Red Hands and White Sheets

by johnny cade (johnnycake)

Summary

Johnny Cade survives the church fire and no one is straight.

The story of everything that came after the church fire.
A story of trauma, struggles, pain, happiness, healing, and, of course, love.

(Vulnera Martyr is not exactly a sequel to this. More of a companion fic. It takes place a year after this one)
Chapter Summary

PART ONE: THE PROMISE AND THE HOSPITAL

Chapter Notes

the first chapter exist already within this universe as two separate fics, but i am putting them in this fic as the first chapter because if someone wants to just read this fic it's going to be confusing, so yeah!! if you've already the first chapter, sorry, the second is coming soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The church was on fire. They'd been able to see the smoke from down the road and the flames from the top of the hill. If they'd been paying attention, they would’ve been able to see the smoke from back at the Dairy Queen. But they hadn’t been paying attention. And, as Johnny saw the smoke and flames now, he wondered if they would’ve ever even considered the fire could’ve been coming from the church anyhow. It seemed that somehow they always assumed the worst possible situation couldn’t happen to them when fate was constantly proving otherwise.

Dally drove down the hill to where a group of children stood being watched over by adults – threewoman and a heavyset man. There was a school bus parked at the side of the road by the church.

As they drew closer, Ponyboy jumped out of the back of the car and ran towards the group of people. Johnny stayed in the car, but stood in the front seat, trying to see what Ponyboy was doing. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Dally gestured for Ponyboy to come back as he said in low, dangerous tone, “Get over here, man.”

One of the women watching over the children was saying something, but Johnny was just far enough away that he couldn’t hear. The heavyset man said something back to her. She shook her head and looked around frantically. Then he understood: some of the children were missing. His eyes drifted over to the flaming church, his stomach filling with dread, and that was when he heard it.

The faint high-pitched screaming, coming from inside the church.

Ponyboy must’ve heard it at the same time he did because he ran for the church, going around the side as he tried to find a way in. For one moment, Johnny watched him go, then, deciding something, pushed open the passenger door and sprinted after him, Dally’s shouts following him the whole way. He paused halfway there to grab a large boulder on the ground and when he found Ponyboy he threw the boulder through the boards nailed across one of the nearby windows. It didn’t break through as many as he’d hoped it would, but they made quick work of the rest of the boards, pulling them off one by one until there was just enough room to climb through the window one at a time into the flaming hell beyond.
Johnny took a breath and he immediately began to cough as smoke filled his lungs. Tears formed in his eyes as the smoke burned them. The heat of the fire around him was intense, heat like nothing he’d ever felt before in his life.

Ponyboy was coughing too, but somehow he managed to choke out, “Is that guy coming?”

“Nah,” Johnny replied, waving at the smoke in front of his face.

“How come?” Ponyboy replied, a smirk in his voice. “Too scared?”

“Nah, man, he’s too far,” Johnny said, struggling to smile while coughing.

They began to move through the church, searching the main room and then heading towards the back rooms in an attempt to find the source of the screaming. As they walked around and Johnny began to sweat, a feeling he’d never felt before in his life began to rise up in him. It was a freeing feeling. It made him want to fly. It made him feel like he could fly. Like he could jump and the wind or simply the air around him would lift him off his feet.

It wasn’t until they turned a corner to find four or five little kids huddled in a corner by one of the boarded up windows that he realized what the feeling was: euphoria. He was inside a burning church and he wasn’t afraid. He was euphoric. It was ridiculous. It made no sense. If Dally knew, he’d be yelling at him. The thought alone made him want to laugh and he would have if he hadn’t been coughing from all the smoke instead.

Miraculously, the boards covering the window next to the children began to disappear. Dally’s face took their place and Johnny rushed over to the children, picking up the nearest one and handing him through the window to Dally, shouting at him over the flames, “Here Dally take this kid, take ‘em, man.” Dally did as he was told for once in his life and set the child down next to him. Johnny turned to Ponyboy and said, “Ponyboy take ‘em, give ‘em to Dally.”

And it was then, as he was grabbing another one of the children, that he realized why he felt the way he did: for the first time in his life he was doing something useful, something important, something that would help someone else.

For the first time in his sixteen years of life Johnny Cade didn’t feel worthless and he couldn’t stop himself from grinning at Ponyboy as he handed him the next child, even as he coughed out smoke, even as Dally shouted at them, “Get the kids and get out!” It was like the fog when he’d killed the Soc except better. So much better. It made everything clearer, sharper, and all the bad feelings, all of the things that held him back, more dull.

It took a shockingly short amount of time to pass the children through the window and once all of them were through, Johnny turned around, trying to see through the thick black smoke filling the room to make sure they hadn’t missed anyone. He heard Ponyboy and Dally calling to him from the window, but he wasn’t going to leave anyone in this church. He coughed harder, puffs of smoke coming out of his mouth because of the amount there was now in his lungs. He couldn’t breathe without coughing more. He tried waving his hand in front of his face to clear the smoke, but in a burning building he might as well have been nothing at all.

A horrible creaking groan sounded from above him and he heard Dally shout from somewhere to his right, “Johnny, c’mon, are you crazy?!”

Several flaming beams fell from the ceiling as Johnny threw himself up against the side of the church to avoid them. The roof was caving in.
It was time to leave.

The kids were safe.

The euphoria was gone.

It was time to go.

He turned and saw both Ponyboy and a patch of blue sky directly in front of him.

The window was the sky. Their salvation.

He took two steps towards it when he heard the creaking groan again. He didn’t glance up and only reacted, pushing Ponyboy though the window as one of the flaming beams fell on the small of his back hard, knocking him to the ground hard enough that he blacked out, pinning him there, but not before he felt pain blossom, for one brief moment, where the board had hit him, and then, strangely and just as quickly, disappear.

When Johnny opened his eyes, the first thing he felt was agony and the first thing he saw was fire. Vaguely, he realized that his hands were burning. They weren’t on fire, but the skin was blistering badly from the heat and it hurt a lot, but that wasn’t the only point of pain on his body. His chest and shoulders were burning too. The small of his back was on fire in the literal sense. But that was all he felt. Oddly, he couldn’t feel anything below the small of his back and when he tried to push himself to his feet...he couldn’t. He could hear a far off screaming, the worst noise he’d ever heard in his life, hellish and eerie, and he felt strangely sick when he realized it was coming out of his own mouth.

Distantly, he felt a pressure he hadn’t known was there coming off his back. He heard a voice and when he turned his head to the side, he saw Dally. The arm of his jacket was on fire and he was grimacing and Johnny tried to point it out, but the agony in his body was too much.

Dally vanished from his line of vision for a moment and when he returned, he grabbed the collar of his jacket and shook him. He was shouting something, but Johnny couldn’t hear him. His eyelids fluttered. He heard the horrible creaking groan one more time and felt Dally, and somehow his body as well, move very quickly before he was pulled into blessed blackness once more.

The first thing Johnny noticed when he woke up was a gentle rocking and then soon after, shouting. He tried to open his eyes, but they felt like they were made of lead and weighed a ton. He felt the light pressure of something on his face, but when he tried to reach up to pull it off, his hands stung and he found he couldn’t move them either. He felt a prick in the side of his arm and a few words that weren’t muffled by the fog in his brain and then he sank back into nothingness.

The next time he surfaced back to consciousness, the rocking was gone, but a flat beeping somewhere off to his left had replaced it. He could move now, though. Not very much. It was still hard, but he could move.

He opened his eyes first and immediately wished he hadn’t. The room he was in was very bright. Everything was white. He shut his eyes again.

Everything is white...he thought to himself. I must either be dead or...

....or in the hospital.
He opened his eyes again and now he could see that his second guess was the correct one. His room wasn’t very big. It only had enough room for his bed and a couple of chairs. To his left was the machine that made the beeping and some stainless steel poles. Tubes ran from the poles to needles in his arm. There were two of them, each filled with a different colored liquid. He wasn’t sure what either were. He was on a strange sort of bed, his arms placed on cooling towels on either side of him. He turned his head and saw his hands.

He couldn’t stop the sharp intake of breath that hurt his lungs as he saw his hands.

Burned. Badly. Almost all the way up to his elbows. He couldn’t see how far on his right arm because it was bandaged at the place near where it ended. Moving them hurt. Pulling them away from the cooling towels – though he had no idea how they were staying so cool – hurt. Doing anything but letting them lie perfectly still hurt.

Breathing through his mouth also hurt. It hurt through his nose, but it hurt less because there was a tube of oxygen running underneath. Through his mouth it seared his throat and his lungs flared with pain. It was this that first alerted him to the fact that there was something very wrong. That was when he realized he couldn’t feel anything below the waist. He couldn’t move his toes or his legs or feel them to know what had happened to them because he couldn’t feel them.

However, despite all of this, he noticed it didn’t hurt as bad as it might have – or should have, after he saw how his hands looked. There was a button running from one of the IV drips. The button rested next to his hand, so he didn’t have to move it very much if he wanted to grab the device and press the button. He’d heard of them. It was a morphine drip. It startled him to see it. The only time he’d ever heard of it being used was for dying people since the stuff was highly addictive. Only people who were in a really bad shape used morphine.

He wanted to panic, but vague memories of the church, the fire, the beam falling on his back explained anything he might’ve wondered. His face twisted and, though it wasn’t burned, it still hurt the burns on his neck and shoulders as he did so. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream and the worst part was that either option would just make things worse. The crying would aggravate his burned lungs, the screaming would aggravate his burned throat. All he could do was lie there in silence, holding his breath as tears ran down his cheeks, trying to control the sobs building in his chest.

He must’ve cried himself back into unconsciousness and done exactly what he’d known he shouldn’t because the next thing he knew he was opening his eyes and there was a doctor sitting next to him. There was a folder sitting on the table next to his bed. The doctor’s hands were clasped in front of him. He looked grave.

“Johnny, is it?” the doctor asked.

“How’d you know?” he asked in reply. His voice was hoarse, scratchy.

“Your friends kept saying your names when you came in last night. They told us which one of you was which,” the doctor explained.

That was when he remembered: “Ponyboy and Dally, they alright?” he asked.

“Yes,” the doctor replied, “but I need to talk to you about yourself.”

If he could’ve, Johnny would’ve clenched his hands into fists to brace himself for what was coming next, but he was too weak to do something like that at the moment and even if he could’ve, it hurt too badly at the moment to even try.
The doctor gave it to him straight: his back was broken. Badly. Badly enough that he would probably never walk again. Not even on crutches. Even if he did have surgery. Him gaining any sort of feeling below the waist ever again with or without surgery was unlikely and, if he did, it would be shocking. But worse than that were the burns in his lungs and on his body. His chest and lungs had gotten the worst of it. While his lungs hadn’t had direct contact with fire like his chest, hands, shoulders, neck, back, and legs had, the scalding air he’d inhaled had singed them enough that even if he recovered he’d most likely have trouble breathing for the rest of his life as well. If he recovered enough for his weak body to be able to handle surgery, he’d need skin grafts on the worst of his burns and he’d be scarred almost all over his body for the rest of his life. And the worst part was none of this might even matter anyway. His burns were so bad and his body was so weak that there was a very good chance he would just die.

That was why he wasn’t in surgery now, he realized. They thought it might kill him.

They were both silent with the doctor finished speaking. Neither one of them knowing what to say, but Johnny really did not know what could possibly be said. Sorry you’ll never walk again? Sorry I’ll be trapped in the house I hate with the people who don’t want me for the rest of my life? Just accepting it? Getting angry? Every reaction seemed like the wrong reaction.

Finally, the doctor stood and grabbed his file, saying something about having other patients he needed to talk to. Johnny didn’t say anything in reply. He wanted the doctor gone. He wanted to be alone. And the minute the door shut behind him, he felt that scream he’d suppressed earlier building in his chest. But he still couldn’t let it out and instead clenched his jaw, closed his eyes tight, and willed himself back into unconsciousness before he could start crying and, to his great surprise, it worked.

When he opened his eyes next, time had passed, but he wasn’t sure how much. All he knew was that now he was lying on his stomach. It turned out the reason the bed was so weirdly shaped was because it allowed him to be placed comfortably on either his stomach or his back. There was a mirror beneath him so that when doctors and nurses came into the room, he could see them without having to turn his head. His hands were still resting on the cooling towels. It occurred to him then that the reason he was on this type of bed was so his burns on his back could air out as well.

He started to hate the mirror really fast. They hadn’t thought to make it small so he wouldn’t have to stare at himself the whole time while awake and there was nothing else more interesting to look at, so he kept his eyes closed. He didn’t like looking at himself anyway in any event. He had to see every imperfection on his face including the scar left by the Socs that had jumped him. Eventually, keeping his eyes closed made him more tired than he already was and he fell asleep again.

When he woke up next, Tim Shepard was sitting in one of the chairs next to his bed and Johnny was on his back again. He wasn’t looking at Johnny, though. He was looking through a newspaper. When Johnny opened his eyes, however, he shut it and turned to him.

“I came to see Dallas,” he said, “but when he told me what kinda state you were in I figured I might as well say hi. So...hi.”

Johnny swallowed. “Hi,” he replied, his voice still hoarse.

Tim nodded. He didn’t seem to know what else to say and Johnny really couldn’t blame him. If he knew everything the doctor had told him, what was there to say? He had a feeling he was going to be having a lot of visits like this and he wasn’t looking forwards to any of them.

Neither of them knew each other very well and, as a result, they didn’t have anything else to say to one another, present events aside. The fact Tim had said hi was more than enough and Tim knew it.
He gathered up his newspaper and left.

Back to being all alone in his room, Johnny counted the tiles in the ceiling until he got tired again, something that seemed to be happening a lot lately, and fell asleep for a few more hours. When he woke up, he was once again on his stomach and he cursed silently. The mirror was back too and it wasn’t any smaller. He wondered why he always ended up being asleep when they turned him over. Maybe they did it that way on purpose. A part of him was glad. Another part of him wasn’t, since he hadn’t gotten a chance to tell anyone to get a smaller mirror.

This time he was awake for far longer than just a few minutes and he had time to think about everything the doctor had said. The two things that kept sticking out were the fact he was most likely going to die and that even if he didn’t die, he would be crippled for life. He’d be trapped in that house with his parents and he wouldn’t ever be able to leave, not without someone to help him. He’d probably die there. He wouldn’t be able to escape his parents anymore when they hurt him. He wanted to cry about it, but it seemed all his tears were gone and he just felt a numbing horror instead.

He was sadder about the fact he might die. He was only sixteen. And yes, he’d thought about killing himself more than once, but that didn’t mean he meant it. He didn’t really want to die. He just wanted everything else, all the pain, panic, and agony to stop. But now it looked like even if he lived that wouldn’t be the case. How could he possibly hope for a painless, panic-less future if he was trapped in a house with people that hated him and loved to express this by hurting him? He knew that any of the gang would take him in if they could, but...could they? Could any of them? Ponyboy’s family couldn’t. Two-Bit’s parents weren’t much better than his. Same went for Dally’s family. He had no choice. He would be trapped there until he died or until a miracle came down from the heavens and magically healed his legs. He was pretty sure the former would happen before the latter.

Vaguely, he heard angry voices in the hallway. He couldn’t hear what they were saying from the distance they were at, but he recognized Two-Bit’s voice and his heart leaped at the idea of seeing him. A third voice joined in and, immediately after the arguing stopped, the voices silencing. For a moment, Johnny thought the doctor had told them to leave, but then he heard footsteps.

“Hey, Johnnycake,” Two-Bit said, smiling broadly. He moved into Johnny’s line of vision, looking down at him through the mirror.

“Hey y’all,” Johnny replied, his voice still hoarse, as he saw Ponyboy standing beside Two-Bit.

They both looked horror struck. He wondered how bad the burns on his back looked.

“How they treatin’ you, kid?” Two-Bit asked.

Johnny opened his mouth to answer. It took more effort than he’d thought it would to say two things in a row and by the time he’d thought up an answer, Two-Bit was already saying something else.

“They got your picture here in the paper,” he was saying, placing the paper on the mirror where he could see it, “for being a hero.”

For a moment, all he could do was stare at it in silent amazement, his mouth open slightly in shock. A hero? He was being called a hero? Not even a week ago he’d killed someone and now he was a hero – his stomach dropped slightly as he realized that was something else he’d have to deal with if he lived. Odd how one act of bravery that probably still would kill him had suddenly turned him into a hero overnight. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

He glanced towards the paper and saw the picture and, for one brief moment, the guilt was lifted, and
he was happy that for once in his life, he was seen as something other than worthless. He smiled weakly. “Yeah, that’s tuff enough, huh?”

“Guess you can look at it later,” Two-Bit said, pulling it away and setting it on the table beside his bed. Johnny wished he hadn’t, so he would have something to look at besides his own face once Two-Bit and Ponyboy left. “You want anything?”

“A book, man,” Johnny said, glancing towards Ponyboy. “Can y’all get me another one?”

Two-Bit’s brows drew together, but Ponyboy said, “I think he wants a copy of Gone With the Wind, so I can read it to him. Would you mind going downstairs and gettin’ one?”

For a moment, Two-Bit said nothing, his eyes on Johnny. He didn’t want to leave him. Johnny could tell by the look in both of their eyes they were half convinced he was going to die right here, right now with them watching and, if they weren’t careful, he’d be gone before they knew it.

He half wondered if they were right.

Finally, Two-Bit said, “Nah, they got a gift shop downstairs, I’ll go get it.”

Johnny wondered if he’d actually pay for it. The thought almost made him want to smile.

As Two-Bit moved past Ponyboy to get to the door, Ponyboy sat down in the chair Two-Bit had been standing in front of, but neglecting.

Like Tim Shepard, Ponyboy didn’t seem to know what to say, but unlike Tim Shepard, he wasn’t at a loss for words. “So,” he began, glancing around the room, searching for something to talk about or maybe just searching for anything to look at that wasn’t Johnny’s burned back, “Guess Dal’s gonna be okay. Me and Darry we’re gettin’ along real good now.”

A sudden sharp pain pierced Johnny’s chest. He couldn’t stop himself from wincing and letting out a weak groan, squeezing his eyes tightly against the pain before he’d quite realized what he’d done.

There was a creak as Ponyboy leaned forward in the chair he was in. “Johnny, are you alright?”

“Oh yeah,” he replied, once he was sure his voice would come out as something more than just a gasp. “It just hurts sometimes. Usually don’t cause I can’t feel anything below the middle of my back. Pretty bad off, ain’t I, Ponyboy?”

He meant it to sound like a joke, but he could tell from the look on Ponyboy’s voice it didn’t come out sounding like one at all.

“No, you’re gonna be alright, kid” Ponyboy replied, tears forming in his green eyes. He looked away for a moment as he tried to hold them back. A part of Johnny was glad, knowing if Ponyboy started crying he would too. “You gotta be. Couldn’t get along without’cha.”

“I won’t be able to walk again,” Johnny reminded him. He wasn’t sure why. Maybe he really did understand where Darry was coming from and just this once he wanted Ponyboy to face reality too. “Not even on crutches. Doc says I busted my back.”

“You’re gonna be fine,” Ponyboy protested, the tears he was struggling to hide beginning to fall. He sniffed and looked away. “I know ya are.”

“Wanna know something, Ponyboy?” Johnny said, his voice shaking. “I used to talk about killin’ myself all the time, man, I don’t wanna die now. It ain’t long enough. Sixteen years ain’t gonna be
long enough.” He blinked furiously, finding himself sniffing as well. “Hell, I wouldn’t mind so much if there wasn’t so much stuff I ain’t done yet, so many...so many damn things I ain’t seen or nothin’.” He closed his eyes silent for a moment and in that moment everything he hadn’t done and wanted to do flashed through his mind all at once: going to a cabin, going to another state, seeing the ocean. He opened them again and went on. “That time we were up in Windrixville...was the only time I’ve ever been way from my own neighborhood.”

He winced again. Talking was exhausting. It took a lot of effort and made his throat hurt.

“Knock it off,” Ponyboy replied, not smiling as he sniffed again, his eyes swimming with tears. “If you get too juiced up the doc won’t let us see you no more.”

The door opened behind them and for a minute, Johnny thought it was Two-Bit, come back with the book, but it wasn’t. It was the nurse.

“Johnny,” she spoke softly.

“Yeah,” he muttered.

“Your mother’s here to see you.”

For a moment, Johnny felt surprised. His mother? The mother who called him worthless daily and had beaten him with a broom handle before was here to see him? A part of him – a very large part of him – wanted to let her come in, let her hug him and hold him. Maybe she would now that he was dying. Maybe things would be different.

*But they won’t be,* he reminded himself quickly. *She’s not here because she cares about you.*

And the thought made the lump in his throat larger so that when he replied, it was in a moan, “I don’t wanna see her.”

“It’s your mother,” the nurse protested. “She’s here to see you.”

Johnny closed his eyes and, for a moment, he felt so tired, he almost blacked out, then he forced his eyes open and went on, “I said, I don’t want to see her. She probably just wants to come down and tell me about all the trouble I’m causing.” Anger filled him suddenly and he moved his hands, trying to sit up, forgetting all about the fact he was paralyzed for a moment, intent on telling his mother what he really thought for once. “Why don’t you just tell her to leave me al –”

Pain stronger than he’d felt since he woke up in the hospital coursed through him, cutting him off. He let out a breath, shocked for a moment by the intensity of it. Then he clenched his jaw, struggling to keep himself conscious despite the agony, his body shaking with the effort, but he couldn’t do it. The pain was too strong and in moments his jaw went slack he fell again into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

i really am at quite a loss as to what to do next, but if anyone wants to give me some suggestions, i would love that!!
Dallas Winston loved to fight. It was probably his favorite thing to do. He liked drinking and doing drugs just fine, but nothing took away the frustration, anger, anxiety, and pain like fighting did. A very large part of him, hated himself for it. It reminded him of his father, the way he enjoyed the feeling of skin hitting skin, the way it brought him peace in a way few things could.

Every time he thought about that, he thought about his mother, cold and dead in the ground because of his father and his carelessness.

You’re too much like him, a voice in his head constantly reminded him. That’s why all the girls leave you. That’s why Johnny doesn’t love you back. That’s why no one wants you.

He was running right now. Running towards the vacant lot where the rumble was going to be held. He shook his head once, trying to clear it, trying to forget he’d been in love with Johnny for years now, that he drank it and fucked it away as much as he could, but it still wasn’t enough.

Shaking his head wasn’t enough either.

It only brought in other images, ones that were worse.

The burning church. The sound of Johnny screaming. The way Johnny looked when he’d pulled him out, unconscious, burned, before Dally passed out too. It was the worst thing he’d ever seen and he still had nightmares.

And they just made him hate himself more.

He hadn’t seen Johnny yet, hadn’t been able to make himself walk even the few hundred yards between his hospital room and Johnny’s, terrified of what he would see when he reached his destination. He knew what had happened. He knew that Johnny would need skin grafts on a good portion of his burns if he lived – the keyword being if. He knew that Johnny would never walk again either and that was worse. He’d be trapped in that house with the people who hurt him, unable to leave. The idea terrified Dally as much as he broke his heart. He knew the only reason Johnny was still alive was because he could get away from his parents when they beat him. What would happen
to him when he could no longer do that?

And that was only if he wasn’t put in prison for killing Bob Sheldon.

The prick had deserved it, Dally felt, but he knew a court of law wouldn’t see that justice had been served as much as he did. But the idea that they could punish Johnny so harshly horrified him just as much as the idea of him living with his parents.

Men did things to pretty boys in jail. He knew that. He knew that well.

Johnny be more at risk because he hadn’t been born a boy. The gang forgot that most of the time, including Dally, but now the realization hit him full force and he ran faster. Johnny wouldn’t just be at risk, he’d be a target.

A part of Dally wished Johnny would die, so he wouldn’t have to face what might happen.

He gritted his teeth, hating himself more.

The hospital wasn’t anywhere near the vacant lot, but Dally hardly noticed the distance, his thoughts so caught up in everything else. He didn’t realize he was almost there until he was stepping onto the curb and then the grass, and then he was seeing the group of Socs walking up to the group of greasers standing near the back of the lot frowning with their arms crossed, a few smoking cigarettes.

Dally’s eyes flicked to the large oak tree in one corner of the lot. The car seat Johnny slept on when it was warm and he didn’t want to go home was beneath its branches.

He gritted his teeth harder.

No one was looking at him. They were talking. And for some reason he felt the need to change that. So he shouted, “A rumble ain’t a rumble without me!”

And that was how it started.

One of the Socs and several of the greasers turned to look at him as he shouted, and those who noticed their opponents were preoccupied took that advantage. Dally got to the center of the fight by climbing up and leaping off the rusted, red husk of a car that had been left in the lot ages ago. He punched the first Soc he saw across the face.

Fighting felt good. It was what he knew.

And it made all of the bad images in his head go away.

Johnny in the fire at the church. Punch! Johnny screaming. Wham! Johnny, burned and unconscious, as they climbed out of the collapsed church. Pow!

He fought with a grimace on his face, hurting the Socs for everything they were, for everything they’d done to Johnny, wanting them to feel a fraction of the pain Johnny did, unable to be here, now, because he was dying in that hospital. He hardly noticed the pain in his burned arm. He hardly noticed he wasn’t using it as well as normal. All he could notice was the fury, the anger that kept him going.

The Soc he was fighting was getting the better of him because of his burned arm. His head snapped to one side as the Soc punched him in the face. He let out a grunt as the same fist then connected with his stomach and then came back up to his face. He could feel his lip split at one corner. He was going to have a large bruise by his eye tomorrow.
It began to rain, hard, drenching everyone in the vacant lot within seconds.

Dally’s denim jacket stuck to him, his bare chest beneath becoming covered in gooseflesh as the cold water ran down his skin to the hem of his jeans, drenching them too, sticking them to his legs. It was even harder to fight when his clothes became so wet they would not move with him.

At some point, the Soc he was fighting turned on his heel and ran. It took Dally a moment to realize that the greasers around him were whooping and hollering with excitement, crashing together in wet victory hugs as the Socs ran to their cars parked at the edge of the lot.

He blinked. Somehow they’d won.

“We won,” he heard himself saying, though his voice sounded far away. “We beat the Socs.”

He blinked again and turned, seeing Ponyboy standing beside him. His shirt was badly torn and his face was covered in blood, already turning black and blue. He clearly looked a lot worse than he felt because he was standing, watching the Socs leave the same as Dally. Everyone celebrated around them. They stood silent, blinking rainwater out of their eyes.

Then Dally came back to himself. He saw the sun was gone, the sky was black. It was night. He blinked and this time saw Johnny, alone in the hospital. He hadn’t seen him yet. He needed to see him. He swallowed hard and grabbed Ponyboy by the shoulder saying, “Come on.” Ponyboy stumbled as he half dragged him into the street, heading for the nearest car. He could give it back to whomever it belonged to later. “We’re goin’ to see Johnny.”

Ponyboy still struggled to keep up. “Hurry!” Dally half-shouted. “He was gettin’ worse when I left. He wants to see you.”

Dally didn’t know any of that for sure. He hadn’t seen Johnny yet, but he had overheard the doctors speaking. He’d heard what they were saying about him. - He’s so weak. I’m not sure he’s going to last much longer. – It was why he’d been too much of a coward to go see Johnny to begin with. He wasn’t sure he could stand to see him like that. But he knew now they were running out of time.

The car they ended up taking belonged to Buck Merril. Dally half pushed Ponyboy into the front seat before leaping into the driver’s seat. He turned the key in the ignition and roared down the street, hardly paying attention to anything except the fact he had to get to the hospital now.

Dally wasn’t sure how far they got before the red flashing lights appeared in their rear view mirror accompanied by a siren, but he didn’t think it was very long. He pulled over, feeling antsy. Every moment wasted was a moment missed with Johnny.

Who knows how long he has? A sinister voice whispered in his mind. He could be dead already. He could be dead already and he will have died alone. You will have let him down again.

He’s not going to die, Dally insisted, gritting his teeth, his hold on the steering wheel tightening as the police officer came around to the driver’s side door. I’m not going to let him die.

If the voice could’ve laughed, Dally was sure it would have. You can’t do that.

It was right, but he didn’t want to admit that Johnny could die and he couldn’t stop it. He had to stop it. He couldn’t live without Johnny. No one got that. They all thought he was so hard and tough, the definition of a hood, but that was around everyone else. Johnny turned him into someone else. If he lost Johnny...he’d lose everything else too.

He got rid of the police officer easily, even convinced him to give them an escort by claiming
Ponyboy had fallen off of his motorcycle. With all of the blood on his face, he sure looked like that’s what could’ve happened. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel and the antsy feeling that had crept up on him when the police officer stopped them kept building until he started talking and couldn’t make himself stop.

“I was crazy, you know that, kid? Crazy for wantin’ Johnny to stay outta trouble, for not wantin’ him to get hard. If he’d been like me, he’d never have been in this mess. If he’d got smart like me, he’d never have run into that church. That’s what you get for helpin’ people. Editorials in the paper and a lot of trouble...” He pointed at Ponyboy. “You’d better wise up, Pony...you get tough like me and you don’t get hurt. You look out for yourself and nothin’ can touch you...”

He hit the steering wheel hard. It jarred his burned arm, but he welcomed the pain. He let out a sharp gasp and found there was a lump in his throat that he couldn’t swallow.

I can’t lose him.

He kept talking, but even he didn’t know what about. It wasn’t until they pulled into the hospital parking lot that he finally shut up, throwing open the car doors and dragging Ponyboy inside, hastily thanking the police officer as he raced down the sterile hallways to Johnny’s room.

There was no one outside of Johnny’s room to Dally’s surprise. They both went inside and Dally froze in the doorway.

Johnny lay on a bed specifically designed for burn patients. There was an IV pole to the left of his bed that held two bags of fluid with tubes leading to needles in his arm. To the right were two large machines. One had a tube of oxygen that ran under his nose connected to it. The other was beeping and connected to circular stickers on his chest that recorded his heartbeat. It was very slow. If it hadn’t been for that beeping, Dally would’ve thought Johnny was dead already.

He swallowed hard, taking a shaky step forward. “Johnnycake?” His voice was hoarse. He could hardly speak around the lump in his throat. “Johnny?”

Johnny stirred weakly, his eyelids fluttering open just barely to see them. He gave a weak smile that broke Dally’s heart and managed to say, “Hey.” His voice was barely more than a whisper.

“We won,” he burst out, moving so he was next to Johnny. He looked so weak, so sick. A fist closed around his heart as he realized this was his fault. If only he’d saved him sooner... “We beat the Socs. We stomped them – chased them outta our territory.”

Johnny didn’t smile. Dally wasn’t sure he even could. “Useless...fighting’s no good...” His normally dark brown skin was very pale, almost white.

Dally licked his lips, swallowing again. “They’re still writing editorials about you in the paper. For being a hero and all.” He was stumbling over his words. He was talking too fast. “Yeah, they’re calling you a hero now and heroizin’ all the greasers. We’re all proud of you, buddy, it’s gonna be alright.” He reached out and touched Johnny’s arm, wanting more than anything to hold his hand too.

Johnny still didn’t smile, but his eyes glowed when Dally said this. And that was enough.

“Ponyboy.” Johnny’s voice was hardly audible and, for a moment, Dally thought he’d imagined him speaking. Then he saw Ponyboy leaning down to hear him and he heard Johnny breathe out, “Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold...”

Dally didn’t know what that meant, but it hardly mattered because Johnny became too still then and a
moment later the beeping on the machine became one, flat endless note.

Dally’s own heart nearly stopped.

Johnny was dead.

Mere moments passed before a group of four doctors pushed their way into the room, devices in their hands that Dally didn’t understand, but their sudden presence was enough to snap him out of the numbing coldness that had begun to seep through him.

“Johnny!” he heard himself scream. He began trying to get to him. One of the doctors held him back, saying something, but Dally couldn’t hear him. He could only see Johnny’s limp body on the hospital bed, the doctors struggling to keep him breathing, struggling to start his heart again, but it wasn’t working. It wasn’t working at all.

The scene before him was like watching his heart break in real time. Every time the doctors couldn’t revive Johnny was another crack in the armor Dally wore around himself. He could feel the lump in his throat breaking as tears formed in his eyes instead. He didn’t look at Ponyboy. To be honest, he wasn’t even sure where he was. He had to be there, but he could only see Johnny, his limp (NOT!) dead body on the bed.

And then a miracle happened.

The flat note ended and the beeping resumed. It was weak and faint, but it was there.

Dally had slumped against the doctor, his knees buckling, nearly collapsed on the floor, his head hanging, unable to watch any longer, but when he heard that beeping he looked up, pushing the doctors aside, unable to contain himself as he held Johnny’s face in his hands, watching him take a gasping breath in. He didn’t open his eyes, but it was enough. He was alive.

It took all of Dally’s willpower to pull himself away from Johnny as quickly as he’d gone to him. It was not common for men to behave that way around other men. Even if Johnny had scars on his chest that showed he hadn’t been born a mad. Even if Dally was his best friend. It wasn’t normal, but somehow no one seemed to notice. Ponyboy was crying tears of joy in one corner, collapsed in a chair and the doctors and nurses around them seemed just as joyful and shocked as they were.

Dally wanted to celebrate, even though he could hear the doctors saying that Johnny surviving was still unlikely, especially considering how long it had taken them to restart his heart. He wanted to go back to the Curtis house and break out a six pack for everyone to share, even though the doctors were saying that if his heart stopped again, they most likely wouldn’t be able to restart it.

But they did restart it, he thought to himself. And now Johnny was going to live. At least through the night. At least a little longer and maybe, just maybe, a little longer could be forever.

Chapter End Notes

i don’t know much about medical...things (obviously lol), but i know enough to know that lol this probably could not happen this way irl bc of...things, so pls suspend your disbelief. i bend the rules in the medical world for angst purposes, so prepare for that throughout this fic tbh *upside down smile emoji*
again tho idk what to do, so pls lemme know if you've got ideas!!
Sterilized Visits That Smell Like Smoke

Chapter Summary

Johnny gets a visit from Dally

Chapter Notes

so!!! i actually have ideas now!!! for this fic. not for my hanahaki fic, but yay?? i know what's gonna happen in the next couple of chapters.

As the day wore on and his death became more and more inevitable, Johnny became more and more okay with it to the point that by the time he died in his hospital bedroom, he’d done everything he felt he could do to prepare himself and the rest of the world for his passing: he’d seen the parents of the children he’d saved and they’d thanked him, he’d written a letter to Ponyboy and left it in his book, instructing the nurse to return it to him. Now all he had to do was wait for Dally and Ponyboy to get back from the rumble, force himself to hang on just long enough to say a proper goodbye and that was what he did. In fact, he was so prepared for his death that when his eyes fluttered open after saying those goodbyes and he found himself not in the afterlife but back in his same hospital, bright bedroom the next morning, he was shocked.

He was still in the strange bed, clearly designed for burn patients, though currently he was on his back. He still had his arms on the cooling towels. He was still on oxygen, still connected to the beeping machine, still unable to walk. He still had a hard time moving and speaking. Nothing had really changed since the last time he’d been conscious, except he felt less tired, less exhausted. And it made no sense. The last thing he remembered was telling Ponyboy to stay gold and then falling into a deep hole that was warm and dark. That, surely, was death. So by what miracle was he now alive?

The doctor was back in the seat next to his bed, the folder once again sitting on the nightstand next to his bed. The doctor looked slightly less grave than he had the last time Johnny had seen him when he’d told him he was dying. This time he told him that his heart had stopped and they’d managed to restart it, a miracle in and of itself. His odds for survival hadn’t exactly increased, but they hadn’t decreased either. The doctor didn’t say it in so many words, but his message was essentially this: You could live, but you very well might not, so don’t get your hopes up.

Johnny wished the doctor would’ve just said what he meant. He felt that way with most people.

“If you survive the week, then we’ll be able to operate on your back. The odds of you walking again are still very slim, but with this surgery they will increase a little bit and at least give you some feeling back in your legs and lower body,” the doctor told him as he stood to leave. “We’ll also be able to operate to give you skin grafts on the areas where the burns will not heal, but that will have to be done after your back operation.”

All Johnny could do was nod.

How hurt did you have to be for a doctor to not even try to be optimistic?
When the doctor left, his mind started to wander. First it went to the day before, to when the parents of the children he’d saved had come to thank him for their children’s lives. The visits had all been brief – he was sure the parents weren’t comfortable being in the presence of a burned and dying sixteen-year-old boy with odd scars on his chest – but it’d made him feel better about dying. It made him feel like he’d served some purpose.

Now that it was still up in the air as to whether or not he was going to die, he wasn’t sure how to feel about yesterday and all the things he’d said and done. Was that purpose now taken away now that he’d lived rather than died? He wondered also if Ponyboy remembered what he’d said to him, if he would still take it to heart now that he was alive and not dead in the ground. He hoped he still would. He’d meant everything he’d said. And yet, at the same time, it all felt...oddly fake now that what he’d prepared for hadn’t happened. It still could, he supposed, but...he didn’t feel it would. And he wasn’t sure how to feel about that either.

It also reminded him that now he had other things to worry about. Like the hearing that would determine whether he’d go home or a juvenile detention center once he was released from the hospital. That was the biggest thing on his mind. Dally’s words of warning of what jail could do to him kept running through his head. He couldn’t stop thinking about how it was the last thing Dally had said to him before he’d run into that church to save those kids.

The hearing wouldn’t take place for a week at least and the odds of him being able to attend it were slim considering what the doctor had just told him. He wondered how that would work, if someone would come speak to him or would someone just speak on his behalf. And if he were sentenced how would that work? Would he go straight from the hospital to juvie once he was well enough to leave it? He didn’t want to think about it, but he had nothing else to do. He wanted to read the newspaper Two-Bit had left on his nightstand the day before or Gone With the Wind, which was also on his nightstand where he’d left it after he’d written Ponyboy’s letter.

Now he stared at it from his place in bed, unable to move, and wondered how he’d ever managed to find the strength to do that to begin with.

Left with nothing to do, his thoughts eventually morphed into dreams as he drifted into sleep. He dreamt of living on a plantation with Ponyboy and Dally. They watched the sunsets and then suddenly their house was on fire and Johnny was inside. He was banging on the door, trying to get out, but no one could hear him over the roar of the flames. He turned and saw Bob Sheldon there, smirking as he staggered to one side, his fingers curled around his flask, his rings glinting in the light of the fire. Without thinking, Johnny killed him. He stabbed him and watched him stumble back and die, as clear as he had the first time it happened. Then he heard a creaking above him. He looked up and watched the roof crumble to nothing on top of him. In his dream, he screamed and then he started awake, drenched in sweat, breathing heavily, the machine next to him beeping erratically.

It took him several moments of lying in his hospital bed gasping before he realized there was a hand on his shoulder. He froze, blinked, turned, then relaxed when he saw it was only Dallas Winston.

“Hey, Johnnycake,” Dally said. He looked sad, sadder than Johnny had ever seen him, even though he was smiling. It didn’t make sense to him why he would feel that way if he were alive, but Dally brought him out of his thoughts by adding, “How you feelin’, man?”

Johnny swallowed and didn’t know how to answer. That was such a loaded question. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he didn’t want to ruin whatever time he had with Dally, so he forced himself to smile and said, “I’m okay, I guess. I don’t feel nothin’ below the middle of my back and I don’t feel nothin’ much anyway cause of the drugs they got me on.”

As Johnny watched, Dally’s eyes flicked to the bags of fluid hanging from the IV pole, his face for
one moment full of worry and contempt, before they flicked away again, back to Johnny’s face.

Dally really was beautiful and Johnny turned away, not wanting him to see him turn red. He’d never told anyone about the crush he’d always had on Dallas Winston, but he felt that if anyone looked hard enough they’d see it. And that was dangerous, he knew that, people didn’t approve of boys loving other boys, but he couldn’t hide it either. He didn’t know how. He’d always hated that about himself; he wore his heart on his sleeve and he didn’t know how to take it off and that always got him hurt.

“How long you been sittin’ there?” Johnny finally asked.

Dally shrugged, not looking at Johnny as he said, “Since the hospital opened.” His eyes flicked to Johnny just for a second and he added quickly, “I was worried about you, y’know, after what happened last night.”

“You mean after I...died and came back.” It sounded weird to say it out loud.

Dally still didn’t look at him and there was something tortured in his voice as he replied softly, “Yeah. After that.”

There was a silence after that during which Johnny thought for the first time what that must’ve been like for Dally and Ponyboy. He imagined if the roles had been reversed, if it had been Dally in this bed instead of him, what it would feel like to watch him die. He had to repress a shudder. It was the worst thing he could possibly imagine. Even if he were brought back only minutes later. Even if he were alive now. It was still just that horrible. He couldn’t think about it. He just couldn’t do it.

When he looked at Dally again, he could see in his eyes that that was exactly how it had been for him too. Johnny turned a light shade of red, his eyes immediately flicking to the window, as he realized he’d never imagined in his life that someone, including and maybe especially Dallas Winston, cared that much for him.

Dally was the one who finally broke the silence, saying, “The doctor told me your surgery is gonna be in a week. They-they still ain’t sure you’re gonna make it, Johnnycake.”

He didn’t look at him as he said it.

Johnny wished he could do a lot of things in that moment, most of which would probably ruin a lot of aspects of his life and burn a lot of bridges. He was almost glad he couldn’t walk then so he wasn’t able to act on his impulse.

He honestly wasn’t sure he would’ve been able to stop himself otherwise.

“When is the hearing?” he asked softly instead.

“The day of your surgery,” Dally replied. “So you ain’t gonna be able to be there.’”

Johnny wanted to clench his hands into fists, dig his nails into his palms to keep them from shaking, but they still hurt too badly. The burns hadn’t healed enough yet. He wondered if it was a good idea for him to be unable to speak for himself at the hearing. Then again, maybe the jury would pity him, being unable to be there since he was crippled. But he was still a greaser…

“Don’t worry, Johnny,” Dally said seriously as though he could read Johnny’s mind. “They ain’t gonna send you to jail. You’re a crippled sixteen-year-old hero. They’d be monsters to put you in jail after that.” But even as he said it, Johnny could see the anxiety in Dally’s own eyes for just a moment. Dally had been to jail before. It hadn’t occurred to Johnny until just now he might have a
reason for trying to keep him from going to jail.

And then another fear, one he’d thought of before, resurfaced, and he said, “I dunno where I’m gonna live, though. I-I’m gonna have to go back to livin’ with my folks, but...” He trailed off, unsure of how to describe all of his fears surrounding that. However, one glance at Dally told him he didn’t have to. The anxiety that had been in his eyes a moment ago had returned.

This time Dally said nothing and Johnny was thankful for it. There was nothing he could think of that he could say that would really solve anything or make anything better. Short of having him move in with him. But he doubted that would happen. Dally still lived with his father and his father was not much better than Johnny’s.

At least he had his mother until she died, a part of him thought bitterly.

Another part hated himself for thinking that at all.

“You’re not supposed to be in here.”

The sudden voice startled them both, making Johnny jump on his bed. The nurse was in the doorway to his bedroom, her mouth pressed into a thin line, her lips wide with anger. She was glaring at Dally and Dally, always defiant, glared right back.

“You need to leave,” the nurse went on. “He needs his rest.”

“Yeah?” Dallas replied, frowning, “and who’s gonna make me?”

“Security, if you don’t leave now,” the nurse replied without missing a beat.

“Dally, just go,” Johnny said softly. “You can come back later.”

Dally glanced at him and for a moment he looked betrayed and it didn’t make sense to Johnny as to why. The only reason he’d feel that way would be if he wanted to stay longer. Dallas Winston didn’t like staying with anyone. Especially in a hospital room.

The look vanished almost as quickly, his lips turning into a line as thin as the nurse’s, still glaring. He grabbed his burned leather bomber jacket off the chair he’d been sitting in and turned to go. He paused, turning back just for a moment and reaching out, leaning down, about to say something, but he blinked and stopped halfway through the motion and straightened quickly as though he remembered something. He swallowed, his frown deepening and left the room.

The nurse left with him and Johnny wondered what had caused Dally to look at him like that, to make him pause before he left, and to then turn and leave without doing what he had thought of doing. And a part of him, a very small, hopeful part of him, thought that maybe, just maybe, he had the kind of impulses Johnny had too.
A Broken Home in Dallas, Tulsa

Chapter Summary

Dally goes home after visiting Johnny.

Chapter Notes

WOW I REALLY ENJOYED WRITING THIS. i haven't written anything to do with Dally's dad yet, so that was fun. idk how much more he'll show up in this fic, but probably a couple more times because of what i have planned. anyway!! enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dally left the hospital in an angry huff, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his jacket, his head down, glaring at his shoes as he walked as fast as he could away from the hospital. He wasn’t sure exactly why he was angry or who he was angry, but he was angry and, since it looked like he was going to be walking home, he had plenty of time to think about it.

At first, he thought he was angry with Johnny for not telling the nurse to fuck off and let him stay, but that wasn’t really accurate. He knew full well Johnny wouldn’t have done that. Johnny could hardly stand up for himself, how could he be expected to stand up for anyone else? Especially when he scared of just about everyone except the gang.

Then he thought that he was angry with the nurse for kicking him out of Johnny’s room when Johnny barely had any visitors as it was and the gang was the only family he had. But that wasn’t really accurate either. Sure that made him upset, but it wasn’t the reason he was upset in this moment.

But the person he finally settled on was the person he realized he should’ve blamed from the very beginning because it always turned out to be their fault anyway.

Himself.

If he had come a little later, the nurse would’ve passed by Johnny’s room and he would’ve been able to spend a lot longer with him. But even as he thought that, he knew that wasn’t the reason he was upset with himself. It had to do with Johnny, but that wasn’t the reason. Not really.

The reason he was upset was because he was still in love with Johnny. And he still hadn’t told him. There was a good reason for this – he could not know how Johnny would respond; they didn’t exactly live in a town where queers were accepted – but he also felt the longer he denied his feelings for Johnny, the stronger they became. He tried to deny this thought too, but he couldn’t. It was true.

Without thinking, Dally ran to the nearest wooden pole, holding up the powerlines, and slammed his fist into it. His face was held in a grimace as his knuckles collided with the wood covered in old staples and nails. The staples cut into his skin, but he didn’t notice the pain, couldn’t feel the blood dripping down his fingers to the sidewalk below.
He wanted to do a lot more than that, but he could feel the eyes of the people on the street around him on him, wondering if the angry hood was going to go after them next. He wanted to scream at them that he couldn’t give less of a shit about them. They weren’t his problem, but he knew that people tended to call the police when hoods started shouting. Even if it were justified.

Dally walked quickly through town, turning down an alley that would lead him to his neighborhood as quickly as possible so he could grimace in peace without being judged.

The world faded around him as his thoughts turned to Johnny – as if they’d ever really left him. The doctors still thought there was a chance he would die. It was why they were waiting to operate on his back. If he were too weak, if his body couldn’t handle the physical strain of surgery, then he would die, right there on the table.

Dally clenched his teeth even harder, convinced at this point that they were grinding each other down to little ivory nubs. What would he do if Johnny died? He had watched him die only the day before and he had been brought back, but that had been a stark reminder of what could happen, what he had no control over.

_I would kill myself if he died_, he decided, his hands clenching into fists in his pockets, his nails digging so deep into his palms they drew blood. _I’d take all my old man’s sleeping pills and drink a bottle of whiskey. Or I’d go rob a convenience store with his gun and let the cops do it instead._

He felt he should have been scared on some level that he was so willing to end his own life should the slightest thing go wrong, but he wasn’t. It felt comforting to know he had such an easy way out if things got too hard.

_But they won’t be too hard as long as Johnny is alive_, a small voice reminded him.

He wanted to argue, wanted to remind it he was Dallas Winston and he didn’t need nobody.

But he couldn’t make that argument, not even to himself, after having just considered suicide should Johnny die.

He vaguely recognized that Johnny didn’t believe anyone would feel that way if he died and he found himself wondering why. Everyone did everything they could for Johnny and it broke all of their hearts that he still believed himself unworthy of love after all of that because his folks had drilled it into his head and convinced him of that.

_We would all fall apart if Johnny died._ And even as he thought it, he realized just how true it was. Johnny was what held them all together. He was the glue of the gang.

_He can’t die_, he insisted, his hands still clenched as he walked faster, hardly noticing he’d turned onto his own street. _He can’t. The world will end if he does. It will stop spinning._

Logically, Dally knew this wasn’t true, but it might as well have been. _His_ world and the gang’s world would end if Johnny died and that was the only world that truly mattered in Dally’s mind.

Dally didn’t notice he was already home until he was walking up the steps and turning the door handle. He pushed it open and closed it again without noticing anything other than his anger.

And then the silence of the house hit him and he was snapped back into reality all at once.

Houses are typically silent, but his house had two kinds: Loud silence and total silence.

Total silence one only meant one thing.
His father was home.

Dally swallowed hard. He wasn’t a fearful person. Not really. But every time he realized his father was home, he felt like ice was melting in the pit of his stomach.

His father couldn’t really hurt him anymore. Hadn’t really tried in years and even if he did, Dally knew he’d be able to fight back. But his father said things and that was almost worse. Physical bruises healed so much more easily than the bruises left by his father’s words. What lasted even longer was the frustration and shame that his father could even bother him to begin with.

The living room, where he had come in, and the kitchen – visible from his place by the door – were empty. When his eyes flicked to the left, he saw the TV was on on mute. His eyes then went to the entrance to the hallway. The hall light was off, making the hall dark and look more like the entrance to hell than an innocuous hallway.

Dally listened, but he couldn’t hear the shower. He couldn’t hear anything.

And that was worse.

He could be anywhere. Doing anything.

And then Dally knew where he was and his anger came back.

He didn’t bother to be quiet. He let his boots fall heavily to the carpeted floor, muffled only barely because he was trying to make noise now. He turned down the hall, passing the empty and quiet bathroom, never reaching the opened door of the master bedroom at the end of the hall and instead turning to the left right after the bathroom to his own bedroom, the door ajar as well.

His father was standing by his desk, examining something. It wasn’t anything important and his things didn’t looked too rifled through, but Dally was still furious. His bedroom was all he had in this house and even then it wasn’t much. It was the smallest room in the house, barely big enough to hold his bed, his dresser, his nightstand, and his desk. There was an open window by the bed where he snuck in and out when his father was home, but he hadn’t known his father was home, had missed his car in the driveway. Still. The room was all he had and his father still felt the need to tarnish it.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?” Dally said loudly, enunciating each word.

His father turned to look at him calmly. He’d probably known his son was there the whole time and just hadn’t bothered to look up. He set down what Dally could now see was his mini rubix cube and turned to him slowly, his face calm, a relaxed smirk on his lips.

“This is my house,” his father replied. “I’m doing what I want.”

“I don’t give a fuck if this is your house,” Dally retorted instantly. “This is my room.”

“It’s your room because I say it’s your room,” his father said, his tone hardening slightly.

Dally had no reply to that. It was the truth, but it didn’t make him any less angry. And it was strange. It made him so angry he was calm, his brows hardly drawn together, his lips barely frowning. It was probably for this reason only he managed to calm his voice enough to say, “And you wonder why I ran away to New York, you wonder why I’m never here when you. You wonder why Ma died.”

This last sentence made his father’s face snap to his so fast he flinched involuntarily. His father had picked up something else, but he dropped it back onto the desk. It bounced to the floor as his father crossed the room. He was still taller than Dally, but not by much. Just enough he could intimidate
him and that was what he did now. For a good few minutes, Dally was certain his father was going to start hitting him.

But then he only smirked, walked by him and said, “No. I don’t wonder why she died. Children are stressful, Dallas.”

And he left the room.

The words left him rooted to the spot, made his face relaxed into one of shock. He tried to hide the expression before his father could see it, but he seemed to have lost control of his facial muscles and his father left the room, smirking more widely than he had when Dally first entered.

He knew what his father had said was untrue. He knew it with all his heart. His mother had died from stress, yes, but she’d always told him he was her pride and joy, her only reason for living. Why would she die if it had been him that caused her death if that was how she felt?

*Because she was lying to you, a hideous voice whispered. And your father is right. After all, she loved him first. She married him before she ever thought of having you.*

He wanted to argue with that, but, just as before, he couldn’t.

Without really thinking about it, he crossed the room to his bed and, climbing over it, went through the window and dropped into the backyard. He went to the nearest tree and hit it with the same hand he’d hit the telephone pole with. It hurt worse this time, reopening the wounds that had started to close, tearing at some of them, and creating new ones. He wanted to scream, but his father would hear him from here and he would *not* give him the satisfaction.

He started to run instead. He ran through his backyard and hopped the fence. He ran down the street through the vacant lot and into the woods. He ran until he couldn’t run anymore and that was when he fell to his knees and screamed until his voice was hoarse.

Chapter End Notes

> as always, i love ideas for the next chapters, so feel free to comment any you may have <3
Dally goes to visit Johnny again. Later at night.

It took Dally over thirty minutes to calm himself down, though he didn’t know that’s how long it took. He wasn’t paying attention to the time. Everything was swimming around him. He was still in the woods, now lying spread-eagle in a patch of leaves on the ground, staring up at the star-speckled sky, the moon just dark enough that he could see more stars than usual.

His throat was burned and raw from screaming. He’d screamed so long and loud that he was surprised no one called the cops to come see what was wrong. But either he was far enough into the woods that he sounded distant even to the nearby neighborhoods, or the nearby neighborhoods heard screams at night so often they didn’t think twice about it. He guessed the second one.

The stars twinkled far above him, the sky seeming to spin slightly as he was still somewhat dizzy from running and screaming through the woods. Vaguely, he wondered if that was how the legend of werewolves had been started: boys went screaming into the woods when things got too hard and maybe to the people nearby it sounded like howling and that was how the legend began.

That’s so stupid. It was. He agreed. He stopped thinking about it.

Slowly, Dally sat up, the world spinning faster as the blood rushed out of his head. Once the spinning had slowed some, he forced himself to his feet and staggered until he was leaning against a tree, it the only thing keeping him upright as he adjusted to the spinning once more.

As he stuffed his hands into his pockets and began to walk away from the patch of leaves to the trail he’d abandoned, he realized he didn’t know how long he’d been out here, but it had to have been quite a while. The sky had gone dark and the stars had come out. The sun had just been going down when he bolted out of his bedroom after what his father said. It had to have been hours.

The path was hard to find in the dark without a flashlight and for a good fifteen minutes, Dally wondered if he was going to have to wait and spend the night out here. The woods weren’t that large or dense, but in the dark with no light except that of the half-moon and stars, everything seemed vast. The only reason he ended up finding it was because he tripped over a branch and fell onto it. By some happy miracle, he chose the direction that went out of the woods the first time and found himself in the vacant lot within another ten minutes.

The streetlights illuminated the lot, the only shadows near the tree where the ripped out car seat and
the empty rusted oil drum filled with newspapers sat. Looking at them, Dally felt a pang in his chest as he saw Johnny in his memories, sitting there, building a fire and then warming his hands by it with a bruise on his face after a rough night with his family.

Would Johnny ever be able to do that again?

But he really didn’t need to ask that question because he already knew its answer: No. He wouldn’t. Not as long as he was paralyzed, trapped in his parents’ house, unable to walk. Again, Dally wondered how Johnny would survive that and, again, believed truly in his heart of hearts he wouldn’t.

Pulling his gaze away from the tree and all that lay beneath it, he walked through the lot and down the street. He passed his own house, seeing the living room light on. He could see his father through the window, sitting in front of the TV with a beer in his hand, but his father didn’t see him. He was crossing on the other side of the street. He flipped his old man the bird as he turned out of his neighborhood and headed towards town.

He wasn’t entirely sure where he was headed. He was just letting his feet take him where they wanted. He wasn’t sure what time it was, but it must’ve been late. Most things in town were closed, though there were still other greasers tromping in groups through the streets. Socs in their Mustangs and Cadillacs drove slowly through them too, looking for someone to jump if possible. Dally tensed himself for a fight every time one of them drove by, but to his surprise none of them stopped. Maybe it was because they recognized him and they knew that if they tried to jump Dallas Winston, it would be more trouble than it was worth.

A part of Dally wished they’d stop and try to hurt him. Then he’d have an excuse to fight, have a reason and a place to take out his anger at his father, at Johnny being hurt, at the world. But it never happened and he only clenched his hands into fists, his injured hand hurting, a few of the cuts reopening as he did so. He still hadn’t bandaged it. He wasn’t sure he was going to. And it wasn’t until he was standing in front of the hospital that he realized where he’d been going all along.

To see Johnny.

Visiting hours were over, but that didn’t mean anything to Dallas Winston. He snuck through the halls, skirting corners, hiding in the shadows and doing everything he could to prevent himself from being seen as he practically tiptoed through the halls to Johnny’s room in the ICU. He was still surprised there wasn’t staff around him twenty-four hours with how sick he was. Vaguely, he recognized that this was was just one of the very many ways he disagreed with how the world took care of his Johnnycake.

His Johnnycake.

He hated hospitals, had hated them since he was a child and had to see his mother in them every time his father or her illness hurt her too much, and he hated them just as much now. Johnny was here because he was all but dead. The only reason he was alive was because Dally had burned his arm halfway to hell to rescue him. He would do it again given the chance. Hell, given the chance, he would’ve traded places with Johnny in an instant. There was no one who deserved to be paralyzed, barely able to breathe, and barely alive than Johnny Cade.

Finally, he turned down the hallway Johnny’s room was on and after looking both ways several times for any wayward nurses or doctors, he slipped inside. There was a door, but it was left ajar and he felt it would draw too much attention to close it, so he left it open.

His gaze turned from the hallway to Johnny on the bed, the special bed for burn patients the doctor
had informed him when he’d asked, and as it had the first time he’d seen him, his heart dropped. Johnny looked so sick. He looked even smaller than he did normally, shirtless, the burns on his chest, arms, hands, shoulders, and neck visible. He was rolled on one side, propped there by a dozen pillows that had to have been placed there by nurses. It seemed to defeat the purpose of the burn bed, but Dally wasn’t going to move Johnny, not when he was sleeping so soundly, not when it took so much to get him there now when he was in so much pain all the time.

There was a tube of oxygen under Johnny’s nose, the main thing helping him to breathe. There were two bags of fluid hanging from the IV pole next to his bed. One was morphine, Dally knew, because of the small button resting close to one of Johnny’s hands for easy access if the pain became too much. The pure knowledge he needed that made Dally grimace and look away.

He moved around the bed so Johnny’s back was to him and all he could see was a wall of pillows. He listened to Johnny breathing slowly, in and out and closed his eyes. After the night before, it was the most beautiful sound in the world to him. The beeping machine was still there, recording his heart rate. The beeping seemed like it might be annoying to anyone else, but Dally preferred the beeping to the one unending note he’d heard the night before.

Dally stood there, for how long he did not know, his eyes closed, listening to Johnny breathe. It probably would’ve seemed weird, if not downright creepy, to anyone who came into the room. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his eyes closed, looming over Johnny. He probably looked anything other than friendly, but he didn’t care. No one was there. And if they were, he was staring to care less and less if people understood him.

When he finally opened his eyes again, an idea had come to him, one he was stunned he hadn’t thought of before. It sounded impossible, even in his mind, but he would do it. He had to. It was the only way either one of them would be able to survive.

“I’m gonna get a job, Johnny,” he whispered. Even in the silent ward, he didn’t want to run the risk of being heard. ‘I’m gonna get a job and buy us a house. Even-even if you don’t love me back, that’s okay. I wanna give you a home, someplace away from your folks. I don’t want you to be...condemned to that life. I ain’t gonna let it happen. I’m gonna save you. I promise.’”

He placed one hand on Johnny’s shoulder, a silent promise to keep his word.

*I’m going to save you. I promise.* And he meant it.

Then he turned and left.

Dally had said the words because he meant them, yes, but also because he was certain Johnny was asleep. There were parts of that sentence he didn’t want him to hear, but what he didn’t know was Johnny knew him. He knew the sound of his footsteps. He knew the sound of his breathing too. And the moment Dally entered his room, he woke up.

Johnny kept his eyes closed throughout Dally’s visit, but the moment he left he opened them and, for the first time since the church fire, he smiled, tears leaking out of his eyes. But they were tears of joy. Dally was going to save him. Dally liked him. Maybe even the same way he did.

But the best part wasn’t even any of that.

No.

The best part was he knew Dally meant it.
Johnny's visited by several people four days before his surgery.

Johnny was slowly getting used to waking up in a position different from the one he’d fallen asleep in. He still wasn’t sure why the nurses were moving him in his sleep, but he also still wasn’t complaining. Maybe they recognized how awkward it would be to do otherwise. Today he woke up on his stomach again and he wished more than anything they’d find an alternative. He hated having to stare at his reflection in the too-large mirror that rested under his bed for this purpose specifically.

It had been only two days since Dally had come to visit him, but he hadn’t come back. At least, as far as Johnny knew. Though he’d woken up that one time when Dally had come into his room, he knew he couldn’t truly be certain if he woke up every time Dally visited his hospital bedroom. He liked to think he would, but he didn’t know for sure.

Johnny closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the hospital around him. He could hear the beeping of the machine next to him. He could hear people walking up and down the halls. He could hear muffled voices. He could feel the pain from his burns just barely and he could feel the button to press for morphine right next to his hand just in case. He moved his hand ever so slightly to curl his burned fingers around the button.

The day before the doctor had told him that he was doing better. Or as much better as he could be. He still needed surgery on his back and he still needed skin grafts and he still needed oxygen to breathe with his damaged lungs, but he was doing better. It was only four days until his surgery and the doctor said if he continued to grow stronger the chances of him being able to have skin graft surgery sooner would increase. Then he could go home sooner too.

A part of him – a rather large part – wasn’t sure Dally had meant what he’d said even though he’d been so certain he had at the time, and he was afraid that once he was released from the hospital and able to go home, he would be going back to his parents, and he really wasn’t sure he’d survive that.

But he meant it, a cautiously optimistic voice inside him reminded him. You know he did.

And that was true. Johnny wasn’t sure how he knew Dally meant what he said, but he did. Maybe it was because he’d said it when Johnny was asleep and he didn’t think he was listening and Dallas Winston never said his feelings out loud to anyone if he thought they could hear him.
His eyes still closed, Johnny tried to imagine what life living with Dally might be like. It was a dream come true if not for the fact he didn’t know for sure if Dally felt the same way about him that he did. He’d said he cared about him and that it was okay if Johnny didn’t like him back when he’d come to visit, but having known Dally all his life, Johnny knew that could mean almost anything.

But even if they were just roommates, just friends, it would be a better life than Johnny had ever known. He wouldn’t have to worry about being woken up at night to be abused by his father or woken up early in the morning to the sound of his mother opening his door to yell at him. He would have enough food to eat for the first time in his life. He’d be able to stay in his own home without having to fear being abused or hurt for doing the wrong thing.

After an entire life of being abused, it sounded almost too good to be true.

A much more negative part of him wondered how they would support themselves, how they would ever have enough to eat with only one of them working, if Dally worked at all. For some reason, Johnny couldn’t picture him having a job. It was so out of character for him. And that was why he was worried about Dally’s resolve to have him move in with him. How could that even happen if Dally couldn’t find or keep a job? And even if he did, how were they ever going to afford a house? Houses were not cheap. There was a reason Darry and Soda had to work in the Curtis house. And that wasn’t even factoring in other bills and expenses that might come up.

The whole idea made Johnny’s head spin and he closed his eyes more tightly, willing it to stop.

It was then he heard footsteps and voices behind him. He opened his eyes, recognizing the voice of the nurse, but couldn’t quite make out what she was saying. Then another voice joined in and he recognized that one as well: Two-Bit. He still couldn’t hear what they were saying – they were just far enough away that their voices sounded like mumbles more than actual words – but a moment later he heard the footsteps again and Two-Bit entered his room.

“Hey, kid!” Two-Bit said, greeting him as he came into his line of vision in the mirror, his voice strangely upbeat. Johnny wondered if he really did still look so bad that everyone still felt the need to treat him differently. He realized as he thought that that only Dallas hadn’t done that.

Forcing a smile, Johnny said, “Hey Two-Bit. What’s goin’ on?”

Two-Bit shrugged, spinning the white plastic chair next to Johnny’s bed around to sit on it backwards, his arms resting on the back of the chair as he said, “Everyone else is at work or school, ’cept Pony, since he’s suspended like you till the hearing on Friday, but Darry’s makin’ him do the homework he missed while y’all were gone to Windrixville, so I decided to come here.”

Johnny gave a small smile, but this time he meant it. Everyone in the gang treated him like the little brother – or, as Pony put it, the pet – but Two-Bit, Steve, Dally, and Darry were all particularly protective of him in a way that Soda and Pony weren’t. It was for this reason that Johnny knew Two-Bit wasn’t just here because the other boys were busy, he was here because he knew that Johnny needed the company.

That was why Johnny smiled. He still wasn’t really used to people actually caring about him.

“How’s Pony doin’?” Johnny asked. His voice was still weak and hoarse. “And Dallas?”

“Pony’s okay,” Two-Bit replied. “He ain’t excited about the hearing, but I don’t imagine anyone is really. You won’t be there, but I think that’ll be okay. There ain’t no one who’s gonna take the Socs’ sides except the other Socs and that’s only cause they don’t wanna have to admit they started the whole thing that led to one of their own gettin’ killed anyway.”
Johnny flinched at the mention of Bob’s death. He still saw blood on his hands.

Two-Bit would never knowingly say something that would hurt Johnny. He was more scatterbrained than the rest of the greasers and he forgot what might upset him sometimes. Johnny didn’t hold it against him.

“What about Dallas?” Johnny said again.

“Dally?” Two-Bit said. “Well, shoot, he’s workin’ if you’ll believe it. He gotta job at the same garage Soda and Steve work at fixin’ cars. I dunno how he got the job. Maybe he asked Soda for a favor. But he got the job a couple days ago. He’s been spendin’ all day there. He works more than Soda does.”

Johnny didn’t have to pretend to be surprised because he was. So Dally had gotten a job. Right after he’d seen Johnny it sounded like. He had to bite his lip to keep himself from smiling. That was one less thing to worry about and a little bit more proof that when he was finally released from the hospital, he’d be going home with Dally. It still felt too good to be true, but somehow it was possible.

“I dunno why he’s workin’ so much,” Two-Bit was saying, not having noticed Johnny’s expression. “He ain’t ever had or wanted to have a job before.”

“Kinda like you, huh, Two-Bit?” Johnny said weakly with a half smile and a wince.

Two-Bit only grinned back. “I ain’t gonna work till I have to, kid, you know that.”

They smiled at each other for a moment in silence. Johnny felt glad to have Two-Bit and all of the rest of the gang. He really didn’t know what he’d do without them.

Two-Bit seemed to be thinking along the same lines because his smile faltered slightly and he said, “Hey, uh, y’know Johnnycake, we’re all real glad that you’re doin’ better. We were all real worried about you. Still are, to be honest, but...I dunno what we’d do without you, kid. The gang would fall apart if you weren’t around.”

Johnny remembered Ponyboy saying something similar when he had visited him the day after the fire in the church and, again, he realized he wasn’t used to people caring about him this much. He honestly didn’t think his parents would really care if he died and that hurt more than he wanted to admit, but the fact the gang cared almost made up for it.

But only almost. He’d meant what he’d said to Ponyboy. It wasn’t the same as having your own folks care about you. He wished it could be, but it wasn’t.

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, Two-Bit,” he said, his voice still weak. “Not if I can help it.”

And he meant it too. All his life he had been suicidal, but now, oddly, he wanted to live.

Two-Bit was opening his mouth to reply when, for the second time that day, Johnny heard voices in the hallway that he couldn’t understand but recognized. They were much angrier than Two-Bit’s had been and he frozen on his bed, wishing now more than ever he was on his back. He felt far too vulnerable on his stomach. The voices belonged to, again, the nurse...and his parents.

Two-Bit seemed to recognize who they were not long after he did and turned in his seat.

Johnny watched as he frowned and the voices got close enough that they could now hear what they were saying.
“I already told you, you can’t see him,” the nurse was saying. “He doesn’t want to see you.”

“He’s our son,” Johnny heard his father reply and he flinched. “We have a right to see him.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Johnny saw Two-Bit glare.

“That doesn’t matter,” the nurse said, her voice hard. “If he doesn’t want to see you, he doesn’t want to see you. He doesn’t need to be more —”

Her voice broke off and there was the sound of a scuffle. Johnny watched Two-Bit stand quickly, taking several steps towards the door, moving out of Johnny’s line of sight. He wished Dally were there or someone else that would be willing to hold his hand or put a hand on his back, just to tell him he was safe, that he was going to be okay.

Johnny could feel his heart pounding, could hear the beeping of the machine to his right accelerating to accommodate.

He heard Two-Bit shouting, but he couldn’t make out the words over the sound of other voices he didn’t recognize at all now shouting. He wasn’t sure what was happening, but a moment later Two-Bit silenced everyone by shouting, “Don’t let ‘em come in! The only reason they’d wanna be here is to upset him! They don’t love him! They ain’t ever loved him! The gang loves him more than y’all do!”

“How dare you —” Johnny heard his mother begin, but Two-But cut her off, his voice rising.

“How dare I? How dare you come here actin’ like you care about him when the reason he’s here is cause y’all don’t give a shit about him to begin with. He ain’t goin’ home with you. I ain’t lettin’ you beat him again. Not after this.”

Two-Bit’s words were shocking enough to silence everyone. Johnny could imagine the nurse was looking at him in shock, not having known there was a very good reason that Johnny didn’t want to his family. He could imagine the shock on his parents’ faces at the knowledge that everyone knew what they were, even though they denied it to everyone except himself.

Then the nurse broke the silence. “You need to leave. Now. And don’t come back.”

His parents exploded. His mother shouted about how Two-Bit’s words were lies while the scuffle resumed and Johnny figured his father must be trying to attack someone. The beeping went up again and he wondered if his parents realized they were their own worst enemies in this situation. A much larger part of him was glad for them doing this. Now they weren’t allowed back.

Eventually the scuffle stopped and Johnny heard the nurse say in a breathless voice, “Security, escort them out. And don’t let them back in.”

There were a few more angry words shouted, words that Johnny was thankful he couldn’t make out, and then they were gone, almost as though they’d never been there to begin with. The only memory of their visit was his pounding heart and the pain that told him he needed another shot of morphine. Two-Bit must’ve been able to tell because as he stepped away from the door, he went over to Johnny, saying, “They’re gone, Johnnycake. They ain’t comin’ back either.” Then he took the morphine button and pressed it. Johnny knew he could’ve reached it himself, but he knew Two-Bit was only trying to help him.

The morphine made him drowsy and he couldn’t keep his eyes open.

Two-Bit sat back down next to him, talking to him about Dally at his job, Ponyboy doing
homework, while he was suspended from school, and what they all were going to do now that it was almost summer. Johnny listened to Two-Bit, truly grateful for his company, until his words faded away and he fell asleep.

When Johnny opened his eyes again, he was alone and on his back, thankfully, once more.

“Oh, I hope I didn’t wake you.”

If he hadn’t still been so weak, he would’ve jumped. It turned out he wasn’t alone after all.

He turned to his left and saw a women there he didn’t recognize. She was nicely dressed, her hair done nicely as well. She wore makeup and had a designer bag that Johnny had seen in the windows of the nicer stores on the other side of town. He couldn’t see her shoes, but he was willing to bet if he could they’d be nice too. She reminded him of Cherry Valance, except twenty years older.

“What are you?” he asked in the same hoarse, weak voice.

The woman smiled warmly. “My name is Sarah Price. You saved my daughter, Lily, in that church. You saved her and her best friend, so...I wanted to come thank you, if that’s alright.”

For a moment, Johnny was stunned into silence.

Though he thought about the church fire almost every day, it seemed like a distant memory already, even though it hadn’t even been a week since it happened. He couldn’t remember the faces of the children he’d saved, only that he’d done it and nearly died doing it. But here, now, was this woman whose daughter he must have saved and she wanted to thank him for doing so.

Yet again, he was too used to people telling him to back off for being a greaser that being thanked by a woman who looked like a Soc felt surreal.

He nodded, unsure of how to respond and the woman smiled a little wider.

“You know, my daughter is my pride and joy,” she said, looking down at her hands. Johnny wondered if her nails were painted. She looked up again. “I was unable to have children for years. I got very sick and had many miscarriages and the doctors thought I would die if I kept trying. But then a miracle happened and I got pregnant and I kept the baby and had the baby and that baby was Lily. I don’t know what I would've done if I’d lost her after all that I went through to have her, so thank you. You saved my life as much as you saved hers.”

Again, Johnny was stunned into silence, unsure of what to say. He was silent for so long that it wasn’t until the woman had gotten up and was headed out the door that he finally found his voice again and said, “I couldn’t have lived with myself if I didn’t save her. I heard her...in the church. And...I had to run in and save her. I couldn’t’ve let her die. You...don’t have to thank me. It wasn’t a big deal.”

The woman turned to him again, one hand on the door jamb. Her nails were painted. She smiled at him and said, “I don’t know your name, but I don’t think you value yourself as much as you should. I don’t think you realize how important what you did is. And that’s okay because we all know, but I hope someday you’ll see it too.”

And then she left, leaving Johnny with a lot to think about.

Like the knowledge that the last thing she’d said was exactly right.

And he didn’t know at all what to do about it.
i realize that this actually took place right before winter/fall in canon, but bc it’s summer now and i wanna write a summer story, we’re changing the timeline. alsoalso i know the parents came to thank him before this, but THIS IS AN AU PLS BEAR WITH ME.
Dally Winston has a job now.

yes, i rly did just want an excuse to write the church fire from dally’s pov.

The church was completely engulfed in smoke if not actual flames by the time they returned. Staring at it, driving down the hill to where a small group of children was huddled with four adults, Dally was surprised they hadn’t seen the smoke earlier. Had they really been so wrapped up in their own conversations they didn’t notice the huge plumes of smoke coming from where they had been only thirty minutes earlier? And that was another thing: how had the fire started? Hadn’t they just barely left the church? There was no way they could’ve started it, was there?

The minute they stopped, Ponyboy jumped out of the back of the car and ran forwards a few feet to where the huddle of adults and elementary school children were. Johnny pulled himself up in his seat, using the windshield of the convertible, but didn’t follow him, while Dally pulled himself up the same way and said, his teeth gritted, gesturing at Ponyboy, “Get over here, man.”

From this distance, neither Johnny nor Dally could hear what the adults were saying. They could only watch as a woman came up to them, frantically gesturing at the burning church. A heavyset man next to her said something in reply, but the woman shook her head. Dally wasn’t sure what was going on until he heard it: a faint shrieking coming from the church.

Things went from 0 to 60 real fast after that.

Ponyboy ran for the church, not listening to Dally’s and the heavyset man’s calls of warning that he was going to hurt himself. For a moment, Johnny watched him go and then went after him. Dally tried grabbing his arm, tried to make him stay in the car because by golly he wasn’t going to let Johnnycake run into that burning building, but Johnny only ripped his arm from Dally’s grasp and went tearing after Ponyboy.

They disappeared around the side of the church and Dally could only watch, listening to the children’s shrieking, hearing the roar of the flames and knowing that Johnny was inside that church, that burning hell.

That thought alone was enough to get him out of his car and to follow them around the side of the church. He saw where they’d gone in, smoke pouring out of the opening, and he followed the sound of the children’s screaming to another boarded up window. The only indication the children were there were four white little fingers poking out between the boards.

Dally began to rip away the boards, the faces of four other children making themselves known
through the smoke and flames as he did so. He saw Johnny and Ponyboy through the smoke too and
gave a silent prayer to whoever was watching over them at the moment.

Johnny picked up the nearest kid and began handing him through the window to Dally, saying,
“Here, Dal, take this kid, take ‘em!” Dally did as Johnny asked, grabbing the kid under his arm pits
and setting him down on the wooden porch of the church next to him, while Johnny turned to
Ponyboy saying, “Ponyboy, take ‘em and give ‘em to Dally.”

As Ponyboy did exactly that, Dally pulling a few more boards from the window, Dally shouted, “Get
‘em and get out!” Hoping Johnny would hear him over the roar of the flames.

It took far less time than Dally had thought it would to get all five children through the window to
safety. What ended up taking more time, was convincing Johnny to leave the burning building once
the kids were safe.

“Johnny!” Ponyboy yelled from the safety of the window.

“Johnny, move!” Dally yelled as well.

But Johnny had his back to them, staring into the flames. Dally couldn’t figure out for the life of him
what it was he was doing, but he decided he could figure it out later and pulled Ponyboy through the
window as the roof gave a horrible creaking groan and several large flaming beams fell.

