to sleep, ok?”

“Ms. McCall, I wasn’t asleep; just thinking is all.” She leaned her head back on her pillow and stared at the ceiling.
“Want to talk about it?” Dixie hoped that Elaine’s memories were starting to reconcile themselves in the correct order; that is, if the explanation Kel had given her last night was true.

Elaine thought for a long minute before she shook her head negatively. “No ma’am, not yet please.”

Dixie gave her a soft smile. “Well, you just remember I’m here for you and my shoulders have caught plenty of tears before.”

“K, thanks.” I wish they could catch mine too, Ms. McCall but even the shoulders of Atlas himself aren’t big enough to catch all my tears.

A knock at her door made them both look up from their thoughts. Dixie watched as Elaine’s fingers gripped the blanket that covered the lower half of her body. Poor girl, she thought as she realized just how much Elaine had been dreading relaying, and reliving, the details of the last twenty or so hours of her life.

“Come in,” Dixie said in a slightly raised voice.

Officers Keller and Sampson walked into the room introducing themselves again to Elaine. They knew that she most likely wouldn’t remember them. After exchanging a few pleasantries with both of the women they began asking questions related to the case.

Forty minutes later, the officers accompanied by Dixie, exited the room. Dixie still couldn’t believe that even after Elaine had calmed down she was still insisting that Johnny was her attacker. Her story seemed to make perfect sense except for that one aspect; at least in Dixie’s mind it did. However, Officer Sampson wasn’t buying it.

“Ms. McCall,” he began before she interrupted him.

“Dixie, please.” She allowed her supervisees to refer to her by her surname but she really preferred to be called by her given name.

Wil smiled and then continued. “Dixie, please don’t take this the wrong way but we have to look at this from every angle, ok?”

“I understand.”

“Well, have you ever known Ms. Hickson to , uh, be less than completely honest about anything?”

Less than completely honest? Come on, just say it!

“By that I assume you mean have I ever caught her in a lie?” Dixie never minced words and she never danced around a subject.

“Well, let’s call it an error not necessarily an outright lie.”

Officer Keller wasn’t sure where this conversation was headed. “Wil, I’m not sure I follow you.” Collin looked questioningly at his partner as they reached the elevator and waited for the car to arrive.

“No, I’ve found her to be honest as far as I can tell. I’ve never caught her in any, um…mistakes. Why do you ask?”

The car arrived and the three of them stepped inside. They were the only passengers and Wil waited until the doors closed before he continued. “Dixie, as much as I hate to say this……well…I think
she’s withholding information.’’

Finally!

“Confused, mistaken or lying?” In Dixie’s mind there were differences between the three.

“That, I’m not entirely sure of but the way she says things happened just can’t be. For one thing, she
claims that the amount of time between when she and Mr. Gage returned to her residence from their
evening out and the time she made the call for help was approximately thirty minutes. She said that
when he walked out the door she locked it and called the police. Then he immediately began trying
to break back in to get her purse. But when I had him in the back of the car and I leaned over onto
the hood of his vehicle to talk to Officers Winston and Newton…..it was still hot. Mr. Gage had just
driven up which matches his statement exactly.’’

Dixie wanted to shout but thought better of it. “Well, but emotional trauma can cause gaps in
memory though right?” Damn it, Dix. What are you doing? You know Johnny is innocent! What she
really wanted was an explanation that would exonerate both of them – Johnny and Elaine – because
she knew them both to be honest and caring people neither of whom would intentionally hurt the
other.

Wil was about to share his other concern when the elevator doors opened into the emergency
department.

“This way fellows, Kel is napping but his note said this was urgent.’’

The two officers followed Dixie to office number 127 and waited as she knocked. She had to giggle
when a moment later a very weary and dazed looking Dr. Brackett opened his office door; the
imprint of his couch cushion on his left cheek and chin a testament to how hard he’d been sleeping
when her knock had awakened him.

“Thanks for stopping by officers. Please come in.’’

Dixie turned to walk away until he called to her. “You too, Dix. You’re gonna want to hear this.’’

After the four of them were seated, he began. “Gentlemen, I got the lab report back on the semen
sample from Ms. Hickson’s exam last night. While semen samples can’t be used to retrieve specific
DNA unique to an individual they can be used to determine blood type. I thought I might be able to
assist in determining if Mr. Gage could be eliminated as a suspect; if his blood type didn’t match that
of the sample. Unfortunately, they’re both O+. However, what the lab determined from the sample is
that the man who attacked her has either had a vasectomy or he is in the one percent of the male
population with an extremely low sperm count.’’

He took a moment to glance at Dixie and even though she wasn’t smiling her eyes were completely
lit up. She understood what he was saying and more importantly what she hoped he was about to
say.

“Gentlemen, earlier today, I brought Mr. Gage, with permission of course, in here to test his sperm
count. His sperm count is exactly at the levels we’d expect to see in a man his age. And might I add
that the levels are somewhat lower if tested within a few hours of ejaculating. So..’’

“So, the man who allegedly raped her is still out there?’’ The question came from Wil.

“Precisely, Mr. Sampson.’’ Dr. Brackett leaned back in his chair and pointed his index finger at the
chart on his desk. “The semen sample from Ms. Hickson’s exam last night absolutely did NOT come
from Mr. Gage.’’
Wil, looks like we need to right a wrong then huh?” Collin knew that with this evidence there was no way the District Attorney would even attempt to prosecute Gage.

“But the fact remains, we still have a victim here who deserves our best efforts to give her justice.”

Dixie was thrilled that Johnny’s name was being cleared but she still had a very upset young nurse who was feeling very alone and afraid right now.

This was Wil’s opportunity to express a concern he’d been having since the beginning.

“Folks, I have to ask a sensitive question here but, do you think there’s any possibility that she might be making up the assault? Now, now…….” Wil could already see Dixie’s anger growing. “I have to ask because all of her injuries could have been self-inflicted. The finger print bruises on her neck and wrists are positioned in a way that could, and I say could, have been inflicted by her own hands. I’ve reviewed your report, Dr. Brackett, and I see no injuries noted that are impossible to self-inflict. There’s also a noted absence of defensive wounds on her hands and arms. Plus, the cigarette burns were on her upper chest/shoulder area – not the middle of her back – but in a place where she could have reached. And the only cigarette butt we found in the apartment was crushed in a drink coaster on her coffee table……and it had lipstick on it.”

Dixie and Kel looked at each other with shock on their faces.

Dixie broke the silence. “I’ve never seen her smoking when she was here.”

“Then how do you explain the semen?” Kel asked.

“Well Doc, you said yourself that you couldn’t say for sure that the sexual activity was non-consensual.”

Kel pressed his fingers together in a steeple shape while he thought carefully about his next comment.

“And when Johnny returned with her purse, she was basically caught and didn’t want him to know she had been with another man?”

“It’s just a possibility, that’s all. We have to look at everything. And as much as I despise the way this is sounding, well, something is missing here.” Wil hated to be portrayed as blaming the victim in this situation and he knew that was exactly how he sounded. Too many crimes go unreported for that very reason and he knew it. Still, his gut was telling him that something was amiss in her story.

Kel thought about her behaviors and demeanor since she was brought in to Rampart nearly a full twenty-four hours earlier. “Gentlemen, if she’s faking this, she’s one hell of an actress.”

Dixie spoke up then. “I agree Kel, emotionally, she’s a wreck; a little better today than last night but that’s the normal course for this type thing. I was wondering…..I’ve been with her pretty much since she was brought in and I think perhaps she trusts me more than anyone else around her right now.” Dixie tried hard to present her idea in a positive light. “Would it be wrong for me to talk to her about this? Just mention to her about the semen sample from the exam. Not tell her about Johnny’s test results but just say enough to get her thinking.”

Wil looked to his partner for confirmation before he answered. “Dixie, I’m sure she’d be more likely to give you more details than she’s given us. Being a woman, in the same profession and a friend too might help her, in a multitude of ways.”

“And helping her is why we’re here.” Collin was very sensitive to the fact that the two of them were sounding like uncaring and loathsome men when in fact they were the exact opposite. They wanted
nothing more than to see her attacker rot away in a jail cell; problem was, the man in the cell right now definitely was not her attacker, if there was even an actual attack.

“Dixie, sounds like you have an excellent plan here but tread lightly. I don’t want her to lose her trust in you. Right now, she needs a lot of support from everyone who cares about her. So, if you pick up on anything significant, even if it seems insignificant to you, please let us know about it. It might be the one thing that paints a clear picture.” Wil said before he stood up to leave.

They each gave Dixie and Kel a business card. They had already given Elaine their cards and had elicited a promise from her to call them if she thought of anything else. They asked the same of Dixie and Kel before departing.

“Dix, are you sure you know what you’re doing? You’re not a social worker you know.” Dixie flashed Kel a pretty smile and nodded her head affirmatively.

“Yea, Kel, I’m comfortable with it.” She tucked the business cards in her pocket and headed for the elevator. She needed to get back to Elaine.
Chapter 18

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

Captain Stanley reviewed his notes as he prepared for roll call.

“Excuse me, Cap?”

Hank spun his chair around to face his visitor who was now standing in his office doorway.

“Morning, Roy, come on in.” He set his notes aside so his senior paramedic would have his full attention. “What’s the latest on Gage?”

“Well, that’s what I wanted to tell you. I’ve been asked not to share the details, I hope you understand, but there’s medical evidence now that proves he’s innocent. It was confirmed yesterday afternoon. I haven’t heard for sure but he should get out today, I’d think; even though he doesn’t have a lawyer.”

“Wow, that’s great news! Sounds like he’d be wasting his money to hire one now.” Hank couldn’t help but let his elation show on his face.

“Yea, seems so…uh…Cap, what are you gonna tell the guys?”

Hank had been wondering the same thing. This was a touchy subject and he wanted to protect the privacy and reputation of his younger paramedic. He also knew that the men in his crew were closer than most brothers and he wanted John to feel that support too.

“Roy, you know John better than I do. How do you think he’d want me to handle it?”

Roy thought a moment before he spoke. “Why not just say he needed to tend to some personal business. I’m sure he’ll be back next shift and can elaborate if he chooses to.”

Hank felt a sense of relief wash over him. “Sounds like just the right answer to me.” He looked down at his watch and noted the time was 0800. “Time for roll call,” he announced as he stood up. He reached down, retrieved his notes from the desk and followed Roy out to the apparatus bay.

“Ah, Bellingham, thanks for working a double shift. Gentlemen, Johnny is off to take care of some personal business this shift so Bellingham is filling in for him…and” he looked directly at the ‘B’ shift paramedic as he glossed over Johnny’s absence before the men had time to hit Roy up with questions as to the whereabouts of his junior paramedic. “Bellingham, you’ll feel a little better when you hear this. The human remains you discovered a few weeks ago in that arson fire were NOT those of an unrescued victim. The autopsy revealed that the fire was not the cause of death and…. He hesitated before he continued. “Well, you don’t need the gory details but let’s just say the individual died LONG before the fire.”

Marco spoke up even though he was stating the obvious. “Cap, that means the arsonist is still alive too then.”

“So it would seem, Pal.” Hank assigned chores and ended with a comment about hoping for a quiet and peaceful Sunday.
Dixie awoke with a start inside Elaine’s hospital room. She looked over at Elaine’s bed and saw that her eyes were moving rapidly beneath her closed lids. The whimper that had awakened her sounded again and she realized it was Elaine having a nightmare.

She’d been asleep last night when Dixie returned to her room but she hoped that later on this morning she’d be able to bring up the subject weighing so heavily on her mind. She stepped lightly over to Elaine’s bedside and softly stroked her forehead. The bruising at her hairline was more prominent today but she also thought that Elaine looked paler too. She listened to the few broken words Elaine was mumbling.

“No……peas…..”

Her respirations were shallow and rapid as whatever horrors she was envisioning played out behind her closed eyes.

“Ja….hep…….JOHaarrgh!” Her eyes popped open as both hands rose swiftly to cover her eyes. Dixie cradled the sobbing woman in her arms.

“Ssshhhh….Elaine, he’s not here. It’s just you and me, honey. It’s just a bad dream. You’re safe.”

Dixie held Elaine in silence as the younger woman began to settle back down. Dixie waited until she felt Elaine slowly pull away from her and she then looked into Elaine’s swollen red eyes.

“Is this the first nightmare?”

Elaine still had not found her voice and only nodded affirmatively.

“Well, it might not be the last I’m afraid but just remember that you are not alone, ok?” She waited for a response but got nothing. This is it, Dix. Now’s your chance.

“Elaine, I know you’ve got a lot that you are worried about but I want to share something with you that might, I hope, offer a little peace.”

Elaine looked at Dixie with eyes filled with hope and anticipation. Dixie continued. “I’ve talked with Kel and if you’re worried about a possible pregnancy then that’s one thing you don’t have to worry about, ok?” Dixie chose her next words very carefully so as not to mention the name of her alleged assailant. “The semen sample he obtained during your exam showed no active sperm cells. That’s rare, something like 1% of men or something like that have the condition but….well, I just wanted to let you know that you don’t have to worry about that, ok?” Dixie again brushed her bangs away from her eyes with a motherly warm smile.

Elaine’s brain was suddenly thrown into overdrive. She stared at the air between herself and Dixie for a very long moment. No wonder I never got pregnant with Oto. But what are the chances that Johnny has the same condition? Oh no – he’ll request a test to prove it wasn’t him.

Dixie watched as Elaine’s respirations increased and her eyes grew more unfocused. She knew that her carefully aimed arrow had hit its mark. Come on Elaine, remember who it was….just say his name if you know him. I’m here, I’ll help you. We all will.

“Elaine, sweetie, this is nothing to get upset about.” She gently placed her hands on Elaine’s shoulders and began rubbing her upper arms in an attempt to calm her down. She had no intentions of upsetting her; only helping her realize that it wasn’t John. “Here, let me get you some water, ok?”
Dixie poured Elaine a cup of water and held it to her quivering lips. She managed to take a few sips then turned her head away.

“Ms. McCall, I think I’d like to rest a little more, please.”

Dixie understood that this was a polite invitation for her to leave. She made sure that Elaine was comfortable and then turned off the light and left the room.

Elaine curled up onto her side with her IV hand resting on top of the pillow she was now squeezing with all the energy she had left. She had tried so hard to think of a way out of this mess; a way that would leave no one hurt. But now she was quickly coming to realize that there really was only one way out. Only one way to make things right that she had made wrong on Friday night. No, she hadn’t asked to be placed in this position but then again, neither had Johnny. Oh Johnny, I really was falling in love with you. Perhaps one day you’ll understand. With that last thought posted like a banner on her heart, she began to finalize every detail of the chain of events she was about to put into motion.
Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

A soft knock brought her out of her trance-like state.

“Come in.”

The door slowly opened and a very timid young candy striper entered her room. “Hello, Ms. Hickson. Can I get you anything?”

Elaine tried to offer a polite declination but quickly realized that this young girl actually could assist her. “Thank you, uh…what’s your name?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, it’s Melody,” she said as the door slowly closed behind her.

Elaine tried to put on a friendly face. “Well, Melody, I really could use some paper and a pen. I need to write a couple of letters. Could you find those things for me?”

“Oh, yes ma’am. I’ll be right back.” The girl exited feeling happy to have helped a patient.

E!

Johnny stood at the counter while Officer Keller retrieved his personal belongings from the safe. Part of him wanted to go to the hospital and see Lainie; to talk to her about what had happened but he felt torn. Half of him wanted to hold her and offer her comfort and understanding for the trauma she had experienced while the other half wanted to never see her again for hurting him the way that she did. The sound of Collin returning brought him out of his reverie.

“Ok, Mr. Gage,” he said opening a large manila envelope and pouring the contents out onto the counter.

“Wallet, watch, pocket knife, keys and $0.43; does this look like everything?”

Johnny exhaled while replacing the items into his pockets. “That it does.”

Officer Keller stood silently summoning the courage to say what was on his heart. “Mr. Gage, I’m sorry for what happened. I wish…”

Johnny raised his hands to stop the unnecessary apology. “Hey, call me John and you and your partner were just doing your job. No need to apologize. No hard feelings ok?”

“Thank you, John …say, I don’t know where you and Ms. Hickson stand after this but uh, well…’I’d like for you to call us if you think of anything that might help us with this case.” Collin extended his hand.

Johnny reached out and shook the hand of the young officer. “Well, I honestly don’t know how I feel about her right now but, if I think of anything, I’ll call.”

He walked out the side door of the building, down the steps and across the parking lot to the place where his rover had been parked. He climbed inside, stuck the key in the ignition……and sat back in the seat. His passenger’s seat was empty and even though he didn’t want to admit it, so was a part of
his heart. He couldn’t bring himself to look over at the place where she had sat just a couple of days ago. How could I have been so wrong about you, Lainie? He closed his eyes and remembered the feel of her hand in his…..the softness of her lips……her scent that lingered for a fleeting moment as she walked near him……and the color of her eyes as she looked into his very soul. He had allowed himself to become vulnerable with her and until forty-eight hours ago he had not regretted it for a minute. Now he was silently kicking himself for letting his guard down; for being too open and revealing too much about himself to her. He opened his eyes and reached down to turn the key in the ignition. He was too tired to make any decisions right now. For the time being, he needed to get home, shower, and try to get some rest.

E!

Another timid knock preceded the return of Melody. “Here you go, Ms. Hickson. I brought a stack of paper, a few envelopes and a couple of pens; just in case you feel like writing a lot.”

Elaine couldn’t help but smile this time. “Melody, you are going to make a great nurse one day. You have the perfect personality for it.”

Elaine noticed a slight blush color Melody’s cheeks.

“Well, if you think of anything else you need just let me know.” Melody turned to exit but Elaine stopped her.

“Oh, uh…Melody, could I trouble you for one more thing please?”

“Of course, Ms. Hickson, anything.”

Elaine knew this might be her only opportunity. She reached over to the small chest of drawers beside her bed and opened the bottom draw. She withdrew her purse and began fishing around inside it for her keys. Her fingers brushed against the dreamcatcher that Johnny had given her and she pulled out her key ring.

“Melody, I’m a nurse in the ER department here. Here’s the key to my locker downstairs.” She held up the tiny key. “It’s number 8. I have a bag in there that has some of my toiletries in it and I would just love to put my hair up in barrettes. Do you mind going down and getting it for me?”

“Sure…oh cool, a dreamcatcher,” she said running her fingers over the delicate object in her hand. You should have this hanging up in here.”

“Melody, you know what a dreamcatcher is?” Elaine was intrigued by Melody’s reaction.

“Oh, yes ma’am, I’ve had one in my room since I was just a baby.”

“Well, my…uh…a friend of mine gave it to me the other day.” Elaine had no idea what Johnny was to her now. She could only assume that what they once shared was over. He would always hold a very dear place in her heart because he was the only man she ever really trusted. And because of Oto, it’s over now. No, that isn’t entirely true. I made the decision to lie to the cops. I looked him in the eyes and accused him of a crime I know he’d never commit. And now I’ve got to face the consequences.

E!

Dixie looked down at her watch as her waitress brought her a steaming cup of coffee.
“Dixie McCall…how’ve you been?” The older African American woman said as she took the seat across from Dixie.

“Harriett, thanks for coming on such short notice.” She stood and gave her old friend a sideways hug.

“Hey, I may be old but I’m not dead,” she laughed.

“Would you like a menu ma’am?” the waitress asked.

“Oh no need. I’ll just have a cup of coffee too, please.” Harriett smiled at the waitress.

“Now, you sounded so upset on the phone, Dix. What on earth is going on?” Harriett could tell that her friend was worrying about something….or someone.

“You and I think alike, Harriett. We’re all business aren’t we?”

Harriett didn’t answer. She knew that Dixie would get to the heart of the matter very quickly. She thanked the waitress as she set a cup of coffee down in front of her and turned to leave. Dixie waited until she was out of hearing range before she began.

“I’ve got a difficult case I need to run by you please.” Dixie took a sip of her coffee before she launched into the story of Elaine and Johnny.

Harriett listened intently without interrupting but remembering every detail. She had spent the last 23 years working as a crisis counselor for a local mental health center and Dixie trusted her completely.

“Well, Dixie, you sure have a doozie on your hands.”

“Yea, tell me about it.” Dixie waited silently for Harriett’s response. She could see the wheels turning and hoped that she could shed some light on the mystery surrounding Elaine Hickson.

“Dixie, there’s a couple of things here that….well…..” Harriett hesitated and her hesitation alarmed Dixie.

“Harriett, please just spit it out. I’m at a loss.”

“Ok, I see two possibilities and they are at opposite ends of the spectrum, alright.”

Dixie nodded while circling her hands around her cup of coffee.

“Now, I don’t know your victim so I’m looking at this totally objectively. The first option is that she engaged in some sadomasochistic behaviors with a man and she didn’t want her current beau to find out so she cried rape. Now, that would explain the type of injuries you’ve described but I don’t think it’s the most likely explanation.”

“Ok, so what do you think is the most likely explanation?”

Harriett looked down at the white tablecloth and then back up to Dixie before she continued. “Dixie, I agree with you. She sounds like a battered woman from the things you’ve told me you’ve seen and what others have witnessed. You mentioned the lack of defensive wounds as being a concern. You’re right. They are a concern but not for the reason you think. If she is being battered, by whomever, the lack of defensive wounds doesn’t necessarily mean that she wasn’t assaulted. It could very well mean that she’s given up.”

Dixie let Harriett’s words sink in for a minute before she spoke. “Oh dear God! So, she wouldn’t
even fight back? I don’t get it?”

“If I’m right and she has given up then it means that she has learned that there is no hope for her situation. Resistance is futile and she has learned that by just accepting her fate she experiences less pain. Think of it this way, Dixie. Two boxers are in a ring. One knows that he’s going to be knocked out. The only question is how many punches will it take? If he wants it to be over quickly then he never blocks a punch. And mercifully, the fight is short. The outcome isn’t changed just the length of time the loser suffers.”

Realization spread over Dixie’s face. “Harriett, I do get it. I never thought of it that way before but it makes sense.”

Harriett leaned slightly toward Dixie and held her hand. “Then listen to me carefully. If this is true then you’ve got to talk her into staying away from him. I’ve seen too many situations like this where she goes home after the fight within her is gone…..and the next time she leaves her house….it’s in an ambulance……or a body bag.”

Dixie looked down into her empty coffee cup. Please Elaine, please talk to me. Let me help you.

“Dixie I don’t have a bunch of research to back me up on this but …..”

“But I trust your experience, Harriett.” Dixie gave her a genuine smile then. “And I sure do value your friendship.”

E!

Johnny listened as the phone at the station rang. He wanted to let Roy know he was finally home.

“Station 51, Captain Stanley speaking.”

“Hey, Cap, it’s John. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to make it to work today.”

“No problem, John, no problem. Roy told me the good news about proving your innocence and I’m real happy for you.”

Johnny smiled into the phone but it was only briefly. “Is Roy where I can speak to him?”

“No he isn’t. The squad is out on a run but I’ll be glad to have him call you when they get back.”

“That’s ok, Cap. I’m gonna try to sleep for a while if I can. Um, just let him know I’m home, ok?”

“I’ll be glad to. You take care and I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

“Yea, see ya, Cap.”

E!

Roy expertly backed the squad into the parking space at Rampart. He knew Bellingham wouldn’t be available for several minutes so he decided to pay a quick visit to Elaine. He exited the elevator and headed towards her room. He knocked but didn’t hear anyone answer; so he gingerly opened the door. He didn’t want to awaken her if she was sleeping. He was alarmed at first at the sight of her empty bed but then heard the shower turn on in her bathroom. At least she’s feeling well enough to get out of bed. He walked back out of the room and returned to the ER to pick up his shift partner.

Inside the bathroom, Elaine struggled to stay upright. She was still extremely weak. She knew she wouldn’t feel better until she started eating again but eating made her throw up and she wasn’t sure
how much of the blood she could keep hiding. She brushed her teeth and washed her face. Then brushed her hair; wincing as she pulled the brush through the tangles near the bruised areas on her forehead and back of her head. She pinned her dark tresses back with the barrettes she kept in her duffle bag from her locker. Dizziness nearly overtook her and she realized she’d have to rest before she changed clothes. She returned to her bed to try to relax while she waited for the nightshift to start.

Nearly four hours later, she had managed to eat a little dinner and kept it down. Dixie had come by for a while; probably to make sure she ate. Once again, Elaine had feigned being sleepy in order to avoid conversing with Dixie. She really liked her and she knew that the more time she spent with her the more likely it was that she’d say more than she needed too. Just like I did with Johnny. She was pleased when she had finally convinced Dixie to spend the night at her house tonight. After all, she was due back on shift early in the morning and really hadn’t had any time off. Finally, the floor nurse came by to check her vitals. Ok, Lainie, got to do it now.

She pulled her IV pole into her bathroom and reached into her duffle bag again. She pulled out the somewhat wrinkled uniform she’d had stored in there since the shift after the young patient had died; the one who had bled out on the table in spite of their best efforts to save him. That thought led her to remember her conversation with Johnny afterwards and a single errant tear streaked down her face. Dry it up, Lainie. It’s over. She slowly dressed in her uniform and then sat down on the toilet for the next part. She had to remove her IV and she knew it would likely be messy. Without an alcohol prep pad she had no way to sterilize the site afterwards but at this point an infection was of no concern to her.

Slowly, she began to peel away the tape until she was left with the final few pieces still securing the cannula inside her vein. She grabbed a wash cloth and ran it under a stream of cold water to wet it. Then using it to cover the site, she removed the last of the tape and pulled out the cannula as blood quickly began to fill the wash cloth. She waited for several minutes until the bleeding began to slow down. She quickly replaced the first wash cloth with a second one, leaving the first one on the floor in her bathroom. Then she stood up, wrapped her duffle bag around her forearm to hide the makeshift bandage and walked back to her bed. She pulled open the drawer that contained the letters she’d written. She wished there was some way she could know for sure that they would reach their respective targets. She’d just have to trust that whoever found them would deliver them. She laid them out carefully in a fan formation on her bed and reached for her purse. She quietly made her way to her door and cracked it open just enough to see the nurse’s station. The same floor nurse who had taken her vitals earlier was standing at the desk documenting in a chart. She waited for what seemed like an eternity before she heard a call button ringing and was thankful when the nurse responded quickly. She seized the opportunity to walk the few feet to the stairwell. Lightheadedness nearly caused her to lose her balance as she made her way down the stairs and no one took notice of the very weary and haggard looking young nurse who exited Rampart Hospital that night.
Dixie groaned at the sound of the ringing phone. It's four o'clock in the morning! Who's pissed off now?

Too many times she'd been awakened in the early morning hours by an irate intern who wasn't happy with one of her nurses. She groped along the edge of her bedside table until she found the receiver and picked it up.

"Hello?" She said groggily quickly becoming aware that Dr. Brackett's stern voice was on the other end of the line.

"Kel, what's wrong?" Panic began to make its presence known as she listened, wide awake now, to what Dr. Brackett was saying.

"I'm on my way." She slammed down the phone and rushed into her bathroom. She quickly took care of all the necessities, threw on a uniform and grabbed her keys on her way out the door.

Half an hour later she was sitting in Kel's office nursing a cup of stale coffee while he debriefed her on what the floor nurse had found when she went to check on Elaine.

"Kel, she's still so weak. I just don't see where she could have gone."

"Dix, I don't like it either. From what you've told me, she may have gotten her ex-boyfriend to pick her up."

Dixie closed her eyes at the thought of him being anywhere near Elaine. "Kel, we have to call the police."

"And report what, Dix? That a grown woman of sound mind left the hospital of her own free will? There's just nothing to report." Kel took a sip of his coffee and grimaced at the taste.

Dixie was about to say something when his ringing phone made her jump.

"This is Dr. Brackett." He looked at Dixie as he listened to what his caller was saying. "Ok, Ms. McCall is with me so we'll both be right up."

"What is it, Kel?"

He exhaled sharply. "The floor nurse just found some letters on Elaine's bed beneath her blanket. There's one addressed to you and one to me."

"Well, let's go see what she has to say to us then." She stood, leaving her cup of disgusting coffee on Kel's desk as the two of them made their way up to the second floor.

E!

Elaine closed her eyes as she waited for the first buses to begin running. She was so dizzy and tired but in her heart she knew she was doing the best thing for everyone involved; even if she had to sacrifice herself in the process. Walking the two blocks to the first bus stop away from Rampart had
taken her a very long time and now she hoped she could make it home. Home? Home is supposed to be a safe refuge isn't it? In the distance she heard an ambulance siren and watched as it passed by the bench on which she sat. It was followed by a red squad bearing the number '51'. When she saw the driver was Roy something inside her wanted to call out to him but the squad sped by without him noticing her as he made the turn heading to Rampart Emergency.

E!

Roy stood in the hallway waiting for Bellingham to be released by Dr. Early. Their patient was an elderly male with some unusual neurological symptoms so Roy was glad Joe was the physician who had taken the call. He heard the elevator door open and out of habit glanced down the corridor past the nurse's station. He was a bit surprised to see Dixie and Kel exit. They're here early this morning.

"Well, I see you aren't getting any more sleep than we are huh?" Dixie tried to smile at Roy but her efforts failed.

"Do I want to know?" He could almost read her mind; something was wrong with Elaine.

"She eloped, Roy. Somehow, when the floor nurse wasn't looking she walked right out the door. There was a bloody wash cloth in her bathroom beside her IV pole; removed that herself, I suppose."

"But, she isn't well is she? I mean, isn't this a bad idea?"

"Oh yea," Dr. Brackett started, "but she didn't ask our opinion before she left."

"But, she did leave a few letters here." Dixie held up three envelopes and Dr. Brackett held up his.

"Well, what did she say?" Roy was more than a little curious.

"We were just heading to my office to see. Care to join us?" Brackett turned toward his office and gestured for Dixie to walk in front of him.

"Uh, let me check in with my partner and I'll meet you there." Roy stuck his head into the treatment room as Dixie and Kel walked back to his office.

Dixie placed two envelopes on Kel's desk as they were not addressed to her and began opening up the one with her name on it. Dr. Brackett was doing the same as Roy entered and took the vacant seat.

Roy waited patiently as Kel finished his letter first. He folded it back up and replaced it in the envelope. It was a truly heart-warming "Thank You" for the care he had rendered to her while she was hospitalized. He had been very caring towards her even though he knew who she had accused of her assault. He looked up at Dixie and noticed that Roy had placed a protective arm around her as though he was comforting her. That's when he noticed how much Dixie's hands were trembling …and the tears streaming down her face. She finally gave up trying to read it and basically shoved it across his desk.

"Kel," she whispered while sniffling. "I can't finish it. Please, um, please read it to me."

He pushed a box of tissue towards her and picked up the pages of her letter. He carefully placed them back in the proper order and began to read.

Dear Ms. McCall,

I cannot ever thank you enough for what you've done for me over the last couple of days; no, ever
since you hired me to work at Rampart. This will be a long letter and I'm sorry for that but I want to explain everything so that maybe one day you can forgive me. The day you hired me was one of the best days of my life. I knew that I'd have money to move out on my own and away from my boyfriend. I lived with Oto for over a year and now I wish I had never met him. He's a horrible abusive man. I don't know why it took me so long to realize that what he was doing to me was wrong. I can't go into the details of all that went on because I'll run out of paper. But, somehow, he tracked me down and he found out that Johnny was a fireman. He hates firemen. Ms. McCall, I'm so sorry for what I did but when I opened my door Friday night, I thought it was Johnny but it was him. I know that no one ever believed me except the police when I said that Johnny hurt me. But you still treated me so nice. I never deserved that. I disappointed you and everyone else and I hurt Johnny. Every time I close my eyes I can still see the look on his face when I told Officer Keller that he was the one. I wish to God I hadn't done it but I didn't have a choice, Ms. McCall. See, Oto had made a lot of threats. I didn't care what he did to me but he threatened to kill Johnny. He's killed before and unless he's stopped he will kill again. I couldn't let that happen, Ms. McCall. I had fallen in love with Johnny and I was hoping he might be feeling the same way. If I just hadn't forgoten my stupid purse then this might have turned out differently. I thought I was protecting Johnny. If he was in jail then Oto couldn't hurt him. But, I didn't think about how to get him out and get Oto in jail. Then when you said that the lab result showed Oto was sterile, well, I just knew it was over. I'm so sorry that you wasted your time on me. My time at Rampart was wonderful. I wish things were different but this is something I have to do. It's the only way I can make sure that Johnny is safe. No one needs to worry about him though because he'll be fine now. Oto will have what he wants and he'll forget about Johnny. I've written him a letter to explain this as much as I can but I don't know if he'll read it. I wouldn't blame him if he didn't. That's why I'm telling you all this. If Johnny won't read my letter then please find a way to let him know that I never meant for this to happen. But I really did love him so much that I had to make sure he would be ok. He's one of the best men I've ever met and he deserves a long and healthy life. I wish you and everyone who helped me the best life has to offer. Thank you for caring.

Love,

Lainie

Kel folded the pages back up and placed them in the envelope. When he looked up he saw that Roy's eyes were red rimmed and Dixie was holding her head in her hands.

"Dixie, don't you even think about blaming yourself for any of this." Kel never handled tears very well but he certainly didn't know how to handle them when Dixie was the one doing the crying.

"I…I know that she was going to find out whether I told her or someone else did. And Johnny didn't deserve to be sitting in jail for something another guy did but Kel….." her voice began to crack and Roy continued his efforts to comfort her. "Guys, listen to how she wrote that. It's all in past tense not the present. She's given up. She's…"

Dixie couldn't finish her thought. She couldn't verbalize what she was thinking.

"Dix, it doesn't mean that she's going to do anything."

"Oh Kelly Brackett open your eyes! Either this Oto character is going to kill her or….."

"Or she's gonna do it herself." This time it was Roy who spoke. He had already picked up on the way the letter was written. He hated to admit it but he was afraid that Dixie was right. And he knew that his partner needed to read his letter soon and he vowed to get it to him as quickly as he could. He just hoped there was something in it that they could use to find her before it was too late.
Elaine watched as the bus doors closed at the stop where she should have gotten off. She continued to sit in her seat instead and continued on. She leaned her head against the window as the bus lumbered on its way. When she reached the stop she needed, she somehow summoned the strength to make it to the door. Home sweet home.

Johnny lay in bed as the last remnants of sleep lingered like a fog surrounding him. His phone awoke him and he reached out his hand to grasp the receiver.

"Yea, hello?" He heard nothing. "Hello!"

"J..Johnny?"

John couldn't believe she had the nerve to call him after what she'd done. His emotions weren't battling within him at the moment.

"This is John, Elaine. Only my friends call me Johnny."

"I, uh, I deserve that, John. I just, ah, I wanted to hear your voice and say I'm sorry." Her voice was barely audible by the time she reached the end of her sentence.

"Yea, Elaine. Me too." He returned the handset to its cradle and rolled over.