Ponyboy’s arm was on fire and Dally had to lay his body on it to put it out. “Stupid kid!” he
exclaimed, grabbing Pony by the lapels, ready to give him a piece of his mind, but Ponyboy had
passed out cold on the grass.

That mattered for about two seconds when Dally heard the hellish shrieking coming from behind
him. He turned slowly, ice forming in the pit of his stomach as he realized who was making that
awful sound.

Johnny. Johnny was still in the church. He’d left Johnny in there.

Dropping Ponyboy to the ground, he turned to the church, climbing through the window, saying,
“I’m coming, Johnny!” as another creaking groan came from above and the entire roof of the
church collapsed.

Later, Dally would never know how he walked into a burning church, the moment the roof was
collapsing, and didn’t end up pinned under something and badly burned, but somehow he didn’t. He
pressed himself up against one of the walls, watching the church cave inwards. He waited for the
groaning to stop before he began to search the flaming wreckage, searching for Johnny, praying he
would find him before he became an unrecognizable charred husk.

He pushed aside a large wall of wood and found Johnny, pinned to the ground by a large flaming
beam. There were parts of him that were on fire, Dally realized, and he rushed forwards, using all of
his strength to get the beam off of Johnny and pull him towards the small patch of sunlight he could
see through the smoke and flames.

The ruins of the church were as such that he had to pause several times to move them before pulling
Johnny further. He didn’t even know that the arm of his jacket was on fire until he finally got to clear
skies and no smoke and someone was rushing over to him with their own jacket, wrapping it around
his arm to put out the flames. But he hardly noticed that either.

It was hard to notice anything when he looked at Johnny.
He looked dead. His burned clothes had been put out, but beneath them were burned skin. Badly burned skin. And there was a lot of it that was badly burned.

Dally passed out then, falling into unconsciousness slowly as the ground rushing up to meet him, thinking the whole time that Johnny was dead, that he was too late, that there was no way someone could be burned that badly and survive. There just wasn’t any way.

Later there would be times he would wish that had been the case.

* * *

Dally started awake in bed, covered in a thin sheen of sweat, shaking badly and breathing hard. For a moment, he didn’t know where he was. All he could see was fire and Johnny, lying on the ground, looking very sick and very dead. He gasped for air, thinking he was back in the hospital for a moment, back before he knew Johnny was going to be okay – though, to be honest, he still didn’t know that for sure – and, for a moment, he forgot everything that had happened in the past few days. He could only feel fear for Johnny, for his safety. Then he registered the room around him as belonging to Buck Merril. He heard country music booming from downstairs, even at this early morning hour and he covered his face with his hands, his breath slowing down. The nightmares didn’t happen the same way every night, but it was rare he went more than one day without reliving the church fire again.

It had been three days since Dally’s secret visit to Johnny’s hospital bedroom. He’d had a job for all three days since. The minute he’d left Johnny’s hospital room, he’d gone to Steve’s house, not wanting to disturb the Curtis family, they’d been through enough in the last few days.

Steve had been home alone and awake. He got along with his father, but his father had the same job Dally’s did: he was a trucker and was gone for weeks at time. He brought home big paychecks, but Steve worked because he liked it and just in case. Dally had asked Steve if the garage was looking for people and he said yes. The next morning, he’d gone with Steve to work and had been hired on the spot, which had surprised him, but he’d soon found out why.

The garage was full of other hoods just like him.

Some of them were around his age like Steve and Sodapop and another boy called Dues, but there were several others that were much older. The oldest man, who was also the owner, was in his late fifties and they called him Digger. The others were Andy (in his mid-thirties), Robert (in his mid-fifties), Fix It or Fix (in his mid-twenties), and Bleach (also in his mid-twenties). Digger gave Dally a uniform, told him to change, and that was the start of his first day.

Dally soon learned that Andy was mostly known as Chatterbox because he wouldn’t shut up and said anything that came to his mind whether it was appropriate or not. Fix had gotten that nickname because he could fix any car, no matter the problem. He was also the guy someone went to if they were having a hard time either literally at work or figuratively in their personal life. Bleach had gotten his name because he bleached his hair instead of greasing it and no one understood why. They thought the bleach made him a little crazy, but Dally thought he seemed alright enough, especially when you considered they were all a little crazy, except Robert, who was the calmest person there.

Pushing back his blankets, Dally crossed the room to the dresser and pulled it open, grabbing his work clothes out of the top drawer along with a pair of socks. Work started early when you worked as much as he did, but that was necessary. He took as many hours and extra shifts as he could. He needed to if he wanted to be able to buy a house for Johnny by the time he was released from the hospital. As a result, he hadn’t seen Johnny since getting his job, but he had already asked for the day of his surgery off and, if he were honest, he felt that it was more important he get the money
Pulling on his clothes, Dally lit a cigarette from the pack on his nightstand and smoked it while he got ready. He was the only one of the gang who didn’t wear hair grease and didn’t do much with his appearance. The only thing he did to maintain his appearance was not eat. No one knew it. They didn’t pay attention enough to know it, but Dally skipped breakfast and dinner almost every day. He’d eat at work because people were watching, but he hated eating in front of people.

He hated eating period. He smoked cigarettes instead.

But he didn’t see any problem with it and never really had.

The garage was a little further from Buck Merril’s place than his father’s house because it was on the outskirts of town near the train yard. The garage was closer to town, but it was still close enough that Dally could walk. He slung a jacket over his arm in case it was a chilly morning and headed down the stairs to the bar and billiards area below.

Buck Merril’s place was always busy and always booming. It was never not quiet and that was part of why Dally liked it. The loud country music drowned out his thoughts, making it easier for him to sleep and forget about whatever was on his mind. He didn’t even have to drink that much.

He crossed the foyer to the front door. Buck, himself, pointed at Dally on the way out and laughed and Dally rolled his eyes good-naturedly. Buck – and everyone else too – thought it was funny that Dallas Winston had a job. A full time job. One that he had to get up early for. Maybe a few months ago, Dally might’ve agreed with them. But a lot had changed since then.

The morning wasn’t chilly enough Dally needed his jacket, but he didn’t want to go all the way back upstairs, so he just walked to work with it. The world was covered in a fine layer of dew and a low mist hung around the world where there were less cars and highways. It made Dally feel as though he’d stepped into one of Johnny’s fantasy novels. It took less than twenty minutes to get to work, but he was always the last one to get there because he lived the furthest away.

“Hey Dally!” he heard Soda call as he walked into the garage. Soda was grinning. He was always grinning. Dally had yet to figure out how he could be so happy all the time and wished he knew his secret. He bet life was a lot more fun for Sodapop Curtis than it was for most people.

“Hey Soda, what’s up, man?” Dally replied, taking the cigarette still dangling from his lips so he could talk. “Where’s Steve?”

Steve popped up from behind a car. “Right here,” he said.

“Damn, I really am always the last to arrive,” Dally replied, grinning.

Steve grinned back. “Hurry your ass up next time and maybe you won’t be.”

“Yeah,” Soda replied, glancing at Steve, “or move back into your old man’s house.”

“I ain’t doin’ neither of those things and you know it,” Dally replied, going to the row of lockers along one wall where workers put their things. He put his jacket inside his before realizing he’d forgotten to make a lunch for himself and vowing to eat dinner when he got home. If he felt like it.

“Oh, did Dallas finally get here?”

Dally turned around and saw Andy, now, grinning at him from one corner of the shop. He had his arms crossed over his chest and he was holding an oil-covered rag in one hand. He always did his
best to upset anyone that came into the shop and as such had started calling Dally by his full name, which he knew he hated and made Dally dislike any shift he shared with Andy. Which, sadly, happened to be most of them.

There was only one person Dally let call him by his full name and he was still in the hospital.

“Hey shitface,” Dally replied with a smirk, slamming his locker shut instead of decking Chatterbox in the face. “Who’s mother did you fuck last night?”

Andy’s grin didn’t falter even slightly. “Yours,” he replied.

Dally froze for a moment. He knew that there was no way Andy the Chatterbox could know his mother was long since dead, that she’d been killed by his father everywhere except on paper after being beaten and assaulted by him for the last fifteen years of her life, causing the autoimmune disease she’d had all her life to exacerbate and kill her. There was no way Andy could know any of that. But Dally still had to use every ounce of his strength not to beat Andy to pulp right there.

“My mother is off limits, man,” he said instead, but he wasn’t joking this time. His voice was dangerous and Andy must’ve been able to tell because he only leered. He didn’t say anything else, but Dally didn’t like that grin. It was the promise of more to come later. It reminded him of his father.

There wasn’t any time for Andy to make good on whatever threat his smile promised, however, because their first customer of the day drove up and work started.

Even though it had been three days since he’d started working there, he was still surprised by just how many people needed their car fixed daily in Tulsa. He’d always thought this was a small town, but the garage made it seem like the size of a city with the traffic it got. He wondered why Digger hadn’t hired more workers. Maybe no one else really wanted to work in a garage full of hoods except other hoods. Though, in this neighborhood, that was what everyone was.

The first half of the day sailed by so fast, Dally barely noticed he’d been working for six hours until Digger told him, “Winston, Chatterbox, Fix It, lunch.” They took lunch in three people shifts. Next would likely be Robert, Soda, and Steve.

Dally grabbed a pack of cigarettes, since he’d forgotten his lunch and sat on the back stoop, smoking one while Fix and Andy ate their lunches.

“Man, this shit is way better than what I had in jail,” Andy said.

Dally, who was in the act of lighting a second cigarette, had frozen. Every time someone even said the word, images of everything that had happened to him there flooded his mind. He wanted to look at Andy, wanted to see if he knew, if he could tell, but he didn’t dare. He didn’t want to see that leer again. It was then he also recognize this was what the original leer had meant, the warning of what was to come, and he wondered how on earth Andy knew about his experiences in jail?

He heard Fix saying something in return. It sounded like an agreement, but for some reason Dally couldn’t hear right. He could only hear what Andy was saying and nothing else, nothing else except the rush of blood in his ears.

“Oh yeah, jail is fuckin’ awesome,” he heard Andy saying. “You can get a lot of dick there.”

The words shocked Dally. Probably exactly as they were meant to, but it still surprised him that Andy would say something so brazen in this town. What if Fix decked him?

But Fix didn’t deck him. He only stared at him in shocked surprise.
Dally was still frozen halfway to lighting his cigarette, but it was Andy’s next words that broke the spell completely.

“Huh, Dallas?”

That was when he snapped. Forgetting all about his cigarette, Dally dropped his lighter and cig to the ground, rushing Andy, slamming him up against the side of the garage with his arm at his throat. Andy was grinning and it was only then Dally realized this was exactly what he’d wanted to happen. This was the reaction this fucking Chatterbox had been hoping for.

“I knew you were queer,” Andy hissed, only loud enough so Dally could hear him.

And Dally couldn’t even dispute the statement. He wasn’t queer. Not in the way that Andy was suggesting, but he was in love with Johnny and that was definitely considered queer. To everyone who wasn’t like him, they were one and the same thing.

“Dally, cool it, man,” he heard Fix saying to his right. He sounded so far away even though Dally knew he was right next to him.

“You don’t know nothin’ about me,” he hissed back at Andy before shoving him once more against the garage and then letting him go. He grabbed his cigarette and lighter off the ground and stalked back inside before Andy could say anything else.

The rest of the day went by slowly. Dally counted every minute until he could escape the garage, escape Andy, and be alone at the bottom of a bottle in his room at Buck’s.

Jail had been the worst thing that had ever happened to him. He was thirteen the first time he went and he found out very quickly what happened to cute little boys there.

And he never could quite forget it.

I’m queer, he thought to himself as he worked, I know I am. But not like that. I didn’t want that. I didn’t want it...right?

But what if you did? A nasty voice asked him. What if that’s exactly what you wanted? What if Andy is right? You are queer, after all. You said it yourself.

Dally wanted to scream, to run into the woods again and punch trees, but he couldn’t. He was at work. So he took a deep breath. He took several deep breaths. And promised himself a bottle of whiskey when he got back to Buck’s.

It was the best he could do.

Chapter End Notes

also i changed my mind and have one more chapter planned before his surgery, which means tbh i would like an idea for one more chapter after that as well. if u have any ideas without context of that chapter, pls lemme know!! if u need context, the next chapter will be up soon!!
The Truth Comes Out When You Least Expect It

Chapter Summary

A social worker comes to speak to Johnny about his parents.

Chapter Notes

it has been a hot fucking minute since i updated this, but i forced myself to bc otherwise i would get trapped in my one-shots forever (i have 4 more planned rip).

also, i meant to write and post this yesterday, but my old man was being a jerk (jerk here having the meaning of total piece of shit) and i had a breakdown, so this was kinda cathartic to write (my relationship with my parents is GREAT!!!! /sarcasm), but i didn’t have the energy until today.

anyway, i hope u enjoy!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Johnny was always grateful for the times he woke up on his back instead of his stomach, the times he didn’t have to spend the hours until he fell asleep again staring into that mirror. He’d seen all of the details of the scar on his face, the tube under his nose, and how red his skin was, like he’d gotten a bad sunburn rather than ran into a church on fire. He was tired of looking at himself and preferred to stare at the ceiling. His window was behind his headboard and, being unable to move very much, he couldn’t look out it. He couldn’t really hard out of it either. The nurses never left it open. He made a mental note to ask them later if they could.

He wasn’t awake for very long when he heard someone say next to him. “Johnny? Are you awake?” He turned and saw a woman he didn’t recognize sitting in the chair next to his bed. She had shoulder length blonde hair styled in a bob cut. She looked older, close to her 50s, maybe even 60s. She was wearing a woman’s suit colored a dark red and Johnny was sure if he could see her feet, she’d be wearing those small heels businesswomen usually wore. She had on bright red lipstick.

Turning to the woman, he blinked, wondering how many times this had happened in the last week: him waking up to find a stranger in his bedroom. It had to be at least the third time by now. A part of him wondered how she’d managed to get in here without the nurse stopping her, but another part of him had a feeling that he was going to find out here very soon.

“My name is Barbara Brown,” the woman said, holding out her hand. He didn’t lift his own to take hers. He couldn’t. The woman held her hand there awkwardly for a moment before lowering it back into her lap. He wasn’t sure she understood he couldn’t move and felt instantly guilty. He opened his mouth to explain, but she went on, quickly, “I work for the county with child protective services. The nurse here said your friend said something concerning about your parents when they were here last. That they beat you. I’d like to talk to you about that if that’s okay.”

For a moment, Johnny was frozen stiff on his hospital bed, all too aware of how exposed he was,
how little he was wearing. The only thing that was covering him was the white sheet that went up his torso and stopped just beneath the scars on his chest. He shook slightly, his eyes wide, his lips pressed into a thin line as he thought about what would happen if his parents found out he was talking to a social worker. That was one of their biggest rules. Tell no one. Tell anyone and it would be worse for him. Much, much worse. He’d found that out the hard way as a child.

What would they do to him if they found out there was one sitting in his hospital bedroom now because Two-Bit had let the truth slip? He vaguely remembered how angry they’d been at the time. They would come back. Probably when the nurse wasn’t around. When no one was around. And who would protect him then? He couldn’t even hardly move. How could he possibly defend himself?

*But you aren’t going back there,* a voice reminded him, one that was somehow much stronger than the voice of fear still whispering in the back of his mind. *You’re going to live with Dallas. He’s working right now because he wants to get you a house, so you never have to go back there.*

*And if you never have to go back there, you never have to worry about what they might do.*

He swallowed. The voice was right. He wasn’t going back to his parents’ house. He was going to live with Dally. And he was safe with Dally. He wouldn’t ever let anything happen to him. He would put extra locks on the doors if he had to. He knew Dallas. He knew him better than anyone. And there was only one person Dallas Winston wasn’t the tough hood around: it was Johnny.

He nodded to the woman and she smiled, saying, “Wonderful.”

She opened the clasp of her briefcase with a snap and pulled out a packet of papers. Johnny thought it was things he was going to have to fill out and he was opening his mouth to, again, tell her he couldn’t move when she said, “These are just questions I’m going to ask you. You can answer them or not answer them. There aren’t any wrong answers. Just please be honest.”

The questions were very similar, but Johnny answered all of them.

“Is your house safe?”

“Do your parents hurt you?”

“How do they hurt you?”

“Do they beat you?”

“Has anyone molested you?”

“When? How old?”

“Where? What time of day?”

“Did it happen more than once?”

“Do you remember how many times?”

“Where you raped?”

“When? How old?”

“Where? What time of day?”
“Did it happen more than once?”

“Do you remember how many times?”

“Did your parents ever let other people hurt you?”

“Who? Do you know their names?”

“How many times?”

“Did you try telling anyone before?”

“Who all knows about this?”

“Have they seen anything?”

“Can I talk to them too?”

It went on like this for longer than Johnny was paying attention. By the time the woman was flipping to the last page in the packet of papers, the nurse had already come by to give him his lunch. He felt embarrassed as he always did when this happened. He had to be spoon fed child-sized bites. His stomach had become strangely sensitive and he couldn’t move on his own. He felt like a broken bird whose carer’s knew he was never going to be anything other than that and he hated it because he knew deep down it was true.

Finally, the woman closed the packet, having asked him the last question (“Can I come back and talk to you again later?”). She put the papers back into her briefcase, saying, “Well, Johnny, I think you’re a very brave young man. This will be reviewed depending on the urgency the board thinks it has. However, I heard about...what happened a week ago with that boy that got killed.” Johnny flinched, closing his eyes briefly, but the woman didn’t seem to notice. “And I think that the knowledge of this will really help your case.”

She beamed at him then and stood to leave, clutching the handle of her briefcase with both hands in front of her. She was turning to leave when Johnny heard a commotion in the hall and his skin turned white as she sheets beneath him as he saw the faces of his parents in the doorway. The nurse was right behind them, shouting they couldn’t be there, but they looked murderous and Johnny wondered now how he thought the nurse or even the woman standing next to his bed with her briefcase could protect him either. They were violent people. They didn’t care who got hurt if they got between them and their prey.

“He’s our son!” his mother was shouting hysterically to the nurse. “We have a right to see and do to him whatever we want. It’s the law.”

His father was more frightening. He stood, silently, his arms crossed over his chest, frowning at Johnny from the doorway. Johnny felt himself shaking again. He’d seen that look on his father’s face many times before now. He knew exactly what it meant. It wasn’t a threat at all. It was a promise. A promise of the pain and hurt that was to come and he shuddered just thinking about it.

The social worker, Barbara, must have noticed something was wrong and stepped in between Johnny and his father, blocking his father’s gaze. Johnny felt himself shaking again. He’d seen that look on his father’s face many times before now. He knew exactly what it meant. It wasn’t a threat at all. It was a promise. A promise of the pain and hurt that was to come and he shuddered just thinking about it.

The social worker, Barbara, must have noticed something was wrong and stepped in between Johnny and his father, blocking his father’s gaze. Johnny closed his eyes briefly with relief, thankful for the first time since he’d woken up that she was there. After the conversation they’d just had about everything his parents had done to him, seeing them and especially seeing his father look at him like that, made everything feel that much worse.

“Excuse me,” the social worker said, her voice shockingly calm. “But who are these people?”
She was speaking to the nurse, but it was his mother that answered.

“We’re his parents,” she said, acid laced into every word. “We have a right to be here. Who are you? What gives you any right to be here more than us?”

Johnny couldn’t see Barbara’s face, but he pictured her brows coming together and a small frown marring her red lips as she said, “I’m a social worker. I was just speaking to your son about what his life is like at home. With you.”

She didn’t say anything else, but she didn’t need to. The silence that permeated the room after the statement was palpable. Johnny was certain if he were able to move and hold a pair of scissors, he could’ve reached out and cut the tension swirling through the air in half.

Then something snapped and his mother started trying to get around the social worker, saying, “How dare you! After all we’ve done for you! We’ve put a roof over your head, fed you, clothed you, given you money to buy lunch at school, and this is how you repay us.”

His father was glaring. He hardly moved his body, only his head, only enough to look around the social worker, who was still trying desperately to block him from their view, as he pointed at Johnny menacingly and said, “Just you wait till you come home, boy. You ain’t gonna know what hit you. You’ll learn not to say shit like that ever again.”

“Actually, he won’t be going home with you,” the social worker said. “He’ll be going someplace else. Once the county reads my report, odds are you two will be going to prison.”

His mother did something unexpected then. She laughed. She put her hands on her hips and laughed in the social worker’s face. “Then where will he go?” she asked. “Go to live in a foster home? As if that’ll be kinder than here. He’ll realize how good he had it and come running back. You mark my words. There ain’t nowhere he can go that’ll be better than –”

“I’m going to live with Dallas.”

The room went silent again and everyone turned to look at Johnny. He was lying as still as ever and his voice was so weak and hoarse he was surprised anyone had heard him at all. But they all turned to him when he spoke and he turned bright red, frowning with determination, clenching his hands into fists, despite the fact they were burned and that hurt a bit.

“What’s Dallas?” the social worker asked at the same time his mother laughed again and said, “The boy who left you for New York? You think he won’t do that again.”

Johnny clenched his hands more tightly. “He didn’t leave me,” he insisted, not sure if he believed that or if he were still trying to convince himself of that truth. “He left cause of other things and he ain’t gonna do it again. I know he ain’t. He hated it there. He wanted to come home.”

Not even two weeks ago, Johnny never could’ve pictured himself saying any of this to his parents and a part of him knew that the only reason he could now was because he knew he was never going back there. He was never going to have to worry about them beating him or molesting him or raping him or manipulating him or...what was that term the social worker had just used?...gaslighting him either. Somehow the knowledge of all of that gave him the strength to say what he’d wanted to say all along. And as he did, he realized he hated them. A part of him still loved them too and even felt guilty fr speaking to the social worker, but a larger part of him, the more dominant part now, hated them and for the first time in his life, he hoped they got put in prison.

His mother tried to say something else, but the social worker was smirking this time as she said, “I
think you need to leave now. You aren’t his mother. You never really were. A mother doesn’t treat their child the way you have.”

Johnny wanted to cry. Never had anyone said anything like that in his presence before. Never had anyone stood up for him before in such certain terms. Well, Dally had, but this was different. This was another adult. An adult who could actually do something about what was happening. And that was why it meant so much more. Because for the first time in his life, Johnny felt listened to.

His parents left not long after that, being escorted out by security yet again, kicking and screaming the entire way. The nurse stood in the entrance to his doorway with the social worker, watching them go. Once they were out of sight, the social worker said goodbye and left with the promise to return as soon as she was able. The nurse began to leave as well, but Johnny stopped her.

“Would-would it be okay to have my window open?” he asked, his voice soft, tentative. He didn’t look at the nurse as he spoke. “I just wanna be able to hear somethin’ and feel fresh air.”

The nurse smiled at him and said, “Of course.” She opened it as far as it would go and left.

Johnny fell asleep with a smile on his face to the sound of birds chirping outside his window.

Chapter End Notes

i have decided i’m gonna write my one-shots in between chapters, so that’s what’ll be next!! this is random, but i am also trying to get better at show don’t tell, so hopefully i accomplished that in this chapter!! comments and kudos keep me goin <3
The church was on fire again. Every night since it had originally happened, Dallas visited it in his dreams and tonight was no exception. However, every dream was slightly different from the last and this one was too. Tonight, it started with him trapped inside the church, searching for Johnny, calling out his name and only getting hellish screams as replies.

Every time he turned a corner, he seemed to be getting further and further away from Johnny’s screams, no matter how many times he turned towards them. The screams seemed to get more desperate the further he got from them. And yet somehow, he finally turned a corner and saw Johnnycake, lying sprawled on the ground, burned beyond recognition, clearly dead.

Dally fell to his knees in anguish, screaming as he did so, letting the fire consume him. If Johnny wasn’t alive, then he didn’t see any reason to go on living either.

* * *

Dallas sat bolt upright in bed, thrashing, gasping for air, his skin covered in a thin sheen of sweat. It took him a moment to realize he wasn’t in the burning church, but rather his bedroom at Buck Merril’s place – he’d chosen to sleep there instead of home because his father had come back from his last trip and Dally didn’t want to be around him. This only a distant realization, however. The memory of the church and the dream were still too fresh to truly go away with something as simple as waking up. He held his face in his hands, shaking, seeing Johnny’s blackened body in his mind’s eye.

He’s not like that, a voice tried to remind him. He’s never looked like that. He’s at the hospital. He’s safe. He’s doin’ better. Enough better that his surgery is tomorrow.

That calmed him, but only slightly. Johnny’s surgery was tomorrow. They were going to cut him open and fix his back and while for a healthy person, that procedure was only moderately dangerous, with how week Johnny was from being burned and being unable to breathe on his own, the doctors had warned them both repeated there was a chance the surgery would be ineffective or that Johnny would die on the table if his body were strained too much from the operation itself.

A very large part of Dally had wanted to call the whole thing off if there was even a slight chance...
that the surgery would kill Johnny, but the doctor, seeming to read his expression, had immediately
warned that not going through with the surgery would be worse and mean almost certain death for
Johnny. His body wouldn’t be able to get over the strain of a broken back, being burned almost all
over, and damaged lungs. One of them had to be fixed manually so the others had a chance to fix
themselves. And in this case, that meant putting Johnny through a risky surgery that might kill him
and might not even do what it was meant to at all.

Dallas checked the clock and lit a cigarette. He had enough time before he had to start getting ready
for work that he could smoke before he got dressed instead of while doing it.

It didn’t seem fair that Johnny was the one that always got hurt the worst. His parents beat and
assaulted him and said things to him that made even Dallas flinch. His arms and, Dally was willing to
bet, his entire body were covered in scars from all the times he’d hurt himself because what he’d
really wanted to do was die. And now he was lying in the hospital, barely able to move from drugs,
weakness, and pain, preparing to go through a surgery that could either save his life or kill him. And
even if it saved his life, odds were he’d be bound to a wheelchair forever.

Dally ashed his cigarette and ran a hand through his hair, looking out the window and the mist and
dew covered world that came with early morning outside. If only he’d run into the church a little
sooner...if only he’d stopped Johnny from going into the church at all...if only they’d come back ten
minutes later or ten minutes sooner...

No matter how he looked at it and no matter how many times Soda and Steve and everyone else told
him it wasn’t, he couldn’t help feeling like what had happened to Johnny was his fault. Every time
he remembered the church fire, he thought of something he should’ve done differently. He didn’t
blame Ponyboy. He was just a kid and had run into the church same as Johnny. In fact, Johnny had
pushed Ponyboy out as the church started to collapse. There was nothing he could’ve done.

But Dally had been outside the church up until he’d run in to grab Johnny. He’d heard the horrible
creaking groans that signaled the ceiling was going to cave in, but he hadn’t done anything about it.
He’d stupidly believed they wouldn’t be that unlucky and that all of them would get out in time.
After all, the kids they’d just saved had and there was no reason for him to believe otherwise.

And yet as he thought about it now, he couldn’t help thinking that that was naive and he should’ve
known better. He wasn’t stupid. So why had he behaved so stupidly he’d almost gotten his
Johnny cake killed? He grimaced at the thought and an old conversation swam up to the forefront of
his mind and he wondered if Darry had been right: maybe he was bad for Johnny.

But he pushed the thought out of his mind as quickly as it arose. Whether or not it was true was
irrelevant. He was doing his best to be good for Johnny now by going to work and saving up to buy
him a house, and had had to convince him that was what truly mattered.

Especially when he couldn’t change the past.

Throwing back the blankets, Dallas went to his closet and dug through it, looking for his work
uniform. When he found it, he pulled it on and then stepped into his shoes. There was a mirror
hanging from one of the closet doors and Dally checked his appearance in it, feeling he looked pretty
tuff, before he grabbed his bomber jacket and left, a brand new cigarette dangling from his lips.

Work went by fast, but that was because Dallas had other things on his mind.

Both Johnny’s surgery and the horse race he’d talked Buck into letting him ride in that night.

Buck hadn’t wanted him riding because he felt Dallas was too emotional, too tensed up, too worried
about Johnny, to be able to ride his horse safely or even well. But Dally had insisted.

“I gotta do this,” he’d said. “I’m doin’ this for Johnny. For luck. I want him to live.”

Buck hadn’t really understood that logic, but something about what he’d said had convinced him and Dally vowed to do his best in the race. But he fully intended to win. He always raced fair. It was the only thing he did fair. But he always won too. Maybe that was why he was honest about it. He didn’t have to cheat. He was just that good.

By the time Digger was telling him his shift was over, he’d already gone over the race in his mind ten different times. It was better than going over the surgery. The race he could really picture. The race he had some sort of control over. The surgery would be out of his hands and he could convince himself all he wanted that running a race the night before Johnny’s surgery was good luck, but the truth was luck was relative and nothing he could personally do would change anything.

“You okay, Dally?” Soda asked as they left the garage, the sun getting ready to start going down. Dallas noticed Steve turning his head to glance at him as well out of the corner of his eye when Soda spoke. Sometimes Dally wished Soda would mind his own business.

“I’m runnin’ a race tonight,” he said, not looking at them.

Neither of them said anything and Dally clenched his hands into fists.

Never before had anyone cared if he ran a race, but he could tell from the silence that Soda and Steve both thought it was a bad idea and Dally wasn’t stupid. He knew why. He thought he was so hard to read, but he’d gotten a job and hadn’t been talking about why. He was sure everyone had figured out the reason by now. After all, Johnny was still in the hospital. And if they’d figured out the reason, none of them were going to be happy about him putting himself in danger when Johnny was relying on him.

“Why?” Steve finally asked. “You don’t need the money.”

Dally shook his head. He hadn’t even thought of the reward money until just now. “I’m doin’ it for luck. For Johnny,” he replied, still not looking at Steve or Sodapop. “If I run a race before somethin’ important, even if I lose, it turns out okay.”

But he’d never lost, so he didn’t know that for sure. And he didn’t plan on finding out tonight.

There was another long silence. Then Soda asked, “Can we come? Can the gang come?”

Now Dally did turn to look at them. Kids their age weren’t typically allowed anywhere near the races. Dally was only allowed in the races themselves because he knew Buck personally. Odds were he’d be able to convince him to allow the gang to come cheer him on. He nodded to Soda and said, “Yeah. I’ll talk to Buck. I don’t see no reason he won’t let you in.”

They were silent again, but it was different this time and Dally realized they weren’t judging him for running another race, but eager to see him win. That made him feel a strange kind of anxiety he’d never before experienced before a race. They all saw this race as much of an omen of the outcome of Johnny’s surgery as he did and that made him feel more pressure than he’d ever felt before.

What if this was the first time he lost? What would that mean?

_You’re not going to lose_, he insisted, digging his nails into his palms. _You can’t. Johnny’s counting on you to win. For him._
The truth was, Johnny would probably never know he was going to be running a race, so he had no idea, but Dally still felt that way. If he lost, he would be letting the whole gang down.

He turned towards Buck Merril’s place and Soda and Steve headed for their neighborhood and they all waved goodbye to each other, promising to see each other later at the races. He wondered if Darry would even let Ponyboy go to a race on a school night. Somehow he had a feeling this was the one time an exception would be made.

The first thing he did after walking through the front door of Buck’s place was find Buck himself and talk to him about letting the gang watching him race that night.

“You told ‘em why you’re doin’ it, didn’t you,” Buck said, looking up at him from his place behind his desk in the small den tucked into one corner of the house. He was rarely there, but when he was, he was doing the books or something else equally important that kept the bar running.

Dallas didn’t reply, but he didn’t need to. Buck had gotten it in one.

Buck sighed. “Fine,” he said. “But only cause I know what this means to y’all. If I let minors into my races too often, I could be put out of a job.”

Dally wanted to make the smart remark of how he’d been running in the races for years and he was still a minor, but he didn’t want to push his luck. Instead, he gave a thin, tight lipped smile, thanked Buck and went upstairs to change into his riding clothes, which just consisted of a loose-fitting pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and his denim jacket. Then he headed over to the stables.

Even though he’d been riding races for quite some time, Dally had never bonded with a horse the way Sodapop had with Mickey Mouse. Dallas had never ridden Mickey Mouse, but he hadn’t wanted to either. That horse kicked anyone off him didn’t want riding him. So he’d had one jockey and therefore they’d had no leg to stand on when he got sold and Soda never got to see him again. Dally rode whatever horses needed a jockey, but sometimes people gave their jockeys a night off just to give their horse a chance to win. They knew if Dallas Winston rode their horse, they weren’t going to lose.

He swallowed hard, stepping into the stables, hearing the sound of horses around him.

He couldn’t stop worrying about losing. It had never mattered he not lose before. But now it did. That was why it worried him.

The stables were all but empty. A few other jockeys, wearing clothes that looked like they belonged on jockeys, were in the stables, but they didn’t notice or look at him when he came in and he walked up and down the aisles of horse stalls until he found one with no jockey name next to it. He opened the stall door and went inside, finding a beautiful black mare. The long hair around her hooves was white and she was massive. She had to be a Clydesdale.

As he picked up the brush in the bin in one corner of the stall to brush her, Dally found that strange. Clydesdale horses were not typically racehorses because they were big rather than fast. So why was she being entered into a race? She looked healthy and well taken care of, so it wasn’t a case of animal abuse – not that Buck would’ve stood for that anyway; he’d almost killed a guy who was mistreating his horses once.

Now Dally was certain he wanted to ride her.

If he could ride her and win? A horse that was most likely deemed unwinnable by the public at large...then he would know Johnny’s surgery was going to turn out okay.
He didn’t want to think about what the opposite happening might mean.

It was only ten minutes before the race when the owner of the horse finally found him.

“I was hoping you would find her,” he said, startling Dally who had still been brushing the horse. She was huge and probably didn’t this thorough of a brushing despite that, but brushing the horse gave him something else to think about. He turned at the sound of the man’s voice and said, “She yours?”

The man had nodded. “I was hoping you would ride her.”

“You know the odds of her winning are slim, right?” he asked, tossing the brush back into the bin in the corner. He dusted off his hands and put them on his hips. “She’s big. Not fast.”

The man nodded again and smirked. “That’s why I want you to ride her. You never cheat, but you always win. And...I think you will be surprised by how fast she is once the race begins. She’s big, yes, but she wouldn’t be here if she didn’t have a chance.”

That was true. Buck didn’t allow horses into his race that he thought had no chance at winning and Dally didn’t blame him. It just didn’t make sense to have horses that couldn’t win in a race. So why allow this Clydesdale to run. But he supposed it didn’t matter. And, as an announcement went through the stables, telling jockeys to line up with their horses at the starting gate, he realized he didn’t exactly have time to change his mind now either.

He mounted his horse along with all the other jockeys at the stating gate. Dallas was different than most riders, however.

The only way he knew how to ride a horse was bareback.

One of the jockeys next to him noticed and scoffed. Another a few horses down shouted, “You ain’t gonna win on that giant, Winston!”

He ignored them, staring instead through the slats of the starting gate to the track beyond.

He was going to win.

The bell rang, the gates opened, and, with only a gentle nudging from the jockeys, the horses ran out onto the track. There was a roar of the crowd as they saw their horses and began to cheer them on. Dally looked into the crowd only once to find the gang. They were sitting near the starting gates, holding bags of popcorn and Cokes, screaming like their lives depended on it. Dally smirked.

He was going to win.

Never in his life had Dallas been able to concentrate on anything for too long, but races were different. He immersed himself in them and forgot everything else around him and, as soon as he turned away from the gang, that was what happened.

The world disappeared and slowed down and he could see all the possibilities at once.

All the ways he could lose and all the ways he could win.

He knew immediately that the man who owned the horse had been right. This mare was much faster than she looked. She wasn’t at the front of the pack, but she was in the middle and the jockeys around him even seemed shocked she was keeping up that well. She didn’t even look tired either. This wasn’t a strain for her, but it would become one if she kept it up for too much longer.
And that was when Dally smirked

He knew exactly how to win.

He made the mare slow so they were almost at the back of the pack.

Around him he could hear people screaming. Distantly, he heard the announcer saying something about how his decision was going to get him to lose. The first loss anyone was ever going to see Dallas Winston have, but he was still smirking because they were all wrong.

As they were making the final turn, Dallas did what he’d been planing to do from the beginning.

He made the mare go back up to her original speed.

Except this time she’d been resting for most of the race and surged through the horses to the front. She crossed the finish line only seconds before the horse behind her and the crowd roared. He was sure most of them were indignant. There couldn’t have been many people who thought that the Clydesdale would win.

The world was spinning in circles as Dally jumped down off the horse, being mobbed by the other jockeys congratulating him as well as the owner and the people who had bet on his horse and just won a good amount of money.

And then the gang was pushing their way through the crowd and when they reached him they wrapped him in one big hug that involved all of them. When they pulled away, they all shouted excitedly at him. Soda jumped up and down from excitement with Ponyboy. Darry ruffled his hair, grinning. Steve and Two-Bit were drunk and singing “He’s a jolly good fellow” while swaying back and forth, arm-in-arm.

It was the first time they’d been collectively happy since the church fire.

And Dally truly hoped that the outcome of the race meant Johnny would be okay.

Without him, all of this would fall apart.

Chapter End Notes

u bet i’m gonna write the conversation he and darry had, just u want!! (it won't be in this fic tho; it'll be in abandonment issues).

also i only have one more idea after this which is the day of johnny’s surgery, so if any of y’all have any ideas either now or then, pls lemme know so this fic doesn’t just die.

kudos and comments keep me goin <3
All the Kings Horses and All the Kings Men Couldn’t Put Johnnycake Together Again

Chapter Summary

The day of Johnny's surgery and his hearing.

Chapter Notes

lol i’ve had this chapter name planned since i knew it was gonna happen.

also i knew this chapter was going to be long from the beginning, so yeah that’s why it took so long to post.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first time since he’d been admitted to the hospital, Johnny woke up with the sun. He hated more than ever the fact he couldn’t see the window, but was grateful at least that he’d woken up on his back. That is until he remembered what today was and his good mood and desire to see the sun rise vanished as quickly as it had come. It probably wouldn’t look golden like it had up in Windrixville anyway. But that wasn’t the point. The point was the date.

Today was Friday.

The date of surgery.

Today they were going to try to put him back together again. Today they were going to cut him open and fix his broken back. Lucky for him, it wasn’t shattered. Just broken. And if all went well, he would have the feeling back in the lower half of his body. Him relearning how to walk was still a long shot and the doctor had repeatedly warned him of that as the big day loomed nearer, but at least this way he would have a chance.

Either that or he would die.

There wasn’t really a between outcome and that was what made him feel so nervous.

Despite his numerous suicide attempts, only one of which had landed him in the hospital, and frequent talk of wanting to die, Johnny didn’t really want to die. He’d meant what he’d said to Ponyboy when he’d visited him, that sixteen years wasn’t long enough, that he wanted to see some good things too before he died, that he didn’t even want to die to begin with. And the only way to prevent that from happening was to get this surgery done.

That is if the surgery didn’t kill him first.

And that was a very real possibility.

The doctor had explained to him over and over again how weak he was. Being burned all over and
having a broken back did that to you. The physical strain of having surgery might be too much for him in the state he was in. However, if they didn’t perform this surgery, the strain of having a broken back and being burned all over would kill him anyway.

So they were taking the risk. And really it had been because Johnny agreed to it.

He swallowed hard, staring at the patterns in the ceiling in the darkened room, only illuminated by the first rays of early morning sunlight streaming through the windows behind him. He had gained some of his strength back. Enough that he could move his hands and arms and now he clenched his fingers into fists. He grit his teeth as well, trying to keep the tears that had inexplicably filled his eyes from falling. It took him a moment to realize why he was so upset.

It wasn’t fair. That was why. It wasn’t fair that he would die without the surgery and even with it still he might die and even if he survived, the odds of him ever being able to walk again were still very slim. He clenched his teeth so hard his jaw hurt and squeezed his eyes shut, tears falling from the corners of his eyes down the sides of his face, into his ears. It wasn’t fair. His life had just been a series of unfair things happening over and over again and he was so sick of it.

And that was when he remembered why he’d wanted to die to begin with. Because of things like this and he realized, vaguely, that if he died on the operating table it wouldn’t be so bad. At least then he wouldn’t be in pain anymore and everything would be over.

He thought of the letter he’d written Ponyboy, hidden in the inside of the copy of *Gone With The Wind* that Two-Bit had bought him in the hospital gift shop and wondered if he’d read it yet. He hoped he hadn’t. A part of him hoped that if he lived he never would. If he died, he hoped he saw it, just for the end. He wanted someone to take Dallas to see a sunrise or a sunset. He wanted someone to show Dallas the beauty in the world. Even if he survived his surgery, even if he went home with Dallas afterwards, he wouldn’t be able to do that. He couldn’t walk anymore. And who knew, even if he *could* somehow walk again, how long it would take him to relearn how to do.

The color of the light on his ceiling was pale blue and purple. He watched it turn to orange and pink as the sun rose into the sky and he thought about all of the things that could go wrong during surgery. He heard the beeping machine to his left speed up as he thought and he clenched his fists more tightly even though it hurt with the burns on his fingers and palms.

He stared at the clock, watching the second hand tick the hours by until it was ten in the morning and the fluorescent lights above him came on and the nurse came into his room to check his vitals like she did every morning. At first, it had been every two hours, but then it had become every five hours, which was much better. Then it became once in the morning, once at night, and once at lunch time. And that was even better. He was able to get a full night’s sleep again.

“You nervous about your surgery?” the nurse who took his blood pressure that morning asked. She was much younger than most of the nurses who worked there and spoke quietly. She didn’t look at Johnny when she spoke to him.

Johnny looked away, swallowing as he said, “Yes.”

“Don’t be.”

He turned back to her, his brows drawn together in confusion. The nurse was looking at him now and she smiled when he looked at her.

“You’re gonna be okay,” she said softly. “I know it.”
She didn’t say anything else and left rather quickly after that, but Johnny wondered who she was and if he’d ever see her again. He bet she was a Soc. She wore her hair the way Ponyboy’s friend, Cherry, did. And her hair was red like Cherry’s too. He probably wouldn’t see her again. At least, not outside of the hospital. Socs and greasers didn’t hang out together. Not even if they were friends. Darry and his Soc friend, Paul, were living proof of that.

At ten-thirty, the doctor came into his room. He thought it was time to head down to the operating room, since his operation was at noon, but the doctor only took his usual seat in the white plastic chair next to Johnny’s bed and said, “Are you sure you wanna do this?”

That wasn’t what Johnny was expecting to hear. Still, he swallowed hard and said, “I’m gonna die if you don’t do, right?”

The doctor nodded.

Johnny swallowed again. “Then yeah. I’m sure.”

He’d long ago decided he’d much rather die on the operating table than weeks later in pain from the burns and what had happened to his back. It would be quicker. There would be less suffering.

The doctor nodded again, saying, “Alright then.” He stood to go, but turned back at the entrance to Johnny’s room and said, “You’re a brave kid. Probably the bravest I’ve met and I’ve seen a lot of those in this job. Lots of kids gotta be brave. Though, not many of ‘em are here because of their bravery to begin with and don’t make hard choices once they’re here. They let their folks do it. But you don’t got your folks. You’re a strong kid.”

Johnny didn’t know what to say to any of that, but lucky he didn’t have to say anything because the doctor left shortly after that and Johnny continued watching the way the light made patterns on the ceiling as the second hand slowly ticked away the time left until his operation.

It was then another anxiety inducing thought occurred to him.

His hearing was today too.

He swallowed hard. Not for the first time since he’d been admitted into the hospital, Johnny wished he had a cigarette.

* * *

Dallas woke up much more slowly that morning and realized as he did that, even though he wasn’t going to work today, he’d woken up at the time he did when he did have work: just before dawn. He stared at his ceiling, looking at the way the lighting shining through his window made patterns on it and he realized that today was the day of Johnny’s surgery and that was why he didn’t have work. He’d asked for the day off.

Automatically, he reached for his pack of cigarettes on his nightstand at Buck Merril’s place. He’d officially moved out of his father’s house, taking everything that was important with him. Thankfully, Buck didn’t mind letting him stay temporarily in his guest room. He planned to stay there until he could buy a house. He knew that Johnny wouldn’t be sent home after this surgery. He still needed skin grafts. But this surgery brought him one step closer to that.

If Johnny survived the surgery, that is.

Dally had gone to the surgery after hours again after his race, wanting to see Johnny, but he’d run into the doctor instead. The doctor had threatened to call security with him there after visiting hours,
but he’d convinced the doctor to tell him if Johnny was going to be okay instead. Then he promised he would leave. The doctor obliged and told him that Johnny very well might die from this operation, but if he didn’t get the operation he would die anyway. If he survived, there was a chance, however slim, that he might be able to walk again if he regained enough feeling in his legs.

“He’ll be going home with you, won’t he?” the doctor asked and Dally nodded, wondering how the doctor had found that out to begin with when he hadn’t even told anyone yet. “Good. I heard what his parents are like. It would not be good for him to live in an environment like that. There’s a very good chance the strain of that would kill him too.”

Dallas had left after that, hating the doctor for preventing him from seeing Johnny, but being a man of his word, walked away anyway. He tried not to think of all the ways the surgery could go wrong. How Johnny could wake up in the middle of it if he weren’t given enough anesthesia, how he could die if he had something to eat or drink beforehand. And those were only the first two things that came to mind. There was also the fact his heart could give out because he was so weak from being burned all over and breaking his back to begin with. That was actually his biggest fear. He knew how weak Johnny was. He’d seen it for himself the few times he’d visited him. And he’d seen the look in the doctor’s eyes when he’d brought it up himself.

The doctor was just as worried about it happening as he was. And that made him worry more.

Even now as he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom at Buck’s, he felt that fear rise up in him again. He wished now that he’d snuck back into the hospital and gone to Johnny’s room via another route just so he could see how he was doing. Now he didn’t know and he didn’t have any idea if Johnny was going to survive his surgery or not.

There was only one way to remedy that.

He’d have to get there when the hospital opened.

He turned to the digital clock sitting on his nightstand. It wasn’t even six in the morning yet. He had quite a while to wait.

If he walked to the hospital, it would take him four hours. The hospital wasn’t exactly close. By the time he got there, it should be open.

He smoked another cigarette slowly, still staring at the ceiling, watching the sun come up by watching the light change on his ceiling. First, it was purple and pale blue. Then it changed to pink and orange and yellow. He wondered if Johnny were awake to see the sun. He wondered if he even could from his bedroom. Then he remembered Johnny only had one window in his room and it was on the wall his bed was up against.

Dally frowned, taking another drag on his cigarettes, trying to blow smoke rings at the ceiling. He wasn’t as good as it as Johnny was. His frown only deepened at the thought. Johnny had to be hating it there in the hospital. He had seemed miserable when he’d visited him with Ponyboy. Then again, Johnny had been dying at the time, so maybe that wasn’t a good example. Even so, he knew that Johnny hated being trapped in one place for too long. He was probably getting stir crazy by now.

He blew out the smoke again and put out his cigarette in the ashtray on his nightstand.

Poor Johnny.

If Dally had only gone in after him five minutes sooner, then he wouldn’t be worrying about his surgery and if he were going to survive it. He’d just have his hearing to worry about.
Dally swallowed hard at the thought. That was more anxiety inducing than the surgery if he were to be honest. He had been working all this time with the assumption than Johnny would be released to him when he got out of the hospital, but that was only if he were found not guilty. And while Dally and the rest of the greasers thought Johnny was innocent, they were probably the only ones. Cherry Valance was the only Soc who saw their side of the story. And then there was the fact no lawyer had talked to Ponyboy or Johnny. Someone had told him that the social worker talking to Johnny was enough, but that didn’t seem right to Dally. The social worker worked for the government, sure, but she wasn’t a lawyer. She couldn’t defend them in a court of law.

And what happened if Johnny were found guilty? He’d have to got to jail after this. Maybe prison. For who knew how long. And then what would happen to him? He wouldn’t be able to defend himself in jail like Dally had been able to. Not with being unable to walk or breathe on his own. He’d not just be defenseless, he’d be a target. Dally had thought that before, but the realization that today was the hearing brought all of the feelings and worries back.

He wouldn’t be able to protect Johnny if he were in jail.

His horse race victory wouldn’t matter if Johnny were just going to be thrown in jail.

Dallas grimaced. He didn’t want to think about it. He didn’t want to even admit it might be a possibility and instead of thinking about it more, he forced himself to sit up and went to the bathroom attached to the guestroom, shucking off his sweatpants and underwear as he went. He turned on the shower until is was almost scalding and then stepped under the spray, letting the burning water wash away all of his problems, even if only for a moment.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood under the spray, but by the time he got out it was six in the morning. He dressed quickly, pulling on his typical jeans and tshirt with leather jacket outfit that he wore when he wasn’t going to work. He realized vaguely only now just how rarely he was leaving Buck’s place to go to work. He wondered if this was how Sodapop and Darry felt. Probably not. The difference between him and them was he’d hardly hung out with the gang since he’d gotten his job.

He checked himself once in the mirror before he went down the stairs and out the door.

Even after he’d been getting up at this time for days, he still wasn’t used to how quiet the world was when almost no one else was awake. Even as he started down the street and headed towards the main road that led to the hospital, there were so few cars that he saw more animals than people. He watched several squirrels run across the road, saw enough rabbits that he was wondering if there were any foxes in the area, and heard so many birds chirping, he wondered if it were still the first of spring.

As he walked, it dawned on him slowly why Johnny, a boy who loved animals and was afraid of people, enjoyed going outside during the night and at this time of day. He promised himself to take Johnny out on morning walks once he brought him home. Even if he had to push him in his wheelchair. Something told him that Johnny would like that.

Turning a corner, he could see the horizon and the sun slowly coming up over, shooting pink, orange, yellow, and gold through the clouds and the sky. For a moment, he stopped walking and just stared, stunned by its beauty. The sun’s rays danced across everything, turning the dust motes in the air into golden sparkles and suddenly Dallas knew exactly what Johnny had meant when he’d told Ponyboy to stay gold. He wondered if they’d seen something like this together when they’d been up in Windrixville. He sure hoped so. Johnny deserved to have beautiful things in his life.

By the time Dallas arrived at the hospital, the magic of the early morning had long since worn off. It
was almost ten-thirty and when he walked into the hospital, he saw the rest of the gang, already sitting in a cluster of worn armchairs in a waiting room nearby. Darry was standing. Dally noticed he was dressed really nicely. Soda and Steve were passing a crossword back and forth, while sitting with their legs draped over the arms of their chairs, facing each other. Two-Bit had somehow snuck in a bottle of beer and was drinking it surreptitiously every time a nurse passed by.

“They told us we can’t go up to see him,” Darry said as soon as he noticed Dallas was there. “They said we ain’t gonna be able to see him until they bring him down into the pre-op area.”

Dally pressed his lips into a thin line. There were ways around that, but it seemed somehow unfair of him to go sneak upstairs to see Johnny while the rest of them were waiting patiently to see him already. He slumped into one of the chairs, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his bomber jacket, the back of which was badly burned, and stared at the clock.

“Where you been all week, Dally?” Steve asked, passing the crossword to Soda.

Dally forced his usual smirk. “You know where I been, man, at work.”

“Yeah, but what about when you’re not at work?” Steve replied. “You ain’t workin’ all the time.”

“I work a lot more than you do,” Dally shot back, but he was smiling.

Steve shrugged. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“We’re goin’ over to the courthouse for the hearing after this,” Soda said, writing in a word. He turned to look at Dally. “Wanna come?”

Dally wanted to say no. A part of him didn’t want to have to sit there and listen and say nothing, but another part of him, a much stronger part, didn’t want it to be someone else that was going to tell him the verdict. “Yeah,” he said. He didn’t have anything else better to do anyway.

It was then the doctor came down and said, startling everyone out of their thoughts, “He’s in the pre-op room now. If you want to see him.”

Everyone stood at once.

Dally wondered not for the first time how Johnny could think he wasn’t important.

* * *

The pre-op room Johnny was wheeled in his own bed down to since they couldn’t move him without running the risk of damaging his back even more, was very different from his hospital room. He was shielded from the rest of the world only by a thin paper curtain. The beeping machine was still to his right and he was still hooked up to IVs, but they’d changed the morphine to something else. They’d given him enough to last him until his surgery, but he felt nervous without the button close to his hand. He hadn’t felt the full force of his pain because of how many painkillers they had him on and that alone made him terrified of what it might feel like if they ever wore off.

He hadn’t been in the pre-op area for very long before the gang burst through the curtains, all talking at once and clamoring around him until a nurse loudly reminded them to use their inside voices and not to touch him if they could help it. That sobered everyone up quickly. It seemed to remind them all at once just how sick and hurt he was.

“How you been, Johnnycake?” Soda asked, smiling crookedly. He had his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans and he looked at Johnny shyly. He hadn’t come to see Johnny till now, but
Johnny didn’t hold it against him. He knew he had to work a lot. It was only then he scanned the group for Dallas and couldn’t stop the small gasp that escaped him when he’d found him.

Forcing himself back to the present moment, he said, “I’m okay, Soda.” His voice was still weak and hoarse. He wondered how long it would be till that went away. “You been workin’?”

“Yeah,” Soda replied. “Steve and I been workin’.”

Steve nodded at this and turned to Dally, slinging his arm over his shoulders as he said, “Even ol’ Dally been workin’. He got a job at the same garage as us. He went from not workin’ at all to workin’ more than me and Sodapop.”

“Must be savin’ up for somethin’ big,” Soda replied, looking at Dally.

Dally didn’t reply, but smiled and glanced at Johnny. Two-Bit glanced at Johnny too and Johnny realized only then that there were only three people in that room who knew why Dally was working so hard. It surprised Johnny also that Two-Bit was keeping his mouth shut. Usually, he was the one that told everyone’s secrets. However, he seemed to be able to keep one too when it was necessary. Like Johnny’s secret, the one that he hadn’t been born a boy. He’d kept that one.

No one knew Johnny’s other secret, that he liked boys. But the fact Two-Bit hadn’t said anything about him moving in with Dally was good enough reason for Johnny to believe that was the right move. He loved the gang. But he didn’t know if they would still love him if they found out that he didn’t like girls at all and never had. A part of him thought they wouldn’t care. They hadn’t cared when he’d told them he hadn’t been born a boy. In fact, they’d saved up for him to get top surgery while Dally had been in New York. It stood to reason that they wouldn’t care if they knew he liked boys. But the fear of not truly knowing was strong enough to keep him quiet.

“Where y’all goin’ after this?” Johnny asked, not really realizing that no one had said anything in the silence that had followed Soda’s teasing.

“The hearing,” Ponyboy replied, his voice nervous and quiet. He didn’t look at Johnny.

Johnny swallowed hard, hearing the beeping machine to his left speed up.

Darry turned to Ponyboy and frowned, saying, “Don’t work him up, Pony. He can’t take that in his current condition with his operation happenin’ soon.” Darry probably thought he was speaking quietly enough, but Johnny heard every word.

The silence after that was far more uncomfortable and no one seemed to know what to say. Johnny had a thousand things he wanted to say to all of them in case he didn’t make it, but none of them would want to hear it. None of them would want to believe there was a chance this was the last time he would see them, so he did something else instead, something he’d never done before.

“Hey y’all, before you leave...can I have a hug?”

They all looked at each other, surprised, but Johnny didn’t see that. He wasn’t looking at them. He was half afraid they were going to laugh at him and call him a sissy. They didn’t hug. Not often. Mostly they shook hands. Hugs were reserved for special occasions. He wasn’t sure this counted. Especially if not one of them wanted to believe he might die, but then he felt all of them touching his bare chest, wrapping their arms around him as best they could without moving him and Johnny felt a lump form in his throat and tears fill his eyes.

He didn’t want this to end. He didn’t want to die.
They didn’t pull away until the doctor came in and told them they had to leave because they were going to wheel him into the operating room now. As they pulled away, Johnny saw that more than one of their eyes were wet and realized they’d all been thinking the same thing: this could be the last time they were all together like this. They even waved to him as he was wheeled down the hall to the operating room. He raised his arm slightly off the bed and waved back.

He didn’t want this to end. He didn’t want to die. But he hoped that if he did, they’d be okay.

They’d, somehow, be safe.

* * *

The gang watched Johnny get wheeled down the hall and through the doors into the operating room in silence. None of them wanted to admit that there was a chance Johnny would die in there, but they were all thinking. Dally could tell. All of them had tears in their eyes. Even him.

When they’d all been hugging Johnny, he’d wanted to push them all away and just hold Johnny himself. Maybe kiss him too, tell him how much he loved him. He hadn’t. Only because he was afraid of how the gang would react, but he promised himself as the doors of the operating room swung shut behind the doctors that if Johnny was declared ‘not guilty’ at the hearing, he would tell him.

“We better head over to the courthouse,” Darry said quietly after a moment.

It was only then they all realized they were still standing in the hall, still staring at the doors of the operating room, praying softly to whoever was listening that Johnny would be okay.

They all turned away and left the hospital quickly. None of them spoke as they headed to the courthouse, each trapped inside their own mind, worrying about what they’d left or what they were walking towards. Neither had a good chance of coming out right and everyone couldn’t help thinking they didn’t have enough luck for both of them to come out alright let alone one.

The courthouse was already crowded when they got there to Dally’s surprise. He, Two-Bit, and Steve sat in a row in the back, while Darry and Soda sat closer to the front. Ponyboy sat at the table with lawyer. Two-Bit still had his paper bag full of beer and he passed it to Steve and Dally, each of them taking a healthy swig. They were as nervous as any of the Curtis’s. All of them knew Johnny wouldn’t survive jail.

Dally couldn’t understand why there were so many people there. All of the audience seats seemed to be filled except for their back corner, which was, thankfully, just the three of them. Some of them had to be reporters, he knew. They were probably hoping to be the first to write the outcome of the hearing, since the boys it was about had been in the paper. But not all of them could be reporters or family members or even Socs from the gang the Soc Johnny had killed had been a part of. It seemed like there were far too many people here for that.

Everyone stood when the judge arrived and the chaos that had been the courthouse only moments earlier died down almost instantly. Someone announced the judge, the judge announced the beginning of the hearing, and everyone sat.

Dally felt a chill run through him as he looked at the clock and realized it was exactly noon. The hearing for Johnny’s life had begun in two places at once.

* * *

The operating room was brightly lit and Johnny squinted as he entered it. The doctors who wheeled
him in grabbed the sheets of his bed and transferred him in one swift motion from his bed to the operating table. He felt himself shaking slightly, but he only swallowed and said nothing. Another doctor put a mask on his face and told him to breathe normally and within a few moments, the operating room melted away into darkness.

He was unaware of anything and yet he felt at the same time he was trapped in a cocoon at the center of the universe, watching himself in the operating room as if from far away and yet in perfect detail. He watched as the doctors filled him carefully over and put a sheet over him. They covered the skin of his back where it had been broken with an orange goo and then marked it with a permanent marker. Then they cut him open.

It was a big cut and it was deep and Johnny shuddered when he saw his own bones amidst the blood. It took him a moment to realize the bones he was seeing were his spine and he could also see where it had been broken as if snapped in half right in the small of his back.

There was a tray next to the operating table, full of metal rods and tiny screws and he knew that was how they were going to fix him. He winced just looking at it. Metal rods in his back would hurt. It would hurt to learn to walk again, if he were even able to. The break looked clean enough, but as much detail as he could see, he was too far away to see how badly his back had been broken.

In his cocoon in the universe, he pulled his legs to his chest and closed his eyes tight, still seeing the operating table despite this. Please let it work, he thought to himself. He didn’t have much hope that he would walk again. At least, not the way he’d ever walked before. But he wanted to live. More than anything he realized.

He wanted to live. He wanted that life with Dallas. Even if they were just friends.

He wanted to live.

That was when his heart began to speed up and one of the doctor’s shouted, “He’s going into cardiac arrest!” A moment later, the beeping machine stopped beeping and instead let out one long, unending note.

* * *

The courthouse seemed to have no air conditioning and sitting in there in the middle of summer with this many people was making Dally sweat like a sinner in church. He took off his bomber jacket, but that only helped at first and that was when he realized that he was also sweating from nerves. The judge seemed to be fair, letting both the plaintiff – Randy, the Soc – and the defendant – Ponyboy – have their say, which was more than could be said for most people in his position.

Right now Cherry was speaking as a witness for the defense. Dally couldn’t see Randy’s face, but he bet he looked murderous. Cherry was supposed to be one of their own. In their world, she was practically a traitor now. Dally knew Cherry didn’t like him, and for good reason, but he wondered if she would be in danger if Johnny and Ponyboy got off scott-free.

Cherry got up from the stand and the social worker took her place.

Dallas watched them question her, also watching the reactions of the jury as they did. One of the jury gasped as the social worker described what Johnny had told her in her interview with him. A part of Dally was sure this was breaking some sort of confidentiality code, but he found that in this instance he didn’t really care. If they could get Johnny off with a pity vote, that would be fine with him.

Once the social worker left the stand, the judge stood and said, “We will take a short recess, while
the jury decides the verdict.”

Dally felt his entire body tense up as the gavel hit the wood and everyone stood, filing out of the courthouse and onto the steps. Steve, Two-Bit, Dally, and the Curtis’s followed, all of them pulling out their respective packs of cigarettes and lighting up as they did so. None of them spoke. None of them really had anything to say. What was there to say? There was nothing they could do except what they’d already done to assure that Johnny wasn’t put in jail.

Soon enough the recess was over and everyone was filing back into the courthouse.

Dally realized he was shaking as he sat down. He didn’t know what he would do if Johnny was sentenced to any amount of time in jail. It would be the same as a death sentence.

* * *

Johnny watched as the doctors closed his skin back over the opening they’d made in his back before flipping him over again. One of them was holding a pair of paddles and Johnny knew from books he’d read that they would restart his heart.

He held his arms around his legs in his cocoon tightly as he watched them, his eyes still squeezed shut, even though he could see everything happening around him despite this.

His mind was a litany of the same word over and over and over again.

Please, please, please, please, please, please…

Then the beeping started up again.

“We have a pulse!” one of the doctors said.

His heart had restarted and he opened his eyes, letting out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding – or even could hold in this strange limbo-like reality. He realized vaguely that this was the second time his heart had stopped and the second time it had been restarted.

How many more times would he be that lucky?

The doctors flipped him back over and began to operate on his back once more.

* * *

Dally watched with a clenched jaw as the jury filed back into their seats. It wasn’t until everyone was seated that the judge returned. Everyone stood for him and sat with him and then the judge announced the continuation of the hearing and the room became immediately full of a silence thick with tension. Dally realized his hands were clenched into fists as well as one of the jury, the person on the end of the bottom row nearest the judge stood and cleared their throat.

The entire room waited for him to speak with baited breath.

“We find the defendant, Ponyboy Curtis, not guilty of the charge of assisted murder.” There was a pause, but no one said or did anything. There were no cheers. The juror turned back to the paper he was holding and continued. “And we find the defendant, John Cade, not guilty of manslaughter.”

That was when the room stopped holding its breath, when Steve and Two-Bit jumped up and cheered and Sodapop and Darry in the first row hugged each other enthusiastically. Ponyboy jumped up and went to them holding them as well and when he pulled back, Dallas saw that there were tears
in everyone’s eyes. None of them had really believed Johnny would get off.

As everyone in the courthouse stood, talking to one another, Dally pushed his way through the crowd and out the door. He ran down the courthouse steps, hardly noticing the grin on his face as he ran as fast as he could down the street in the direction of the hospital.

He had a promise to keep.

* * *

Once the doctors got the rods and screws in his back, holding the broken pieces in place, they stitched Johnny up. Johnny watched them do it from his cocoon. He no longer was afraid. For the first time in his life, he wasn’t afraid of what was going to happen. He knew, somehow, as he watched himself get stitched up and wheeled to the recovery room, that he was going to be alright.

Somehow, and later he would never really be sure how, his cocoon vanished and he fell back into his body. And then he was opening his eyes, blinking at the brightness of the recovery room. He still couldn’t move, the anesthesia was wearing off, but the doctor was next to him, looking optimistic and happy for the first time since Johnny had been admitted as he said, “You’re gonna be alright, son. The surgery went just fine. I dunno if you’ll walk again yet, but you’re gonna live.”

And Johnny wanted to cry at the news. He was going to live.

For the first time, he felt happy about that.

The doctor left and not long after that, Johnny heard a commotion near the entrance to the recovery room. He blinked blearily and turned his head, with difficulty in the direction of the disturbance. He saw Dally, standing yelling at a nurse. He couldn’t hear what he was saying, but he didn’t really need to hear it. Seeing Dally made him smile. He was going to be going home with him. Then anxiety settled over him as he remembered the hearing and he swallowed hard. At least, he hoped that was what was going to happen.

Eventually, the doctor came over and told the nurse to let him through. Dally said something that made the nurse gasp and purse her lips in a very offended sort of way as he practically ran down the length of the recovery room to where Johnny was. When he reached him, he pulled the paper curtain around them, dimming the brightness of the room somewhat. Johnny half expected a doctor to come over and open the curtain, telling them they couldn’t do that, but his shock no one did.

“Dallas,” he said his voice barely audible after having a tube down his throat during surgery. “What’re you doin’ here? What’s goin’ on? How’d the hearing go?”

Dally was quiet, breathing heavily where he’d pulled the curtain closed a moment before and, for a moment, Johnny was terrified the worst had happened, but then Dally stunned him again. He did something Johnny had never thought he would, not a million years, not in a million different scenarios, not in this life, not in any life.

He crossed the room in two strides, took Johnny’s face in his hands and kissed him.

For a moment, Johnny was frozen in place, unsure of what to do or even sure if this was real. Maybe he had died somehow and this was heaven. But then he decided that he didn’t care if it was real or not. The fact of the matter was it was happening. It was what he’d always wanted and he kissed Dallas back just as hard.

The world seemed to vanish from around him as he kissed Dally. He could almost pretend that he wasn’t in the hospital, that he wasn’t just on trial for murder, that everything was the way it used to
be except better because Dallas was kissing him. He was kissing him and that meant Johnny was right. Dally did like him the way Johnny did and that was more than he’d ever hoped for.

Dally finally pulled away when he couldn’t breathe anymore, pressing his forehead to Johnny’s as he did so and gasping out, “I love you, Johnnycake. You got off. You’re not guilty. You’re gonna be just fine. Everything’s gonna be fine because I’m gonna take you home with me, okay? I’m gonna get us a house and I’m gonna take you home with me.”

“Okay,” Johnny gasped out. He was smiling so widely he thought his face was going to split. The beeping machine had sped up again, but this time it was because he was happy. He was happy. For the first time in his life, he was truly happy.

He felt like there were a million different things he could say.

I thought you didn’t like boys.

I thought you didn’t like me.

What about Sylvia?

What about any of the other girls?

Is this real?

But in the end he decided that none of those questions really mattered. Dallas was here, holding him, telling him he loved him right now. And that was more than enough of an answer for anything he could say or ask, so he just kissed him again because he needed Dally to know, even if he didn’t say it with words that he knew the answers to the questions he was asking too.

Yes, I like boys, you idiot.

Yes, I love you.

I ain’t ever liked girls.

I ain’t ever had a crush except you.

This is real.

This is real.

This is real.

Chapter End Notes

yes the parallels between johnny’s pov and dally’s pov are done on purpose. same with references to things that you might not know about. that’s why i recommend everyone read the one-shots before this big fic cause i am gonna reference them.

also i rly have no idea what to after this, so pls pls PLS tell me if u have ideas cause this fic is far from over.

also i found out that i might be homeless soon because our landlord is kicking us out, so
my updates might be slow.

kudos and comments as always keep me going <3
The first thing Johnny became aware of when he woke up the morning after his surgery was how badly he wanted a cigarette. It was only now that he realized it was over a week since he’d last had one. His hands were starting to ache from it rather than the burns and no amount of morphine could stop that kind of ache. He bit his lip when he woke up and squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his hands into fists. The burns on them were healing. They didn’t look so red, the skin wasn’t peeling so bad anymore. But the burns on his torso, his legs, and his shoulders weren’t healing at all. That was why he was still shirtless and still on morphine. That and his back was now healing too. With metal rods in it. It wasn’t going to feel pleasant.

Not long after he woke up, a nurse brought him breakfast. He’d, of course, been getting food his entire stay there, but this was the first time he was really able to eat by himself, his hands had healed enough he was able to both hold his silverware on his own and have it not hurt. His hands were badly scarred and, along with all of the other burn scars scattered across his body, probably would remain that way the rest of his life.

The breakfast consisted of waffles with syrup and butter and a side of bacon and sunny-side-up eggs. Johnny’s stomach growled as he stared at the plate of warm food, steam still wafting off of it. People said a lot of bad things about hospital food, but this looked delicious. Maybe it was just because he was hungry. Maybe it was just because he was excited to be able to eat on his own again. Or maybe he was getting special treatment because he was a crippled kid in the hospital.

Whatever it was, he wasn’t complaining, and he dug into his food with the ravenous hunger he usually displayed when eating. He shoveled his food into his mouth and finished it in record time. His stomach hurt a little from eating so fast, but the food had tasted good and he found he didn’t even really care that his stomach hurt. It was worth it.

The nurse came back not long after to retrieve his plates and, not for the first time, Johnny found he was really bored. There wasn’t anything on the walls except cabinets and things set into the wall that worked the mechanics of his bed and the machines on either side of him. He was still connected to several IVs, oxygen, and that beating machine that recorded his heart rate. The only thing he had for entertainment was Gone With the Wind, still on the table to his left.

He bit his lip. He was propped up when he was eating, but as soon as he was done, he was laid back
down. It had something to do with how the burns on his back were healing or needed to be aired out or something. He wasn’t sure which it was. Either way, he also wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to hold the book up in front of his eyes before his arms started getting tired.

Still. It was better to do that off and on than to stare at the ceiling bored like he had been doing.

He picked up the book, heavier than it looked because of how thick it was. He flipped through the pages, trying to figure out where he and Ponyboy had left off before he decided to just start the whole thing over. He liked thick books and he liked reading. He was the only one that Ponyboy could get to go to the library with him because he enjoyed it just as much. He didn’t mind starting over.

However, he didn’t get very far before there was a knock at his door and he lowered the book.

The doctor was standing in his doorway and Johnny swallowed hard automatically. The doctor had only been to visit him once with good news and that was directly after his surgery. Visiting him again so soon couldn’t mean anything positive.

“How’re you today, Johnny?” the doctor asked. He sounded optimistic, but the smile on his face looked forced and didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Johnny didn’t reply. He only swallowed hard, lowering the book slowly to his side, holding it tightly between his fingers as he looked up at the doctor, more fearfully than he meant to.

The doctor must’ve noticed because his false smile faltered and he said, “I’m here to discuss your skin graft surgeries.”

Johnny’s grip on the book at his side loosened slightly. He swallowed hard, still staying silent, still staring at the doctor. He didn’t want to have to go through surgery again. Especially not multiple surgeries, but even he had noticed how the burns weren’t healing. He saw the looks on the nurses faces when they changed his bandages and knew distantly what that meant, but it wasn’t until he heard the doctor say it out loud that it clicked in his own mind.

“There are two ways we can do this,” the doctor went on. “We can do it as one surgery, depending on how well you’re doing and how large the grafting areas are going to need to be. Or, if the areas are too large and you’re not strong enough, we can do it as three or four surgeries. At the moment, we’re looking at the first option, though we don’t know how you will react, so we’re going to wait a week. By then if we don’t see significant progress and improvement, we will discuss the second option and what your options will be in terms of how much longer you’ll have to be hospitalized and such. With the first option, you will most likely only have to be hospitalized at most for three more days before release. With the second option, we’ll need to keep you in the hospital until all of the surgeries are complete.”

Of course, Johnny hoped the first option would be what would happen, but he wasn’t the doctor and he didn’t know how to measure his own health the way the doctors did. He swallowed hard, trying to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind. He only gave the doctor a weak, tight-lipped smile, the same sort of false smile the doctor had given him when he’d first come in. He was certain the smile didn’t reach his eyes either.

The doctor clearly didn’t know what to say and got up and left. Johnny closed his eyes briefly and let out a sigh of relief once he was gone. He didn’t like talking to strangers. Especially ones that were adults. Even if he’d known that stranger for almost two weeks now. He waited until he heard the doctor’s footsteps disappear down the hall before he lifted the book again and continued trying to read.
The gang thought he didn’t enjoy reading. They all thought it was just Ponyboy, but that was mostly because Johnny went to the library by himself. And the books he did own he kept stored in an abandoned treehouse, hidden in the woods that bordered the vacant lot. He wondered vaguely now if he would ever get those books back. The only other person who knew about the treehouse was Dallas. He supposed he could ask him.

He finished the first chapter of *Gone With the Wind* just in time for the same nurse who’d brought him his breakfast to bring him his lunch. This time it was a club sandwich with a pickle, a small bowl of fruit, and a side of salad. Johnny’s stomach rumbled again. It was only now he realized how little he’d been eating, how much the fear of death and his surgery had been effecting him. He dug into his food with the same ravenous hunger he’d displayed at breakfast.

“Whoa, slow down, Johnnycake! Ain’t nobody gonna take it from ya!”

Johnny jumped at the voice, spilling the water he’d been drinking all down his front. When he finished choking, he looked up again and saw Two-Bit and Ponyboy standing in the doorway. They were both smiling at him and there was something in their smiles that made him look away, feeling embarrassed. It wasn’t their fault. He just wasn’t used to people caring about him so much they were happy to see him healthier than he’d been.

He cleared his throat and blinked away the tears that had formed in his eyes when he’d been coughing so hard and said, his voice still frustratingly hoarse and weak, “Hey y’all.”

It didn’t escape his notice that they’d been the first two to visit him when he’d been admitted into the hospital as well. That was because neither of them worked. Everyone else did. It hit him then that the three of them in that room were the only ones in the gang without jobs. Even Dallas had a job now. Something none of them had seen coming.

*He’s doing it for you,* a voice in his mind reminded him and he smiled to himself.

The voice was right and, for once, he knew it too.

“You look a lot better, Johnny,” Two-Bit said, his voice a little more serious than normal as he stepped forwards and, taking the plastic white chair by his bed, spun it around and sat on it backwards, his arms folded across the top of the chair’s back.

Johnny felt himself turn a deeper red. “It ain’t nothin’ special,” he said automatically.

But Two-Bit was already shaking his head. “It is special,” he said. “You weren’t able to do this a week ago. A week ago we all thought you were gonna die, Johnnycake.”

For the first time, Johnny heard the fear in Two-Bit’s voice and it made him look up at him. Two-Bit was the one turned away now, his eyes blinking rapidly. Was he...trying not to cry? Johnny’s eyes flicked to Ponyboy and he looked emotional too. He also wasn’t looking at him.

“I’m okay now,” he said weakly.

They both looked up at that and Two-Bit nodded almost to himself as he said, “Yeah. You’re okay now, Johnnycake. You better stay that way, got it?”

A part of Johnny couldn’t help being slightly stunned. Two-Bit never cried.

Well, none of the gang really cried, but Two-Bit in particular. He and Sodapop were both so happy all the time, it was hard to picture either one of them being sad if you’d never seen it before. And Johnny had never seen Two-Bit or Sodapop cry. He’d never even seen them look sad.
Johnny forced a smile, trying to cheer Two-Bit up, even a little bit, and said, “I ain’t goin’ nowhere. Not if I can help it.” And he meant that. For the first time in his life, he didn’t want to die. He was going to be living with Dallas soon. Really soon. Soon enough that Dallas was saving up for it. It was actually happening. And he didn’t want to die before that.

Ponyboy started talking then about he had to go to summer school for all of the things he missed while they were in Windrixville during the last week of school.

“I don’t think you’ll haveta do anythin’ though,” he went on, turning to Johnny. “You bein’ in the hospital and all. They ain’t gonna make a crippled kid do schoolwork he missed savin’ kids from a burnin’ buildin’. ‘Specially now that you got off on the hearing.”

Johnny flinched as Ponyboy called him crippled. It was the truth, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. He had feeling in his legs back, sure, but that didn’t mean he could use them. The doctor had told him he would need quite a lot of physical therapy to get to the point where he would even be able to stand on his own. And none of that would even be able to get started working on until his skin graft surgeries were over and done with, he’d been released from the hospital, and he’d healed from them.

However, Ponyboy must’ve noticed because he winced even before Two-Bit turned to give him a look and said, “Sorry, Johnnycake. I shouldn’t’ve said that.”