Elaine tried to explain herself but she heard the click and the dial tone. He was gone; in more ways than one.

Two minutes later, another phone call nearly threw him into a rage.

"What!" He answered abruptly.

"Johnny, cool it, geez."

"Oh, Roy, I'm sorry, I uh, just got a call from," he hesitated, "Elaine and I thought she was calling again."

"Wait, she just called you? Hold on Johnny, I'm putting you on speaker phone."

"Speaker phone, what?"

"Ok, John, can you hear us?" Dr. Brackett's voice was the sound he heard now.

"Yea, Doc, um, what's up?"

This time it was Dixie who spoke. "Johnny….Roy, Kel and I are in Kel's office. Did you say Elaine just called you?"

"Yea, Dix, why?"

"What was said Johnny? It's really important for her safety. She's, well, she walked out of the hospital last night."

Johnny sat up in bed then. "Look, after what she did, I'm sorry Dix but I just didn't want to talk to her."
Dixie closed her eyes and hung her head.

"John, did she say anything about where she might be?"

"No, Doc. She just started talking about being sorry and I said something like, that I was too and …"

"Johnny, how did she sound? What did she say exactly?" Roy was really concerned about how his partner was going to feel when he found out the rest of the story.

"Well, I don't know exactly. I mean," Johnny rubbed his face with his free hand. He was having second thoughts now about what he'd said to her. "I… I wasn't very nice, I'm afraid. I ….well, I told her to call me John because only my friends call me Johnny." He hung his head.

Dixie had heard about all she could handle and she did something she hardly ever did. She lost her temper with one of her favorite paramedics. "Johnny Gage…..I love you, I really do but right now, you're behaving like a real horse's ass!"
By Monday afternoon Officers Keller and Sampson had read the letter that Elaine had addressed to them. In it, she had given them all the details of what had happened the night she was assaulted. Oliver Tobias Owens, aka Oto had been her assailant. He had forced her to smoke the cigarette that he had later used to burn her with during his rampage because he found the smoke to be arousing. She gave details of his fire breathing dragon tattoo and explained that in his twisted mind he somehow thought he was that dragon. She gave them years of information on various crimes he had committed going back to the time of his childhood. She claimed that he had confessed to her that he had deliberately started the fires that caused not only his father’s death but also his mother’s death while she was pregnant. She had written 17 pages of details about the person they now knew as Toby Owens but she had left out one very important detail. She didn’t tell them where he was currently residing.

E!

Roy sat watching his partner reread the letter Elaine had left for him. Johnny’s eyes were swollen and red; something Roy had only seen happen one other time. That was when his police officer friend, Drew had been killed in the line of duty. Joanne was in the kitchen preparing some coffee for them. The DeSoto’s had insisted that Johnny stay with them for a few days. He didn’t need to be alone in his current state of mind.

“Roy, I saw all the signs, man. Why didn’t I do something, say something?” Johnny scrubbed his hands over his face and then ran them through his hair.

“Johnny, you did. You and I discussed it, remember? There just wasn’t enough time for her to really open up to you. Don’t blame yourself for this. You didn’t do it.”

“I know Roy…..I know. But I didn’t stop it either.” Johnny knew he wasn’t being a very good guest but the truth was, he felt as much at home here as he did at his own place. He thought of how lucky he was to have so many good friends; and to have this couple whom he considered to be his family. Then he thought about how alone Elaine must be. She had no one. Oto had kept her isolated so she had very few if any friends. Then she had found the courage to leave him and had begun to develop friendships at Rampart Hospital. And, she’d fallen in love…..with him……and he’d let her down. Now, he didn’t know where she was or what was happening to her. In fact, he didn’t even know if she was dead or alive.

“Here’s you some coffee, Johnny.”

“Thanks, Jo.” He attempted a smile but he couldn’t fake it. They would both see right through it.

“You know,” Johnny began looking at both Roy and Joanne. “Please, don’t ever ever ever, take each other for granted. Never part company without letting each other know how in love you are.” He looked away from them then; unable to look at the emotions he knew were being displayed on their faces. “You just never know when it might be the last chance you’ll have to say it.”

E!

Elaine opened her eyes taking a moment to remember where she was. The heavy smell of cigarette
smoke lingering in the air mingling with the dust jolted her memory. She was back in her old apartment.

Her body felt like it weighed a ton. She tried to move but the effort was almost more than she could bear. She turned her head over and saw him lying there next to her. Her nausea returned then but this time there was no abdominal pain accompanying it. She was so thirsty that her tongue felt sticky in her mouth.

“Oto” she whispered trying to wake him. He didn’t respond.

“Oto, please.” Her voice was slightly louder then. He stirred and cracked open his eyes to her.

“What?”

“Oto please, I’m thirsty. Please…”

“So? Get you something to drink.” He rolled over and tried to get back to sleep but there was no use. It was late afternoon anyway. She’d been here two days already and hadn’t done a damn thing for him; just laid in bed complaining. Now it was late Tuesday afternoon and he was getting that feeling again; the hunger that he needed to feed. He got up, dressed and prepared for his next adventure. He knew that Johnny would be back on shift in a few hours. He’d be ready; he’d keep him busy.

He walked out after dark, leaving her alone. She heard the door click and lock. He was gone but he’d be back soon enough. She struggled to crawl to the bathroom in the darkness; hanging on to the dreamcatcher John had given her. She wasn’t able to stand or even pull herself up, she felt the cold tile as she laid her head down and closed her eyes. She was finished with her struggle. The fight was truly over.

E!

He sat and watched the sun rise on Wednesday morning. The building was near a daycare center. He’d be able to create a fantastic panic for the entire city if he started a fire so close to so many children. He grinned his evil smirk as he waited for 0800.

E!

“You sure you feel up to this, Junior? I’m sure Cap would understand.”

John gave an appreciative glance at his partner. “Yea, I need to do something good today, Roy.” He said as they turned into Station 51. They’d both put on their uniforms before leaving Roy’s house so they headed straight for the kitchen and their first cup of coffee before Roll Call.

E!

Dixie sat in Kel’s office rereading her letter from Elaine; and silently berating herself for what she’d said to Johnny. Her shift had started an hour ago but so far the morning was frighteningly quiet so she found solitude in Kel’s office as she scoured Elaine’s letter one more time looking for something to clue them in on where she might be. On the third read through she saw it. It glared at her like it was jumping off the page. Why didn’t I see it before? She rushed to Rampart’s personnel office and asked the secretary to pull the file on Elaine Hickson. After a few minutes of searching the older woman brought back a thin file and handed it to Dixie.

“I’ll bring this right back.” She said as she walked into a vacant office and closed the door. She reached inside her pocket and found Wilton Sampson’s business card. On the back was his home phone number.
“Sampson residence.”

“This is Dixie McCall at Rampart Hospital. May I speak with Officer Sampson, please?”

“Yes,” his wife said. “Let me see if I can catch him. He just walked out the door headed to work.”

Dixie closed her eyes and waited; hoping to hear his deep voice pick up on the line.

“Dixie, any news?”

She knew he was asking if she’d heard from Elaine. “No, but I pulled out her file and reviewed her application. In her letter, she said that when I hired her she knew she’d have the money she needed to leave him. That means she was still living with him then.” She read the address to him that was on her original job application in her file. “Wil, that’s the only other place she could be. Please find her.”

“I’m on my way, Dix.” As an afterthought he asked her to call out a squad to meet them there; just in case.

E!

Johnny and Roy were just starting to clean the kitchen when the klaxons sounded.

“Squad 51 – meet officers for a welfare check at …..”

John stood leaning against the broom rolling his eyes. “Damn I hate these.”

“I know, junior, but let’s roll.”

“10-4, KMG365” Hank acknowledged as his paramedics rolled out headed to the older apartment building 10 minutes away.

E!

Oto lit his last cigarette; the one he’d use to ignite the lighter fluid soaked materials in the rear corner. He’d planned to again snake a trail of the accelerant around the inside of the building leading to the rear door where he’d make his escape. This time, he had chosen a building with an old staircase on the side nearest the daycare center. He thought about his father and how he’d fallen to his death as the fire beneath him swallowed him up. His macabre thoughts brought visions of John falling down this staircase into the inferno he was going to start below. He was so lost in thought that he didn’t realize he was walking backwards near some old pieces of furniture. He stumbled and fell backwards, dropping his cigarette and smashing his head on the corner of an old metal desk turned on its side; rendering him unconscious.

E!

Roy pulled the squad up behind the patrol car parked in front of the building. He was a bit surprised when he recognized the two officers who exited.

“So, we meet again, huh?” Roy said as he and John began removing the equipment that they were certain they would not be needing on this run. Welfare checks seemed to normally end with a call to the coroner’s office.

Johnny nodded at the two officers; it was a polite gesture of recognition on his part. He heard Roy talking with them as they entered the building ahead of him but he wasn’t paying attention to what was being said.
They seemed in a very big rush to him for a ‘welfare check.’ He made his way down the hallway as Officer Collin began to pound on the door.

Roy knew he had to warn Johnny of what they might find. “John, listen to me. When we gain access, let me go in and you stay out here, alright?”

“Roy, don’t tell me you don’t think I can handle this?” John’s feelings were hurt but before he had time to process what his partner meant Roy interrupted his thoughts.

“Johnny,” Roy had a look more serious than any he’d seen in a very long time. “This is Elaine’s old apartment….they think she might be in there.”

“Lainie?” Emotions began to swirl around in Johnny’s head like debris in a violent tornado. He felt hot suddenly and thought for a moment he might lose his breakfast. Before he even realized what he was doing he dropped the biophone and let go of the oxygen tank. He never felt a thing as he charged past his partner in a blur; straight between the two police officers and crashed full force against the door of the apartment.
Chapter 22

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

22

“Johnny, NO!”

Roy watched helplessly as his partner slammed into the apartment door with enough force that he actually broke the door facing around the locking mechanism and found himself flat out face down on the floor of the apartment. He shook his head as he began to stand and watched the two officers rush past him. Sampson headed for the bedroom while Keller searched the kitchen area.

“LAINIE?” Johnny shouted as he finally made it to an upright position. He felt Roy’s hand pulling on his shoulder but ignored his efforts.

“In here, hurry.” The voice was Sampson’s.

Roy somehow managed to step ahead of Johnny; he couldn’t let his partner be the first to see her if she was deceased. He found Wil huddled over Elaine’s pale still body; she was curled into a tight fetal position on the floor of the bathroom. The two exchanged understanding glances as Roy knelt down beside her searching frantically for a pulse.

“Lainie, Oh God, no, NO!!” Time seemed to stand still for Johnny as he felt himself moving backwards against his will. Sampson and Keller were dragging him away from the bathroom door; and away from her. Please, no, Lainie. Don’t leave me, please, please! He watched in horror as Roy checked and rechecked for a pulse and then cradled her in his arms. He picked her up and carried her out of the small bathroom into the living room and laid her down on the floor.

“I got a weak pulse; get the equipment.”

Keller and Sampson retrieved the medical equipment and rushed back to the place where Roy had laid her down.

John was kneeling at her side, completely frozen. His eyes were glued to her hand now resting on her abdomen. She was holding the dreamcatcher he’d given her. He watched as Roy began his quick assessment and was giving him orders he couldn’t comprehend in his present state of mind. Roy reached over with one hand and clutched a handful of Johnny’s shirt at his chest.

“Gage, it’s just you and me buddy and I can’t do it alone. Help me, Johnny! She needs you!”

Johnny shook the cobwebs from his brain and felt himself sliding into paramedic mode full force.

“Get an ambulance rolling.” Roy shouted without looking up. Sampson fled the room heading to the patrol car’s radio.

“Rampart this is squad 51. How do you read?”

The scene was one of organized chaos. Vitals checked. Orders given. Paramedic hands providing life-saving emergency medical service while in the distance a siren blared.

“Roy, I can’t….raise a vein, shit, oh shit! Roy, Roy help me, please!”

“Jugular stick, Johnny. Gotta get a lot of fluid in her fast……DO IT!”
Seconds passed by like hours as they worked on her. She was much more dead than alive; but they were at least giving her a chance. The ambulance attendants arrived and they carefully loaded her onto the gurney taking extra care with her head and neck. Roy knew that his partner couldn’t handle riding in with her alone but neither could he drive right now either.

“Keller,” he called out. “Take the squad?”

Collin understood and agreed to follow the ambulance to Rampart while Wil followed them both in the patrol car.

Neither of the paramedics knew that Engine 51 had been toned out for a three alarm structure fire. The ambulance careened down the street followed by the squad and the patrol car; carrying its precious cargo to Rampart and the waiting medical staff. It zoomed through a busy intersection in a northerly direction while moments later Engine 51 crossed in an easterly direction.

Hank noticed his squad in the entourage at the intersection. Looks like their welfare check turned out better than they normally do. He knew those calls usually ended with a ‘dead on arrival’ scenario. He returned his attention to the call to which they were headed; a building on fire next door to a daycare center. He already knew that the building was fully involved and that their attention would be needed to assist with evacuation of the daycare center. He silently prayed that his paramedics would be released from Rampart quickly so they could assist his engine crew.

E!

Dixie and Kel stood by the base station; staring at it as though expecting it to come to life. Dixie glanced at the clock. She watched the second hand tick slowly willing the ambulance to arrive ahead of their stated ETA. Three more minutes.

The base station crackled and the voice of a very emotional John Gage spoke. “Rampart, pulse’s lost, starting CPR, at your door now.”

Dixie sprinted towards the emergency room doors while Dr. Brackett followed. They both rounded the corner to see a gurney being wheeled in with Roy straddling the victim while performing chest compressions. Johnny was struggling through his tears to keep her ventilated. Dixie reached out to the young paramedic; easing his hands away so that Dr. Brackett could take over for him. Johnny felt as though the corridor leading to treatment room two had been extended; taking him far more effort and time to walk the distance than it ever had before. Dixie kept her arm around his waist leading him in the correct direction but prepared to ease him to the floor if he collapsed. Neither of them saw the pretty young nurse following them down the hallway and into the treatment room.

“Johnny, sit here and let us work ok?”

He was too numb to answer as he stared into the space between himself and the frantic crew. Roy was still doing chest compressions as his stethoscope dangled around his neck. John could see the lines of perspiration beginning to soak through the back of his shirt. He was giving Elaine all he had; but was it too little too late?

From somewhere in the distance Johnny heard Dr. Early begin to count.

“One, two, three, four, clear!”

Roy’s hands flew up as he leaned back away from her.

Johnny saw her body jolt from the electrical stimulation and for a fleeting moment imagined that her movements were spontaneous. Reality slapped him when he saw Roy begin compressions
again… and the heart monitor displaying a flat line.

Johnny closed his eyes as he leaned his head back against the wall. Sweat mingled with his tears forming streaks of wetness on his cheeks. He didn’t see the young nurse standing near him; but she saw him. She was watching him and wanting to reach out to offer him comfort. But she was also intrigued by the form lying on the gurney. She slowly made her way over to see who it was that was causing such an emotional reaction in John Gage.

Johnny thought he was in a nightmare as feelings of déjà vu over took him. This was the treatment room where he’d brought in the young man who eventually bled out in spite of their best efforts to save him. He had stood where Roy was standing now, going through the same motions, while cursing the violence that had taken the teenager’s life. He began to sob as his memory drifted back to the image of Elaine holding onto the young man’s hand encouraging him to fight for life just as they were doing for him.

The pretty young nurse stepped between Dr. Brackett and Dixie for a better look. What she could see resembled a mannequin; or perhaps a corpse. Her young thin female form was lying naked on the table; IV’s, monitors, tubes all offering life-sustaining treatment while the medical staff surrounding her worked at a frantic pace to restart her heart. She was nearly the same color as the sheets on which she lay; the only contrasting color being her dark hair and something she held in her hand in a death grip. The young nurse looked more closely and was shocked to see that it was a small dreamcatcher; and it was identical to the one she too owned. No, it can’t be.

She returned her gaze back towards the wall and watched as a convulsively crying John Gage stood up and somehow stumbled over to the left side of the gurney.

Johnny reached lovingly for the limp right hand of his beloved Elaine. Her behavior all those weeks ago had inspired him. He wanted to offer her the same comfort as she had offered the young man who died in this very room. He vowed that she too would not die alone and uncared for.

“Baby, it’s Johnny. I’m so sorry, sweetie. I wasn’t there when you needed me. I let you down. I’m here now and I won’t ever leave you. Please… please don’t leave me. Fight Lainie! Fight! You’re strong and I know it. You’ve got to help us help you. Come back to me, please. I….I love you, Lainie.”

He reached up to caress her forehead as the young nurse he still hadn’t seen suddenly had a revelation. She had heard him and she too had been filled with a sense of déjà vu as this scene played out so reminiscently of the one she had worked many weeks earlier. She became overwhelmed with emotions then as she shifted her position to gain a better view of the woman who lay dying in front of her. As her face came into view the young nurse released a silent scream……she was staring down at her own face. This was her hospital, her friends trying desperately to save her……and her Johnny who sat there lamenting over wrongs he hadn’t committed. He had been there for her. He had helped her……….and now, she knew he loved her. She stood there realizing that she was suspended between two worlds. She had a choice to make and it had to be made quickly. She heard Dr. Early begin the count again and watched as Dixie pulled Johnny away from the table as the word “clear” was shouted. She closed her eyes and allowed the brightness she saw jerk her back into the depths of darkness and nothingness and overwhelming silence.

Johnny collapsed to his knees on the floor clutching onto Dixie as a frightened toddler holds onto his mother. He couldn’t speak through his tears and could barely breathe when he heard it. The sound he feared he would never hear again. The beeping sound registering on the heart monitor, a heartbeat – her heartbeat.

She was alive.
Chapter 23

A/N: Just a short chapter here. Don’t worry though, we’ll get back to Lainie and Johnny very soon.
Thank you for reading and reviewing. You folks are awesome!

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

Keller and Sampson sat in the waiting room waiting for any news on Elaine. They had assisted in her
rescue and had been involved in her case since the night of her assault. They both heard the sounds
of another ambulance arriving at the entrance to Rampart Emergency Department then were
surprised to see a gurney being rushed in with another paramedic busily performing CPR while the
gurney was rushed down the hall.

“Damnation!” Sampson looked at Keller. “Full moon?”

Keller laughed at his partner. He’d been in law enforcement long enough to know that there did
seem to be a correlation. Within a few minutes, Mike Morton exited the treatment room looking
down the hallway to the waiting room. He didn’t recognize the two officers but he knew they were
obviously waiting on word about a victim.

“I’m Dr. Mike Morton, are you two with the victim the paramedics brought in?”

“Yes we are. How…”

Mike spoke before Wil finished asking his question. He hated this part of his job but knew it was
necessary. “I’m sorry. There was nothing we could do.”

“Oh, no.” Keller hung his head thinking of Johnny and how he must be feeling. He had seen how
distraught he was earlier.

“The head injury was rather minor so my preliminary determination of the cause of death would be
smoke inhalation.” Mike thought then of the irony of the situation.

“Huh?” Sampson and Keller looked at each other quizzically. “There was no fire, Dr. Morton.”

Now it was Dr. Morton’s turn to be confused. “Ah, wait, are we talking about the same victim here?
Young fellow, Caucasian, Dragon tatt on his left chest?”

“No, we’re here with Elaine Hickson.”

“Oh, man, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I’m looking for someone who’s with the victim Squad 45 just
brought in from a fire.” Mike was absolutely mortified with his error. He had given these men quite a
scare and he certainly had not meant to. “Ah, excuse me fellows. Again, my apologies.”

Officer Keller returned to his seat as Officer Sampson walked over to the water fountain. He hated
waiting for news and he feared what that news might be.

Collin looked up suddenly at the sound of Wil coughing. He turned back from the water fountain
and looked at Collin with a red face and watery eyes. He was just finding his voice again when he
walked up to his partner.

“Collin, did you catch what that Doctor said?”
Collin just stood staring into the eyes of his partner while slowly shaking his head. He replayed the conversation briefly but remembered nothing significant.

“Young white guy with a dragon tattoo? Does that sound familiar?”

Realization dawned on Collin’s face and both of them turned to find Dr. Morton. They needed more information on this latest victim.

E!

Roy stepped out of Elaine’s treatment room and leaned against the wall. He let the coolness of the tiles press into his wet shirt and lower his body temperature. He felt a strange combination of elation and exhaustion. Elaine was alive; extremely critical but alive. He had temporarily forgotten that there were two police officers waiting for news on her condition and was somewhat startled by their hasty approach.

“Roy, hey….uh..” Collin wasn’t sure how to read Roy’s expression.

Roy began to gently nod his head in affirmation as he responded to his question. “Alive, it was a really close call but she’s, uh…she’s a fighter…..she’s in critical condition but she is alive.”

“That’s wonderful,” Officer Sampson said as he exhaled loudly. “Roy, we’ll touch base with you in a little bit alright? We need to discuss another case with Dr. Morton.”

They politely excused themselves and headed to the staff lounge where they had seen Mike enter just before they stopped to talk with Roy.

E!

Elaine was surrounded by darkness and nothingness. There was silence all around her. The only sensation of which she was aware was touch. She could feel a man’s hand holding hers and guiding her through the darkness. The hand was larger and stronger than her own and she knew that as long as he held onto her she would be safe; no matter how long she had to travel the road of lightlessness.

Johnny continued to hold onto her hand as they continued to treat her. After a consultation with Dr. Marks, the decision was made to go ahead and operate on her bleeding ulcer. She had aspirated some blood during attempts to resuscitate her leaving the doctors with concerns for pneumonia. However, the bleeding had obviously increased leaving them with no suitable alternative. As she was being prepped for surgery, Johnny was allowed to remain with her. But when the time came for her to be transported to the operating room, he was forced to let go of her hand. Dixie led him to the staff lounge and was surprised to see Roy, Collin, Wil and Doctor Morton involved in a very serious conversation around one of the tables. Dixie sat Johnny down on the couch and headed over to the coffee pot.

Roy took the opportunity to sit by his partner. He had some very important news to share with him.

“Hey Johnny….you ok?”

Johnny looked over at his partner and then back at his hands before he answered. “I really don’t know, Roy.”

“Well, uh…we’ve got some news for you that might help a little while you’re waiting on news for Elaine.” He reached over and put his hand on the back of his partner’s neck.

Dixie hesitated before returning with John’s coffee. She wasn’t sure what was going on but she
knew she didn’t need to interrupt the moment.

“What is it Roy?” Johnny finally made eye contact with his partner although his eyes were somewhat lifeless.

“Johnny, Oto is dead. Forty-five brought him in a little while after we got here with Elaine. He coded on them on the way and he couldn’t be revived.” Roy watched for any reaction from his partner. Seeing none, he continued. “Johnny, he set another fire; this time right beside a daycare center. He was the only one hurt thank goodness but he died from smoke inhalation a little while ago. His body is in the morgue now.”

John continued to lean over with his elbows on his knees staring at the floor. The news took a few moments to sink in but when it did, he looked up at his partner.

“Are you sure?”

Dr. Morton confirmed it for him while Keller and Sampson agreed. He had been positively identified by his driver’s license in his wallet; and the description Elaine had provided in her letters to the police officers. There was no question about it. Oliver Tobias Owens had set his last fire; and died in the process.
“Johnny, Officer Sampson is going to ride with me back to the station. I’ll let Cap know that we need replacements and then Sampson and Keller will bring your rover back here if that’s ok with you?” Roy knew that he needed to remain with Gage at the hospital for a while. He did not need to be alone with Elaine in such critical condition.

“Uh, thanks Roy. I really appreciate that. Would you mind bringing my duffle bag back with you? It’s in my locker. I want to change out of this uniform.”

“Sure, anything else I can get for you?”

“I think I’ll be fine if I can just change clothes.”

Roy patted his friend on the shoulder and stood to leave. Before he walked out the door John called out to him.

“Roy, thanks man; for everything. I mean it.”

“You’re welcome.” Roy gave him a slight smile. “Be back in a few.”

Johnny returned his face into his hands as Dixie finally made her way over to him with a cup of coffee. She sat down beside him with her left hand on his right shoulder. Johnny looked up but not at Dixie; he just looked at the air in front of him. He reached over with his left hand and covered her older softer hand with his. There was no word to describe the relationship they shared with each other. She was something between a mother and a big sister to him.

“Johnny, I owe you a major apology. I am so sorry for calling you a horse’s ass the other day. You didn’t know what I knew at that point and I should’ve thought about all that before I spoke. Please forgive me.” She wasn’t looking at him either but she felt him give her hand a big squeeze. When she looked up at him, she saw the face of a scared little boy.

Johnny looked at her with watery eyes. He didn’t think he had any tears left to shed but her heartfelt apology sent him over the edge. He was holding onto her left hand so she used her right hand to gently wipe his tears away from his cheeks. He closed his eyes and leaned into her hand slightly; enjoying her touch.

“Johnny, I love you so much young man. And I am so proud of you. We’re all going to do everything we can for her. She will get the best care possible. But I really think she needs you as much as she needs medical attention. Don’t be afraid to talk to her John. More likely than not, she is listening even if it looks like she’s asleep. The unconscious brain registers much more than anyone realizes. Her will to live will play a vital role in her recovery and you, my dear friend……….you give her the will to live.”

Johnny couldn’t hold back any more. He reached for her and allowed himself to relax in her embrace. She stroked his hair at the back of his head while he sobbed uncontrollably into her shoulder. The same shoulder she had tried to get Elaine to cry on. The same shoulder she would offer her again when she regained consciousness. She just hoped that was a ‘when’ and not an ‘if.’

The moment was interrupted as Dr. Brackett entered the staff lounge. Hearing the door open, Johnny
pulled himself out of Dixie’s arms and began to dry his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“Doc, what’s wrong? What happened to her?”

“Whoa, whoa Johnny; slow down. I’m actually bringing you some better news.”

John and Dixie both leaned towards Kel encouraging him to continue the task that brought him into the lounge in the first place.

“John, Dr. Marks ran some additional tests before subjecting her to surgery in her weakened condition. What he found was that the irritation in her throat has worsened. He doesn’t think the ulcer has improved but he also doesn’t think it’s grown significantly worse. Surgery is extremely risky for her right now and thankfully, it doesn’t appear to be medically necessary at this point. The benefits just don’t outweigh the risks. We’ll keep monitoring it but right now, she’s headed to ICU. And I’d like for you to stay with her if you can. John, I’m not going to sugar coat this. She did aspirate some blood and she’s on a vent. Now, you know how dangerous either of those can be but together, well……pneumonia is a definite concern. We’re going to have to work to get her weaned off that vent as quickly as possible and that’s where I believe you can help her the most.”

Johnny looked into the eyes of his former adversary and saw a compassionate doctor and true friend.

“I’m not going back to the station today and I still have some vacation time I can take. Roy’s gone to get my bag and my car for me. So, I’m here until somebody with a lot of letters behind his name kicks me out.” For the first time in days, Johnny felt like offering a true, albeit slight, smile.

E!

Roy backed into the apparatus bay of Station 51 while Officer Sampson pulled around to the parking lot behind it. He wondered momentarily what kind of call the engine was on but let the thought pass as he headed to the locker room. He found what he needed in Gage’s locker and walked back out the door just as Mike was shifting the engine into reverse. He waited as the long vehicle was expertly parked and the crew disembarked.

Cap caught sight of Roy standing alone holding Gage’s duffle bag and then saw the two officers walking towards them from the rear of the station. Oh Lord, only John could get himself injured on a welfare check call.

“Roy, what happened to John?” Cap was covered in soot and debris as were the rest of the men who wearily trudged toward the locker room and a shower.

“Can we talk to you in your office, please?” He gestured behind him so that Hank would understand that it was all three of them who needed to speak with him.

“Of course, this way.” Hank walked towards his office followed by the trio. He removed his turnout gear and helmet before entering to keep some of the smoky stench from impregnating the small room.

“Let me get another chair and..”

“Ah, Cap it won’t take long….” Roy noted the worried look on his Captain’s face. “And Johnny isn’t hurt or sick or anything. He is at Rampart waiting though and I need to get back to him.”

Hank briefly closed his eyes and shook his head affirmatively. “Well that’s good.”

“Cap, this is Collin Keller and Wil Sampson. They’re officers with the police department. They
actually were the ones who responded to the call at Elaine Hickson’s apartment last week. They were the ones who arrested Johnny. Anyway,” Roy struggled to make a long story shorter. “After everything worked out to prove Johnny didn’t attack her, there was evidence brought forth that showed who did. He’s her abusive former boyfriend. Well, Sunday night she sneaked out of the hospital, still too sick to be left alone, and somehow made her way back to her old apartment where he now lives. Seems she accused Johnny of the crime so as to keep him in jail where this guy, Oto, wouldn’t be able to get to him. He’s threatened to kill him, Cap. Anyway, no one heard from her. Dixie found her old address off her job application at Rampart and that’s when we got the call for the welfare check this morning. She just happened to live in our district.“

Cap was trying to take in the whole unbelievable story. “Wow.”

“You, we found her barely alive on the floor of the bathroom. We got her to Rampart but she coded just as we drove up. We worked on her for a while and I thought Brackett was about to call it when we got her heart going again. She’s probably in surgery now and, well Cap, Johnny just isn’t in any condition to work the rest of his shift. He’s really torn up right now and, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to stay with him. She may not make it through surgery and even if she does it’s still going to be touch and go for a while. I’d like to stay with him…..if you can call in some subs for us.”

Hank Stanley looked around for a moment trying to get his bearings. “Yea, Roy, sure I um,…sorry, I’m a little rattled myself. I’ll see what I can do alright? We’ve had another fire that looks like the same arsonist but this time it was beside a daycare center and ah, well, we found one, also barely alive, inside the burning building. I doubt he makes it either.”

“He didn’t, Captain Stanley.” Officer Sampson spoke then looking at Hank. “That victim was Ms. Hickson’s ex. He died at Rampart within minutes of his arrival.” Wil thought about saying more but didn’t.

“Poetic justice, huh?” Hank said what the others were thinking. There would be no grieving the loss of Toby Owens.

“Marco found him. I’ll be sure to let him know that the guy didn’t make it; and that he probably started the fire that resulted in his own death.”

Hank stood up then. “Well, we’re on stand down right now anyway so Roy, go do whatever you need to for Gage. I’m going to take a shower and then see if I can get a couple of folks to come in for the rest of your shift……and I hope they come in for nothing.”

Roy smiled. He knew exactly how his Captain was feeling. “Let John know we’re all thinking about him, ok? And I’ll check in on them when shift is over.”

“I sure will, Cap. And thank you – from both of us.”

“No problem. You’ll let us know if anything changes right?”

“Yes, sir. I will.”

The four of them exited his office. Hank headed towards the showers while Roy went to his own vehicle. The two officers climbed into the patrol car and the rover. All three vehicles pulled out from the station and took a right turn heading for Rampart.

When they arrived a few minutes later they couldn’t find Johnny, Dixie or Dr. Brackett. Roy felt cold fingers crawling up his back as his thoughts immediately rushed to Elaine and what might have happened.
Joe Early walked out of treatment room 1 and saw the three of them with befuddled looks on their faces. “If you’re looking for John, he’s upstairs with Elaine in ICU.”

“She’s already out of surgery?” Roy wondered momentarily how long they’d been gone.

Joe realized then that the three men standing with him now had already left when Kel came back to give Johnny the news that Elaine wouldn’t be getting surgery today. He quickly filled them in on what had transpired after they left and walked with them to the elevator.

Roy inhaled deeply as he pushed the button that would take them to ICU. He knew Elaine’s chances were not very good at the moment. And he wondered how Johnny would handle it if Elaine didn’t make it.
Chapter 25

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

The darkness was back and she was alone again. She tried desperately to find the kind hand that had guided her earlier. She searched in the darkness but found nothing - except nothingness itself. She heard nothing, saw nothing, smelled nothing, tasted nothing and now that the hand was gone, she felt nothing. Despair and hopelessness were her only companions on this long and lonesome journey. She pulled even farther inside of herself waiting and hoping someone would care enough to find her and help her escape.

E!

Johnny stood at the door of her ICU room. One wall was solid glass giving the ICU nurses constant visual access to their patients. Each nurse was responsible for the care of only two patients; patients who were the sickest of the sick. Dr. Brackett had managed to pull some strings to allow Johnny to visit with Elaine much longer than is normally allowed. He had a theory he wanted to test and if he was correct then he would ask that Johnny and/or Dixie be allowed to sit with her around the clock if they so desired.

“Let’s go in, shall we?” He stood back and used his hands to direct Dixie and Johnny into the room.

Johnny eased up to Elaine’s bedside and took in her unconscious form. Had it not been for the beeping of the heart monitor, it would have been easy to assume she was deceased. She was very pale and seemed even thinner than he remembered. She was connected to numerous devices all for the purpose of keeping her alive. She still had the IV in the right side of her neck that he had started in a panic on her living room floor. Now that she had more fluid on board she also had IV’s in both arms; and he was encouraged to see the tubing from the foley catheter was showing some urine output as well. The nasogastric tube snaking through her right nostril to her stomach ensured that she wouldn’t continue to vomit and risk aspirating again. The ventilator was keeping her blood oxygenated while allowing her body to concentrate on the process of healing. He watched the monitor readings wishing the numbers were higher. Her blood pressure and heart rate were lower than he wanted them to be and he felt absolutely helpless. He took a deep breath and reached out to her. He allowed his fingers to trace the bruises on the back of her right hand; the hand he’d been unable to start an IV in. His efforts had left the bruises on her and left him with a feeling of incompetence. He eased his fingers through the space between her thumb and index finger and gently squeezed. She was still alive after all; and as long as she stayed with them he’d make sure she knew she wasn’t alone. He slowly and gently ran his thumb back and forth across the back of her hand caressing her tender skin.

“Lainie, it’s Johnny. I’m here Baby. Keep fighting for us, ok? We’re not gonna let you go, but you’ve got to want to stay with us, too.”

Kel watched as Johnny began providing tactile stimulation and he began studying the numbers on the monitors too. Come on, Elaine. He’s here for you. Let us know you’re aware of his presence.

Dixie couldn’t control the tears that had started to spill onto her cheeks. She walked over to Elaine’s bedside opposite John and reached for her other hand. She squeezed gently with her left hand and began caressing Elaine’s forehead with her right. The bruising along her hairline was fading as were the other bruises Oto had left her with. The only permanent scars would be the cigarette burns. And
whatever emotional damage that son of bitch left her with too. Dixie knew he was dead and wouldn’t be able to ever hurt Elaine again. She just hoped that Elaine would one day know that her torment was over.

Kel continued watching the readings for several minutes and finally allowed his face to relax slightly. Neither Johnny nor Dixie had noticed it but he definitely had seen it. Her heart rate had increased slightly. It wasn’t a lot but in his mind it was significant. She knew and she was responding.

E!