Johnny shook his head. He tried to smile, but he couldn’t and he couldn’t stop himself from sounding miserable either as he said, “Don’t be. It’s the truth. I am a cripple.”

There was a short silence, but then Two-Bit said, “Who cares if you are? We still love ya just the same, Johnnycake. You know that.”

It didn’t escape Johnny’s notice they were using his nickname a lot, but he also knew that happened a lot whenever he was sick or got hurt. The gang really did treat him like the pet. Ponyboy hadn’t been wrong when he’d said that and he still wasn’t sure how he really felt about that. Sometimes it felt like their care was more pity.

However, he didn’t say that. He only smiled at them and gave a small mumbled, “Thanks.”

Two-Bit and Ponyboy stayed for quite some time. They stayed until the nurse found them when she was coming in to make him lie back down again an hour later. Johnny was smiling when they left, all of them waving to one another as Two-Bit and Ponyboy left the hospital room hesitantly, still laughing over something Two-Bit had said a minute ago. It still felt strange to feel his face twist that way after so long of doing the opposite.

He went back to reading Gone With the Wind, finishing several more chapters before the nurse came back to give him his dinner. This time it was meatloaf with mashed potatoes and gravy, corn, and a glass of orange juice. He had just barely finished his dinner, the nurse just having left after coming to take it away and lowering him back down onto the bed, when there was another knock at his door.

When he lowered his book this time, he saw Sodapop and Steve and he smiled again.

“Hey y’all,” he said for the second time that day the two boys immediately rushed into the room, giving him bear hugs and ruffling his hair. They were so close he could smell their cigarette smoke, still lingering on their clothes, and again wished for a cigarette himself.

“You can’t be here,” the nurse said from the doorway, startling all of them. Her lips were pursed and she seemed to be holding herself more straight, trying to exude some authority over them all.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Steve said, waving the nurse away and rolling his eyes. “We’ll be gone
in an hour anyway. Ain’t that when y’all stop visiting hours?”

To Johnny’s surprise, the nurse only sniffed and walked away, her nose in the air.

“We just came from work,” Steve said once the nurse was gone, taking the chair Two-Bit had vacated when he’d left. “Dally wanted to come along too, but he was workin’ later than we were.”

“I thought the garage closes at six?” Johnny asked, his eyes flicking to the clock on the wall near the door. It was five now.

“It does,” Steve replied. “But Digger, our boss, has other things he’s gotta do like go through the books and make sure everythin’ is in place and lockin’ up and stuff. We take turns stayin’ back with him, but Dally has been volunteering most often cause he gets paid extra for the hours he stays.”

“I still don’t get it,” Sodapop replied, crossing his arms over his chest. He was leaning up against the wall next to Johnny’s bed on the left, behind Steve in the chair. “Dally ain’t ever had a job before. He ain’t ever wanted to neither. What changed?”

“Beats me,” Steve replied. He pulled an apple out of his pocket and bit into it.

Soda shrugged and shook his head again, while Steve started telling Johnny about their upcoming double date with Evie and Sandy, their girlfriends. Johnny only turned red as he listened. He’d never told anyone and no one had ever really asked, but Johnny wasn’t even interested in girls. Sylvia, Dally’s old girlfriend, had tried coming onto him once while Dallas was in jail. Steve had scared her off and then told him not to trust her or any of the girls they hung around, but he really hadn’t needed to. Johnny wasn’t even interested in girls.

“You and Dallas need to get yourself girlfriends,” Steve cut in. “Then y’all could come with.”

Johnny almost choked as he tried not to laugh. He forgot that no one else knew Dallas had run to the hospital and kissed him the minute he woke up from his back surgery. The idea, now, that he and Dallas might have girlfriends someday seemed funny.

But he didn’t say anything. People weren’t too kind towards queers in Tulsa. And even though Sodapop and Steve were his best friends, he didn’t know how they’d react to that sort of news. He’d heard horror stories of boys like him in other counties getting strung up or beaten to death for being caught kissing another boy.

“D’you know if Dallas is coming over later?” Johnny asked, his voice soft.

Soda shrugged and shook his head again, while Steve said, “He didn’t say, but probably.”

“Visiting hours are only until six –” Johnny began, but Soda and Steve were already shaking their heads and smirking.

“When has that ever mattered?” Steve replied, grinning.

They didn’t stay much longer after that. The nurse came in fifteen minutes before visiting hours were over and kicked them out even though they all protested. And within another fifteen minutes, Johnny was back to reading Gone With the Wind. It wasn’t that the book wasn’t good or he didn’t enjoy reading it. It was that he wanted something else to do besides read.

Still. He read until it was lights out and he put his book back on his nightstand and stared at the clock in the darkness, wondering if Dallas would come long after he’d fallen asleep again and then just stand there and watch him. Not that Johnny really minded, but he wanted to see him. He hadn’t been
able to talk to him about the kiss yesterday, even if he had felt they’d said everything they needed to say at the time, he realized now there were more things he needed to ask before he’d be satisfied.

Almost as if he could sense his thoughts, that was when Johnny heard soft footsteps running down the hall. He tensed in his bed, ready for a threat, but when Dally’s silhouette appeared in the door frame, he relaxed and felt himself smile. Dallas stood there, staring at him only for a moment before he stepped into the room and crossed it in only a few strides. He was standing next to Johnny then and Johnny opened his mouth to speak, to say hello, but Dallas silenced him instantly with a kiss.

When he pulled away, Dallas pressed his forehead to Johnny’s again and said, his voice soft, “ Been wantin’ to do that all day.”

Johnny smiled, but his smile faltered almost instantly as the questions he had rose up in him again and he said softly, “ Dal?”

“Hmm?” Dallas hummed softly, not pulling away.

“ Is- is this for real?” he asked, his voice soft, barely more than a whisper.

Dallas pulled away then to look at him and Johnny swallowed afraid of his answer.

“Of course, this is real,” he replied, his voice still quiet. “ I ain’t kissin’ you just for fun.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said, looking away, “ I know, but…you ain’t gonna get bored of me or nothin’?”

Then Dallas took his chin between his fingers, turning his face and forcing him to look at him. Johnny tensed at first, expecting to see hate in Dally’s eyes like he did with his parents. But Dallas only looked stern, not scary, not even angry and his voice was still soft if firm when he said, “ I ain’t ever gonna get bored of you, Johnnycake. If you think you’re gonna be like Sylvia or any of those other girls I dated, stop thinkin’ that right now. Besides, they only were boring cause they cheated on me all the time and… I don’t think you’re gonna do that.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Johnny said softly though Dallas hadn’t said it as a question

“Good,” Dally replied, smiling again, going to stroke Johnny’s arm with the tips of his fingers. “ Then there ain’t gonna be a problem.”

“Steve and Soda still don’t know why you got a job,” he told Dallas softly, smiling as he said it.

Dallas grinned right back. “ Ain’t nobody knows,” he said. “ Not except you.”

“And Two-Bit,” Johnny replied.

Dallas drew his brows together. “ What?”

“He found out when the social worker came to talk to me about my folks,” Johnny said. “ My folks showed up and I told them I was gonna be livin’ with you.”

“How did you know then?” Dally shot back. He wasn’t mad, just confused.

“I was awake that night you came in,” Johnny said with a shrug.

Dallas nodded in understanding and leaned forwards to kiss him on the forehead. “ Well, I meant what I said, Johnnycake,” he replied. “ That’s why I been workin’ so much. I’m gonna get you a house. And we’re gonna live there together and we’re gonna finally be happy, I promise.”
Johnny smiled, catching Dally’s hand in his own and lacing their fingers together.

Dallas never broke his promises. And Johnny never stopped believing in him.

He kissed Dally’s knuckles his eyes closed, and, when he finished, he only beamed up at Dallas and said, “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

sorry this took so long rip. i’ve not been having a good go of it lately, so it’s been harder to write. also i have the rest of this part of the fic planned, but i am always open to suggestions, so if any of y’all have any feel free to comment them below!!
A House Isn't Always A Home

Chapter Summary

Dallas goes house shopping.

Chapter Notes

this isn't very long, but we needed something between this chapter and the next so yes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Never before in his life had Dallas felt this happy for this long. It had been two days since Johnny’s surgery and it was like ever since he’d run out of the courtroom to the hospital and kissed Johnny his life had been one never-ending episode of rainbows and candy. Like one of those kid’s TV shows that came on in the mornings or sometimes after school. And he could hardly believe it. He was certain that he was going to wake up at any moment and this all would’ve just been an extremely good dream and something would’ve gone horribly wrong, something that he missed while he was sleeping.

He worked long hours at the garage, often saying goodbye to Sodapop and Steve long before he got off himself. He visited Johnny every night once he was let off. And every night, to his surprise, Johnny was awake, waiting for him. He was reading Gone With the Wind most times when Dally came upon him and, once when he asked what he might like to have while he was still stuck in the hospital, he’d said simple, “Just some books.”

Dallas didn’t really feel that he should be surprised by the fact Johnny liked to read, but he had never seen him reading before either. He knew that meant nothing. Johnny often disappeared for entire afternoons, only coming back once it was dark to the vacant lot. It only occurred to Dally now that he was probably spending a lot of that time at the library.

With a jolt, Dallas also realized that he would never be able to do that again.

The surgery had given Johnny feeling back in legs, yes, and yes, that did also mean that he could potentially learn to walk again, but the doctors were not optimistic and had told him that even if he did learn to walk again, his mobility would always be limited. He would never be able to walk and move around like he had before.

Dally, who was sitting in the car he’d borrowed from Buck Merrill outside a house he had never been in before, curled his fingers around his steering wheel until the knuckles were white. Whenever he thought about Johnny’s inability to walk – the fact he would be in a wheelchair the rest of his life; the fact that, though he was out looking at houses for them to live in, he had to make sure all of them were one level; the fact he was going to have to build a ramp up to the front door to accommodate his wheelchair – a wave of guilt hit him at the same time and, for a moment, his happiness vanished.

If only you’d pulled him out of the fire sooner, a voice taunted him. Now he’s going to be crippled and in pain for the rest of his life. And it’s all because you didn’t save him soon enough. You
should’ve known he was in trouble. You should’ve known.

Dally grimaced and pressed his forehead to the top of the steering wheel, curling in on himself.

Logically, he knew that voice was wrong. How could he have known the church’s roof was going to collapse like that? How could he have known that Johnny would be stupid enough to not even try to save himself? And yet...even as he said these things, the arguments felt weak. Because of what he knew: He’d heard the creaking groan of the ceiling, signaling it was going to collapse soon. He knew Johnny was suicidal and cared more about others than himself. Saving himself was his last priority.

You can make up for that, another voice, a kinder one, whispered. You can take care of him and love him the way no one ever has. You can make sure you give him what he deserves. You can make up for your mistakes.

Dally nodded, more to reassure himself than to agree with the voice.

He could make it up to Johnny. He could fix it. And that was why he was out looking at houses.

He pushed open the car door and got out, stuffing his hands into his pockets. He’d gotten off work early to go do this. He was finally getting enough money that he’d be able to buy a house. In truth, it really hadn’t been that long, but he’d been working so much he’d gotten the money together much more quickly than he’d thought he would.

This house was on the street over from where the rest of the gang lived, but it was one story. He was meeting a Realtor here to look at the place, but he already didn’t think he was going to take this house because of how far it was from the gang. It wasn’t that far, not really, but a whole extra street over would be a lot when Johnny couldn’t walk and the gang spent the most of their time between the two streets everyone else's houses were on. Dallas wasn’t going to isolate Johnny like that.

The Realtor got there a few moments later and, as she showed him the house, his feeling that this wasn’t the right choice only grew. It wasn’t only one story like he’d asked and everything was very tight and small. There wasn’t going to be any way Johnny would be able to maneuver his wheelchair around the house. He thanked the Realtor and left and drove to the next house.

But, though the next house was closer, it still wasn’t what he was looking for. And neither was the next one or the next one. By the time he was headed back to Buck Merrill’s place for a beer before he headed over to see Johnny, he was beat. He wanted to take a nap too, but Johnny might be asleep by then. That hadn’t happened yet, but he didn’t want Johnny to go to sleep thinking he’d forgotten him. That would be in complete opposition with what he’d promised himself in the car.

He went through the bar and up the stairs to his bedroom. He grabbed a beer while passing through the bar and once he got to his room and locked the door, lit a cigarette as he changed out of his work clothes and got into something more comfortable. He cracked open the beer and took a sip, falling back on his bed. He lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling, blowing smoke at it.

Ever since getting a job, he hadn’t been drinking as much. Ever since he’d kissed Johnny he hadn’t drank at all. Drinking this beer now was more for something to do to relax than because he felt he had to. It was an odd feeling and he didn’t even realize that was happening until he was halfway through his cigarette and the beer still had over half of it left.

He allowed himself to finish his beer as well, something that took far longer than he thought it would with how he was drinking it, before he got up and left again. He locked his room at Buck’s before he left, knowing anyone could come upstairs, barge in, and go through his things if he didn’t. He, again,
borrowed Buck’s car and drove at top speed towards the hospital, taking back roads, knowing cops were less likely to be on those roads. He got there in record time.

It was already long past visiting hours by the time he arrived, but he didn’t care. He dodged doctors and nurses, sneaking his way up to the second floor where Johnny’s room was. He checked the coast was clear before he darted into Johnny’s room, the door closing softly behind him.

“Dallas!”

Johnny’s voice was still weak and hoarse and probably would be for a while. Some of his insides had gotten burned as badly as his outsides. That was why he was still on oxygen. And why he still had trouble speaking in more than barely above a whisper. Still, despite this, Dally could hear the happiness and excitement in his voice and he felt his heart swell.

He never thought it was possible for him to love Johnny more than he already did and yet every time Johnny did something else to prove him wrong.

“Hey Johnnycake,” Dally said stepping forward, smiling slightly. He sank into the white plastic chair to the right of Johnny’s bed. He crossed his arms on the railing that was on either side of the bed and smiled down at Johnny. Johnny reached up a tentative shaking hand and Dally caught it in his own, lacing their fingers together. Johnny’s fingers were still rough from the burns that were still healing. Dally knew he would carry those scars forever, but he didn’t care. He brought Johnny’s hand to his lips and, closing his eyes, kissed his knuckles.

“I missed you,” Dally said, reaching out with his other hand to brush Johnny’s hair, so much shorter than it used to be and without any grease in it, off his forehead.

“I missed you too,” Johnny replied. He smiled at Dally and, despite how sick he looked, despite the burns still healing on his neck and shoulders, despite the burns that weren’t healing on his chest, he looked beautiful. He looked radiant. Dally was still certain that somehow Johnny was angel, put on earth to watch over him. Or maybe that wasn’t the point. Maybe the point was Dallas Winston, the hood who took care of no one, was taking care of an angel.

Johnny bit his lip and added, “The doctor said I need skin graft surgery.”

Dally, who had been stroking Johnny’s arm with the tips of his fingers, running over the scars that crisscrossed up and down them, looked up at Johnny then with only his eyes. “Yeah,” he said, his voice still soft. “I thought that might happen.”

He only knew what it was because Darry had mentioned it.

He didn’t know how Darry knew what it was.

Johnny continued chewing on his lip. “The doctor said they might be able to do it in one surgery, but...that’s only if my body is strong enough. He said it might not be.”

Dally watched Johnny chew on his lip, his eyes flicking around the room, looking everywhere but at Dallas. The nasty voice in his mind reminded him that if he had pulled him out of the church just a little bit sooner things would be very different. He wouldn’t be lying in a hospital with burns that weren’t healing, with a body that had just barely been put back together, worrying about the next surgeries he would need.

*I wish it was any one of us except Johnny.* Two-Bit’s words rang in his head not for the first time and, not for the first time, he agreed with them. Johnny had been through so much already. What cruel twist of fate had decided he deserved this too?
Dally tightened his hold on Johnny’s hand, bringing his hand to his mouth again and kissing it before he leaned forwards and kissing Johnny on the lips, Dally’s own hand on his cheek, tilting his face towards him as he did so. When he pulled away, he pressed his forehead to Johnny’s and said, “It’ll be okay, Johnnycake, I promise. When this is all over, you’re gonna come home with me.”

Neither of them said that they didn’t know when it was going to be over because they didn’t need to. It hung heavy in the air around them anyway.

Chapter End Notes

so...dallas and johnny both have a lot of ptsd, but that is what the next two parts of the fic are for (not this part, the two after this part). so if ur wondering where that is...it’s coming, fear not. just not yet.
Followup Visits With Black Briefcases

Chapter Summary

The social worker comes back to talk to Johnny about his parents.

Chapter Notes

ok so i listened to gone by ionnalee while writing this and it was so...accurate?? somehow?? ionnalee in general is a mood for this fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It never meant anything good when Johnny’s father opened his door at night. If he was doing it slowly, it was even worse. It meant he didn’t want to get caught and he was going to do something far worse than beat him. If he did it quickly, if the door banged against the opposite wall, it could mean any number of things. Either he was going to beat him, do something worse, or something else he hadn’t originally thought of altogether. But the most dangerous was when he opened it halfway between slowly and quickly. It meant it was angry, furious, but he didn’t want to get caught and whatever he was going to do was going to hurt ten times worse than it might if he’d just opened the door a little more slowly.

And that was what he did tonight.

Johnny woke up instantly and started shaking. His father was just a silhouette in the doorway. One hand wrapped around the neck of a liquor bottle, the other wrapped around the door knob. Johnny couldn’t see the expression on his face. His father was like a faceless monster come to torture him now that the world was asleep and no one would see what he was going to do.

Even in reality, monsters did their horrors in the dark to the people who least deserved it.

As his father stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, he thought about making a run for the door, trying to get out of the house before his father could catch him, but now that the door was closed, there was no hope for that. His eyes flicked next to his window. It was also closed, but he was desperate enough to try.

Johnny threw back the blankets, using his father’s shock to get across the room. He tried to shove his window upwards, prepared to dive through it and run as fast as he could to the vacant lot or the Curtis’s house, but the window didn’t budge. He tried again and that was when he realized with a kind of frozen horror that the window was locked.

That was all he had time for before his father pulled him away from the window and threw him to the ground and Johnny saw stars. He didn’t say a word to him as Johnny pushed himself up against the wall in an attempt to get away from him.

He still couldn’t see his father’s face, but he didn’t need to.
He knew what was going to happen next.

His father pulled him away from the wall by his arm. Johnny cried out as his father threw him to the ground again, this time on his stomach. Johnny heard his pants unbuckle. He felt his father’s hands curl around his wrists, holding him down. He could feel him now, pressed up against him and that was when he screamed as loud as he could, struggling to get away.

But he couldn’t get away and it didn’t matter that he screamed because there was no one in this house or any of the houses nearby that cared to come and save him.

And that only made him scream louder.

* * *

“Johnny! Stop screaming! You’re safe! Wake up!”

Johnny jolted awake, his entire body shuddering as he did so. His eyes snapped open and he felt for a moment like he couldn’t breathe, every part of him tensed. Then he let out a breath, his hands he hadn’t even realized he’d clenched into fists uncurling slowly. He realized slowly he was no longer trapped in his room and his father was no longer holding him down, hurting him. He let out several gasping breaths and realized also that he had been screaming and someone had woken him up.

He swallowed again and blinked, registering a hand on his shoulder, and he tried not to flinch away, though he did tense up again, as he turned and saw the nurse standing next to him. She looked alarmed. He didn’t look towards the door, but he wondered how loudly he’d been screaming, for how long, and how many people had heard him before he was woken up. He had an odd image of a silent ward, then a sudden piercing scream, and this nurse running from the opposite end of the hallway to his room to wake him up.

The nurse swallowed hard too. Her brows were drawn together and she was frowning slightly. If Johnny didn’t know any better, he’d think she was concerned. Immediately after that thought entered his mind, he felt guilty and he swallowed, saying his same hoarse, weak voice, “I’m fine.”

But the nurse didn’t look convinced as she propped him up and gave him his breakfast. Today it was sunny-side-up eggs with bacon and sausage. It looked so good, Johnny’s mouth watered, but he couldn’t get the images of the dream he’d had out of his head and ended up only eating half of it before his stomach roiled and he realized he couldn’t eat anymore without risking vomiting all of it.

Once the nurse returned to take his food and she laid him back down, he wished more than anything he could curl onto his side, until he stopped shaking, until the images went away. Instead, he waited until the nurse left and then closed his eyes. You’re not going back to them, he reminded himself firmly. You’re going to live with Dallas, remember? You’re not going back there. Dallas isn’t going to let that happen. He promised. He never breaks his promises.

He wasn’t entirely sure how long he lay like that: staring at the ceiling, shaking, wishing the images flashing through his mind would disappear altogether.

This wasn’t the first time this had happened. More than once he’d woken up in the lot or at home or at the Curtis’s house, screaming and shaking, thinking of the past. Sometimes he wouldn’t be screaming, he would just be tense and shaking in his sleep, almost like he was having a seizure. Darry had thought that was what was happening once until he was able to wake him up. But it had scared him. Johnny was certain Darry had seen something in Johnny’s eyes when he woke up, something that convinced him there were things children shouldn’t see that they sometimes did.
Even thinking of that now made his cheeks redden and he swallowed embarrassed, even though it was the truth. And yet...he couldn’t help thinking that somehow, even as he thought it, even as he knew he’d just woken up from dreams that were only a shade away from memories, he couldn’t help feeling that everything he was thinking was somehow a lie, that it wasn’t all that bad and his parents hadn’t done those things. And he knew that none of that was true and yet he still felt it. He didn’t understand why. Why should it be him wracked with guilt and shame and doubt? He knew, however distantly, that he’d done nothing wrong, that none of this was his fault. So why did he feel differently? Why should he be made to feel differently.

He frowned, his eyes closed.

All his parents had ever done, ever since he could remember, was remind him of how much they hated him. Every once in a while they would try to make up for it, pretend they loved him and deny that they’d ever hurt him, but that would always change. He couldn’t trust their motives.

You won’t be living with them anymore, a voice reminded him again. You’re going home with Dallas. That’s where he is right now: working to get you a home. He’s going to save you. Just like in your fairy tales. Sometimes they can be real.

He could still hardly believe it.

“Johnny?”

Again, a soft voice pulled him back to reality and his eyes snapped open. This time when he looked to his right, he saw the social worker called Barbara he’d met with before his surgery standing, holding that same black briefcase handle between her fingers. She wore a suit similar to the one she’d worn the time before except it was a different color. Instead of dark red, this one was dark purple.

“Do you remember me?” she asked, her voice still soft.

He nodded. “Yeah,” he said, his voice hoarse and quiet.

“I’m back because I reviewed your case,” she said. “If you were still going to be living with your parents when you’re released from here, we would be looking at finding you a new home, but since you are going to be living elsewhere, we’re going to instead offer you a choice.”

Here she paused as though waiting for him to say something, but he didn’t know what to say, so the social worker continued.

“Your case was deemed severe enough that, though you are going to be living somewhere else, you can persecute them for child abuse. Your father alone will be sentenced to prison for several years most likely – possibly for life – and, if he’s released, will have to register as a sex offender for the rest of his life. Your mother will also likely serve a few years. The odds of her being released are higher, but she will have a restraining order put on her as will your father, so they will be unable to come within three miles of you ever again.”

Here the social worker paused again, but this time it was to take a breath, when she continued, she said, “Your choice is whether or not you want to persecute them. The only thing you would get out of it would be the security that they’re behind bars and unable to hurt you. They likely don’t have enough money to pay you enough for reparations, but they would spend their time behind bars and once they got out giving part of whatever they make to you for the rest of their lives.”

For a long moment, Johnny was silent, thinking about this.
If he persecuted his parents, they’d be taken out of that house at the end of the street and put behind bars not likely. He would have people fighting for him. The gang would be on his side. The social worker would be on his side. Even the nurse at this hospital would be on his side. That was more people than he’d ever had on his side before in his life. It might even be enough people to take on his parents, to get them put away, to – for once in his life – feel safe.

There was a part of him that didn’t want to do it too. A part of him that loved his parents no matter what and didn’t want to subject them to the horrors of prison. He’d heard what they did to people like his father in jail from Dallas and, while a very large part of him felt he deserved it, he couldn’t help feeling guilty for even considering doing anything that would lead to that to begin with.

He swallowed, looking at the ceiling and the patterns in it. He could hear the birds singing outside his window, the nurse had opened it everyday since he’d asked her about it. He looked at the clock. It was almost noon. He looked at the social worker again. His hands clenched into fists.

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

ollo, actually traumatized person here. i mention this only cause the reason johnny literally can’t tell if people care about him and if he does he feels guilty are literally caused by his trauma and i know from experience, so if anyone thinks HEY WHY CAN’T HE TELL, this is why. maybe that’ll change within the course of the fic. we’ll see.
Lace Doilies and Rose Patterned Wallpaper

Chapter Summary

Dallas finally finds the perfect house for himself and Johnny.

Chapter Notes

i was going to have this be a little longer, but tbh, it didn't feel like it needed to be

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had become almost routine for Dallas to get off of work early every other day to go look at houses. They were all over Tulsa, but the only ones he seriously considered were in the same neighborhood as where they already lived. He didn’t know exactly when Johnny was going to be getting out of the hospital, but it couldn’t be very long now that he’d had his back surgery and he wanted to have a house already bought and moved into by the time Johnny was released. He knew he still needed skin graft surgeries, but he wasn’t sure how long those would take and he wanted to plan ahead.

The house he was checking out today had just barely been vacated and put up for sale. It was, shockingly, on the street that ran between Johnny’s parents’ house and the Curtis house. It used to be occupied by an elderly couple, but they got too old to take care of the place and had moved into senior living homes. Even as Dallas sat in his car outside of the house, looking at it, he had a good feeling about it. If an elderly couple could live there for so long, maybe a crippled kid could too.

He got out of the car, slamming the door shut loudly behind him, and stared at the facade of the house. It looked like a square box with a triangular cone put on top. The roofing was tan and the house itself was white. There wasn’t any porch, just a few steps paint wasn’t peeling and the house looked relatively well kept. Compared to the houses around it, it was like a shining pearl in a sea of dirty oysters. Staring at it, Dallas felt like there was some sort of strange twist of fate at work here. And that was saying something. Dally didn’t really believe in fate.

A car swung onto the street and parked behind Dally’s. He turned to see who it was and saw the Realtor he’d been visiting houses with for the last few days climb out of her car. She was a middle aged woman. She wore a long deep blue woman’s suit, a pair of glasses that had decorated chains hanging from the sides, pantie hose just barely visible in the small space between the end of her suit and her shoes, which were small black heels. She had dark brown hair that she tied up in a messy bun. She clutched a clipboard covered in papers to her chest. Dallas thought she seemed a bit nervous, but she did her job well and she wasn’t annoying either. Her name was Tara. She reminded him of a mouse.

“Hello, Mr. Winston, how’re you today?” she gave him a bright smile and Dally tried, not for the first time, not to laugh at the formal title. No one in his life had ever called him that. Except teachers and then they hadn’t meant it as a term of respect.

As a result, he still didn’t know how to respond, and he ended up scratching the back of his head nervously and saying, “I’m good. How much is this house?”
Tara looked confused for a moment, saying slowly, “You haven’t looked at the house yet.”

“I don’t wanna buy it yet,” Dally clarified, “I just wanna know how much it is.”

“Well, even though it’s an older house, a lot of it functions like new,” she replied. “The previous owners really took good care of this place. However, it still is an older house and the odds it’ll remain so well kept going forward is slim, so it’s valued at about $9,500.”

Dallas only barely managed to hide his wince. That was a little more than he was hoping. It was true he didn’t know how much longer Johnny was going to be in the hospital and, though he was missing $4,500, had time to make that up, but that was still a lot of money.

_Take a look around the house, a voice in his mind urged him. Then you’ll know for sure._

He actually agreed with that, so he said, “Let’s look around the house.”

Tara smiled and led the way into the house, still talking about how nice the house was for its age. And as they stepped through the door in the main area of the house, Dallas had to agree.

The first thing he noticed was that it was indeed one floor. There was a basement, but that was a requirement. Any house they had would also have a basement. And odds were Johnny wouldn’t have to go down there anyway unless there were a storm and if that were the case, he was willing to bet that he’d either be there to get him to the basement himself or one of the gang would come over to make sure he was safe. They were all good at taking care of Johnny when he couldn’t.

The entryway wasn’t very large. There was a place to the left of the door for him and Johnny to put their shoes and coats, but that was it. To the right was the living room. There was even a fireplace, something rare for houses like these. Directly in front of him was the kitchen. It wasn’t very big, but it had a stove and a more modern refrigerator and lots of cupboard storage and counter space.

The doorway to the basement was near the entrance to the hallway that led to the bedrooms and bathroom. There were two bedrooms. One was larger than the other and clearly meant to be the master. The bathroom was much larger than the Curtis bathroom and had a bathtub against the wall and a shower against the wall behind it. The bathtub was footed and the shower was small, but big enough that Dally knew he’d be able to fit a chair in it for Johnny.

The basement was unfinished, but Dallas felt it was going to be mostly used for storage anyway. Tara showed him a small storm area under the stairs. Tornadoes weren’t uncommon in Tulsa and, while Dallas had never been in one, he knew people who had been and had driven through the towns leveled by the sheer destruction it could cause. Tornadoes were a very rational fear and everyone had a storm cellar or area under the stairs in case there was one sighted nearby.

As they were going back up the stairs, Dallas clenched his hands into fists. This house was perfect. It was one level, everything was very spaced out, enough that a wheelchair could get through, and there was a bathtub and a shower, each separate, the shower even large enough for a chair. And that wasn’t even factoring in its perfect location.

**But it’s almost $10,000, something whispered inside him. You’d never be able to afford it.**

_That’s just the initial price, something else whispered a little more loudly. After that you wouldn’t have to pay quite as much for everything else. The biggest expenses would be Johnny’s hospital visits and care. And that you’ve already planned for. That you can afford._

The second voice was right, but Dally still hesitated, his hands on his hips, looking around the first level of the house, trying to come up with a reason this was a bad idea other than he’d be flat broke
for a while after he bought the house. But there was honestly nothing, no feasible reason he could come up with that moving here wouldn’t be a good thing. For him and for Johnny.

“I’ll take it,” he heard himself saying before he could stop himself.

“Really?” Tara sounded shocked and he didn’t blame her. He’d been unimpressed with everything she’d shown him so far.

He turned to her. “Yeah,” he said. “This place is perfect.”

She let out what he thought was a sigh of relief and said, “Oh great! Well, like I said the listed price is $9,500, but I doubt you can pay all of that right now, so we can set up a system of payment. Depending on how much you put down initially and how much you pay off each month, you should be able to own your home within a year or two.”

It hadn’t even occurred to Dally until that moment that he could pay a little bit at a time and he almost laughed with relief. He wanted to own the house, but if he paid for the house with everything he had now, he’d be able to own it in less than a year, assuming he could get another $1,000 each month for the next four months.

He felt a lump form in his throat as he started signing the papers.

For the first time in what felt like forever, things were working out.

Chapter End Notes

this is kinda random, but when i was looking up housing prices in 1965 i found that several significant events happened that year too, so i’m gonna see if i can sneak them into this fic in the next part or the part after that. one of them is black people gaining the right to vote, but latinos didn’t gain that right until 10 years later. johnny is half latino in this fic.
Weakness in the Face of Adversity

Chapter Summary

Johnny finds out if his body can withstand just one skin graft surgery or not.

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK FROM PRIDE SO HERE!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was in his room again, the door opening again, his father silhouetted in the doorway from the light that shone in from the hall again. Everything was the same. Except this time he couldn’t move. He curled into a tight ball in bed and shook violently, pulling the blankets more tightly around himself as he held his stuffed animal to his chest. His eyes were shut tight, hoping that by being still he wouldn’t be noticed, knowing from experience that he would be anyway.

The silhouette crossed the room and crawled into his bed. He felt it against his skin and that was when his eyes snapped open. His entire skin felt like a live wire, like he was going to explode out of it if he didn’t do something soon. But he couldn’t move. God, help him, he couldn’t move no matter what he did or told himself.

And that was when he started to scream.

* * *

“Johnny! Wake up! Stop screaming! You’re safe!”

For the second day in a row, Johnny started awake, the world coming into focus slowly as the dream drained, just as slowly, from his mind. His entire body was tense, still a live wire, still ready to spring into action, though there was no way he could, at the first sign of danger. He felt the nurse’s hand on his arm and he had to clench his hands into fists, the healing burns stinging as he did so, to keep himself from screaming again or flinging himself off the bed to get away from her.

He swallowed hard, closing his eyes tight for a moment, willing the memory-dream to fade, before he opened them again and he looked at the nurse. It was the same dark haired woman who had been taking care of him since he’d been admitted. He wasn’t sure how he looked, but there must have still been some fear in his eyes because her own expression shifted, ever so slightly, to one of guilt and pity. Johnny clenched his hands even tighter. That was the reaction everyone had to him. Even before he was crippled and covered in burns.

“We gotta do some tests real quick,” she said, her voice soft, almost too calm, as though she were speaking to a wounded animal.

“How come?” he replied, his own voice equally soft and still scratchy and hoarse.
“The doctor wants to assess if you will be strong enough for one single skin graft surgery,” she replied and Johnny let out a sigh and closed his eyes. At least she was being honest with him.

He opened his eyes again and said, “Okay.”

The tests didn’t take a very long time and, to him, seemed very standard. They listened to his heart with a stethoscope, they looked in his eyes, ears, and mouth with a bright light. They listened to his lungs with the same stethoscope. They also took his blood and checked the stitches in his back. Then they wheeled him in his bed down to the x-ray lab and x-rayed his back to see how it was healing. The last thing they did was check how his burns were healing. Then he was finally allowed to go back to his room and the nurse finally propped him up to let him eat breakfast.

“The doctor will come and tell you the results around lunch, alright?” She smiled at him, but Johnny could tell it was forced and he didn’t feel very good about his odds of having the skin graft surgeries all done at once. He bit his lip.

His breakfast today was waffles with syrup and butter as well as a side of scrambled eggs and a couple pieces of bacon. It looked good and it smelled good. He was still impressed by how good the hospital food was. But he still didn’t eat very much of his breakfast. His stomach felt like a twisted bundle of broken nerves and he couldn’t stop his hands from shaking.

Again, he wished he had a cigarette. He made a mental note to ask the gang to get him some the next time they stopped by. Though, that was assuming they even would to begin with. All of them could see he was still on oxygen. His lungs, they knew, had been damaged by how much smoke he’d breathed in and from the burns on his chest and back. He loved them, he really did, but he knew they wouldn’t give him cigarettes when his lungs were already damaged and a part of him sometimes wished they loved him a little bit less.

The hours before lunch seemed to pass slowly, as though someone had fixed the clocks to go twice as slow. Every time Johnny looked at the clock whenever he looked up from his book, it seemed that only five minutes or less had passed. It seemed impossible so little time had passed when he’d read so much of his book. Maybe he was just a fast reader.

He’d always been better at English in school than anything else. It wasn’t because of English he’d gotten held back a year. It was because of math. So when the doctor finally did walk into his room right after he had lunch – later than the nurse said – he wasn’t sure how much time had passed since he’d started reading, but it probably felt like a lot longer than it had been.

Johnny knew from the minute the doctor walked in the room what the answer would be. The look on his face told him everything he needed to know. The doctor was in his late fifties and had no poker face. It probably came from wanting to tell his patients the truth, something many doctors didn’t believe in – for whatever reason – and which Johnny appreciated, but he could feel his heart sinking already and any hope he’d had of getting out of the hospital soon, sinking right along with it.

The doctor set his folder on his nightstand like he had before his back surgery. He clasped his hands in front of him and said, “After reviewing your tests, I believe it would be unsafe to attempt one large skin graft surgery. Your body is a lot weaker than I thought because of the burns. Your insides are still recovering from it. Like your lungs. If we operate all at once, there’s a good chance you would either die on the table or die from complications later on.”

Johnny nodded, but he didn’t say anything else. That seemed to be how their conversations went. The doctor would tell him something and he would only nod because he didn’t know what else to do or say. He couldn’t think of any questions he wanted to ask or anything to say. There was nothing he could do except trust the doctors around him and that was what he’d been doing. Even though adults
made him nervous.

“We’ll schedule the surgeries over the course of three weeks,” the doctor was now saying. “One at the end of each week. It will give you time to recover in between, but we need to get these surgeries done quickly. The longer your skin is burned and exposed you’re at a much higher risk for lethal infections. At the very latest, you should be able to go home by the end of the month.”

That was the one piece of good news, but having to go through three surgeries in three weeks didn’t sound fun. The first one alone had given him such bad anxiety he had to be almost sedated. The first one had almost killed him too. What if that was what happened with the second and third and fourth ones? He’d thought it before, but how many more times could his heart be restarted before it started getting damaged or before it just didn’t restart? Twice already seemed too lucky.

The rest of the day seemed to pass far more quickly. Maybe it was because he was so caught up in his own thoughts and worries that he hardly noticed the way the shadows started lengthening on the walls. It wasn’t until he had his dinner that he realized how much time had passed. He tried reading after he ate, but he couldn’t focus on his book. All he could think of was going back into that cold, sterile operating room. Three more times.

It wasn’t until the nurse came in and shut off his lights that he realized it was night.

He swallowed hard. He had no idea how he was going to sleep tonight.

His thoughts continued to go in circles around his pending operations, listening to the sounds of the world outside after dark. The nurse had forgotten to shut his window tonight. He liked it when she did that. Then he could listen to the world until he fell asleep.

But tonight he heard something different. Footsteps, coming down the hall.

They stopped in his doorway and, despite his fear, he immediately smiled as he recognized the tall, lean silhouette, framed by the dim light from the hallway.

“Dallas!” he exclaimed softly.

Dally stepped into his room, his face slowly coming into view from the hallway. He was grinning too. He was still wearing his work clothes and Johnny’s smile widened further as he picked out grease stains on his hands and cheeks. He looked like he needed a shower. It was still strange to see Dallas in work clothes, but it made him happy too.

“How was work?” he asked, his voice soft.

Dally’s grin widened. “I got off early and went to look at houses,” he said. “And I found one.”

Johnny’s eyes widened in response. “You mean a house for us to live in?” he asked. His voice was still quiet, hoarse, weak from disuse and his lightly burned throat.

Dallas nodded. “Yeah. It’s on the street between your house and Ponyboy’s.”

A part of Johnny recoiled at the thought of living on the same street as his parents. But then he remembered their upcoming trial and the fact that he’d be living with Dally and within reach of the gang and he relaxed. There was a good chance after the trial that his parents would go to prison. If
not for life, for a really long time. If that didn’t happen for whatever reason, the gang were still nearby. He knew they’d protect him if his parents tried to come over. Plus doors had locks and they had that whistle they used to identify each other.

For the first time in his life, Johnny felt like things were manageable. And, despite everything, he smiled and said, “That sounds perfect, Dal.” Because, despite everything, it did.

Chapter End Notes

i thought this was going to be a lot longer than it was, but i’m happy with how this turned out anyway. i’m excited for y’all to read the next chapter!!
so….who else likes anberlin?? and if u do like anberlin...how many of u have seen the music video for this song?? cause yes. that is where i got this idea from.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was still surreal to Dallas that he now owned a house. Or would anyway after a few more payments. Except for Darry, he was the only one of the gang who owned a house. It was a strange feeling. Especially since he never thought he would live long enough to own a house to begin with. Honestly, deep down, he’d been sure none of them would. This was Tulsa not New York, but the greaser mortality rate was only slightly better between the two.

He’d met with the realtor again today, this time at her office, to put down the first payment on the house and set up a system of payment for the next few months, so he would own it in by the end of the year. Once he’d done that, she’d handed over the keys to the place and told him the date of his first payment as well as that he could start moving in whenever he wanted.

Now his fingers were curled around the keys in the pocket of his denim jacket as he headed towards the hospital’s front entrance. He had to tell Johnny. He’d gotten the day off work to tell him about this and then spend the rest of the day with him. He hadn’t taken a day off like this since he’d started and he wasn’t entirely worried about it. In fact, he was excited. He couldn’t wait to see the look on Johnny’s face when he told him about the house. He’d told Johnny about the house’s existence already and that it was the one, but he hadn’t told him he’d bought it or about how nice it was inside.

As he walked through the front doors, waving to the now familiar nurse at the front desk as he went, the smile on hi face faltered as he thought about what Johnny had told him the night before.

After he’d told him about the house, Johnny had told him the doctor told him he needed three separate skin graft surgeries. When Dally had asked why, his answer had been vague, but Dallas understood the gist of it and then why Johnny was being vague about it: his body was still weak from the operation on his back, but, like the operation on his back, without skin grafts, he would get an infection, likely a deadly one, and die. Not for the first time, Dallas had felt stuck between a rock and a hard place and again he was terrified that Johnny wouldn’t make it out of these surgeries alive.

Everything will be for nothing if he dies, he thought to himself as he walked down the hall of the hospital. Why buy a house if I’m going to live in it alone?

Because the truth was he had no intention of living in it alone. If Johnny died, that was it for him too. He already knew exactly what he’d do: take his gun, maybe used it on himself or rob a store and get the cops to use it on him instead. He’d learned a lot in New York.

He got to the end of the hall and pushed open a door, electing to take the stairs instead of the elevator. He needed to keep his shape. He’d been eating too much and exercising too little being so busy with work. He needed to get back on track and he silently vowed to once Johnny was released from the hospital and they were living together.

The thought alone still seemed so surreal and always made him smile.
He started up the stairs. Johnny was on the third floor and he had to take a total of four flights of stairs to get to it. He pushed open the door on that level and turned left, heading in the direction of Johnny’s room. He was still in the intensive care unit. Even though he was doing so much better. Dallas swallowed at the thought. It showed just how sick he still was.

Johnny’s room was at the end of a long hall and he turned into it before any nurse could see him and try to stop him. Not that he thought they’d truly succeed in kicking him out. He just didn’t want the hassle of having to sneak back in.

“Dallas!” Johnny exclaimed as he always did when he came into his room.

Dally turned to Johnny and smiled. Johnny did still look sick and weak. There were still multiple IVs in his arm, he still was on oxygen, and he still was having his heart recorded by a little band wrapped around his finger. Then there was the fact his burns were still visible and most of the ones on his torso weren’t healing. In truth, he only looked slightly better than he had since he’d been brought in. It seemed odd to Dallas that that would be so when it felt like so much more time had passed since then.

“Hey Johnnycake,” Dally said, giving his typical response. He grinned right back, hardly able to contain his excitement over his news. “How’re you?”

Johnny shrugged one shoulder. “Can’t complain,” he replied. “What about you?”

Dallas wasn’t entirely sure he believed that, but he wanted this to be a happy day, so he grinned, pretending he believed him, and said, “I got us a house.”

Johnny’s eyes widened slightly. “The one you told me about?” he asked softly.

“Yeah, and Johnny, it’s amazing,” he said, sitting down in the chair on Johnny’s right. He took his hand, kissing his knuckles, too happy to stop himself. “It’s all one level. It’s spaced out enough that your wheelchair will be able to get around it and it’s got a shower and a bath separate. It’s so nice, Johnny, I can’t wait for you to see it.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Johnny replied, his voice still hoarse, but a little stronger as he said it. His eyes flicked to a wheelchair sitting in a corner near the door. “They won’t let me out of here. I ain’t been outside since the fire. I ain’t been out of this room since the fire. Except for surgery. And that don’t count cause I came right back.”

Dally’s eyes went to the wheelchair and his cheeks spread wide in a mischievous grin as an idea came to his mind. He turned back to Johnny and said, “I have an idea. It might make a few people angry, but it’ll be fun.”

Johnny grinned right back. Dally knew that meant yes.

He went over to the corner and pulled the wheelchair out of it. He brought it over to the side of Johnny’s bed and started trying to figure out how to get him into the wheelchair despite all of the things he was attacked to. There was an IV pole attached to the wheelchair, so that wasn’t a problem. The hardest part was figuring out the oxygen machine. Johnny’s went into the wall, but there were tanks of oxygen in a closet against the wall adjacent to the door. He finally figured out how to oak Johnny up to one and then, wrapping Johnny up in the sheets on his bed as much as he could, he picked him up and put him into his wheelchair.

The one thing he couldn’t figure out was the heart monitor, but he had a feeling that was only used as a record, not something to keep him alive and healthy.
“Ready?” he asked Johnny, positioning himself behind the chair his hands on the handles.

Johnny adjusted the sheets around him so they covered him and almost looked like a hospital gown. He turned and smiled up at Dallas, a smile far more radiant than he’d ever seen on him before.

“Ready,” he replied.

Dally started at the front of Johnny’s chair, pushing him out the door by the front of the wheelchair’s armrests. He grinned at him and Johnny grinned back, his hands clutching the ends of the armrests.

Then Dallas went around to the back of the chair and shot down the hallway at full speed.

Immediately heads turned and people started shouting after them. He heard the voices of nurses shouting that he was running way too fast, of doctors saying Johnny shouldn’t be out of bed, and above it all, he heard Johnny’s laughter. He only grinned in response. It was the most beautiful sound in the world.

They turned a corner, narrowly missing a rack of wire shelves. Johnny grabbed a cleaning squirt bottle off one of the shelves as they went by and began spraying whatever was inside throughout the hall as they sped down it. They would never know it, but the entire hallway would smell like flowers for weeks afterwards and the patients would miss the smell once it was gone.

They turned down another corner and Dally slowed slightly as they went down a hall devoid of people. They passed the x-ray viewing rooms. There were x-rays on the light panels in the room. They both turned to look at them, seeing the shadowy outlines of other people’s ribs, lungs, and pelvis’s. Dally glanced at Johnny’s face as they passed him and watched his smile vanish and swallow hard. His eyes were widened, just barely, not enough that anyone who didn’t know him would be able to tell, but Dally did know him and he wondered what Johnny was thinking about, staring at the x-rays.

Dally sped up again, moving past the x-ray room faster than light and going down another crowded hall. Johnny’s smile reappeared as the shouts of the doctors and nurses started up again and when they turned down another deserted hallway, Dallas bent down, kissing Johnny’s cheek, wrapping his arms awkwardly around Johnny’s middle from behind. Johnny laced their fingers together and brought their interlocked hands to his lips, kissing Dally’s knuckles. No one could see them here. No one except for whoever was watching the security cameras and Dally had a feeling the security guard had more important things to be looking for than two people walking down a hallway, intertwined with one another. Why should anyone care if the two people in love happened to be boys?

They went down another hall and came upon a wall of windows, looking down into the courtyard below. It looked so nice outside and Dallas could see the longing in Johnny’s face to be outside again. It had to be hard for someone who was used to roaming all around town all day to now be confined to one place all day instead.

“Wanna go down there?” Dally asked softly.

Johnny, still looking down at the empty courtyard, nodded.

It took more time and skill than either one of them thought it would to get down to the first floor and out into the courtyard without any of the nurses who were now looking for Johnny finding them. It also took a while to figure out how to get to the courtyard to begin with when they couldn’t ask for directions, since they were trying not to get caught, but eventually they did.
The courtyard was beautiful, green everywhere except for the pond, which was surrounded by green. There were fish in the pond and aquatic plants all around it. Around that were flowers of all colors. Throughout the courtyard under the trees were more flowers. There was a bench between two of the trees and a swing between another two on the other side of the yard. Four of the trees – the ones on either side of the bench and the swing – were full of white flowers that were fragrant enough they could smell them from where they were. All that seemed to be missing was a fountain, spurring water into the air, but the pond did have a small waterfall that probably circulated the water for the fish and that seemed good enough.

Johnny’s eyes darted all over, an open-mouthed look of awe on his face as he stared around the courtyard. Dally smiled at his expression. He wanted to show him more beautiful things, he wanted to see that look of stunned happiness on him over and over again until it disappeared, until he realized that the world was beautiful and there was more to it than the pain he’d been dealt.

Dallas moved them over to the bench and helped Johnny onto it, then sat down on it himself and wrapped his arm around Johnny before he could fall over. He knew that Johnny was still learning to sit up by himself again. He still had to be propped up during mealtimes.

“It’s so beautiful out here,” Johnny said, his voice soft, barely more than a whisper. He laid his head on Dally’s shoulder, his eyes closed, a smile on his face. “Thanks, Dal.”

Dally only smiled. “Yeah, of course, Johnnycake,” he replied, his voice just as soft.

It made him happy to know that he could make him this happy. He wanted to be able to do that for the rest of his life. He also realized he wanted to do something for Johnny to prove to him that he wasn’t going to abandon him, he was going to take care of him and he meant what he said.

His fingers went automatically to the St. Christopher pendant around his neck.

It was traditional for Dallas Winston to give his Christopher to whomever he was going with. It would be a red hot sign to everyone that they were together now, but Dally had a feeling the gang was going to find out sooner or later and he was going to have to talk with them about it eventually, so it might as well happen now. Hopefully, they wouldn’t hate them for it. Somehow, though, he didn’t think they would. If they were, they would never have accepted Johnny when he told them all he hadn’t been born a boy.

And he wanted Johnny to have the pendant. He knew Johnny would know what it meant and, even though every girl he’d ever given to had given it back, he wanted more than anything for what he had with Johnny to mean something. Not that it didn’t already, but this was something else. This was a physical promise, something Johnny could see.

Still supporting Johnny with his shoulder, he reached around his neck and unclasped the pendant. Johnny looked at him and watched as Dally handed him the pendant. His eyes widened slightly as he did and then flicked to Dallas saying in a voice that was again barely more than a whisper, “Why- why are you giving me this?”

Dallas wrapped his arm back around Johnny and said, “Because I love you, Johnnycake. And I want you to be able to see that. I want you to know how much I love you. I want you to have that. My ma gave it to me a long time ago. It used to be hers, but...she meant for me to give it to someone else someday. I know it. I just...didn’t know who the right person was until now.”

Johnny’s lips slowly stretched into a smile and he positively beamed. It was a smile that lit up the entire courtyard and Dally was certain could power the entire city too. He flung his arms around Dally’s neck, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t sit up on his own and Dally had to catch him
once more before he fell over backwards off the bench. He held Johnny in his arms, his face buried in the crook of his shoulder, his arms holding his small body against his own.

“I love you too, Dallas,” Johnny replied, his voice soft in Dally’s ear. “More than anything.”

Dally tightened his hold on Johnny and smiled so widely to himself that he felt tears prick the corners of his eyes.

“I love you more than anything too.”

Chapter End Notes

also i realize that like...two weeks is not long enough to get 4k together, but i can’t do math.
A Visit to the Gates of Hell

Chapter Summary

Dallas goes to Johnny's parents' place to pick up some of Johnny's things.

Chapter Notes

this chapter was not originally planned, but i was roleplaying with my dallas and in one of their replies they suggested dally going over to get johnny’s stuff AND YKNOW I HAD TO DO IT TO EM.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was only two days before the first of Johnny’s skin graft surgeries and Dallas was so worried he could hardly concentrate on anything else as he walked down the street. The sun was high in the sky, baking the world below. He could hear cicadas buzzing in the trees and see the heat rising up in waves from the pavement beneath his feet. He was sweating, he knew that much because of the beads of it that he kept wiping off his upper lip and the way it kept dripping off his forehead onto the ground below, the drops vanishing as he moved.

It was thinking about Johnny’s surgery that had gotten him up out of the house he could now call his own, and moving up the street towards the house that belonged to Johnny’s parents. He was going there because yesterday before he’d left the hospital, Johnny had asked him to go get some of his things in his old room at the house. Dally didn’t want Johnny going anywhere near the place again, so he’d offered instead to go for him.

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” Johnny had protested, biting his lip as he spoke.

“They ain’t gonna hurt me,” Dally had replied, a wry grin on his face, but he meant it. “I could take both of ‘em with my hand tied around my back.”

Johnny gave a wry grin as well. “I’d like to see that.”

He’d also asked Dallas to bring him another big book or two and some cigarettes. He’d agreed to the first, but not the second. Even after Johnny pouted and complained that none of the rest of the gang would get him cigarettes either.

“You’re in the hospital. On oxygen,” Dally replied. “We ain’t gonna make that worse. Plus ain’t it dangerous to smoke before surgery anyway?”

Johnny hadn’t replied and had instead looked at his lap and picked at the sheet he’d wrapped around himself before they’d left his room. Dally knew that meant yes and that Johnny already knew that. The thought made him smile and he’d kissed his temple. “Don’t worry, you’ll be out soon and then you can have as many cigs as you want, okay?”

“I hate bein’ the pet sometimes,” was all he’d said in response.
Dallas kissed his temple again and helped him back to his room. Johnny had been annoyed he wouldn’t get him cigarettes, but Dally knew he wasn’t angry and Dallas wasn’t angry at him for being pouty about it either. The kid had gone almost three weeks without cigarettes, the longest he’d ever gone since he’d started when he was nine years old. Dallas wasn’t sure he’d have been able to do that without complaining himself.

Taking his eyes off his feet, Dallas looked at the house in front of him. It was dark brown and had white trim and looked so innocent from his position on the street that his hands clenched into fists in his pockets, his jaw clenched too, and he frowned as he drew his brows together. How could anyone think this house was innocent? He frowned at the yellow house to the right. It wasn’t spaced that far apart from Johnny’s. It wasn’t like whoever lived there wouldn’t be able to hear was going on in the house next to it every night. Why had none of them done anything? Called the cops? Something? There was no way they couldn’t have known it was a kid getting beat on.

His eyes darted around, trying to gauge if anyone was home. It didn’t seem like it. That was what he’d meant by innocent. It was so silent now. No one who’d never been there before would’ve ever been able to guess that only weeks earlier a boy had lived here and he was being beat every time he came home. Somehow that made Dally angry again. But he knew why. It was as he’d just been thinking: because everyone who lived there had known and hadn’t done a thing.

And now he’s paralyzed in the hospital and he still might die, he thought bitterly, walking around the house to where the window leading into Johnny’s room was. That seemed like the best bet. If anyone was home, they wouldn’t see him.

He wasn’t entirely surprised to see the window still open from the last time Johnny had opened it. He bet his parents never went into Johnny’s room to do more than see if he were there to yell at or beat or do something worse to. He pushed the window open a little more, before hauling himself inside and landing catlike on his feet just inside.

The room was dark. It didn’t face the sun and seemed to be angled just so that no light really came into the room itself. Even during the day, there were dark corners and Dally could tell why Johnny didn’t like being there. The room was very sparsely furnished. There was his bed against the same wall as the window, his nightstand right next to it and a dresser up against the wall across from the bed. There was also a closet on the wall next to his door that was open, but all that was in there were clothes. Dally wasn’t even sure all of the clothes in there were Johnny’s. Then he recognized them as adolescent girl clothes and realized they were Johnny’s. They were the clothes his parents bought him that he never wore. The gang had bought him all the clothes he did wear and they were in the dresser, which was what Dallas turned to first.

It was only as he was pulling the clothes out of the dresser that he realized he probably should’ve brought a duffle bag. However, some rifling through the closet revealed one and he stuffed the duffle bag with Johnny’s clothes. Then he went to the rather large stack of books by his nightstand and started stuffing them into the bag as well. He turned to the bed then and couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his face.

At the hospital, Johnny had told him there were stuffed animals he wanted on his bed and, at first, it seemed he was afraid Dally would laugh at him, but Dallas had only smiled. “You have stuffed animals?” he asked, his voice soft.

Johnny had looked at him nervous and somewhat surprised. “Yeah,” he replied, his eyes quickly flicking away again. “I dunno. They’re nice sometimes. I know that makes me a sissy, so don’t tell anyone else, okay?”

But Dallas had only shaken his head and said, “Nah. It don’t make you a sissy.” He had promised
not to tell anyone just for Johnny’s peace of mind, but he had a feeling none of the gang would judge him for it or even really be surprised.

Besides, there was something that was special about Johnny and the way he viewed the world. Maybe some boys would’ve been made hard and angry by their parents constantly beating them, calling them names, doing unspeakable horrors to them in the dead of night while everyone closed their doors and pretended not to listen. But not Johnny. Instead, he’d been made soft, tender, and while at one point that had scared Dallas – he’d seen how much of a toll that kind of thinking took on him when he lived with his parents – he wasn’t worried anymore. Johnny wasn’t living here anymore.

It also warmed his heart to think that of all the rough boys in Tulsa, there was one of them that slept with stuffed animals at night. It made him hopeful somehow.

He started shoving the stuffed animals into the duffle bag, making sure to get the ones that Johnny had pointed out first.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

The voice startled him and he jumped involuntarily before turning around.

Johnny’s father stood in the doorway and Dally couldn’t help but stare. He’d seen Johnny’s mother plenty, but never his father. The man had a beer belly, but you could hardly tell with how overweight he was. He was balding in the back of his head and you could only tell from the front because of how sparse his hair was there too. He wore a wife beater, which Dallas found ironic and a pair of beige slacks. He was wearing old, yellowed socks and he looked furious.

Instead of answering the question, he dove for the window, but Johnny’s father was shockingly fast and grabbed the back of the duffle back, pulling him back as he did so. He was also surprisingly strong and managed to wheel Dallas around to face him. Dally didn’t think he was going to hit him until he saw some sort of recognition alight in the man’s eyes and he said in a voice full of shocked accusation, “You! You took it away! You made it do this!”

That was when he hit him.

Dallas stumbled back and saw stars, his head snapping to the side from the force. He wasn’t sure what the man meant by the last bit and, at first, was confused by the second bit. Then he realized that by ‘it’ Dally’s father meant Johnny and he felt fury rise up in him as he remembered every awful thing this man had done to Johnny. And the worst part was Dally knew the man thought it was all justified because he didn’t see Johnny as human.

This thought took him out of the dazed state he’d started in. He grabbed the duffle bag off the ground where it had landed and slung it over his shoulders before he shoved Johnny’s father hard. “Yeah!” he screamed in his face. And it felt good to get some payback for what Johnny had been put through. Better than sex or drugs or alcohol. Better than fighting. Better than anything. “Yeah, I did! And you know what? He’s safe! He’s happy! He’s gonna be even happier! And there ain’t a goddamn thing your sorry ass and your pathetic excuse for a wife can do about it! You’re just gonna be here rotting! Old and alone! How’s that feel, you miserable prick?!”

The man let out a yell of rage, rushing back at Dallas, swinging wildly. “It was mine!” he was screaming now, almost hysterical in a way that surprised Dallas more than the man’s strength had.

“He was never yours!” Dallas shouted back, catching Johnny’s father’s fist in his hand and pushing him back with all his strength. It made him grin widely to see the man stumble back, a look of
surprise on his face. He wanted to make him hurt. And for a moment, he really thought about doing just that. He’d learned how to make someone hurt in the worst ways while keeping them alive by watching other gang members in New York. He could do it now and the man would deserve it.

But the police probably wouldn’t agree with him. Most people probably wouldn’t agree with him, so instead, he kicking Johnny’s father in the stomach as hard as he could and, once he fell to the ground, rolling, clutching his stomach, looking as pathetic as Dallas wanted him to feel, Dally stood over him and, looking down his nose at him, said, “Stay here and rot, you disgusting piece of shit.”

He hoisted the duffle bag up onto his shoulders once more and climbed out the window. He walked casually out of the backyard and down the street, back towards the house that was his and Johnny’s, whistling all the while.

He hadn’t been in this good of a mood in a long time. He even felt like laughing.

_Take that_, he thought. He wasn’t sure to who in particular, but it felt good for once to get justice. So many people had hurt Johnny. So many people had basically tortured him. The Socs, the teachers and bullies at school, his parents. And none of those people had paid for what they’d done.

It was nice to get some payback for once.

It was nice to show the universe that it was wrong.

It didn’t get to hurt this boy. Not anymore.

Chapter End Notes

i’m having more inspiration for this at the moment than my one-shots so i’m gonna focus on this until i can focus on the one-shots again <3 sorry for anyone waiting for anything ;-;

also the parts with dally confronting johnny's dad were all courtesy of the roleplay i did with my dally <3
Survivor's Guilt/Survivor's Bravery

Chapter Summary

The day before Johnny's first skin graft surgery

Chapter Notes

i rly hope this doesn't get repetitive since we have two more surgeries for him to go through after this rip

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Johnny woke up much the same way he did before his back surgery the day before his first skin graft surgery. His eyes fluttered open and the first thing he did was try to remember why he was so scared, why his heart was pounding in his chest and he had a sense of dread. It only took him a few seconds to remember his surgery was today and then his burned hands automatically clenched into fists. His jaw clenched too and he stared at the white ceiling, listening to the birds calling to one another out his window, and wondered if this surgery would be the one that killed him.

The doctor came in not very long later with the nurse, who propped him up to give him his breakfast – sunny-side up eggs with waffles and syrup – while the doctor spoke, “The operation we’re going to be doing today will be on your back. We won’t be doing all of your back today. There’s too much, but we will start with the site where you were operated on. There is a chance it will disturb the stitches, but we need to get healthy skin over that area before it can heal.”

Johnny swallowed hard, listening to the doctor speak, his heart pounding the whole time. The doctor described how they would do the surgery and, though he was going to be unconscious and wouldn’t feel a thing, it still made him cringe. They were going to shave the skin off his body, the burned skin, and then they were going to put new, healthy skin over it. They explained how the second part would be done too, but he didn’t really understand it. All he knew was that when it was over and his skin had healed, there would be diamonds in it.

“The odds of the surgery being successful are very high,” the doctor was saying now. “The odds of you dying on the table are much less compared to your back surgery as well. However, because your body is so weak, you are still at a higher risk for it than someone else in your position.”

Johnny wasn’t really sure what that last bit meant. Wouldn’t anyone in his position be as hurt as he were if they were truly in his position? But maybe the doctor was just trying to make him feel better and he didn’t say anything.

“Depending on how you recover and what happens between tomorrow’s surgery and the surgery after that, none of these surgeries could be dangerous for you. However, if your body weakens between any of the surgeries the likelihood of you dying increases even more and the danger of the surgeries increases as well. That all being said, these surgeries are also necessary for your survival. Without them, the odds of you getting a deadly disease are much higher and, with your weakened immune system, the odds that you would be able to fight it off decrease dramatically too.”
The doctor paused here as though waiting for Johnny to say something, but, as always with these conversations, he didn’t know what to say. A part of him wondered how many more times they would have this type of conversation: the doctor speaking, Johnny listening and not replying.

“You will be allowed to eat dinner tonight,” the doctor went on once it seemed apparent Johnny wasn’t going to say anything. “However, tomorrow morning you won’t be able to eat breakfast and after midnight you will not be able to eat or drink anything. But you already know that.”

This time Johnny nodded. They’d done the same thing before his back surgery. They’d told him it was dangerous to eat and drink beforehand because of the effects the anesthesia could have on him if he did. And, as much as he’d wanted to die even just a few weeks ago, he didn’t want to now. Not when he was so close to moving in with Dallas and having everything he ever wanted.

It was still strange to think that only a few weeks ago, he’d wanted so desperately to die, he’d run into a church that was burning down to save some kids. But he hadn’t died. He’d only been crippled and badly burned and he wasn’t sure yet that that wasn’t worse than death. The only good part about any of this had been Dallas and the gang. It was everything else that was hard to deal with.

The everything else was the fact he couldn’t walk. The fact he might not ever walk again, despite the surgery he’d gotten. The fact he still might die during his next surgeries if his body didn’t get stronger. The fact that he’d killed someone. The fact that everyone would hate him for it. It didn’t matter he’d legally been declared not guilty. He knew there were people that disagreed with that sentencing. The doctors and nurses didn’t treat him any different, but he had eyes and his door was almost always open. He could see the looks on people’s faces as they walked by his room.

His hands clenched into fists again and his eyes squeezed shut tight as images began to flash through his mind. It hadn’t even been a month since he’d killed the Soc in the park and he could still see it like it had happened yesterday. He could still see his knife sinking into the Soc’s side, could see him stagger back in surprise, his hand to his side before he pulled it away and saw red, his eyes going wide with shock. He could still see the way the Soc had looked at him after that, hardly daring to believe the little kid he’d beaten and done much worse to three different times had done this now. And Johnny hadn’t been able to believe it either. It was true he hadn’t meant to. When he’d rushed at the Soc, he’d meant to threaten him or push him into the fountain or something, but his knife was already in his hand when he got to the fountain and everything had felt like it was electrified and all of his rational thinking had gone out the window.

It’s my fault, he thought miserably, tears pricking the edges of his eyes. It’s all my stupid fault. I shoulda talked to him, I shoulda told him to stop, I shoulda just threatened him or made them come after me again. Then Ponyboy woulda been fine and they would all be alive.

And he wouldn’t be crippled and burned either because he never would’ve had to run away.

He threw his arm over his eyes, blocking out the world, grimacing.

So it was all his fault. If he’d just thought ahead, then none of this would’ve ever happened.

The fingers of his other hand curled into the sheets, clutching at them with all his strength.

Everything is my fault, he thought miserably, trying to hold back the sobs rising in his chest. It’s all my fault. If I’d only been smarter...none of this woulda happened. And then he couldn’t hold the sobs back anymore and he let them flow out of him. He was sure that everyone on that floor could hear him crying, but, in that moment, he didn’t care. He was sick of everything. He was miserable. And he was going to cry. He deserved a moment of peace. And it never came. And that was why he cried.
“Johnnycake?”

The voice startled him and pulled his arm away from his face, swiping quickly at his cheeks, before he looked at the door and saw Steve, Two-Bit, and Darry standing in the doorway. They all looked nervous, worried, and he knew they must’ve heard him crying. He wondered how long they’d been standing there or how far down the hall they’d been able to hear his sobs.

Any smile he could give them now he knew was going to look fake, but he tried anyway and said in the weak, hoarse voice he’d had for weeks now, “Hey y’all.”

This seemed to break some kind of spell and they all smiled back. Johnny could almost see the tension go out of their shoulders as they slumped slightly. His fingers in the sheets tightened as he realized just how much heartache he caused them on a daily basis.

“How you doin’, Johnny?” Darry asked, his face still looked worried as he sat in the chair on the left side of his bed, being careful to avoid the tubes and wires on the floor connecting Johnny to the IVs and machines around him.

Johnny still didn’t know how to answer that question and he swallowed hard, feeling everyone’s eyes on him as he said, “My first skin graft surgery is tomorrow.”

“Shit, does Dally know?” Steve asked.

Johnny nodded. “Where is Dally?”

“He had to work,” Steve replied. “So did Soda. Pony’s at school.”

“So you’re stuck with us,” Two-Bit said, grinning, but the grin didn’t meet his eyes.

“That’s not so bad,” Johnny replied, smiling back.

Everyone else smiled at him. But their smiles were sad, as though he knew he was hiding his own pain for their sake and they could just now see exactly what kind of toll that took on him. It’d gotten him to run into a burning church without a care for his own life. But he didn’t blame them or feel that way. He could just see it as their own guilt. They all blamed themselves for what had happened to him and he found that ironic since he blamed himself too.

Not for the first time, Johnny put himself in their positions and tried to imagine how he would feel if it were Dallas or Ponyboy or any one of them on this bed instead. He’d probably be doing the same thing they were: trying to convince themselves and everyone else that everything was okay.

“So,” he said, softly, looking away, staring at his hand still curled in the sheets, before his eyes flicked back to them again, “what’s been goin’ on with everyone?”

“Dally bought a house,” Steve said quickly, excited, “but I think you already knew that. You’re gonna be livin’ with him, right?”

Johnny nodded. He had to physically keep himself from reaching up for the St. Christopher necklace around his neck. He could feel the cool pendant against his skin. He wasn’t sure if Dally had told the rest of the gang about them yet and he didn’t want to say anything about it until then. He didn’t know how they would react and he’d heard horror stories of what had happened to some boys that liked other boys – especially boys who were not born boys like him – and, even though he loved the gang and he knew they loved him, he couldn’t help feeling afraid they might do the same things.

Then Johnny saw movement by the door and immediately his eyes flicked in that direction.
Instantly he froze and took a small, sharp breath.

The rest of the gang turned to the door too and all of their eyes widened too.

His parents were standing in the doorway and all of them were frozen, staring at them, because they weren’t supposed to be able to get here and none of them could figure out how they had. Though, even as Johnny thought that, he also thought that if Dallas could figure it out, he was sure his parents could if they really wanted to as well. His parents seemed just as surprised to see them as they were.

Darry was the first to recover and he stood, moving forward so he was standing in front of Johnny’s bed, blocking his parents’ path. “What the hell do you think you’re doing here?” he asked. His face was twisted into a mask of hate that Johnny had never seen on his face before. He hardly even looked like himself and he wondered just how many times he’d worn that expression. He was willing to get it wasn’t often.

His mother stepped forward, which wasn’t uncommon, but he noticed his father wasn’t looking at them, which was uncommon. Finally, his father turned his face and Johnny saw a large bruise on his cheek. He also had a split lip. His eyes widened. Had his mother done that? Somehow he didn’t think so. He was sure his father would fight back if she went after him. He didn’t love her enough to just let her hurt him like that without some sort of penance.

“He’s our son,” she said. It still surprised Johnny she called him by the right pronouns, name, and titles, but he knew why she did it: she thought it made her better than his father. She thought it made her a good mother. She thought it excused everything else. “We have a right to see him.”

Darry was already shaking his head and Two-Bit and Steve were standing on either side of him. “No. You don’t,” Darry replied, a lethal smirk cross his lips. His hands were clenched into fists, Steve’s arms were crossed over his chest, and Two-Bit’s hands were in his pockets, but they all looked dangerously mad. It was almost like they wanted his parents to give them a reason to hit them.

“Yes!” his mother replied, taking a step forwards, looking up in Darry’s face. “I do!”

“No, you don’t.”

Everyone turned. The voice hadn’t come from Darry, Two-Bit, or Steve. It’d come from the bed behind them and when they turned they saw Johnny, propping himself up with his elbows. The sheet had fallen off his chest, revealing the bad burns there and Johnny tried to ignore the way the gang’s eyes widened in shock and fear before they quickly turned away. He wasn’t really looking at or focusing on them anyway. He was glaring at his parents, the nails of his clenched fists digging into his palms as he did so.

“You don’t got any right to be here,” he said, his voice shaking with the effort of keeping himself upright. “Not after what you done.”

“What we’ve done?!” his mother shouted, gesturing to herself, incredulous. “What about what you’ve done?! You’re bringing charges against us! Charges that aren’t even true! All we’ve ever done is fed and clothed you and kept a roof over your head and this is how you repay us! We give you anything you want! What more could you want?!”

“A mother who doesn’t beat me!” Johnny shouted, wishing he could sit up all the way, wishing it
didn’t hurt to shout. “And who doesn’t let my father rape me and then blame me for it or, worse, not even believe it happened altogether!” There were angry tears running down his cheeks now. “I want a father who loves me and doesn’t wanna r-rape me or-or molest me or anythin’.” He looked away, the tears, running down his face into the healing burns on his neck, making them sting. He took a breath and turned back. “Leave.”

The room was silent for a moment, but then Darry turned to his parents, crossed his arms over his chest and said, “You heard him. Leave. And don’t come back.”

“Or what?” his mother shot back.

This time Darry took a step towards her and the look he gave her wasn’t one of fury. He looked completely calm and that was what made him so scary as he said, “Then I’ll kill you.”

The room was silent again. Johnny had never heard Darry threaten anyone like that before.

His mother stood there for a moment more, looking up into Darry’s face, shock on her own, before she finally glared again, turned on her heel and walked back down the hall, his father trailing after her. Steve and Two-Bit waved sarcastically and blew kisses as they left, telling them to make sure the door didn’t smash their ass on the way out.

Johnny immediately slumped back down into his pillows, worn out, gasping for air and staring at the ceiling. It didn’t take very long for his distress to be noticed by Darry and he made Two-Bit and Steve calm down enough to talk with Johnny until the nurse found them there and told them to leave, but Johnny was smiling when they left. He’d been smiling ever since his parents left.

For the first time in his life, he’d gotten to tell them exactly how he felt without worrying about being beat with words or fists for doing so. It felt good. Better than good. And the fact the gang had backed him up had felt even better.

He smiled, beaming up at the ceiling now.

He was still scared about his surgery, still scared about everything that would come after once he was released from the hospital, but he was going to be living with Dallas and his parents were going to be charged for what they’d done to him. Things were going right. Just very slowly. Just a little bit at a time.

Chapter End Notes

so i know dallas just confronted them, but we live for payback!!! honestly i wrote this as a sort of cathartic thing cause in my dreams this is what happens with my own parents.
The first thing Dally did every morning before he had to go to work was have a cigarette. Sometimes he had it as he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, watching it slowly get brighter and brighter as the sun came up. Sometimes he had it while he was getting dressed, leaving it in his ashtray on his nightstand while he pulled on his work uniform. And sometimes he had it on the front stoop of the house he’d bought, staring out across the street, watching the sun come up over the houses.

The last one was new. And he’d only started doing it after he brought Johnny some new books to read and he gave him *Gone With the Wind*, so he could put it one the bookshelf he’d already bought for their living room and started to fill with the books Johnny already had. He’d opened the book after he left the hospital and a letter had fallen out. It was addressed to Ponyboy and the date was from two weeks ago, but he recognized Johnny’s handwriting and he read it before he could stop himself.

The letter had clearly been written the night of the rumble, the night Johnny had almost died and reading it now still put fear into veins and pain into his heart. It reminded him that even now there was a chance Johnny still might die. It had been two weeks since this letter was written and still his life hung in the balance. He had better odds now, but that didn’t make Dally’s fear vanish.

Parts of it had made a lump form in his throat. Like the part about him being okay with dying if he was able to save those kids. It felt heartbreaking to know that Johnny, a kid who had been so beat down by life he’d barely gotten to live it at all, had been ready to die at sixteen. More than once in his life Dally had wanted to die, but he never would’ve done anything about it. Johnny had tried to kill himself several times and the only reason he’d never succeeded was because the gang stopped him in time. Seeing the letter reminded Dallas that it didn’t matter how many times they stopped him or told him he cared if he didn’t believe it was true.

But it was the final lines that had gotten to him.

He’d asked Ponyboy to take him to see a sunrise. He’d asked Ponyboy to tell him that there was still good in this world. And as he’d read those two statements it made him realize just how well Johnny knew him. He had never seen a sunrise or sunset. He didn’t think there was any good in this world. Especially not after what had happened to Johnny.

He still wasn’t sure he believed there was good in the world, but he’d started watching the sunrises,
trying to see what Johnny did in them and, as he sat on the stoop, smoking his morning cigarette, already dressed in his work clothes, the day of Johnny’s first skin graft surgery, he thought the dawn looked particularly beautiful and hoped it was a sign of how the day would go.

Finishing his cigarette, he put it in his pocket and flung his jacket over his shoulder as he started towards work. He mostly watched his feet as he walked, but he looked up every so often to see the progression of the sunrise.

Today was the first of Johnny’s skin graft surgeries and he wasn’t going to be able to be there because he had to work. He’d asked Digger for the day off, but when he told him that Johnny had two other surgeries that not only he, but Soda and Steve would have to miss work for as well, Digger had given them all a choice: they could all go to one of Johnny’s surgeries, or they could take turns working, before, during, and after the surgeries. They’d found that to be fair and had agreed. Besides, Dally would be getting off two hours before Johnny was supposed to be out of surgery. He would be able to see him then if anything.

* * *

Like with his last surgery, when Johnny woke up the morning of his skin graft surgery, he couldn’t quite figure out why his heart was beating so fast and his hands were already shaking, until he remembered. Then he closed his eyes, swallowing hard, and tried to convince himself as he had before his last surgery that everything would be alright.

He was still trying to calm himself when he heard a knock at the door. His eyes snapped open and he saw the doctor standing in the doorway, carrying the same folder he always did and wearing the same grave expression he always seemed to wear whenever he came to visit him. Johnny’s eyes darted immediately to the clock on the wall. It was nine-thirty. His operation was at noon.

“Today we’re going to be replacing the patches of skin throughout your body that are burned too badly to heal on their own,” the doctor said as he pulled the chair next to Johnny’s bed forward and sat down. “The next operation will be replacing the skin on your back. The final one will be
replacing the skin on your chest. The first one holds the least risk, which is why we’re doing it first.”

Johnny nodded at the doctor. He wasn’t sure what parts of his body the doctor thought needed to be grafted other than his chest and back, but he knew he wasn’t the professional and the doctors taking care of him had done a good job so far, so he was willing to at least try trusting them going forward. He was afraid of adults. And for good reason. He didn’t trust them easily.

The doctor reminded him he wouldn’t be able to eat or drink anything until after his surgery and Johnny felt his stomach rumble as the doctor spoke, but even so he wished he could drink something more than anything else.