The darkness wasn’t abating but suddenly her fears were. The hand was back and was gently tugging her forward toward an unknown destination. She felt at peace when the larger hand held hers; somehow keeping her safe in her somber surroundings. Then a second hand joined the first and she felt the tugging even more strongly. She felt as if she knew both hands; one larger and the other smaller. Both were caring and strong hands; hands of healing and hands of comfort. She didn’t know their names, but she did recognize them somehow; particularly the masculine one firmly holding onto her right hand. She agreed to allow these hands to lead her in the direction they wanted her to go. Because even though it was the most difficult thing she’d ever had to do, she trusted these hands; trusted them with her life.

E!

Roy stood in the corridor outside Elaine’s room. The room was already crowded with the three people in there with her at the moment. He hadn’t been standing there long when Dr. Brackett looked up and saw him. They made eye contact and he saw Dr. Brackett excuse himself from Elaine’s room and step out in the hallway to talk with him.

“How’s she doing, Doc?”

“Well, she’s weak but,” he smiled then at what he was about to say. “When those two are with her, she improves.”

He relayed to Roy what he had just witnessed in Elaine’s room. Roy had been in the medical profession long enough to know how important tactile stimulation could be so he had no reason to doubt his words. He knew how emotional Johnny had been when he’d realized that she was still alive and he knew that if anyone could reach her and bring her back to her previous state of health, it would be his partner.

It wasn’t long before an older red haired nurse shooed Johnny and Dixie out of Elaine’s room. The two joined Roy and Kel in the hallway outside her room. It was obvious that both had been crying. Johnny thanked Roy for retrieving his bag and car as they made their way to the ICU waiting room. John wanted to change clothes but right now it was more important to hear what Dr. Brackett had to say about her condition. He could change clothes later.

“John, Dix….she knew you there with her. Did either of you watch the monitors while you were in there?”

When neither of them had, he explained to them what he’d seen happen when they touched her and began talking to her. Johnny’s emotions began bubbling up to the surface again and Dixie reached over and grasped his hand in hers.

“That’s wonderful news, Johnny. Really it is.”

“I know…..but they won’t let me stay with her. I don’t want her to lose ground when we leave,
Dr. Brackett spoke up as if on cue. “And I’m going to see what I can do about that. She’s my patient and I’d like for her to have the two of you with her as much as you can be for the next couple of days. I want to get her condition upgraded quickly.......and get her off that vent. I’ve already ordered IV antibiotics that she’ll be starting within the hour.” He looked at both Dixie and John then. “I’m not trying to put you two on the spot, but how much time do you want me to request for you to be with her?”

Johnny looked directly at Dr. Brackett and without missing a beat he replied, “Forever.”
Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

26

It was dark still and she was alone and cold. Where did the cold come from? There were no hands to hold onto; she had lost her way. She pleaded silently for their return. She craved their warmth. She hated the bone chilling cold that felt like it was growing deep inside her. Finally the cold began to subside and she reached out again into the drab nothingness.

E!

John sat staring at Dr. Brackett’s desk feeling like a kid in his principal’s office. He didn’t know with certainty why he was there but the news couldn’t be good could it?

“How high is her fever, Doc?” Johnny interrupted.

“It’s gotten up to 100.4 degrees but the antibiotics are working and she’s beginning to fight the vent.”

“That’s a good sign, right?”

“Yes it is and I’d like to start weaning her off of it…..if you’ll help us.” Kel waited for Johnny’s reaction.

“You know I will, Doc. She could get really upset, huh?” Johnny had seen more than one person panic when being weaned off a ventilator.

“Yes,” he hesitated before continuing. “I’ll give her something for that but, uh…well, you know the routine Johnny.”

“Yea,” Johnny looked down at his hands in his lap. “Too much will slow down her breathing and too little will allow the discomfort to break through…..and make her panic.”

Johnny looked up at Kel. “What do you need me to do?”

“Talk her through it; help her relax and stay calm.” Kel knew that if anyone could help create a calming atmosphere for her it was Johnny and Dixie. He’d already spoken to Dix and gotten her confirmation before he met with John.

“But will she hear me? She still hasn’t woken up yet and it’s already Friday.” Concern was unmistakable in his voice.

“I believe she’s almost there, John. When we ease off on her sedation I believe she’ll come around. That’s another reason why I want you and Dix there if at all possible.”

“When?”

“Right after lunch. We’ll try a breathing test and see how she tolerates it.” Kel wanted to make sure Johnny remembered that it wasn’t just as simple as removing her tube.
“Thanks, Doc. I really appreciate all you’ve done.” Johnny stood then and extended his hand to his friend across the desk.

“My pleasure, John. Get you a bite to eat and then let’s meet in her room at around 1:15 pm.”

Johnny had never been one to miss a meal, but he just wasn’t hungry. He did get a milkshake and drank it on his way back to her room. The nurses in the ICU had grown accustomed to seeing him around. He walked past them; dropping his milkshake cup in their garbage can as he walked by the nurse’s station. He stepped into her room and over to her right side. Grasping her hand he thought for a moment that he felt a slight squeeze. The feeling startled him and he eased her hand back down. He waited a moment and then gently grasped it again; again he felt a slight twitch. His grin was spontaneous. Maybe Brackett’s right. Maybe she is coming around.

E!

The pitch blackness enveloping her was beginning to lighten up just a bit; becoming more of a pearl gray color. There was an echo in the distance she didn’t recognize and then she felt the most wonderful thing. The larger hand was back; gently holding her cold hand inside his warm one. She tried to hold tightly to it so he wouldn’t take it away again….but then he did. But before she had time to get upset, it was back and holding on to hers. She tried to grip it again; trying harder this time. He was pulling her again to that place he wanted her to go. And this time, she knew that if she went there, he would be there with her. She’d be safe and she wouldn’t be alone there; unlike here. Momentarily, the smaller hand joined them and it too was encouraging her to move forward. She gave it a squeeze too. It was with all her might that she squeezed and she felt the feminine hand give her a slight squeeze back. They were communicating and she finally felt an unexplainable comfort. It felt good.

E!

“Did you feel it, Dix?” Johnny’s excitement couldn’t be contained in the small ICU room.

“Yes, John, yes I did!” Dixie was absolutely beaming.

“She’s….uh…” Johnny had to choke back a tear. “She’s gonna make it. I just know it. She’s got a strong will and she’s gonna make it, Dix.”

Dixie reached over with her free hand and reached out to Johnny. He took her soft hand in his and squeezed hard. She had been with both of them during this journey and he knew she would be there until it was over.

“Well, what have we here?” Kelly Brackett entered the room and was a bit taken aback by the trio holding hands in a circle.

Dixie was the one who offered an answer. “She’s trying to come back to us, Kel. She’s squeezed both our hands.” Dixie had a twinkle in her eyes.

Dr. Brackett looked down at his watch; back up at his two friends then finally down to his patient.

“Well, Elaine, right on time.”

Johnny saw the smile on his face and felt a flood of relief wash over his soul.

“John, why don’t you talk to her; try to get her to wake up a little.”

Johnny continued caressing her right hand as he very gently shook her shoulder. “Lainie, baby can
you hear me?” There was no response but John Gage wasn’t going to give up easily. After several moments, all three saw it; the first signs of spontaneous movement from her since they’d brought her in over two days ago. Her eyelids began to flutter slightly. Efforts to arouse her from unconsciousness continued for several minutes until finally John saw the sight he’d been longing to see – behind the tiny slits of groggy eyelids he saw her beautiful sea foam green eyes.

Johnny smiled broadly and watched as his tears began to fall on her cheek and shoulder. He sniffled as he began trying to talk to her. “Hey Baby, welcome back.” He leaned down and planted a kiss on her forehead. “Don’t be afraid, ok? You’re safe. You’re at Rampart, see.” He turned slightly and looked up at Dixie as Kel walked up behind her. They were both within Elaine’s line of sight now.

“Elaine, everything’s going to be alright. Just relax.” Dixie was struggling to get her words out too.

“We’ve been taking very good care of you; nothing to be afraid of, dear.” Dr. Brackett was the least emotional of the three but even he felt a tug at his heartstrings at the sight of her. She lay still staring at three faces she knew she should recognize but didn’t. They all seemed so kind; especially the young man whose tears continued to fall onto her shoulder. She felt really tired and wanted to sleep but the three familiar strangers didn’t want her to close her eyes. That’s when she realized she was connected to something; some type of machine. She tried to speak but couldn’t and trepidation filled her being.

The three of them noticed her anxiety level increasing rapidly.

“Johnny…….” Kel didn’t need to finish his sentence. Johnny had noticed her too and was already working with her.

“Lainie, Lainie, don’t be afraid. You’re doing great, honey. Everything’s going to be fine. You’re on a ventilator right now. It’s been helping you breathe while you were unconscious but Dr. Brackett here wants to try to remove it ok? We’re going to take it very slowly and we’re going to be right here with you. Nothing to be afraid of, I promise.”

She blinked her eyes slowly as if accepting his explanation. Dixie reached out and began caressing her forehead. It had seemed to relax her a week ago when she was first brought in after the assault. She hoped it would work again.

Brackett………Rampart……familiar faces……

They knew her and somehow she knew them. They were reassuring her that she was safe and ok – even though she couldn’t talk to them or ask them questions. Then she felt it; their hands were more than a little familiar. She recognized the feel of them; they were the hands that had been guiding her through the darkness; the ones that kept her warm when she was cold. The hands that made her feel safe. And finally, she remembered.

Johnny and Dixie both felt her squeezing their hands at the same time. “You remember us don’t you?” Another affirmative squeeze and he knew. His Lainie had come back to him.

The spontaneous breathing test went better than expected. It wasn’t long before Dr. Brackett felt confident that their first attempt had been a success. She was breathing spontaneously. It took more effort than she would have thought just to breathe but she was doing it. The oxygen helped her out quite a bit but now her throat hurt and even when she tried to speak, she couldn’t.

“Hey, Lainie, sshhh, don’t try to talk ok? Your throat’s gonna be real sore so just relax and rest. I’m
right here, right here with you. I’m not going anywhere, ok?” Johnny’s words were like a salve for her soul.

Kel reached out and pulled Dixie closer to him. She leaned into him slightly as they turned to leave.

“Call if you need anything. I’ll check on her in a couple of hours.” With that, Dr. Brackett and Dixie made their quiet exit.

Johnny kissed her forehead again and when he pulled back, her eyes were closed. He watched for the gentle rise and fall of her chest. Seeing it, he laid his head down beside hers on her pillow and closed his eyes.

A/N: Thanks to Starlight Guardian for the technical assistance.
Chapter 27

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

“John, hey Johnny, wake up.” John felt someone shaking his shoulders and he bolted upright in his chair. He turned his head behind him to see Dr. Brackett and Roy grinning at him.

“Wake up, sleepy head.” His partner couldn’t help but badger him a little.

John rubbed the sleep from his eyes and yawned as he looked at his two friends. Then reality set in. Had it all been a dream? He spun back around to look at Elaine’s sleeping form. He was relieved when he saw the oxygen mask on her face instead of the ventilator. He hadn’t dreamed it. She really was breathing on her own.

“Easy John. She’s doing very well.” Dr. Brackett had already reviewed the monitors as well as her chart. She was having no difficulty with spontaneous respirations and her temperature was down by half a degree.

“What time is it?” Johnny yawned while looking down at the fuzzy numbers on his watch. He was still trying to focus his eyes when Roy told him it was four-thirty.

“Man, can’t believe I slept that long.” He then looked over at Elaine’s peacefulness. “Guess I wasn’t the only one needing sleep.

“It’s good to see her resting peacefully.” Roy was genuinely happy for her as well as for Johnny. The man really needed some good news in his life after the last week he’d had.

“How about I take you out for a celebratory dinner, Junior?”

“I am kinda gettin’ hungry but,” he turned back to Elaine. “I can’t leave her alone.”

“Now, now, Johnny. If I’m a suitable replacement I’ll be happy to stay with her. I’m off shift and was just coming to check on her before I left for home.” He smiled at the paramedic duo. “You two go ahead and take your time.”

E!

Johnny wouldn’t agree to go any farther than the cafeteria but to Roy that was an improvement over sitting in a tiny ICU room. He admired John’s dedication to his girlfriend but he also knew that Johnny would neglect himself terribly for someone he loved. He knew Elaine was going to need Johnny’s support for several weeks to come and didn’t want him to burn himself out and end up being a patient here too.

“You think I’m nuts don’t ya?” Johnny asked with a mouth full of cheeseburger.

Roy wasn’t sure what he was talking about. “I don’t follow you there, Junior.

“About not leaving her alone. I mean, she is in the best hospital and all but, I don’t know, Roy. I just can’t leave her right now.” He took a long sip of milk to wash down the remnants of the food he’d just swallowed.

Roy thought carefully before he spoke. “Johnny, I don’t think you’re nuts at all. I know you and
you’ve got a heart of pure gold the size of Texas. Not to mention that the last time you left her alone; well, things didn’t go so well for her.” Roy hoped John wasn’t reading more into that than he’d meant. In no way was he blaming John for what had happened to Elaine that night.

Johnny slowly chewed the French fries he’d just put in his mouth. He finally swallowed them with a slow gulp and then looked up at his partner. “Roy, do you think that’s why I can’t leave her side for very long? I mean, did Oto mess up my head when he hurt her?”

Roy knew he needed to answer John but the truth was, he hadn’t even thought of that aspect of the situation. Was Johnny going to need some psychological help too? They had already talked about asking Dixie’s friend Harriett to meet with Elaine when she was up to it; just to assess her to see if she needed any further assistance. She had been abused for over a year; and her background hadn’t left her with a lot of personal coping skills. But none of them had even thought for a minute how this all might affect Johnny.

“Roy….ROY!” Roy looked up to see Johnny with a slight smirk on his face. “Where’d you zone out to buddy?”

“Oh, sorry, I was just thinking.” Roy looked at his friend.

“Uh-oh, about what?” Johnny asked as he slurped the last of his milk and tossed his napkin on his empty plate.

“Johnny, have you thought about going with Elaine to talk to Harriett?”

Shock was written on John’s face. What? “So, you do think I’m nuts! Well, listen here, Pally. If that was Joanne that all this had happened to then you’d be doing exactly what I’m doing; acting just like I’m acting and don’t say you wouldn’t!” Johnny stood up and slammed his chair back underneath the table.

He started to walk away when he stopped and turned back around. Without saying a word he pulled out his billfold and dropped a few dollars on the table in front of Roy. “Damn you, Roy DeSoto.”

John decided to take the stairs to ICU. He felt an unusual amount of energy he needed to work out of his system before he went back to her room.

Roy sat in stunned silence. Johnny, what the hell was all that about?

Johnny reached the metal door in the stairwell that would take him to ICU. Everything inside him wanted to scream, kick and punch something. But there was nothing around he could punch or kick without injuring himself; and a scream would probably get him locked up. So, he buried those urges back down inside his soul and calmly pushed open the door.

E!

Roy stood leaning against Dr. Brackett’s car. He didn’t dare go back into ICU and risk another run-in with Johnny. But, he did hope to see Dr. Brackett. He needed to talk to someone who might be able to explain to him what he’d just witnessed in the Rampart Cafeteria.

“Hey, Roy. I figured you’d left already.” Kel knew something was wrong but he had no idea what it was.

“Doc, I just….well, how was John when he got back to Elaine’s room?” Roy really didn’t know how to ask what he needed to know.
“He seemed fine, why? Something happen between you two?” Dr. Brackett stood with his hands in his pockets waiting for Roy’s answer.

“Doc, I’m not really sure.” He took a few minutes to explain to Kel exactly what had transpired in the cafeteria; including Johnny’s uncharacteristic outburst.

“Roy, this may have affected John much more deeply than I realized.”

“Doc, that’s the same thing I was thinking. Actually, I never really thought of it affecting him at all; I mean, other than him getting really angry at Elaine for having him arrested.” Roy stood with his hands on his hips staring at the ground.

“Roy, I’d like to talk to Dixie about this; very soon too. I’m thinking Harriett may need to intervene with Johnny before she even talks to Elaine.”

E!

John sat watching Elaine sleep. The red haired nurse had just brought in another Maalox cocktail for her to drink.

“Let her sleep a little longer. If she hasn’t woken up in about half an hour then we’ll need to wake her up to take it. We’ve got to keep her esophagus and stomach coated.”

“I’ll make sure she gets it by,” he looked at his watch, “5:50pm.”

She smiled as she left the cup of chalky fluid on her bedside table. Before she turned to leave she looked at John one more time. “She’s really special to you, huh?”

Johnny looked back at the sleeping woman beside him. “That she is, Ma’am. That she is.”

Within twenty minutes John caught a slight movement out of the corner of his eye. He leaned forward so that she could see him when she opened her eyes……and he waited.

She struggled to lift her heavy eyelids. She reached her hand out a couple of inches longing to feel his warm hand again. He saw her reaching and grasped her hand in his before whispering to her.

“Lainie, I’m here, sweetie. I’m right here.”

The sound of his voice gave her the incentive to open her eyes fully. This time, she saw him clearly and immediately recognized him. “Jo…” she winced at the pain in her throat. “John?”

John also winced but for a different reason. He remembered his last words to her before he and Roy found her collapsed on her bathroom floor. He had asked her to call him John………….because only his friends called him Johnny.

He brushed her hair back away from her face. “How ya feel?” Johnny asked and was rewarded with a brief smile.

“Listen sweetie, you’ve got to take some medicine the nurse left you.” He held up the small cup.

Elaine knew immediately what it was and really didn’t want to swallow it. But, she already knew why she was being given the Maalox and she knew it was for her own good.