“Your odds of surviving this surgery are very good,” the doctor went on. “It will put minimal strain on your body and, most likely, heal very quickly. The only risk this does pose is it could strain your body enough that it wears you out. If that is the case, then the next surgery will be more risky. However, the odds of you dying from the second surgery, even if the first does exhaust you, are still slim. Skin graft surgeries are some of the safest at the moment.”

Johnny only gave a tight smile and nodded again. He could hear the machine to his left beeping erratically as his heart pounded in his chest from nerves. His fingers curled slightly in his sheets and the doctor looked at the machine before saying, “I’ll get the nurse to come in and give you some medicine to help you relax until your surgery. We’ll be bringing you down to the pre-op area around eleven. Your friends are already here, I think. They’ll be able to see you then.”

The doctor got up to leave then and Johnny found himself slightly surprised that his friends were coming to this surgery as well as his last one. This one wasn’t nearly as important or dangerous as the last one and a part of him felt guilty for making them miss work when that was the case. However, at the same time, he was also grateful they were there.

He read until the doctor came for him again. He was reading *The Hobbit* now. He’d borrowed it from Ponyboy and he had the rest of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in a stack on the nightstand next to his hospital bed. He liked fantasy and sci-fi novels more than any other kind.

The nurse gave him another dose of the medication to help calm him before they wheeled him down to the pre-op room and, a few moments later, the gang burst through the paper curtains hung around his bed, all talking at once and going to hug him. They all seemed much more happy and enthusiastic than they’d been before his last surgery. He didn’t know if the doctor had told them the risk factors of this surgery, but he was guessing he hadn’t.

Darry, Ponyboy, SodaPop, Steve, and Two-Bit were there. The only person missing was Dallas and Soda explained that was because he had to work. “He’ll be here once you get out of surgery, though,” Soda went on, smiling. “Our boss didn’t want all of us missin’ the day. We gotta go in as soon as you get out of surgery. He’s really sorry he couldn’t be here though.”

Johnny nodded. He understood that even if he didn’t like it and, to be honest, he felt it was more important Dallas be there when he wake up rather than when he went into surgery.

Everyone went back to talking amongst themselves and Johnny remained silently anxious.

“You nervous, Johnnycake?”

Johnny turned and saw Ponyboy sitting in the chair next to his bed. Soda and Steve were talking about cars. Two-Bit and Darry were talking about something Johnny really couldn’t hear since their voices were so low. He didn’t mind being left out of conversations, but he was grateful at the same time to Ponyboy for coming to talk to him anyway.
He shrugged one shoulder in response and said, “The doc said it ain’t gonna be a dangerous surgery like the last one, so I dunno why I’m still shaking.”

“She surgery is scary no matter what, but you’ll be okay, Johnny, we’ll be right here with you and we’ll be here when you wake up too,” Ponyboy replied, reaching out to take one of Johnny’s hands and squeeze it. He gave a small smile. “You gotta be okay. You know we couldn’t get along without you.”

Ponyboy was a very physical person and showed everyone he loved them through touching them. He was the only person besides Dallas Johnny didn’t mind touching him. Ponyboy was the person who understood him best. Second only to Dallas.

And his words touched Johnny too. He wasn’t sure how true it was that the gang wouldn’t be able to go on without him, but the fact they all insisted it was made him feel important anyway. It was one of the reasons he didn’t want to die: he didn’t want to have to find out if he were wrong or not.

“Thanks, Pony,” he replied softly and gave a small, close-lipped smile of his own.

It wasn’t long after that the doctor returned and told the gang to go to the waiting room. They all gave Johnny a hug like they had last time, but there was none of the tense sadness there had been before. This time they held Johnny to give him courage and strength, rather than because they were afraid they would never see him alive again and Johnny was grateful for it.

“It’ll be just fine, Johnny,” Darry told him. “We’ll be here when you wake up.”

They all smiled at him and he smiled back as his bed was wheeled towards the operating room.

Not for the first time, he felt lucky to have such good friends.

* * *

The eight hours of Dally’s shift passed so slowly that he was certain someone had fixed the clocks to move half their normal speed. By the time two o’clock finally rolled around, he felt like he’d been there all day rather than only eight hours. He punched out as quickly as possible and ran as fast as his legs would carry him back to his house and the car he was borrowing from Buck Merrill, waiting there. He jumped into the passenger seat without even opening the door, started the car and sped off down the street so fast, he was lucky there was no one in the way because he surely would’ve run them over.

The hospital wasn’t that far away and there were still two hours left of Johnny’s surgery, but he felt he had to get there as quickly as possible. At every turn, his tires screeched and the back of his car swung wildly. He heard voices shouting at him from other open car windows. He heard horns honking at him loudly as he passed a little too close for comfort, but he ignored them all. He had to get to the hospital. He had to get to Johnny.

His tires squealed again as he pulled into the parking lot and found a spot surprisingly right next to the door. He locked the car and pulled the keys out of the ignition as he jumped out of the car, again without opening the door, and ran into the hospital. He glanced at the now familiar nurse sitting at the receptionist’s desk in front, who saw him and pointed down the hall. He ran in that direction and found the gang in the waiting room where they’d been before the end of Johnny’s last surgery.

They all turned to him when he entered the room, breathing heavily. He collapsed in a chair next to Sodapop and Ponyboy and, once he managed to catch his breath, asked, “How was he? Before he went into surgery?”
“He was nervous,” Ponyboy replied. “But okay otherwise.”

Sodapop and everyone else around them nodded. Dally nodded too.

He wanted to get up and pace. Now that he was here he felt that the nervous energy that had filled him ever since he went to work wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon. Without realizing what he was doing, he got up and started pacing back and forth. It wasn’t until he started getting agitated too, thinking about everything that could go wrong, and noticed people staring that he sat back down again, but he still felt the need to move, so he bounced his leg instead, staring at the clocks, still moving extra slow, counting down the minutes until the end of Johnny’s operation.

Finally, what felt like decades later, the doctor reappeared and the gang all stood up at once, going to him, the same question on all their faces.

“The surgery went just fine,” the doctor told them. “He’s in the recovery room right now, but you can go see him if you would like.”

The gang all nodded eagerly and several nurses had to yell at them to slow down as they practically ran to the recovery room once the doctor told them the direction to go in.

Once they got there, Sodapop and Steve threw back the paper curtains around Johnny’s bed and they all crowded in around him. Dally pushed himself to the front of them, making sure he was standing at Johnny’s side where Johnny could see him as the rest of the gang, smiled and told him how strong and tough he was.

“Ain’t nobody in the gang as tough as you, Johnnycake,” Two-Bit was saying like a proud older brother. “Ain’t nobody been through this much pain and not cried about it.”

Johnny smiled weakly at all of them, but he looked genuinely happy. He had bandages at odd places on him now. His left wrist, his right forearm, a few of his fingers, a patch on his neck, another patch on his shoulder, and that was just what wasn’t being covered by the blankets. Dally swallowed hard as he realized what each of them meant and wondered how long it would take Johnny to recover from having to be put back together almost literally from scratch. He wondered if they’d even find all the pieces or if the pieces would ever fit together right again.

The gang stayed through the night. They stayed when he got moved back to his room and they stayed even when the doctors and nurses tried – halfheartedly at best – to kick them out. Eventually, they got quieter, each of them taking turns playing card games on the floor or smoking out the window. Two-Bit had snuck in beer at one point and everyone, except Johnny, was now a little tipsy.

Johnny kept fading in and out of consciousness, which worried Dallas. He seemed much more exhausted than he should’ve been for a surgery that was supposed to be low risk and low strain.

“I’m okay, Dallas,” Johnny told him, smiling, his eyes closed. “Really. Go have fun with everyone. I’m okay.”

But Dally didn’t believe him and, as he watched as Johnny fell asleep again, he bit his lip.

How unfair would it be for him to survive so much only to lose him now?

But then Two-Bit came over and offered him another beer and Soda roped him into a game of poker and Dally forgot all about his worries as Johnny slept soundly on the bed behind them.
i'm hoping i'll be able to update this while i'm moving and driving over there and whatnot, but idk for sure yet. i am not gonna abandon this or anything in this universe tho, that's for sure.
The First of Many Moving Days

Chapter Summary

Dally starts moving into his new house and the gang helps him out.

Chapter Notes

sorry this took so long!! i've had low motivation lately ;-; i rly hope that doesn't go on forever because i am enjoying writing this series and i don't want it to die.

The first thing Dally learned when moving his stuff from both Buck Merrill’s apartment and his father’s place to his own house was that the car he was borrowing wasn’t nearly big enough and, though it looked nice, he wished in this instance he had the truck Darry drove. There was much more room in the bed of Darry’s truck than there was in his entire car. He was going to have to take several trips between here and his father’s house and Buck Merrill’s. He could already tell.

Dallas had been moving things into his new house all day. The day before, he’d had the gang come over and they’d taken measurements to figure out how to build the ramp they would need to build up to the door, so Johnny could get inside in his wheelchair. Darry, who roofed houses for a living, had been the most help, telling Dallas and everyone else exactly what they would need to do to build the ramp and have it be functional. He’d also promised, along with the rest of the gang, that they would be back when it came time to build the ramp, which was supposed to be sometime today. The thought alone now made Dallas smile and not for the first time he wished Johnny could see how much the gang loved him.

He pulled up in front of the house and stared at it. Right now, it was mostly empty and from the way it looked on the outside, it looked like it hadn’t been inhabited for a few weeks, even though Dallas had been sleeping there on his bed for almost a week now, and something about it made it seem sinister. However, despite that, Dallas wasn’t worried. He was just not used to house and in a few weeks, he’d forget he’d ever felt this way to begin with.

The top of Buck’s car was down, which made it easier to grab boxes of his things out of the back and lug them into the house. The only furniture in the house so far was an old couch Buck had given him that he didn’t use anymore as well as an old coffee table that had been given him to him by the Curtises for the same reason. His bed was in the bedroom, along with his nightstand, but other than that the house was empty.

As Dallas carried the boxes back and forth, stacking them just inside the door as he worked, he thought about Johnny.

The gang had stayed with Johnny all night after his first skin graft surgery. They’d stayed until the doctor and nurse came in the next morning to wake Johnny for breakfast and then they hadn’t left until the doctor and nurse had told them everything they’d wanted to know.
The surgery had gone well, but only just. Johnny was still very weak, much weaker than they’d thought and, though the doctor was optimistic about the upcoming surgeries, the risk for them had increased. The doctor reassured them that he still felt good about Johnny’s chances of surviving those surgeries, but he wouldn’t know their risk for certain until they happened and could see how much Johnny had or had not recovered.

That hadn’t been the answer anyone was hoping for or expecting. Somehow it seemed they’d all thought that after this surgery Johnny was out of the woods, he was in the clear, and they had nothing to worry about anymore. But it seemed that they had also somehow forgotten that he had two more surgeries still and two more weeks at least until he was going to be released. If he were released. If he survived. The thought alone made them all bite their lips as they left the hospital that morning.

It had now been two days since Johnny’s surgery. His next surgery was scheduled for the end of the week and, as Dallas set down another load of boxes and went back to the car for more, he couldn’t help feeling anxiety spike in his chest at the thought.

Not for the first time, Dally wondered how many more times Johnny could get lucky with his health. Even now it already seemed like he had gotten more than his fair share of medical luck. How many more times could he get lucky before whoever was watching over them decided they’d had enough luck and took it all away?

The thought made Dally’s fingers tighten around the boxes he was holding and he set these ones down much harder than he had the others and the entire stack by the door wobbled as he did so. He didn’t care if it fell. He didn’t even watch this happen. He turned his back on it and walked woodenly towards the couch before collapsing into it, feeling his entire body shake with fear at the thought of losing Johnny.

He really meant it that life wasn’t worth living without Johnny in it. He also really meant it when he said – or, more likely, thought – about how he would kill himself if Johnny did die. He loved the rest of the gang just fine, but the way he loved Johnny was different. It was unconditional, pure love. And even the thought of having to live without him was too much.

*What would be the point of this house if he just died?* He thought to himself, staring at the ceiling which spun in circles above him.

There wouldn’t be a point to anymore. And that was the truth.

But he wouldn’t want to kill himself in here. He wouldn’t want to hang himself.

He would use a gun or get someone else – maybe the cops – to use a gun on him instead.

Dallas closed his eyes, horrible images of Johnny’s death, Johnny’s funeral, life after Johnny, flashing through his mind as he did so. His fingers curled into the couch cushions, clutching them as he gritted his teeth. In any event, if Johnny died, he was dying too. This world was too dark and cold and cruel and he knew he couldn’t survive without him.

There was a light knock at the door and a voice said, “Dallas?”

Dally jumped, opening his eyes and turning towards the door, which he hadn’t realized he’d left open, to see Darry, Steve, Two-Bit, and Sodapop standing in the doorway. It took him a moment to realize why they were here. It was a weekday, so Ponyboy was at school, but everyone had gotten the day off of work to help build the ramp up to the house. Dally was still surprised that Digger had let himself, Soda, and Steve off for the day.
Forcing himself to smile, Dally sat up and then stood saying, “Hey, man, how you doin’?”

“We bought a ton of wood at the hardware store,” Soda was saying as they all stepped back out into the front yard. “Darry brought all his tools, but we still had to get more.”

Dally nodded absently, staring at Darry’s truck which was loaded full to bursting with wood. Darry seemed to notice him staring and said, “We got as much as the truck could carry, but...we still might need more. None of us have ever built somethin’ like this before.”

Dally only nodded again and said, turning to look at Darry, “Well. I’ve never built anythin’ in my life, so what d’you think we oughta do first?”

For a few moments, everyone was silent while Darry thought. They didn’t have a blueprint. They didn’t have instructions. They only had examples from pictures they’d taken of other such ramps in the neighborhood and Darry’s knowledge of building. Dallas could only hope that was enough.

Finally, Darry said, “We should start by cuttin’ the wood up into the pieces we’re gonna need.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the stack of photographs he’d taken of the other ramps around the neighborhood, examining them as he called out rough measurements, assuring everyone as Soda wrote them down, that they could always buy more wood if they made mistakes. Dally wasn’t entirely sure that was true. They were all poor and there was definitely a finite amount of wood they could buy, so he hoped they got it right the first time.

Once Darry had finished examining the pictures and telling them how they needed to cut the wood, Two-Bit and Steve started unloaded the wood, while Sodapop and Dallas unloaded the equipment and Darry started marking the unloaded wood with the measurements he’d just called out using a permanent marker.

They swung easily into a working rhythm once all of the wood was unloaded and marked and the equipment had been sent up around the yard. More than a few people stared at them as they passed on the street, wondering what five boys could be doing with that much wood and hardware tools in the yard of someone they were sure wasn’t related to any of them.

Darry cut the wood he’d marked, Soda sanded it and Two-Bit, Steve, and Dally started to put the ramp together. If Dallas were being honest, he was already surprised how well the ramp was turning out. The thought made him smile and he realized only vaguely that he’d never done anything like this before. His mother had been too sick to do wood shop things with him and his father just hadn’t ever wanted to. However, sitting here now, doing this with the gang seemed like it was ten times more fun than anything his parents could’ve come up with.

They worked through the day, even as the hot summer sun beat down on them, heating up the backs of their necks, making them sweat like dogs. Every few hours, someone would volunteer to go get water bottles or Coke’s down at the corner store. They took turns doing it, walking down the street and back with enough drinks for everyone.

They didn’t stop until the sun was starting to go down and then they couldn’t work anymore because they couldn’t see what they were doing. Steve and Soda ran to the corner store one last time and when they came back, everyone set down their tools, examined their work – they’d gotten only a quarter of the ramp done, but Dally thought it looked great so far – as they drank their drinks and waited for the stars to come out.

“Thanks for all your help,” Dally said into the silence that followed. “Johnny is really gonna appreciate havin’ a ramp he can get up and down by himself if he’s ever out on his own.”
The rest of the gang smiled at him and raised their glasses.

“We’re happy to help!” Soda replied excitedly and everyone else nodded in agreement.

Dally could only smile back.

He had to admit, as much as he got on Johnny’s case for not recognizing how much the gang loved him, he was guilty of the same damn thing. He shifted his gaze to the house behind him and wondered not for the first time if things were finally starting to go right.

Chapter End Notes

i also have another universe idea for another fandom that is similar to this one. only my friend dyingpoet knows what that is at the moment, but i’m hoping that maybe today or tomorrow i’ll have the first part of it up!!
Recovery is Never Linear

Chapter Summary

Johnny has a bad health day.

Chapter Notes

I AM SO SORRY THIS TOOK FOREVER. i am out of weed, which is what i usually use to focus, so i've been having trouble with that. and then there's the fact i'm moving across the country right now, so yeah rip. these chapters and other things will probably take more time than usual for me get them out until the end of the month, maybe longer, idk (i hope not).

When Johnny woke up, three mornings after his surgery, he knew immediately that something was wrong. The last three days since his surgery he’d felt tired, but when he opened his eyes that morning, he felt exhausted. Like the last three nights of sleep had never happened and he’d been awake since the morning of his surgery. When his eyes looked towards the clock, he saw he’d slept in too. It was nearly noon and his breakfast – more sunny-side-up eggs with sausage and bacon – had been left on the nightstand by his bed. Even from the bed, it already looked like it was cold and getting too old to really be good to eat anymore.

And it wasn’t just the fact he was exhausted in his bones and had slept in.

When he opened his eyes, it felt like the world was spinning. When he closed his eyes again, it felt worse. His head pounded as though he had a fever and a part of him wondered if he did. That couldn’t mean anything good if that were the case. He remembered vaguely the doctor telling him that was a sign of infection. The other sign was his surgery sites feeling too warm, but none of them felt that way. It was just every part of himself he could feel that felt too warm.

Not for the first time he wished he were stronger so he could kick off his blankets and cool down, but he had a feeling the minute he did that he’d start shaking from how cold he was and just want them back on again.

When the nurse came in only fifteen minutes later with his lunch, he could tell from the tight-lipped smile she gave him that his not being awake for his breakfast had concerned her. She helped prop him up for his lunch and took away the breakfast tray like it wasn’t even there, telling him, like she always did, that she’d be back to take his tray and help him lie back down once he was finished.

That was when he discovered another problem.

His appetite seemed to be gone too. And every time he took a bite his stomach roiled, protesting the nutrients for reasons he couldn’t discern with his limited medical knowledge.

But it did make him nervous.
The doctor’s words before his last surgery echoed in his head over and over again: *The only risk this does pose is it could strain your body enough that it wears you out. If that is the case, then the next surgery will be more risky.*

*The only risk…*

*The only risk…*

*The only risk…*

The doctor had followed that statement by telling him that even if the first surgery did exhaust him, the odds of the second killing him were slim, but that didn’t make him feel any less anxious about it. The possibility was still there and Johnny wondered just how much longer he would have death hanging over him.

A part of him was afraid it would be the rest of his life, that even after the other two skin graft surgeries, he would still be warned constantly he might die and that someday, even after everything they’d done in an attempt to keep him alive, they would be right and he would just die.

It was strange now to think that he’d once wanted to die so badly and now he was scared to die. There were still days his desire to die was there, but he could recognize it now and knew that he didn’t really want to die. He just wanted everything to stop. He wanted the pain to stop. He wanted the fear to stop. He wanted greasers and Socs to be friends.

But he knew none of that would ever happen.

The Socs hated them more than ever now that Johnny had killed Bob. It didn’t matter that Bob and his friends had attacked them first. And it didn’t matter that in a court of law they’d agreed Johnny wasn’t guilty. The Socs felt Johnny had gotten away with murder. They didn’t think they’d done anything wrong. And, sometimes, Johnny thought they were right.

He had killed someone. No matter what the reasons were, he could never take that back.

How would he feel if the Socs had killed Ponyboy? Or Dallas? If he lived through it, would he ever forgive them? Would he ever be able to move on? Were the Socs able to move on? He doubted it. Even if Bob hadn’t been all of their best friend, he’d been part of their gang. And, though the Socs were heartless bastards, Johnny didn’t believe any of them really deserved to die.

*Your fault, your fault, your fault,* a voice chanted in his head, the same voice that always chanted it every time he thought about Bob. And he couldn’t even argue with it. The voice was right.

It was his fault. Everything that had happened since the night he’d killed Bob had been his fault. The church fire, him getting paralyzed, him getting burned. All of it. If he hadn’t killed Bob, none of it would’ve happened. And he knew that. It didn’t matter what the gang told him or what they believed. The truth was he was a murderer. And it was his fault he was hurt. He’d made his bed with red hands and white sheets and now he had to lie in it.

The nurse came in a short while later to take away his lunch tray and lay him back down. He stared at the ceiling, not wanting her to see the tears swimming in his eyes as he clenched his hands. They still felt sticky with blood. Every time he looked at them, they still looked bright red. And it wasn’t because of the burns.

As Johnny waited for the day to pass, watching the shadows grow on the ceiling as the sun made its journey across the sky, his gaze turned more than once to the books on his nightstand. But every time he picked it up, he couldn’t focus on anything except the images of Bob’s surprised face in his
mind’s eye when he’d shoved the knife into his side, right between his ribs. It was the last face he’d ever made, the face he’d died with. Not even the realm of Middle Earth could make it disappear.

Johnny wasn’t sure when he fell asleep, but his nightmares were full of blood, bone, blades, water, and death. He was woken up by the nurse again for his dinner and, as with twice before, he awoke gasping, clutching at his sheets, staring up at the ceiling, which was now all but dark. His eyes flicked to the clock and he saw that it was actually three hours passed his dinner.

“You were sleeping so soundly when I first came upon you,” the nurse explained when he turned to look at her as she propped him up with pillows. She wasn’t looking at him and there something in her expression that Johnny couldn’t read. “I thought I’d just bring your dinner later.”

When she did look at him, she smiled, but everything about it seemed fake and that worried Johnny more than his own speculation ever had.

His dinner was meatloaf with mashed potatoes and gravy and a side of corn covered in butter. It looked so good and yet as he tried eating it, he found he could eat only as much as he did at lunch, which was barely anything at all. His stomach growled in protest, begging for nutrients, but nothing he put into it made it happy.

This isn’t fair, he thought when the nurse came back for his food, frowning at how little he’d eaten. And it really wasn’t fair. He’d been through two surgeries in two weeks and he had two more to look forwards to in the coming next two weeks. And now he was tired all the time, so unable to focus he couldn’t read, and he couldn’t eat, even when he was hungry.

Johnny’s face twisted as tears pricked the corners of his eyes and he covered his face with his hands, letting out a gasping sob as he did so.

Some days it felt like the world was conspiring against him and no matter what he did to appease it, it was never enough.

* * *

It had become typical for Dallas to get off work around eight or nine and then go over to the hospital to spend as much time as he could with Johnny before one of the nurses found him and kicked him out and today was no different. He waved goodbye to Digger and Bleach and headed for the bus stop. The hospital was much too far to walk and he never drove to work, since work was close enough to walk. The buses ran until midnight and he would be headed home long before then most likely.

The bus wasn’t crowded at this time of night and he was able to get a seat in the back where no one would bother him. The bus made three other stops before it finally pulled up at the church that was on the corner next to the hospital. Dally got out, thanking the bus driver as he did so, before heading into the hospital. He didn’t bother sneaking in anymore. They knew he was going to come whether they tried to stop him or not and the nurse at the front desk just waved him forwards rather than trying to remind him what normal visiting hours were.

When Dally got to Johnny’s room, he stopped short.

Johnny was asleep.

He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall by his door. It was only nine. Johnny never went to sleep this early. Not even when he was tired. Not even now that he was in the hospital. The earliest he went to bed was eleven-thirty when Dallas left. Sometimes even midnight. Why was he asleep
now?

Instantly, fear filled the pit of his stomach as he remembered what the doctor had said about Johnny being weak after surgery. He also remembered how the doctor had said that was potentially dangerous. It could narrow or altogether ruin his chances of surviving his next surgery and as Dally took a tentative step into the room, he felt anxiety spike in his chest as images of the night Johnny’s heart had flatlined surged up in him. The thought alone made his hands shake uncharacteristically and he had to clench them into fists to keep them still.

He knocked lightly on the door and watched Johnny immediately stir in his sleep.

“Johnnycake,” he said quietly, stepping into the room. He went to the left of his bed, sitting in the chair that was waiting there. He took one of Johnny’s burned hands, looking at the peeling skin that was now slowly starting to heal.

Johnny blinked blearily, rubbing his eyes with his free hand before he opened them and smiled the moment he saw Dallas sitting next to him. For some reason, the gesture made Dally feel guilty. It wouldn’t be till later that he would realize it was because there was nothing he personally could do to help or save Johnny. He just had to wait and hope and pray and that wasn’t nearly enough. Not to him.

“Dallas,” he said in a voice hoarse from sleep. “What time is it? I-I’m sorry I fell asleep.”

“It’s okay, Johnnycake,” Dally said, his own voice still quiet. “It’s only nine. I ain’t been here very long. You can go back to sleep if you want.”

But Johnny was already shaking his head. “No,” he said firmly. “I wanna see you.”

Dally smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He was too worried.

“How was work?” Johnny asked, still blinking the sleep from his eyes.

Dallas shrugged one shoulder. “It was alright. Bleach stayed late with Digger tonight.”

“You like Bleach?”

Dally shrugged again. “He’s better than Chatterbox.”

“That’s Andy, right?” Johnny asked, his brows drawing together.

Dally nodded. “Yeah, he’s a real jerk. No one really likes him. Digger only tolerates him cause he’s so good at fixin’ cars. Not as good as Fix, but almost as good.”

They talked more about Dally’s work, then about the gang, and then about nothing in particular. Dallas smiled and laughed in all the right places and Johnny did too, but that fear was still hanging over them, the fear that this might not be happening for very much longer, and it really didn’t matter what they talked about. It stayed until Dally left.

Chapter End Notes

DID U SEE ME SNEAK IN THE TITLE?? heehee. this title rly came directly from that metaphor to begin with, so it was gonna happen eventually haha. i hope you enjoy
this since idk when i'm going to update next ;-; the next chapter tho is gonna be really fun :3 i honestly can't wait for y'all to read it.
Behind the Sodapop Machines

Chapter Summary

Dallas learns something about two of his best friends.

Chapter Notes

i have been excited to write this chapter since i had the idea for it!!!! aaaa!!!!!!!!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Work had become about a hundred times more stressful since Johnny’s surgery. More than ever Dallas had a hard time concentrating on his work rather than the thought that Johnny still might die or might be getting worse alone in the hospital when he couldn’t see him. He knew that the gang visited him as often as possible when they weren’t working or going to school, but even they couldn’t be there all the time and Dally’s biggest fear had become Johnny dying, slipping away alone and no one knowing until they went to the hospital to visit him, only to find he was dead and gone.

It was the day before Johnny’s second skin graft surgery and Dally had gotten off of work at three instead of eight-thirty because he’d asked Digger for the second half of the day off. He wanted to spend as much time with Johnny as possible before tomorrow. He kept reminding himself that the doctor had said the odds of Johnny not surviving this surgery were slim, even with the way the first one had exhausted him, but the possibility was still there and that was why Dallas was worried.

He was still thinking about this as he got his stuff out of his locker, one of many that lined one wall of the garage, and went out the back door. There were vending machines back there were all sorts of candies and sodas and he was planning on getting one of each to eat on his way to the hospital. Dallas didn’t eat much. He never really had. He was afraid of what would happen to his shape if he ate too much. But he hadn’t had breakfast or lunch and he was getting shaky. He needed to eat something, even if it was small, so he didn’t collapse on the way to or at the hospital.

He was so caught up in his own thoughts that he didn’t even realize there were already two people by the vending machines until he looked up and saw them. And then his eyes widened, his jaw dropped, and he realized what he was seeing.

Sodapop Curtis and Steve Randle were wrapped around each other, kissing each other so passionately that Dallas was wondering if they were going to eat each other’s faces. Even as he watched them, he realized that he should’ve known they were together all this time. Lord knew the gang had been given enough clues and yet, at the same time, he was still shocked. He wasn’t even really sure why. Maybe because he’d thought it would be too good to be true to think that there were more than two people in their gang that not only liked boys, but would be okay with him liking boys too.

Without noticing, Dallas dropped his jacket and his wallet in shock. They didn’t make much of a sound, but they made enough of one that Soda and Steve jumped apart, each of them turning to see Dally at the same time. Soda didn’t look at Dallas, his eyes on the ground and darting every which
way. He seemed afraid. Steve just stood, looking at Dally with the same open-mouthed expression. For several moments, they were all silent and frozen in place, the only one of them moving was Soda and even then it was nervous energy.

“Shit, Dally, did you see that?” Soda finally asked, rubbing his hands anxiously on his jeans. His eyes flicked to Dally’s face a few times before going back to the concrete beneath him.

It took Dally several moments to regain his composure, but once he did, he swallowed and closed his mouth saying, “You-you’re together?”

“Yeah, so?” Steve said. He was frowning and he’d crossed his arms over his chest.

Dally instantly put his hands up in the don’t-shoot-the-messenger gesture and said, “Yeah, but I ain’t judging you.”

“Yeah?” Steve went on, still frowning. His voice was laced with venom. He’d clearly been expecting an entirely different reaction. “And why not?”

For a moment, Dallas was silent as he swallowed again and lowered his hands. There wasn’t any reason for him to not tell them about himself and Johnny and yet at the same time, he still felt nervous. What if they weren’t really together? What if they were just experimenting? He knew they’d just told him that they were together and therefore not experimenting, but the fear of anyone finding out about him and Johnny was not one that was easily snuffed, even when confronted with other people in his own friend group who were just like them.

But this was Sodapop and Steve. He’d known them since he was a kid, since before he went to New York. And he knew the only reason Steve was being defensive now was because he felt the same way that Dallas did: despite everything, he was still afraid of what could happen to himself and Soda if he let anyone know their secret.

He swallowed again, clenching his hands into fists. They were shaking from more than just lack of food now. He looked at Soda and Steve and said, “Because me and Johnny are together. We’ve been together since the day of his back surgery. And-and I’ve loved him for a long time before then. I think he loved me too. But...we never said anything cause we were afraid the other wouldn’t feel the same way. Not until two weeks ago.”

There was another silence during which Steve and Soda stared at Dally in silence. He couldn’t read their expressions and for several long moments was terrified they were going to attack him, tell him he was a freak, or something that would let him know they didn’t accept them after all.

But that wasn’t what happened.

In fact, the exact opposite happened.

Soda jumped in the air, pointing at Dallas as he did so and shouted, “I knew it!” He turned to Steve. “Didn’t I tell you? I told you so! I told you! I was right!” He fist pumped the air, saying over and over again, “I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!”

Steve’s stern expression softened becoming slightly more surprised as he said, “Wait, for real? Seriously? You’re not just messin’ with us?”

This time Dally couldn’t stop himself from smiling at Soda’s reaction as he said, “Nah. I ain’t messin’ with you. I wouldn’t like about somethin’ like this.” Steve grinned now, though his arms were still crossed over his chest. Dally took a few steps forward and sat on the edge of the pavement, Steve and Soda sitting down next to him. “So...how did y’all get together?”
“When we were kids,” Soda said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and handing one to Dally and Steve before he lit all of them with his zippo lighter. “Steve and I kissed each other cause...well I dunno why. I think cause we wanted to know what kissing was like. But...it wasn’t until we got to the end of junior high that we realized we didn’t wanna just be friends who kissed sometimes. We wanted to be more. We never said anything cause we were afraid of what y’all would say.”

Dally nodded, understanding exactly how they felt. “What about Evie and Sandy?” he asked.

That was when both of them grinned and Soda laughed. “Well, they’re dating each other,” he said. “We just pretended we were all dating, so we’d have an excuse to all hang out together.”

The comment made Dallas laugh too. It was a good idea and a part of him was surprised he hadn’t recognized it sooner. Then again, he was so busy being afraid someone was going to figure out his feelings for Johnny, he’d probably been too preoccupied to recognize it before then.

But thinking about Johnny reminded Dallas of all his fears surrounding Johnny’s condition. He’d been so weak when he’d seen him the night before. And every night he’d seen him since his surgery. What would he do if he lost him? He wasn’t sure he would recover. Not ever. In fact, he’d kill himself. He knew that. He knew how he’d do it too. The gang might miss him, but they didn’t get it. Even they could survive without Johnny. Maybe not well, maybe the gang would breakup over it, but they could each individually survive.

Dally was different. Without Johnny he was nothing. He couldn’t do it without him.

“How’s it going?” Soda asked, leaning forwards to better see Dally’s face. “You okay?”

Dallas turned to him, giving him a tight-lipped smile, an excuse on his lips, but it died there too. They’d been honest with him, the least he could do was be honest in return. “It’s Johnny,” he said, his voice quiet. “I’m worried about him. He ain’t been doin’ well since his last surgery and the doctor said odds are he’ll make it through the next one, but...he’s so weak.”

“Yeah,” Steve said quietly after a moment, looking at the ground. Dally could tell from his expression when he turned to him he felt the same way. “He fell asleep when Soda and I went to visit him the other day too. He’s really weak and...I know the doctor keeps sayin’ he’s gonna be okay, but doctors can be wrong.”

Soda was looking at the ground now too, blowing his smoke at the ants carrying pieces of dirt and food to their hill back by the vending machines. “I dunno what we’d do if he died,” he replied quietly. He’d said something similar before, but Dally and Steve nodded in agreement all the same. It was the same thing that had been going through Dally’s head only a moment earlier.

There was a silence during which all three of them privately considered the possibility of Johnny dying and what might happen if he died. Then Soda smiled, always the one to cheer everyone up and said, “You and Johnny are gonna have to come on a date with us and Evie and Sandy sometime once he’s out of the hospital. We always hang out at the abandoned barn on the edge of town.”

Dallas grinned, taking a drag on his own cigarette and blowing the smoke at the clouds drifting lazily across the sky. “Count me in,” he said. And he meant it. It sounded fun. Then he bit his lip again and asked, “What ever happened to Sylvia?”

Soda shrugged and Steve said, “I dunno. She still lives in that house, but...no one sees her anymore. She must run in different circles. Last I heard she was with Curly Shepherd.”

Dally laughed and scoffed. “He’s in jail right now, isn’t he?”
Soda nodded. “Yeah. He got caught stealing in three different stores around town.”

Dally’s eyes widened, surprised that had never happened to Two-Bit as he said, “Well, he’s gonna be in for a rude awakening whenever he gets back. She ain’t a faithful girl.”

Soda and Steve nodded in agreement. They all knew how many times she’d cheated on Dallas while he’d been in jail. It stood to reason she would do the same to someone else. Unless she really loved Curly. But she had told Dallas multiple times she really loved him too and yet every time he’d gotten out of jail, he’d found her wrapped around some other guy.

_That doesn’t matter anymore_, he reminded himself. _You’re with Johnny now. She was a waste of time. She was just a distraction._

And though he knew he was right, that didn’t stop him from feeling like there was something wrong with him for how many times she’d cheated on him.

Not long after that, Dally stood and waved goodbye to Soda and Steve. He was an hour later leaving that he would have liked since four was the beginning of rush hour, but a part of him felt glad he’d stayed too. Knowing Soda and Steve were like him made him feel better about everything.

_Maybe if they can make it, we can too_, he thought.

And there was a smile on his face as he walked to the bus stop.

Chapter End Notes

yes, i am going to bring evie and sandy into the story at some point as well as cherry, but that probably won't be until part three. only five more chapters of part two!!

also yes dallas has an eating disorder and it's going to be brought up later in the fic too.
Diamonds in the Skin Part II

Chapter Summary

Johnny's second skin graft surgery

Chapter Notes

gosh i hope this isn't getting redundant rip. i'm trying to make each one original, but rip. i hope i actually am.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Johnny thought when he woke up on the morning of his second skin graft surgery was that at least this was the second to last one. He just had to survive one more surgery after this and then he’d be allowed to go home and everything would be okay again. Today they were going to be operating on his back, replacing all of the burned and damaged skin there to prevent the site where they’d cut open his back to put him back together from getting infected. There was still the risk of infection as they would be operating on the surgery site, but the risk would be less with it bandaged and him being put on a ton of antibiotics after the operating itself.

The doctor had told him all of this that morning just like he had the mornings before his other surgeries. Then he’d told him again that the last surgery would be done to replace the burned skin on his chest and after that was done, he’d be able to go home. It was still a full week off before that would even be a thought in the doctor’s mind, but the idea of getting out of the hospital soon made Johnny close his eyes and let out a sigh of relief. He was getting sick of being chained to this bed by tubes and wires and his own inability to move without help.

Like the past two surgeries, it was scheduled for noon and he wasn’t allowed to eat before it. He tried reading more of The Hobbit, but he couldn’t focus on it for longer than a couple of minutes. His eyes kept drifting towards the clock, watching it slowly count down the minutes until he would be in surgery and he shuddered.

It didn’t matter how many surgeries he had. It was always still scary.

At ten-thirty, the nurses again wheeled him in his bed out of his room and down to the pre-op area, giving him another healthy dose of anti-anxiety medication to slow his heart rate somewhat and make him more comfortable until the time of his surgery.

Again, as he felt the medication flow from his IV into his veins, he closed his eyes and let out a grateful sigh, giving the nurse who gave the medication to him a breathless thank you before he relaxed again into his pillows. He still wasn’t wearing a hospital gown and wouldn’t until his final surgery. His burns still needed to be aired out. The ones on his hands, shoulders, and legs were almost completely healed at this point, but that was only because they’d been aired out.

A part of Johnny wished he could just wear the gown anyway. He hated being so exposed. Even in the dead of summer when it got close to one-hundred degrees out, he wore his jeans, a t-shirt, and his
denim jacket. Part of it was because he liked wearing the same clothes over and over again. Most of
it was because he didn’t like being touched and keeping himself covered was the best way to prevent
that from happening.

“Johnnycake!”

Johnny jumped nearly a foot in the air as Soda threw back the teal paper curtains around his bed. The
rest of the gang piled through the curtains behind him, surrounding Johnny’s bed. Johnny noticed
Dallas was there this time, looking nervous, but smiling along with everyone else. Johnny smiled too,
feeling lucky, not for the first time, that he had such good friends.

“How you feelin’, Johnnycake?” Soda asked grinning, his arms crossed over his chest.

Johnny shrugged one shoulder. “Can’t complain, I guess. A little nervous.”

“You’re gonna be just fine, Johnnycake,” Darry said, placing a hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “We
ain’t gonna let nothin’ happen to you.”

“Even though y’all ain’t doctors?” Johnny asked. He raised an eyebrow, but he was still smiling.

“We’re good enough doctors that we’ll make the ones operating on you save you if they think they
can’t,” Two-Bit replied, grinning.

That didn’t make much sense to Johnny or the rest of the gang, most likely, but they still nodded
along with Two-Bit and Johnny still smiled. It was the thought that counted.

But even with all of the happiness that seemed to be in the air, there was the unspoken fear that all of
this was going to end very, very soon. Johnny could see it in the way Two-Bit held a beer in a paper
bag, drinking from it every so often. He could see it in the way Dallas stood away from everyone,
not saying anything, only occasionally smiling at Johnny. He could see it in the way Darry crossed
his arms over his chest, even though he was smiling, and Soda kept fidgeting even though he was
smiling too. It was Steve’s turn to work during his surgery and Ponyboy was still in school, and both
of them would be there once he got out of surgery, but everyone else looked tense. They all smiled,
they all laughed, and they all talked amiably with each other, but under it all was that fear.

It wasn’t too much time later that the nurse returned with several other nurses and announced it was
time for his surgery. She ushered the gang out of the pre-op room, all of them struggling against her
and waving goodbye to Johnny one last time. He waved weakly back, hoping silently it wouldn’t be
the last time he saw all of them.

As they positioned themselves around his bed, ready to wheel him towards the operating room, the
nurse pointed the St. Christopher necklace, still around his neck. “You wanna keep that with you?”
she asked, already going to remove it.

But Johnny instantly placed his hand over it, stopping her. “Yes,” he said. “I want to keep it.
The Christopher felt like a good lucky charm. It had gotten him through his last surgery. It felt
wrong, almost dangerous, to remove it now.

The nurses and doctors wheeled him out from behind the curtains and started towards the hall. Once
they reached it, Johnny saw Dallas, standing at the end of the hall near the entrance to the waiting
room, his hands in his pockets. Johnny saw him and gave a small half smile. Dally gave one back
and Johnny prayed desperately it wouldn’t be the last one of his he saw.

* * *
As Dally watched Johnny get wheeled down the hall towards the large, silver, swinging operating room doors, he wondered, like he had during his last two surgeries, if this would be the last time he saw him alive. Honestly, he wasn’t sure he could stand to see Johnny if he were dead. Just the thought of his limp body lying on a bed, never to move again made his hands start to shake and he had to clench them into fists in his pockets.

But once the images entered his mind, they didn’t go away. Then he was seeing the night Johnny had almost died and he remembered how Johnny had looked then, so small and still and silent. He saw what the world would’ve been like if he’d somehow survived Johnny’s death. He saw the gang putting him into the ground. He saw his parents not respecting him and putting his birth name on a headstone instead of his real name. He saw them putting him in a dress to bury him in instead of a suit. He saw him, his neck and hands still burned, never to heal now, in a pine box, looking asleep instead of dead. Then he saw that pine box lowering into the ground. He watched as hands that belonged to people he didn’t know threw dirt into the grave onto the casket. He saw the hole filled in and flowers put over the mound of dirt.

“Dally?”

Dallas jumped and turned to see Soda standing next to him, looking concerned. He had one hand on Dally’s arm and it took several moments of Dally blinking at him before he came out of his thoughts and back into the present where Johnny was just alive and in surgery.

“You okay?” Soda asked, still looking worried.

Dally blinked a few more times, glancing over his shoulder to see the gang all sitting in the waiting room chairs behind him looking at him as well. He forced a smile onto his face and nodding. “Yeah, I’m okay,” he replied.

Soda didn’t look convinced, nor did everyone else, but none of them said anything else, except, “Come sit with us, Dally!” And he obliged, sitting next to Darry.

Everyone looked tense. It wasn’t just him. Two-Bit was still drinking his beer. Or at least Dally thought it was beer. Or at least Dally thought it was something else, since he still hadn’t finished it. Darry was sitting with his arms on the arms of the chair he was in, one of his legs bouncing with nervous energy. Soda had so much of that energy he was just pacing the waiting room. Steve was at work, but Dally couldn’t imagine him being any calmer than the rest of them, just distracted. Same went for Ponyboy at school. Dally hadn’t told them how poorly Johnny seemed to be doing, but it seemed they all had been able to tell anyway.

Not for the first time, Dally wondered if Johnny would make it through this surgery. As always, he reminded himself that the doctor had said the odds of him dying during surgery still were very slim even with him in a weakened state, but that didn’t really make him feel better anymore. Doctors could be wrong. Doctors could mess up. And Johnny could be much weaker than the doctor thought.

The surgery would last six hours, much longer than the last one, but they were replacing the skin on his back and that was where it had been the most damaged. That was where that big beam had fallen on his back, breaking it and burning him badly. Dally had thought they would replace that skin last, but with the incision site from where they’d put his back together being there, they wanted to make sure there wasn’t a risk of infection as quickly as they could.

It was then that Dally realized he had never seen Johnny’s back. He had never seen what the burns there looked like. He’d seen the ones on his chest, hands, shoulders, and neck, but not the ones on his back. He wasn’t sure if he was grateful for that or not.
Time seemed to pass at half its normal speed. By the time six o’clock rolled around and Johnny’s surgery was over and the doctor came out to speak to them, Dally felt certain that twice that amount of time had passed.

They all stood when the doctor came into the waiting room, but that was all they did. They could tell by the doctor's face that something was wrong. Dally felt his heart speed up and he swallowed hard, his hands clenching into fists again. “What happened?” he said louder than he meant to. “What happened? He’s okay, right? He’s okay?”

The doctor nodded and Dally closed his eyes in relief, until the doctor spoke. “Only just,” he said. “His heart stopped during the operation and we only barely got it restarted. He was...a lot weaker than we thought he was.”

Dally’s own heart jumped into his throat at the words and again he wondered how many times Johnny’s heart could stop before it just couldn’t be restarted again. The thought that he had come, again, so close to dying made his hands shake, even though they were fists. What did this mean for his next surgery? Would he even survive it if he was already this weak?

“We’re going to be monitoring him closely before his final surgery,” the doctor went on. “If he’s this weak again, we’ll have to postpone the surgery or risk him dying on the table. Even then, there is still a chance that might happen.”

No one spoke. Dally didn’t look at the rest of the gang, but he didn’t have to. He was sure all of them looked identical to him: wide eyes, shaking hands, nervous swallows.

“Can we see him?” Soda asked in a weak voice somewhere off to Dally’s right.

The doctor nodded. “Yes,” he replied, “but he’s very weak. I don’t want you wearing him out.”

Everyone nodded and headed back to Johnny’s room, none of them speaking, all of them staring at their feet as they walked, all of them thinking the same thing.

**What if he doesn’t survive the next surgery? What if he dies?**

“I wish it was any one of us except Johnny,” Two-Bit said softly, breaking the silence.

No one responded, but they didn’t have to. He knew they all agreed.

Chapter End Notes

only four chapters left of part 2!! then we're onto part 3!! idk how i'm gonna start it yet, but hopefully i'll know by the time i get to it. this one took forever to write because i am in the middle of moving across the country and this is the first day in a while i've had time to sit and write.
It was the nurse who woke him up for breakfast the morning after his surgery. Johnny started awake when he felt her hand on his arm and his eyes flicked to the clock automatically. Again, he’d overslept. It was almost eleven already. He let the nurse help him sit up, let her give him his breakfast – waffles covered in syrup and butter with sausage and bacon – but he couldn’t stop thinking about the day before and what had happened during his surgery.

The doctor had come to him after his surgery, after the gang – more solemn than they’d been since before his first operation on his back - had left and gone home after the nurse practically had to kick them out. He’d sat down in the chair to Johnny’s left like he typically did, placing his folder once more on the end table next to his stack of *Lord of the Rings* books, *The Hobbit* on the top of the stack, he was borrowing from Ponyboy.

“Your heart stopped again during your last operation,” the doctor told him, not looking at Johnny as he said it. “It was unexpected. But evidently you were much weaker than we thought you were. Had we known, we might have postponed the surgery, but doing that may have just ended up with you getting a bad infection and dying anyway.”

“So...” Johnny began, his voice quiet. He never asked the doctor anything during these talks, but today he felt the need to. “So are you gonna go ahead with the next surgery?”

The doctor was quiet for a moment, staring at the ground. Then he looked right at Johnny and said, “Yes. Without the skin grafts, your body is still open to infection and with how weak you are at the moment, the odds of you being able to fight it off are very slim. This does mean your next surgery will be much more risky than the last two and the odds of you not surviving it are significantly higher than we thought they would be. That being said, I don’t think you will die.”

Johnny had swallowed hard and said nothing else. A part of him wanted to insist they wait longer to do the next surgery, infections be damned, but at the same time he wasn’t sure that really was the right choice. He wasn’t the doctor in this situation. All he could do was sit and pray that they knew what they were doing and he would survive his next surgery. Again, he marveled at how only a few weeks ago he’d wanted to die. Now the idea scared him and he was praying for the opposite.

He ate only half of his breakfast and when the nurse returned to take away his plates and give him his lunch – tomato basil soup with a few pieces of garlic bread – she frowned again at how little he’d
eaten. The soup and bread were easier to eat, but he still only ate half of his food. He knew it was because he was depressed, thinking what was the point if he was just going to die in a few days during his last operation, but that didn’t mean he could make himself eat. Eating felt useless. Just like every other thing that was going on right now.

When the nurse returned to take away his lunch, she said, “The doctor wants us to do a few tests to see how you’re doing. It’s nothing to be worried about. It’s just to make sure that your body will be strong enough for your operation on Friday.”

Johnny didn’t ask why the tests needed to be done. They’d done the same thing before his back surgery. They wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to die on the table. He wondered vaguely if they would cancel the operation even if the tests came back negative.

The nurse disappeared then, but came back with a stethoscope and a few other things she would need to check his vitals. She listened to his heart and his chest before taking a blood sample. Then she went away and told him the doctor would be in shortly to discuss the results with him.

Staring at the ceiling, he watched the way the shadows moved as the trees swayed in the wind outside. He could hear birds calling to one another through the open window and the breeze just barely ruffled his hair that was finally starting to grow back out. He was going to need grease for it again soon. It didn’t look as nice without grease once it got longer. He clenched his hands into fists as he realized he might not even live long enough for that to happen.

There was movement near the door and his eyes flicked from the ceiling to the door to see the doctor standing in the entrance again. He looked just as grave as he had before, his folder still in his hands. He knocked on the door to let Johnny know he was there, but Johnny felt that was redundant since he’d already seen him. The doctor came in and, as usual, set the folder on his nightstand, taking his seat in the white plastic chair to Johnny’s left.

The look on his face scared Johnny. Was he really that frail? Was he really going to die soon?

“After reviewing your tests,” the doctor began, “we’ve determined that it would be more safe than not to go through with your surgery on Friday. However, we did discover that your lungs are more damaged by the fire and the external burns on your chest than we originally thought. It’s very likely that you will have to be on oxygen for the rest of your life. When you go home, we’ll be sending an oxygen converter with you as well as several tanks for when you leave the house.”

“Won’t that make the surgery more risky?” Johnny asked quietly.

The doctor was quiet for a moment. It was obvious pretty quickly this was the question he’d been hoping he wouldn’t ask. Finally, the doctor nodded and said, “Yes. It will make the operation to replace the skin on your chest more risky. However, like I told you before, not going through with it could result in a deadly infection and with the damaged skin so close to your lungs and heart, the odds of you surviving it would be slim to none. You have a better chance of surviving the surgery on your chest than you do an infection.”

Johnny said nothing after that, unsure of what else he even could say and the doctor left not long after. He didn’t feel reassured by what the doctor had said and once again felt like he had before his first operation: that he was stuck between a rock and hard place. The surgery could kill him, yes, but if he got an infection he would for sure die. It seemed unfair that nothing in his life was ever easy.

Once the doctor left, Johnny returned his attention to the moving shadows on the ceiling, watching them, unable to focus on his book – though he tried – until the nurse brought in his dinner – meatloaf with green beans and mashed potatoes with gravy. He didn’t even eat his dinner. He tried taking a
few bites, but everything made him feel nauseous.

How could he survive any of this? It seemed impossible at this point. How many times had his heart stopped now? Four? Five? He’d already lost track. How many more times could they restart it? Once? Twice? None? He didn’t know. It seemed more and more likely that despite everything he was going to die and that was the most unfair thing of all. How could he have gone through so many surgeries, so much recovery, to die now? Now when he was going to be moving in with Dallas and have everything he’d ever wanted?

Build a thousand paper cranes, a voice in his head whispered. Build a thousand paper cranes and let your wish be to get well.

Johnny wasn’t sure where this came from. He wasn’t even sure where he’d originally heard the legend of the thousand paper cranes that could grant a wish. Maybe from one of the many books he’d read when he chose to spend his days during the summer at the library.

Once upon a time, his wish would’ve been to die, maybe to get free of his parents. But now he wanted to live. Now he was already going to be getting away from them. The only wish he had was to get well and if not as healthy as he had once been at least healthy enough that he wouldn’t die, so he could have the life he’d always wanted with Dallas.

As he drifted off to sleep that night, after watching the sun go down by watching the colors change on his ceiling, he could’ve sworn the shadows looked like a thousand birds taking flight.

Chapter End Notes

sadako and the thousand paper cranes - which is where the idea for this chapter came from - wasn’t written until the 70s, even though her story happened before the events of the outsiders. that being said, the legend of the thousand paper cranes granting a wish has been around for much longer than that, which is why she isn't mentioned and the legend is.
Another Visit in the Dark of the Night

Chapter Summary

Dallas blames himself for Johnny’s condition and doesn’t know how to handle it.

Chapter Notes

who was it that said they like chapters like this?? cause i thought of you while writing this...even if i'm a shmuck and can't remember ur name ;-; rip me

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ever since Johnny’s second skin graft surgery, Dallas had been working more and more. He’d gone back to his excessive working schedule where he was at work all day and then stayed after with Digger, while he went over the books. But there was a reason for Dally’s excessive working and it was because he couldn’t stand to see Johnny in the hospital so weak, so close to death it scared him. And for that, he hated himself. For that, he thought himself a coward. The rest of the gang had been to see Johnny. But not him. The one person who was supposed to care for him more than anything.

And as he left work that night, he clenched his hands into tight fists and grit his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. He wanted to run to the lot and punch trees until his knuckles were so bruised and bloody he couldn’t feel anything else except the pain. Because that was what he deserved for doing this to Johnny when he needed him most: nothing but pain. Nothing but pure agony. He’d just gotten out of work too. The lot would be empty and everyone in the neighborhood would be getting ready to sleep. No one would hear him if he screamed a little and punched a few trees.

He didn’t even say goodbye to Digger, he was so caught up in his own thoughts. He pulled his jacket out of his locker and slung it over his shoulder by muscle memory before he left the garage, heading towards the vacant lot, intent on keep his promise to himself to punch a few trees before heading home for the night. It was already ten thirty and dark out. No one would notice if someone was screaming in the lot. This neighborhood was full of screams.

The garage wasn’t far from the neighborhood even if it did seem to be on the outskirts of town. Dallas found his way to the lot, watching the way his shadow moved around as he passed under the yellow and orange streetlights. If he looked up, he knew he would see a myriad of bugs buzzing around the bright lights, burning themselves in a way to get to the bright light. The thought alone made him smile bitterly. It sounded like a metaphor for his life.

The lot was dark. There were only lights on the corners of the lot and there was no fire going on the pit the gang had created because Johnny was still in the hospital, still dying, and not there to start it. Dally grit his teeth all the harder, his fists digging deep into his palms, so deep he wondered if they were going to draw blood. He threw his jacket to the ground and stalked up to the nearest tree, grimacing as he slammed his fist into the bark over and over again.

This is for Johnny’s parents, he thought as he slammed his fist into the tree trunk. This is for the Socs. This is for that fucking church. This is for Johnny’s pure heart, goddammit.
He slammed his fist into the tree trunk until it hurt too bad and was too bloody to do it anymore. Then he used his other fist and did the same thing. He didn’t realize he was screaming too until he finally stopped hitting the tree and staggered back a couple of steps, gasping for breath. Then his knees buckled and he fell to the ground, struggling to keep the sobs rising in his chest from breaking free, but he was already gasping, choking on the sobs, and the tears were already falling and no one was around, so Dallas Winston let himself cry.

He would never be sure how long he sat there in the dead grass of the vacant lot, sobbing into his knees, staring at the ground, blurred through his tears, but eventually he got up, forcing himself to his feet and started walking, away from the lot, away from his misery, away from everything. He wasn’t sure where he was going, but he knew he had to get away from here, do something. It wasn’t until he ended up at the bus stop that he realized where he was going.

The hospital. He was going to see Johnny. Whether he liked it or not. He owed him that much.

Frankly, he felt he owed him a lot more than that, but he didn’t know what else to do. There was nothing else he could do except wait and pray like everyone else.

He didn’t have any money with him to get on the bus, but the driver must’ve seen something in his face because he let him get on anyway. He chose a seat near the back of the bus and stared out the window at the dark world beyond as it pulled away from the curb and headed towards town. The bus didn’t make very many stops this time of night and he arrived at the hospital much more quickly than he’d thought he was going to.

The nurse at the desk just inside the door didn’t say anything to him either when he came in. He wondered what he must look like for no one to question him in what he was doing. He also wondered how he could copy this when he wanted to get his way in the future.

The walk to Johnny’s room took a much shorter time than he’d thought it would and when he reached the room, he stood in the doorway for several moments, his hands in his pockets, staring at the sick, dying boy on the bed. Even blurred by the darkness of the room, Johnny still looked small and frail and Dally’s hands, now in the pockets of his jacket that he didn’t remember picking up or even putting on, clenched into fist again.

What would he do if Johnny died? How would he survive?

The truth was he wouldn’t. He didn’t plan to. If Johnny died, he’d kill himself. He wasn’t sure exactly how. Maybe he would use his gun on himself. Maybe he would go rob a store and then let the cops shoot him instead. Maybe he’d tie himself a necklace of rope or jump off the bridge that led out of town, the same one he’d stopped Johnny from jumping off of not even that long ago.

Stepping into the room, he shut the door behind him, not wanting any doctors or nurses to come find him and tell him to leave before he was good and ready to do so. Nothing was stopping them from walking into the room, but maybe this would buy him more time.

He walked around Johnny’s bed and sat in his typical seat – the white plastic chair to the right of Johnny’s bed. There was one on the left too, but that was where all the machines Johnny was attached to were and everyone tried to avoid those when they visited him, not wanting to mess anything up and make things worse.

Again he thought of what Johnny’s funeral might look like. He imagined the entire gang fighting with Johnny’s parents, making them dress him in a suit rather than a dress. He imagined the gang staying around the grave long after all the other mourners had left and the grave itself had been filled in. He imagined Soda placing a single rose on the fresh earth. He imagined Darry, Steve, and Two-
Bit crying. He imagined Ponyboy trying to kill himself after losing his only friend.

He imagined shooting himself in the house he was going to share with Johnny, now just four walls full of memories that would never be.

No.

That couldn’t happen.

Johnny couldn’t die.

The gang would fall apart.

He thought this every time he thought about Johnny’s death, but it was the truth. Johnny was the glue that kept them together. They all liked each other just fine, but they were all united in their desperation to take care of Johnny. If he were gone, they’d be broken apart. They might hang out together again, but it would never be the same. And they would never be the gang again either.

Johnny let out a soft sigh in his sleep and turned his face, so he was facing Dallas. His mouth was open slightly, the oxygen tube under his nose shining dully in the moonlight shining through the windows of the dark room. Even in the darkness, Dallas could see the burns on his neck and shoulders as well as the ones on his hands and fingers. He could see all the bandages from his first skin graft surgery, covering various parts of him.

He’d be covered in scars for the rest of his life. And not just the ones he’d made himself.

Dally’s teeth grit again. It was his fault. All of this. If he’d gotten Johnny out of the church sooner, if he’d never let him go into the church to begin with, none of this would’ve ever happened. A part of him – a dark vicious part – hated the children Johnny had saved for getting themselves trapped in the church to begin with, but he knew it was only a desperate attempt to shift the blame to someone – anyone – besides himself. And that made him feel all the more guilty.

Finally, Dallas checked the clock and stood. It was nearly eleven. The buses didn’t run any later than midnight and if he didn’t want to have a long walk home, he had to leave now. He shoved his hands into his pockets and went to leave the room. He stopped in the doorway and turned back to look at Johnny, still sleeping soundly on the bed. He could see his chest rising and falling in the light that shone in just barely from the dimly lit hallway outside.

“You’re not gonna die, Johnnycake,” he said quietly, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I won’t let you.”

Chapter End Notes

there are three chapters of this part left!! idk what i’m going to do for part three yet or how i’m going to start it, so i might focus on other fics for a little bit until i come up with ideas, unless y’all give me ideas, but i guess we’ll see!! :D
After School Special

Chapter Summary

Ponyboy comes to visit Johnny in the hospital for the first time since his back surgery.

Chapter Notes

yes i did get the title from that one supernatural episode, but it fit well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As was the typical schedule now, the nurse woke Johnny up for his breakfast. He didn’t wake up anymore unless she woke him up. At first, she’d let him sleep, assuming he would eventually wake up and eat his breakfast in the tray on his nightstand, but when he didn’t wake up until she woke him up for lunch, she started waking him for breakfast as well. It didn’t matter how late she woke him up or how much sleep he’d gotten the night before, he was always exhausted and he always felt like he needed at least another hour or two of sleep.

And he could tell it was starting to worry her.

When the nurses thought he wasn’t listening or looking, they would talk behind their hands, glancing at him as they did so. He didn’t know what they were saying, he’d always been hard of hearing for reasons no one could quite explain – though he knew Darry thought it was because his parents had hit him one too many times in the head – but he had a pretty good idea.

He wasn’t stupid. He knew that him being this tired all the time wasn’t normal.

_The doctor came in a while ago, but I knew anyway. I keep getting tireder and tireder._

He’d written that in his letter to Ponyboy when he’d thought he was going to die. When everyone thought he was going to die. And now here it was happening again. He got more and more tired with each passing day. He slept through most days. He no longer even had the energy to read the books Ponyboy had lent him. All he could do was what he had done before: lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to the world outside his window he couldn’t see out of.

A horrible thought occurred to him then: maybe he would die without ever seeing the outside world again. Dallas had come and taken him around the hospital that one day, but that was ages ago now, when they’d thought he was getting better, when they thought he might survive. Now even the nurses were wondering if he were going to. He hadn’t seen the doctor since he’d told him his chances of surviving his last operation had decreased. A part of him was glad for this – no news had become good news – but another part of him was afraid the doctor was visiting him because the next thing he had to tell him was really bad and he was putting off.

He knew it was a ridiculous assumption. He didn’t have any real concrete proof of this, but growing up the way he had no proof was proof and he couldn’t help assuming the worst.
Without warning, tears filled Johnny’s eyes and he swallowed hard, struggling to keep the sobs that accompanied them in his chest as the tears leaked out of his eyes, making tracks down his temples to the pillow beneath his head. He grit his teeth as the ceiling above him blurred from his tears, the rays of the sun smearing into one mess of color.

He grimaced and draped his arm over his eyes, hiding them darkening the world as he sobbed silently. It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair. He saved a bunch of kids and now he couldn’t walk and was probably dying. He’d defended himself and Ponyboy against the Socs and he was called a murderer and burned halfway to hell.

*But you deserve it,* a darker, angrier voice whispered. *You killed someone. Do you honestly think it matters that it was self defense? It was still murder. You are a murderer And you know as well as I that this is your penance.*

Johnny wanted to argue with the voice, tell it was wrong, but he couldn’t because it wasn’t.

He *had* killed someone. He *was* a murderer. And it really *didn’t* matter in the eyes of the Socs that he was defending himself, he’d still killed one of their friends. He’d killed Cherry’s boyfriend. She was a nice girl. She didn’t deserve that. And he knew she knew that too. He knew there was a reason she hadn’t come to visit him. He wasn’t stupid.

And that only served to make him cry all the harder.

He was sick of all the pain and suffering and, lying there in that bed, thinking those things, a part of him would’ve been very glad to just die right then to end all of the doubt and pain and suffering. A part of him thought it would even be good for the gang if he died now. Then they would all be able to stop worrying and wondering too.

“Johnny?”

The voice made Johnny jump and pull his arm away from his eyes quickly. He swiped rapidly at the tears still making tracks down his face, trying to make it look like he hadn’t just been crying, though he knew his eyes were probably bright red and puffy, before he looked towards the door where the voice had come from.

It was Ponyboy and that startled him almost more than his unexpected voice had.

Ponyboy had been in school the past few weeks, attending the last few weeks of classes before the summer holidays. Johnny hadn’t expected him to be coming over to visit him. Not until he got out of the hospital and school was out for the summer. And even as he realized it was nearly the end of June and school would be out in a week anyway, he was still surprised Ponyboy was there. Didn’t he have finals he needed to study for?

Vaguely Johnny wondered if he’d have to repeat another grade since he’d been in Windrixville and then the hospital for so long.

“Hey Pony,” he managed weakly, his voice hoarse and scratchy from crying.

“You okay?” Ponyboy asked, his brows drawn together. Ponyboy was his best friend. He was able to read him about as well as Dallas.

Johnny forced a smile and said, “I’m okay. What’s up?”

Ponyboy shrugged one shoulder as he stepped into the hospital room, seeming unconvinced by Johnny’s words. “I just wanted to come by and say hi,” he replied. “I ain’t been here since the day of
The mention of that night almost made Johnny start crying again with all he had been thinking about before Ponyboy’s arrival. Pony must’ve noticed it too because he said quickly, “I’m glad you’re doin’ better now, though. I really dunno what the gang would do without you, Johnnycake.”

It seemed everyone had said this to him at least once and, while at first it had made him feel better, now it just made him feel guilty. They needed him around and, whether he believed that or not, they truly believed it. And now it looked like he was just going to die anyway. Even after everything. That was the most unfair thing of all: the doctors and nurses had done so much to save him and nothing had worked. He was still going to die.

And suddenly Johnny couldn’t keep it to himself anymore. He bit his lip and turned away so Ponyboy wouldn’t see the tears in his eyes, feeling, despite everything, that he had to be strong for him. Everyone saw Johnny as the kid, the pet, but Johnny thought Ponyboy fit that role better than he did and had always seen him that way. And, as such, he felt the need to protect him from how he really felt, feeling that maybe if he were strong, Ponyboy wouldn’t be as afraid, but he knew, even without looking at him, that that wasn’t working.

“I think I’m still gonna die, Pony,” he said, his voice a whisper. “I feel like I did when y’all came to see me after the rumble.” He turned back to look at Ponyboy now and saw the fear on his face. “I keep gettin’ tireder and tireder and I dunno what to do. Even the nurses look scared.”

Ponyboy was sitting in the chair Dallas usually sat in when he visited now, his hands between his knees, looking nervous. He reached out to him, his fingers wrapping around his wrist. Johnny could feel the ridges of the scars there and how Pony’s fingers closed over them. A part of him was surprised Ponyboy didn’t immediately pull away in disgust.

“You can’t die, Johnny,” he said, his voice sounding as desperate as Dally’s did sometimes. His face was a mask of pain and fear. “We couldn’t get along without’cha, you know that.”

Johnny swallowed hard, trying to swallow the sobs rising in his chest with it. “I don’t gotta choice,” he said quietly. “I can’t control that. I wish I could, but...I can’t.”

They were both quiet for a long time after that, both thinking the same things, both of them too afraid to say them out loud because that would make them true. Johnny didn’t look at Ponyboy. He didn’t want to see the pain and fear on his face. He didn’t want to be reminded he put it there because he couldn’t keep his own goddamn fears to himself.

“Do you remember when you told me to stay gold the night you almost died?” Ponyboy finally asked, his own voice as soft as Johnny’s. “I’ve been thinkin’ about that a long time. And...I didn’t get what you meant at first. I thought you were just delirious cause you were dyin’, but I get it now. I know what you meant and, even though you ain’t dead, I’m still gonna live that way. I’m still gonna stay gold, so-so don’t you dare give up, Johnnycake. You’re gold too. I know it. And I know you don’t believe me cause of all the shit your folks have put you through, but you are. You’re more gold than any of us. That’s why you’re the pet. That’s why the whole gang would be lost without you. Cause you give all of us hope. If you can be so good after all you been through, then-then maybe we can too.”

Johnny did look at Ponyboy then, surprised by his words, unsure of what to say until he burst out, “But I killed someone. I stabbed him and watched him die and didn’t do a thing to stop it. How-how is that gold or good at all?”
“You wouldn’ta done it if you didn’t think I was gonna die and you were gonna get beat up,” Ponyboy pointed out.

Johnny closed his mouth. That was true. But it didn’t make him feel any less guilty.

“Besides, you got off in court too. Even the law agrees with you. You are gold, Johnny. I wouldn’ta ever said that poem to you if I didn’t think you were already.”

Johnny still didn’t know what to say. He still didn’t smile. He still just swallowed hard, not even daring to believe that Ponyboy really believed the things he was saying to him. How could he? He’d vomited after he’d seen what Johnny had done to that Soc. How could anything he was saying be true? Johnny truly didn’t understand it.

“Well,” Ponyboy finally went on quietly, “I should probably get back home. I gotta do a lotta homework cause finals are this week. You’re lucky you ain’t in school for them.” He gave a wry smile, clearly trying to cheer Johnny up.

Johnny couldn’t help smiling as well. “I bet I’m gonna have to repeat another grade, though,” he replied, trying not to sound as miserable as he felt.

“Nah,” Ponyboy replied, standing, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket as he headed towards the door. “You’re a hero and a sick kid. They ain’t gonna make you do that. Hell, they’ll probably pass you cause you saved all those kids.”

“You think so?” Johnny asked, this time genuinely curious.

Ponyboy smiled widely at that and nodded. “Yeah,” he replied, “yeah I do.”

Johnny gave Ponyboy a genuine smile then and said, “Thanks, Pony. I’m glad you’re still my best friend.” And he really meant it too.

Ponyboy could tell because he nodded in response and said, “You take care of yourself, okay? And I meant what I said, so stop blamin’ yourself for what happened. If anythin’ it’s my fault for not agreein’ to leave when you suggested it.”

Johnny opened his mouth to tell him that wasn’t true, but Ponyboy was already leaving, heading back down the hall and towards his home. Johnny listened to his footsteps going down the hall until they melded into the other sounds with the hospital.

He still felt he was going to die. He still wasn’t happy about it, but...at least Ponyboy didn’t hate him or blame him for what happened. That was something at least.

Chapter End Notes

i got this idea from one of my friends on here and on instagram when we were talking about johnny and ponyboy's idea and i def agreed this chapter needed to exist, so this wasn't originally planned, but i'm glad i wrote it anyway because this also sparked a second idea with ponyboy except with dallas, so that will be next!! :)
Old Pieces of Mail

Chapter Summary

After visiting Johnny, Ponyboy visits Dallas.

Chapter Notes

i was supposed to have this up yesterday, but i went to the store and then had a breakdown and then had no energy, so i wrote this today instead

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Even though he was working as hard as he’d been before Johnny’s back surgery and before he’d bought the house, and though he was doing it to avoid the bigger problem – Johnny’s health being significantly worse than anyone had originally thought – Dallas was beginning to enjoy coming home to his own house, sitting on his own couch, and enjoying his own beer before he went to sleep in his own bed. He was drinking things harder than beer with the way Johnny’s health kept deteriorating, but it was still nice to be able to drink in the privacy of his own home, rather than have to wonder if his father was going to yell at or hit him if he drank any of his alcohol and he noticed.

But under all of that was the knowledge that Johnny was sick, maybe even dying and so instead of drinking one beer after work, he had two or three. Sometimes he had whiskey instead. Sometimes he had vodka. It depended on how he was feeling that night. And tonight he didn’t feel good. He’d rediscovered the letter Johnny had written the night of the rumble, the night Dallas had watched his heart stop and wondered if it would start again.

Tonight he was drinking whiskey.

The doctor had told them all after Johnny’s most recent surgery that there was a chance his heart was damaged from having been shocked and restarted so many times. Most people didn’t survive one resuscitation let alone four or five. Most people with bodies as weak as Johnny’s were dead by now. Dallas himself had lost count at this point how many times Johnny’s heart had stopped and been restarted, but apparently it was too many times. The doctor hadn’t told them for certain if Johnny’s heart was damaged, but with the way things were going, Dallas wouldn’t have been surprised if it was. That seemed to be the way life was going at the moment.

But the whiskey helped him forget it. And when he’d gotten home that night, he’d poured himself a tall glass of the stuff, sat down on the couch in living room, and stared at the ceiling while he smoked a cigarette and drank his alcohol, watching as the world became fuzzy around the edges and spun slightly when he looked around. If he were to be honest, he hated drinking. He hated the taste of alcohol. He hated how it made him feel. And he hated what it made him do. But it was the only thing that helped take away the agonizing pain and fear his heart and for that he would endure the bad taste and feelings of almost anything.

But Johnny’s failing health was only part of the reason he was drinking tonight. It was also the letter. Dallas had read it once before, but finding it again seemed like fate and a warning. The last time he’d
read the letter had been the day after Johnny had almost died after the rumble. He’d never shown it to Ponyboy even though that was who it was addressed to. He wasn’t really sure why. Maybe he was afraid of how Pony would react, but even when he thought that it didn’t sound accurate or right, and the truth was, he wasn’t sure why he was keeping the letter to himself. Only that he thought he should.

He blew smoke at the ceiling, feeling guilty for not visiting Johnny when he was so sick, feeling scared at the prospect of visiting him at all, feeling even more scared at the thought he could die while Dallas was away at home or at work and he wouldn’t even know until one of the gang told him or he went to the hospital and found out himself.

He wasn’t sure which option was worse.

The only thing he was sure of was he wouldn’t survive Johnny’s death.

He had no intention to.

Johnny was his last, best reason for living. Take him away and he had nothing to live for.

He took a long swig from his whiskey, taking several swallows and closing his eyes tight as he felt it burn his throat all the way down to his stomach and then it burned there too. But he liked the pain. He liked the bitter taste. It made him think about something else other than the fact the only person he had ever truly loved – besides his mother who had been dead in the ground for almost a decade now – was lying in a hospital weak, sick, and probably dying.

*You think about this too much,* a voice in his head whispered. *How many times have you thought the same damn thing and nothing has changed? What are you going to do when he actually does die? Kill yourself? Let someone else kill you? That might be happening sooner than you think.*

The voice was right about everything and Dally didn’t even try to argue with it.

He *did* think about this too much.

He *had* thought this over and over with no change to what was happening in the present.

He *was* going to kill himself if Johnny died.

And he had to believe it was only an *if.*

He didn’t want to die. Not really. He wanted to live a happy and full life with Johnny, but if Johnny was dead, he truly had nothing to live for and he didn’t want to have to try to survive another death of someone he loved, especially someone he loved as much as he loved Johnny.

He went to take another swig of his whiskey and found it was empty. He sighed and got up, staggering slightly as he got to his feet, the world spinning around him, and headed towards the kitchen. He opened the cupboard underneath the sink and pulled out the still mostly full bottle of whiskey and twisted open the cap. He was just about to pour himself another glass when there was a knock at the door that made him jump a foot in the air.

Dallas wasn’t a jumpy person by any means, but he could be startled. And no one had come to visit him since he’d been living here. It made him wary about who it could be now.

Trying to be as quiet as possible, he set the whiskey bottle back down next to the empty glass and began walking as quietly as he could towards the door. He checked through the peephole to see who was waiting for him and was shocked when he saw Ponyboy on the other side.
What was he doing here? School would be out in a few days. Didn’t have finals to study for?

He opened the door slowly, his brows drawn together in confusion until he saw Pony’s face. He looked...almost broken. He hadn’t seen him since the day of the hearing. Pony looked up at him, smiling sadly and Dally didn’t have to ask where he’d been to know: he’d been to see Johnny. Only Johnny could make any one of the gang look like that. Johnny was Dally’s soulmate, now his boyfriend and significant other as well, but he was still the gang’s pet. That wouldn’t ever change. Even if he died.

“You know why I’m here?” Dallas said as he opened the door. “What’re you doin’ here?”

“I just went to see Johnny,” he replied, confirming what Dallas already knew. “He ain’t doin’ too good, Dal. I’m worried about him.”

Dallas swallowed and held the door open wider for Pony to come in. He stepped into the living room and looked around. No one else had been to the house yet. He was the first one.

“This is a nice place,” he said. “You gonna have Johnny live with you if...when he gets better?”

Dally nodded and went back to the kitchen to finish pouring his glass of whiskey.

Yeah. If he gets better. The voice in his head was taunting him again.

Then, making a snap decision, he pulled the letter Johnny had written out of his pocket and, holding it out to Ponyboy, said, “This was in his copy of Gone With the Wind. It’s addressed to you and...I found it the day after the rumble. The day after Johnny almost...” He swallowed hard, unable to say the word, even if it hadn’t really happened. “Anyway, I shoulda given it to you right away, but...I dunno. I didn’t think I should.”

Ponyboy didn’t say anything. He just took the letter and unfolded it. Then he sat down on the edge of the couch in the living room to read it. Dally watched his expression as he did so and saw all of the same emotions he’d felt himself while reading it flash across Pony’s face. When he finally folded it back up and set it down on the couch next to him, there were tears in his eyes, tears he was trying desperately to hide and failing miserably.

“He really thinks that?” he said, his voice quiet. “He really thinks he’s better off dead?”

Johnny’s letter didn’t say that word for word, but the implication was clear.

Dally brought his whiskey over to the couch and set it on the end table as he said, “Yeah, I guess and...I dunno if he’d gonna feel any different...even if...” He trailed off again. “He don’t realize how much we need him, Pone. He don’t get it. He thinks he’s worthless cause that’s all his folks have ever taught him and I dunno how to convince him they’re wrong.”

Ponyboy turned away to swipe at the tears on his face. He swallowed as well as he said, “Yeah, he said as much when I visited him today. He don’t believe we need him. He thinks if he died we’d all get along fine without ‘im and...I dunno how to convince him that ain’t true either.”

Dallas only nodded in response and for several moments they sat there in silence, both of them wondering what they had done wrong to make Johnny still feel they would be better off without him. Finally, Ponyboy spoke and said, “You really ain’t ever seen a sunset or sunrise before?”

Dally looked at Pony then and replied, “I hadn’t till I read that letter.”
Ponyboy didn’t ask him to elaborate and Dallas didn’t bother to either.

That’d been when he’d been certain Johnny was going to live.

For a long time they sat that way. Both of them silent. Dallas drinking from his whiskey every so often, Ponyboy speaking only once to ask for a cigarette, before Dally lit one himself and they both blew smoke at the ceiling.

Dally wasn’t sure what to say. He wasn’t sure if there was even anything he could say.

Johnny felt the gang would be fine without him. The gang felt they would fall apart if he died. And no one had yet figured out how to convince him that what he thought wasn’t true and what they were telling him was.

It seemed somehow unfair to Dallas that Johnny was the most loved of all of them and yet, of all of them, he felt the most unloved.

Chapter End Notes

only two more chapters left of this part of this fic!! then we'll be on to part three!! like i've said though i have no idea how to start that, so if y'all have ideas, i would love to hear them.
A Rare Form of Generosity

Chapter Summary

The parents of the children Johnny saved come to visit him...with a gift.

Chapter Notes

i know this happened before his "death" in the book (in quotation marks cause that didn't happen here obviously), but this is also an au, so yes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day before Johnny’s final skin graft surgery, he wasn’t awoken by the nurse as had become the norm in the week preceding and proceeding his second skin graft surgery, but by his hands aching. It took him a moment to realize this was because he wanted a cigarette. Really bad. He thought about asking the gang for once whenever they came to visit him again, but they all knew by now that his lungs had been damaged by the fire and that him smoking was probably not the smartest thing to do.

I don’t care, he thought bitterly, staring at the ceiling as he waited for the nurse to bring him his breakfast. I’m gonna die anyway. I might as well be allowed to do what I want in the meantime.

The nurse was surprised when she came in to give him his breakfast – waffles with butter and syrup and a side of bacon – and he was already awake. As she propped him up, getting him ready to eat, she told him that the doctor wanted to run more tests on him today to make sure that he would be ready for his surgery tomorrow.

“The odds of him canceling the surgery are slim, since you need it, but if it’s certain that you will die without the surgery, the doctor will postpone it another week or a few days,” the nurse told him, standing in his doorway with one hand on the door jamb, watching him eat. “You need to eat as much as you can. You won’t be able to eat anything after dinner tonight.”

Johnny didn’t reply. He wasn’t sure what he could say.

He was damned if he did and he was damned if he didn’t. The surgery was necessary for his survival, but after the last surgery, after his heart stopped again – and now may be damaged from how many times it’d had to be shocked and restarted – the odds of him surviving this one had decreased. And yet, without it, he would get an infection for sure die.

He was again stuck between a rock and a hard place. That thought alone made his appetite vanish and eating his breakfast impossible. And when the nurse came back, she pursed her lips and gave him a frustrated look. She didn’t say anything and Johnny was grateful for that. He wasn’t sure what he might’ve said back if she did.

He was angry and bitter.

He was sick of being the one that the world picked on.
And he was sick of everyone telling him how to cope with it.

He knew the gang were only worried about his wellbeing when they told him not to smoke or not to kill himself, but what the hell did they know? They’d never been through half the things he’d been through. How would they feel if they had? Would they want to continue living in this world? Would they think things were fair? Would they care that they might damage their lungs more by having a few more cigarettes before a surgery that was basically a death sentence? He really didn’t think so. He couldn’t see how anyone would.

You don’t know that, a voice reminded him. Maybe they just don’t talk about it.

And his anger left him as quickly as it’d come. The voice was right. He didn’t know for certain what his friends had and hadn’t been through. None of them really talked about their home lives to each other. The only reason anyone knew what was going on with Johnny’s family behind closed doors was because he left the house with bruises. There had been times his mother had chased him out of the house with her broomstick, hitting him as he went and more than once one of the gang had been walking by and had had to stop her.

Maybe they’re afraid to tell you, the same voice hissed in his ear. Maybe they’re afraid of what you’ll say or how you’ll react.

And that just made him feel worse because that sounded far more likely.

If that were the case, then the gang, the only group of people who had ever truly cared about him, were suffering in silence to give him peace of mind. He reached his hands up to his face, grimacing as he covered his eyes with his palms, his fingers curling in the ends of his hair that had just barely started to get as long as it had once been. Vaguely, he thought about how he would need grease for it again soon if he wanted to make sure it didn’t get so flyaway.

Then suddenly there was a knock at his door and he jumped, pulling his hands away from his face. The nurse was back at his door. She didn’t have his lunch tray, but there was a small group of people, mostly women who looked to be in their late twenties or early thirties, standing behind her, looking in at him eagerly. He immediately recoiled. Whoever they were, he didn’t want to see them. In fact, he wasn’t sure he really wanted to see anyone right now.

“Johnny,” the nurse said quietly, “there’s some people here to see you.”

“I don’t wanna see them,” he replied, swallowing hard, his own voice quiet.

The nurse was silent for a moment, staring at him. Then she did something she’d never done before and walked into the room, closing the door behind her. For a moment, Johnny felt fearful, unsure of what she was going to do or what was going to happen, but then she bent down so her mouth was by his ear and said, “They’re the parents of the children you rescued. I think they got something for you. I think you might want to see them.” She was quiet for a moment, as though waiting for him to reply. When he didn’t, she added, “I really think you should see them.”

Johnny looked at the nurse this time. The only person she’d tried to get him to see in the past had been his mother and that had only been before she’d known what his mother was. A part of him was still wary, but there was something in the nurse’s face that made him want to trust her, that made him think that maybe she did know what she was talking about and this was the right idea.

He swallowed. “Okay.”

The nurse went to the door and opened it. She said something Johnny couldn’t make out and a group
of ten or twelve adults entered the room, all crowding to the left of his bed where there was the least amount of tubes and wires. They all looked at him nervously, some of them with pity in their eyes. Johnny looked away. It made him uncomfortable.

“Johnny Cade?” one of the women said and Johnny turned back to them. He recognized the woman. She’d been the one who came to see him after he’d nearly died the night of the rumble. He couldn’t remember her name, but it seemed that in the time since the rumble she’d learned his.

“I’m Sarah Price,” the woman went on. “I came to see you once before and I told you you saved my daughter Lily. And...well...I didn’t think it was right to just thank you verbally. None of us did, honestly.” She gestured to the other parents around her and they all nodded in agreement. “So...we wanted to bring you something. From all of us. All of us and our children.”

From behind them, they pulled out a large poster board. It was covered in signatures and well wishes. Some of the signatures were messy, clearly made by children. Some of them had drawn pictures next to their names. Some of them were their favorite animals or fictional character. Some of them were pictures of him saving them from the flames with Ponyboy and Dallas.

Johnny smiled despite himself, despite the fact he knew he still could die, his eyes getting wet as he looked at all of the thank you messages, some of them long and elaborate, some of them short and just the words “thank you!” and “get well soon!” No one he didn’t know had ever done something so kind for him. He was beside himself and unsure of what to say to them in thanks.

“And...well...” Sarah was saying now, “this isn’t all. We-we all pooled our resources and whatever money we could spare and...we would like to pay for your hospital bills and physical and mental therapy once you’re released. It’s the least we can do for you saving our children. You nearly died for them. We would all be lost without them.”

Johnny’s jaw dropped.

They wanted to pay his hospital bills? And for physical and mental therapy? Did they know how much that would cost? Even though he was sure they could afford it from the look of their clothes?

“Are-are you sure?” he heard himself saying. He wasn’t sure what else to say.

Sarah smiled and several of the other parents nodded their heads. “Yes,” she said. “We’re sure.”

A lump formed in Johnny’s throat and he covered his mouth with his scarred hand, the tears in his eyes leaking out of the corners and dripping down to the pillow beneath his head. He tried to blink them away, but that only made more tears came. He tried looking away so they wouldn’t see him crying, but he knew it was already too late.

It took him several moments before he was able to pull his hand away from his mouth and speak without choked sobs coming out of his mouth, and once he did, he said softly, “Th-thank you. I dunno what to say. Really. I-I never expected y’all to help a greaser like me.”

“You’re more than the labels people put on you, Johnny,” one of the fathers said. “Just because you smoke cigarettes and put grease in your hair doesn’t mean you aren’t a good person. To all of us, you’re a hero. Heck, you’re more than that. You’re a savior. Really, you are.”

“Even though I killed someone?” Johnny asked before he could stop himself.

He was surprised, shocked really, when all of the parents – every single one – nodded. “Yes,” Sarah replied. “It isn’t right to kill someone, but...you did it in self-defense. And then you risked your own life to save our children. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. You’ll always be a hero to us.”
The parents then talked about how they would put money into whatever bank account they needed him to and would do so continuously until he no longer needed to go to physical therapy. Johnny was afraid to tell them that he would be living with another man – another man he was in love with – and that it was his bank account they would be putting the money into, but he told them anyway. And, to his surprise again, none of them looked at him suspiciously.

They left shortly after that, but Johnny was still beaming, still crying with joy.

He’d been right. There was still good in the world.

Chapter End Notes

ONE MORE CHAPTER AND THEN WE'RE ON TO PART 3!!!! seriously if y'all have any ideas for chapters for part three i would be eternally grateful cause idk what i'm gonna do with it at this point.

i also realized today that.....i have no real end point for this fic. i have 4 parts planned, but idek what's gonna be in part 4 and idek where this is gonna end, so i guess we'll see???
Diamonds in the Skin Part III

Chapter Summary

The day of Johnny's final skin graft surgery.

Chapter Notes

welp!! this is the final part of part 2!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the day of Johnny’s final skin graft surgery, it was Dallas who woke up nervous, his hands aching for a smoke as he stared up at the darkened ceiling above him. It was still before dawn and Johnny’s surgery wouldn’t even be until noon. He lay in bed, watching the early morning sunshine slowly creep in through the windows of the bedroom, a cigarette hanging loosely between his lips, the smoke drifting up towards the illuminated ceiling, until the entire room was filled with a bright golden light. He waited until the gold faded, until it became a flat yellow and he could hear birds singing outside, before he finally forced himself to get up.

He went into the bathroom, a cigarette still in his mouth, smoke trailing from his lips, to take a shower. He turned the water so hot it almost burned his skin and then stood under the spray, staring up into the warm water, his eyes closed, letting the warmth envelope him until he couldn’t feel the worry in his chest, the fear that this truly would be the last day he saw Johnny alive.

He didn’t work today, but he had a feeling even if Digger had scheduled him he would’ve skipped anyway. He wasn’t going to let Johnny die – if he were going to die – alone in the hospital without him there. He wouldn’t let him be alone. The kid had been alone his whole life. Even with the gang, he knew Johnny had always felt alone because of the way his family was. He wasn’t going to continue letting him feel alone. Especially not now when he needed him most.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood under the shower head, letting the water turn his skin bright red, but when he finally shut off the water, the sun was much higher in the sky and the water had started to go cold. He dried himself off with the towel sitting on the counter and then went back to the bedroom to get dressed. He didn’t know if the gang were going to be meeting up at the hospital or the Curtises house, so he put on his shoes, shoved his knife and pack of cigarettes into his back pockets, and left the house, locking the door behind him, before he walked up the street towards the Curtis’s.

According to the clock on his wall next to the door. It was already ten o’clock.

Somehow five hours had passed from the time he’d woken up and gotten in the shower and he wasn’t really sure where all that time had gone. It sure didn’t feel like he’d sat in bed for three or four hours and then stood in the shower for one or two.

It turned out going to the Curtis place was the right place to go. Darry’s truck was still parked out front and when Dallas walked in the (unlocked) door, everyone was sitting around the living room,
Looking nervous, Ponyboy was tearing pieces of origami paper to shreds, which watching TV, a few origami figures sitting on the coffee table in front of him. Two-Bit was also watching TV and there were three beer bottles sitting in front of him. He was drinking a fourth. Steve stood, leaning his back against the wall, one foot braced against it, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked angry and sick at the same time. Soda kept walking between the living room and the kitchen where Darry was frantically cooking and didn’t seem to realize he’d already made way more food than anyone in the room was going to be able to eat.

They were all so absorbed in their thoughts that they didn’t even notice Dally come in. It wasn’t until he sat down on the couch next to Ponyboy and Ponyboy blinked, turning to him to say, “Hey, Dal,” that the spell the entire living room was under seemed to break and everyone returned a chorus of “Hey, Dally” back. And yet, even then they all spoke in a flat voice, their eyes blank. None of them was really in this moment, thinking of what was going on right now. All of their minds – Dally’s included – were on Johnny’s upcoming surgery. And whether or not he would survive it.

Darry stopped cooking about ten minutes later, but he didn’t call anyone to the meal. Instead, he wiped his hands on the towel that was hanging over his shoulder and said, “We should get goin’. Johnny’s surgery starts in an hour and he’s gonna be in the pre-op room already.” It was like he’d completely forgotten he’d been making food for the last hour and a half and everyone else had too because they all nodded and slowly started getting up, walking woodenly out the door to Darry’s truck.

“Steve, ain’t you gotta work today?” Soda asked as they filed out of the house.

Steve blinked and looked at Soda, then he shrugged and shook his head. “I ain’t goin’ to work.”

No one bothered to ask why. They all knew the answer.

Dallas sat in the truck bed with Two-Bit. They both watched the world fly by as Darry drove them, much faster than usual, to the hospital, ducking down whenever they saw a cop car. Two-Bit passed his beer to Dallas and he took a generous swig. He knew it wouldn’t be enough to get him drunk, but the thought alone was nice and he shared as much of the drink as Two-Bit was willing.

When they finally reached the hospital, and Darry had parked the car, they all stayed still for several minutes, staring up at the imposing facade that was the hospital. Dallas thought it strange that a hospital was seen as a place of hope and light and life and at the same time was also seen as a place of sickness and despair and death. Which would it be today? They would just have to go in and find out.

They got out of the car in silence, each of them staring at the ground with their hands in their pockets because it was easier than staring at each other or the hospital itself. They didn’t look at the receptionist as they went into the hospital. They knew where to go by now.

Down the hall and to the right. That was where the pre-op room was.

They burst through the doors without anyone telling them they could and walked down the rows of bed to the one covered by teal paper curtains. Soda threw the curtains back in much the same fashion he had last week before Johnny’s second surgery. He was grinning and everyone else was too, but Dallas could tell from the look on Johnny’s face that he could tell it was all an act.

Dallas didn’t bother trying to act along with everyone else as they sat at the end of Johnny’s bed or in the chairs on either side of him, asking him how he was doing. He just stood back, away from it all, watching Johnny’s face.
He didn’t look much better. He was still sickly pale and the oxygen tube under his nose didn’t help that look either. He looked like he’d lost weight too and that made Dally swallowed hard with nervousness. Johnny didn’t exactly have much weight to lose to begin with. He was starting to look scary thin, almost skeletal. His bones stuck out far too much.

_How can someone so frail survive having his skin grated off and put back on?_ He thought miserably. _How can someone who’s already been through so much survive more pain?_

He didn’t have an answer to either of those questions. And no matter what scenario he spun in his head, he couldn’t conceive of one where Johnny lived. He looked at the ceiling, to keep the tears forming in his eyes where they belonged. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his bomber jacket, the one with the burned and blackened back that Ponyboy had been wearing during the church fire, the jacket that had saved his life.

_If only Johnny had been wearing it instead_, he thought miserably, swallowing hard past the lump in his throat, and hated himself instantly for thinking it.

It seemed they had been with Johnny for only five minutes before the doctor appeared, throwing back the curtain and telling all of them to go wait in the waiting room. They all paused, none of them moving for several long moments, not one of them wanting to have to wait to see if he survived or not. Then, as if they’d all rehearsed it, they hugged Johnny like they had before his back surgery.

Dally wanted to hug him alone, wanted to hold him and tell him how much he loved him without anyone else being there, but he knew he couldn’t, not without it looking suspicious and he still hadn’t told anyone outside of Soda and Steve that he and Johnny were together, so he gave Johnny the most meaningful look he could and left with the rest of them.

The look on Johnny’s face was seared into his retinas: hope and fear in equal measure.

His surgery would take another six hours, just as long as the last one had been. If it were successful, Johnny would be going home in a week. If not...well...they all knew what that meant.

Like the two times before Soda paced the waiting room, Two-Bit drank as much beer as he could without getting caught, Dallas shared with him, Darry sat in one chair with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him, Steve stood against the wall like he had been at the Curtis’ house, and Ponyboy was now tearing up the magazines that were on the end tables all around the waiting room. No one tried to stop them from doing anything they were doing. It seemed this type of behavior was often seen by people waiting for their loved ones in surgery. The hospital staff were just used to it at this point.

Dallas closed his eyes tight, clasped his hands, and did something he hadn’t since elementary school, since before the death of his mother: he prayed. He prayed over and over again for only one thing: _Please let him live, please let him live, please let him live, please let him live._

It was the only thing he’d ever truly wanted. More than life. More than food. More than sex or clothes or anything at all. He just wanted Johnny to live.

Eventually Sodapop and Two-Bit started playing checkers with the beer bottle caps Two-Bit had in his pocket, using a sheet of graph paper as the board. Ponyboy watched and then played a game with them. Darry, Steve, and Dally didn’t move at all.

It felt like they spent six days in that waiting room rather than only six hours and when the doctor returned, they all stood up at once, going over to him crowding around him, eager and nervous to hear what he had to say.
“He survived,” the doctor said and everyone collectively let out a breath, some closing their eyes with relief. “However, he is still very weak and his lungs are damaged from his chest being burned and the smoke he inhaled beforehand. We’re still unsure about his heart. It does seem stronger than we thought, but it also is much weaker than the average heart for someone his age.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, taking in the information the doctor had given them.

Johnny had survived, yes, but his lungs were damaged – though they’d already known that – his heart was most likely damaged. Even if he’d survived this, they all knew that people with damaged hearts and lungs didn’t live long lives.

*He’s alive right now,* Dallas told himself, clenching his hands into fists and swallowing hard. *That’s what matters. Right now, he’s alive.*

“Can we go see him now?” Soda asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes,” the doctor replied. “But be gentle with him. He’s very, very weak. He’ll be released at the end of the weak, but that depends entirely upon how he’s doing. Even so he may still be weak for a long time. Even with physical therapy and the best care we can give him.”

Everyone nodded solemnly and ran past the doctor, down the hall to Johnny’s room.

They all stopped short at the door.

Johnny was asleep on the bed, but in Dally’s opinion he looked dead.

For the first time since he’d been admitted to the hospital, he was wearing a hospital gown. His head was turned to one side and his mouth was open slightly. He was pale as he’d been before his operation, but it was like something had happened on the operating table and he looked even more skeletal than he had before. The only sign he was alive was the steady rise and fall of his chest as well as the beeping of one of the machines to the right of his bed.

“Johnnycake?” Steve asked, taking a few tentative steps into the room. He placed a shaking hand carefully on one of Johnny’s legs.

Johnny’s eyes fluttered open slowly and he slowly smiled, seeing the gang around him. “Hey, y’all,” he said quietly, his voice weak and hoarse from the tube that had been put down his throat during the operation.

Another sigh of relief came from everyone in the room.

“How you doin’, kid?” Two-Bit asked, taking a seat to the left of Johnny’s bed.

Johnny managed to shrug one shoulder and say, “I’m real tired, but I’m okay.” He was still smiling and it occurred to Dallas just then he was as happy to be alive as everyone else was happy that he was alive. It seemed strange that would be the case when he knew Johnny had wanted to die all his life and had tried to several times.

Everyone smiled at him.

Everyone was just glad he was alive.

The gang stayed for hours and hours. They stayed through the night, Darry leaving only once to bring back board games and pizza for everyone. Johnny didn’t want any, so Darry got him soup instead. Good soup. Not the stuff that they had at the hospital – though Johnny insisted to all of them
that hospital food wasn’t as bad as they thought.

It wasn’t until around midnight everyone started falling asleep. To their surprise, no one came to kick them out. Ponyboy fell asleep at the end of Johnny’s bed, Two-Bit fell asleep in his chair. Darry fell asleep in the armchair by the window and Soda and Steve curled up together on the hard hospital floor and somehow managed to fall asleep there.

The only one awake was Dallas, standing by the window, staring out at the dark sky and all the tiny stars he could see from there.

“Dallas?”

The weak voice from the bed made him jump and turn. To his surprise, Johnny was still awake.

He smiled at him. “What is it, Johnnycake?”

Johnny bit his lip, looking away as he said, “Can-can you read me to sleep? I ain’t able to sleep by myself and I dunno I think it might help. But...but it’s okay if you don’t wanna. You don’t gotta do it, it’s okay. I just –”

But Dally cut him off, picking up the book on Johnny’s nightstand and opening it up to where the bookmark was. “I don’t mind, Johnnycake,” he said, sitting in the only empty white plastic chair to the right of Johnny’s bed. “I love you, remember? I don’t mind doin’ stuff for you.”

Johnny smiled then, really smiled, the first real smile he’d seen out of him since the day he’d taken him out of his hospital room and to the courtyard full of blossoming trees. And Dallas couldn’t help it. He smiled right back. And his own smile widened when Johnny said, “I love you too.”

Dally read to him then. He read to him until he fell asleep in the plastic chair and Johnny had long since passed out on the bed before him.

For once, things had gone right.

Chapter End Notes

after this we're on to part 3!! i do have a few ideas for the first few chapters now (thanks to help from a friend), but if y'all have any other ideas, pls feel free to comment them!! i always am in need of ideas.
The day the doctor cleared Johnny to go home felt surreal to him. He’d spent the last month in the hospital. He’d missed the last month and a half of his freshman year of high school. Being sent home during the second month of summer still felt like a dream. A part of him had thought he’d never leave the hospital and would be trapped there until he died. The fact he hadn’t died still was a surprise to him as well and that same part of him was half sure that he’d actually died and gone to heaven.

The only thing that reminded him that wasn’t the case was the fact he couldn’t walk and was still in a lot of pain, even with the pain medication they were sending home with him. He would be starting physical therapy in a week and when Dallas had asked how they’d pay for that, he told him about the generosity of the parents of the kids he’d rescued.

He still couldn’t believe that a group of parents who were probably Socs were paying for his physical therapy and his hospital bills. It was even more surreal than being released from the hospital after spending a month wondering whether or not he was going to die.

The doctor still hadn’t decided if his heart was damaged or not, but promised to run some tests in a week to find out. His lungs were damaged, so the doctor was sending him home with an oxygen converter for the house and several tanks for when he left the house. He wouldn’t need the oxygen all the time, but he would need it more often than not. However, odds were his lungs would never heal. Not completely anyway. He would always need oxygen.

He still had trouble sitting up and he had to have Dallas hold him up while he put on his clothes, his legs dangling over the side of his hospital bed, the wheelchair he’d be sent home with only a few feet away. Dallas helped him into his clothes. He had a hard time getting them on by himself when he wasn’t able to sit up on his own. Once he was dressed, Dally moved his wheelchair closer and helped him into it before pushing him out of the room, down the hall, and out of the hospital.

Johnny tilted his head towards the sky, his eyes closed as he felt the warmth of the sun on his face for the first time since Dallas had snuck him out of his hospital room before his skin graft surgeries. He felt a breeze blow through his hair that was just getting long enough for hair grease again. He took a breath and wished he had a cigarette. Then this moment would be perfect.
“How’s it feel to be a free man again, Johnnycake?” Dallas asked as he wheeled him out into the parking lot, heading towards the red convertible that belonged to Buck, but that had all but been given to him to get around town with.

Johnny tilted his head back so his neck was resting on the thin back of the wheelchair. He grinned up at Dallas, giving the first genuine smile in what felt like months. “It’d be great if I had a cigarette,” he said, trying to give Dally his puppy eyes.

But Dallas only laughed. “Nuh uh, don’t even try it,” he said. “Your lungs are damaged. You ain’t smokin’ for a good long while. It’ll just make ‘em worse.”

Johnny frowned and pouted. “C’mon,” he said in an uncharacteristically whiney tone of voice. “Just one? To celebrate?”

This time Dallas smiled and bent down, kissing Johnny’s forehead. “Maybe later.”

Johnny didn’t say anything else. Later was better than never.

Dallas helped Johnny into the car before folding up his wheelchair and putting it in the backseat. He wore a pair of sunglasses and handed Johnny a pair as well. It was nice to be out in the sun again, but Johnny still didn’t like bright lights and that included the sun.

Though he had been in the hospital for only one month, everything looked so much more different than it had when he’d left for Windrixville. Everything seemed brighter, more full of life. It struck him then that he hadn’t been back to his own neighborhood since the night he killed that Soc.

*Bob,* a nasty voice whispered in his mind. *His name was Bob Sheldon. He had a name. He had a life. And you killed him. You got off scott-free, but you’re still a murderer.*

He closed his eyes and started slightly, swallowing hard and wondered if there was still a blood stain by the fountain at the park. He wondered if there was still dried blood on the grass where he’d wiped his knife after. He wondered how often the other Socs thought about that night and wondered if it were as often as he did...or more.

*How dare you think you’re more hurt by that night than them?* The nasty voice went on. *You killed their friend. You’re a murderer. You could’ve talked to him. You could’ve just let him beat you again. Then he’d be alive and you wouldn’t be burned or paralyzed.*

*But Ponyboy would be dead,* he retorted, clenching his hands into fists. *If I hadn’t done something Ponyboy would’ve been killed instead.*

*You don’t know that,* the voice went on. *You could’ve pushed him instead of stabbing him. That would’ve been just as effective. You could’ve done a million other things besides kill him.*

*Hindsight is always 20/20,* he thought miserably, but the voice was right. The fact he could see the solutions now didn’t change anything. It didn’t make Bob any less dead. It didn’t make him any less paralyzed. And it didn’t change the fact he had killed someone without really a second thought.

“Johnny?” Dallas said, bringing Johnny back to the present with a jolt. He blinked and looked at Dally. Dally looked concerned. “You okay?”

For several moments, Johnny looked at Dallas blankly, trying to process what he’d said, then he smiled and nodded saying, “Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.” He reached across the bench of the front seat and grabbed Dally’s hand, squeezing it tightly, trying to reassure him more than himself.
He looked back out around him and realized they were in their neighborhood already. How much
time had he spent inside his own mind? It felt like the drive from the hospital should’ve taken much
longer than this. They stopped in front of a small white house, halfway down the street from his
parents’ house and the Curtis’s house. There was a ramp in front of it leading up to the front door, so
he’d be able to get in and out in his wheelchair easily. He stared at the house in awe.

“You like it?” Dally asked, grinning as he stopped the car and turned off the ignition. “It’s real
spacious inside. It’s got plenty of room for your chair. Everyone helped me build the ramp. And the
porch. I knew you’d want somewhere to sit outside.”

Johnny turned to Dallas and grinned before he flung his arms around him. “It’s perfect,” he said
quietly, holding him tight. “Thanks, Dallas.”

And he meant every word. The house was perfect. He didn’t need to see inside to know that.

* * *

Dallas had been antsy all day. He was eager to bring Johnny home and once he got him from the
hospital, he could hardly believe it was happening. After a month of wondering whether or not
Johnny was going to die in that horrible place, he was finally able to take him home, finally able to
bring him to the home he’d set up for him, made as perfect for him as he could, and he wasn’t going
to have to worry every waking moment if he were going to live or die. His lungs were still damaged
and his heart was probably damaged, but the doctor still hadn’t told them whether or not it was.

“We’re going to want him to come back in a week for tests,” the doctor had said. “After those, we
should know for sure whether or not his heart is damaged and the extent of the damage.”

A part of Dallas had wanted to demand they do the tests right then and there. It wasn’t fair they were
being kept in the dark like this, but he hadn’t for two reasons: one, the doctor probably had a reason
behind wanting to wait a week and, two, he hadn’t wanted to make Johnny spend anymore time in
the hospital than he had to when he’d already been trapped there for a week.

The drive home was mostly silent and Dallas was fine with that until they stopped at a light and he
saw the look on Johnny’s face: a mixture of guilt, fear, and panic warred for dominance on his
features and Dally felt worry fill him at the sight.

“Johnny?” he asked. Johnny turned to look at him, his expression blank as he came back to reality
from wherever his thoughts had taken him. “You okay?” For several moments, Johnny just blinked
at him, then he smiled and told him he was, but Dallas wasn’t sure he believed him.

Not even when he reached across the bench of the car to squeeze his hand and smiled. The smile
looked more like a wince to Dallas than anything else. It was nothing like the genuine smile he’d
given him when they left the hospital before he’d asked for a cigarette. A part of Dallas was tempted
to give him one right then and there. Maybe that would make him feel better. Maybe that would
bring back the smile he’d seen in the hospital parking lot.

It was only then as they pulled up in front of the house that Dallas realized he could save Johnny
from anything, but not himself, not his thoughts.

That wouldn’t stop him from trying though.

After admiring the front of the house, and after Johnny pulled away from the embrace he’d thrown
himself into, he got Johnny’s wheelchair out of the back seat, unfolded it, and helped Johnny into it.
The kid was light as a feather, but he always had a been. In this instance, he was glad for that. He
had a feeling he was going to be doing this a lot for a good long while.

“You gonna put the car in the garage?” Johnny asked as Dally started pushing him up the ramp towards the front door.

Dally nodded. “Yeah, in a bit,” he said. “There ain’t nothin’ valuable in there and I got the keys.”

“Someone could hot wire it,” Johnny reminded him.

Dally shrugged and grinned mischievously. “It ain’t my car.”

Johnny rolled his eyes and didn’t say anything, but he was smiling again.

Dallas carefully unlocked the door and opened it. All of the lights were off in the living room and when he turned them on he only had a moment to see all of the balloons on the ceiling and the big Welcome Home banner on the wall, the booze in the corner and the red solo cups on the small fold-out table someone had brought, and the gang standing in front of them and grinning like clowns, before they all shouted, “Surprise! Welcome home, Johnny!”

Johnny’s face lit up, so bright and beautiful that Dallas wanted to kiss him right then and there in front of everyone, but instead he just enjoyed the view. When was the last time Johnny had smiled like that? Had he ever smiled like that? He wasn’t entirely sure. And in that moment, he loved the gang more than anything for making him smile like that. He deserved to smile like that all the time.

“Oh wow, thanks everyone,” he said quietly. There were tears in his eyes, but they were tears of joy and for once Dally didn’t try to make them go away. “This is real great. I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t gotta say nothin’ Johnnycake,” Two-Bit said stepping forward. “We’re just all glad you’re home and okay. Finally.” Everyone nodded and murmured their assent.

There was a beer already in his hand. It looked half empty too. Dally laughed to himself and shook his head. Good ol’ Two-Bit.

“That’s great and all, but...can I please have a cigarette?” Johnny asked.

Everyone laughed, including Johnny. They all knew how long it had been since he’d last had one and, to Dally’s chagrin, each one of them handed him a pack of cigarettes. Johnny held them all in his arms and threw back his head and laughed. In that moment, he looked healthier than Dallas had ever seen him. Even with the oxygen tube still under his nose.

“You ain’t smokin’ more than two of those a day,” Dally warned as he started trying to set up the oxygen converter in the living room. “You ain’t gonna damage your lungs worse than they already are, Johnnycake. I ain’t allowin’ it.”

Johnny stuck out his tongue at him, but he knew he’d listen.

The party was great. Better than any of them expected.

Two-Bit and Steve had brought more beer than sixteen and eighteen year old should’ve been able to buy. Sodapop had brought something better than booze – a whole ounce of weed. It was supposed to help with pain, so he gave it to Johnny. Johnny had never smoked that in his life, but Soda gave him a bowl to smoke it out of as well and Johnnny thanked him. Darry and Ponyboy had brought several decks of cards for people to play games with and Ponyboy had brought Johnny a whole box full of books to read while he was home waiting for Dallas to get off of work.
Johnny seemed beside himself, unable to really speak or thank anyone he was so overwhelmed by their kindness, but everyone knew he was grateful. He didn’t have to say it.

They were just sitting down to play a card drinking game when Johnny cleared his throat and said, “Can I ask y’all somethin’? It’s...kinda dumb.” He turned red and looked away, scratching the back of his neck as he spoke.

“Yeah, of course, Johnnycake,” Darry said, shuffling the cards.

“Well, y’know our special whistle?” Everyone nodded. “Can y’all do that when you come into the house? I just...I don’t wanna worry about people comin’ in that I don’t want there. I know the door locks, but...I dunno. It just would help, I guess. I know it’s dumb.”

“It ain’t dumb,” Steve said, shaking his head and smiling. “Of course we’ll do that, right?”


The card game lasted until everyone got too drunk to really pay attention to it anymore. Then they started drifting off to their spots throughout the living room. Two-Bit and Ponyboy sat in front of the TV, playing whatever was on, while they played a game of checkers with beer bottle caps. It seemed that had become their favorite past time. Soda and Steve arm wrestled at the table, playing cards occasionally when they weren’t trying to show off their strength to each other. Darry sat at the end of the couch and drank a beer, watching the TV, every now and then yelling at Ponyboy and Two-Bit to move out of the way so he could see what was going on on the TV. Johnny had lied down on the couch, but had ended up falling asleep. Dally was sitting in front of the couch, looking back every once in a while to check on Johnny.

“Poor kid,” Two-Bit eventually said as he gathered up the bottle caps to start another game. “Sure is tired a lot, huh?”

“Bein’ sick wears you out,” Dally replied.

But he didn’t mind. No one minded.

They were all just glad they were back together again.

They were just glad they no longer had to worry about him dying.

It had been far too long since they’d felt that way.

Chapter End Notes

i got this idea from one of my friends i met on here, so thank you!! i can't remember ur ao3 username rip ;-; (i think it's silkyn or something similar god i'm bad at names) but you know who you are!!

also fun fact: my word document of this is almost 100 pages long already. my word document of my one-shots is over 100 pages long. THAT'S A LOT OF WRITING.
The Consequences of Shopping

Chapter Summary

Johnny and Dallas go shopping for furniture, but as usual nothing goes as planned.

Chapter Notes

i meant to write this yesterday, but then i had a bad day and a breakdown, so that didn’t happen. kudos again to silklyn for this idea!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Dallas had gone to work early. He’d had to be there by six a.m. Johnny had still been asleep when he’d left and he’d left him a note on the nightstand on his side of the bed telling him he would be back by five or six at the latest. He was supposed to get off at two or three, but sometimes work ran over and he couldn’t get out of staying later. He knew darn well Johnny needed reassurances of when he’d be back. He had ever since Dallas had left for New York and not come back for four years.

To this day he still felt guilt surge through him when he thought about it.

But he’d learned his lesson. He knew better now. And so he left a note and went to work.

He had plans for when he got home. Their house had the basics – a couch, a bed, an end table in the living room, nightstands in the bedroom, and a small wooden table in the kitchen – but it was still pretty empty. Their were whole rooms with nothing in them and now that he knew that he wouldn’t have to spend money on Johnny’s hospital bills or physical therapy, they had some leftover to spend on things they wanted to spend it on. Like furniture for their house.

Those were his plans. Once he got off work, he was going to take Johnny to the furniture store and they were going to pick out what they didn’t already have. He’d picked out what they had already, but he wanted Johnny to have some say in how the house looked. After all, it was his house too.

The thought alone made him turn his face to the sun smile as the walked to work.

Never had he ever thought he’d feel this way. Never had he ever thought he’d have something in his life that made him this happy. Never had he ever thought he’d have something in life that made him happy at all. He’d thought he was only destined for misery.

Work felt like a drag after the euphoria of his walk there that morning. Digger was in grouchy mood and Andy the Chatterbox was working that shift too. Fix was there and that made it easier, but by the time three o’clock rolled around, Dally was more than glad to leave. A few more minutes and he was sure he would’ve killed Andy with his bare hands, and with Digger in such a bad mood, he was actually surprised he was leaving work on time.

The walk home from work was considerably less delightful. The sun was high in the sky and beating
down on the world, feeling like it was trying to bake everything alive beneath its rays. By the time Dally got home and shut the door behind him, he felt like he was more sweat than human. Thank god for the air conditioning unit he’d had installed in their living room. He wanted to get a second one for the bedroom, so they wouldn’t be so hot at night, but AC units cost a lot of money. The only reason he had one at all was because it had come with the house.

Dallas whistled the beginning of the *Who’s there?* whistle that the gang had come up with to make sure they knew it was one of them coming rather than someone else as he walked in the door, remembering how Johnny had asked they all used it when coming to the house. It was a smart idea, especially when the Socs had decided they didn’t like keeping to their territory anymore and Johnny’s parents lived just up the street.

“Johnnycake?” he called, kicking off his shoes by the door. “I’m home!”

He heard the stuttering reply of the second half of the whistle and smiled as he walked into the living room and saw Johnny sitting there on the couch under a blanket that the gang had brought over, a book sitting opened on his lap. It was the same one he’d been reading in the hospital, the one about the fantastical world called Middle Earth. His wheelchair sat right next to the couch and Dallas was glad they’d left it so close to the bed, so Johnny could get into it and move about the house. A part of him was also surprised he’d managed to do that at all.

“Hey Dal,” Johnny said, tilting his head back to look up at him as he came into the room. He was smiling. “How was work?”

Dally sat at the end of the couch, on the only cushion that Johnny’s legs couldn’t reach. He shrugged one shoulder, wishing he had a towel to dry himself off with as he said, “Just long. Everyone who came into the garage was mad and Chatterbox worked today and Digger was in a bad mood. There ain’t no air conditionin’ there neither, so we all gotta bake while we work on cars.”

Johnny grimaced. “Don’t sound too fun,” he said quietly.

Dally shrugged again. “I gotta make us a livin’ somehow,” he said, looking at Johnny. “Besides, it ain’t so bad. Most days I got Soda and Steve to keep me company and Fix is pretty cool too.”

Johnny smiled at him then. “Good,” he said, his voice still quiet. “I’m glad.”

They were silent then, sitting in the living room, both reveling in the fact they lived together and could even do this together. Dally had truly never thought this would happen. Even when he’d bought the house, even when Johnny had come home, it had all seemed so surreal. Even now he was half certain he was dreaming, that he was going to wake up at any second and Johnny would be dead and he would be alone.

But he didn’t want to think about that.

He shook himself slightly, pulling himself violently out of his thoughts and turned to Johnny. “You wanna go to the furniture store?”

Johnny, who had gone back to reading his book, looked up at Dallas, blinked as he tried to process what he’d said, then closed the book and replied, “What for?”

“Well, our house ain’t exactly full of furniture,” Dally told him, smiling wryly. “We need a coffee table, a dining table, and another couch for the livin’ room. Probably more stuff too, but we can start with that. We gotta have more room for the gang when they come over, man.”

Johnny blinked at Dallas again for a moment before he smiled and said, “Yeah, alright.”
Dally grinned back, somehow excited to do something as domestic with Johnny as shopping for furniture. He helped him back into his wheelchair, finding as he tried to to it himself that he had almost fallen out of it before. He grabbed Johnny’s clothes and helped him into them before also grabbing one of Johnny’s oxygen tanks. He put it in the black bag that hung off the wheelchair handles, and connected the tube under Johnny’s nose to it before handing him the blanket he’d been using on the couch and pushing the chair out of the cool of the house and into the baking heat of the late afternoon.

“You wanna walk or take the car?” Dally asked, pushing Johnny down the ramp. “The store ain’t that far, but it’s up to you, Johnnycake.”

Johnny was silent for a moment, thinking, then replied. “Let’s walk.”

At first, Dallas was surprised by his choice. It was so hot outside that Dally was sweating within a few moments of being out of the house. But then he remembered that Johnny had spent the last month in the hospital and the only time he’d been outside in all that time had been when Dally had snuck him out of his room to the courtyard. It made sense he’d want to spend as much time as he could outside after being trapped indoors for so long. Dally didn’t think Johnny had ever spend so much time inside. Not in his entire life.

As they stepped out of the shade of the trees and into the sunlight, Johnny turned his face towards the sun and smiled and Dally smiled just watching him, watching the sun reflect off his dark skin. He had never understood why Johnny thought he was anything less than beautiful.

The furniture store was shockingly close. Even closer than Dally’s work. It was technically a corner store, though much larger than most corner stores were. Dallas let out a grateful sigh of relief as they stepped through the new fancy automatic doors. Johnny blinked rapidly closing his eyes and shielding them from the bright fluorescent lights of the store. He didn’t pull his hands away until they reached the couches and his eyes had adjusted to the brightness.

“I was thinkin’ we could get one of those really soft ones,” Dally said, walking by several leather couches. “None of those cause your legs stick to ‘em. And we don’t want one of those real uncomfortable ones. I don’t want you hurtin’ your back when you’re sittin’ on them at home.”

“What about a blue one?” Johnny said, reaching out to touch the fabric of the couch they’d stopped in front of. “Like a dark blue one?” He turned to look at Dallas.

“Why blue?” Dally asked, though he was smiling.

Johnny turned red, but he smiled back. “Blue’s my favorite color,” he said softly, his eyes shifting back to the navy blue couch in front of him, rubbing the fabric between his fingers.

Dally smiled as well. Johnny was so innocent, so pure, despite everything that had been done to him. Even with the fact he’d murdered someone, Dallas thought that. In Dally’s opinion – and in the opinion of the law – it had been self-defense. In Dally’s opinion, considering everything that Soc in particular had done to Johnny already, he was ridding the world of an asshole. He didn’t even want to think his name. He didn’t feel he deserved it.

They ended up choosing the blue couch and took one of the little payment slips sticking out of the plastic pocket hanging off the side of the couch before moving on to the coffee tables.

“What kinda coffee table d’you wanna have, Johnnycake?” Dally asked, pushing Johnny’s chair around the corner and smiling.
Johnny was quiet for a moment, thinking, then said, “What about somethin’ with dark wood and then...then glass in the middle?”

Dally’s grin widened. “That’s what I was thinkin’.”

They ended up picking a low sitting mahogany coffee table with a glass center. There was wood around it because they both agreed that getting an entirely glass top for a house that would be frequently full of rowdy, intoxicated boys, probably wasn’t a good idea. They grabbed the second payment slip from the small plastic pocket hanging off one of the chairs around the table and went on.

They had just found the dining table they wanted – also dark wood, but this time with no glass center – and grabbed the final payment sheet when Johnny blanched and swallowed hard, saying softly, looking down at his lap, “Oh no.”

Dally was turning around, his brows drawn together to see what Johnny was upset about. And then he saw it and he let out a long suffering sigh, closing his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying not to scream in frustration. “Oh no.”

“Well, look who it is,” said the new leader of the Socs. Dally couldn’t remember his name, but he was tall with dark curly hair. He was taller than Dallas even, but that didn’t intimidate him. “The crippled murderer and his fairy boyfriend.”

Dally’s heart skipped a beat at that. He’d thought they were being careful keeping their relationship under wraps. Were they that obvious? If the Socs could see it, could everyone else too? Could the gang? And if they could, why hadn’t they said anything yet?

Maybe they don’t care, a voice whispered in the back of his mind, but he couldn’t fathom that. Most people hated queers. They called them names like the Socs just had. Or worse: they killed them.

“Don’t call him that,” Dally forced himself to say, stepping in front of Johnny, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning, trying to look bigger and tougher than he felt in the moment.

“Oh which part?” the Soc sneered. “Cripple? Murderer? Cause he’s both and you know it.”

“The law disagrees with you,” Dally sneered right back.

“Oh I know you don’t,” the Soc replied, taking a step forward, his face inches from Dally’s. “He murdered our friend in cold blood. You think we give a damn about the law?”

“Y’all broke the law multiple times hurtin’ Johnny. You and your friends did things to him that would make a nun faint. What did you think was gonna happen? That he’d just continue to take it?”

The Soc glared at Dallas, clearly at a loss for words. Dally resisted the urge for a few moments to smirk at him. But only for a few moments. Then he did smirk and said, “Get out. I don’t wanna see your ugly mugs ever again. Y’all know what you did. And if you ever hurt Johnny again...you better fuckin’ hope that I ain’t the one to come find you cause I’ll kill you all.”

The Soc glared at Dallas, but, to Johnny’s surprise, walked away. He turned right before he reached the door, this time he was the one smirking and he said, “You don’t wanna do anythin’ to us, greaser. They’ll take you away from your crippled friend. And then who’s gonna protect him.”

Dally glared at them, his hands clenched into fists. He wanted to follow them out of the store, follow them to a dark alley, and beat the tar out of them. How dare they threaten him? How dare they
threaten Johnny? He wanted to kill them. He wanted to destroy them so they could never hurt any one of them ever again. He took a step forward, but then felt a hand on his wrist. He turned and saw Johnny, staring up at him with wide, scared eyes.

“No, Dallas,” he said quietly. “Don’t.”

And the anger seeped out of him in an instant. He let out a breath and slumped. “I’m sick of them, man,” he said softly. “I’m sick of them hurtin’ you and gettin’ away with it. I ain’t gonna let it happen again, okay? I swear it.”

Johnny swallowed and gave a nervous smile and nodded. “I live with you now,” he said, his voice just as soft as Dally’s. “I know they ain’t gonna hurt me again.”

Dally gave a weak smile and took Johnny’s hand for a moment, lacing their fingers together and squeezing them. He wheeled him up to the front of the store, payed for the furniture, and planned to come pick up the furniture the next day after work.

Dallas wheeled Johnny home and, when they arrived, helped him into bed when he told him he wanted to rest, just for a moment. Dally kissed him on the forehead and went into the kitchen to make dinner. When he returned, Johnny was fast asleep, but Dallas didn’t mind. He just smiled.

*I live with you now. I know they ain’t gonna hurt me.*

He swallowed hard. He just hoped Johnny was right.

Chapter End Notes

the socs have jumped johnny more times than just the once in the books in this universe, which is why dally says what he does jsyk
Broken-Hearted Shower Stalls

Chapter Summary

Johnny and Dallas take a shower together

Chapter Notes

yet another idea silklyn gave me!! i love the ideas y’all give me!! they're always perfect!!

i meant to have this up yesterday, but my cat is sick so i’ve been feeling rly depressed lately cause i’m worried about him :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunlight streamed through the white silk curtains, dappling the floor in odd patterns as the curtain blew in the breeze that came in through the open window. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the patterns on the floor went up the side of the bed to the pillow nearest the window and Johnny blinked rapidly as the bright light hit his eyes, waking him up. He let out a gasp and stretched before rolling over and hiding his face, trying to fall back to sleep.

The patterns went further up the bed still and hit Dally’s face and he, too, let out a small gasp and stretched, waking up as he saw Johnny trying to hide his face. He smiled and brushed Johnny’s hair back from his face, kissing his forehead as he said, “Time to wake up.”

Johnny let out a hoarse moan and buried his face further in the blankets. “Still tired,” he groaned, covering his face with the blankets.

Dally smiled, watching him do it. He tried to pull the blankets back down, but Johnny held them fast and Dally couldn’t stop the small chuckle that escaped his lips. He pulled away, saying, “Fine, but when I’m back with breakfast you gotta get up, deal?”

Johnny pulled the blankets away long enough to look at Dallas with bleary eyes, smile sleepily and say, “Okay,” before settling back under the blankets. Within moments, he was asleep again and Dally’s smile widened. How long had it been since Johnny had been able to roll over in bed and go back to sleep without having to worry about someone coming to drag him out of bed to yell at or beat him? He didn’t know and, though he cared, he tried to convince himself it didn’t matter anymore. Johnny could do it now and that was what mattered.

He went to the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator. They had eggs, bacon, and sausage. He knew in the cupboards they had flour and everything else he would need to make pancakes. However, today he decided to make something simple but good: sunny-side-up eggs with bacon and sausage links. He could give Johnny maple syrup for the sausage in one of those fancy side cups.

It didn’t take long to make eggs, bacon, and sausage, but Dally took his time doing it. He’d learned how to cook from watching his mother before she died and watching cooking shows when he was
home alone and his father was gone. He knew how to season everything to perfection. He knew how to cook everything so it was perfectly tender and by the time he finished making everything it had been almost thirty minutes since he got out of bed. He put everything on a plate and put the plates on a tray and carried them into the bedroom, thinking to himself how he wouldn’t have ever thought he’d be bringing the person he loved most breakfast in bed. He certainly couldn’t imagine doing this with Sylvia or any of this other exgirlfriends.

“Breakfast is served,” he said, taking his seat back in bed and setting the tray on his nightstand as he watched Johny pull the blankets off his face and roll over in bed. Dally helped Johny sit up and lean against him and the pillows before he set the tray in his lap and watched him eat. Dally wasn’t hungry. He wasn’t ever hungry in the mornings. But it seemed that wasn’t true of Johny. He ate as ravenously as ever and Dally felt compelled to tell him to slow down.

“What?” Johnny asked, his mouth full of bacon, sausage, and egg at the same time as he turned to look at Dallas, his eyes wide with surprise.

“You’re eatin’ way too fast,” Dally told him.

Johnny went back to his food. “I eat normal. You just eat slow."

“Nah, man, I’m the one who eats normal,” he replied. “You eat too fast.”

Johnny seemed surprised by this, but said nothing else. He did make an effort to eat more slowly after that, but Dally could tell it was a struggle for him and he knew why: he was afraid of having his food taken away from him.

The thought alone broke Dally’s heart, reminding him yet again the type of life Johnny had had for so long. He reached out and placed his hands over Johnny’s holding his silverware as he said, “No one’s gonna take it from you till you’re done, Johnnycake. You don’t gotta rush.”

Johnny looked at him again, his eyes still wide, his mouth closed as he swallowed his food. He didn’t say anything, but the fact Dallas said this to him seemed very surprising. It made him realize no one had ever said it to him before and that broke Dally’s heart all over again.

When Johnny finished his food, Dally got out of bed and said, “I’m gonna go take a shower. Then I gotta go to work. You gonna be okay while I’m gone?”

“Can I come with you?” Johnny asked, his face turning red as he said the words.

At first, Dally thought he meant he wanted to come with him to work, but when he saw him blush he knew he meant the shower instead. Dally had to physically stop himself from grinning as he said, “Yeah, of course, Johnnycake.”

Dallas picked him up, not bothering to put him in his wheelchair. The bathroom was only a few steps away from the bedroom and once he reached it, he propped Johnny up on the toilet seat while he turned on the shower and made it warm. Dally had gotten a wooden bench for the shower that Johnny could sit on since he was unable to stand and once the water was warm enough he went over to Johnny and asked, “D’you need help gettin’ out of your clothes?”

To begin with, Johnny shook his head, trying to struggle out of his large t-shirt he wore to bed and his underwear, but when he couldn’t get his underwear off, he looked away, bit his lip and nodded, allowing Dallas to help him out of them. Dallas then picked him up again and carried him into the shower that was much larger than a shower that might’ve been in a house that hadn’t previously belonged to a pair of infirm elderly people and set him on the wooden bench.
Dally started washing himself with the soap, rubbing it all over himself, standing under the spray to let the suds wash off him and go down the drain. He was just turning to hand the soap to Johnny when he saw the look on his face. First of all, he wasn’t even looking at him, he was looking at the ground, but he was biting his lip and his brows were drawn together. He was holding himself up by bracing his hands on either side of him on the bench and Dally could tell it took effort because they were already shaking and his knuckles were white.

“Johnny?” he asked quietly, kneeling down so he was at Johnny’s eye level. “What is it, man?”

Johnny didn’t look at him at first, his eyes darting everywhere else as he continued to chew on his lip. Then his eyes flicked to Dally’s face and he said quietly, “I’m just a burden now.”

“What?” Dallas asked, unsure where this had come from.

Johnny looked at him miserably. Even in the shower, he could tell there were tears in his eyes. “I can’t even stand in the shower, Dal. I can’t do anythin’ on my own. I can’t even get undressed on my own. I gotta have someone help me with everythin’ cause all I am is a crippled murderer.” He squeezed his eyes shut tight and grimaced, his shoulders shaking from the force of holding back sobs. “Why are you with me, Dallas?” His voice was barely more than a whisper. “I’m worthless. I can’t do nothin’ anymore. Why are you with me at all?”

For a moment, Dally was silent, watching Johnny’s face break again as he continued to sob, his heart clenching and unclenching repeatedly as he tried to imagine the things Johnny was feeling right now. He swallowed hard, reaching out to place his hand over Johnny’s as he said, “Johnny...don’t hate yourself for stuff you can’t control, man. You’re a hero, remember? You saved a bunch of kids and the parents were so grateful they’re payin’ for everythin’. If-if anythin’ it’s my fault you’re like this.”

As he said it, he felt the truth of it and when Johnny looked up, surprised, saying, “What?” He already had an answer ready.

“I let you run into that church,” he said silently, not looking at Johnny, staring at the moist tiles beneath his feet. “I didn’t run in soon enough. If I’d not let you go in or-or just gone in sooner, then you wouldn’t be like this. You’d be able to stand in the shower. You wouldn’t be in pain all the time. And you would be able to breathe on your own.”

Johnny was silent for several moments just as Dally had been and in those moments, Dally imagined Johnny thinking it over, believing that Dally was right. Then he felt a finger on his chin as Johnny tilted his face up to look at him. He looked sad, but he was smiling as he said, “Dallas...when will you run in that church? You can’t control me. You can’t control the choices I make. I wanted to run in that church. You couldn’ta stopped me. Even if you held me down. And...you didn’t know the church was gonna collapse on top of me. None of us did. You gotta stop blamin’ yourself for things you can’t control too, okay man?”

Dally smiled weakly. He reached up to wipe the tears from his eyes before they had a chance to fall and asked, “How come we can see the guilt in each other is wrong, but not ourselves?”

Johnny leaned forward to press his forehead to Dally’s, bracing himself by placing his hand on Dally’s shoulder. He had his eyes closed as he said softly, “Because it’s easier to be objective than subjective.” Dally didn’t know what that meant exactly – he didn’t read nearly as much as Johnny and Ponyboy did – but it sounded right, so he nodded.

“C’mon,” he said, pulling away and putting his hand out to make sure Johnny didn’t fall over as he did so. “Let’s wash ourselves and get out. I’m gonna be late to work if I ain’t careful.”
Johnny smiled up at Dally as he stood and nodded, this time taking the soap when Dally offered it to him, allowing Dally to help him wash the places he couldn’t reach. Dally knew they both still felt guilty, both still felt it was their fault for what had happened to him, but it would take a long time to feel otherwise and he knew that too.

Chapter End Notes

i haven’t been getting as many comments on my stuff lately, so pls leave a comment if read!! :D they’re what keep this fic and all my others going!!
Sunrise, Sunset

Chapter Summary

Johnny and Dallas watch the sunrise together.

Chapter Notes

yes i did get this title from that one song from fiddler on the roof.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was fire everywhere and more heat than Dally thought could be generated in one place. Everywhere he turned he saw flames, reaching towards the ceiling, scorching the beams above them. He could hear a creaking groan coming from somewhere up there and when he looked up, he saw the ceiling sagging, ready to cave in, ready to consume him and everything around him. He wondered vaguely if this was what hell looked like, felt like.

From somewhere in the blaze, he heard a screaming, a high keening that sounded as hellish as the world around him now looked and it took him a moment to realize the scream belonged to Johnny. That was when he began to panic.

Johnny was trapped in this blaze too. Trapped and screaming somewhere and he couldn’t see him, couldn’t find him, couldn’t do anything for him except scream back that he was coming, that he was going to find him and save him if it were the last thing he ever did.

Dally stumbled through the flaming mass of wood. There were beams on the floor, blocking his way in many places, old church pews toppled and simmering with heat. Everything that wasn’t burning was scorched black, looking like it might catch fire at any moment, but none of it mattered. Every time Dally was deterred by something in front of him, he went around it, following the screaming, though it never sounded like it was getting any closer, only further away.

Then he rounded a corner and he screaming stopped and when he looked down he saw why.

At his feet lay a blacked husk, hardly even a person anymore.

Dally fell to his knees, panic and pain rising in his chest as he realized he was too late, his rushing through the fire had done nothing except delay the inevitable. And now here was the proof: Johnny lay dead at his feet, dead and not even recognizable as human anymore.

Dally didn’t move. He stayed there until the flames consumed him too.

* * *

Dally started awake, covered in a cold sweat, gasping for air, his hands clenched in tight fists around his damp sheets. For several long moments, he stared up at the ceiling, breathing like he’d just run a marathon, his eyes wide with fear, forgetting reality, only able to think of the flaming church, feel the
heat of the fire, and see the burned husk that had once been Johnny.

He heard a soft sigh somewhere off to his right and the shifting of blankets. He turned his head and saw Johnny rolling over onto his stomach, letting out soft breaths as he did so, his hands going under the pillow as he settled into his new sleeping position. Dally watched him sleep for several long moments until he remembered the fire in his mind was just a dream, that Johnny hadn’t been a blackened husk when he’d found him, he’d been alive. Burned, yes, paralyzed, yes, but alive. And that was what mattered. And here he was now, sleeping next to him.

Dally swallowed hard, closing his eyes and mouth as he did so.

Johnny was alive, yes, but he was also in pain all the time, he still needed oxygen to breathe because his lungs had been damaged, and there was a good chance his heart was damaged from being restarted so many times when he’d been in the hospital. And it was all his – Dally’s – fault. If he’d found him sooner, if he’d gone into the church sooner, then maybe Johnny wouldn’t be in pain all the time. Maybe he wouldn’t have been hurt at all. His dream had been just a dream, but there was truth to it too. Johnny hadn’t been a burned husk when he found him, but he hadn’t been far from that. Even now when he opened his eyes, he could see the scars from his skin graft surgery on his exposed skin.

It’s your fault, a voice hissed in his mind as he stared at the tiny diamonds in the skin in the places where the bandages had been taken off. He’s covered in scars and hurts all the time because you didn’t stop him from going into that church, because you didn’t go in to get him soon enough.

He couldn’t argue with the voice. He knew it was right.

His eyes he hadn’t realized he’d closed again, opened and he watched Johnny sleep. He wore an eye mask because he was so sensitive to bright lights and couldn’t sleep without it on, but it was cute in Dally’s opinion. It made him smile. He could see Johnny’s hair was getting long again. He kept grease on his nightstand again now and put it in his hair when he woke up in the mornings. The thought of Johnny doing that made Dally smile wider. He could see scars on Johnny’s arms from things other than being burned, from his switchblade and razors he’d taken out of the things used for shaving. That made his smile falter ever so slightly.

But he has you now, a kinder voice in his mind whispered. He doesn’t do that nearly as much anymore because he has you. You saved him.

And as much as Dally blamed himself for Johnny’s current condition, for the pain he felt every day and the way he felt like a burden to the rest of the gang, he knew that this voice was also right. He had saved Johnny. If it hadn’t been for him taking him in, buying them a house, he would be living with his parents right now or in some foster home, miles and miles away. That would’ve killed him. Both would have. For different reasons.

He had saved Johnny twice. Even with the guilt still eating away at him, he knew that no one else in the gang could claim to have done that. Not with anyone.

His smile returned.

His eyes drifted from Johnny’s form on the bed to the silk curtains that covered the window on the wall to his right. The world outside was a deep blue, the color right before dawn and suddenly Dally’s face lit up with an idea and he shook Johnny’s shoulder.

“Hey Johnnycake,” he said quietly, kissing his temple, brushing his hair back from his face to kiss his forehead. “Wake up. I wanna show you somethin’.”
Johnny moaned in protest at first, hiding his face, trying to get Dally to leave him alone so he could go back to bed. Finally, he looked at Dally, frowning as he said, “What? I wanna go back to bed.”

Dally shook his head, throwing back the blankets and getting dressed, he wrapped Johnny in the blankets and picked him up, putting him in his wheelchair. Johnny yawned, wrapping his blankets more tightly around himself as Dally grabbed one of his oxygen tanks and hooked the tube up to it before putting it into the black bag hanging off the handles and wheeling him out of the room. He pushed him through the living room to the front door and then stopped at the top of ramp, closing the door behind them. The sky was purple now and as Johnny yawned, still blinking the sleep from his eyes, Dally could see understanding dawn on his face and watched as Johnny smiled widely.

“The sunrise!” he said, his voice hoarse with sleep, but full of innocent excitement.

Something about the way he spoke tugged at Dally’s heartstrings and when Johnny reached back for Dally’s hand, he took it and squeezed hard, trying to keep himself from crying. Johnny deserved to be this happy all the time. He deserved not to hurt, not to have to breathe through a tube. He still didn’t understand why the world chose so often to pick on Johnny. It wasn’t fair. Not at all.

The sun rose slowly, turning the purple sky pink, then deep gold and orange. Johnny let out a small gasp of awe as the light caught the dew on the leaves and the grass. Dally watched him look up as the way it shone through the trees, dappling the ground in beautiful patterns. Johnny held out his hands, watching the sun shine on them, turning his dark skin bright gold. In the sunlight, you couldn’t even see the scars that were on his fingers and hands from how badly they’d been burned.

Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold.

And suddenly Dally understood what Johnny had meant when he’d said that.

Everything was beautiful and new and golden. Once it became day, nothing would be new or golden anymore. But here, in this moment, everything was golden. Staying gold meant staying interested in the world, staying fascinated by the small things. And as Dally watched Johnny’s awe at the sunrise though he knew he’d seen many before, he knew that though Johnny thought Ponyboy was gold, he was the most gold out of them all.

Maybe that was why the world picked on him: because it could see his golden heart and it wanted to do everything it could to destroy it.

Well, you won’t, he thought, gripping Johnny’s wheelchair handles now that he’d taken his hand back. If you couldn’t break him by now, you’re not going to. And I won’t let you.

He wouldn’t let the world break Johnny. He wouldn’t let it make him like Dally.

Johnny would stay gold forever. Dally would see to it.

Besides, if anyone deserved to, it was Johnny.

Chapter End Notes

everyone afraid to be forgotten by ionnalee has been the entire mood of this fic. and idek how because her lyrics don't rly fit this fic, but her music always inspires the shit out of me.
so yeah listen to her music (she also is behind the artist iamamiwhoami) because she's amazing.

pls comment if you read. i haven't been getting as many comments lately and it's rly bumming me out :/
Dallas went to work once the sun had risen and the world became a pale yellow rather than a deep gold. He helped Johnny back into bed before he left, tucking him in and promising he’d be back before eight p.m. Johnny didn’t reply, only settled back into his blankets and was asleep before Dally even finished straightening after kissing him on the forehead.

Johnny slept through the morning and into the afternoon. Ever since he’d come home from the hospital, he’d been more tired than he’d ever been before. He slept most of the mornings and awoke in the afternoon. He would spend time in bed if the curtains were open to let in light and if they weren’t he’d get into his wheelchair that was by his bed and push himself into the living room before throwing himself onto the couch with difficulty. Even if there was light in the bedroom he usually did this since his books were kept in the living room, since that was where he spent most of his time. And when he woke up today that was exactly where he went.

He had finished *The Hobbit* and returned it to Ponyboy who had then lent him the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Johnny like fantasy novels and was really enjoying this series. He was still on *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The books were very detailed and therefore very hard to get through, but he had nothing better to do with his time so he read. Ponyboy promised to bring him more books when he needed them since he had so many that his parents, Darry, Soda, and the rest of the gang had gotten him for birthdays and Christmas.

He smiled to himself as he turned the page in his book. The Fellowship in the book reminded him a lot of the gang. He felt a lot like Frodo, Ponyboy reminded him of Sam, Soda and Steve were like Merry and Pippin. Darry reminded him of Boromir or maybe Gandalf, Two-Bit was like Gimli, and Dallas reminded him of Aragorn. He wasn’t sure anyone else would agree with assessment, but the thought alone made him grin as he thought of them all dressing up as the characters for Halloween. He doubted he would be able to convince them do to it, but it sure sounded like it would be fun.

It was a little past two in the afternoon when he heard a knock at the door. The door opened almost instantly afterwards and for a moment he was frozen on his couch as panic filled him. The person at the door could be any number of people – friend or foe. But then there was a chorus of whistles, the same whistle used by the gang to let the rest of them know it was one of them coming rather than someone else and Johnny relaxed, smiling slightly.

It would seem the gang had come to see him.
They rounded the corner from the short hallway that led from the front door to the living room all chatting in low voices. It was Darry, Two-Bit, Steve, and Ponyboy. When they saw him they all cheered and said various versions of the phrase, “Hey, Johnnycake!” Before they all bent down to hug him, ruffle his hair, pat him on the shoulder, and ask him how he was doing.

“When’ll Dally be off work?” Ponyboy asked, sitting at the small table while Two-Bit and Steve went to rummage in the refrigerator.

Johnny opened his mouth to reply, but Steve beat him to it saying, “Probably when Soda gets off, which is around 6 p.m. Depends on when Digger lets em off.” He and Two-Bit returned to where everyone else was gathered around the couch Johnny was sitting on or the table, both now with a beer in hand. A part of Johnny wondered vaguely why they drank so much. He thought about asking if they were okay, but he also didn’t think they’d tell him any sort of truth around everyone else.

Two-Bit turned the TV on and switched to the cartoons. Everyone knew that Two-Bit loved cartoons more than any other type of television show, which was just fine with all of them. The few other stations they had were news reels or soap operas and none of them liked those. Cartoons were always the best option. But the only time Two-Bit really watched them was when they were Mickey Mouse cartoons. The cartoons that came on now were Looney Toons and Two-Bit went to sit at the small table with Ponyboy and play checkers with the beer bottle caps he kept in his pocket, while Steve watched and helped them cheat.

“What did y’all come over for?” Johnny asked, looking from Darry sitting at the end of the couch he was on to Steve, Two-Bit, and Ponyboy playing checkers on the small fold out table in the living room. There was the nice wooden dining table he and Dally had gotten in the kitchen. He wasn’t sure why they chose the shitty table over that.

Steve shrugged one shoulder, not looking up from his checkers game as he said, “Ain’t it obvious? We wanted to see you, Johnnycake.” This time he did look up and when he did he grinned. But something about it made Johnny feel sad and guilty.

They could be out doing anything they wanted to do, but because he couldn’t walk, because he couldn’t even breathe on his own, he couldn’t go out with them. And he wasn’t sure why they chose to stay here with him anyway. Maybe it was guilt or some feeling of duty. Whatever it was, it made him look away from them, frowning, hating himself more than he could remember hating himself.

It seemed all he was good at was making people hurt.

He’d killed Bob, whether that had been self-defense or not, he’d still killed him, and he’d hurt Cherry in the process. After all, he’d killed her boyfriend.

Then he’d gone to the church and he’d had to take Ponyboy with him, just a kid, a fourteen year old kid. And he’d heard Darry and Sodapop, making them worry about him by doing that.

Then the church had caught fire and, though he’d saved all those kids, he’d gotten himself burned half to death and paralyzed in the process, which had led to Dallas and the rest of the gang being hurt because now they couldn’t do what they wanted without him without feeling guilty.

He clenched his hands into tight fists, grimacing.

All of this was his fault. Every bit of it. From the moment he’d killed Bob to now.

And the worst part was everyone felt guilty for his mistakes.
“Johnny?”

The voice startled him and he looked up.

“What’s goin’ on?” Darry had moved. He was now kneeling down next to him, his hand on his wrist, looking up at him with worried eyes and Johnny only felt worse.

He tried to force a smile and said in a voice far too bright to be real, “I’m okay! I’m fine!”

But Darry gave a wry smile, clearly not convinced as he said, “When are you gonna get it, kid? You ain’t botherin’ us by tellin’ us what’s goin’ on.”

Johnny swallowed hard. That hadn’t been an answer he was expecting. He looked away and tried to think of what to say, but then Darry squeezed his wrist slightly, a reassuring gesture, and it all came spilling out of him all at once.

“I’m just a burden now, Darry,” he said in a voice barely more than a whisper. “I can’t go nowhere or do nothin’. I’m trapped here and I make it so y’all are trapped here with me cause you feel too guilty to go and do stuff alone. But...but all of this is my fault and I dunno why y’all should be punished for my stupid mistakes too.” He swallowed hard, still not looking at Darry, not knowing that now Steve, Two-Bit, and Ponyboy were looking at him too. “It ain’t fair to y’all what’s happened. You don’t gotta feel bad for leavin’ me behind.”

The room was silent for a moment. The only sound the soft music and comical voices coming from the television. In that silence, Johnny felt afraid. He didn’t look at them, terrified he would see anger on their faces, or worse yet: agreement.

But then Darry squeezed his wrist again and he heard Two-Bit, Steve, and Ponyboy get up from the table and come over to him. He still didn’t look up, still afraid they were going to tell him that this was all his fault too – not that he would’ve disagreed or thought he deserved any less.

“Oh Johnny,” Darry said, his voice soft and sad. “None of this is your fault, okay? Not even killin’ that Soc. It was self-defense, remember? Even a court of law agrees with you on that. As for everythin’ else...you really think it’s your fault a beam decided to fall on your back? Or that you chose to stick yourself in a pit of fire and get burned? We ain’t like your folks, Johnny. We ain’t gonna blame you for stuff you can’t control. And just cause you can’t walk don’t make you a burden. We like comin’ over and spendin’ time with you. Even if that means we don’t walk around town all day.”

This time Johnny did look up and when he did, there were tears in his eyes as he saw the smiling faces of Darry, Steve, Ponyboy, and Two-Bit looking at him. He smiled back, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat, blinking rapidly as he tried not to let the tears fall. He swallowed again and said, “I dunno what I’d do without y’all. I really don’t.”

“We don’t know what we’d do without’cha either, kid, so don’t you worry bout us,” Two-Bit replied, leaning forward to ruffle his hair. “We ain’t gonna get sick of ya. We couldn’t get along without’cha and you know that.”

The rest of the gang nodded in agreement.

“Thanks, man,” Johnny said, looking away to quickly wipe away the tears that had fallen.

“You don’t gotta thank us, Johnny,” Steve said as Johnny looked up again. “Really. We do this stuff cause we wanna. Not cause we feel guilty.”
Johnny smiled, unsure of what else to say, but it turned out he didn’t need to say anything else. What he had said already was enough. The gang went back to what they were doing and Darry took his seat back at the end of Johnny’s couch, watching cartoons and occasionally shouting something at the boys playing checkers on the foldout table.

And as he watched them on the foldout table he realized something.

They didn’t play at the dining table because it was too far away. They wanted to be close to him.

The thought made him smile so big he almost started crying again.

Chapter End Notes

why yes i am going to have a chapter that addresses two-bit's and steve's drinking

i haven't been getting as many comments lately, which is rly bumming me out and contributing to my low energy so pls comment on this if you read it!! :D <3
Late One Night

Chapter Summary

Dally gets home late from work. It takes a toll on Johnny he wasn't expecting.

Chapter Notes

i'm still sick so stuff is getting released much slower than usual rip ;-;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The gang left around six p.m. Darry had go to start dinner for himself and his brothers. Steve had to get home so he could get up early for work tomorrow. And Two-Bit wanted to go wandering around the neighborhood drunk for as long as he could before climbing in his bedroom window and going to sleep. Steve and the Curtis brothers were the only ones out of the gang who had happy home lives. Two-Bit’s parents were drunk all the time and hardly noticed their son existed and when they did, they spent all their time taking out their anger on him by yelling at him.

A part of Johnny desperately wished they’d all stay behind with him until Dallas got home, but he would be back in a couple of hours and he didn’t want them to stay if they had other plans, so he sat in the living room, reading his book and waiting for the door to open behind him and to hear the whistle that would signal Dallas was home.

But eight o’clock came and went and Dally still wasn’t back.

He wasn’t back by nine o’clock either. Or ten. And by the time eleven rolled around, Johnny was getting nervous. If he could pace, he would’ve been pacing. If he could walk at all, he would’ve gone down to the garage to make sure nothing had happened to him, but he felt that if something had Sodapop would’ve come by to tell him so.

Still that didn’t stop the panic from rising in his chest and it didn’t stop his thoughts from spinning in circles, convincing him that something horrible had happened to Dallas, something to make it so he wasn’t coming back. He couldn’t stop thinking about Dally getting crushed under a car and eventually he got back into his wheelchair and pushed himself into the kitchen.

For several long moments, he looked miserably around the kitchen, trying to figure out why he’d gone in there to begin with, trying not to think about all of the horrible things that might’ve happened to Dallas. Then the horrible image of him being crushed beneath a car popped into his mind again and he winced, twitching slightly, remembering all at once why he was in the kitchen: alcohol. He wanted to get drunk. Whether Dally was okay or not didn’t really matter anymore, he wanted to get rid of the horrific images in his mind.

He found the booze beneath the sink and had to fall – quite painfully – out of his wheelchair to reach it. He found himself not caring that his back hurt like hell now. He found himself not giving a shit when he ripped off his oxygen tube and found it harder to breathe. If he died, what would anyone care? What would he care? He was sick of suffering. And with his switchblade back on the end table
in the living room, the only solution was to drink until he forgot. That was what Dallas did, right? There wouldn’t be any problem with him doing it either, right? He wasn’t sure if he were trying to convince himself or whoever would find him passed out drunk on the linoleum of the kitchen floor later.

There was vodka, whiskey, and a bottle of wine under the sink. Dally didn’t drink. At least, not nearly as much as he used to. The bottles of all three of them were full. Except for the whiskey which was a quarter empty. Johnny hated hard liquor. He could barely stomach it and being such a lightweight, it made him really sick really fast, so he grabbed the bottle of wine, thanking whoever was listening the cap was a twist off and began gulping it down.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat in the kitchen, drinking wine, struggling to breathe, his back ache dulled slightly by the alcohol. He couldn’t see the clock from where he was sitting, but he could hear it, ticking away the seconds and minutes, every single one a reminder that Dallas wasn’t home yet, that there was a good chance he would never be coming home again.

Johnny slumped to the floor, curling into a fetal position as he stared at the cabinets across from him and tried to ignore how the hard linoleum hurt his back.

And what’ll happen if he doesn’t come back? A ruthless voice whispered in his mind. You’ll have to go back and live with your folks until the trial. And even then if they’re let off, you’ll still have to live with them. And then you’ll die. They’ll kill you. But it won’t be quick. It’ll be a slow and painful death and you will be all alone. No one will visit you there. No one will save you again.

Everything the voice said was true and Johnny watched as the world around him blurred as tears filled his eyes and he grimaced, trying to keep the sobs in his chest from being released.

How much more pain could he take before his body gave out and he died? How much more pain could he take before his mind couldn’t take anymore and he simply lost the will to live? He wasn’t sure, but he didn’t think it was much more. As much as the rest of the gang liked to pretend and tell him otherwise, he wasn’t strong like they were. In fact, he was surprised he’d made it as far as he had.

“Well let it end,” he whispered to himself, feeling tears fall from his eyes and make tracks down his face before dripping to the floor. “Please. Just let it end.”

He didn’t want to do this anymore.

He didn’t want to suffer like this anymore.

And, like he’d just thought a moment ago, he wasn’t sure he could either.

He took a breath and heard something clatter loudly to the floor. He sat up quickly and turned, seeing his switchblade lying on the ground behind him. He drew his brows together in confusion, wondering in his drunken state how it had gotten from the end table to the floor when he realized that it had probably been in his pocket the whole time and he just hadn’t known it.

Carefully, as though it were a hot poker, Johnny picked up the knife and flicked it open, staring at the blade, seeing his own face reflected in the silver of it.

Without really thinking about it, he pressed the knife to his arm, noticing vaguely what a contrast the bright blade was with his dark skin, and pulled it across. He barely felt the pain, the alcohol dulling it more than the pain in his back. He watched as bright beads of red sprouted up where the blade had once been and, being drunk, they looked beautiful. He wanted to see more.
He did it again and again. So many times he lost count, before he finally collapsed onto his side again and watched, his arm laid out in front of him, as the blood dripped down the sides of his arm – like the tears had gone down the sides of his face – creating a small pool of crimson beneath it.

That’s gonna stain the linoleum, a voice whispered in the back of his mind.

He gave a wry smile. I don’t care, he replied.

* * *

It had been a long, long day at work. Dallas was supposed to get off at 8 p.m., but then they’d gotten a rush of customers and Digger had asked him if he could stay later. Dally had said yes, knowing he needed the money. However, the rest of his shift – which lasted until one in the morning, since someone had to stay with Digger while he went through the books – he had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. He tried to brush it off as just being annoyed he had to stay so much longer, but no matter what he said to himself, it sounded like bullshit.

He said goodbye to Digger the minute he told him he could go, slinging his jacket over his shoulder as he headed down the street, back towards the home he shared with Johnny. He walked quickly, wanting to get there as fast as possible. And once he realized that he’d told Johnny he would be home five hours earlier, he realized what the horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach was and he started to run, thinking of all the horrible things Johnny might’ve done to himself in his absence.