Johnny gently pulled the oxygen mask away from her face and held the tiny cup up to her lips. She swallowed the entire cupful but when Johnny pulled it back from her mouth a drop landed on her chin. He couldn’t help himself; he burst into giggles as he used his thumb to gently scrape it off her
chin and wiped it on his pant leg.

She gave him a radiant smile and in a very raspy whisper she said, “Thanks, John.”

He eased the oxygen mask back up to cover her mouth and nose as with a hint of remorse he said, “You can call me Johnny.”
“Think this is going to work?” Roy was very upset by the sudden change in personality of his partner. He knew that Johnny had been devastated by the assault on Elaine and the aftermath that ultimately resulted in his arrest. Now he sat in Dr. Brackett’s office along with Dixie and her counselor friend, Harriett.

“I certainly think it will, Roy.” Harriett sounded much more confident than any of them felt.

Dr. Brackett opened the door then and walked into his office.

“Ok, Joe is on his way up to Elaine’s room. He’s going to tell Johnny that he needs to come to my office so all of us can discuss ways to support Elaine during her recovery.”

Elaine’s condition had improved enough for her to be moved to a private room. She was beginning to take in some nutrition and hydration by mouth; enough that all of her IV’s had been discontinued. She was still painfully thin but her throat was feeling much better now so talking wasn’t as painful. She had also made one very important decision for herself.

She had recognized her need for counseling and was willing to let Harriett assist her.

However, Johnny’s three friends who were now seated in Kel’s office were as concerned about him as they were Elaine. He had already made it clear to Roy that he did not need to talk to Harriett; therefore, his friends were going to try to help him without him realizing it.

Within a few minutes there was a knock on the door of office 127 and a somewhat haggard John Gage was invited in.

“Hey Doc,” he stopped mid-sentence as he noted who all was in the room. He swallowed hard and then looked down at the floor. “Uh, Dr. Early said that you, ah, needed to see me about, um, something to do with Elaine?”

John hated it when he stuttered like this but he wasn’t expecting Roy to be in the room.

“Have a seat John and thank you for coming down on such a short notice. I won’t take up much of your time.” Harriett had such a warm and welcoming personality that he couldn’t help but feel at ease in her presence.

John refused to make eye contact with Roy but did take the only seat left. The one between Harriett and Dr. Brackett’s desk; strategically placed at the farthest point from the door.

“Johnny, this is my good friend Harriett Bowman. She’s been a crisis counselor for over twenty years and has a lot of experience in cases like Elaine’s.” Dixie hoped John would be helped as much as Elaine.

“Mr. Gage, my purpose here over the next little while is to offer Elaine’s friends,” she gestured to the
others in the room, “some things to be mindful of in order to help Elaine through this ok?”

Everyone’s eyes focused on Johnny hoping for a sign from him that he was accepting of the assistance.

“That, ah, that sounds good, Ms. Bowman.” Johnny looked down at his hands in his lap before continuing. “I want to do everything possible for her.”

“I’m very glad to hear that Mr. Gage.”

Over the next half hour, Harriett explained to the group what to expect from Elaine.

“Everyone reacts differently so these are just some things to be aware of that she may or may not go through.”

She explained to them how to handle flashbacks and fears; even fears that may not seem related to the abuse itself. “For example, she may become very nauseated by the scent of cigarette smoke. Our sense of smell is very powerful when it comes to bringing back memories – both positive and negative. She was physically injured while being surrounded by cigarette smoke.” She looked at each one of them and saw that they were understanding her completely.

She gave them ideas on ways to help her take back control of her life; ways to encourage her to make decisions for herself. “Even the most minute details of her life were most likely controlled by Oto. So it’s important that she realize she now has the power to make her own decisions. She was doing that when Oto reappeared in her life. That was a setback for her for sure BUT,” Harriett held up her finger for emphasis. “Each of you helped her in your own unique way to learn to overcome her trust issues. She had begun to make progress……and she will make progress again.”

Johnny sat mesmerized by her words; taking them all to heart. Dixie noticed it and knew that Harriett was the right person to reach him.

“Elaine suffered at least three types of abuse; physical, emotional and sexual. Each can cause lasting scars but the stronger her support system is, the sooner she will take back her life.”

She looked at the four people in the room; those who had helped Elaine the first time and she felt confident that they would all be there for her now. What she was saying to them was all very important especially for Elaine……but she wasn’t the only one who needed Harriett’s help.

“Remember, there will be a lot of times when she needs someone to just listen; even if it’s to the same story being repeated. This will help her work through it. Think of it like muscle strengthening. You don’t just pick up a dumbbell and pump it a couple of times then walk away with rock hard muscles. It takes repetition. She needs you to be the best listeners you’ve ever been.”

She looked for affirmative nods before she continued. “Any questions about your part in her recovery?”

The only person in the group who didn’t respond was Johnny. Harriett could see the questions and worries written all over his face and knew that everything was working out great……so far.

“I have some additional information to share with you, Johnny. Will you please stay another few minutes with me as this doesn’t apply to the others?”

John looked at her and drew his eyebrows together in a quizzical expression. Harriett answered the question that he didn’t ask of her. “John, you and Elaine are closer than just friends. She needs more support from you and I’d rather discuss it privately.”
“Um, yea sure…of course.”

Dixie wanted to shout for joy. Their plan had worked. Harriett would have some time with John; and both Elaine and John would be the beneficiary of her knowledge and experience. Kel, Dixie and Roy excused themselves.

“Take all the time you need.” Dr. Brackett said to Harriett and then patted John on the shoulder as he followed Roy and Dixie out of his office.

Harriett shifted her chair so that it was at a 90 degree angle to John’s. She wanted him to feel encouraged to open up to her but not to feel threatened or suffocated by her presence.

“John, I hear that you are one of the best firefighter/paramedics in the entire state; maybe even the country.” She didn’t wait for a response from him knowing that his ego was very bruised at the moment. “I want you to know that Elaine needs you just as badly today as she did that Wednesday morning when you and Roy rescued her from that apartment.”

Johnny sat with his elbows on his knees without looking up at her. “But John, be aware that this will affect you almost as much as her, but in a very different way.” She waited for a moment letting her words sink in.

She heard Johnny sniffle as he barely uttered the phrase, “already has.”

Harriett had been ready for defiance, denial, even an angry outburst of sheer rage; but his humble acknowledgement was totally unexpected. She had to regroup because he was ready for her help and she wanted more than anything to rescue the rescuer.

“John, can you explain what you mean by ‘already has?’”

Over the next forty minutes John opened up to her about his feelings of fear and how angry he was about the whole situation. He never looked up as he spoke; finding it easier to pretend he wasn’t actually talking to a counselor. Harriett helped to guide their conversation through skillful questioning of John. Because he seemed to be so open to talking at the moment, she continued to gently push him onward until she finally broke through the tough exterior of John Gage to the soft warm center where he seemed to hide within himself so often.

Harriett watched his body language carefully and noticed how much his hands were shaking. She saw him close his hands into tight fists and then release them again. He kept repeating this behavior as he talked more and more. She watched his right leg begin to bounce as though controlled by some outside force. She could almost feel his internal rage and knew he was close to saying what she knew to be weighing so heavily on his heart.

“John, what’s going through your mind right now?” The silence between them was palpable. She was giving him time to sort through his feelings and she did not want to rush him. In a hushed whisper he finally said, “I can’t fix it.”

“Can’t fix what John?”

Johnny hung his head even farther down. The pent up rage was beginning to boil to the surface and it scared him.

“I can’t undo what that bastard did.” He said through gritted teeth.

Harriett knew where this was heading. She’d seen it before only in this situation there was one major
difference. “And he didn’t have the balls to face you man to man either; he got himself killed before you could get the satisfaction from doing it yourself.”

Johnny was shocked at what he’d just heard. How’d she know about that?

“John, you are not the first man to feel that way and unfortunately you won’t be the last.” She looked at him and tentatively reached her hand out to him placing it gently on his shoulder.

“What you are thinking and feeling are perfectly normal in the situation, Johnny. Something would be wrong if you didn’t feel that way.”

She could see Johnny’s jaw muscles working and she knew she’d struck a nerve. She also knew there was more.

“Johnny, I’m going to ask you a question and I really hope you’ll answer me honestly, alright?”

He shook his head affirmatively.

“John, somewhere deep down are you blaming yourself for not being there to stop him?”

She watched as Johnny’s adam’s apple moved as he swallowed hard. He closed his eyes tightly trying to hold back the flow but he couldn’t. His tears began as a trickle and then began to pour.

“John, talk to me.”

His breathing rate increased and he balled up his hands into one tight fist. “Ms. Bowman, when people are in trouble and need help, they call the fire department. I’ve gone out hundreds of times on calls similar to Lainie’s. But I wasn’t there when it mattered the most. Don’t you get it? I wasn’t there. I could have stopped it but I wasn’t th…” His voice broke before he could complete the last word. He had admitted his fault in this situation and it hurt him to his core.

Harriett squeezed his shoulder. She knew he was struggling to keep his emotions in check but she also knew that she had to press on.

“John, how many calls have you responded to where a drunk driver killed an innocent person?” John just shook his head. In his heart he knew where she was headed and he didn’t want to accept her reasoning.

“How many, John?”

“Lots.”

“How many of those accidents could a family member have prevented if he’d been present at the scene?”

“Dunno” he said momentarily.

“John, how many could have been prevented if the drunk driver had never gotten behind the wheel?”

He merely shrugged his shoulders.

“John, the blame for what happened to Elaine lies solely with the perpetrator. Had you known what was going to happen you never would have left her at home that night right?”

Johnny shook his head; his voice completely washed away by his tears.
“John, listen to me. You didn’t know. Elaine didn’t know. The police didn’t know. The only person who knew is dead. You want revenge don’t you?”

He nodded.

“Then you and Elaine work through this together and live happily ever after. That’s the best revenge possible. Don’t let Oto take away what you have with her.”

She watched as Johnny’s shoulders shook harder and she could see his tears begin to splash on the floor.

“You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing. You have been by her side constantly since last Wednesday morning. She is without question alive because of what you and Roy and Dixie, and Dr. Brackett and the two officers all did for her. Each of you played an important part in her being alive today.”

He looked up at her then.

“Do not discount what you and your friends have done. She doesn’t blame you not one iota. So stop blaming yourself and get on with the business of living.”

His chocolate eyes seemed to be melting. His lips formed a tight thin line as he gathered up the strength to speak. “But Ms. Bowman, I can’t tell her how I feel. Then she’ll feel like it’s her fault somehow.”

Harriett wanted to smile at the absurdity of it all. “Sounds to me like you two have a lot in common.”

He closed his eyes again and shook his head thinking back to all the times he had shared that same thought. Yea, we’re two halves of the same whole.

Johnny, let her lean on you…..but you lean on your friends.”

Johnny opened his reddened eyes once more. “I’m surprised I have any friends left.”

Harriett knew then that she needed to share with Johnny what she knew about his situation. “John, I know what happened in the cafeteria yesterday. Roy wants to be here for you if you’ll just stop pushing him away. He’s talked to me. Now the question is…..will you talk to him?”

He nodded and again in a whisper said, “yea, I need to.”

He relaxed his hands finally and watched as the color returned to his fingers. Harriett stood and walked toward the door as he continued to sit and collect himself enough to be presentable. Within a minute or so, he heard the office door open and shut again. He was expecting Harriett to return with some tissues or water or something. He never looked up still trying to dry his eyes with the heels of his hands. And then he felt it. A very familiar hand rested on his shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. He didn’t have to say a word for Johnny to know who he was. He lost all semblance of control over his emotions at that moment; the moment when his best friend reached out to him. No words were spoken and none were necessary. Roy sat in the chair Harriett had vacated moments before and held him close. Johnny sobbed into the chest of his best friend; the one who’d shared his life over the last several years. The friend who’d been able to stay calm when Johnny’s world was falling apart. His partner who had saved his life on numerous occasions and whose life Johnny had saved an equal number of times. Masculinity be damned, he needed Roy’s shoulder to cry on and strength to carry him through this season in his life and he’d never been so thankful for friendship as he was at that
moment.
Chapter 29

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

Johnny stood leaning on the passenger’s side door of Roy’s sports car as Roy walked around to the driver’s side and got in.

“Roy?”

“Yea?”

“I…well I, uh….I’m really…”

Roy quickly held up his hand with his palm facing John.

“No need, Junior. You’d do the same for me.”

He gave his partner a half grin and then opened the passenger’s door. He hoped that Joanne wouldn’t be disappointed in him for falling apart with Roy. He knew his eyes were red and swollen so she’d know immediately that he’d lost it. Finally, he could take it no more.

“Roy, um….how much does Joanne know?”

“Know about……..?” He drew out the last word so Johnny would know he needed a little more information from him.

Johnny rubbed his index finger across his upper lip as he thought about how to word his next question.

“Well, she knows what all happened to Elaine but, does she know about, well…..how upset I’ve been?”

Roy knew that the real question John was asking him was ‘does Joanne know I’ve been blaming myself and acting like a total ass to my best friend?’ Roy had told Joanne about the whole incident in the cafeteria. Joanne had expressed her concern to Roy about Johnny being angry and turning that anger inward. She hadn’t had a chance to talk to John even though she wanted to. She had asked Roy to try to get John to come over to their house to eat a good home cooked meal and at least see a few different sites than the walls of Rampart Hospital. With Harriett meeting with Elaine for a while, he’d been able to talk Johnny into it.

“Johnny, she knows you’ve had a difficult time. She loves you and so do the kids. Hell, Junior, even I love you.” He laughed out loud at his own comment. He even got a snicker out of Johnny and with that he knew that his friend and partner was truly going to be alright.

E!

Harriett knocked on Elaine’s door and entered hesitantly when she heard a female voice bid her admittance. She found Elaine sitting up in bed trying to force herself to drink another glass of water.

“Hello Elaine, my name is Harriett Bowman and I’m..”

“Oh yes, you’re Ms. McCall’s friend, the counselor.” Harriett was a bit surprised by how pleasant sounding Elaine was under the circumstances.
“That’s right I am. And I understand that you have agreed for us to work together for a while. Is that right?” Harriett not only needed Elaine’s permission for treatment but she also needed her cooperation. Elaine would be the engine driving the train. Harriett was only the engineer determining the pace and navigating through tricky twists and turns in the railroad.

“Yes ma’am. I, well, I don’t really know where to start.”

“Well, first of all let me begin by saying that whatever you say is kept completely confidential. If you want someone to know what we discuss then you tell them or else you’ll need to give me written permission to do so. And that includes the doctors and nurses here including Ms. McCall. The only two exceptions to that are if I believe you are a danger to yourself or to someone else. Now that I’ve set the ground rules, so to speak, you decide where you want to start and we’ll go from there. If you want to start at the beginning then that’s fine or if you want to start at the end then we’ll work backwards. Or, you could keep it interesting for us and start in the middle.” Harriett’s smile was huge; not patronizing at all but warm and genuine. She had a way about her that put her client’s at ease and they seemed to find it easy to talk to her; even about the most intimate and embarrassing details. Their secrets were safe with her and they knew it.

“Before you decide where to start though, I do have a question for you.”

“Ok.” Elaine was a little bit nervous about having to reveal something uncomfortable immediately during their first session.

Harriett knew that she’d made Elaine a little nervous so she quickly moved forward with her question.

“First, feel free to call me Harriett or Ms. Bowman. I am both and I am either so that’s totally up to you. I’ll call you whatever you prefer though so just let me know how to address you whenever you feel ready.” She noticed Elaine flashed her a smile and she knew she was building a rapport with her newest client.

She then continued with the question she liked to use to begin a session with a new client.

“What is it that you hope to get out of our time together?” Harriett allowed the silence to linger between them as Elaine thought carefully before responding.

E!

Johnny pushed himself away from the table and patted his full stomach. “Joanne that was another fine meal. Thank you for having me over.” He smiled at Joanne as she reached out and patted his shoulder while she stood up to get dessert and coffee.

“Well, I’d told Roy to either bring you here or we were going to bring the food to you. I’m glad you came here though. John, do you think Elaine would be able to eat some? I’d love to send her a plate by you when you go back.”

Johnny didn’t hesitate. “Are you kidding me? I think she’d love it. She’s really trying to eat more and gain a little weight so Doc will release her.”

“Excellent! I’ll fix her a plate then.” Joanne brought Roy and John each a piece of apple pie then returned for their coffees. She watched for a moment as her two favorite men dug into their dessert before she turned to fix a plate of food for Elaine. By the time she’d returned with the plates, two empty dessert plates rested on the table as they began slurping their coffee.

“Now, John, just as soon as Elaine is up to it we’d like to have her over for dinner. She’s important
to you and that makes her very important to us.” She gave him a playful wink.

“Aw, she’d, I mean we’d really like that. She’s ….” He hesitated then staring at his fingers as they curled around the coffee cup. “She’s kind of alone, I guess is the best way to say it. I mean, well…..you said that she was important to me which makes her important to you. But, I don’t think she thinks she’s important to anybody……maybe not even me. It’s sad really. She is such a wonderful person but………well, so much has happened to where, uh…..she doesn’t think she’s important or really matters to anybody.” He shook his head negatively then.

Joanne’s face lit up like a light bulb. “Well, we just have to show her then don’t we?”

Joanne didn’t elaborate on the topic then. She still had to think through a few things first before she brought the guys in on it.

“Johnny, do you know what the plans are for her when she’s discharged? I mean, she probably doesn’t want to be alone yet does she?” Roy had already discussed this subject with Joanne and they had both agreed on the plan they were about to present to John.