His hands were shaking as he pushed the key into the lock, turning it and throwing the door open. He whistled quickly so Johnny would know it was him, but when he didn’t hear the return whistle, he slammed the door behind him, locking it again quickly before, stepping into the house, calling out in a shaking voice, “Johnny? Johnnycake? It’s me! I’m finally home!”

He looked in the living room, but Johnny wasn’t there. However, when he went into the kitchen he found him and let out a gasp, pulling himself up short as he saw Johnny, lying on the kitchen floor, his oxygen tube a few feet away, a wine bottle closer, and a small pool of blood about a foot away from him. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what had happened and Dallas wanted to punch something to dust for being so fucking stupid.

This was his fault and he knew it.

If he’d only come home sooner...none of this would’ve happened.

He covered his face with his hand for a moment, trying not to cry, trying not to think about what Johnny might’ve been thinking when he came into the kitchen, trying not to think about how he might’ve hurt himself after.

He can’t be on the ground like that, he thought dimly, kneeling down next to Johnny, fast asleep now, curled into a fetal position. He needs his oxygen too.

Dally tentatively placed his hand on Johnny’s shoulder and swallowed hard, saying quietly, “Johnny. Johnny, it’s me. You gotta wake up, man. You shouldn’t be on the ground like that.”

Johnny started awake and looked up at him. For several long moments, he looked like he couldn’t believe he was seeing Dallas in front of him and Dally watched in horror and sadness as Johnny’s eyes filled with tears and he began to cry. Johnny cried a lot. A lot more than any of the rest of the gang thought or saw, but every time he did, it still broke Dally’s heart because Johnny only ever cried over what really upset him.

“Oh thank god,” Johnny said in a small voice. “I thought you were dead. I thought somethin’
happened and you were dead and weren’t comin’ home.”

Dally smiled sadly, helping Johnny to sit up. He was gasping for air and Dally put his oxygen tank back around his head, watching as Johnny closed his eyes and took a deep breath in through his nose as he did so. “I’m okay,” he said, his voice still quiet. “I ain’t goin’ nowhere, Johnnycake. Not without you. You know that, right?” Johnny nodded, trying to hide his arm that he’d cut up, but Dally noticed and grabbed his arm, saying, “We gotta wrap that, okay? I don’t want it getting infected.”

Johnny didn’t look at Dally as he nodded again and let Dallas pick him up, putting him back in his wheelchair as Dally pushed him into the bathroom, grabbing everything he would need to wrap his arm: bandages, peroxide, and antiseptic.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call and tell you I was gonna be home late,” Dally said in that same quiet voice, as he dumped some of the peroxide onto a rag and pressed it to Johnny’s arm. Johnny winced, cracking his knuckles in quick succession as he always did when he was in pain. “I shoulda called.”

“We don’t gotta phone, Dal,” Johnny said, his voice tight with pain. His eyes were squeezed shut in pain and when he opened them, he looked at him again and said, “It ain’t your fault.”

But that only made Dally want to punch something even more. He shook his head, now using the antiseptic to wipe at Johnny’s cut up arm. “No,” he said, his voice firm, though it was still soft. “No, it is my fault, Johnny. I shoulda known what would happen if I stayed longer and I shoulda called someone and had ‘em tell you to come check on you. There ain’t no excuse for it.”

Johnny was quiet for a long time, watching as Dally began wrapping his arm in gauze, before he finally said, “Yeah, well hindsight is 20/20, Dal.”

Dally looked up, drawing his brows together in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“It means you always know what to do after the fact,” Johnny replied, still staring at his arm. “It means you can’t blame yourself for what you don’t know.” His eyes flicked to Dally’s face. “Okay?”

Dally swallowed hard. He didn’t want to admit Johnny was right, even though he knew he was. For some reason, admitting he had no control over how things went was worse than accepting the blame. If he accepted the blame, it meant he could stop it next time. If it weren’t his fault, it meant it would happen again and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Like fate. He didn’t believe in fate. He didn’t want to.

However, he finally nodded and said, “Okay. Alright.” But only because he knew it would make Johnny feel better. Not because he actually believed it.

He finished wrapping Johnny’s arm and carried him to bed, pushing his wheelchair in to his bedside behind him. He kissed Johnny’s forehead and climbed into bed next to him, watching as Johnny rolled over and let out a soft sigh, falling asleep almost instantly.

For some strange reason, Two-Bit’s words from when Johnny had been in the hospital popped into his head then, playing on a loop: I wish it was any one of us except Johnny. We could get along without anyone except Johnny.

And though then he had meant Johnny being hurt and dying, Dally felt it applied to now too.

Out of all of them, Johnny deserved to feel bad enough to hurt himself the least. Especially when he had already been through so fucking much.
i haven't been getting as many comments on my writing lately and it's rly buming me out :/ so pls comment if you read this !! <3
Tested Heart Monitors

Chapter Summary

Johnny goes to the hospital to get his heart tested to see if it's damaged

Chapter Notes

i again meant to post this yesterday, but i had someone stalking my tumblr and spent most of the day having a panic attack so that’s why this didn’t get up until today. also this isn't as good as my usual writing because a) i'm still sick and b) i’m still panicking.

Dallas didn’t have to go into work until late the next day, but the reason for that was he had to take Johnny to the hospital to get tests done on his heart to see whether or not it had been damaged by having stopped and being restarted so many times.

Dally woke long before dawn, staring at the white ceiling turned a pale navy blue in the predawn light. He didn’t bother waking Johnny this time. He only lay there, listening to Johnny breathe, occasionally glancing over at him to watch him sleep. He was so peaceful when he was asleep and it hurt him to think that was the only time he looked that way. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out above him, watching it curl and spin in circles as it made its way up, up, up to the top of the room and then stayed there before dispersing into nothing.

As he finished one cigarette and started another, he looked over at Johnny, watching him sleep, watching the slow rise and fall of his body as he slept. What would happen if Johnny’s heart were damaged? Even if it weren’t that badly damaged, people with hearts damaged at all didn’t tend to live very long. Or at least, not as long as most people.

He covered his face with his arm, grimacing as he struggled to swallow past the lump forming in his throat and keep the sobs rising in his chest from breaking free.

He couldn’t live without Johnny. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t.

He didn’t want to imagine what life might be like without him, but the truth was if Johnny’s heart were badly damaged, odds were he’d lose him and then he would have to know what it felt like.

I’m not gonna live much longer if he dies, he though to himself, pulling his arm away from his eyes to see the ceiling had gone from a pale navy blue to dark purple. If he dies, I die. It’s that simple.

He turned away from Johnny then, going back to watching the ceiling change colors until light finally streamed in, the silk curtain moving in the breeze from the open window dappling the floor in strange patterns. He kept smoking the whole time, not caring if he got sick, not caring if he got lung cancer. Maybe then he’d be able to take on at least some of Johnny’s pain and die with him.

He was still smoking when Johnny finally woke up, taking a sharp breath inward and turning to
Dally smiling at him sleepily as he said, “Mornin’ Dal.”

Dallas couldn’t help smiling back. Even with the oxygen tube that ran under his nose, he still looked beautiful to Dally, like some sort of renaissance painting hung in a museum. It seemed unfair to him that world hurt him so much when all Johnny ever did was hope for the best and see the best in others. Even the people who’d hurt him. But the world was cruel and it seemed to Dallas that people felt that anything beautiful in the world, like Johnny, they had to break.

And that, to Dallas, was the most amazing thing about Johnny.

Despite everything that had happened to him, despite everything that had been done to him, he remained good and kind and Dallas didn’t understand it. He’d been torn apart by the things that had happened to him in jail, at the hands of his father, and the death of his mother. But Johnny had been through far worse than he had – or so he thought – and he still saw the good in the world. He could still wake up and smile at him in the morning. And that, to Dallas, was a miracle.

“Mornin’ Johnnycake,” he said quietly, leaning across the bed to kiss Johnny on the forehead as he held his cigarette to one side to keep it from touching the sheets. “How’d you sleep?”

Johnny shrugged, closing his eyes, pulling the blankets back up over him as he said, “Okay, I guess.” He yawned and settled back down into the bed. He looked like he was asleep again, but then he said, his voice barely more than a whisper, “When do we gotta go to the hospital?”

Dally’s smile vanished. Something about the way Johnny asked it, something about the fact he knew what was going on, broke his heart. Johnny was only sixteen. He would be seventeen in just under seven months, and even then he was still just a kid. A kid who had been through things that many seventy year olds hadn’t been through and couldn’t imagine.

The lump in Dally’s throat returned and he had a hard time swallowing past it as he glanced at the digital clock on his nightstand. “Well, we gotta be there at noon and it’s ten now.”

Johnny nodded, not opening his eyes. He didn’t say anything either.

Somehow to Dallas that was worse than him getting upset about it. He just accepted his fate without question, like he just expected pain at this point.

Dallas tried to swallow again and had to look at the ceiling, blinking rapidly to keep the tears in his eyes from falling. It wasn’t fair. None of this. He’d thought it before and he knew he would think it again: Johnny deserved this least out of anyone in the gang. And he knew that if any of them had the choice they would take on his pain in an instant.

They lay in silence for another hour and a half before Dally finally said, “We should probably get goin’, Johnnycake. It takes about thirty minutes to drive to the hospital.”

Johnny only nodded and took a deep breath, throwing back the blankets as he stretched in bed. Dallas got up, getting himself dressed before grabbing Johnny’s clothes out of the closet as well and going back to the bed. He gave the clothes to Johnny and started to walk away to get his wheelchair ready to go before pausing and asking, “D’you need help? Gettin’ dressed?”

At first, Johnny shook his head, still leaning up against his pillows, since he hadn’t learned to sit up on his own again yet. but he wasn’t looking at Dallas as he did it and Dally knelt in front of him so he could see Johnny’s face and, taking one of his hands in both of his own, said, “I don’t mind helpin’ you. You know that, right?”

Johnny’s eyes shifted to Dally’s and he swallowed hard saying, “Yeah, I know. I just...I just hate
bein’ so weak, Dal. I hate not bein’ able to anythin’ on my own. I can’t even sit up by myself. Or—or even breathe by myself.” He then did what Dally had done not that long ago: blinked rapidly and looked at the ceiling, swallowing hard again as he did so.

“Johnny,” Dally said quietly, squeezing Johnny’s hand, making him look at him. “You ain’t weak, man, okay? You’re strong. You think anyone could go through all the shit you have and not only survive, but still be such a lovin’ and good person? I mean...look at me. I turned into a heartless asshole. You’re still soft and sensitive. Why d’you think the whole gang protects you? Cause we all can see how rare that is. We love you just the way you are. And none of us think you’re weak, man.”

Johnny gave a weak smile and said, “You really mean that?”


Johnny’s smile widened as Dallas added, “Now let me help you get dressed, okay?”

This time Johnny nodded and Dallas helped Johnny sit up, holding him up as he pulled on his shirt. He did the same thing when he pulled on his jeans. Johnny shrugged on his denim jacket on his own, grabbing his switchblade off the nightstand and putting it in his back pocket before Dallas helped him into his wheelchair and pushed him out of the bedroom, then out of the house and to the car that was parked in their back alley garage.

They were silent the entire ride to the hospital. Dallas kept glancing at Johnny every now and then, but every time he did, he just saw him staring out the window. He couldn’t see his face and couldn’t figure out what he was thinking or feeling.

With morning rush hour traffic over, it took them less time to get to the hospital than it might have otherwise. When they arrived, Dallas parked before pulling Johnny’s folded up wheelchair out of the trunk and unfolding it near the passenger door. He opened the door for him and helped him into his chair before pushing him inside. The receptionist waved at them, knowing them by name at this point, as they went in and, when Dallas asked where they would need to go to get Johnny’s heart tested, she pointed them the way happily.

“I like her,” Johnny said quietly as they turned down the hall towards the elevators. The place they needed to go to was on the third floor. “She’s nice.”

Something about the way Johnny said this made Dally look at him. He blinked as the elevator dinged and he pushed him into it. How many people really were nice to Johnny outside of the gang? Few enough that commenting on a nice receptionist seemed necessary to him.

Just how much as this kid been through? He thought to himself, watching the numbers on the wall of the elevator go up as the car went up. Just how many people have treated him poorly?

He thought he knew, but he clearly didn’t and now he wasn’t sure he really wanted to.

The place the receptionist had directed them to – room 350 – was a waiting room full of sick people. As they checked in with another receptionist there who told them to sit down until they were called, Dallas looked around, noticing how everyone in the room was far older than Johnny was.

He ain’t supposed to have heart problems at this age, he thought bitterly, looking at an old man who was also connected to oxygen. He ain’t supposed to be havin’ any of these problems.

“Johnny Cade!” a nurse called from the entrance to a hallway.
Dallas stood instantly, surprised how short of a time that had taken as he went behind Johnny’s chair once more and pushed him down the hall. The nurse had Dallas push Johnny onto a special scale specifically for weighing people who couldn’t walk. She also managed to see how tall he was with some sort of other measuring thing that Dallas wasn’t sure how it worked. Finally, she led them into another room and said, “The doctor will be with you a moment.”

“How long is this gonna take?” Dally asked quickly before she left. He knew Johnny hated hospitals and he didn’t want him to have to get poked and prodded any longer than he had to.

“Well, we need to run an EKG,” she said, looking at the chart in front of her. “Then we need him to get a blood test and run a CT scan. After that he’ll come back here and the doctor will tell him the results. Then y’all will be able to go home.”

She smiled widely before leaving.

Dally grimaced, clenching his hands into fists to keep himself from cursing. That sounded like a lot. A lot more than he’d thought they’d have to do. When he turned to Johnny, he could tell he was nervous too, twisting his hands in the ends of his clothes. Dally forced a smile and said, “Hey. It’ll be okay, Johnnycake. I ain’t gonna leave you. I’ll be here the whole time, okay?”

Johnny gave a nervous smile and nodded, but he didn’t seem convinced.

It didn’t get much better when the doctor came in and told Johnny to remove his shirt, so he could put a bunch of sensors on his chest, Johnny flinching each time he did so. Johnny didn’t like being touched. Especially not by strangers.

The doctor flicked on the EKG machine once the sensors were in place and Dally immediately started talking about the time they all went to the carnival that came to Tulsa during the summer. “Remember how Two-Bit got so drunk and ate so much cotton candy he got sick?” he said, grinning, trying to get Johnny to think about anything other than what was happening.

Johnny smiled back and said, “Yeah, he still can’t eat cotton candy. Remember the tower drop ride y’all dared me to go on? That scared me half to death. I ain’t ever goin’ on it again.”

“But you did go on it once,” Dally pointed out. “You at least got braggin’ rights.”

“Yes, but I still ain’t doin’ it again,” Johnny replied. “Heights scare me.”

“Well, it don’t matter now,” he said. “I wouldn’t let you go on those rides. Not now.”

Johnny stuck out his tongue good-naturedly, but neither of them said what they were really thinking: Johnny was just too sick now to go on rollercoasters and other thrill rides. If his heart were damaged, odds were he wouldn’t be allowed to, let alone be able to safely handle it.

A minute later the test was over and the doctor was giving them a slip of paper to give to the nurse they would go see at the blood lab on the first floor. He told them how to get there and sent them on their way, telling them he would meet them back here once the other tests were over.

The blood test took all of two minutes.

They gave their slip of paper to the nurse that was waiting at the blood lab. She didn’t even bother helping Johnny out of his wheelchair and into one of the chairs that lined the walls of the blood lab. She just put a tray over the arms of his chair and told him the stretch out his arm. She wrapped a tourniquet around the upper part of his arm, sterilized the crook of his elbow, and stuck a needle in. She took two vials of his blood before taking off the tourniquet, putting a pressure bandage around
the wound and telling them how to get to where he would take his CT scan.

“Did it hurt?” Dallas asked as he headed down the hall towards radiology where the CT scan would be, both out of curiosity and to make sure Johnny was okay.

Johnny shook his head. “It don’t hurt after you do it so many times,” he replied.

Dally wasn’t sure what that meant, but it made him wonder how many times they’d stuck him while he was in the hospital for a month.

The final stop was the place for the CT scan and, as it happened, it was the only place Dallas couldn’t follow Johnny to. He helped him change into a hospital gown and was told by the nurse that he would have to sit in the small waiting room off from the room where the scan was done. It would take thirty minutes to scan just his chest. Dally hated it. Especially when Johnny looked over his shoulder as the nurse pushed him out of the waiting room and into the scanning room. He looked scared, biting his lip as he looked back at Dallas, and again Dally thought how unfair this all was, how Johnny shouldn’t have had to go through any of this.

The thirty minutes in the waiting room were the longest of Dally’s life and when Johnny finally came back, already dressed in his street clothes, he stood quickly.

“Why didn’t you call me?” he asked, looking at the nurse, trying to hold in his anger.

“For what?” she asked. “I can help him just fine.”

“Yeah, but he don’t like strangers helpin’ him,” Dally replied, moving towards Johnny, still frowning at the nurse his eyes narrowed. “But you didn’t bother askin’ that, did you?”

“It’s not a big deal,” the nurse replied, though she looked nervous.

“Actually,” Dally replied, smiling bitterly, “it is. Next time call me. I mean it.”

The nurse didn’t know what to say and left quickly. Dally wanted to scream. None of this was supposed to be happening. Not to Johnny. Not today.

“Dal, it’s okay,” Johnny said quietly in the elevator as they rode back up to the third floor to speak to the doctor about the results of his tests.

It took Dally a moment to realize that Johnny was talking about the nurse and Dally shook his head. “No, Johnny,” he said softly. “It’s not okay. None of this is okay. You’re only sixteen, Johnny! You ain’t supposed to be havin’ these problems now!”

Johnny opened his mouth to reply, but that was when the elevator dinged and they stepped back out, going back into the waiting room they’d been in before waiting for the nurse to call Johnny’s name before they went back to the same room they’d been in before and waited for the doctor to come with the results, neither of them speaking.

When the doctor finally came in, Dally knew by the look on his face what the results were going to be, but his heart still sank and icy anxiety filled him when the doctor said, “It would seem that your heart is in fact damaged. Not horribly. You will still be able to live a mostly normal life. However, there may be times your chest will hurt and if you get too overexcited there is a chance you could have an attack, which could potentially damage it more and make the condition worse.”

Johnny only nodded. He didn’t even look surprised.
Dally’s heart broke a little more.

“On another note, your physical therapy will be starting at the beginning of next week,” the doctor went on. “However, I must warn you now: it will be very strenuous and painful. You are going to have to learn how to do everything all over again including sit up on your own, which is where they will start, but all of it will be hard and painful because of how badly your back was broken.”

Again Johnny only nodded.

Dally had to look away to keep the doctor from seeing his grimace.

The doctor left then, prescribing Johny some medication for his heart. He told them he could pick it up at the pharmacy in the hospital. They picked up the medication and then headed home, the drive there just as silent as the one there.

Dally kept glancing at Johnny as they drove. He was looking out the window as he had been on the way there, his fingers curled around the tiny pill bottle. They stopped at a light and Dallas saw a single tear running down Johnny’s cheek. He pretended not to see, but that tear made him want to cry too. Normally, when Johnny was upset, everyone who was in the general vicinity knew. But Johnny was trying to be strong and somehow that made Dally’s heart hurt more.

*He shouldn’t have to be strong all the time,* he thought bitterly, his fingers curled around the steering wheel going white. *He should be out runnin’ around with everyone. He should be allowed to be a fuckin’ kid, goddammit.*

But it seemed the universe didn’t agree with Dallas and had other plans for Johnny’s life and as they drove home in silence, both pretending they didn’t notice the distress of the other, Dally wondered if Johnny would ever truly be healthy again.

Chapter End Notes

idk if this is how heart conditions/damaged hearts are discovered. i'm just going off my own knowledge of how hospitals are run and whatnot. also i realize it takes much longer to get CT scan results and CT scans weren't even invented until the 70s, but we bend the rules for angst.

i haven't been getting as many comments on my writing lately and it's really bumming me out so pls comment if u read!!
Home Alone Drunkenness

Chapter Summary

Johnny has a nightmare, but he knows how to get rid of it now.

Chapter Notes

yay a second bit of writing today because i wanted to make up for that last shitty chapter rip. i hope y'all like this one better. if i hadn't already posted the last chapter i'd go back and fix it, but sadly, i never think ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The park was dark and silent. Peaceful almost if not for the fact that Ponyboy was sitting on the jungle gym next to Johnny, trying to hide his tears, trying not to keep crying after what had happened between him and Darry only moments earlier. Johnny pretended not to see, staring instead at the stars above them, trying to pick out the constellations he’d read about in books at the library despite the amount of light pollution around them.

A bright light swung around the park, illuminating everything before settling on the jungle gym that Johnny and Ponyboy were sitting on. Johnny pulled his eyes away from the sky and saw a blue Mustang driving towards them as Ponyboy somewhere to his left said, “Uh oh. Look what’s comin’.” He sounded worried now, not sad. Johnny swallowed hard, his hands starting to shake as the car drew closer and stopped only a few yards from them.

“Bet they’re lookin’ for us,” Johnny replied in a small voice.

Images flashed through his mind then. Images of the Socs finding him at the vacant lot in April. Images of them beating him so bad he couldn’t move. Images of them forcing him to suck them all off afterwards when they knew he’d be too weak and in too much pain to fight them off. And then the worse things they’d done: how they’d taken all of his clothes, how they’d taken advantage of him, how they’d dressed him afterwards to make it seem like nothing had happened.

How he’d told no one of what they had done.

How he’d told no one of how they’d done the same thing three more times after that.

He could still hear all the names they’d called him while they forced themselves on him: worthless, freak, stupid, freak, ugly, freak, disgusting, freak...freak, freak, freak. That was their favorite word. They called him a girl too. They called him ‘she’ pronouns. That had almost been worse than anything else they’d done, reminding him that he wasn’t really a boy. Not to most people. No matter how much he felt like one. He didn’t have a dick. He’d had his breasts removed. And yet he still was a girl to anyone who saw what was in his pants. Sometimes he was even a girl to himself.

When all of the memories were gone, he was sitting next to the fountain, clutching his knife, staring at the blade, dripping with bright crimson onto the gray concrete beneath him. His hands were
covered in that same crimson and he couldn’t move them. He couldn’t move at all. All he could do was sit there, staring at the body of Bob Sheldon, his eyes staring unseeingly up at the sky, his mouth wide, a line of blood running down one side of his face.

Then, to Johnny’s horror, Bob sat up, staring at Johnny with that same wide-eyed, wide-mouthed expression. He stared, unblinkingly, at him for several long moments, then, not even moving his mouth, said, “Your fault. Your fault. Your fault. You killed me. You’re a murderer. This is your fault, your fault, your fault.”

“I didn’t mean to!” Johnny shrieked, though his own mouth wasn’t moving either. “I just wanted to protect my friend. I didn’t want him to die! I didn’t want y’all to kill him!”

“Could’ve tried talking to us!” the specter of Bob went on. “Could’ve tried telling us to stop! Didn’t have to pull out your knife first thing and kill us! This is all your fault! Your fault! Your fault! Didn’t go to jail, but still your fault! Still a murderer! Still deserve to suffer and die!”

“No!” Johnny protested, putting his hands over his ears, but Bob’s voice was inside his head, continuing its mantra, telling him the same thing over and over and over again: “Your fault, your fault, your fault! Murderer! Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!”

Johnny began to scream, trying to block out the noise, but that didn’t help either. Nothing helped. Nothing could change the truth. And he knew the truth: the truth was Bob was right. He was right, he was right, he was right. It was his fault. Everything was his fault. And now he had to suffer the consequences, now he had to pay for what he had done.

“Your fault! Your fault! Your fault! Your fault!”

* * *

Johnny started awake, his eyes flying open, and for several moments as he lay there, gasping for air, he couldn’t figure out where he was. Nothing around him was familiar. Then he recognized the ceiling of the living room, recognized the way the light slanted in from outside, and realized he was at the house he shared with Dallas. He closed his eyes briefly, swallowing as he clenched his jaw and hands, trying to keep himself from shaking, but he couldn’t stop seeing the images from his dream.

*The Socs forcing themselves on him.*

*Him killing Bob Sheldon in cold blood.*

*Murderer, murderer, murderer.*

*Your fault, your fault, your fault.*

His heart pounded in his chest and he reached behind himself to the end table where his heart medication sat. He somehow managed to get the cap off, even though his hands were shaking like leaves in the wind and threw two of the pills into his mouth before downing them with a cup of water on the table. But that didn’t make him feel better. It just made his heart calm down so he didn’t have an attack and it was only after he’d taken the medication that he realized maybe he should’ve let that happen. It wasn’t like the dream was entirely wrong. He was a murderer. This was his fault. He did deserve to suffer for what he’d done.

*You could always drink it away,* a tiny voice whispered in the back of his mind and he immediately thought of the day before yesterday where he’d done just that when Dallas hadn’t come home. It had helped then. Why couldn’t he do it now?
Because you could hurt your back, another voice replied sternly. Because your oxygen can’t reach all the way over there and you know it.

What’s your point? He thought bitterly. I deserve to hurt anyway. If I’m not gonna have a heart attack, I might as well drink. I might as well suffocate. I might as well hurt until Dally gets home to stop me. I deserve it. And you know it.

The voice had no response to that. It knew he was right.

Painfully, he pushed himself upright and then managed to get into his wheelchair. He pushed himself into the kitchen and, once there, flung open the cupboard beneath the sink where the alcohol was. There was another bottle of wine. He didn’t think Dally had bought a new one since he’d drank the last one. More like this was one he hadn’t noticed before. He threw off his oxygen tube and flung himself to the ground, crying out in pain and curling in on himself as he hit the floor and agony shot up his back. He grabbed the wine bottle with one hand and, again, somehow, managed to get it open with his hands shaking violently. He gulped down the alcohol and grimaced at the taste as he sat there, shaking, gasping for breath, praying that the agony in his body and his mind would vanish if he could just consume enough of the stuff.

Your fault, your fault, your fault, the voices in his mind – that sounded just like Bob Sheldon’s – chanted over and over again in his mind. He took another gulp of alcohol, willing the voices to stop, willing them to be quiet, willing them to just shut up.

He closed his eyes tight, grimacing, still gasping for air, his heart still pounding as though he’d never taken his medication to begin with. When he opened his eyes again, his hands were covered in red again and no matter how many times he tried to wipe them off on his shirt or the floor, they stayed red, almost like they were permanently stained.

Murderer, murderer, murderer.

He grimaced, letting out a whimpering moan as his own voice countered the words in his head with a plea of his own.

Kill me, kill me, kill me.

This time he really didn’t have his switchblade with him and it wasn’t enough to just pick at the healing scabs on his arms. He wanted to bleed. He wanted to die. It was what he deserved.

He gulped more of the alcohol down.

* * *

This time when Dallas had a bad feeling while at work, he asked Digger if he could go home early. When Digger asked why, he told him the truth: “I think Johnny might be in trouble.” There must’ve been something about the way he looked because Digger didn’t ask anymore questions and said simply, “Don’t be doin’ this too often. We need you here, Dally.” He only nodded, rushed to get his things and practically ran out of the garage.

Like the other night, he practically ran home, feeling like he was chasing the setting sun as he watched the shadows get longer and longer, his own shadow strangely distorted as he ran. When he got home, he fumbled with the lock and almost forgot to whistle once he got inside. He stopped halfway through, shouting, “Johnny? Johnnycake? I’m home! I’m here! It’s okay! I’m here!” However, like the night before, he got no answer and when he looked in the living room, Johnny wasn’t there. He immediately went to the kitchen and, again, stopped short.
Johnny sat on the floor, hunched over from barely being able to sit up while leaning against the counters behind him, and gasping for air. One hand was curled around the neck of another wine bottle that Dallas hadn’t even remembered they had, the other was bracing himself against the floor, his entire arm shaking from the effort of keeping himself upright. He was half panting with the effort of breathing without his oxygen tube, which lay a few yards from him. When he heard Dally come in, his eyelids fluttered as he looked up at him, but his expression didn’t change. He was spending all of his energy trying to keep himself upright and breathing.

“Johnny...” Dallas said quietly, kneeling down in front of him. He pulled him into his lap, supporting him so he wouldn’t have to. He could only imagine the pain he was in at the moment as he helped put the oxygen tube back around his head, going under his nose. Johnny slumped in his arms, taking a deep breath in through his nose as Dally asked, “What happened?”

“It’s all my fault,” Johnny whispered. “Everythin’. I’m a murderer. It’s all my fault.”

Dally knew immediately what he was talking about, but he was still confused as he asked again, “What happened, Johnnycake?”

Johnny swallowed hard, burying his face in Dally’s chest, curling his fingers in his shirt, clinging to him as he said in a muffled voice, “Bad dream. Real bad dream. Dreamt about the Socs. About-about what they did to me. About killin’-killin’ Bob.” He shuddered when he said his name.

“What they did to you?” he said quietly, thinking for a moment. “You mean when they jumped you?” He knew it’d happened more than once. He knew what they’d done to him each time. He was the only person in the gang who knew everything that had happened. And he still wanted to kill the Socs for it. Their leader dying, in his opinion, wasn’t enough. Not after all they’d done to Johnny first.

Johnny only nodded, still shaking.

Dally held him more tightly and picked him up, carrying him to the couch and holding him there. He rocked him back and forth like a small child and said, “Johnny, none of this is your fault, okay? The Socs were the ones that came at you and Ponyboy and if you hadn’t done somethin’ they woulda killed him. He’d be in a pine box right now. You did the right thing, okay? This ain’t your fault, man. Anyone woulda reacted the way you did. Especially after all they did to you first.”

Johnny didn’t say anything for a long time, but when he did speak, he whispered, “Can-can you put your hand on my scar? The scar on my back? It helps.”

It was then Dally realized Johnny was shaking from pain, not fear, and the moment he did as Johnny asked, the shaking stopped and Johnny let out a small sigh of relief, his entire body sinking into Dally’s as he slowly relaxed. For a long time, they just sat that way in silence, both of them breathing in the scent of the other, trying to think about anything except the past.

“I meant what I said, Johnny,” Dally finally said quietly, breaking the silence. “None of what’s happened has been your fault. Even the law agrees with you. You got off, remember?”

“But I still killed someone,” Johnny whispered in reply.

“Yeah and he asked for it,” Dally said firmly. “He came after you three times before then. Or was it four? Either way you didn’t deserve it and anyone woulda reacted the way you did. You weren’t gonna be able to reason with him. Especially not if you couldn’t the first times.”

Johnny didn’t say anything in reply. He just clung to Dallas more tightly and Dallas let him, holding
him for as long as he needed to be held, wishing more than anything – and not for the first time either – that he could take away Johnny’s pain, that he could experience it instead.

Finally, he said in a quiet voice, “C’mon. I’ll make you dinner. You can relax here while I do.”

Johnny nodded and let Dally extricate himself from Johnny’s grasp. He brought his wheelchair over to the side of the couch in case he wanted to use it before returning to the kitchen to start making soup. He knew Johnny liked soup best out of anything else he made.

As he stood in the kitchen, making the food, he glanced back every now and then to check on Johnny and wasn’t surprised when he found him asleep. He smiled and continued making dinner, glad that, despite everything, he was able to find enough peace to sleep.

*He doesn’t deserve to be in pain all the time,* he thought, his smile vanishing as he did. *Out of all of us, he deserves this agony the least.*

It was not the first time he’d thought that. He doubted, too, that it would be the last. But that didn’t stop him from feeling that way.

Johnny was innocent. More innocent than any of the rest of the gang and that was including thinking about what the Soc he had killed. He hadn’t done so on purpose. He had done it in self-defense. In fact, he probably had no idea what he was doing until he’d already done it. Dally knew how the kid’s mind worked. If he killed that Soc it was because his brain had convinced him there was no other option and, as far as Dally was concerned, it was probably right. Especially when you took into consideration all of the other times the Socs had hurt him and hurt him in ways most people couldn’t even dream up or even dared to imagine.

*He doesn’t deserve to be in pain all the time,* he thought again.

But the worst part was, he didn’t know how to make that pain go away.

And that left him feeling useless.

Chapter End Notes

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i actually love it when y'all give me ideas so if you have any ideas (even though i have this entire part of the fic planned out) pls lemme know!! i love writing stuff for y'all!!

i haven't been getting as many comments on my writing lately, so pls if you read this pls leave a comment!!
Barnyard Funtimes

Chapter Summary

Johnny and Dallas go on a triple date with Soda and Steve, Evie and Sandy.

Chapter Notes

yay i finally got to the chapter i promised y'all a while ago!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dallas started awake from a dream about the church being on fire at dawn, covered in a cold sweat, forgetting for several long moments where he was and what he was doing. In his mind, he still saw the church burning, still heard the horrific sound of Johnny’s screams, still felt the heat of the flames as he threw himself back into the collapsing church to save him. It wasn’t until Johnny shifted in bed – like he had last time Dallas had this dream – that he closed his eyes, letting out a sigh of relief, remembering Johnny was safe, Johnny was alive, and he was going to be okay.

He lit a cigarette, his hands still shaking from the aftereffects of the dream, hoping the nicotine would stop it. He watched the ceiling change colors again as he smoked it, blowing the smoke at the ceiling like he always did. He wondered as he watched the smoke curl and disperse around the room if he would always have these nightmares. It had been almost two months since the church fire and he still had them every other night.

As Johnny shifted again in bed next to him, he turned to look at him and wondered how many more nightmares he would have too. He knew he had them. Sometimes it was during the night and he woke up gasping and panting like Dally did during his own nightmares. Other times it was during the day when he took naps when Dallas wasn’t home. Then he only knew about it if Johnny told him or if he found him drinking in the kitchen. He’d thought about moving the alcohol or just getting rid of it, but he knew Johnny would just resort to hurting himself with his knife if the alcohol was gone.

He really wasn’t sure what the lesser of the two evils was.

Hetook one last puff on his cigarette and got up to go take a shower, kissing Johnny’s temple as he left the room. He worked from six in the morning to two in the afternoon today and he left a note on Johnny’s nightstand, telling him when he’d be home. He also wrote down the time he would be home if he had to stay later. He didn’t want what had happened the other day happening again. He didn’t want Johnny thinking he wasn’t coming home. He didn’t want him thinking he’d leave him in this world alone when he knew that he needed him.

His shower was a quick one, just enough to wash himself off and shampoo his hair. It didn’t even last more than ten minutes. He got out, towelled himself off, dressed in his work clothes, kissed Johnny one more time, and left the house, locking the door behind him. He knew Johnny liked being locked in. It made him feel more safe.

As always seemed to be the case when he walked to work, he stared at the long shadows the rising
sun cast, watching his own distorted shadow bounce across the road as he walked. A part of him wanted to skip like he had as a child, watch the shadow distort even more. The fact he felt good enough to want to skip at all made him grin. He knew it was purely because he lived with Johnny. He never in a million years would’ve felt this way on his own. His life before Johnny had been all switchblades and leather, alcohol and blood. Now it was the exact opposite. He’d never thought that would ever happen.

The garage really wasn’t that far from the house and he got there five minutes before his shift. He put his jacket in his locker and went to go smoke with the other guys who were standing by the vending machines out back, waiting for Digger to get there and the day to begin.

Soda and Steve were also working that day and were also standing with the rest of the guys, having a smoke, each trying to out do the other blowing smoke rings at the sky. When they saw Dallas, they both said hello and seemed to forget all about what they were doing, talking to him instead. He’d never been close with them before, but since he’d started working there – and since he’d found out about their relationship and they knew about him and Johnny – they’d become very close.

When Digger arrived and the other guys started going back into the garage, Dallas moved to follow them, but Soda grabbed him by the arm, pulling him back and saying, “Hey. Me, Steve, Evie, and Sandy are all goin’ to the barn on the edge of town tonight to hang out. You and Johnny wanna come along? We promised we’d invite you next time we went.” He grinned as he said it.

For a moment, Dallas was at a loss for words and tried to think of how Johnny might enjoy going on a triple date with Soda, Steve, Evie, and Sandy. As far as he knew, he’d never met Evie and Sandy and Dallas hadn’t met them either. However, if Soda and Steve were hanging out with them as regularly as they did, they had to be good people.

Dallas smiled, thinking of how it might be to be able to be affectionate with Johnny around people who were like them and nodded, saying, “Yeah, man. That’d be awesome.”

“Nice,” Soda replied, still grinning. “We’re gonna go as soon as we’re done with work.”

“When d’you get off?” Dally asked, following them back into the garage.

“Same time you do,” Soda said. “Around two. We’re goin’ to the barn around three or four.”

Dally nodded again, hoping Johnny would want to go as he said, “That sounds good. I’ll ask Johnnycake about it when I get home.”

“See you there,” Steve replied with a smile as he went to work on the first car that pulled into the garage that day, Soda right behind him.

Dally nodded a third time, replying, “See you there.”

After that, work couldn’t go by fast enough. The eight hour shift felt more like ten hours and dragged on forever. It seemed the procession of cars coming in and out of the shop would never end and Digger would never send him home. However, around three – about an hour after he, Soda, and Steve were supposed to get off – the continuous stream of cars slowed to a trickle, Fix and Bleach came in, and Digger told them they could go home.

The three of them raced to their lockers, grabbing their things and practically skipping out of the back doors of the shop, laughing and talking loudly. They all lit a cigarette as they headed back to their homes to get ready for that night – the date was now set for around four or five since they’d gotten off later – a cloud of smoke seeming to hover around their heads as they walked.
“You think Johnny’ll wanna come?” Soda asked as they turned a corner, only a block away now from their neighborhood. “I know he ain’t too keen about meetin’ new people.”

Dally thought for a moment, inhaling another cloud of smoke into his lungs through his cigarette, which he held to his mouth with his thumb and forefinger, before blowing it out, adding to the cloud already surrounding them. “I think he will,” he replied. “He ain’t ever met Evie and Sandy before, but he trusts y’all and if y’all like ‘em I think he will too.”

Soda and Steve nodded in understanding and a few moments later waved goodbye as they went one way, heading towards their homes to get ready for that night while Dallas continued down the street towards the house he shared with Johnny to do the same thing.

He had meant what he’d said about Johnny most likely wanting to go, but he was still worried Johnny might say no. He didn’t particularly like meeting strangers, even those strangers were people his friends knew. And though Dallas understood why after all of the bad experiences with strangers Johnny had had, but surprisingly for once in his life Dallas really wanted to go to the barn and hang out and socialize with everyone there.

Reaching the house, he unlocked the front door and whistled as he went inside, smiling as he called, “Johnny? You up? I got somethin’ to tell you.”

Today he found Johnny in the living room, stretched out on the couch, reading a book. When Dally came into the room, he closed his book and smiled up at him, saying, “What is it?”

Dally only grinned back for a moment, his hands on his hips, happy that Johnny was happy, especially after coming home almost two days in a row to find him drunk and in pain in the kitchen. Then he said, “Soda and Steve invited us to hang out with them at the barn tonight with Evie and Sandy.” He paused, then added, “Soda and Steve are like us. They’re together. So are Evie and Sandy.”

Johnny’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He stayed that way for several long minutes, just staring at Dallas in shock. Then he seemed to compose himself and said, “That actually don’t surprise me all that much. I thought that might be happenin’, but I didn’t know for sure, but Evie and Sandy too? That does surprise me. I hung out with all of ‘em once while you were in jail.” Dally watched as he swallowed hard then and looked away. Johnny didn’t say anything else, but Dally felt there was a story there and he wasn’t sure it was a good one.

*It can wait,* he told himself, despite the sense of foreboding that had fallen on him like a dense cloud of despair. *We’re gonna have fun tonight. Bad shit can wait until later.*

“You wanna go?” Dally asked. “I think it might be fun.”

Whatever dark cloud had settled over Johnny dissipated for a moment as he looked up at him and smiled, saying, “Dallas Winston wants to socialize?”

“Hey, it ain’t normal socializin’, man,” he replied, though he was still smiling as he said it. “They’re people like us. We ain’t gotta be careful and pretend. We can just be ourselves.”

Johnny’s smile softened, still staring up at Dallas before he looked away, his gaze going to his hands in his lap as he said quietly, “That sounds nice.” He looked back up at Dally once more. “Yeah. I think it’ll be fun. Let’s go. It’ll just be us, right? Just us, Soda, Steve, and Evie and Sandy?”

Dally nodded, his brows drawing together slightly at Johnny’s question, but he ignored his own confusion and said, “Yeah, just us. I don’t think they’d invite anyone else anyway.”
Johnny seemed to nod thoughtfully before asking, “When’re we goin’?”

Dally’s grin returned and he started towards the bathroom and then the bedroom. “Whenever you’re ready, man,” he called as he flushed the toilet. “I just gotta change.”

“Get my clothes too, will ya, Dal?” Johnny called back from the living room.

Dally called back his assent and went into the bedroom, grabbing himself a t-shirt and his bomber jacket out of the closet along with Johnny’s favorite t-shirt, his jeans, and his denim jacket from the dresser and the closet as well. He returned to the living room and set the clothes on the couch before asking, “You want my help?”

Johnny was already pushing himself up, grabbing for his clothes, but at Dally’s question, he nodded without looking at him. He still couldn’t sit up on his own and still needed help with just about anything. From the way he turned red as he nodded, Dallas guessed he wasn’t happy about it either. Dallas swallowed hard and knelt in front of him, so Johnny could see his face as he said, “You ain’t a burden, Johnny, okay? I promise. You ain’t. Not at all. Not one bit.”

He watched as Johnny bit his lip, looking away as he said, “Yeah, okay, Dal.” He knew the kid didn’t really believe him, but he wasn’t sure how to make him, so he simply decided to show him by helping him get dressed, by taking care of him, by doing whatever he needed. He loved Johnny with his entire heart and soul. And he’d do everything he could to show him that.

The drive to the barn on the outskirts of town – once they were both ready to go and packed away into the car – took a lot less time than Dallas thought it would. It was near the train yard and, as they parked their car and go out, they could hear the sound of a train horn blaring so close that when it finished, they could hear the clickety-clack of the wheels on the track as it roared passed Tulsa to whatever and wherever its destination was.

Soda and Steve, Evie and Sandy were already there. A car parked right next to theirs showed that. It had to have belonged to one of the girls because Dally knew that neither Soda nor Steve had a car of their own. Nor could they afford one. How the girls managed to was a mystery to him as well. Cars weren’t cheap. Even used cars weren’t cheap.

As he helped Johnny out of the car and into his wheelchair, he noticed the kid was chewing his nails, his eyes glazed over, his expression telling Dallas he was deep in thought. Like he had at the house, he knelt in front of Johnny’s chair, smiling as he said, “This is gonna be fun, okay? I ain’t gonna let anyone treat you bad, kid, you know that.”

Again Johnny nodded, but it was like he’d barely heard him. Dallas bit his own lip nervously, wondering what was going through his mind, vowing to ask him about it once they got a minute alone. At the moment, however, he stood, went behind Johnny’s chair, and pushed him towards the barn entrance. There was music coming from inside and when he entered he saw why.

As suspected, Evie, Sandy, Sodapop, and Steve were already there. Evie and Steve were dancing together while Soda and Sandy whistled at them, while sitting on bales of hay pushed up against the barn’s walls. Evie held a beer in one hand as did Steve and Sandy. Soda never drank, but he held a joint between two fingers and there was a thick cloud of smoke hovering above the hay covered dance floor, obscuring the white Christmas lights someone had strung above them. On a foldout table in one corner there were two six packs of beer and a turntable, playing the music they’d heard, which Dally could now distinguish as Elvis Presley. The place looked magical, like a paradise made just for the six of them and Dallas couldn’t stop the grin that spread across his face at the sight of it. When he glanced down at Johnny, he saw he was smiling too.
Dally had been to the barn before when he’d been dating Sylvia, but it had been transformed since then and he wondered if the people before him were the ones who’d done it. He couldn’t think of anyone else who might have. Still, it made him smile. This place belonged to them now.

Soda’s eyes went from the dance floor to the barn entrance and he jumped up from the bale of hay he was sitting on to sprint across the barn and pull Dallas into a hug before doing the same to Johnny. “I’m so glad y’all came!” he said. “We’re just seein’ who has the best dance moves. Steve and Evie think they got it, so they’re doin’ a dance off. I think Evie’s winnin’.”

“You know it’s the truth!” Soda yelled back, sticking out his tongue at him as he did so. He turned back to Johnny and Dallas asking, “Y’all wanna beer? Or a joint? I got both.”

“I’ll have both,” Dally replied, grinning as he followed Soda back over to the bales of hay and parked Johnny’s chair in front of him before hopping up on one of them.

Johnny smiled and said, “I’ll have a joint, Soda.”

“Two joints and a beer comin’ right up!” Soda replied and went over to the foldout table to get them while the song ended and Evie and Steve came off the dance floor and back to the bales of hay.

“Hey Johnny!” Evie said, her face flushed her voice breathless from dancing. She was smiling. “I ain’t seen you in a long, long time.”

Johnny smiled, turning red. He was always embarrassed when he talked to people he didn’t know well. “Hey Evie,” he said quietly. “How’s it goin’? I didn’t know you and Sandy were datin’.”

Evie let out a soft laugh and said, “Yeah, we been goin’ together for a while. No one except the people in this barn know about it though. We always just pretend we’re havin’ sleepovers as friends when we hang out. Or they we’re goin’ to hang with Steve and Soda who are supposed to be our boyfriends. Our folks don’t even suspect anythin’.”

“That’s cause we’re smart,” Sandy cut in, taking a big drink from her beer bottle and finishing it off before hopping up to go to the foldout table and get another.

Evie hopped up onto the bales of hay next to Dallas, taking Sandy’s place as she said, taking a swig of her own beer, “So how long have y’all been goin’ out?”

“Just a few weeks,” Dallas replied, reaching down to place his hand on Johnny’s shoulder, reveling in how good it felt to be able to do that without fear of being judged or hurt or worse. Johnny reached up, placing his hand over Dally’s and then lacing their fingers together. “Ever since the day of his back surgery, which was...well almost two months ago now I guess. I loved him for years though.”

“How many years?” Sandy asked, returning to sit by Evie.

Soda came over as well, handing Johnny a joint and Dallas a joint and a beer. He gave them both a matchbook as well so they could light their joints. Johnny lit his the way Dallas used to: using the St. Christopher necklace Dallas had given him as a way to strike it. Dallas smiled at him, watching him do it. It still amazed him how much the kid looked up to him, especially when he personally didn’t see anything to look up to.

Johnny took a long puff on his joint, closing his eyes and blowing the smoke up towards the ceiling where the other smoke had collected. Dallas took a sip of his beer and then copied Johnny, taking a
long drag off his joint and blowing the smoke towards the ceiling, watching it curl up there and stay there in a way that cigarette smoke didn’t.

It was then Johnny turned to him and smiled, one of his big giant genuine smiles that he so rarely saw. It made Dally’s own face light up and he thanked whoever was smiling down on them at that moment for everything he had, particularly Johnny, mostly Johnny. Johnny was his everything, his whole life. Without him, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to survive.

The barn doors banged open and everyone inside jumped – Evie and Sandy, who had started making out, jumped apart – their heads swiveling towards the door. Dally’s smile vanished almost immediately as he recognized the silhouette coming into the barn.

Sylvia.

“Hey y’all,” she said, giving them all a Cheshire cat grin.

“Sylvia,” Evie said in a monotone, her own smile turning to a frown so fast it was almost as though she’d never been smiling at all. “What’re you doin’ here?”

“I was drivin’ by and saw the cars out front,” she replied, though Dallas didn’t believe for a second that’s what had happened. “Y’all came out here and didn’t invite me?” She pouted.

“Maybe there’s a reason we didn’t invite you,” Sandy replied, not bothering to try to hide the venom in her voice with indifference the way Evie had. “Ever think of that?”

Sylvia pretended she hadn’t heard and her eyes shifted to Dallas. She started towards him, the big grin back on her face as she said, “Hey, Dally. How you been? How come you ain’t returned any of my calls? I been wantin’ to hang out with you.”

Dallas frowned at her. “I don’t live there anymore,” he responded, his own tone flat.

She pouted again. “You moved and didn’t tell me?”

“Why would I?” he replied. “We ain’t together no more.”

“Says who?” she asked as though hearing this for the first time, and Dallas laughed bitterly.

“You cheated on me for the last time,” he said, his tone as bitter as his laugh. “I ain’t with you no more. And I ain’t ever gonna be with you again. You can count on that.”

It was then his eyes shifted to Johnny and he saw him breathing heavily, his eyes wide. He drew his brows together, wondering what could’ve prompted such a response from him. Surely not Sylvia. She hadn’t done anything to him. Not like the Socs had.

Had she?

_Had she?

His own heart started beating rapidly as images of his relationship with the girl in front of him – now talking to Soda and Steve who looked just as displeased for her to be there as everyone else – flashed through his mind. He remembered how many times she’d gotten him blind drunk, so drunk that he couldn’t say no when she came onto him. He remembered how many more times he’d woken up naked, knowing she’d used him the night before and then he remembered what Johnny had told him: once upon a time, when he’d been in jail, Sylvia had come onto him in this barn. Steve had scared her off, but...had he really? She wasn’t the type to give up. Not until she got what she wanted.
And Dallas slowly put the pieces together.

What he’d said before they’d left: *It’ll be just us, right?*

How he’d looked when they’d reached the barn.

His reaction now, looking at Sylvia and hyperventilating from panic.

Dally’s eyes widened with fear and his mouth opened slightly.

What had she done to him? What had she done when he hadn’t been here to protect him?

While everyone was distracted by Sylvia and Sylvia was distracted by Evie, Sandy, Soda, and Steve, Dallas jumped down from the bales of hay and pushed Johnny over into a corner where he could speak to him privately. He knelt down in front of his wheelchair again, so he could see into Johnny’s eyes as he took his hands, kissing the tips of his fingers and said, “Johnny, what happened? What’d she do? What’d she do to you?”

For several minutes, Johnny couldn’t talk. He could only gasp for air, his eyes darting around the barn as he saw something other than the room around him. Then his eyes finally settled on Dally’s and he said exactly what Dallas had been fearing:

“When you were in jail, the night Steve told her off, she-she found me later on the way home. She said she was just gonna give me a ride back to my place or the lot or somethin’, but she brought me back here. She got me drunk...real drunk. So drunk I couldn’t see or think and-and I still don’t remember exactly what happened, but...I woke up the next mornin’ naked. And...she was gone.”

He took a gasping breath and Dallas watched in horror as Johnny began to cry, sobbing silently, his shoulders shaking as he remembered. Then his voice, so soft and small like a child’s, as he gasped out, “It was my fault, it was all my fault. I knew somethin’ was up, but...I didn’t wanna walk home alone in the dark. I was scared the Socs would find me again. But I let her take me here. I let her give me beer. I let her...have her way with me. It’s all my fault.”

Dally grabbed Johnny’s face, taking it in his hands and making him look at him as he said, his voice soft so only Johnny could hear, “I want you to listen to me very carefully, okay, Johnnycake?” He waited until Johnny nodded before he went on. “What happened was not your fault. She’s a bad person. She’s a horrible person. She does that to people. She-she did it to me too, okay? So it ain’t your fault. Even if you accepted the beer. Even if you let her drive you here. It ain’t your fault. It ain’t ever your fault when someone takes advantage of you, okay? Say okay.”

Johnny swallowed hard and then said in a small voice, “Okay.”

Dally pressed his fore head to Johnny’s closing his eyes. “I ain’t gonna let her hurt you again, man. I promise. She ain’t even gonna be here long, I’ll make her leave, okay?”

“Oh, Johnny said again, his voice quiet.

Dallas stood to do just that, but Sylvia was already gone, the music was playing louder than before, and he wondered how Soda, Steve, Evie, and Sandy had managed to get rid of her so fast.

He pushed Johnny in his chair back over to the bales of hay and the dance floor, trying to think about anything other than what Johnny had just told him, but his mind kept drifting back to it, no matter how much booze he drank or pot he smoked. He watched Evie and Sandy dance together on the makeshift dance floor with his eyes glazed over, drinking so much beer he didn’t even realize how drunk he was, vowing silently that he was going to get revenge.
He wouldn’t hurt her. He wasn’t that kind of person. But he would scare her. She needed to know she couldn’t do that to Johnny again.

It seemed everyone did.

And now that Dallas was with him and out of jail he was going to make sure no one hurt Johnny Andrew Cade ever again.

Chapter End Notes

sorry i didn’t post this till today, i had to plan out part 4, which i wasn’t even sure was gonna happen till yesterday, so that’s what took so long <3

that bein said i still need at least 10 more chapter ideas, so if y’all have any, pls comment them below!!

also i haven't been gettin as many comments on my stuff lately, so if you read pls comment!! <3
As had become normal since moving in with Dallas, Johnny woke up around noon alone. There was a note from Dally on his nightstand, telling him when he was supposed to be home and between what times he would be home if he were kept later. Johnny smiled at the note, at Dally’s messy handwriting, scrawled in a hurry as he’d left the house. It was sweet of him, he thought, that he left him a note like this every day ever since the one night he’d been late and Johnny had freaked out. A part of him felt guilty about it, but most of him felt grateful. He was lucky to have Dallas and he knew it.

He got out of bed and into his wheelchair, pushing himself into the living room before moving himself to the couch and grabbing one of his books to spend another day reading there. He didn’t mind doing that. He really didn’t have much else he could do and Ponyboy supplied him with a lot of books. He was still reading the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The books were long and tedious, but he enjoyed them. He’d always enjoyed fantasy and science-fiction.

As he read, he again thought about everyone dressing up as characters from the book for Halloween. Again he thought that Ponyboy should be Sam. Though he privately believed that Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins were together like he and Dallas were, he couldn’t see Dallas as Sam, though he personally wanted to dress up as Frodo. Dallas was much more like Aragorn: suave, poised, tough, and good, though Dallas tried to prove the world he wasn’t.

The thought made Johnny smile. Dallas was good. Far more good than anyone – including Dallas himself – realized. Despite what Dally thought, he knew that not just anyone would take in a crippled boy and take care of him while he recovered knowing all of the expenses and work that came with it. Yes, the parents of the children he’d saved had offered to pay for his hospital bills and his physical therapy, but there would be other expenses that they probably wouldn’t be able to cover, other things that would happen that no one could predict, and Dallas would pay for it no matter what the cost may be. He knew he would.

That made him good in Johnny’s opinion. Very good. More good than he thought he was.

And Johnny loved him all the more for it.

A knock at the door startled him out of his thoughts and he sat, frozen on the couch for several long moments, thinking he’d imagined it until the knock sounded again. He swallowed hard, wishing he
had a window to look out of to see who it might be that was knocking. He felt anxiety spike in his chest as the knock sounded a third time.

*You should probably answer that,* a soft voice whispered in his mind.

He wanted to disagree, wanted to stay put on the couch and wait until whoever was knocking went away, but something told him he shouldn’t do that. And the more he thought about it, the more he believed whoever was at the door wasn’t there to hurt him.

Slowly and carefully, the knocking still sounding, he moved from the couch to his wheelchair and pushed himself into the short hallway that led from the living room to the front door. There was a peephole on the door, but it was far too high for him to reach in his wheelchair. The window next to the door was covered in opaque glass and Johnny could only see the hazy dark outline of the whoever stood at the door through it.

Unlocking the door, he swallowed hard, praying he was making the right decision, praying this wasn’t someone come to hurt him. He wasn’t sure how much more of that he could take before his mind couldn’t take it anymore and his body gave out.

He opened the door slowly, peeking around it like a small child, ready to slam it shut and lock it again if it were someone he thought of as a threat, but who he saw was not who he was expecting.

It was the social worker, the one who had spoken to him in the hospital about his parents.

She smiled at him when he opened the door and said, “Hello Johnny. Is it alright if I come in?”

Confused as to why she was there, but knowing she wouldn’t hurt him, Johnny nodded and pulled the door open. He backed up in his wheelchair as he did so before turning around and leading her through the hallway into the living room. He heard her shut the door and lock it again behind them. Had it been anyone else doing that – anyone other than Dallas or one of the gang, that is – he would’ve immediately panicked, but something told him she wasn’t going to hurt him. All she’d ever done was try to help him. He didn’t think that was going to change now.

“This is a nice place you got here,” she said and when Johnny turned his wheelchair to face her again, he saw she was looking around the expanse of the living room and the kitchen smiling. She turned to face him. “You like it here?”

Johnny nodded, but didn’t smile. He was still shaken from the unannounced visit.

As though she could tell what was bothering him, she said, “I’m sorry for coming without telling you. I didn’t know your phone number and therefore couldn’t warn you about my visit.”

Johnny tried to force a smile, hating that anyone felt the need to cater to him or his feelings. “It’s okay,” he said. “I don’t think we even gotta phone yet.”

The social worker sat down tentatively on the edge of the couch. “Well, I promise I won’t be here long. I just have a few things to tell you and then I’ll be on my way.”

Johnny stayed put. His wheelchair was only a yard or so away from the couch. He nodded at her words and folded his hands in his lap.

“The first thing I need to tell you is that the trial for your parents will be in a few weeks. Two or three at the most,” she said. “You won’t have to see them when you testify against them. And neither will your friends or whoever wants to testify on your behalf. They’ll be in another room while you testify. They will be able to see and hear what you say, but you won’t have to see them.”
Johnny nodded, feeling a sense of relief at this. The idea that he’d have to look at his parents or even see their faces while talking about all of the horrible things they’d done to him made his heart rate speed up and his hands shake just thinking about it. The fact that wouldn’t happen made him feel better about the whole thing.

“The second thing I have to tell you is that your physical therapy sessions will start in a few days,” she went on. “The parents of the children you saved have every intention of paying for them as long as you need them, so you don’t have to worry about expenses or coverage or anything like that. They won’t, most likely, be pleasant. Relearning how to walk and sit up on your own is very difficult according to the other people I’ve talked to about this in the past. The odds of you being able to walk again on your own without some sort of assistance as well are very slim. Most likely you will need a walker or a cane for the rest of your life.” She gave him a thin smile then and Johnny could tell she was trying to lighten the dismal mood that had fallen over them at her words. He only nodded in reply.

“Do you have any questions for me?” she asked.

Johnny noticed she still had that same black briefcase she’d carried with her at the hospital, but at her question he shook his head.

The social worker nodded then and stood. “Well,” she began, reaching into her briefcase and pulling out a small, white index card. “If you do think of anything, please feel free to call me at this number once you get a phone. And please let me know your number. I don’t want to come here and startle you again like I did today.”

Johnny nodded again and said in a quiet voice, not looking at her as he spoke, “Thanks for tellin’ me about this.” He meant it, even if he did have a hard time looking her in the eye.

When he did look up again, she was smiling and she said, “You’re welcome.”

They were both quiet then, an awkward silence that filled the room the same as the dismal mood had, Johnny biting his lip, wondering what was supposed to happen next.

“You’re a good boy, Johnny, okay?” the social worker finally said then, her voice as quiet as his and she knelt down in front of him so he could see her face. “I know you’ve been told by your parents all your life that you’re not, but you are. I just – I see a lot of kids like you and a lot of them feel the way you do and I just want you to know you’re not alone. You have lots of people who agree with me and who love and care about you, okay?”

Johnny looked at her, surprised by her sudden words, but nodded and she smiled.

“Well, I better go,” she said, standing once more. “Don’t forget what I said, okay?”

Johnny nodded again and this time smiled too.

He watched her leave, watched her let herself out and, not until he heard her car drive away, did he push himself to the door, locking it behind her.

As he made his way back to the couch, back to his book, he thought about what she’d said.

You’re a good boy, Johnny, okay?

Was he really? Was that how people saw him? Even though he’d killed someone?

He found it hard to believe, but he was still smiling. It was nice to think that at least one person
outside of the gang thought that. At least one other person was on his side.

Chapter End Notes

i know how child abuse cases are run from personal experience, so everythin she said about the trial is accurate to real life!!

i haven't been gettin as many comments on my writin lately, so pls comment if you read this!!
Best Friends in Sickness and in Health

Chapter Summary

Ponyboy comes over to visit and brings Johnny some books to read. But that's not the only reason he's there.

Chapter Notes

i added this in because i wanted to have more chapters with ponyboy and johnny interacting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the social worker left, Johnny returned to reading on the couch, but it didn’t take long before he fell asleep, the book open on his stomach. When he woke up, it was again to knocking on the front door and, again, he started awake, feeling panicked, wondering who it could be this time as he got painfully into his wheelchair from the couch. Surely not the social worker again. She’d just barely left. It hadn’t even been four hours since she’d left yet.

He was shaking as he pushed himself down the short hallway to the front door as the knocking sounded again. However, this time when he looked through the opaque window that showed the front stoop, he recognized the hazy figure standing there and he smiled big, showing teeth.

It was Ponyboy.

He opened the door and smiled at Ponyboy, who smiled back. “Hey Ponyboy,” he said. “You scared me, man. I thought you were someone else.”

“I woulda come in, but your door was locked,” he replied. “I dunno where you keep the spare key anymore,” he added, looking around the front stoop as though he might find it lying around. “Dally musta moved it or somethin’.”

“It should still be under the welcome mat,” Johnny replied, jutting his chin towards the mat that Ponyboy was standing.

But Ponyboy shook his head. “Nah, it wasn’t under there,” he said looking confused.

Johnny knew he should be a little more concerned about that than he was, but he was just happy that Ponyboy was there to visit him and he ignored the silent warning in the back of his mind that if the spare key was missing someone else might’ve taken it.

But who would’ve taken it? He retorted as he pulled open the door more and pushed his wheelchair back so Ponyboy could get in. Ain’t nobody else knows where it is besides the gang.

But even as he thought that, the unnerved feeling in the pit of his stomach didn’t go away.

“I brought some more books for you to read,” Ponyboy said, pulling Johnny out of his thoughts. He
turned to Ponyboy and watched as he held up a rather large stack of books he was holding under his arm. Johnny tried to read some of the titles and saw *Fahrenheit 451*, *1984*, *Brave New World*, *Animal Farm*, *A Sound of Thunder*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. He hadn’t read any of those, though he knew of them and also knew they were well known books.

He smiled up at Ponyboy, his previous bad feeling forgotten as he said, “Thanks, man. I’m almost done with *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I’m really likin’ this book. Even though it goes on and on and takes forever to get anywhere.”

Ponyboy nodded in understanding, handing the books in his hands to Johnny. “Yeah, *Lord of the Rings* is good, but Tolkien don’t know how to write anythin’ in any sorta short way.”

Johnny nodded as well and then said, placing his hand on top of the stack of books in his lap, “So why’d you come over? Can’t just be to give me books.”

Ponyboy shrugged, sitting on the couch and clasping his hands in front of him, but he wasn’t looking at Johnny and he was biting his lip. Something was bothering him. Johnny could tell. He pushed himself closer to the couch and said, “What is it, man?”

For a long time, Ponyboy was quiet, sitting on the couch, biting his lip. Johnny noticed his clasped hands were shaking and Johnny wondered what could bothering him that bad. He thought back to when they’d been in the church together. He’d done the same thing when he started thinking about what might happen to them if they were caught by the police and dragged home. He’d done the same thing when he thought about what Darry might say when he got back. Johnny did the same thing when he was nervous and didn’t want people to notice. But what could be bothering Ponyboy so bad *now* that he would still feel the need to do that?

Finally, Ponyboy said, not looking at him, “It’s my fault, Johnnycake.” And his voice shook just as much as the rest of him was. “It’s my fault. All of this. All of it. It’s my fault.”

Johnny drew his brows together and tilted his head to one side, taking a deep breath through the oxygen tube under his nose. Vaguely, he wondered as he always did how long he would have that oxygen or if he would need it for the rest of his life. He licked his lips and asked, “What’re you talkin’ about, Ponyboy? What’s your fault?”

Ponyboy took a shuddering breath and blinked, rapidly, looking at the ceiling, and Johnny was hit with a wave of shock as he realized he trying to keep himself from crying. Ponyboy cried a lot more than anyone else in the gang. Probably because he was the youngest and more sensitive than the rest of them – except for maybe Johnny, but even then he only cried in private or around Dallas; the only time he cried around anyone else was when he was really, *really* upset. Even still, it surprised Johnny to see him so upset now. What could possibly have made him feel this way?

“It’s my fault you’re paralyzed,” Ponyboy finally said, looking at Johnny now. “It’s my fault you hadta kill that Soc too. It’s my fault you got burned and almost died. And it’s my fault you gotta be in a wheelchair now and hurt all the time and can’t even breathe by yourself.”

It took Johnny several moments to even formulate a reply as he sat there, listening to Ponyboy speak, amazed at how much like Dallas he sounded in that moment. Dally blamed himself for all of those things as well. He said it constantly and Johnny heard him crying softly sometimes at night, muttering over and over again that it was his fault. He’d never told Dallas he heard him doing that. He knew that Dallas didn’t want him to know and figured it was kinder to pretend he didn’t hear. But to hear that Ponyboy felt the same way surprised him and all he could ask in return was, “Why?”

Ponyboy turned away again and swallowed hard, saying, “Cause I’m the one who provoked the
Socs into attackin’ us. I’m the one who didn’t run fast enough and get away from ‘em, so you hadta save me. I’m the one that ran into the burnin’ church, so you hadta follow me to make sure I didn’t get hurt or nothin’. If I hadn’t done any of that, none of this woulda happened. Everythin’ would be okay. You wouldn’t be hurt. You wouldn’ta been charged with murder or anythin’.”

For a moment, Johnny just stared at Ponyboy in shock. Then he swallowed and said, “Y’know, Dallas says the same thing, but I’m gonna tell you what I told him: it weren’t your fault any of that happened, man, okay? I chose to run into that church after you. I chose to kill...Bob.” It was still hard to say his name. “I coulda – I coulda just talked to him or somethin’. But I didn’t. All of this is my fault. It ain’t yours. And it ain’t Dally’s fault either, okay? So don’t blame yourself.”

Ponyboy shook his head and said, “It ain’t your fault neither, Johnny. If it ain’t my fault it certainly ain’t your fault. You were defendin’ me when you killed that Soc. If you hadn’t, I woulda died. And...you couldn’ta known the church was gonna collapse and hurt you.”

Johnny gave a weak, sad smile and said, “Yeah, well, if I couldn’ta known that neither coulda you, okay? It ain’t your fault, Ponyboy. I don’t blame you for anythin’ that happened, okay?”

Ponyboy gave him a weak, sad smile of his own and said, “Yeah, okay. I just...I wanted to say I’m sorry...for everythin’. Even if it ain’t my fault, I just wanna say sorry.”

Johnny wanted to tell him he didn’t have to, remind him again that none of this was his fault, but he knew that would just send the conversation in another circle, so instead he said, “Thanks, Ponyboy. I don’t blame you for it, though, okay? So please don’t blame yourself.”

Ponyboy only nodded, but didn’t reply.

Johnny knew he didn’t agree with or believe him, but, like with Dallas, he knew he wouldn’t be able to convince him otherwise. He’d have to come to that realization himself in time.

“Wanna watch cartoons?” he finally asked.

Ponyboy perked up at that and said, “Yeah, man, definitely. I gotta be home by six, though. Darry’s makin’ dinner and wants me home for it. He wants me to start goin’ to bed early again soon so I’ll be ready when school starts again in a couplea weeks.”

As they turned on the tv and began watching Mickey Mouse cartoons, neither of them mentioned the unasked question.

How would Johnny ever graduate now when he couldn’t go to school anymore? Because how could he go to school with his health so poor and unable to walk there with everyone else?

Johnny didn’t want to think about it. Not now.

Right now, he just wanted to have a good time.

But the question kept circling in his mind up until Ponyboy left and he wondered every time the question flashed through his mind if he were just not allowed to have fun without thinking about the dismal prospects posed by the future.

Chapter End Notes
i don't have any other ideas for ponyboy and johnny interacting after this, so if y'all have any pls lemme know!!

i haven't been gettin as many comments on my stuff lately and it's rly bummin me out and contributin to my low energy, so pls comment on this if you read it!!
Out to Dinner, Out to Lunch

Chapter Summary

Dally and Johnny go out on a date, but as usual nothing goes as planned.

Chapter Notes

this was supposed to be up yesterday, but i got sick and had rly bad anxiety, so it's up today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had been a long time since Dallas had enough money to take Johnny out on a date. In fact, he wasn’t sure he’d ever had enough money to take him out on a date. But when he got his paycheck that Friday and saw the numbers on the dotted line, he grinned. They had more than enough money for bills. They had enough money to do something fun if they wanted to and that was exactly what Dallas planned to do. He would take Johnny out to the Dingo for dinner when he got home.

Work couldn’t go by any slower after that. Every time he looked at the clock, it seemed only ten minutes had passed when it felt like hours. He was so concerned with looking at the time that he had a hard time paying attention to what he was doing and more than once one of his coworkers yelled at him, telling him to do this or that instead of staring off into space and not thinking about his job.

Chatterbox was the worst about this, making fun of him each time he did, saying things that no one else in the garage would have dared to, even bringing up Johnny as a way to torment him, something he would not have tolerated anywhere else. The only thing that kept him from beating the tar out of him right there and then was the knowledge that he needed this job to support himself and Johnny. If he saw him outside of work, though, all bets were off. He’d make him sorry he ever spoke Johnny’s name or insulted him. He’d make sure he didn’t do it again.

Finally, three o’clock rolled around and Digger said he could go and Dally practically ran out of the garage. The sun was already starting to go down, signaling summer was coming to an end and fall would be upon them soon. He watched his long, distorted shadow bounce as he ran down the street, turning at the corners, until he finally reached the house he shared with Johnny. He was so excited he almost forgot to whistle as he unlocked the door and came in, calling as he locked the door behind him, "Johnnycake! I gotta surprise for ya!"

Johnny was sitting on the couch like he always seemed to be when Dallas came home, but he was asleep, the book he’d been reading open on his chest as he slept. Dally smiled at him, almost hating to wake him, he looked so peaceful, and he knew that Johnny rarely looked that peaceful. The thought made his smile falter and not for the first time, he thought it was his fault that was the case.

If you’d run into that church sooner, he wouldn’t be so badly hurt he can’t even breathe on his own, the nasty voice in his head reminded him. If you’d stopped him from running in at all, he would be able to walk still and wouldn’t need a wheelchair. If you’d just protected him better, none of this would’ve happened. You know it’s your fault. You know it is.
The thoughts made his smile disappear entirely and he shook his head, trying to shake the thoughts from him at the same time. Even if all of that were true, he wasn’t going to let it ruin his evening with Johnny. He was going to have a good date tonight. Whether the thoughts wanted him to have a good date or not.

Swallowing hard, he smiled again, unsure if it were real or fake as he bent over Johnny and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He knelt down next to him and stroked his cheek with the back of his hand, saying softly, “Time to wake up, Johnnycake. I’m home.”

Johnny stirred on the couch, yawning and stretching as his eyelids fluttered open, blinking blearily up at Dallas as he did so. He smiled when he saw him, big and wide, and the oxygen tube under his nose didn’t detract from how beautiful he looked in that moment at all. “Dallas,” he said, his voice quiet as he shifted on the couch, tilting his head to look up at him better. “How was work?”

Dally smiled back. How could he not? Johnny truly did look beautiful like that, lying on the couch, smiling up at him, the biggest happiest smile he’d seen from him since the night at the barn. “It was slow,” he said, “but...” and here his grin widened as he reached into his pocket, pulling his paycheck out of his back pocket, “I got paid. I got paid a lot. So...I was thinkin’ we could go out to lunch. Only if you wanna of course.”

Johnny’s smile only widened and he nodded enthusiastically, saying, “That sounds real fun, Dal. I’d love to go out to lunch with you.”

Dally’s own smile widened and he said, “Awesome. I’ll go get changed and get your clothes.”

He went into the bathroom first, washing his hands, cleaning them of grease and oil from working all day in the garage. He washed his face too, trying to get as much of the grime off himself as possible without taking a full on shower. Once he was as clean as he could make himself, he went into the bedroom, changing into his street clothes and grabbing Johnny’s out of the closet before making his way back into the living room to help Johnny put on his pants.

While Johnny put on his shirt and denim jacket, Dallas put pillows on his wheelchair to make it more comfortable and once Johnny was dressed and ready, helped him back into it before giving him a blanket to put over his legs if he got cold. He seemed much more prone to that ever since the fire. The only thing left to do was put Johnny’s oxygen tank into a black bag hanging from the handles of his wheelchair and they were ready to go.

“You wanna walk there or take the car?” Dally asked, going behind Johnny’s chair and pushing him out of the house and down the ramp to the sidewalk. “The Dingo ain’t far.”

“Let’s walk,” he said quietly, turning to look up at Dallas. “It’s real nice out.”

“Sounds good to me,” he replied and started down the sidewalk, heading in the direction of town where The Dingo was located. He couldn’t blame Johnny for wanting to spend as much time as he could outside. He’d been locked in the hospital for a month and now he was basically locked in the house. They didn’t have a porch he could go out onto and it wasn’t like he could really go outside without one, being confined to a wheelchair.

As they headed down the sidewalk, stepping into the sunlight from the shade of the trees growing on either side of them, Dally watched Johnny turn his face towards the sun, his eyes closed, smiling as he did so. The way the sun shone on his brown skin was beautiful. Everything about Johnny was beautiful and the way he smiled at being in the sunlight made Dally smile too.

Johnny had so much pain in his life. It seemed constant and never ending. The fact he could, if even
for only a moment, give him some happiness, something to make him smile about, made every bit of Dally’s life that much more worth living.

The Dingo really wasn’t far and it seemed like only moments after they’d entered town, they were walking up to its front door. Everyone looked at them, staring at Johnny in his wheelchair with his oxygen, but Dallas glared at every one of them, not allowing them to make this day bad. They were out to have a nice time and they were going to have a nice time, even if he had to beat every single one of them to keep their eyes where they belonged.

The Dingo allowed its patrons to seat themselves and Dally chose a table in the bath of the restaurant where they would be less likely to be bothered by the other people there. He pushed Johnny’s chair up to the table and sat there, smiling at him, waiting for the waitress to come and take their order, wishing with everything in him that it were safe for him to take his hand, to kiss his knuckles, to kiss him at all, without fear of anyone in the building hurting them for loving each other.

“Hello! My name is Marie!” said a too-cheerful voice, making them look away from each other and look up at the waitress who’d come to them. “I’ll be your waitress today. What would you boys like to drink? Do you know what you’d like to eat too?”

“Yes,” Johnny said shyly, surprising Dallas. “I’d like the Juicy Lucy and a glass of water.”

The waitress wrote this down on her notepad before turning to Dally who said, “I’ll have a Coke and the bacon cheeseburger. We’d like a thing of fries to share. With your seasoned sour cream.”

The waitress wrote this down as well, told them their food would be out in a moment before walking back towards the kitchen, shouting their order at whoever was cooking.

“Thanks, Dal,” Johnny said quietly, looking around The Dingo. “It’s been a long time since I gotta come out to eat.” He beamed at him and Dallas wondered just how long it had been since he was last there. Had it really been since the day he’d killed that Soc? That was almost three months ago now.

“Yeah, of course, Johnnycake,” he replied, grinning as well. He reached under the table to put his hand on Johnny’s knee for a moment, still smiling at him. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and his smile vanished almost immediately. “Oh fuck,” he said in a low voice.

Johnny’s brows drew together and he turned around to see what Dallas was looking at. It didn’t take him long to spot it and he turned back around almost as quickly, saying, “Oh no.”

It was Sylvia. Standing near the entrance. Almost like she’d followed them to The Dingo.

Dally’s hands clenched into fists under the table and his jaw clenched as well. He hardly noticed when the waitress came over, giving them their drinks. He stared at the tabletop, hoping that if Sylvia didn’t see his face, she wouldn’t come over, wouldn’t bother them. But even as he thought it, he knew it was a pipe dream. Sylvia’s great joy in life was causing him and the rest of the gang as much misery as she could. Why would today be any exception?

Sure enough, the sound of heels walking down the restaurant towards where they were sitting made Dallas look up and he cursed when he saw Sylvia, smiling at them, looking beautiful to anyone except those that knew her best. Her hair was in ringlets, she wore big gold hoop earrings, and the skirt she wore was so short with the fishnets she wore underneath that Dallas felt uncomfortable just looking at her, something he might not have felt before he started dating Johnny.

“Hey Dally,” she said, still grinning her Cheshire cat grin. One hand was on her hip and she stared down her nose at him. “How you doin’, babe?”
Dallas glared up at her, but before he could even open his mouth to reply, she was sitting down in his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck like she had when they were together, laying her head on his shoulder. Dally didn’t have to look at Johnny to know he was uncomfortable.

“What are you doin’ here?” he asked, his voice as stiff as the rest of him, hoping that his body language would make her go away, make her realize she wasn’t wanted here.

But he should’ve known better than that because she only pouted and said, “Don’t you want me here?” She glanced towards Johnny with a look of disgust. “Don’t tell me you prefer the company of this...crippler than you do me.”

Her shirt was so low he could see right down it and as she moved to make her shirt even more revealing he looked away. He wasn’t going to let Johnny think even for a second he wanted to be with her. He knew how insecure Johnny was because of his family, because of how they had treated him growing up. He wasn’t going to let Sylvia make things worse.

“Get away from me, Sylvia,” he said in a low dangerous voice, the horrible images of what Johnny had told him she’d done flashing through his mind as he did so. “Before I make you.”

Sylvia grinned again. “Make me?” she said, her own voice low and dangerous. “How’re you gonna make me? You wouldn’t hit a girl, would you, Dallas Winston? Especially when you know you want me more than you’ll ever want that ugly little crippler.”

That was the last straw. Dallas pushed her off of him, watching her fall to the floor and everyone in The Dingo turn to look at him as he did so. He stood, towering over her as he said, pointing threateningly at her, “I told you to stay away from me. And don’t you dare insult him. He’s twice the person you’ll ever be. If you come anywhere near me again, I’ll make you regret it.”

While he yelled at her, not caring everyone was staring at him, she stared up at him, her mouth open in an O of shock and surprise. But the minute he finished speaking, she grinned her same dangerous smile as she stood. She pressed herself against him and said, “What’re you gonna do about it? You ain’t gonna hurt me. I’m too pretty for that and you know it. Everyone wants a piece of me. Including your little crippled friend here. You know he’s a freak, right? He ain’t even gotta dick, but that don’t mean he didn’t like what I did to him?” Here she turned to Johnny – who, by now, was shaking so badly he looked like he was shivering – and added, “Didn’t you babycakes?”

This time when Dallas pushed her away, he hit her too, slamming his fist so hard into her cheek that her head snapped to the side and she fell to the ground again. Any other time he might’ve felt bad for hitting a girl, but Sylvia was no girl. She was a monster. She was a rapist. She was the worst kind of person and hitting her, he thought, was less than she deserved.

“You stay the fuck away from him too!” he practically shrieked at her this time, not caring that everyone was staring at them. “You don’t get to talk to him after what you did!”

Sylvia stood again, her hand on her cheek. She grinned again, but didn’t try to press herself to him again. She only said, “You’ll come back to me, Dallas. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but you will eventually. I know you will. I’m the only one for you and you’re the only one for me.”

“You stay the fuck away from him too!” he practically shrieked at her this time, not caring that everyone was staring at them. “You don’t get to talk to him after what you did!”

Sylvia was still grinning, but she did as he told her to do, leaving The Dingo. Everyone watched her go. Everyone watched him sit down again across from Johnny, his hands clenched into shaking fits, but not from fear, from anger. Johnny was still shaking too and he wished they were at home, wished they weren’t in a public place so he could take him in his arms and tell him everything was going to
be okay. He would never let her touch him again.

But he couldn’t do any of that. So he reached under the table again and touched his knee. Johnny looked up at him and Dallas asked, “You okay? You’re shakin’ pretty bad, man. You wanna go home? We can get our food to go or somethin’?”

To his surprise Johnny shook his head and said, “No, I wanna eat here.” He looked away then, biting his lip as he said, “Was she right? Are-are you gonna go back to her eventually?”

Dally frowned, hating Sylvia for putting doubt into Johnny’s mind as he shook his head and said, “No, Johnny. I ain’t ever gonna leave you. I promised you I wouldn’t and I keep my promises. I ain’t ever gonna lie to you neither. I never have and I never will lie to you.”

Johnny turned back to him and gave Dally what he could tell was a forced smile, but said, “Okay. I just...I’m worried. I can’t walk or even breathe on my own. I dunno why you would even wanna be with me to begin with.”

“Because I love you,” Dallas said without hesitation, not caring they were in a public place at that point. It was loud enough anyway that no one was going to hear him. “Because I love you and I don’t love her. I never did. I’ve always loved you. I always will love you. I ain’t ever gonna leave you, Johnnycake. Not for any reason. So you better get used to havin’ me around.”

Their food came then and Johnny smiled as he dug into his hamburger, eating fast as he always did, unable to shovel into his mouth fast enough. Dally knew he’d have to talk to him about that someday, but today they were going to have fun. Whether or not Sylvia had tried to ruin it.

Fuck her, he thought as he dug into his own burger. Fuck her. She doesn’t own us.

And as he thought it, he felt better. She didn’t own them. And if she ever tried anything like this ever again, he’d make her regret it.

She was done messing with him and done messing with Johnny too.

No one messes with Johnny Cade anymore, he thought as he started in on the french fries, dipping them in the seasoned sour cream as he did so. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter End Notes

this fic still has a long ways to go, but i hope everyone is enjoyin it!! :D

i haven’t been gettin as many comments lately and that’s rly bummin me out so pls comment if you read!!
Chapter Summary

Johnny has a breakdown and cuts his hair.

Chapter Notes

i know i keep sayin’ this, but i’ve been havin’ a real hard time lately, so this was supposed to be released yesterday, but i didn’t get around to releasin’ it today cause i didn’t finish it till today

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Truth be told there was nothing really wrong when Johnny woke up, but the minute he woke, knowing Dallas was gone to work for the day, a block of ice settled into the pit of his stomach and then melted slowly, pumping that ice throughout his veins. An anxiety he couldn’t name the origin of seemed to have wormed its way inside him and as he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, breathing heavily, he wished then he would die so he wouldn’t have to feel this way ever again.

He closed his eyes tight, throwing his arm over them, making the world totally dark as he did so. Not for the first time, he thought it wasn’t fair he felt this way so often, felt this way so much more often than most people did. In truth, he was glad that it was him that felt it instead of any of the rest of the gang, but he still had to wonder: What had he ever done to deserve this pain? And not just that, but what had he done to deserve this much pain?

You know what you did, the voice in his head reminded him. You killed Bob. Even if you saved the kids in that church, you earned this and you know it. Everything bad that’s ever happened to you has been your fault and you know that. How could you even ask what you did to deserve this when you know already? You know what you did. You know it’s all your fault. You know you deserve this. Don’t ask pointlessly stupid questions.

He grimaced, the fingers of the hand not slung over his eyes curling in the sheets and clutching them like a lifeline as he shuddered and let out a whimpering moan. The voice was right and he knew it. It was always right. In fact, it was so right, he couldn’t even come up with a good argument to counter it. And that always seemed to be what happened. That always seemed to be his train of thought. What did that say?

Later, he would never be sure how long he laid there, his hands clenched into fists, shaking and grimacing and wishing things were different. It could have been minutes or hours and with no clock in the bedroom to tell him the time, he just wasn’t sure.

Eventually, he pulled his arm away from his eyes and stared at the ceiling, illuminated by the light coming in from the window to his right, throwing back the blankets as he did so. He pushed himself up with difficulty and managed to move from the bed to his wheelchair by some miracle. His back radiated nothing but pain once he was in the chair. For several moments, all he could do was sit there, his hands that were clenched into fists sitting on his knees, the whole of his body shaking
while he hunched over himself and grimaced. Vaguely he wondered if he was learning how to sit up on his own again and, as soon as he thought that, he remembered also that his first physical therapy session was only two days away. He wondered if it would be as painful as this. Then remembered how the social worker had said it would be.

*It isn’t fair,* he thought again, thinking of what the physical therapy sessions might entail.

Yes, it is, the voice chimed in instantly. *And you know it. Didn’t we just go over this?*

Again he let out another whimpering moan. He couldn’t argue with the voice. He was a murderer. And even if he weren’t he was dirty. Dirty from all the people who had touched him without his consent. Dirty from his father, his father’s friends, Sylvia, the Socs. It seemed like there were an endless number of people who had made him this way and yet he couldn’t blame them. No one really made him behave this way. Not in his mind anyway. Truly, he felt he could only blame himself.

As though he were a plane on autopilot, he straightened and pushed his wheelchair into the hallway and towards the bathroom. Using the bathroom without help was hard, but he’d learned how to do it in such a way that it was easier than it might have been otherwise. He was just getting back in his wheelchair, just getting ready to push himself to the mirror and put grease in his hair when he looked in the mirror and blinked.

He knew he was looking at himself, but for some reason he didn’t recognize himself. Maybe it was the lack of grease in his hair. Maybe it was because his hair was so long now. Whatever it was, he had to fix it. Change it. Do something about it to make the person in the mirror look like himself.

He grabbed the scissors out of the medicine cabinet and started hacking away at his hair, trying to make it even, trying to make it short, but not too short.

He muttered to himself while he did it, saying things that didn’t make sense even to him.

“This is what you did!” he hissed, thinking about the Socs, thinking about Sylvia and his parents and his father’s friends. “This is what you will become!” he added, thinking now about Bob, about his friends, about Dallas. And even then he wasn’t entirely sure why he said it.

The scissors snipped away at his dark hair as if of their own volition. He watched the hair fall into the sink, some of it falling down the drain. It wasn’t until his hair was so short it was sticking up in the back – shorter than Ponyboy had cut it at the church – that he finally stopped and looked at himself in the mirror. And then he just felt worse.

He’d cut it too short. One side was uneven and shorter than the other. He didn’t bother trying to even it out, knowing he would only hate it more then. He threw the scissors into the sink and they barely made a noise, cushioned by all of the dark hair that was still in there. He stared at it for a long time before moving the scissors again and picking up fistfuls of the hair, throwing it into the toilet before flushing it and repeating the process over and over again until the hair was gone.

He went into the living room then and sat on the couch, shaking, but he couldn’t stop seeing the clumps of hair, twirling down the drain, wondering what what he’d done meant.

* * *

Dally had a bad feeling almost the entire time he was at work and after having bad feelings before and coming home to find Johnny a wreck, he couldn’t get out of work fast enough. He kept glancing at the clock, more forgetful and clumsy than he’d been a few days before when he and Johnny had
gone on their date. But then he’d been excited to get home, eager to take Johnny out to have fun for once. Now he was just scared and nervous, wondering just what sort of horror he would find when he walked through the door today.

When Digger finally told him he could go, he waved a hasty goodbye to Fix, Soda, and Steve, and ran home as fast as his legs would carry him. As he stared at his distorted shadow this time, he felt it looked ominous, like some dark creature chasing him home, warning him of the danger to come. His heart beat fast and not just because he was running.

*Please let him be okay,* he begged whoever might be listening. *Please let him be fine.*

But as he opened the front door, not even remembering to whistle this time, and heard nothing, the fear inside him only grew. The house was quiet. Too quiet. And as he stepped inside and locked the door behind him, his legs and hands shook, terrified at what he might find.

“Johnny?” he called tentatively, his voice shaking as much as the rest of him. “Johnnycake? I’m home. It’s me. You okay, man?”

No answer.

He walked into the living room and found Johnny asleep on the couch, but there was no book open on his lap this time. And his hair was short. Much shorter than he’d ever seen it before. So short that it stuck up in the back. It was uneven on one side, which told him Johnny had cut it himself. But that wasn’t what worried him.

What worried him was the fresh scars, covering both of his arms. He hadn’t bothered to even try to clean it. He could tell. There was dried blood all over and in between the scars. There were so many that Dally was certain if he tried to count them all it would number in the 80s or 90s. Maybe even the 100s. What had happened to make Johnny do this?

Kneeling down next to the couch, Dally placed the back of one hand on Johnny’s cheek. Instantly, Johnny started awake, looking alarmed. Then he saw Dallas and his face twisted and broke as he started to cry and Dally immediately felt guilty he hadn’t been there for him. Even though he’d been at work, even though he knew he couldn’t have gotten out of it, he still felt guilty.

“Johnny,” he said quietly. “What happened, man?”

Johnny shook his head, saying, “Everythin’ felt wrong,” Johnny gasped out, reaching out for Dallas and wrapping his thin arms around Dally’s neck. Dallas wrapped his arms around Johnny, pulling him to him, holding him tight. “I woke up and I couldn’t stop thinkin’ about everythin’ and then...then when I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, I didn’t look right, so-so I cut my hair, but...it turned out lookin’ all wrong and I dunno how long it’ll take to grow back. Probably a long time. So then I came in here and I used my knife and...” He didn’t go on, but he didn’t have to. Dally knew the rest.

“What were you thinkin’ about that made you do this?” Dally asked quietly, running his hand up and down Johnny’s back as he tried to soothe him, tried to stop his shaking.

Johnny shook his head, saying, “Everythin’. Bob and Sylvia and the Socs and my folks and my old man’s friends and everythin’ they’d ever done to me. And-and everythin’ I did to them.” He was quiet for a moment, taking shuddering breaths as he struggled not to sob as he added, “I-I kept seein’ Sylvia, though. She told me she liked my hair.”

He let out a whimpering moan after that and shuddered in Dally’s arms, clinging to him all the more tightly as he did so.
Immediately, Dallas felt anger flash through him at the mention of Sylvia, at the idea that even after all that had happened between now and The Dingo and now and the night at the barn, Johnny was still affected by her and what she’d done to him.

Automatically, he picked Johnny up off the couch and carried him into the bedroom, holding him in there instead, holding him until he fell asleep in his arms with Dally’s hand resting over the scar on his back where they’d put him back together.

He lay there until the sunset and the room was dark and all he could hear out the window was the sound of crickets. He stayed silent the whole time and glared into the darkness. He was going to make Sylvia pay for what she did. He would make her pay if it was the last thing he ever did.

Chapter End Notes

i'm gonna assume the rest of y'all have seen the 2017 version of IT, so yeah did u catch the reference? ;)

i ain't been gettin' as many comments on my writin' lately and it's rly bummin' me out, so if you read pls comment!!
The First Thing Dallas Thought When He Woke Up That Morning Was That the First of Johnny’s Physical Therapy Sessions Was Scheduled for That Afternoon. Early Afternoon. He Was Missing Work Today to Take Johnny to His Appointment. They’d Installed a Phone Not Too Long Ago and When They Had, They’d Given the Social Worker Who’d Been Speaking With Johnny Their Number. She Called Not Too Long Later and Asked Them What Time They’d Like the First Session to Be. Dallas Had Made Sure It Was in the Afternoon. Johnny Had a Hard Time Getting Up in the Mornings.

Somehow That Felt Forever Ago and Yet Now the Day Was Here. And Dallas, as He Turned to Look at Johnny, Still Sleeping Soundly in Bed Next to Him, Was Sure He Was Dreading It as Much as Johnny Must Have Been. The Social Worker Had Warned Them It Would Be Painful for Him and Already Dallas Felt Guilty with That Knowledge, Grimacing and Turning Away as He Thought About It.

He Lit Himself a Cigarette, Blowing the Smoke at the Ceiling as He Always Did in the Mornings as a Nasty Voice in His Mind Reminded Him, *If you’d gone into the church sooner and saved him, he wouldn’t have to go to physical therapy sessions. If you’d stopped him from going in the church at all, he wouldn’t have to be going to physical therapy sessions. All of this is your fault. All of his pain is your fault. Your one job is to protect him and you can’t even do that.*

There Was Nothing He Could Say to That Because He Knew It Was All True.

Letting Out a Sigh, He Checked the Digital Clock by His Bed. It Was Already Ten Thirty. He Might as Well Start Waking Johnny Up Now, So They’d Be There by Noon.

Slowly, as Though His Limbs Were Made of Lead, Dallas Pushed Himself Up on His Elbows and Turned on His Side to Reach Out to Wake Johnny. But, as Johnny Turned in His Sleep – Now Lying on His Back, His Face Turned Towards Dally, His Hands on His Chest – He Hesitated. Johnny Looked So Peaceful in Sleep. So Calm and Free of Pain. The Fact He Had to Take Him Away from That Made the Guilt That Seemed to Be Eating Him Alive Hurt All the More.
Letting out a sigh, he closed his eyes and grimaced again, his hands clenching into fists, his nails digging deep into his palms, his entire body tensing for a moment, before he opened his eyes again, reached out and gently shook Johnny’s shoulder. “Time to get up, Johnnycake,” he said quietly leaning over him and kissing his cheek as well.

Dallas watched Johnny wake up, watched him shift in the bed and yawn, stretching his arms far above his head before his eyelids fluttered open and he looked up at Dally. “Dallas,” he said quietly. And then he smiled big and wide, sleep making him forget for just a moment everything that had happened and everything that would happen. But Dally could tell when he remembered it. The smile vanished almost quickly as it had come and Dallas felt guilty again.

Johnny swallowed nervously and said, “What time do we gotta be at the hospital?”

“Noon,” Dally replied, glancing over his shoulder at the clock, though only a couple of minutes had passed. “You don’t gotta get up yet,” he added quickly, “we can just lay here for a minute.”

But Johnny was already shaking his head. “If I don’t get up now, I’ll just fall back to sleep.”

Already Dallas felt even more guilty for waking him and something told him his guilt wasn’t going to go away. Especially not when they reached the hospital. Especially not when his physical therapy started. Especially not when he saw how much pain he was going to be in.

It seemed to take a much shorter time to get dressed and ready to go than it normally did. Dallas went into the kitchen and made them both breakfast while Johnny woke up by having his own cigarette and reading in bed after Dallas had propped the pillows up for him to be comfortable. Dally made breakfast in what felt like a haze, his eyes glazed over, doing everything on autopilot. He didn’t seem to see the world in front of him and could only think of what was to come, could only hear the voice in his head that had been on repeat since he’d woken up.

This is all your fault. Everything he has to go through is your fault. If you’d only saved him sooner, if you’d only stopped him from going into the church at all, none of this would’ve happened.

As with before, there was nothing Dallas could say to argue with the voice. He knew it was right. Everything it said was right. He should have gone into the church sooner, the minute he realized that Johnny wasn’t right behind him and Ponyboy, not when he heard him screaming that horrible hellish scream, the scream that still haunted his nightmares. He should have stopped Johnny from going into the church to begin with. He’d had a bad feeling the minute Johnny had run out of the car. He could still see how he’d run towards the church, the last time he’d run, the last time he would probably ever run. He turned his face to the ceiling to stop the tears that filled his eyes at that thought.

And then something surprising happened.

Another voice entered his mind and whispered something else.

You did try to stop him, it said. You tried to grab his arm as he got out of the car, but he pulled out of your grip and ran into the church anyway. You could not have stopped him. You could not have known that when he went into that church, he would come out damaged and broken. You cannot see the future, Dallas Winston, anymore than anyone else can.

It was much more quiet than the other voice, almost like it was afraid to speak up, but the fact it existed at all startled Dallas. And he realized it was right too. He had tried to stop Johnny from going into the church, from even exiting the car, but Johnny had pulled away and as he’d watched him run away, that bad feeling in his heart, he’d thought about running after him, but he hadn’t thought needed to. He hadn’t thought something this bad would happen.
It wasn’t your fault, the soft voice whispered then. It wasn’t anybody’s fault.

Some deep part of Dallas knew that. He knew that this voice was right. He knew nothing anyone could’ve done could’ve stopped what happened that day. Not unless they could see the future and none of them could do that. No one could. And yet, somehow, that only made Dally feel worse. If it were no one’s fault, that meant nothing could’ve been done to stop it. It meant that Johnny was destined to be hurt and in pain. And somehow that was worse than it being his fault.

He saw the world through the blur of tears as he plated the food he’d made, grimacing to keep the sobs in his chest locked inside him where they belonged. He’d thought it many times and he knew it would think it many more, but out of everyone in the gang, Johnny deserved to hurt this way the least. He’d been through so much already. What kind of cruel, capricious god had decided that Johnny Cade deserved to be burned, scarred, and unable to walk or breathe on his own? Maybe not ever again.

He was still working on autopilot when he brought Johnny his food. Somehow he managed to not only tell him, but know as well they didn’t have very long to eat. He could see, as if through a tunnel, Johnny looking at him concerned and he forced himself to smile, trying to reassure him. Johnny didn’t ask what was wrong, maybe he knew he wouldn’t get an honest answer, but his look of worry didn’t leave him as he ate the food Dallas gave him, and it didn’t escape Dally’s notice that Johnny ate barely more than half of it.

“We should probably get goin’,” Johnny said quietly, setting his plate on his nightstand, not looking at Dally as he did so. “Ain’t it almost eleven thirty now?”

Dally glanced towards the digital clock on his nightstand, surprised to find Johnny was right. It really didn’t seem like that much time had passed and he found all he could do in response was nod.

Dally got dressed and helped Johnny into his clothes in a haze. He helped him into his wheelchair and to the car in that same haze, unsure of what to do or say. It seemed so strange to him to think that there was something worse than blaming himself for what had happened to Johnny: knowing that it was meant to happen. He drove to the hospital in the same haze and didn’t even realize neither of them had spoken a word until they got there and were already headed up to the physical therapy room that the receptionist inside the front doors had told them – must have, though Dallas didn’t remember asking – the location of.

It was on the fourth floor, tucked into a mostly unused part of the hospital. There were empty rooms all around it and when they went into the room itself, there were several people in there already, each with their own physical therapist. Dally couldn’t help noticing everyone else was much older than Johnny. He shuddered and gripped the handles of Johnny’s wheelchair more tightly, willing himself not to grimace or breakdown again.

A kind looking black woman stood just inside the door. She turned and smiled when they entered, taking a few steps towards them, holding out her hand as she said, “You must be Johnny Cade and Dallas Winston. I’m Daeshana. I’ll be Johnny’s physical therapist.” Both of them shook her hand as she went on to say, “Today we’re just gonna start small. We’re gonna teach Johnny to sit up on his own again. He’s probably halfway there, since not bein’ able to sit up by yourself is pretty hard and it’s usually the first thing patients learn again once they gain the feelin’ back in their legs. What we’ll be doin’ today is strengthenin’ those muscles.”

Dally couldn’t see Johnny’s face, but from the stiff way he nodded, he could tell he was nervous.

In truth, Dally was too.
How much pain would he be in today? How much more pain would he be in in later sessions?

There was a row of seats along the wall and a shelf of magazines and children’s books on the wall for people who were waiting for patients during their sessions. There were children’s toys in a sectioned off area near the seats. Dally thought about taking one of the magazines off the wall, flipping through it and distracting himself from whatever pain he would have to witness Johnny go through during his session, but that felt like a betrayal of Johnny, of what he’d done to him.

In the end, it didn’t really matter if that soft voice had been right about this not being his fault. He still blamed himself and he was certain that at least a part of him always would.

The haze was gone and, as he watched the physical therapist – Daeshana – help Johnny out of his wheelchair and onto a mat on the ground, wincing and gasping all the while, he wished it’d come back. Somehow everything was easier to handle if the haze was there. But now he had to deal with the full force of the pain he felt, seeing Johnny in pain.

The session lasted almost three hours and in that time, Dallas watched as Daeshana had Johnny stretch out his back and then try to sit up and touch his toes. He grimaced, his entire body shuddering each time he tried. He made small, pained grunts and Dally wished he could take his pain and be the one to feel it himself. He wished he could snap his fingers and give Johnny his legs, his heart, and his lungs back, make him healthy again.

At long last – it felt like it’d been closer to seven or eight hours to Dallas than only three and he could only imagine how long it felt for Johnny – Daeshana sat up and said, “You’re doin’ real good, Johnny! I think we should stop there for today, but at home try doin’ the same exercise, even if you’re in bed or on the couch. It’ll not hurt as much there too, but also try to do it on the floor. It’ll strengthen your back muscles and soon you’ll be sittin’ up all by yourself!”

To Dally’s surprise, Johnny smiled and said, “Thanks, Daeshana, thanks for your help.”

Dally felt angry at the physical therapist for causing Johnny pain, even though he knew that she was only trying to help. He didn’t think he’d be able to smile at her and thank her if he’d been in Johnny’s position or if he did, he wouldn’t be able to mean it, but he could tell from the look in Johnny’s eyes that he completely meant it.

It was, in Dally’s mind, just another testament to how good and kind-hearted Johnny really was. It still amazed him that despite everything he’d been through, he managed to stay so good and kind, that he’d never gotten hard and angry like Dally had.

_He’s like an angel on earth_, he thought as he watched Daeshana help Johnny back into his wheelchair. _He’s like a saint. He doesn’t deserve this pain, but he goes through it anyway with a smile on his face. How can any part of the world want to hurt someone like that?_

Dally’s parents had been catholic and had raised him as a catholic. It was where his St. Christopher necklace had come from. He knew the history of saints, he knew what made them and in his mind, Johnny fit the criteria. The only thing that hadn’t happened was he hadn’t died. Not yet. And Dally prayed he didn’t. Not for a long time. He’d be okay with Johnny never becoming a saint if he weren’t martyred and killed by some horrible outside force. Still, he didn’t think Johnny needed to die to be a saint. He’d been through enough to qualify in Dally’s mind.

They were almost home when he remembered he had to go to the grocery store.

“I know you probably just wanna sleep, but we gotta go to the store, okay, man?” he said quietly,
looking over at Johnny who was staring out the window, but turned to him at his words. “I’ll make sure it’s real quick, but we need somethin’ for dinner tonight.”

Johnny nodded and Dally turned into the parking lot of the grocery store. It wasn’t very far from their house and in all truth, he probably could’ve walked there if he’d really wanted to, but they were passing by it, so it made more sense to just stop.

The store wasn’t very busy at three o’clock on a Tuesday and Dally was able to go through the store quickly, grabbing the things they’d need for dinner. He was standing near the potatoes, grabbing some large ones and putting them in a plastic bag – he planning on making Johnny’s favorite dish that night: twice baked potatoes – when he heard Johnny say, ‘Oh no.”

It was the way that Johnny said it that made Dally look up and turn immediately. He sounded scared, afraid. Not like how he’d sounded with Sylvia, but worse. Like he wasn’t seeing someone he disliked, but like he was expecting to be hurt by who he saw.

Johnny’s parents were walking towards them and they looked furious.

Dally stepped in front of Johnny, shielding him from their view and said, loudly, not caring who he caught the attention of, “What the fuck do you want?”

“This ain’t any of your business!” Johnny’s mother shouted back, sounding almost hysterical as she pointed at Dallas. “This is between us and him! Or did you already forget about the court date?” She tried to look around Dally to see Johnny, but Dally moved with her.

“Court date?” Dally replied, feeling a grin spread across his lips at the words. The social worker must have spoken with them. “You mean the court date set to put your drunken ass and your pedophile husband in prison? You mean that one?”

Johnny’s mother looked at Dally furiously, seemingly unable to come up with a response to his blunt words and that only made the angry glee rising in his chest spill over into a bitter, angry laugh. Finally. Finally something was being done about them. Finally they would face consequences for what they had done to Johnny for so long.

“You really think it’s not justified, don’t you?” he said, grinning, putting his hands on his hips, full of glee. “You really think beatin’ your child and lettin’ your husband rape and molest him is okay? You really thought you were gonna get away with that shit? Well, listen to me, and listen to me fuckin’ well: you’re gonna go to jail for a long, long time and if you don’t, I’ll kill you both. You ain’t gonna get away with this. I ain’t lettin’ you hurt him any longer.”

“We’ll get him back eventually,” Johnny’s father replied in a dangerous low voice. “You can’t stop us. He’s our son. Not yours. He ain’t yours. He belongs to us.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, you worthless piece of shit,” Dally spat back. “He don’t belong to anyone. Not even me. He belongs to himself. Hard to understand for someone as fuckin’ pathetic as you, I know, but it’s the truth. Get with the program. Get over it.”

It was then one of the store clerks came over to Johnny’s parents and told them they had to leave if they weren’t planning on buying anything. They tried to argue with the clerk, but the clerk got the manager and the manager threatened to call the police. They were idiots, Dally had always believed that, but they were smart enough to know that getting arrested not to long before their court date wasn’t a good idea and left, glaring at Dally the whole way. Dally waved them goodbye sarcastically, still grinning. It felt good to see such horrible people get their just desserts.
He turned to Johnny the minute they left. He was shaking in his wheelchair, his eyes wide, his hands close to his face. He was curled in on himself as much as he could be in his wheelchair. Dally knelt down in front of him, gently taking his hands and kissing the tips of his fingers as he said, quietly, “It’s okay, Johnnycake. They’re gone. They ain’t ever gonna hurt you again, okay man?”

“Did you hear what they said?” Johnny asked, his eyes flicking to Dally’s face. There was fear in them and fear in his voice. “They said they were gonna get me back.”

Dally shook his head, looking stern as he said, “No, Johnny. No, they ain’t. Over my dead body. I will not let you go back to that place. I swear it.”

Johnny nodded, but he didn’t reply and Dally knew that was because he didn’t believe him. He knew, too, though, that it wasn’t because of anything he’d done. His parents just still had that much of a hold over his mind and that made Dally hate them even more.

They left the grocery store quickly after that and went home immediately after. Johnny fell asleep on the couch while Dallas was making dinner and Dally let him sleep, knowing it would take at least two hours for the potatoes to cook anyway.

As he glanced at him, while he slept, he wished not for the first time he could take his pain.

*He deserves better,* he thought as he put the potatoes into the oven for the first round of baking. *He don’t deserve to be afraid and in pain all the time.*

*That’s why he has you,* the soft voice from earlier reminded him.

And for the first time, Dally didn’t try to argue with it, didn’t try to put himself down and dispute what the voice was telling him.

He just smiled and nodded.

The voice was right.

Johnny had him. And he would do everything he could to protect him.

He would never let him hurt from outside forces.

Not ever again.

Chapter End Notes

i’m not rly sure what physical therapy for patients like johnny entails so this is probably inaccurate rip

i ain’t been gettin’ as many comments on my writin’ lately, so please comment if you read this!!
The barn was dark. At least, it was much darker and far more sinister than Johnny could ever remember it having been before. It was so dark, he couldn’t even see anything inside the barn itself. It was like the darkness was a void and it swallowed up everything that came in contact with it. It was like the gates of Hell, sucking everything inside, spitting nothing back out. And Johnny realized with a sick sense of horror that he was going to walk into it willingly. Whatever happened from this point onward was his own fault and he knew it.

“Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly,” said a voice that sounded a lot like Sylvia’s, but Johnny couldn’t see her anywhere. He took a step into the barn and heard a sinister sort of laughing off in one corner. It was like Sylvia had not only been consumed by the void, but had been absorbed by it as well. She’d become the void and had given it a voice.

Johnny was shaking so badly he was having a hard time walking. He reached out a hand to the side to steady himself, but there was no wall there. He looked towards what he’d been reaching for and saw only blackness. Whatever was illuminating the way behind him vanished and the darkness became total. He was surrounded on all sides by it and who knew what else that lay within.

He took two steps forward and felt something push him from behind. In an instant, the lights were switched back on and he could see the pile of hay he was going to fall onto on his stomach before he hit it. He turned around quickly once he hit the hay and looked up to see Sylvia standing over him, her hands on her hips, leering her same big Cheshire Cat grin.

“Sweet little freak,” she said, crouching down, cat-like and moving towards him like he’d seen some of the girls do to the other men near their stages at the bars around town. “Everyone knows you wanted it. And liked it. I bet you’d want me to do it again, wouldn’t you?”

Johnny shook his head quickly, opening his mouth and shouting, “No!”

But nothing came out.

He screamed silently and it seemed that no matter what he did, he couldn’t make a sound.

Sylvia grinned, straddling Johnny and pushing him down into the hay as she grinned even wider said in firm, dangerous voice, “Though so.”
And then somehow he’s naked. His clothes piled in the corner like they had been when he’d woken up the next morning and realized what had happened. But this time he isn’t alone. This time Sylvia is on top of him and she’s naked too and he screams, fighting against her, trying to get this all to end, to stop to release him.

When he finally wakes up, he’s thrashing in bed, still screaming. There’s a voice over his screaming that he recognizes but can’t understand. Dally’s. He stops screaming, only just now realizing he was, having thought the screams belonged to someone else. He looks at Dally and, though he doesn’t know what Dally’s been shouting, Johnny feels his entire body shudder as he begins to break down, crying so hard his entire body shakes.

Dally holds him as he cries, running his hand up and down his back, whispering soothing words that Johnny still can’t understand in his ear this time because of how hard he’s crying. When he’s finally calmed down enough he can speak, Dallas pulls away, stroking Johnny’s face and hair, trying to keep him calm as he asks, “What happened?”

For a moment, Johnny’s face twists and he wants to break down again. Dallas must be able to tell this is going to happen because he adds quickly, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’ta asked, that was stupid.”

But Johnny shakes his head, taking a shuddering breath as he says, “No, Dal, it’s fine.” He doesn’t look at him as he says it, but he forces himself to look up at him when he says, “It was about Sylvia. About...what happened at the barn.” He shudders again and whimpers, looking away.

Dally doesn’t reply, but when Johnny looks at him again, his mouth is pressed into a thin line and he’s frowning, his brows drawn together. He isn’t looking at Johnny, but out the window that’s next to their bed, the one they always leave open at night because they like feeling the breeze through the window while they’re sleeping.

He doesn’t need to speak for Johnny to know what he’s thinking.

“Don’t kill her,” he says quickly.

“Why not?” Dally says in a thin, furious voice, still not looking at Johnny.

For a moment, he’s startled by the fact he was right and that Dally sounds genuine about going to kill this girl. Then he swallows and says, “Cause you’d be put in jail again.”

Dally’s eyes flick to him when he says this, no other part of him moving.

Johnny swallows hard and adds, “You’d be there for a long time, too, if you killed someone. That’d be first degree murder. And-and you can’t take care of me from jail.”

For a long time, Dally was silent and Johnny found himself wondering if this was the final straw, this was the last thing that tipped Dally over from hood to murderer. (Like you, a voice whispered in the back of his mind.) But then Dally nodded, still not looking at Johnny and said, “Yeah. Fine.” It wasn’t convincing, but it would have to be enough for now.

Dally blinked and leaned forward, kissing Johnny’s forehead as he said quietly, his lips against his skin as he spoke, “Don’t worry about it, Johnnycake, I promise I ain’t gonna kill her, okay? Just go back to sleep. I’ll watch over you.”

Johnny settled back into his pillow, getting comfortable, looking up at Dallas as he did so. Dally wasn’t looking at him again, staring back out the window, a determined look on his face. He wasn’t going to kill Sylvia. Johnny believed him when he’d said that. But he was going to do something. And there really wasn’t anything Johnny could do to stop him. He just hoped that whatever it was
wouldn’t get him thrown in jail.

* * *

Dally didn’t go back to sleep. It was two in the morning and he had work at six, but he couldn’t sleep. He watched Johnny sleep, he watched the silk curtains blow in the wind that came through the open window, he watched the sun slowly rise as dawn came, but he did not go back to sleep. He couldn’t. All he could think of was how Johnny had screamed, had thrashed in his sleep, because of her. Because of what she had done to him when he couldn’t protect him from her.

This has to stop, he thought, his hands clenching into fists as he heard the first birds of the new day singing to each other. She can’t keep thinkin’ she can come into our lives and ruin them just cause she ain’t gettin’ what she wants. This has to stop.

Johnny still wasn’t awake again when it got time for him to go to work. He kissed Johnny’s temple and got out of bed slowly, dressing just as slowly and then walking to work slowly. He was thinking, trying to figure out what he could do to make Sylvia understand she couldn’t mess with him or Johnny anymore and not get in trouble for it because he knew Johnny was right. Killing her would only martyr her in some sick sort of way and get him sent to prison. Maybe for life. Neither he nor Johnny would be able to survive that.

But there were other things he could do, other ways he could scare her into submission.

Thinking of it that way made him wince and hate himself, but Sylvia had hurt Johnny. Hurt him in ways that he didn’t even want to think about. And for that she had to pay. And by the time he was walking in the front door of the garage, putting his things in his locker, he knew exactly what he was going to do. He just had to speak to Steve and Two-Bit. He would need them too.

As it always did when he had plans, work seemed to go by extra slowly. Soda was there, but Steve had the day off. Dally asked him where he thought he’d be and Soda replied by telling him he was probably at his house, the Curtis’s house. Dally nodded his thanks and left the garage without a word, feeling the eyes of all of his coworkers on him. They could tell something was wrong. Like he had been during Johnny’s first physical therapy session, he was in a haze, thinking only about Sylvia and what he planned to do to her.

He wasn’t going to kill her. He’d promised Johnny he wouldn’t and he wasn’t going to. Johnny was right. It would only get him sent to jail for a long, long time and then Johnny would be in foster care or something worse. No, he was just going to scare her. But for that he needed Steve and Two-Bit. He needed them because they were the next scariest of the gang after him.

He wasn’t really aware of getting to the Curtis’s house or going up the front steps of their porch and opening the door, but suddenly he found himself in the Curtis’s living room with everyone who was inside – Ponyboy, Darry, Steve, and Two-Bit – staring at him, waiting for him to say something. He heard Darry say something, but didn’t really understand him and when he glanced at him, he saw that Darry’s brows were drawn together in concern.

They could all tell something was wrong. Just like the guys back at the garage.

“I need Steve and Two-Bit,” he said in a monotone.

The both of them stood and followed Dally back outside. He walked a few feet from the front door and said, “I gotta tell ya somethin’ and then I need your help, okay?”

They both nodded at him. Their own brows drawn together in concern at his words.
Dally took a shuddering breath, closing his eyes briefly as he did so, wondering how to say this without screaming in anger all over again. Finally, he clenched his hands into fists, his nails digging into his palms as he opened his eyes and said, “Sylvia...raped Johnny. She took advantage of him. And ever since that night at the barn...he’s been thinkin’ about it and she found us at The Dingo and bothered us there too….we gotta do somethin’ about it.”

“She raped him?” Steve said, indignant.

Two-Bit’s mouth just hung open in shock.

“Wait, was this the night we all were at the barn?” he asked, sounding as guilty as Dally felt. “The night she was comin’ onto him and I tried to stop her?”

Dally couldn’t make himself speak. He only nodded.

Steve’s face twisted from shock to anger and his own hands clenched. “That fucking bitch.”

“What’re we gonna do?” Two-Bit asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Scare her,” Dally replied almost instantly. “We ain’t gonna hurt her. She ain’t worth goin’ to jail over and we needta be around to take care of Johnny anyway. But we’re gonna scare her bad enough she won’t come near us ever again. She won’t wanna be in the same neighborhood as us neither. The police can’t do nothin’ unless we hurt her and we ain’t gonna do that. We’re just gonna make sure she don’t bother Johnny again, got it?”

Steve and Two-Bit nodded their assent without hesitation.

“Y’all got your knives?” he asked, reaching into his back pocket for his own.

Two-Bit flipped out his butterfly knife. Steve pulled out his switchblade.

Dally nodded once. “C’mon, let’s go. She’s probably home right now.”

Sylvia’s house was down the street and around the corner from the Curtis’s house. There was no car out front, but that didn’t mean anything. She borrowed her parents’ car – and more often just stole it without asking – to get around. The car being gone only meant that they weren’t home, not that she wasn’t home alone, which was perfect. Dally couldn’t stop himself from grinning. In fact, he was so happy about it, he forgot to knock and burst into the living room.

Sylvia was sitting on the couch, stretched out and watching TV. She was all dressed up like she’d just gotten back from or was going someplace special and Dally couldn’t stop himself from feeling gleeful when she jumped nearly a foot in the air as he burst into the house.

“Jeez,” she said, sitting up and straightening her skirt. “Don’t you know how to knock, Dal?”

Dally flicked open his knife without saying a word and bent down, pressing the flat of the blade against her cheek as he said, “I don’t give a shit about knockin’. Not when he comes to you.”

There was a hint of panic in her eyes, even as she said, “You know that’s breaking and entering. Murder and dismemberment are also crimes too.”

“So is rape,” he said without missing a beat.

Sylvia was quiet for a moment, then she began, “I don’t know –”

But Dally cut her off before she could get any further. “You know exactly what I’m talkin’ about.
You took advantage of Johnny. And I don’t give a shit if you take advantage of me and sleep around while I’m in jail, but you stay the fuck away from Johnny, you got that? Hell, you stay away from me now too. You’re not to come anywhere near us...or I’ll fuck your pretty face up so bad no one will ever want you ever again, understand?"

Sylvia smirked and grinned her Cheshire cat grin as she said, “You really think I believe that? You wouldn’t lay a hand on a girl, Dallas Winston.”

“You ain’t a girl,” Dally replied, spitting his words like they were caustic, poisonous. “You’re a goddamn piece of shit. You only act the way you do cause you know no one wants you around, so treat people like shit, thinkin’ that if you do that, then they’ll want you around.”

“You tryin’ to say you don’t want me?” Sylvia asked, still grinning. “That your little freak of a friend didn’t want it? Don’t lie, Dally. You know you want me and you know he liked it too. You know he begged for it. Even if he didn’t say a word, even if he was drunk, you know he liked it.”

Dally almost lost it there. Almost grabbed her by the neck and slammed her into the wall until the wall broke or her head did, but he made himself think of Johnny, made him remember Johnny was waiting for him to come home safe and sound and that meant without killing this disgusting piece of garbage in front of him and getting himself sent back to jail or prison. Maybe for a long time. Maybe forever. He clenched his knife more tightly and pressed the blade harder into her cheek, watching the small indent it made in her skin.

“Don’t you dare talk about him,” he said, their faces inches from each other, his voice so soft and low and dangerous, he watched with pleasure as her smile faltered for the first time since they’d come in the door and the panic lying just under the surface in her eyes exposed itself fully. “If you talk about him again, if you look at him again, if you come anywhere near him again, I’ll ruin you. And I don’t care what happens to me.”

“Yeah, you do,” Sylvia replied, a last ditch effort to get him to react. “You gotta take care of your little freak friend, and you can’t do that if you’re in jail.”

Dally’s face was so close to hers now, his breath made her hair move. “Look into my eyes and tell me that I’m lying.”

Sylvia did. And her smile vanished completely. She swallowed hard.

Now it was Dally’s turn to smirk. “That’s what I fucking thought.” He straightened, putting his knife away. He didn’t take his eyes off of her as he said to Two-Bit and Steve, “C’mon, let’s go. This waste of a life has a lot to think about it.”

He didn’t look at Steve’s and Two-Bit’s faces, but he could feel the disgust coming off them in waves as they left the house, slamming the door shut behind them.

Dally put his knife away. He didn’t say anything to either Steve or Two-Bit as he headed back towards the house he shared with Johnny and they didn’t say anything to him.

But he’d meant what he said.

Just as he’d meant what he said when he told Johnny he wouldn’t kill Sylvia.

If she came after him again, he would ruin her. And if that meant he got put in jail, so be it.

No one was hurting Johnny Cade and getting away with it ever again.
Not so long as he was breathing.

Chapter End Notes

i am finally at a house that is mine and will be for at least a couple weeks until i go to visit my girlfriend, so hopefully i will be able to get stuff out more quickly
Never Not Sick, Never Not Ill

Chapter Summary

Johnny gets the flu and Dallas gets worried.

Chapter Notes

yet fuckin’ again, this was not supposed to take this long to get out, my ed is rly bad at the moment, which is why it’s takin’ me forever to get stuff out cause i’m workin’ out insteada writin’, sorry :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The minute Johnny woke up, he knew something was wrong. The world was spinning in circles even though he was lying down and he was having a hard time breathing, even with his oxygen on. He sniffed a few times and realized his nose was stuffed up. He reached over for the Kleenex on his nightstand, but his head throbbed violently and he moaned, curling in on himself, holding his head between his hands as he did so.

It was then he realized he must be sick, but what with he didn’t know.

His hands were shaking badly and his skin was clammy. He was shaking from chills, but whenever he pulled the blankets back over himself, he got overheated in seconds and had to kick them off again, only for the whole process to start all over again. He didn’t know what any of this meant, but he knew it couldn’t be anything good.

Reaching out blindly with one arm, he groped for Dallas next to him in the bed as he said in a voice that sounded as bad as he felt, “Dallas...Dallas...somethin’s wrong...I don’t – I don’t feel good.”

He still didn’t move from where he was lying, but he could hear Dallas moving behind him, saying softly, his voice thick with sleep, “What’s wrong, Johnnycake? Where does it hurt?”

Johnny took a shudder breath, wincing at the nausea that washed over him in a sudden wave. He shuddered and moaned. “My stomach hurts,” he gasped out, sounding more like a small child than a sixteen-year-old boy. “My head hurts. My nose is all stuffed up too and-and I can’t get warm. I keep shiverin’ when I pull on the blanket, but...but then I just get hot and gotta kick it off again.”

Dallas was quiet for a long time, thinking, then said in a soft voice, “Sounds like you gotta fever. Maybe the flu.” He was quiet for another moment before adding, “We should go to the doctor.”

It wasn’t until he finished speaking that Johnny realized there was something in his voice that he couldn’t identify. It took him a moment more to realize that what he was hearing was fear. If he hadn’t felt so awful, he would’ve drawn his own brows together and asked why. Why was him having the flu such a scary thing? People got the flu all the time. And then they just stayed in bed until they got better. The flu was curable. People hadn’t died from it in a very long time. Why was it scary now?
Because you’re already sick, a quiet voice reminded him. What is going to happen to you now that you’re even more sick? Your body won’t be able to cope the same way as someone healthy. You very well could die from this.

The voice was right and Johnny knew it and a part of him felt afraid at the words.

What was going to happen to him now that he was unhealthy? And not just unhealthy, but more unhealthy than anyone else he knew. Would he be more sick than anyone else was when he got sick with something as non-threatening as the flu was supposed to be? That didn’t seem fair. But then again, it seemed like nothing in his life was ever fair.

“I don’t wanna go to the doctor,” Johnny said in a moan, wrapping his arms around his middle in an attempt to alleviate the nausea somewhat. He was shaking still, his entire body shuddering from cold or something else, he wasn’t sure which. “I just-I just wanna stay home in bed.”

He felt a light hand on his shoulder, Dallas squeezing it slightly. “I know, Johnnycake,” he said in that same soft voice, trying to soothe him. “But you ain’t like most people, okay? You gotta a harder time fightin’ off infections, and it ain’t just now, you’ve always been that way. You-you can’t just...lay in bed till it goes away like someone else would, cause it might not go away. You need some medicine or somethin’ and I ain’t got medicine like that here at home.”

Johnny was quiet for a long time, thinking about this. He knew Dallas was right, but the idea of getting out of bed, of even sitting up in his wheelchair made him shudder again. His head was throbbing so bad. He just needed to have it resting against something to make the pain go away. Still.

There was a good chance it would just get worse if he didn’t go to the doctor and then he might have to be hospitalized and after spending a month in the hospital that was the last thing he wanted.

“Okay,” he said finally, his voice soft and scared.

Dallas kissed his shoulder and wrapped his arms around him, holding him against his chest. “I ain’t gonna let nothin’ bad happen to ya, Johnnycake,” he said, his lips pressed to the back of Johnny’s neck. “I’m gonna keep you safe and healthy, I promise.”

Johnny meant to answer him, meant to say, “Okay,” again, and maybe “I love you” too, but he was asleep moments later. Dally’s touch was a better antidote than anything a doctor could give him.

* * *

Dally couldn’t sleep after Johnny had woken him up. The idea that Johnny might be sick frightened him. Johnny had never been healthy. He couldn’t remember a time when Johnny had really had the same level of health as the rest of them in the gang, but now after the fire and four different major surgeries, it’d all gotten worse. He was always sleeping, always tired. He knew that meant he had a lowered immune system and here was the proof. He probably had the flu. He knew the flu wasn’t a killer and Johnny would probably be just fine, but the fear was still there and he wondered, not for the first time, if Johnny would ever be even partially healthy again.

He stayed that way, with his arms wrapped around Johnny’s middle, watching him shake in his sleep, until the sun came up. Then he went into the kitchen where the phone was the minute the clock turned from five to six and called the hospital, making an appointment for him. They told him they’d be able to get him in just before noon and Dallas thanked them before hanging up and going back to bed to continue holding Johnny against him until he woke up.

What if he dies? A nasty voice whispered in his mind as he pressed light kisses to the back of Johnny’s neck, his temple, and behind his ear. What if there’s nothing the doctors can do and this is
He wanted to tell the voice to shut up, to go away, to leave him alone, but he didn’t seem to have that power and it didn’t matter what he tried to think about it. The questions were still there, circling in his mind as he felt Johnny shake unnaturally in his arms, waiting for him to wake up.

What if he dies?

What if this is what kills him?

What if he dies?

What if he dies?

What if he dies?

Finally, in an attempt to distract himself, he decided to get up and make breakfast. A nice, lavish breakfast. Something Johnny might enjoy, even if he were sick. Pancakes with sunny-side up eggs, sausage, and bacon. That’d get his mind off things for at least an hour, he thought. But it wasn’t until he was halfway through making everything that he realized it was probably a moot point anyway.

People threw up a lot when they had the flu. What made him think that Johnny would want anything he could make when he was just going to vomit all back up anyway?

I’ll save it for later, he thought, determined to be optimistic. He can eat it when he’s better.

As if to prove his point, just when he’d finished putting everything into their small refrigerator, wrapping it in plastic to keep it from going bad, when he heard a loud moan from the bedroom and, slamming the refrigerator door shut, he flew ran to Johnny, getting there just as Johnny said, turning to look at him when a miserable expression as he spoke, “Dal, I really don’t feel good.”

“You think you’re gonna throw up?” he asked, taking a few tentative steps towards the bed.

Johnny nodded.

In a flash, Dallas picked Johnny up, scooping him out of the bed with his arm under his knees and another arm supporting his head. He carried him into the bathroom and set him down by the toilet, lifting the lid for him as he sat, his arms wrapped around him, so he would have some support. It’d been a week or two since his physical therapy session and he was practicing every day what the therapist had told him in an attempt to learn to sit up on his own, but he was still having troubles and now, being sick, he was having more trouble than before.

Dallas wrapped his arms around Johnny’s middle and rubbed his back, saying, “It’s okay, Johnnycake. I ain’t gonna judge ya if you get sick, you know that.”

Johnny barely had time to nod before he vomited into the toilet bowl. Dallas winced. It wasn’t pretty. Johnny did it again. He vomited until his stomach was so empty he couldn’t get anything out when his body convulsed and he spit into the toilet bowl. He shuddered and moaned when the convulsions finally stopped and slumped against Dallas, still shaking badly.

“I hate bein’ sick,” he said in a quiet voice. “I hate bein’ sick all the time.”

Johnny’s voice was sad, broken, and it made Dally want to cry. Out of everyone he knew, Johnny deserved this the least and yet, it always seemed that no matter what happened, no matter what anyone did, it was Johnny who was in the most pain.
“I know, Johnnycake,” he said, his own voice thick with emotion as he held him against him, rocking him gently, rubbing his back as he did so. “I know. It ain’t fair. It ain’t fair at all. I wish I could take it all instead, so you wouldn’t haveta feel it.”

But to his surprise, Johnny shook his head. “No,” he said weakly. “I’d rather it be me than you.”

For some reason that just made Dally feel worse and he had to look at the ceiling to keep the tears that had formed in his eyes from falling. Even when he was in this much pain, Johnny still thought of others before himself and it wasn’t until that moment Dally realized that the reason he was so upset was because he knew that meant Johnny thought of himself as unimportant.

The tears ran down his cheeks at the thought and he wasn’t sure if they were from anger at the knowledge that it was his parents and the Socs who had made him feel this way or sorrow at the knowledge that there wasn’t much he could do to fix it.

Dallas Winston rarely cried. He could name on one hand the times he had cried in the past year alone and even then it was more times than normal.

Seeing Johnny this way seemed to turn him into a faucet.

“It’s almost ten-thirty,” he finally said, his voice quiet, barely audible. “We gotta get you dressed. I made an appointment at the hospital. I wanna get you medicine to get you better.”

He expected Johnny to protest, to beg him to let him stay home, but to his surprise he only nodded and for that Dallas was grateful. He wasn’t sure he would’ve been able to make him go to the hospital if he really didn’t want to. Especially not after all the time he’d spent there recently.

They didn’t move right away, lying there on the bathroom floor. Dally’s arms were still wrapped around Johnny’s small, shaking body, Johnny still slumped against him, both of them not wanting to go to the doctor, neither of them wanting to be the first to mention they should probably move to get dressed and get ready to go. Finally, as though they’d planned it, they moved at the same time and Dallas picked Johnny up again, carrying him from the bathroom to the bedroom. He helped him into his clothes after getting dressed himself and then helped him into his wheelchair.

The drive to the hospital seemed to take a far shorter time than it would have any other day. Maybe it was because neither of them wanted to get there and both of them were afraid of what was going to happen when they did get there. Dallas stared up at the big imposing building as they parked, thinking about all of the things that could happen during their meeting with the doctor, trying not to think about all of the bad things.

It’s going to be fine, he told himself. He’s going to be fine.

But he wasn’t sure he believed himself.

The receptionist waved to them as they walked in the sliding glass doors. Johnny felt so poorly, he didn’t even notice, but Dally waved back. He reached down, squeezing Johnny’s shoulder as Johnny let out a soft moan as they walked into the bright fluorescence of the hospital. Johnny didn’t like bright lights at the best of times. He could only imagine how much worse it was now that he was sick.

“It’s okay, Johnnycake,” he said softly as they walked into the elevator. “We’re gonna be here as short as we can. Then we can go home and you can go back to bed. I promise.”

The waiting room was shockingly far more empty than usual and it wasn’t long before the nurse was calling Johnny’s name. They didn’t bother weighing him or getting his height, since he was still
wheelchair-bound. The nurse seemed to be able to tell just how bad Johnny felt too and took them straight back to the room the doctor would see them in, telling them he would be in soon.

“Tell him to hurry,” Johnny said in the miserable voice he’d used earlier, surprising Dallas and alerting him to just how bad he must feel to feel comfortable speaking to a complete stranger, especially to make any sort of request.

Again he had to look at the ceiling to stop the tears in his eyes from falling.

The doctor came in quickly as promised and after examining Johnny for only a few moments, he said, “It looks like he has the flu. It’s uncommon for the flu to start going around this early in the season, but looking at his chart, it doesn’t necessarily surprise me. He’s been through a lot in the past few months and his immune system is much lower than the average person’s as a result.”

“Is he goin’ to be okay?” Dallas asked quickly, almost interrupting the doctor in the process.

The doctor nodded. “He’ll be fine, but we are going to need to give him some stronger antibiotics than we might normally. It seems to have hit him particularly hard. I wouldn’t recommend letting him out of the house until this goes away or for a week or two afterwards if you can help it. Like I said, he has a much weaker immune system and the probability of recurrence is much higher with him than it might be with someone else. If it comes back, it could be worse and he may have to be hospitalized as a result.”

Dally nodded, taking the prescription the doctor handed him, feeling numb.

If it comes back, it could be worse and he may have to be hospitalized as a result.

Dally didn’t have to be a doctor to know what that meant.

Johnny was sick. Very sick. Even without having the flu.

The doctor had also handed him a surgical mask for Johnny to wear to prevent the risk of infection or prevent the infection from worsening while he was trying to get better. More proof, Dally thought, that Johnny was very ill.

They got the prescription at the hospital’s pharmacy, but the ride home was just as silent as the ride there, but seemed to take much longer and yet shorter at the same time.

Dallas was trapped in his thoughts, driving on autopilot, thinking of all this meant.

What would happen if Johnny got something worse? Like pneumonia? Would he die? His lungs were damaged already. Would he be able to handle it? He doubted it. He’d almost definitely have to be hospitalized if that happened. What if they’d gotten this far in Johnny’s recovery only for him to die of something that most people survived?

It was unfair. All of it. And Dallas didn’t know how to fix it. He felt helpless.

When they got home, he carried Johnny to bed, giving him one of the pills in the bottle they’d gotten from the pharmacy before tucking him in and letting him sleep.

He laid in bed next to him, watching him sleep, his thoughts still reeling.

He can’t die, he thought desperately, rubbing Johnny’s arm as he slept, trying to calm his shaking. I can’t live without him. Please...please don’t take him from me.
And for the first time since his mother died, Dallas prayed.

*Our father who art in heaven...hallowed be thy name...thy kingdom come...thy will be done...on earth as it is in heaven...give us this day our daily bread...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory...forever and ever...*

*Amen.*

He didn’t know if he believed in god and he didn’t know if it would do any good, but he couldn’t live without Johnny. He couldn’t.

**Chapter End Notes**

please leave comments if you read this. they're the only thing keepin' me goin' at the moment. i'm havin' a real hard time writin' stuff, so i'm sorry it keeps takin' longer than usual for me to get things out.
We All Have Our Vices

Chapter Summary

Two-Bit and Steve come over drunk.

Chapter Notes

yay!! i got a chapter out in a timely manner again finally!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Johnny started awake on the couch to the sound of someone knocking on the door. It’d been five days since he went to the doctor and, though the medication was helping reduce his flu symptoms, the illness was by no means gone. The doctor had meant it when he’d said that Johnny’s immune system was much lower than other people’s and therefore the illness would take a much longer time to get over. His head still throbbed, he still was having a hard time keeping anything down, and, though his fever had broken the first day, it kept coming back off and on throughout the week.

When the knock at the door sounded, he winced and groaned, his head pounding even as he held it between his hands in an attempt to alleviate the pain. A distant part of him was nervous about who might be at the door, especially since the spare key had gone mysterious missing, but at the same time, he was in too much pain to care.

*Let them kill me,* a cynical voice in his head replied. *At least it’d stop my head pounding.*

Later, he would never be sure how he managed to get from the couch into his wheelchair with how shaky he was and how much pain he was in, but he did. He was even more surprised when he managed to wheel himself from the couch to the front door. He peered out the opaque window, trying to make out what the foggy shapes beyond were. If he hadn’t been sick, he theorized he would’ve figured it out a lot sooner, but as it was, it took him a good thirty seconds to recognize the shapes beyond the window were Steve and Two-Bit.

Unlocking the door and pushing himself back slightly in his chair to pull it open, he gave a weak grin when Steve and Two-Bit turned to him and said, “Hey Johnnycake!” almost in unison. However, their smiles vanished quickly when they saw him and Two-Bit said, his brows drawn together, “Johnny, you okay? You don’t look so good.”

Johnny started turning his wheelchair around and pushing it back towards the living room as Steve and Two-Bit walked in behind him, shutting and locking the door as they went. “Somehow I got the flu,” Johnny told them. “Like...five days ago. But the doctor said my immune system ain’t doin’ so good, so I’ll probably be sick for another four days at least.”

He hated how miserable he sounded when he said it even though it was the truth. Like he was throwing some kind of pity party and he expected Steve and Two-Bit to join in.

He turned to them, intent on telling them that wasn’t the case and he was doing fine and he was just
glad that the illness wouldn’t somehow kill him when he saw beer bottles in both of their hands. It was only then he noticed how tipsy they were, how sloppy their smiles were, and how red their faces were. His eyes flicked to the clock in the kitchen. It was only one-thirty. They were already drinking?

For Two-Bit, this wasn’t necessarily a surprise. He was known for having beer for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and then in between as a snack. But Steve was a different story. While he enjoyed beer as much as the rest of them, he only had it when he went out to party or when everyone else was having it. He wasn’t known for drinking to excess and not really for drinking at all. To see him with a beer in his hand, pushing Two-Bit drunkenly around the living room with a crooked smile on his face was uncharacteristic and it made Johnny wonder what had made him decide to drink in the first place.

“So, other than bein’ sick, how you doin’, Johnnycake?” Two-Bit asked, sitting down at one of the chairs by the dining table just inside the living room near the TV. He took another long swig from his beer and let out a contented gasp as he finished it. “Damn, we shoulda brought more beer.”

“I ain’t sharin’,” Steve said instantly, taking another swig of his own.

Johnny shrugged one shoulder as he got back on the couch, wincing as he did so. Two-Bit rushed forwards to help him, Steve right behind him, and Johnny said quickly, “I got it. It just...hurts more cause I’m sick.” He forced a smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It shouldn’t hurt at all,” Steve said in a quiet voice as he and Two-Bit went back to their seats.

Johnny wasn’t sure what to say to that.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room, all of them looking at everything except each other. Then finally, Johnny got up the courage to ask the question that had been circling through his mind, since he’d seen the beer bottles in both of their hands.

“Why are y’all drinkin’? Or...I guess...why do y’all drink so much?”

For several moments, the silence persisted. Then Two-Bit gave a crooked smile and said, getting up to go look in the refrigerator, no doubt for another beer, “Cause we like it, Johnnycake, why else do people drink?”

Johnny looked away, shrugging, thinking of Dallas who only drank anymore when he was falling apart. “I dunno,” he replied. “I just ain’t ever seen you drink this much.”

“Well, I dunno about Two-Bit, but I drink cause it’s my fault,” Steve said, his words slurring. He wasn’t looking at anyone and he set down his beer bottle with a bang, making Johnny jump and turn to him. Steve was staring at the table, looking angry and miserable at the same time.

“What-what’s your fault?” Johnny asked, looking at him curiously.

Steve looked up at him. His eyes looked dead. “What happened to you.”

For a moment, Johnny was stunned into silence. His eyes flicked to Two-Bit, now rummaging under the sink for some whiskey and when he straightened and Johnny could see his eyes, he realized that he felt the exact same way. When he finally found his voice, he gasped out, “But why? None of what happened was your fault. Y’all weren’t even there when the church caught on fire! It was just me and Dallas and Ponyboy! And-and y’all can’t predict the future. How could y’all have known that was gonna happen to begin with. You...you couldn’t stopped it.”
But neither of them looked convinced. Steve took another long swig from his beer and Two-Bit, cracking open and mostly full bottle of whiskey joined in. He took a swig straight from the bottle and winced at the burn as it went down.

“That don’t matter,” he said, shaking his head as he sat down again across from Steve at the dining table. “You’re the pet, Johnny. You’re our responsibility. All of our responsibility. We protect you cause no one else does. And...we know you got Dallas, but...that don’t change facts and the fact is we weren’t there for you when you needed us to be. And now look. You can’t walk. You’re covered in scars. You hurt all the time. Hell, you even get sick worse then the rest of us.” He turned to look at Johnny and Johnny was startled to see tears in his eyes. “And that’s on us.”

Again, Johnny was stunned into silence. Everything they were saying reminded him of what Dallas said, what Ponyboy had said to him too. Everyone, it seemed, blamed themselves in some way for what had happened to him and that made no sort of sense to him at all.

“It’s my fault,” Two-Bit went on, “cause I was with those girls too. The Socs came upon us and they saw me with ‘em too, but I left you and Ponyboy and went home to get drunk instead.” He grimaced, looking away again and Johnny watched him take a shuddering breath before adding, “I remember when I saw you in the hospital and...after you passed out cause you were in so much pain, your ma came to the hospital and started yellin’ to see you. I ain’t ever wanted to die before, but when that happened...when I saw what you mighta been goin’ home to, even though you were so sick and hurt you were dyin’, I wanted to die. I wanted to switch places with you so bad. I told Ponyboy I wished it was anyone else in the gang in your position insteada you and I meant it.” He looked up at Johnny again, tears on his face now. “I still mean it.”

“I’m glad it ain’t you,” Johnny replied quietly just as he had to Dallas the other day when he’d first gotten sick and they’d gone to the doctor. “I’d rather it be me than any of you. I’m used to this.”

“And that’s exactly why I wish it were one of us,” Steve chimed in. “You’ve been through enough, Johnny. Hell, your old man has done things to you that make most people’s skin crawl. And the worst part is your ma’s just let him.”

Johnny was quiet for a moment, swallowing hard as he stared down at the blanket he’d pulled over his legs when he got back on the couch. He was about to open his mouth, about to ask Steve why he blamed himself for him getting hurt, but it turned out he didn’t have to. Steve offered the information all by himself.

“I shoulda gone with y’all to the movies when Two-Bit asked,” he said quietly. “When I got off work, Two-Bit asked if I wanted to tag along and I said no. I went home and went to bed. And when I woke up the next mornin’, y’all were gone and it was in the paper some kid got killed in the park and you’d done it. I wanted to go look for you. Two-Bit did too, but...we didn’t know where to start. And then when you came back and you were hurt...I knew I shoulda gone with ya to the movies. I shoulda followed ya home. I shoulda been there for ya. Then maybe none of this woulda happened.”

Johnny was really quite at a loss for what to say. He didn’t blame either of them for what had happened and he opened his mouth to say so, but he knew they wouldn’t believe him. They were convinced it was their fault. Just like Ponyboy was. Just like Dallas was. And it didn’t make sense to him at all why any of them blamed themselves for what had happened, when in his mind it was very clearly his own stupid fault.

He’d been the one to kill someone. He’d been the one to go ask Dallas where they could stay. He’d been the one to run in the burning church to save the children inside. He’d been the one who hadn’t gotten out quick enough when the ceiling started caving in. He didn’t regret saving the kids. He would do it all over again given half a chance, but he did regret killing Bob. He did regret not getting
out of the church when Dallas and Ponyboy had yelled at him to. And, in all honesty, all of this boiled down to him killing Bob. If he hadn’t done that, then he wouldn’t have had to go to the church. It probably never would have caught fire either because he and Ponyboy wouldn’t have been smoking cigarettes in it. And then the children wouldn’t have needed saving.

He’d be sitting on the ripped out car seat at the lot talking to a sober Two-Bit and Steve right now rather than lying on a couch, barely able to move, hooked to oxygen to keep him breathing with pills on the end table to keep his heart from beating too fast after how many times he’d been revived whilst in the hospital. He would be healthy. And it was his own stupid fault that he wasn’t.

He took a shuddering breath and said all of this to Steve and Two-Bit and they looked as stunned as he’d felt only moments ago. Steve stood and crossed the room, gathering Johnny up in a hug before saying, “No, Johnny. This ain’t your fault. If it ain’t our fault, then it certainly ain’t yours. You killed him cause of what he’d done to you. You were afraid of it happenin’ again. That makes sense. He was askin’ for it and we all know it. Don’t beat yourself up over this, okay?”

Two-Bit joined them holding them both as Johnny said, a lump forming in his throat, “Then y’all can’t blame yourselves either, okay? I don’t want ya drinkin’ yourselves into an early grave cause you think what happened to me was your fault cause it wasn’t. If I couldn’t’ve stopped it, then y’all couldn’t’ve either, okay?”

There was a short silence and then Steve said, “Okay.”

“Okay,” Two-Bit echoed.

Johnny wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that, holding each other and comforting each other, all of them trying to not to cry, all of them pretending they didn’t notice when one of them sniffed or took a stuttering breath, but finally they broke apart.

Two-Bit turned on the TV to cartoons and Steve got out his card deck and the two of them sat on the floor playing cards, Johnny looking over their shoulders to help them cheat ever now and then. They laughed and smiled and they all had fun, the alcohol sitting forgotten on the dining room table.

For the first time in a long time, everyone in the room was happy.
Fun at the Carnival

Chapter Summary

The gang goes to the carnival that comes to town.

Chapter Notes

i've been havin’ a real rough couplea weeks, which is why updates have been far slower than usual, so yeah i'm sorry for that. i'm doin' my best to keep gettin' stuff out tho cause i know if i stop i'll just...never get anythin' done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dallas did not like having to go to work with Johnny sick. He woke up early, long before Johnny ever did, and had a cigarette, watching him sleep, blowing smoke at the ceiling, glancing over at Johnny every now and then to make sure he was still breathing. His biggest fear was Johnny would die while he was asleep or while he was at work and he would never know about it until he woke up or got home and Johnny would’ve left the world alone. Deep down, he knew he wasn’t going to die. Not yet anyway. Not for a long time most likely. But after all that had happened in the last few months that didn’t stop him from worrying about it.

He smoked another cigarette, watching the sun come up outside the window, watching the breeze blow the white silk curtain in the wind, watching the shadows start to the lengthen as the sun rose in the sky, hearing the wind chimes of a nearby neighbor tinkling in the breeze as it blew, until he knew he had to get up and get ready for work or he was going to be late. His eyes never left Johnny as he got dressed, his deep-seeded fear still growing deep inside him, despite his knowledge it was most likely unfounded. He watched Johnny roll onto his back, letting out a soft sigh as he did so and Dallas wished not for the first time that Johnny could find that same peace in waking that he did in sleep.

As he finished buttoning up his shirt, Dallas crossed the room to the bed once more and placed a soft, tender kiss to Johnny’s temple. He pressed his forehead to the spot for a moment as he said in a quiet voice, “I’ll be back soon, Johnnycake. Stay safe here without me.”

Leaving the house with Johnny lying sick in bed still felt wrong, but Dallas reminded himself he didn’t have a long shift today. Just six hours. By the time he got back, Johnny probably still wouldn’t even be awake yet. He would never even know he’d left. At the same time another, darker thought came to him: What if Johnny died in his sleep when Dallas wasn’t there with him? What if he passed into the next world alone? Like his mother had?

He’s going to be fine, he told himself as he left the bedroom, willing himself not to look back, knowing he’d never leave if he did. You’re only going to be gone for six hours. He won’t even be awake by the time you get back. He’s going to be okay.

He wasn’t sure if he believed what he was telling himself, but he kept saying it anyway, hoping that if he said it enough times he would believe it. His mind had been wandering the last few days at
work, so much so that his coworkers had started to notice. Digger had even taken him aside and asked him what was going on. He'd told him the truth, but that didn’t change the fact that he was bringing down the quality of the workplace and Digger had warned him he might have to stay home for a few days if he didn’t get his act together. As much as Dallas would’ve enjoyed that, being able to stay home and take care of Johnny, he knew they couldn’t afford it. He had to go to work. With all the risks that came with that. Whether he wanted to or not.

Soda and Steve were working that day and they waved hello to him when he arrived with his burned bomber jacket slung over one shoulder. He gave them a tight-lipped smile and waved back. Everyone working that day was waiting outside of the garage, smoking a cigarette as they waited for Digger to get there and open the garage, signaling the start of the work day. Dally leaned against the side of the building along with everyone else and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it with a match from the book in his pocket. He didn’t have his Christopher anymore to use as a striker. Johnny wore it now. Thinking about that just made him worry about Johnny all over again.

“Hey Dally,” Soda said, nodding to Dallas as he spoke. He didn’t smoke, but stood with the boys anyway. “How’s Johnny doin’?”

Dally turned to him and Steve, watching Steve blow a long plume of smoke at the sky as he looked away quickly and said, “He’s still sick. He’s doin’ better since we went to the doctor, but he’s still sick. The doc said he probably ain’t gonna be better for a few more days at least. We might haveta go back and get more of the antibiotics. His immune system is shot. The doc said it’s probably cause of the surgeries and gettin’ burned so bad.”

Soda nodded, looking at the ground, scuffing the dirt there with his shoe as he said, “Well, listen. D’you think he’d be feelin’ good enough to go with us to the carnival? It’s in town for a few weeks before it gets too cold and Darry managed to get tickets for everyone.”

The first answer that came to Dally’s mind was “no.” He hadn’t yet forgotten what the doctor had told them when they visited and that was that Johnny should not leave the house until he was completely healed. And even then he should wear a surgical mask for a week or so when he did leave the house. However, at the same time, Johnny rarely got out of the house as it was. He never got to do anything fun anymore since he couldn’t even leave the house unless he was in a wheelchair. He could sit up on his own now thanks to his physical therapy sessions, but that was the extent of his mobility at the moment. Plus it had been almost a week since he’d gotten sick and his antibiotics had really helped him get much better than he had been already.

Still. The idea he could get sick even worse from being around so many people scared him and he gave Soda another tight-lipped smile as he said, “I’ll ask him when I get home. What time are y’all goin’ to the carnival?”

“Soon as we get off,” Soda replied. “We’re goin’ in Darry’s truck, since it’s got more room.”

It didn’t really, but it had a truck bed and a few of the gang could sit there while the rest sat in the cab of the truck. Dally assumed if they were going part of the truck bed would be taken up by Johnny’s wheelchair and Johnny would sit in the cab, since it would hurt his back to sit in the bed. Digger arrived not long after that to open the garage and the day started.

Work went by much more quickly than it might have otherwise. Dally had something else to think about now other than Johnny being sick at home and, as he thought about it more and more, he could come up with fewer and fewer reasons why Johnny shouldn’t go.

The idea of seeing Johnny happy, eating what he wanted at the carnival, watching Dallas win prizes
for him, waving to the gang as they went on the thrill rides and the two of them watched from below – for surely there’d be no way Johnny would be allowed on them now that he not only was wheelchair bound and on oxygen, but had a heart condition as well.

*He deserves to be happy,* he thought over and over again as he worked, getting covered in black streaks of oil and car grease. *He deserves to have something good. He’s in pain and sick so much of the time, he deserves this one good thing.*

By the time noon rolled around, he’d already made up his mind.

They were going to the carnival. Johnny could wear his surgical mask. They had it for a reason.

Soda and Steve still had an hour of work left, but Dally promised to be there by the time everyone was getting ready to leave. They waved goodbye to him, saying they’d see him later.

However, by the time Dallas got home, he’d convinced himself again that going to the carnival wasn’t a good idea. What if Johnny got even more sick? What if he got something less curable? Like pneumonia? Or something even worse? He couldn’t think of anything worse. He didn’t know much about diseases, since he rarely got sick, but he was sure there were worse things, things that would kill Johnny long before they could get to a doctor with his compromised immune system.

He whistled half-heartedly when he came through the door, having depressed himself with his own thoughts. He found Johnny sitting on the couch in the living room as usual, reading a book. It was a wonder to Dallas that he didn’t get bored doing that every day. He supposed he probably watched TV in between, even though that would require him getting up and pushing himself over to the TV to turn it on and then flip between the channels, but still that wasn’t much to do while he was gone.

“Hey, Dal,” Johnny said with a smile as Dally came into view, but his smile vanished quickly when he saw Dally’s face and he added, “What’s wrong?”

Normally, Dallas might’ve smiled and brushed it off, but for some reason today he told Johnny the truth, not looking at him as he spoke. “Soda and Steve invited us to go to the carnival with them. Darry bought tickets for everyone.”

Johnny perked up instantly and said, “I wanna go!”

Dally looked at him, feeling guilty as he said, “But you’re sick, Johnny. Remember what the doctor said? You could get sick worse if you go out in public before you’re all better. And...there’s lotsa people at the carnival. Lotsa ways you could get real sick. D’you wanna risk that?”

Johnny replied without missing a beat. “Yes.”

Dallas turned to look at him, seeing his determined expression. He was holding himself up with his arms, which were shaking from the effort. He swallowed hard and said, “Are you sure? You could get sick. Don’t you get that? Even worse than you are now.”

Johnny shrugged one shoulder. “So?”

“So you could die!” Dally replied. “What would happen if you died, huh? You think any of us in the gang would ever get over it? You think I would ever get over it?”

“But we don’t know that for sure,” Johnny replied, his voice softening slightly. “Besides...if I’m gonna be like this for the rest of my life...I ain’t gonna let it rule my life. If I do, I’ll never have fun. I’ll never go out. I’ll stay stuck in this house and die never havin’ experienced the world. That’s why I wanted to live when I was in the hospital. So I could experience the world. I think it’s worth the
risk.”

Dally hated that he couldn’t really argue with that logic. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Johny cut him off before he even got started. “Plus we got that surgical mask, right? I can just wear that while we’re there. That’s what it’s for, ain’t it?”

Again, Dallas was at a loss for words and nodded. Yes, he could.

Johnny smiled again. “What time are we goin’?”

“In an hour,” Dally replied. “Soda and Steve get off work then. We’re all gonna meet up at the Curtis’s house and drive over in Darry’s truck. I’ll put your wheelchair in the truck bed.”

Johnny clapped his hands and flapped them excitedly.

Dally took a shower and changed. He brought Johnny’s clothes out into the living room and helped him change too. By the time they were all ready to go, an hour had passed and they were heading over to the Curtis’s. There was no reason to take the car since they just lived up the street. As they got closer, Dallas could see everyone fooling around in the living room. He left Johnny at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the front porch and knocked on the door. Darry answered and said hello before calling to everyone it was time to leave.

They all piled into the car. Johnny, Dallas, Ponyboy, Darry, and Two-Bit in the cab of the truck. Soda and Steve in the truck bed with Johnny’s wheelchair folded up between them. As they pulled away from the Curtis’s house and headed down the street, Dallas looked at Johnny. He was grinning, smiling so wide it looked like his face was going to split in two and Dallas couldn’t stop himself from grinning back. He couldn’t remember seeing Johnny this happy. Not since he’d gotten out of the hospital. Maybe not ever. Johnny’s life was hard. It always had been. He rarely smiled like this. And, for a moment, he forgot all about the possibility of him getting sick. Johnny had the surgical mask, crumpled into a tiny ball in his fingers in his lap. He’d be fine.