“Well, I was kinda hoping that she’d maybe come over to my place and stay for a while. My apartment is bigger than hers and my couch lets out into a bed so…..”

“And what about when you’re on shift?” Joanne had a glint in her eye and a smile on her face. Johnny knew she was cooking up something and he hoped he was right about what it was.

“Ah, I also have more neighbors so I’m hoping she’ll be ok there alone for just one…”

“Absolutely not! I will not allow that. She can stay here with me and the kids when you two are on shift until she feels like moving back into her apartment…..whenever that may be.”

Johnny smiled at the look on Roy’s face. That was a tone they both knew well. Joanne DeSoto would definitely get her way on this one.

“You guys are…..I don’t even have the right words for how wonderful the two of you are to me and now to include Lainie into our..” He hesitated a little too long and Joanne once again completed his sentence for him.

“The word is family, John. We are a family.”

Johnny smiled to himself. Yea, and right now Lainie really needs a family.

E!

Roy drove up to the entrance of Rampart and let Johnny out. He giggled a little to himself as Johnny tried to close the door with his hip while balancing two plates in his hands.

“Oh Lordy, that was close.” Johnny felt a blush color his cheeks. He’d never be forgiven by either Joanne or Lainie if he’d dropped the plates.

“Thanks again, Roy….I really mean it. And please give Joanne a kiss of thanks for me.” Joanne always appreciated his pecks on her cheek as a way of saying ‘thank you’ for all the delicious meals she’d prepared for him over the years.
Roy gave his partner a playful grin. “Kids are gone to her sister’s, partner….I’m hoping to give her more than a kiss on the cheek.”

Johnny blushed at the uncharacteristic comment from his partner. “Ok, then get going alright.” Johnny shook his head. It felt good to joke around with his friend again. He knew that Harriett had been gone from Elaine’s room for quite a while and he wasn’t sure if Elaine would be crying, sleeping or laughing. He struggled to knock on her door while holding onto the plates and was relieved when a cheerful voice said, “come in.”

“Hey, Baby.” He held up the plates, “compliments of Joanne DeSoto.”

He was very encouraged to see her smile……from her chin to her forehead. He hadn’t seen her smile like that since before……well, since the last night they’d gone out together.

“She sent all that…..for me?”

“Yes, and let me just tell ya…..it beats anything this place has to offer.” Johnny set the plates down on her bed tray and removed the foil wrapping. “Now….uh-oh….. be right back.”

Elaine was still giggling when he returned from the nurse’s station with a few pieces of silverware for her to use. It wasn’t long before she was eating and thoroughly enjoying the meal. Johnny sat back and watched her eat over half of what was on her plate and most of her dessert. Her appetite was returning; she was doing everything she could to rehydrate herself without the assistance of intravenous fluids and she was smiling again. His Lainie was indeed coming back from the depths of hell Oto had pushed her into and he was filled with a sense of joy. Lainie, you are such a wonderful and strong lady. And Harriett, you are a miracle worker.

When she had finished her dessert she laid her head back on her pillow. That was the most she’d eaten in one sitting in a very long time and she felt somewhat stuffed. She hoped her ulcer was healing enough that she could keep it all down. Thankfully, Joanne had prepared the baked chicken, green beans and creamed corn with very little seasoning. When Johnny saw that she was finished he removed the plates and pushed the tray away from her enough that he could sit down on the bed with her and hold her hand for a moment.

“Lainie, I’ve been thinking about when you get discharged. Will you please come and stay with me for a while? I’m just not ready to leave you alone yet, ya know? And Joanne wants you to stay with her and the kids when Roy and I are on shift. Just until you are comfortable being in your apartment alone….please?” Johnny’s insecurities burst through the walls of his mind and he could have kicked himself then. Hadn’t Harriett told him that Elaine needed to make her own decisions about everything; even the little things? He wondered if perhaps he’d overstepped that boundary by telling her that he wasn’t ready to leave her alone yet.

Elaine thought briefly about what she and Harriett had discussed a couple of hours earlier. Harriett had asked her what she’d hoped to gain out of their time together and with a lot of thought Elaine had told her that what she wanted most was to learn to trust again. She and Johnny both had their insecurities about themselves and where their relationship was heading. She realized in her heart of hearts, she’d never be able to love Johnny the way she wanted to and she’d never be able to allow him to love her the way she wanted to until she learned to trust him; even though he’d never done anything to breach her trust. For reasons that neither of them could change, he was currently living in Oto’s shadow. Elaine wanted more than anything to get rid of that shadow so that she could open her heart and soul to Johnny. She looked up at him and realized he was looking down at the blanket covering her legs and picking at some insignificant piece of lent. She needed to give him an answer quickly before he took her hesitation personally.
“Johnny, I’d really like that……if it won’t be too much of a bother.” Johnny’s smile left her with no doubts. He didn’t consider her a bother. Maybe they both needed this more than they realized.
Chapter 30

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

Johnny was very nervous about returning to work. He knew that Elaine would be fine as she was still in the care of the doctors and nurses at Rampart. He just hoped he’d be able to actually leave her in their care and do his job the way the public needed him too. Roy had already acknowledged that he would want to check on her after each run where a transport to Rampart was required. He also felt relieved when Roy had told him that Joanne had planned to go over and spend a few hours getting to know her while the two of them were at work and the kids were at school.

“Hey John…really glad to have you back.”

“Aww, thanks Cap.” John said as he poured himself a cup of coffee. He’d already talked to Roy and knew that the guys had pretty much figured out everything so there wouldn’t be any long and drawn out explanations.

“Hey, Gage, it’s uh, it’s good to see you. Glad you’re back and….don’t worry…..no water bombs.”

Even Chet was sensitive to John’s situation.

John and Roy had only been at the station for a couple of hours when they were toned out for a possible heart attack.

“KMG365,” Cap spoke into the microphone before handing his paramedics the address on a slip of paper.

“You ready, Junior?” Roy asked as he pulled his chin strap tight.

“Ready, Pally.” Johnny announced as the bay doors rose and Roy made a left turn out of the station.

Elaine was beginning to get ‘cabin fever’ from being in Rampart over the last eight days. She loved the out of doors and being cooped up in a small hospital room was really not helping her feelings. Her appointment with Harriett wasn’t until later in the afternoon so she was going to have some time on her hands. Around 10:00 am a knock on her door caught her off guard as it wasn’t time to have her vitals checked yet.

“Come in.”

“Elaine?” A young woman a few years older than Elaine stepped in and introduced herself as Joanne DeSoto.

“Oh, you’re Roy’s wife, please have a seat.” Elaine had known Roy since she began working at Rampart and had gotten to know him better since she began dating Johnny.

“Well, you are looking well today.” Joanne’s face displayed her pleasant surprise. “I guess I thought you’d be looking a little more tired or something.”

Elaine smiled at her visitor. At one time she had been a pretty good judge of character and her first impression of Joanne was that she was a very caring individual. But Oto had made her doubt herself
in many areas of her life and her ability to be a good judge of character when she first met someone was just one of many areas of her life she now doubted. Elaine gave Joanne a warm smile. “Nice to meet you, Joanne. Johnny said you might stop by to see me and I really appreciate it.”

“Hey, any friend of Johnny’s is a friend of mine.” Joanne was giving her a toothy smile. “He’s really very much like a little brother to me; or maybe a little brother-in-law.”

Both women snickered at that statement. Joanne had a feeling that an awkward silence was about to descend on them so she offered to take Elaine out to the courtyard if she felt like a walk.

“Oh, wow, that would be great. I really would like to get out of this room.”

“Well, let me go get permission from the floor nurse and find you a wheelchair.” She patted Elaine on the shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

Joanne stood to leave just as the door opened and a nurse walked in.

“Joanne DeSoto. You are a site for sore eyes! How’ve you been?”

“Been doing great, Dixie. Thanks for asking. I was just about to go ask permission to take Elaine out to the courtyard for some fresh air and sunshine if that’s ok with you all?”

Dixie crossed her arms in front of her and smiled at the two of them. “I think that’s a wonderful idea as long as Elaine feels up to it.”

“Oh Ms. McCall, I would really like too.”

“Well, then just let me get your vitals before you leave and your nurse won’t have to go looking for you, alright?”

Elaine agreed and within a few minutes Dixie was smiling as she brought in a wheelchair. “Elaine, you’ve gained a pound and a half over the last forty-eight hours and your vitals are looking strong.”

“My dinner last night did the trick!” She looked over at Joanne. “The food you sent was fantastic. Thank you so much.”

“You’re very welcome…..and there’s plenty more where that came from.”

Dixie stood at the end of the hallway and watched as Joanne pushed Elaine toward the elevators. She had a good feeling about Elaine now. They’d come so close to losing her and now she seemed to be doing so well. Dixie reached up and wiped a tear from her eye before returning to the emergency room.

E!

“Squad 51, start an IV normal saline TKO and transport when ready.”

“What’s 51 got Kel?”

Dr. Brackett turned around to see his favorite ER nurse with a very satisfied look on her face. “I doubt that it’s anything more than a severe case of indigestion. Fella decided to add jalapeno peppers to his omelet this morning……even though he has a history of reflux.”

“So they’re bringing him in for some labs and a GI cocktail huh?” Dixie was smiling.

“Hopefully his cardiac enzymes will be normal and that’s all it’ll take to make him feel good as
Dr. Brackett looked at the EKG strip again just to be sure.

“Ok, I’ll get three ready for him.” Dixie headed off towards treatment room three with a little more pep in her step than she’d had in over a week. Things really did seem to be returning to normal around Rampart.

Dixie headed off towards treatment room three with a little more pep in her step than she’d had in over a week. Things really did seem to be returning to normal around Rampart.

Elaine closed her eyes as Joanne parked her wheelchair in the sunshine. Joanne sat on the bench seat next to her. They spent the next hour talking as easily as old friends. Joanne had told Elaine that she’d love to teach her how to cook when she came over on Johnny and Roy’s shift nights. Elaine’s face really lit up then. Having grown up in a group home she’d never really had the chance to learn to cook. It was something she desperately wanted to learn to do. They talked for a little longer when Elaine asked Joanne to help her stand up. She really wanted to see how far she could walk. She knew she needed to exercise in order to get her strength back.

“Ok, I’m gonna lock your wheels and then we’ll see if we can’t get you up.” She reached down to the wheels of the wheelchair and flipped the locking mechanism. She offered her arm to Elaine for support only to find out that Elaine was actually able to stand up without assistance.

“Maybe I should push the wheelchair like a walker.” She smiled to Joanne. “That’ll give me a little support.”

In no time at all, Joanne and Elaine had made a lap around the small courtyard. Elaine returned to the front of the wheelchair and sat down. She could tell she was going to have to pace herself or she’d be regretting it later on today. It still felt so good to get out of her room and feel like she was a part of the real world again.

An hour and a half later Joanne held open the door to Elaine’s room and watched as the younger woman pushed her wheelchair in and crawled back into bed. Joanne had already told her that she needed to leave soon but that she’d be back to visit again soon.

“Joanne, thank you so much. I really appreciate you spending time with me.”

“Truly my pleasure.” Joanne said sincerely.

As Joanne stood up to leave there was another knock on Elaine’s door and a certain dark haired paramedic stuck his head inside.

“Hey Lainie.” He said as he walked in carrying a large bouquet of spring flowers in a beautiful ceramic vase. “I thought these might cheer you up.”

Joanne and Johnny watched Elaine’s face light up with joy and a slight blush. “Oh, Johnny….they’re….they’re beautiful.” She reached up and touched the corners of her eyes with her fingertips.

John watched as she carefully caressed each tender flower and then inhaled deeply taking in the mixed scents of the entire bouquet. He had to smile to himself; he really enjoyed seeing her happy.

Joanne excused herself then to give them a moment alone.

“Johnny, I...I’ve...” she sniffed then unable to hold back her emotions. “I’ve never gotten a bouquet of flowers before. They are the prettiest flowers I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“That’s why they reminded me of you, Lainie.”
She felt another blush rising up from her chest.

“Well, Roy’s waiting for me so, I better run. I’ll check on you later ok?”

“Ok, Johnny…….oh, I almost forgot to share my news with you……I’m up by a pound and a half since day before yesterday.”

“Lainie, that’s fantastic. Keep it up and we’ll spring you outta here real soon.” He gave her another smile and a slight wave as he backed himself out of her door.

Oh Johnny, please say it again soon. I want to hear you tell me you love me again, please.

Johnny returned to her room again twice more during his shift but the first time Elaine was napping; having grown tired from her workout with Joanne earlier. The second time, she was sound asleep for the night. The floor nurse had told him she’d had a really good day and he couldn’t wait until the day he could carry her away from here.

E!

Three days later, after Roy and John worked off their next shift Johnny nearly sprinted for his Rover in back of the station.

“Let me guess……she gets out today?”

Johnny cut Marco a lopsided grin. “Yep, going over to get her now.”

John threw his duffle bag into the backseat as he climbed behind the wheel, cranked it up and drove around the corner of the station. He quickly turned on his right blinker and in no time had made a right turn headed to the parking lot of Rampart Hospital.

E!
Chapter 31

A/N: Hanky alert…again.

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

31

Johnny turned into his apartment complex and pulled into his designated parking spot. He looked over at his passenger and felt like the luckiest man on earth. Elaine was finally sitting in his passenger’s seat again; carefully holding (and admiring) the flowers he’d given her a few days ago.

“Oh, Johnny will you take the flowers in first? I don’t want to leave them out here for even a minute.” The last thing she wanted to have happen was to knock them over with a slamming door. She’d rather wait until he took them in and then come back for her.

“No problem, Joanne will get them.” He grinned at her while cocking his head to the right.

Elaine was surprised to see Joanne and Roy walking down the stairs from Johnny’s apartment.

“They’ve been getting my apartment stocked with supplies for us and of course Joanne insisted on cooking.”

“Elaine, welcome home from the hospital!” Joanne reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Thank you, Joanne. And thank you for doing all this for us.” She gave Joanne a smile that covered her face.

“Hey Jo, will you take her flowers up and let me help her?”

“Of course, Johnny.” Joanne reached in and took the vase.

“I’ll get everything else, Junior.” Roy was already reaching into the back seat from the driver’s side and pulling out a couple of bags.

“Yea, thanks, Roy.”

John returned his gaze to Elaine. “Now, let’s take this slowly. Do you want me to carry you or do you want to try to walk and just hold on to my arm?”

Elaine appreciated his approach with her. He wasn’t trying to treat her like an invalid or a child. “Let me see how far I can go with your arm ok?”

John thought he heard a tiny bit of flirtation in her voice. He let Joanne and Roy go ahead of them up the stairs. He knew they’d be taking it slowly, one step at a time. It did take them a couple of minutes to navigate the stairs but they made it to the top without him having to give her more than his arm to steady her.

“Atta girl, Lainie!” He couldn’t contain his excitement. She was tired but she was giving it her all. She wanted to regain her strength……and her life back. He beamed with pride at the woman who
now held his arm….and his heart.

E!

After lunch was eaten and the dishes were washed, Roy and Joanne bid them farewell and headed home. Both Johnny and Elaine caught themselves yawning and laughed.

“Feels good to laugh, Johnny.” She looked at him with sincerity in her eyes.

“Yea, it does. Lainie, you really need to rest now. You’ve exerted yourself quite a bit today. Remember, take it slow.”

“Yes, sir.” She said sarcastically. “Um, where should I lie down?”

“Come, I’ll help you to bed.” He stood up and gently assisted her down the hallway and into his bedroom. Her bags were on the floor and Johnny was reminded of how awkward it felt for him and Roy to pack up her bags in her apartment. They both felt like they were violating her in some way by doing that. But he knew that they did what was necessary. At the time she wasn’t able to navigate her stairs............and even if she could’ve, she wasn’t able to be in that place yet. One day soon she would be able to go back without sweating, heart palpitations and shortness of breath.

“Do you want to change clothes or are you ok to rest in what you’re wearing?”

Elaine giggled as she looked at her attire. “No, I’m just fine in sweat pants and a tee.”

John pulled back the covers and fluffed the pillows on his full size bed. He then pulled the curtains closed as she eased underneath the covers. He thought he saw a shadow cross her beautiful face. She looked like she wanted to say something but then changed her mind.

“Ok, sleep tight, Baby. I’ll try to be quiet so I won’t disturb you.”

She gave him a smile but said nothing. As he was closing the door he heard her call his name.

“Johnny?”

“Yea?”

“Um, would you mind leaving the door open? I, well…."

“Hey, no need for an explanation, sweetheart. If you prefer the door open then that’s perfectly fine. I’m here to do your bidding.” He gave her a very dramatic bow then promptly stood up to give her a wink.

She giggled which was just the effect he was going for. “Thank you......for everything. I, ah......I don’t deserve all th....” She lost it then. She never completed her word because sobs were racking her body.

John quickly rushed to her side. In that short distance she had pulled her knees up to her chest and had her arms wrapped around them with her face buried in her knees. He was not anticipating such a reaction. She had seemed fine just a second ago. Suddenly Harriett’s words were ringing in his ears and he began to try to comfort her. He sat down softly on the edge of the bed facing her. He wanted to reach out to her and draw her into a hug but he knew not to make any sudden moves.

“Lainie, sweetheart, I’m right here. You’re safe. This is my apartment and he’s gone. Remember, he can’t hurt you any more.”
She nodded her head and sniffled but didn’t look up.

“Listen, I’m gonna go get you a glass of water and a wet washcloth and then I’ll be right back. It won’t take me but a second ok? I won’t close the door and I’ll be just down the hall. Then I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep……or as long as you want. Is that ok?”

Again, she nodded and sniffled but said nothing.

In a flash, John was back with the water and wet washcloth. When he sat down beside her he expected her to look up at him but she didn’t.

“Lainie, may I hold you?”

She looked up then, her red rimmed sea foam eyes flooded with tears. She tried to speak but couldn’t. She only gave him an affirmative nod as she stretched her knees back out and let him reach around her to pull her into his loving embrace. She stayed there in his arms sobbing into his chest for what seemed like hours. He never seemed to tire of holding her. He never said a word to try to encourage her to stop crying either. She needed the release and he knew it. He held her tight and when the wetness of her tears began to roll down the side of his neck, he joined her. He allowed his own tears to mix with hers and completely soak his shirt. He rubbed her back in soothing circles and kissed the top of her head repeatedly. He didn’t rush her at all but eventually he felt her pull back from him slightly and he let her go. He reached over to his nightstand for the washcloth and slowly wiped her face. He then picked up the glass of water and held it to her now parched lips. She was shaking too much to hold it herself but he certainly didn’t mind. He was encouraged to see her gulping the cooling liquid. When she tilted her head back he pulled the glass away from her lips and set it back down.

“S, ah, sorry.” She hiccupped.

“Nuh-uh. No way, Baby. This is what I’m here for. Let me be here for you to lean on, please? I want to ok?”

She nodded again and closed her eyes. He could see shame cloud those precious eyes and he hated it. He didn’t know if now was the right time or not but it certainly seemed like it. He didn’t want to put any pressure on her to say anything back to him but he needed to say what had been on his heart for a couple of weeks now; needed to say it to her when she was listening. She was looking down into her lap now with the washcloth in her hands. He gently placed one hand on hers before he continued.

“Lainie, please look at me, sweetheart. I need to tell you something.” He waited as she lifted her head upwards and finally their eyes met.

“Wa, what’s wro..wrong?”

“Nothing, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Lainie…..I love you. I’ve known it for a while but I wanted you to hear me say it. You mean everything to me and I just couldn’t let another minute go by without you knowing.” The words seemed almost foreign to him. The old John Gage would never have spoken those words so quickly in a relationship, if ever. But she was special. More special than anyone he’d ever met before.

He said it. Lainie, he said it again and he wanted to make sure you heard it. Now’s your chance. Tell him what you saw and heard that day.

She swallowed hard to force her breathing to slow down so she could talk to him.
“Johnny, I need to tell you something too. I didn’t know if I could tell you or not because I didn’t want you to think I was nuts or something but….well.” She hesitated; looking down for a moment as if gathering up her courage before continuing.

“Lainie?” He was growing concerned then by what she might say. Could he handle another rejection? Fear was growing in his heart that she was about to do just that when she finally finished her thought.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve told me. I’m here, alive, today because you told me you loved me that day in the treatment room; when I had flat-lined didn’t you?”

John felt his heart leap inside his chest. Shock wasn’t the right word for what he was feeling; but he had no other word. Then he remembered Dixie had been there; holding him when he collapsed.

“Dixie must’ve told you but yea, yea I did say it and I meant it then same as now.”

“No, Johnny, she didn’t say anything to me. I feel like a fool saying this but it was just so real. See, I was standing in the entrance to Rampart when you and Roy got out of the ambulance with me.”

John did a double-take. Had he just heard her correctly?

“Roy was doing CPR and you….you looked so devastated. I followed you all into the treatment room and I was watching. I mean, I knew that Dr. Brackett was about to call it and then………” she looked into his weepy face as she continued.

“Then you walked over and held my hand. You told me to fight and come back because you loved me. Johnny, I had to make a choice then……whether to stay in that peaceful place where I was or to come back to this life……I chose to come back then……because of you. What I’m trying to say is, Johnny, I love you too.”

Johnny screwed his eyes shut then and Elaine watched as he was racked by sobs. He kept nodding his head and saying “yes, it did happen like that.”

Elaine reached up then and gently began to wipe away his tears with her hand and thumb. She reached around to the back of his head and slowly pulled his head toward hers. When their lips met, they both tasted the saltiness of their tears. They kissed each other passionately; hungrily. Truth be told, they both wanted more…..but now was not the time for that. There was healing to be done for them both before such displays of affection would be healthy for either of them. Knowing that, they pulled their lips apart and opened their eyes; seeing each other for the first time after acknowledging their love. And they smiled into each other’s eyes.

“Will you, uh, will you lie down with me until I fall asleep? I just need to know you’re with me.”

He still hadn’t found his voice yet and merely nodded as he used his toes to remove his shoes and lay down beside her; beside his other half. They both lay on their sides with him assuming the position of the larger spoon protecting her. She pulled his arm across her body and within minutes both lay soundly sleeping.

A/N: No this isn’t the end so stay tuned. We are almost there.
Chapter 32

Things Aren’t Always What They Seem

32

Over the next couple of weeks, Elaine regained her strength and mental bearings. She had even asked John to take her back to her apartment just to see how she would handle it. Both of them were surprised that she handled it as well as she did. She was standing in her apartment looking around when it hit her.

“Johnny, oh no!”

He was by her side and wrapped his arm around her thinking she might be having a panic attack.

“No, it isn’t that. I just realized that I haven’t paid my rent or utilities in six weeks.” She hadn’t even thought about her job or her bills until she returned to her apartment. Tears filled her eyes then because she also realized that she didn’t have the money to pay them. She hadn’t worked in six weeks either and truthfully, she knew she was probably terminated from Rampart for absenteeism. She knew she’d need to begin looking for work again very soon.

“Baby, talk to me, please.” Johnny sat down with her on her sofa and held her trembling form.

“Is it the money?” He asked.

She didn’t want to admit it to him because she knew he’d give her his own rent money if she needed it. “It’s just that I feel like I’m starting all over again….again!”

He knew what she meant. “You are and you’ll be fine. You’ve got a lot of friends, Lainie. You mean so much to so many people. I just wish you realized it.”

She didn’t respond to his comments. Truthfully, she wished she believed him. But, she did recognize that this time, she had him with her to help her make it. She also thought about the DeSoto’s and how wonderful they had been. She was actually becoming a fairly decent cook with Joanne’s help. She also felt like she had a good friend in Dixie McCall and hoped that her connections within the medical community might help Elaine find another nursing job soon. Then she thought about Harriett and how far she’d come with her help.

“Yes, maybe she could start over again, again.

“Listen, take as much time as you need here ok. But Joanne was hoping we could come over there a little early. I think they want to cook some burgers or something. Roy and I go on shift tomorrow and she wanted us to stay there tonight. Just so you don’t have to get up too early in the morning if you don’t feel like it.

“They’ve been so nice about all this……really everyone has.” She gave the apartment one final look and then grasped for his hand as she pulled him towards the door.

“I think I’ll be ready to move back in day after tomorrow. I’ve got to get back on my own two feet and start looking for work again.”

Johnny was stunned. “What do you mean look for work? Lainie, you have a job at Rampart. Don’t you like it?” Actually, he was feeling a little selfish. He remembered how he felt whenever he brought a patient in and saw her standing at the nurse’s station, in the lounge, or waiting for them in a
treatment room. If she wasn’t working there, he’d miss that.

“Johnny, I’m sure that by now they’ve replaced me. I haven’t been at work a single day in the last six weeks. They didn’t have a choice and I understand that but I’ve got bills to pay and I need a job.”

“Lainie,” Again, he couldn’t believe how naïve she could be at times, and how little she thought about her self worth. “You haven’t been there because of medical reasons. You haven’t been fired. I spoke to Dix last shift and she said that she’s just waiting for you to decide you are ready to return. Baby, you can go back to work at Rampart whenever you’re ready…..but not until you are ready.”

Geesh, Gage, that didn’t make much sense.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” He said softly closing the distance between their faces and kissing her lightly on her forehead.

She closed her eyes, willing the tears to retreat. Ms. McCall and the rest of the staff at Rampart did care about her and for the first time she started to feel it. When she felt him pull back from her forehead she lifted her chin to him and their lips met for a long moment.

“It’s really all going to be ok isn’t it?”

“Yea, Baby. It is.”

E!

John knew what was in store at the DeSoto’s but the whole idea was that Elaine wasn’t supposed to know. He had managed to keep it a secret from her and he was a little bit proud of himself. He turned onto the street the DeSoto’s lived on and he recognized a few vehicles parked in various places. He glanced over at Elaine but she was oblivious to anything being different; for that he was grateful. He giggled to himself when he’d first made the turn and saw Chris DeSoto sprint inside his house. He knew what Chris was doing and he made a mental note to thank the youngster later on.

“Well, we’re here. I think I even smell the hamburgers on the grill.” He grinned at her and noticed that she was smiling too.

He jumped out and ran over to her door. She had finally accepted that he liked to open doors for her and she appreciated it. Hand in hand they headed toward the front door of the DeSoto’s house.

“Oh, hi Uncle Johnny and Miss Elaine. Mom and Dad said to come on back here.” Chris then promptly let go of the door to the privacy fence that surrounded the DeSoto back yard.

“Got to talk to that boy about his manners,” muttered John knowing full well why Chris had done it; to block Elaine’s view of her surprise.”

Johnny reached out and pushed open the door leading into the backyard. He held it open for Elaine and placed his hand on the small of her back as she entered. Then she halted so suddenly that he nearly ran over her. He had to reach around her to hold her up.

“Aww, smooth move, Gage, just run right over the lady!”

“Shut up, Chet!” Johnny was absolutely beaming at the normal banter between himself and his friend.

Normal, finally Lainie can enjoy ‘normal.’
No one yelled SURPRISE at her entry but instead she was met by the smiling faces of her friends; even if she didn't realize they really were her friends. She also noticed a huge banner stretched across the back of the fence that read: WE LOVE YOU, ELAINE HICKSON!!

Johnny still had his arm around her abdomen and felt her begin to shiver. Her hands flew up to her cheeks then and he could tell she was wiping tears from her face.

“Come on, Lainie. YOU are the guest of honor.” He led her then over to the crowd of well-wishers.

The first person to embrace her was her supervisor, Dixie McCall. “Elaine, so good to see you doing so well. You take whatever time you may need and just let me know when you can return to work.”

Elaine could only mouth the words, “Thank you” as she was still too emotional to speak.

Dr. Brackett was standing beside Dixie and he patted her on her shoulder. “Glad to see you smiling again.”

Without a second thought, Elaine reached up and gave him a big hug. While embracing him she was able to whisper, “thank you for not giving up on me that day.”

John made a mental note to explain that statement to Dixie and to Dr. Brackett when he had a chance.

Harriett Bowman was the next person to join them and John embraced her before Elaine did.

“Harriett, I can never say thank you enough for bringing us both through this.”

Harriett noticed a few tears in his eyes. She didn’t say anything except a simple “you’re welcome, my pleasure.” She was actually beginning to feel the sting of a few tears herself and it caught her by surprise. She had always been able to separate her emotions from her job and only rarely did she get emotional with a client. This was one of those rare moments and it felt good. Sometimes she was prone to questioning her own humanity when she didn’t become upset over the situations she helped others deal with. But over time she had realized that it was a gift that she could separate herself the way she did; otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to help them. She would have left her chosen profession many years ago.

Each person came to Elaine and Johnny individually while Roy and Joanne continued with the food preparations. She got to meet Captain Stanley and his wife as well as Marco, Chet and his girlfriend and Mike. Dr. Early was there and she later was told that Mike Morton had drawn the short straw and had to work the ER along with a couple of her nurse friends from Rampart. Officer Wil Sampson and his wife were there along with his partner and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Collin Keller. More tears were shed as they each embraced her or shook her hand. They both needed to see this day happen; needed to see that their work on her case had not been in vain and had indeed made a difference.

“Hey Miss Elaine, come see the sign we made you.” Chris grabbed his little sister’s hand and led the group over to the sign hanging on the fence along the back of the yard.

Now that Elaine was closer she was able to see that it had been signed by dozens of people; not just those in attendance tonight either. Harriett stepped forward to explain the sign to her.

“Elaine, these two precious children colored in the letters on this sign for you.” She was grinning at the two DeSoto children who were themselves beaming with pride.

“You don’t have to do it tonight but over the next few days, I want you to read each comment and
signature on this sign. Everyone who signed it thinks very highly of you. Their words are written on here for everyone to see how they feel about who you are and what you mean to them. I like to call them ‘warm fuzzies’.”

This brought a round of smiles from the crowd.

“Save it for the rest of your life and on days when you start to feel your spirit starting to sink, pull it out and read it again and know that you are indeed somebody special…..always have been…always will be.”

Johnny stood behind Elaine with his arms wrapped around her waist and his head leaning closely to her right cheek. She leaned into him for support as she tried to tell everyone how much she appreciated them but the words just wouldn’t come out.

“Elaine, there’s no need for you to tell us ‘thank you’ even though I can see that’s what you want to do. The fact that you are here with us right now is all the thanks we want.” Dixie caught herself getting choked up then and Roy saved her.

“Food’s ready so let’s dig in, gang.”

As every sat around the tables and the afternoon sun began to set, Johnny knew he needed to speak to the crowd. He stood up then and held up his hands asking for everyone’s attention.

“I am so thankful to every one of you for joining us here tonight. Special thanks to Roy and Joanne for hosting this event. Each of you have played an important role in our recovery and uh….I just wanted to say that out loud. We are so blessed to count you all as friends. Thank you.”

As he sat down again, Harriett knew that she had reached him. He used the word ‘our’ recovery; he recognized it was his recovery too not just Elaine’s. Atta boy, John.

Dr. Brackett and Dixie then stood up. “Since Johnny got you all quiet, Dix and I decided now was the time to do this.” He then looked at Elaine as he walked over to her handing her an envelope.

“You’ve been out of work for a while and you didn’t have much paid leave to take so we…all of us here plus the ones at Rampart who couldn’t be here…well, we wanted to show you how much we care about you. We know you’ve had some expenses and we just wanted to help out a little bit.”

Elaine reached for the envelope and noticed that there was a stack of cash inside. Again, the tears began and Dixie pulled her into a sideways hug. “Honey, we’re gonna have to start another IV on you if you don’t slow down on the tears.”

Elaine laughed then; truly laughed and turned to fully embrace her supervisor and her friend.

“Now, it’s not just cash in there so keep on digging.” Dixie gave her a little wink and Elaine’s shock was evident to everyone present when she reached the bottom of the stack of bills. There were receipts for her electric bill, her phone bill, her water and garbage bills and finally even her rent – not just for the month she’d missed but for the next month as well. Her mouth flew open but this time her voice didn’t fail her.

“You folks are so…so wonderful. No one has ever done anything like this for me before. I, I just, I thank you all…..from the bottom of my heart. And I’ll never ever forget this for as long as I live.”

Along the DeSoto’s street the street lamps were beginning to buzz as they came to life to light up the impending darkness. But behind the fence in their backyard, the sound of cheers and applause was all that could be heard as a different kind of darkness was being driven away forever.
Prologue

Elaine returned to her apartment the following week. She felt so comforted as she watch Johnny hang her dreamcatcher on her wall beside her bed. The same place he’d left it that terrible fateful night so many weeks before. Finally, she’d be able to sleep peacefully knowing it was guarding her dream world. She went back to work in the emergency room at Rampart the week after and continued meeting with Harriett on a weekly basis for another three months.

The relationship she shared with Johnny only deepened as they continued to date and share their lives together. They spent quite a bit of time with the DeSoto’s and Joanne helped her in so many ways; not just by improving her cooking skills. She finally felt like she had a close family and an extended family. She now had a big sister and even a mother figure in Joanne and Dixie; something she’d never known growing up.

One of her favorite places to go out with Johnny though was back to the picnic table they’d sat on so long ago. They’d eat tacos and watch the sun set while enjoying the sound of the ocean waves and the wind whipping through their hair. Ten months after they’d met they were once again sitting on that same picnic table sipping their sodas and just enjoying being in the presence of each other. They always referred to the way they sat on it as the “Cap’n Stanley pose.” Both of them were sitting on the table itself with their feet on the seat. She had her eyes closed enjoying the moment and never noticed Johnny shift in his seat. Suddenly she felt him reaching for her hand from in front of her and she opened her eyes anticipating another of his warm kisses.

“Lainie?”

She opened her eyes then realizing that a kiss wasn’t what he had in mind. What she saw made her stomach do a flip. He was standing in front of her with the most serious expression on his face that she’d ever seen before.

“I came so close to losing you that day. And every day from that one til today I’ve thought of just what I would say at this moment. Saying ‘I love you’ just isn’t enough anymore. I feel something for you that goes so much deeper than love ever could. I am only happy when I’m with you and I am just a shell of a man when I’m without you.”

A single tear escaped from his right eye as he closed them tightly. He felt Lainie reach out then and caress the side of his face with her small soft hand and wipe away that tear with her thumb.

“Johnny, I feel the same way, honest I do. I wish I had a word for it too. I love you, Johnny.”

She’d opened the door and now he wanted to run through it. He reached up to the right side of his face and took her hand and held it in his own. She watched, almost in disbelief, as he then knelt down on one knee and held her left hand tightly in his.

“Then Elaine Hickson, will you make me the happiest and most complete man on earth? Will you marry me?”

Time stood still for the two of them. She quickly agreed and he jumped up embracing her and spinning her around. When her feet touched the ground again, their lips met in a very long and passionate kiss. When they finally pulled apart sea foam eyes met brown eyes and each looked into the soul of the other and saw eternity.

The End
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