The carnival was really more of a fair it was so large, but everyone called it a carnival because it had rides too. The fairgrounds weren’t very far from their neighborhood in Tulsa and they knew when they were getting close because the traffic got really bad. It slowed to a crawl and everyone turned to look out the window while the truck passed slowly by the fairgrounds on its way to the parking lot.

The carnival was huge. There were some rides that were so tall, they all had to crane their necks to look at them even out the window. Everyone pointed out the rides they wanted to go on, telling the others they were too chicken to go on them with them, asking Johny multiple times as they did so if he would be okay waiting at the bottom. He reassured them every time he would. He’d never much liked thrill rides anyway. Plus he was coming more for the food and games than the rides. Johnny’s smile never left his face and only grew – if that were even possible – as they turned into the parking lot and parked in the empty space the people manning the lot directed them to.

Everyone seemed to jump out of the car all at once, every one of them bouncing on their toes and grinning. Two-Bit had brought bottles of beer in paper sacks for everyone who wanted one and had even more in the bed of the truck in case they wanted to come out and grab more later. Everyone except Ponyboy and Johny accepted the offer and even then it wasn’t because they didn’t want a beer, it was just neither one of them was allowed to drink. Darry didn’t let Ponyboy drink and no one let Johny drink and it wasn’t just because of his health problems that would only be exacerbated by alcohol. When Johny got drunk, bad things happened.

They went through the front gate, Darry paying for all of their ticket. They all got stamps on their hands in case they wanted to leave and come back later. Then they were allowed through the gate,
and they all cheered collectively. It was rare they got to go to places like this and do what they wanted. But everyone had brought their money from the last several weeks and was planning to splurge a bit. They all felt similarly: after everything they’d been through in the last several months, they all deserved to have fun...just this once.

They went first to the food stands, all of them hungry for something different. Soda got a hamburger, french fries, and a corn dog. Johnny got corn on the cob, a cheeseburger, and some french fries as well. Ponyboy got a hot dog with everything on it, some cheese curds, and a chocolate chip cookie. Dallas got s’mores and a big hero sandwich. Darry got a big hero sandwich as well and potato chips. Two-Bit didn’t get anything because he was drinking. And Steve got the same thing Soda did, but with a hot dog instead of a corn dog.

“This is so good,” Johnny said, devouring his cheeseburger in a matter of seconds, speaking around cheeks full of food as he started in on his french fries.

“Slow down, Johnnycake,” Soda said with a nervous laugh. He still hadn’t even finished his hamburger. “Ain’t nobody gonna take your food from ya.”

Johnny looked up, drawing his brows together, chewing with full cheeks. He swallowed what was in his mouth and then said, “I eat normal. I ain’t eatin’ fast.”

For a moment, everyone stopped eating to look at Johnny.

Johnny turned bright red when he noticed all eyes were on him and said, “What?”

“No, Johnny,” Steve said in a soft solemn voice. “You don’t eat normal. You eat real fast. Like you think someone’s gonna take your food away...or you ain’t ever gonna eat again.”

Johnny still looked confused, but said nothing else. Dally remembered having this exact same conversation with Johnny not long after they’d moved in together. Something about the fact they had to have it all over again broke his heart more than it had the first time they’d had the conversation.

No one finished their food, except Johnny. They all wrapped it up in wax paper and put it one of the unused paper bags Two-Bit had from his beers to take home and eat later.

“What do y’all wanna do now?” Darry asked, standing outside of the picnic area with his hands on his hips, looking around the fairgrounds at all the options.

“I wanna go on the biggest rollercoaster here,” Soda replied, grinning, pointing to a set of tracks that went so high into the sky everyone, including Darry, had to tilt their heads back to see the top. “Who wants to come with me?”

Everyone except Dallas and Johnny raised their hands.

“You sure you’re okay stayin’ behind?” Soda asked as they all headed towards the coaster.

Johnny nodded again. He was wearing his surgical mask now that they’d finished eating. “Yeah,” he said. “I ain’t ever liked thrill rides anyway.”

Soda grinned. “Wave to us when we get to the top of the hill, okay?”

Dally and Johnny promised they would.

The rollercoaster wasn’t the only thrill ride the gang went on. They went on the tower drop after that and then a spinning ride and then another rollercoaster. They went on every thrill ride they could find
in the carnival, until all of them were so dizzy with excitement they had a hard time walking straight and were giggling from the adrenaline. That was when they decided in order to let it wear off, they’d go play some of the games scattered throughout the carnival instead.

Dallas was excited about this despite himself. A part of him wanted to prove to Johnny he was the best at all of the games and win him so many overlarge stuffed animals he wouldn’t know what to do with them all. He wanted to be the knight in shining armor that Johnny deserved. In every way. Including something as mundane as carnival games.

And he did exactly that, winning Johnny so many prizes they had to ask for plastic bags to hang off the handles of his wheelchair so he could keep them all. By the time they left, the sky was nearly dark and Johnny was laughing at all the prizes Dallas had won him.

“Did you have fun?” Dally asked as they all piled back into Darry’s truck once more, worn out, but content with how the day had gone.

Johnny nodded and giggled again. “Yeah,” he said, finally taking off his surgical mask as he did so. “Yeah, I had a lotta fun.”

Johnny fell asleep against Dallas as they drove back to the Curtis’s. Dally watched him sleep. Johnny was smiling, even in sleep and Dallas smiled too. Once they reached the Curtis’s house, he carried him out of the car and put him in his wheelchair, trying his level best to make him comfortable for the short walk home.

“Poor kid,” Darry said smiling, he looks worn out.

Dally smiled back. “Yeah, but it’s the good kinda worn out.”

He waved goodbye to everyone as he started home, watching them all crowd into the Curtis’s house for a carnival after party. A part of him wanted to join them, but another part of him knew that Johnny needed to go home and sleep. He may be worn out in a good way, but he was still somewhat sick and still needed to rest.

He smiled as he reached the house, carrying Johnny inside and tucking him into bed before going back outside for his wheelchair. He paused, staring up at the full moon, a full grin on his face. For the first time in a very long time, he felt like he was exactly who Johnny needed him to be.

Chapter End Notes

i thought this would be cute, so yay!! hopefully the next chapter will be out much more quickly.

also yes, johnny is autistic. that's why he flaps his hands when he gets excited <3
Johnny barely remembered the drive home. He was so exhausted from his day at the carnival that he all but passed out the minute they got into the car. He didn’t wake up when Darry stopped at the Curtis’s house and Dally picked him up out of the car and put him in his wheelchair. He didn’t wake up on the walk home even though he was lying quite uncomfortably in his chair the whole way. He didn’t wake up when Dally carefully took off his shoes and pants and tucked him into bed. He didn’t wake up until midnight and found that Dally was lying in bed next to him, still awake, smoking a cigarette.

Johnny stretched, yawning and smiling at the same time. Dallas looked so beautiful, lying there in bed with no shirt and only a pair of boxers, smoking a cigarette and blowing smoke at the ceiling. It still amazed him quite often that he’d picked him instead of anyone else. And Dallas could have anyone else too. He could have anyone he wanted. And yet for some reason, he’d chosen Johnny. And Johnny still didn’t understand it. Especially when he was so messed up mentally and physically.

“Hey, Dal,” he said quietly, stretching his arms forward, draping them across Dally’s lap. He pulled himself closer laying his head in Dally’s lap and yawning again. “You get any sleep?”

Dally stretched himself, smiling down at Johnny and running his fingers through his hair as he said, “Hey, Johnnycake. It’s only midnight. I ain’t tired yet.”

“But we walked around so much,” Johnny replied yawning again. He turned so he could look up into Dally’s face. “You ain’t tired yet?”

Dally’s smile widened ever so slightly. “Not yet,” he replied. Johnny watched as Dally took another hit off his cigarette, watched as he blew the smoke up at the ceiling, watched it swirl there for a moment before dispersing and vanishing. Dallas continued running his fingers through Johnny’s hair and Johnny closed his eyes letting out a contented sigh, wishing this moment could last forever.

He was about to push himself up and kiss Dally when he saw something on Dally’s inner thigh that he’d never seen before that made him pause. It was a scar. A thick scar that looked like it’d gotten infected once or been picked at a ton before finally healing. He couldn’t tell what had made it, but he was willing to bet it was a burn. And maybe it if were a burn the reason it looked so puckered and horrible was because whatever had burned him had been white hot when it’d done it. It was only two or three inches long and one inch wide, rectangular in shape, but it made Johnny’s eyes widened...
in horror as he wondered how that could’ve possibly happened.

“Dallas,” he said quietly, reaching out to touch the scar, but his fingertips had barely brushed it when Dally’s hand flashed out and grabbed him by the wrist, his grip tight, crushing, making Johnny gasp in pain and shock. He looked up at him to tell him he was hurting him, but again his words died on his lips as he saw something he’d never seen in Dally’s face before: fear.

“Don’t,” Dally said in a quiet, but firm voice. “Don’t touch it.”

“Dallas, what happened?” Johnny asked quietly, pushing down his own fear as his body began to shake, a direct reaction to Dally’s grabbing his wrist and the pain his grip was causing.

Slowly, Dally let go of his wrist and looked away. He took another hit of his cigarette. He was quiet for so long that Johnny wondered if he was going to reply at all and he was never going to know the story of the scar. A part of him hoped that was what would happen. Deep down, he didn’t want to know what could’ve possibly happened to Dallas to not only create that scar, but make him so afraid of it, of the memory of it, to begin with.

Then, very quietly, Dally began his story.

“It was when I was in New York,” he said, his voice so soft Johnny almost wasn’t sure he was even speaking. “I met a lotta people there, but there was one guy I met who...sorta became my boyfriend. His name was Sam. He was older than me. A lot older. I was twelve and he was twenty-seven. He said that I was special. He liked me cause I was beautiful and...ain’t nobody ever said anythin’ like that to me before, Johnny. I thought he meant it.”

Johnny swallowed hard, already terrified of where this story was headed.

“Anyway, he was real nice to me at first. He bought me everythin’ I wanted or needed. He took care of me. When I came back from a rumble with the gang I was in and was beat up bloody or dyin’, he’d pay for my hospital bills or stitch me up and care for me himself. He’d buy me new clothes and cigarettes. He bought me my first butterfly knife. He listened to me when I talked about my ma and told me he understood cause his folks had been killed in a car crash when he was real little. But then...I dunno what happened exactly...he changed.”

Dally paused to swallow hard and take another puff off his cigarette. He held the smoke in for so long this time he started coughing. Johnny was frozen in place, his arms shaking from the effort of holding himself up and when Dally started coughing, he didn’t know what to do. He knew Dally was trying to hurt himself. He knew Dally hurt himself like he did. He wondered if this person was why.

“He started hittin’ me when I did things wrong. He would...have sex with me, but he was never gentle. Not even when he was nice. I don’t remember if I liked it or not, but I must have cause I don’t think he woulda done nothin’ to me if I’d said no.”

Dally was shaking now, shaking bad. He almost missed the ash tray when he went to ash his cigarette on his nightstand his hands were trembling so much

“Anyway, the night I told him I was leavin’, he heated up a poker in the fireplace while we were eatin’ dinner and after dinner, after we had sex, he burned me with it. Right there. It was the worst pain I’d ever felt in my life. He didn’t care though. He didn’t try to make it better like he had with every other wound I’d ever gotten. He let it burn. He let it hurt. And when he finally pulled it off my skin, some of my skin stuck to it, it was so bad. He told me he did it so I’d never forget him. And y’know what? I never have.”
Johnny was quiet for several long moments, staring at Dallas in shock, his mouth open slightly in surprise. He tried to imagine twelve year old Dallas going through that, having an adult take advantage of him the way Johnny’s father and the Socs and his father’s friends had taken advantage of him his entire life. Except this was worse. So much worse. This person, this man called Sam, had convinced Dally he enjoyed it, that he loved him, and so it was okay.

Then, Johnny pushed himself up, leaning against Dally to keep himself upright as he reached out, turning Dally’s face to face him as he said in a firm voice, “It weren’t your fault, okay? I promise. That guy was a monster. He took advantage of you when you were at your most vulnerable. It weren’t your fault he hurt you. You were just a kid.”

Dally’s face was still full of fear. He looked so unlike himself it was almost scary to Johnny. Dallas placed his hand over Johnny’s on his cheek, taking a shuddering breath as he said, “How d’you know that? How d’you know it weren’t my fault? What if – what if I did want it? I never said no. I – I loved him, Johnnycake? Ain’t that what people do when they love each other?”

Johnny gave a small smile. “Is that what we do to show we love each other?”

He watched as Dally swallowed hard and said, “No, but...he’s older than we are.”

Johnny shook his head. “That don’t matter, Dal. In fact, that makes it worse. He knew better. He knew what he coulda done to you. He knew you’d just go along with it cause you didn’t know any better, cause you loved him. He knew exactly what he was doin’. He hurt you. It ain’t your fault. Do you think any of the scar my folks gave me were my fault?”

“No,” Dally said instantly. “Of course not.”

“Then it ain’t your fault either, okay? I promise,” Johnny said before Dally could protest.

Dally took a small breath. “Okay,” he said quietly. “I believe you.”

Johnny’s small smile grew and he said, “Good. Cause I’d never lie to you. No matter what.”

Then he pulled Dally into a kiss. He kissed him so hard he thought he would suffocate and melt into Dallas. He forgot where he ended and Dallas began. He ran his hands all over him, muttering against his lips over and over again, “This is love. This is love. I promise. This is what it feels like. I love you. I love you so much. I love you.”

And Dally kissed him back, kissed him just as hard, running his hands over every inch of him, pulling back only to kiss him everywhere he could reach.

Dallas kissed him so hard and loved him so much that Johnny forgot he was sick, he forgot he had to be on oxygen to survive, he had to take heart medication to keep it pumping right. He even forgot that he needed a wheelchair to get around and could barely sit up on his own.

It took a long time for him to remember all of that was true. And when he finally did he realized that all of the rumors were true: love did heal everything. Even a lifetime of pain and trauma.

Chapter End Notes

my dallas (also my gf) came up with this sort of and we've rped similar things before, so that's where this idea came from. dally's had a hard life too y'all.
also this is kinda a fuck you to this fic i saw not that long ago that was about abuse and pedophilia, so this is what those typea relationships are actually like and how they fuck people up for life.
Danger at the Drive-In

Chapter Summary

Dally takes Johnny out to the drive-in, but as usual nothing goes as planned.

Chapter Notes

i’m currently visitin’ my gf, which is why this took so much longer to release than normal!! i hope to get chapters out more quickly, but since i’m here spendin’ time with my gf, we’ll see.

It had been just over three days since their visit to the carnival when Dallas realized while at work one day that it had been quite some time since he and Johnny been to the drive-in. In fact, he was pretty sure the last time they’d gone had been the night Johnny killed Bob and left for Windrixville. He decided then he would take Johnny out once he got home. They had a little extra money. Enough to both get in and buy themselves some snacks.

Dally smiled as he lay on his back, car grease dripping into his face as he worked under the most recent car that had been brought in, twisting something into place with a monkey wrench, not really seeing his work as he thought about how happy Johnny would be when he suggested they go out. Even though he no longer lived with his folks and his physical therapy sessions were going quite well at the moment, Johnny still rarely smiled. Dally wanted to do something that would make him smile.

He got off work at four o’clock in the afternoon. Perfect timing for him to go home, shower, and change before taking himself and Johnny to the drive-in. He waved goodbye to Digger and to Steve and Soda Pop, who were both working the closing shift that night, and practically skipped home, his long shadow dancing across the pavement as he moved.

He burst through the door when he got home, almost forgetting to whistle as he did so he was so excited. He kicked his shoes off near the door and walked through the small hallway to the living room where he found Johnny, sitting in his usual spot on the couch reading. He was on the second Lord of the Rings book now, this one was called The Two Towers. Dally wasn’t a big reader himself, but from what Johnny had told him about this series, it sounded like something he’d enjoy.

Johnny closed his book as he stretched and tilted his head back to look up at Dallas and smile as he said, “Hey Dal. How was work?”

“Long,” Dally replied, going around the couch to sit at the end where Johnny’s feet were. He let out a huff of breath before smiling again and saying, “But I had an idea while I was there.”

Johnny’s own smile widened. “What is it?”

Dally couldn’t help the grin on his face as he said, “Wanna go to the drive-in?”
Johnny’s smile faltered slightly as he asked, “Do we got the money for it?”

Dally nodded. “Yeah. Even got enough for snacks when we get there too. We ain’t been in such a long time I thought it might be fun. Plus they’re playin’ one of those Disney movies you like tonight. Two of em. It’s kid’s night or somethin’.”

A ghost of the smile that had graced Johnny’s lips a moment ago came back and he nodded once saying, “Okay. That sounds like fun.” He was quiet for a moment, chewing on his lip, before he added, looking up at Dally shyly, “D’you know what movies they’re playin’ tonight?”

Dally nodded, his own smile growing as he said, “Yeah, they’re playin’ *Lady and the Tramp* and *Sleeping Beauty*.” His smile widened a little more as he added, placing a hand on Johnny’s leg, “I know *Sleeping Beauty* is your favorite.”

Johnny turned bright red as Dally spoke, but he nodded, smiling widely at his hands in his lap.

Johnny loved Disney princess movies. They were made for little kids, little girls mostly, but he loved them anyway. They were usually about girls who had hard lives, parents who didn’t appreciate them or who abused them in some way, but they remained positive and upbeat throughout their ordeals and in the end their reward was true love. His favorites were *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella*. He related to the princesses in all of them. The only one who knew he loved those movies, however, was Dallas. He was sure the others had some sort of inkling he enjoyed those movies, but Dallas was the only one he talked to about them.

“Well, we better get dressed,” Dally said. “It’s gonna be time for the shows to start soon.”

Johnny nodded and Dally went to the bedroom, getting Johnny his clothes before going into the bathroom to take a quick shower just to rinse himself off. Once he was done, he got dressed and went back out into the living room to find Johnny all dressed and ready, reading his book again while he waited. He looked up when Dally appeared however, closing his book on his finger as he said in his usual quiet tone, “Ready to go?”

Dally nodded.

The drive-in was only a few blocks away and it was so nice out for September that they both decided it was a good idea to walk than to drive. Besides, it wasn’t like there weren’t seats for people who came to the place without cars. But Johnny being in a wheelchair meant they could no longer go through the hole in the fence and would have to pay to get in.

Dally helped Johnny get situated in his wheelchair – putting a pillow behind his back, a blanket over his legs, and his oxygen into the black bag that hung off the handles of his chair – before he pushed him down the ramp in front of their house and headed to the drive-in. As they walked, Dally watched Johnny tilt his face towards the sun and stare up at the leaves over his head that were just beginning to change around the edges.

“I love autumn,” Johnny said quietly as they rounded a corner and headed towards town. “I getta wear sweaters and there’s Halloween and everythin’ is pretty.”

“Halloween’s still almost two months away,” Dally reminded him, though he was smiling too.

Johnny shrugged. “I’m still lookin’ forwards to it,” he replied, still quiet.

The drive-in was packed, as usual, by the time they arrived. Dally paid for their tickets, a quarter each, before they walked through the front gates and headed towards the outdoor seating area. The seats were sparsely filled and Dally removed one of them to make room for Johnny’s wheelchair.
before he sat down next to him as the first movie, *Lady and the Tramp*, started to play on the giant screen in front of them and all the cars parked in front of them as well.

Johnny smiled as the opening credits played. “I’ve always liked this movie,” he said quietly. “Darry took me and Soda and Ponyboy to the drive-in when it first came out when I was six. His folks gave him enough money for all of us even though they were real poor.” He bit his lip, silent for a moment before he added, “I miss them. They weren’t my folks, but they treated me like their kid.”

Dally didn’t know how to reply to that. The Curtis’s parents and his own mother had treated Johnny like their own because they knew what Johnny’s family was like. He didn’t have a real biological family of his own. He never had. His family was the gang and, though they all loved him as much as a biological family might have, he knew from what Johnny had told him that it still wasn’t the same as the real thing and there was no way it ever could be.

Again Dally thought that Johnny didn’t deserve all of the pain he’d been put through in his life. It had started with his parents abusing him in every way they could. Then the Socs had joined in, beating and assaulting him in much the same way his own father had. Finally, he’d run into a church to save some children from dying and had been thanked by his back being broken, his lungs and heart being damaged, and being covered in burns. To top it all off, he had to go through several life threatening surgeries and would have to further go through painful physical therapy so he could walk again and even then he would most likely need a cane for the rest of his life.

What could he possibly have done to deserve all of this in the eyes of the universe?

Dally pulled himself, with difficulty, out of his thoughts, not wanting to dwell on such things and make himself sad when he was supposed to be out with Johnny having a good time. He took a deep breath and turned to Johnny, giving a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes as he said, “Want me to go get us some snacks?”

Johnny blinked and turned to Dally, taking a moment to process what he’d said before he nodded and said, “Yes, please. I wanna cheeseburger. With french fries. And that seasoned sour cream if they have it. And a Coke if we can afford it.”

Dally’s smile widened slightly. “Okay,” he said. He got up. He wanted to kiss Johnny on the forehead or squeeze his hand or lace their fingers together, but he couldn’t. Not in public. People like them got killed for being so careless. So instead he squeezed his hand into a fist and told himself, stuffing his hands into his pockets, heading towards the crowded concessions area, he could kiss Johnny when they got home.

*It’s not fair,* he thought quietly not for the first time. *It’s not fair I can’t show how much I love Johnny, but ever guy and his girlfriend can.*

The concessions area was indoors and heated and much warmer than the outdoor area he’d just come from. Not that he altogether really noticed. Dallas was like a furnace. He was warm almost always. Even in forty and fifty degree weather. The only time he got cold was when the temperature was in the teens or lower. And even then he wasn’t anywhere near as cold as someone else might be.

He got the cheeseburger, french fries, and seasoned sour cream Johnny wanted along with popcorn for himself and a large Coke for them to split. He was at the cashier, paying for the food, when he heard a commotion outside. He dropped the coins onto the counter, gathering up the food quickly, a bad feeling rising in him as he said to the cashier, “Keep the change.”

He pushed through the glass doors, going back outside. His eyes found Johnny in an instant and he froze immediately, his eyes widening, his lips parting slightly at the scene before him.
The Socs had surrounded Johnny. Even from where he was standing, he could tell Johnny was terrified, shaking where he stood. There were people all around him, but no one seemed to notice or care that these boys had surrounded a disabled boy and were clearly intending to hurt him. He couldn’t hear what they were saying to him, but a moment later it didn’t matter.

One of the Socs moved, moved so quickly Dally couldn’t even tell what he was going to do until it had already happened. He watched with shock as the Soc pushed Johnny’s wheelchair over, knocking over several of the surrounding chairs as he did so. Johnny cried out in pain and one of the other Socs kicked at him.

“No!” Dally screamed, dropping all of the food in his arms, not even caring that it went every which way, getting dirty on the ground below as he finally unfroze and flew across the expanse between himself and Johnny. He reached out blindly, grabbing the first one his hands fell on and punching him on the jaw. One of the others tried to grab him from behind, but he wheeled around and did the same thing. He kept punching them, any one of them he could reach, and didn’t stop until they were running away from him, shouting things he couldn’t understand as they went, their faces angry and a part of him knew this would not be the last time something like this happened. Still, he found himself shouting after them, “And don’t come back!”

His entire body shook from adrenaline and fear. For several long moments, he stood, gasping and shaking. He could hear voices all around him, but he couldn’t tell what they were saying. Very vaguely, he realized that Johnny was still on the ground behind him and he wheeled around once more, dropping to his knees as he did so.

Johnny was curled in on himself, shaking badly, his eyes clenched tightly together, his face a mask of pain. He was barely breathing, gasping for air. Somehow his oxygen tube had stayed in place throughout the entire assault. His chair had fallen on his legs and he couldn’t move them. Dally reached out, his own hands shaking just as bad as Johnny was, taking his face in his hands as he brushed his hair back from his face, saying quietly, “Shit, Johnnycake, are you okay?”

Johnny shook his head, but he didn’t speak. He shuddered and let out a soft whimpering moan.

Instantly, Dally wanted the Socs to come back so he could beat them up all over again.

“C’mon,” Dally said quietly, pulling Johnny away from the chair before he righted it and helped him back into it. “We’re gonna go home, okay?”

However, as he moved Johnny, he saw a large bruise forming on his face and when he tried to move him Johnny cried out in pain. Dally froze again, his eyes widening, terrified he’d just made things worse. “What?” he said in a startled voice. “What happened? What is it?”

“My back,” Johnny groaned, clutching at Dally. “Somethin’ – somethin’s wrong with my back.”

Dally took a sharp breath. Johnny already had a bad back from being operated on. What if it had been broken again? What would that mean? Would Johnny ever walk again? Would he even recover? What if this was what killed him? Because Dally left him alone for a few minutes? Because he froze when he saw what was going to happen before it happened?

This is your fault, a nasty voice whispered in the back of his mind. You could’ve stopped this, but you didn’t. You froze and watched it happen. This is your fault. You’re supposed to protect him and you can’t even do that. This is your own stupid fault.

Trying to fight the cycling thoughts in his mind, Dallas put Johnny back into his chair, putting everything back as close to the way as it had been as quickly as he could before, he got behind the
chair and practically ran out of the drive-in, heading home to get the car and take him to the hospital. If his back really had been broken again, they needed to find out sooner rather than later.

The drive to the hospital was tense and silent. Johnny lay in the passengers seat, curled in on himself, moaning and whimpering, letting out soft cries of pain every time they went over a bump or a hole in the road. Dally reached over, placing his hand on Johnny’s hip, a silent promise that everything would be okay, that he was going to make everything okay.

_He can’t die_, he thought desperately as he turned into the hospital parking lot. _I can’t live without him. I can’t. I’ll die too. I will._

He helped Johnny back into his wheelchair and pushed him as quickly as he could into the hospital. The receptionist stood when she saw them come in and he shouted, “He hurt his back! He has a bad back already! I dunno...I’m scared he mighta broken it again.”

The receptionist directed them towards an emergency bay. Several nurses crowded around them instantly and helped Johnny onto a gurney. They immediately wheeled him into the x-ray lab and, after helping him change into a hospital gown, x-rayed his back. They returned him to the emergency bay almost immediately after and gave him some painkillers. Dally watched as Johnny slowly uncurled himself as the painkillers kicked in. He waited until the nurses left them alone, waiting for the x-rays to come back, before he reached out and took Johnny’s hand in his own.

“I’m so sorry, Johnnycake,” he said quietly, moving as close to the side of the bed as he could. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I’m sorry I didn’t stop em.”

Johnny gave him a weak smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, but he didn’t reply.

Dally didn’t know what that meant, but he prayed it meant Johnny forgave him. He hated himself enough for what had just happened and...maybe he did deserve Johnny’s hatred too. He just wasn’t sure he could live with it.

The x-rays came back within thirty minutes. The doctor informed them that his back had not been re-broken. Everything looked fine. They gave him a week’s supply of painkillers and sent them home. Johnny was half asleep from the painkillers as they drove home and Dally carried him into the house, helping him undress before tucking him into bed and crawling in beside him.

Johnny curled into Dallas, wrapping his arms around his middle as he said in a weak voice that slurred from the drugs, “Put your hand on my scar. It-it helps it feel better.”

Dally didn’t reply, only doing as Johnny asked.

_I’m so sorry_, he thought again, looking at the ceiling as Johnny let out a sigh of relief, tears filling his eyes. _I’m so sorry, Johnnycake._

His job was to protect Johnny. And it seemed that no matter how hard he tried, no matter what he did, he couldn’t even do that. No, he didn’t think Johnny hated him, but, yes, he did deserve it.
It had been four days since the incident at the drive-in and Johnny still hadn’t really recovered. He was sleeping more than usual and barely eating. Dark, bruise-like circles had appeared under his eyes, despite how much he was sleeping, and his skin became a sickly pallor. He sat, hunched over, and tended to list to one side even when he did sit up. He would stare off into space, blinking rarely, his eyes glazed over and Dally wondered often what trauma of his life he was thinking about cause shortly after that, he tended to start shaking and breathing quickly. Dally did what he could, trying to calm him and make him feel better, but there was only so much he could do. And he still had to work.

Dallas hated working. A part of him was terrified of coming home to find Johnny collapsed on the floor or worse. He knew, logically, that probably wouldn’t happen. Johnny couldn’t walk anyway. But that didn’t stop him from being afraid.

He could barely concentrate on his work, thinking too often of what would happen if Johnny somehow did die while he was gone. He didn’t want to think about it, but he couldn’t stop himself. He saw Johnny lying on the floor, unconscious. He saw himself running into the house, feeling for a pulse and finding nothing. He saw himself holding Johnny’s limp body in his arms, rocking back and forth as he realized he was dead, sobbing.

He stopped what he was doing and shuddered at the images, his eyes closed for a moment as he did so, praying to whoever was listening that his hellish thoughts would not become a reality.

“Dally!”

Dally jumped, opening his eyes and blinking as he tried to pull himself back into reality. He looked around, trying to figure out who had spoken, but it was hard, since the entire garage was staring at him, all with mixed looks.

“Dally, you gotta pay attention, man,” said a voice somewhere off to his right. He turned and saw Fix looking at him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Dally,” said another voice.

Everyone turned to look at Digger, sitting in the doorway to his office.
“Go back to work,” Digger said, “I’ll talk to him.”

Dally got up from off his back under the car he’d been working on with Fix’s help. He wiped his hands on his jeans and walked slowly to Digger’s office, closing the door behind him as everyone else went back to work on the car.

“Dally, are you okay?” Digger asked as he sat down in the seat across from Digger’s. “You ain’t been doin’ as well the last few days.”

Dally shrugged, automatically trying to pass it off as nothing as he said, “I’m okay.”

The office was silent for a long time before Digger asked, “Is Johnny doin’ okay?”

Dally looked at him. He’d told Digger about Johnny, told him he was living with him and taking care of him. He hadn’t told him about their relationship. Very few people knew about it. And for good reason, but Digger knew that Johnny meant a lot to him and that they were very close. He might’ve even suspected the type of relationship they had, but he never asked. For that Dally was grateful.

He swallowed hard and shook his head, his hand going to his face, rubbing around his mouth as he looked away, saying, “No. He-he had an accident a few days ago. It made him worse. He ain’t been doin’ too good the past few days.” Dally knew if he didn’t get better soon, he was going to have to take him to the doctor to find out what was wrong. He was just scared to, afraid it would be something that couldn’t be fixed or solved easily.

Digger nodded. “You go home, Dally,” he said quietly. “If Johnny’s really doin’ that bad, he needs you more than we do. I’ll still pay you for the day and tomorrow. Just come back when you know that he’s gonna be okay, alright?”

Dally was shocked for a moment, sitting there with his mouth open, unable to think of anything to say in response. Finally, he blinked and said, “No, Digger, I-I can’t accept that, man, I know you gotta pay everyone else too. And compensate for me not bein’ here.”

Digger shook his head. “Dally, when I was thirty years old, my wife got cancer. She died. And I wasn’t there to be with her while she was sick and when she died cause I was workin’. And I’ll always regret it. I don’t want you to live with that same regret. I dunno if he’s gonna die, I doubt he will cause everyone has accidents, but he is more sickly than most people and if he is gonna die...wouldn’t you wanna be with him? Wouldn’t you wanna spend his last days with him?”

Dally swallowed hard. He didn’t want to think about Johnny dying. He didn’t want to imagine that in any scenario, but he had to admit to himself that it was possible. And he knew that Digger was right. If Johnny was going to die, he would want to be with him for his last days. He nodded and got up, going to open the door. He paused before he did, turning back slightly, not looking at Digger as he said quietly, “Thanks, Digger. I mean it.”

Digger shook his head. “Don’t thank me, kid,” he said, his own voice quiet. “Just take care of Johnny. Just make sure that he’s okay.”

Dally left the garage in a numb state, staring into space like Johnny had, walking slowly, thinking as he did. The images of finding Johnny dead kept flowing through his mind, but this time it was a bunch of different scenarios. He imagined finding him dead when he woke up, when he got home from work and found him on the couch, when he took a nap, or when he brought him his dinner.

There were so many ways and times it could happen that when he got home and he saw Johnny
asleep on the couch, his stomach dropped and he was certain he’d just walked into one of his nightmares. He dropped his coat at the door, running to the couch, feeling for Johnny’s pulse, his heart pounding in his chest as he tried to feel for Johnny’s own beating heart. And he did find it, beating faintly just beneath his skin. He closed his eyes, letting out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding as he did so.

“Thank god,” he whispered, feeling himself shaking as he pulled his hand away, his eyes still closed. He slumped against the couch on the ground, staying there for a long time, listening to Johnny’s labored breathing. He opened his eyes, watching Johnny. Even in sleep, he looked very sick, not helped by the oxygen tube under his nose.

He don’t deserve this, he thought, reaching out to brush Johnny’s hair out of his eyes. He deserves to be happy and healthy. He don’t deserve to be so sick.

There was a sudden knock at the door and Dally jumped, opening his eyes and looking towards the door he’d just come in. He drew his brows together, wondering who it could be. The gang would just come in, whistling as they did so. It had to be someone else. The only other person it could be that wouldn’t be a threat was Johnny’s social worker.

Dally got up slowly, going to the door just as slowly. He looked out and drew his brows together when he saw the fuzzy outline through the opaque windows. Then he saw red hair and he felt anger fill him as he realized who it was.


Dally opened the door, a scowl on his face as he stepped outside, not wanting to wake Johnny to speak to her. He crossed his arms over his chest and said, “What are you doin’ here, Cherry?”

Cherry looked surprised at his tone, but she swallowed and said, “I’m here to see Johnny.”

“Oh yeah?” Dally asked, leaning against the door jamb. “What d’you want with him?”

Cherry swallowed again, reaching up to tuck a lock of her bright red hair behind her ear. “I want to tell him I forgive him,” she said quietly, looking at the ground as she spoke. “For killing Bob.”

Dally couldn’t help himself.

He laughed.

She wanted to tell Johnny she forgave him? Her? Not the other way around? That was hilarious. Especially when you considered all that had happened to Johnny because of Bob before Johnny even killed him, which had been an accident anyway.

Cherry frowned. “What’s so funny?” she asked in a curt voice.

“It’s funny that you think he’s the one that needs forgiveness,” Dally replied, looking at her, hating her in that moment.

“He killed Bob!” Cherry shouted, her hands balled into fists at her sides. “He was my boyfriend! I loved him! And he killed him!”

“Yeah,” Dally replied, uncrossing his arms as he took a step towards Cherry. She took a step back, looking slightly frightened and Dally couldn’t help feeling satisfied when he saw the expression. “He did kill Bob, but do you have any idea why?”
Cherry shook her head, then said, “It doesn’t ma –”

But Dally cut her off. “It does matter!” he shouted back. “First of all, it was an accident what Johnny did! He didn’t mean to kill your boyfriend, but your boyfriend deserved it! Do you have any idea what he did to Johnny before then? He raped him! Several times! He let his friends rape him too! He beat him half to death just as many times with the help of those friends! You know why Johnny killed him?! He was so fuckin’ terrified it was gonna happen again he acted before he could think it through! And y’know what? I think that’s exactly what woulda happened if Johnny hadn’t killed him!”

Cherry was shaking her head, her mouth and eyes opened slightly in shock. “No,” she said quietly. “No, Bob wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t.”

“Youngman man was a monster, Cherry,” Dally replied, towering over her, glaring down at her. “He did things to Johnny that should never be done to a person and you think that Johnny needs your forgiveness for killin’ him? That’s so funny to me. After all he fuckin’ did to him, it is not him that needs forgiveness. It’s all you Socs that made excuses for him and defended him and turned him into some sorta false saint and martyr after he died as a direct result of his own actions.”

Cherry was stunned into silence, only shaking her head, unable to speak.

“Leave, Cherry,” Dally said, his voice full of disgust. “Don’t come back until you can apologize to Johnny for blamin’ him for what’s happened. He’s been through enough without you comin’ here to remind him of the guilt he already feels for killin’ someone who actually deserved it.”

Cherry stood, rooted to the spot for several long moments before turning on her heel, going back down the ramp to her car, parked in the street. She got in, sat there for a long time, staring at nothing, before finally speeding off. Dally didn’t leave the front stoop until she was gone. Then he went back inside and found Johnny, still asleep, on the couch in the living room. He hadn’t moved.

Dallas sat back down on the ground next to Johnny’s face, needing to hear him breathing to know he was still alive.

“Dallas?” a weak voice said nearly an hour later.

Dally turned to see Johnny awake. He gave a weak smile. “Hey kid,” he said quietly.

“What’re you doin’ home so early?” Johnny asked, stretching before settling again.

“Digger let me off early, so I could come home and take care of you,” he replied, turning to brush Johnny’s hair out of his eyes again.

Johnny turned red at the words. “I’m okay,” he said softly.

Dally felt a lump form in his throat at the words as he shook his own head. He struggled to keep the sudden tears forming in his eyes from falling as he said in a slightly shaking voice, “No, man. No you’re not. But that’s okay. I’m gonna take care of you, okay?”

Johnny was quiet for a moment. Then finally nodded and said, just as quietly as before, “Okay.”

“You want some dinner?” he asked, already standing. “I’m starved.”

Johnny nodded, curling under the blanket on the couch. “Mac’n’cheese,” he said softly.

Dally smiled. “You got it, kid,” he replied.
His conversation with Cherry circled through his mind as he went to the kitchen to cook the macaroni, using real cheese for the sauce. How could she not see what Bob was? How could she still believe that Bob was innocent and Johnny was the guilty one?

*She does see it,* he realized as he put the finished macaroni into two bowls. *She just doesn’t want to admit to it. She doesn’t want to admit that she could’ve been with someone so terrible.*

That was why Dally hated the Socs.

Not because they were rich, not even really because of how they treated the greasers, but because they all defended each other, even when they knew it was wrong.

Chapter End Notes

i rly do love cherry and she’s gonna have a bigger part in part 4 of this fic (and sorta redeem herself from this point onward), but there are a few things she says in the original book/movie that make me so mad and i wanted to address that
It had now been a full week since the incident at the drive-in and, much to Dally's horror, Johnny still hadn’t even gotten a little bit better. He was still exhausted all the time and this seemed to be caused by how much pain he was in as a direct result from falling out of his wheelchair. Dallas kept trying to remind himself that when they'd gone to the hospital the night of the incident, the doctors had told him that Johnny was going to be fine. But the more time that passed, the less that seemed to be true.

*Doctors don’t know everything,* a nagging voice at the back of his mind reminded him. *Especially not doctors who haven’t been the ones dealing with Johnny's disabilities all along.*

As much as Dally wanted to argue that point, he knew it was the truth. The doctors they’d seen the night of the incident didn’t know Johnny’s health history as well as the ones who had been there during his back operation and throughout his hospitalization afterwards. The ones they saw in the emergency room the night they went to the drive-in could be wrong.

He was thinking about all of this, late one night, smoking a cigarette, unable to sleep, when Johnny, who moments before had been sleeping soundly next to him, woke up violently. It started subtle. He shuddered and began to moan. Then his moans got louder and he began rocking in the bed. Finally, he was practically screaming into his pillow, clutching at the sheets, his skin damp and clammy with sweat. Dallas got up and went around the bed, kneeling in front of his face, asking him over and over what was wrong, getting more and more terrified each time he didn’t get an answer.

“My back,” Johnny finally gasped out. “It hurts...real bad.”

Dallas swallowed hard as he felt the blood drain from his face at the words and at the look on Johnny’s face, which was now just a mask of pain. His mind went blank for a moment as he froze in fear, unsure of what to do. Then one thought rose above all of the static in hi mind: *I was right. The doctors were wrong. There is something much more wrong.*

The second thought that ran through his head was: *What if this is what kills him?*
He shook his head, both to banish the thought and to clear it, making himself stand and go to the closet, pulling on clothes as he said, “That’s it. We’re goin’ to the hospital.”

He wasn’t going to risk Johnny’s health. Not now. Not ever.

He would rather take him to the hospital a million times and be told nothing was wrong than not take him once and find out later that was the one time he should have.

Johnny was in so much pain he couldn’t move on his own. Dally got his clothes out of the closet too and went back to the bed, helping him to dress slowly. Once he was dressed, he got his wheelchair, putting pillows on it to make it more comfortable, putting his oxygen tank into the black bag on the back, before he finally picked Johnny up and set him in the chair.

It took all his willpower not to run out of the house and down the ramp into the street and to the back alley where his car was parked in their garage. He knew that would just result in Johnny being flung from the chair and getting hurt worse, but he couldn’t help wanting to move quickly. What if this was something that needed to be taken care of right away? What if they got to the hospital and it was somehow already too late? He didn’t want to think about that. He couldn’t. A life without Johnny was no life at all. And besides...he’d already decided what he would do if Johnny died.

Kill himself.

It was quite simple really.

He’d get a gun and do it himself. Or he’d threaten someone else and get the cops to do it.

Either way, he refused to live in a world that didn’t have Johnny in it.

The drive to the hospital was full of run red lights, hairpin turns, and speeding. He thanked whoever was watching over them that he ran into no cops on the way there. Vaguely, he remembered the night Johnny had nearly died in the hospital, only a few months ago, and how he’d sped to the hospital then with Ponyboy in the passenger seat. A cop had stopped them then and he’d managed to con him into escorting them to the hospital.

Though that had gone well, the night itself had been horrible. He’d really thought Johnny was going to die that night. And as he glanced at him on the passenger seat now, he wondered if today would be like that night had been. Could Johnny’s heart even take being restarted if it stopped yet again? Could it even be restarted if it stopped again?

There were too many questions he didn’t know the answers too.

He swung into the hospital parking lot so quickly he could hear the tires squeal. He parked in a handicapped spot, close to the door, not caring that he could be fined up to $200 if he were caught. He’d gladly pay the ticket, in fact, he’d pay it with a smile on his face if the few extra seconds it gave him to get into the hospital saved Johnny’s life.

“My...friend,” Dally gasped to the receptionist as he wheeled Johnny into the hospital – it took him a moment to remember he couldn’t say boyfriend. “He’s gotta bad back. He was attacked a week ago and he’s havin’ a lotta pain from it. He’s been extra tired and in more pain than usual since then.”

The receptionist, who knew them by name by now, pointed them directly to an emergency bay rather than forcing them to wait in the waiting room. He nodded to her gratefully and wheeled Johnny into the bay, helping him up onto a bed as a nurse came in to check him into the hospital. He watched as she gave Johnny a hospital bracelet, stuck an IV in his hand, and began giving him painkillers through that tube. He watched as Johnny slowly relaxed, even falling asleep from how good the
painkillers felt after the amount of pain he’d been in.

The nurse left shortly after, promising the doctor would be in to see them shortly.

Dally gave her a tight-lipped smile that looked more like a wince and nodded, watching her leave before he scooted his chair closer so he could hear Johnny breathing as he slept.

*This is all your fault*, a nasty voice in the back of his mind told him. *You should’ve been there for him rather than getting food. You should’ve gone to him more quickly when you saw the Socs surrounding him instead of freezing like an idiot.*

He wanted to protest, wanted to tell the voice it was wrong, but he couldn’t.

Everything it said was true.

He looked at the ceiling, tears filling his eyes. He had prayed more in the past few months than he had in all of his seventeen almost eighteen years of life. And he prayed again now, prayed that Johnny would be alright, that he would be okay, that he wouldn’t die because Dallas couldn’t live without him, not for one moment. And he refused to try.

Without even thinking about it, Dallas pulled his switchblade out of his back pocket, rolled up his sleeve, and pressed the shining blade to his pale skin. He drew it across his skin in quick succession four times, watching as blood welled up and began to spill over the sides of his arm. He couldn’t help smirking at the sight, thinking it was a good thing he’d sharpened his knife recently.

*This is what you deserve,* he thought as he did it again four more times. *You deserve to hurt. You deserve to bleed. For not protectin’ him. You deserve worse than this.*

But he couldn’t do worse. He knew that.

Johnny needed him. He needed him to take care of him.

The thought almost made him laugh bitterly. Take are of Johnny? Him? Him not taking care of him was the reason he was here to begin with. What made him thought he could do a better job now?

*Because you have to,* a firm voice reminded him. *If you don’t, Johnny will die. Do you really want that to be your legacy? Do you really think Johnny deserves that?*

No was the answer to both questions.

He refused to let Johnny die after a life of so much pain. He deserved to know what life was like without pain, without heartache. And he wanted more than anything to give that to him.

The doctor came in a short while later, making Dallas jump and put his blade away, pulling the sleeve of his denim jacket back down over his arm. After briefly explaining what they were there for, the doctor gently roused Johnny – who jumped nearly a foot in the air from being awoken by someone he didn’t know – and wheeled him, still in his bed to the x-ray lab. They wanted to make extra sure that his back hadn’t been rebroken.

Dallas didn’t know what that would mean if it had been, but he could tell from the look on the doctor’s face as he took Johnny away, leaving him an even emptier emergency room, that it wasn’t good. Something told him that Johnny’s chances of survival would be even more slim if it turned out that somehow his back had been rebroken.

The fifteen minutes Johnny was in the x-ray lab were the longest of his life.
He played with his knife, flicking open the blade and trying to flip it in the air and catch it by the handle. He cut his fingers up doing this, which was just fine with him. When he got bored of that, he played the game where he would stab the blade between his fingers on a table, slowly speeding up each time he got it through without stabbing one of his fingers instead of the table. But he was too good at the game, having played it since he was a kid and it was too easy.

A part of him really wished he’d’ve stabbed one of his fingers, even if it hurt. Even if he needed stitches. He just wanted to feel pain. It was what he believed he deserved.

Finally, the doctor returned with Johnny. He told them it would be another twenty minutes before they got the results of the x-ray. Again, Dallas waited until the doctor and nurses had left before he scooted close to Johnny once more and took his hand in his own, lacing their fingers together.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Johnny shook his head. “Not much,” he said his voice just as quiet. “Whatever they gave me really is helpin’. I-I don’t feel much.”

Johnny swallowed hard then and licked his lips. He was quiet for a long time, but Dallas waited, knowing he wanted to say something. Finally, Johnny took another one of his sharp breaths and said, “Dallas...the doctor said...if my back has been broken again...they probably ain’t gonna be able to operate to fix it again and...I’ll never walk again...I-I might even d –”

“No!” Dallas said quickly, a little louder than he meant to. “No, you won’t. That ain’t gonna happen. I won’t let you. We’ll figure it out, okay? We’ll figure it out together.”

Johnny looked at him, the smile he gave him so sad, Dallas could feel his heart breaking in his chest as he looked at him. “You don’t know that,” he said, his voice still quiet. “You-you can’t operate on my back...especially not if they can’t. Even-even if I live...I won’t ever walk again. That’ll be it. I’ll-I’ll be trapped in this chair forever.”

“And I’ll still love you,” Dally promised, bringing Johnny’s hand to his lips, kissing the knuckles. “I’ll still love you and take care of you and do everythin’ I can to make your life easy and painless and worth livin’. I ain’t gonna leave ya just cause of that, Johnnycake. You know I don’t care about whether you can walk or not. You know me better than that.”

Johnny nodded, but he didn’t say anything else.

The unspoken words hung in the silence between them.

What if he didn’t live? What if he died? What would happen to them then?

Dally hoped Johnny wouldn’t mention it. He didn’t want to think about it, but Johnny took another sharp breath and said softly, “Dallas...if-if I do die...”

“You’re not going to,” Dally replied quickly, not wanting to have this conversation. He knew what was going to come next.

“Yes, I know,” Johnny said unconvincingly, not looking at Dallas as he did “but-but if I do...you gotta promise me somethin’.”

Dally didn’t speak. He knew where this was going.

“You gotta promise you won’t do somethin’...drastic.”
“Like what?” he asked, playing dumb.

“Like kill yourself or somethin’,” Johnny said, still not looking at Dally as he spoke.

Dally couldn’t stop the sad, broken laugh that escaped him. “You can’t make me promise that.”

“Why not?” Johnny asked, his eyes flicking up to Dally’s for the first time.

“Cause I can’t do that,” he replied, placing a hand on Johnny’s cheek. “You’re my world, Johnnycake. My everythin’. I can’t live without you, okay? I just can’t. And-and more than that...I really don’t want to. I don’t wanna live in a world that lets someone as good as you die in such a horrible way after a life of horrible things.”

Johnny looked away again. “I just...I don’t want you to die too. You have so much to live for.”

“Like what?” Dally asked, really genuinely curious. “What is my life without you, Johnny? What exactly would I be livin’ for without you?”

Johnny looked at Dally, swallowing hard. He opened his mouth to reply, but Dally never would find out what it was that Johnny thought he had to live for. At that moment, the door opened and the doctor reappeared. Dally jumped away from Johnny as he heard the handle turn, sitting a friendly distance from him by the doctor looked up and told them with a pleased look on his face that Johnny’s back hadn’t been rebroken, but it had been badly strained and he wouldn’t be able to continue his physical therapy sessions for a few weeks to give it a rest.

“If something like this happens again,” the doctor went on, “there is a good chance that it could be rebroken and...that could be deadly.”

Dally nodded numbly as the doctor wrote them a prescription for painkillers and said that Johnny was now free to leave after the nurse took his IV out. She reappeared only moments later to do that and, as Dally watched her do it, Johnny wincing as he did, he wondered how many more times Johnny could get lucky like this before his luck ran out and he did get so hurt or sick he died.

No one’s luck went on forever. He knew that full well from what had happened with his mother.

And he was sure Johnny’s store was running out.

Chapter End Notes

only nine more chapters until part 4!! i only have 2 chapters planned out for part 4 at this moment, but i’m sure that’ll change by the time i get to it.

also for those of you who are interested: only 2 more chapters until you find out the mystery of the missin' house keys!!
It was hard to believe that a full two weeks had passed since the incident at the drive-in. It was even harder to believe it had been a week since the visit to the emergency room. It felt like a lot more time had passed since then and at the same time it felt like no time had passed at all. Johnny was once more confined to his wheelchair, once more on bed rest and unable to go to physical therapy because of his back being strained. The doctors were worried what might happen if he strained it again. There was a chance he would never walk again.

They were also worried there was a chance he would rebreak it. They didn’t think they’d be able to repair it again if he did. Not because they couldn’t, but because they weren’t sure his body could take it. He’d barely survived the first operation on his back. His heart had already been restarted so many times that it was now damaged. What were the odds he would survive it again? The doctor in the emergency room had said he probably wouldn’t and, if he were to be honest, he didn’t think so either.

It had taken Dallas almost a full week after the visit to the emergency room to make himself go back to work. It had taken a few more days after that for him to make himself go for a full day instead of begging his boss, Digger, to let him go home early to make sure that Johnny was okay. Lucky for the both of them, Digger was a very understanding person and let this go, but Johnny finally sat Dallas down and told him that he needed to go to work. Not because he was afraid Digger would get fed up and fire him – if that were going to happen, he was certain it already would have – but because they needed the money. The bills weren’t going to pay for themselves. And Johnny insisted, though he didn’t know if it were true or not, that he would be okay home alone. If anything was going to happen, he thought it would have a week ago when he first came home from the emergency room.

Dallas didn’t believe him at first, but finally today he went back to work, promising to stay for the whole day rather than running home halfway through. Johnny, who was now sitting on the front porch in his wheelchair, having pushed himself out there around noon when he got sick of sitting inside, really hoped Dallas would be able to make it through the whole day. They did need the money, that wasn’t a lie. And Johnny felt bad. He was making Dally’s life harder than it already was by making him worry about him all the time. How long before Dallas realized this and left him?

He was reading the last book in the Lord of the Rings trilogy now. It was his favorite so far. And it was nice to sit on the porch and feel the cool autumn breeze on his face, watching it ruffle the edges
of the pages of his book, lifting his hair slightly at the same time. It made him smile.

Autumn had always been his favorite season. He loved the cool air. He loved the smells. He loved how it was cold in the mornings and at night, but during the day was the perfect temperature. He loved the food. He was excited for Tulsa’s annual Fall Festival. He was excited for Halloween, his favorite holiday after Christmas. He smiled, big and wide, as he realized this would be the first year he got to spend every holiday away from his parents.

Thinking about his parents reminded him of the upcoming trial, making the smile that had crossed his lips falter slightly as he thought about it. He didn’t know how the trial was going to go. A part of him was terrified of what would happen if his parents got off. What would happen to him? Would he be forced to go back to living with them? And what would happen if his parents went to jail? Would he be sent to foster care? Taken away from Dallas and the gang and everyone?

He couldn’t imagine a good scenario. He wanted to continue living with Dallas. But he didn’t know if the courts would let him. It was true that Dallas was almost eighteen, but he was still only seventeen. The only reason the Curtis’s could stay together was because Darry was twenty. Dally wouldn’t be eighteen until November. That was still two months away. Even if he had a job that he was making good money at, even if he was doing a very good job keeping up with bills and taking care of him, Johnny was still terrified that wouldn’t matter because of Dally’s age.

Unable to concentrate on his book with all of these thoughts circling through his head, he let out a heavy sigh, tilting his head backwards to look up at the sky as he closed his book on his hand to keep his place, swallowing hard as he did so. He hated thinking about this, but for the last few days he’d had a hard time thinking of little else.

The idea that he might soon be taken away from Dallas and everyone else he’d ever known was horrifying. Him being underage meant the courts had complete control of what his future would be. That was a terrifying thought. Maybe it would be better if they gave him back to his parents. Then he could still get out of the house with the gang regularly. He would have people he knew close by.

But he also knew he would never be able to live with Dallas again.

The minute he left, he knew his parents would call the cops and then he really would be taken away from the gang and put in foster care if he didn’t listen to the decision of the courts.

Tears filled his eyes at the thought.

Why was it that his life always seemed to go in the worst direction possible no matter what?

Turning away from the sky, he saw an older couple walking down the street. They were dressed nicely and he drew his brows together, wondering what they were doing in this neighborhood. He raised a hand to smile and wave at them, wanting to be friendly, but then he realized they were staring at him. The looks on their faces weren’t kind and when he raised his hand, the woman put her hand over her mouth, saying something quietly to the man walking next to her. He glanced at Johnny as the woman spoke and nodded before making a face as they sped up and continued on their way.

His smile faltered and he lowered his hand slowly.

This was not the first time this had happened. Not even the first time this had happened today. It seemed that every other person that walked down the street gave him a suspicious look before walking quickly away. Some of them looked like Socs in a greaser neighborhood. Others were greasers he’d seen before, but had never interacted with.
It didn’t take a genius to figure out why they looked at him this way. He knew exactly why.

It was because of what he had done.

Even if it were in self-defense, even if the court of law had ruled him not guilty, and told him he didn’t have to do any sort of restitution because of the ruling, that didn’t seem to matter in the court of public opinion. He was still a murderer, a killer, and in the eyes of the public, he deserved to be shunned, ignored and treated like a pariah. It didn’t matter to them why he’d done what he had. He had still killed someone and, if he were to be completely honest, he agreed with them.

It didn’t matter that hindsight was twenty-twenty. Not to him and not to anyone else. He knew that he could’ve spoken to Bob, could’ve pushed them off of Ponyboy instead of stabbing Bob. There were a million and one things he could’ve done instead, but no. He’d had to pull out his switchblade, had to shove it into Bob’s side and watch him die, watch all of his blood seep out of him, knowing exactly what was going to happen. And now he was a killer and murderer.

_I should’ve known better_, he thought, shaking his head, looking down at his book in his lap, angry, frustrated tears filling his eyes. _I should’ve done something different. I should’ve known what would happen. We shouldn’t have even gone to the park that night._

“Johnny?”

The voice made him look up and he saw Dallas, suddenly standing in front of him, looking nervous, his head bent slightly to try to look him in the eye. He was holding his jacket in one hand, the other held his set of house keys. He was covered in car grease from work.

Johnny quickly swiped at his eyes, sniffling, looking away in an attempt to keep Dallas from seeing the tears in his eyes as he said, “Dal, what’re you doin’ home so early?”

Dally shrugged, looking off to the left, squinting into the already setting sun as he said, “Digger said I could go home early.” He didn’t elaborate and Johnny wasn’t entirely sure that Dally hadn’t again asked to be let to go home early. But he didn’t bring that up. He didn’t want to discuss it now.

“What’s wrong?” Dally asked, turning back to Johnny.

Johnny looked away, shrugging one shoulder. “It’s nothin’.”

Dally knelt down in front of Johnny’s wheelchair, taking the hand that wasn’t still stuck in his book. He laced their fingers together without saying a word before he finally said in a quiet voice, “Please don’t lie to me, Johnnycake. I always know when somethin’ is wrong. What is it?”

Johnny took a sharp breath, still not looking at Dallas as he said, “People keep lookin’ at me funny. I-I sat on the porch cause I wanted to enjoy the weather, but...every other person that walks down the street looks at me like I’m a leper. Like I’m some sorta...demon or somethin’ and...y’know...they really ain’t wrong, I guess. I _did_ kill someone.”

Dally let out a heavy sigh and Johnny did turn to look at him when he did this. “Johnny,” he said softly. “How many times do I gotta tell ya? What happened wasn’t your fault. It was self defense. The court even agreed with you! They said you ain’t guilty! What other people think don’t matter. They don’t know the truth. They don’t know everythin’ that Bob did that drove you to that.”

But Johnny shook his head again. “That ain’t no excuse,” he said quietly. “I _shoulda_ done somethin’ different. I shouldn’t’ve even gone to the park that night. I _shoulda_ known better.”

Dally tightened his hold on Johnny’s fingers. “But you _didn’t_ know,” he said firmly.
Johnny looked at Dallas. He didn’t have a response to that. He knew logically that Dally was right, but he couldn’t change how he felt.

“C’mon,” Dallas said softly. “Let’s go inside, okay?”

Johnny nodded, letting Dallas lead him inside. He was glad that Dallas thought he was a good person, but even then he wondered: how long would it be until he changed his mind?

Chapter End Notes

also life ain’t exactly been goin’ well the last few weeks cause i’ve been sick a lot and my ed is killin’ me, so i’ve been really low on energy, so that is why this took forever
Chapter Summary

This time it's Randy that comes to apologize to Johnny. Dally isn't having any of it.

Chapter Notes

so uh...i’ve been rly rly sick the last while, so that’s why this took forever to be released. also my computer got all...distorted for reasons i still haven’t been able to figure out and while it is functional it’s real annoyin’ so that’s the other reason; anyway, sorry about the ridiculously long delay and i hope ya like this!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Dally were to be honest, he hadn’t noticed the way the rest of the world looked at Johnny until Johnny pointed it out. Then it seemed to be all he could notice. Every time he left the house with Johnny, he would notice the way elderly people would stare at Johnny and, while most of the time he could tell whether or not it was in awe or disgust, he knew Johnny couldn’t tell the difference. People were staring at him and all that Johnny knew was that he didn’t like it.

So, per Dally’s job as his protector, he glared at everyone who dared to look at Johnny too long every time he was with him or they were out together, until whoever was staring looked away. A few times, he had to stand in front of Johnny so someone couldn’t get to Johnny to speak to him. Sometimes, if the person looked particularly eager or hostile, Johnny would cower in his wheelchair or hide his face. Then Dallas would get extra angry.

Johnny had been through enough in his life. He’d been abused by his folks in all ways a person could be. He’d been abused by the Socs equally bad and – in Dally’s opinion – in some ways, worse. Then he’d gotten fed up with the Socs, gotten tired of being hurt and taken advantage of and he killed one of them and the Socs, knowing they wouldn’t be blamed for a thing that had happened, even if they had caused what had happened, ran off, leaving Johnny to deal with the fallout on his own and Johnny, knowing just as well what would happen, had run out of town. With Dally’s help. Then, to add insult to injury, his hiding place had burnt down and, despite this, he had still run inside to save the children trapped inside. And what thanks did he get? A broken back and a body covered in burns.

Dally knew he’d thought this before, but it wasn’t fair. None of it was.

All Johnny had ever been was kind, caring, and loving. He’d been pushed too far by the Socs and that was why he’d killed one of them. They knew that. Everyone knew that. So why were they harassing him now? He was also the kid who had saved the lives of six children from certain horrible death. Why couldn’t they focus on that instead?

But Dallas also knew how peoples minds worked. Everyone loved to focus on the bad things a person had done rather than the good things.
He was thinking about this as he walked slowly home from work, staring at the ground, contemplating, yet again, why, out of everyone had Johnny been the one selected by whatever higher power for such suffering. Why hadn’t even they decided he’d had enough yet? He was nearly home when something told him to look up and he froze.

Randy was standing on the front stoop, peering into the house. Dally wasn’t sure why he was there, but he couldn’t imagine any sort of good reason he would be there. He glared, gritting his teeth, throwing his jacket down onto the ground forcefully as he clenched his hands into fists and walked quickly across the yard, shouting as he went, “Hey! What the fuck are you doin’ here?”

He got a thrill out of seeing Randy jump, not having expected Dally to be behind him. He looked at him wide-eyed, maybe even afraid and swallowed hard. Dallas could tell he was nervous and all he could think was, Good. You better be. Cause I’m gonna beat you to a pulp for settin’ foot on my property. And then I’m gonna beat ya again for what you did to Johnny.

The idea that he could possibly go to jail was the furthest thing from his mind at that moment. All he could see was one of the people who had hurt Johnny in ways that few people could imagine. It really didn’t matter to him why he was here. He was a monster. And he wanted him gone.

“I’m here to see Johnny,” Randy finally said, taking a few steps onto the ramp that led up to the front stoop. Dally was only a few steps away from him. He couldn’t remember walking up the ramp or getting so close, but he was glad he was so close. If Randy tried anything, he was only arms length away. He’d be able to stop him in plenty of time.

Dally almost laughed at Randy’s words. “You what?” he asked.

“I want to see Johnny,” Randy repeated, straightening up as though gathering his courage and in that moment Dally realized why the Socs left him alone: they were afraid of him.

Good. You better be, he thought again. They had no idea what he was going to do to them. Only that none of it would be anywhere remotely pleasant.

“Yeah,” Dallas said, crossing his arms over his chest and smirked. “That ain’t gonna happen.”

Randy frowned. “Why not?” he asked, looking offended. That almost made Dallas laugh too. This boy was so used to getting exactly what he wanted. How entitled could he be?

“Well, how long d’you got?” Dally replied, speaking through gritted teeth.

Randy looked confused and Dally continued without prompting.

“First, you beat the shit out of him,” Dally began, counting off on his fingers as he spoke, “then you – all of you – sexually assault him and do things to him that would make the shit I went through in jail look like playtime. And not only that, you do it to him four times. Then you drive him to kill one of y’all and, not only that, ya don’t even own up and take responsibility for what you did. You leave him there to deal with it by himself. So he runs outta town because of you. He goes to a church in the middle of fuckin’ nowhere because of you. And when it burns down, because he is a better person than you could ever hope to be, he runs in to save a buncha kids he didn’t haveta save. And now you show up here, ready to do god knows what to him. Do I needta fuckin’ go on?”

Randy looked shocked, but Dally wasn’t really sure what at. The fact Dally knew all of that? The fact Dally blamed him for what had happened to Johnny? It was only then he realized that was the reason he was so angry. Or one of the reasons anyway: even though he blamed himself a good amount of what had happened to Johnny, he blamed the Socs even more. All of this was their fault.
And now Randy wanted to act like none of it had happened? How fucking dare he.

Randy swallowed hard again, looking down as he said, “Yes, what we did to him was horrible. I won’t argue with that. Which is why I came here.” He looked up again. “I wanted to apologize to him.”

This time Dally did laugh. “You want to apologize?” he asked, a huge grin devoid of any humor spreading across his lips. “You really think that some simple apology is gonna fix everythin’? You really think he even wants to see you after what you’ve done to him? Are you stupid? And, after all ya did, how the hell do I know that you’re bein’ honest? What makes ya think I would, in any universe, let ya anywhere near him?”

Randy was silent for a long time after this. He finally shrugged again and said, “I don’t know, but I’m telling the truth. I wanted to let him know I didn’t mean for it to go this far.”

But that was more than enough for Dallas. He pushed Randy up against the side of the house, holding him there with his arm against his neck, his teeth grit in anger as he growled out, “You’re so fuckin’ full of shit, you know that? What the fuck did you think was gonna happen? Huh? Do you really expect me to believe that ya would even be here if your friend hadn’t gotten killed and you didn’t feel guilty because of what happened to Johnny?” Randy opened his mouth to reply, but Dallas didn’t give him a chance to speak. “No, you wouldn’t be. You would be cruisin’ around in that fuckin’ blue Mustang of yours, thinkin’ about the next time you could take advantage of him. So don’t give me your bullshit that you woulda changed anyway and done better cause we all know that ain’t true.”

He pulled away from Randy then. Randy rubbed his neck, coughing slightly. “Get the fuck off my property, you waste of a life,” Dallas said, his voice shaking with anger as much as the rest of him. “Before I do somethin’ I’m gonna regret.”

Randy didn’t need to be told twice and without a word ran down the ramp and into his car, parked on the street. He got in, started the engine and sped off. Dallas watched him until he was gone, remembering vaguely the last time this had happened with Cherry Valance.

A part of him knew that both Cherry and Randy meant well, but he didn’t care.

Cherry’s boyfriend had hurt Johnny in ways Dally didn’t want to think about and Randy had been right there helping him and doing it himself.

They weren’t allowed to apologize to Johnny or say something stupid about how they forgave him when they were only doing it to make themselves feel better. Because that, he knew, was what it really came down to. They weren’t there for Johnny. They were there for themselves and the last thing Johnny needed in his life was more selfish people who hurt him because they were hurting.

Chapter End Notes

i know i say this every time, but i’m rly hopin’ i’ll get out my next fic part sooner than this one. so hopefully i won’t be so sick and my computer will get fixed soon. also i realize this chapter was a lot like my cherry chapter, but i still wanted to write it <3
The day started like any other.

Everything was normal. Dallas got up early and went to work, getting dressed quietly, so he didn’t wake Johnny in the process of doing so. He leaned over him, kissing his temple before he left the house, his jacket tucked under one arm as he walked into the rising sun, heading towards the garage, while Johnny stayed back at the house, asleep in bed until noon when Dally’s shift was almost over. He crawled with bleary eyes out of bed into his wheelchair before pushing himself from the bed to the living room and getting onto the couch where he would read until Dallas came home.

Or so he thought.

The door opened around thirty minutes before Dallas was supposed to get home. At first, Johnny smiled, closing his book as he called, “You’re home early!” But there was no responding whistle and he didn’t hear the door close behind Dallas. His smile faltered and he felt panic rise in his chest. That wasn’t normal at all. Not even remotely. The door always closed and Dallas always whistled. The only time he forgot was when he spoke first. And that was different. He still knew it was him.

Who was it that had just come into his house?

He turned slowly, hearing footsteps coming down the short hallway to the living room. The person – or rather, people – revealed themselves and he felt his heart jump into his throat, pounding there, as his eyes widened and his breath quickened.

His parents were standing in his living room.

He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t think of anything to say beyond, What are you doing here? And he couldn’t even make himself say that. The next question that came to mind was, How did they get in? He saw something shining in his mother’s hand and realized it was the spare house key. They must have come and stolen it at some point, then gone back to wait for the right time to come do...whatever it was they were here to do now.

What were they doing here? Nothing good. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to know. His mother had her arms crossed over her chest and his father’s arms were on his hips, the stances they took when they were ready to do something they were sure was going to be difficult. He felt himself shaking,
wishing he could make himself stop, wishing that somehow the months he’d been away from them would’ve taken his fear of them, but it hadn’t. It hadn’t fixed anything. He was just as terrified as he had always been.

He knew what they could do and, if their faces were anything to do by, they were going to do it.

His parents were silent, seeming to be waiting for him to speak first, and, after swallowing, he finally managed to ask the question that had been circling in his mind since they appeared. “What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice soft, shaking, barely more than a whisper.

His mother grinned, showing teeth. His father’s face stayed stony, impassive. His mother was the one that spoke: “You’re coming back home.” Her voice sounded gleeful and she continued grinning as she saw him. “We know you’re fakin’. You ain’t hurt. You ain’t unable to walk. You can breathe without that tube. We know it. So you’re comin’ home. And you’re gonna get rid of that court case against us and everythin’ is gonna go back to normal.”

A part of him knew that everything they were saying couldn’t happen. He could barely breathe without his oxygen, he couldn’t walk at all and had a wheelchair and was in physical therapy to prove it. It was just his parents coming up with some way to turn themselves into the victims here, trying to save their asses and prevent whatever consequences were coming to them because of what he had told the social worker while he was still in the hospital.

But he wasn’t thinking logically at the moment. All he could think was, They’re goin’ to drag me back to that house...they’re goin’ to take away my oxygen and I ain’t gonna be able to breathe...they’re gonna drag me there on my back cause I can’t walk and they’re gonna strain it again or rebreak it and then I’m gonna get real sick and I’m gonna die cause they won’t take me to the hospital. Or they’ll kill me cause they’ll beat me or rape me to death.

Another, smaller voice, still part of the illogical part of his brain that thought any of this was a remote possibility, said, At least they’ll get put in jail after you die. They’ll be put in prison for life for killing a crippled boy with bad lungs and a bad heart. Plus all of the standing charges against them.

As he was thinking all of this, his mother had crossed the room and was now standing over him. He hadn’t noticed this and he jumped when he did. His eyes went up her body slowly to her face. She was still wearing that same gleeful grin. He took a sharp breath, ready to speak, ready to make his case, ready to protest and tell her that she was wrong and he did need his wheelchair and oxygen and he wasn’t going anywhere, but he never got the chance.

In a flash, his mother’s arm shot out, grabbing his, pulling at him. He felt himself slide off the couch and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He had no upper body strength. He had hardly any strength at all. Still, he fought against her, trying to pull his arm back, letting out whimpers of protest as he did so. She tugged at him and he fell off the couch. He cried out as pain rippled up his newly reconstructed, newly healed spine and his oxygen tube fell off his face as he fell to the ground.

“Oh shut up,” his mother said, rolling her eyes, sounding more exasperated and angry than worried like any normal parent would. His father still hadn’t moved from where he was standing. He just watched what was going on with no emotion showing on his face. A part of Johnnys was glad that his father wasn’t taking part in what was happening or he’d be in a lot more pain that he was already, but he knew that if he continued dragging along on the ground like he was, he was going to get involved. It didn’t matter to them that he couldn’t walk. They’d decided he could, so to them that was the truth. Anything else was just their definition of bullshit.

Johnny cried out in pain again as his mother continued tugging him, crying out in desperation, “Stop! Just stop please! Can’t you see I can’t walk?! I ain’t goin’ back with you! You hurt me!”
“You know those are all lies!” his mother shouted back, leaning down and getting her face absurdly close to his for how she was bending over. “Just stand up and come home and this will stop!”

“I can’t stand!” Johnny said, tears running down his cheeks, struggling to keep himself from breaking down into sobs. All of his worst fears had come true in a matter of minutes.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?”

The voice stopped everything and everyone turned to look at the doorway.

Johnny felt relief and fear flood him all at once.

It was Dallas.

Relief: Dallas was here to save him.

Fear: What if they hurt Dallas too?

* * *

Dally’d had a bad feeling for the past thirty minutes. He kept looking at the clock, watching the minute hand slowly make its way across the clock face from two-thirty to three o’clock, the time he got off. He felt an uneasiness in chest, like something bad was happening. Finally, fifteen minutes to the hour, he went to Digger and asked if he could leave early. Digger didn’t ask what was wrong. He could tell from the look on Dally’s face that something was wrong. He told him to come in early tomorrow to make up for it and Dally nodded absently, grabbing his jacket and practically running home.

He knew something was wrong even before he reached the house. He could hear the shouting from down the street and he quickened his pace. Whatever was going on inside wasn’t good and his heartbeat pounded as hard as his feet did on the pavement.

Johnny was in there.

He saw the open door from the street and ran to it. He ended up freezing in the doorway. Not because he was afraid, but because what was going on inside was so shocking he never could have pictured it happening in a million years and yet, even as he thought that, he realized that he should’ve thought something like this would happen at some point.

Johnny’s parents were standing in the living room – his and Johnny’s living room. His mother was pulling at Johnny who was lying on the floor, crying and screaming. It was clear that his mother had dragged him off the couch. The blanket he’d been lying under was half on the floor and his oxygen tube was lying where it’d been left after it had fallen off of Johnny’s face. Johnny’s father wasn’t participating, just glaring at the whole situation, but Dallas could tell from his stance it was coming.

He put a stop to that real quick.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” he said in a voice as loud, angry, and appalled as he felt.

Everyone turned to look at him, the room going silent in an instant.

Johnny saw him and his eyes widened in fear. Dallas knew why, but he wasn’t afraid of Johnny’s pathetic excuse for parents. Anything they did to him would be considered assault and with charges already pending they really weren’t going to want to make things worse for themselves.
Johnny’s parents however – the ones that should’ve been afraid in Dally’s opinion – were staring at him in frustration, looking like he’d just ruined their day. He grinned, looking maniacal and evil and ready for vengeance all at once. Oh your day is gonna be ruined real quick, he thought, his hands already clenching into fists. This was his house. They’d trespassed and broken in and he was pretty sure how. That missing key was starting to make a whole lot of sense all at once. In any event, they had stolen from him, entered without permission, and were on his property. They couldn’t call the police and play the victim even if they wanted to.

“He’s mine,” Johnny’s father said, speaking for the first time, turning to face Dallas as he did so, pressing his thumb to indicate himself in his speech as he did so. He looked stupider in person, Dally thought, than he ever had from far away. “I’m takin’ him back. He’s goin’ to walk home like I know he can and he’s gonna drop those charges and things are goin’ back to the way they were.”

Dallas laughed, still grinning. “Wow, that really ain’t gonna happen,” he said.

“He’s not yours,” Johnny’s father said, taking several strides towards Dallas. “He’s mine.”

He was close now, close enough that Dally could see scars on his face he hadn’t known were there before. He didn’t know how he’d gotten them and, frankly, he didn’t care. He closed the distance between them, feeling smug that he had a good three inches on Johnny’s father. Their faces were inches apart and he said in a low dangerous tone, “See, that’s where you’re wrong. He don’t belong to no one. Especially not a disgustin’ pedophile like yourself. So I suggest ya get outta my house before I fuckin’ lose it and then call the cops. Ya really can’t afford that right now, can ya? What with the trial and everythin’ comin’ up.”

He took pride in throwing that in their face, letting them know they weren’t going to be able to get away with mistreating their son forever. But that seemed to be the last straw for them. Johnny’s father pulled back his fist, but Dally saw it coming from a mile away and dodged it easily, lodging his own fist in Johnny’s father’s stomach. He grinned even wider as he heard the wind go out of him. Johnny’s mother was smart enough not to engage the wild boy who’s house she’d walked into and dropped Johnny’s arm, her jaw dropping as she watched her husband wrap his arms around his middle. He tried to come back from that, trying to sweep Dally’s legs out from under him, but Dally saw that coming too and punched Johnny’s father in the face, knowing with glee that would leave a black eye. Small compensation for all they’d done to Johnny over the years, but it made him feel better.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Johnny curling in on himself and distantly he realized how much pain he must be in, how bad this all had been on his already strained back, how bad this must be on his stressed and damaged heart as well and he felt the anger and hate for Johnny’s parents well up in him all over again. He punched kicked Johnny’s father, now lying on the ground, struggling to stand again. He didn’t really have to, but he wanted to.

He crossed the room in a flash, putting his face centimeters from Johnny’s mother’s and said, his voice still low and dangerous, “I think you should get your disgustin’ waste of a husband and get the fuck off my property before I call the cops, don’t you?”

There was fear in Johnny’s mother’s eyes and he felt elation. It wasn’t enough. It didn’t even scratch the surface in terms of making up for all Johnny had been through, but it was enough in the moment. He watched, still grinning, still looking dangerous, as Johnny’s mother inched around him, moving to her husband wordlessly and dragging him out of the house. They had almost reached the door when Dally rushed at them and said, “And I would like that key back.”

Johnny’s mother tried to play dumb at first, saying, “What key?”
Dally’s fists clenched again. He wasn’t buying that. He knew her thinking was she’d just come back some other day when he was at work for longer and do this all over again and he wasn’t going to let that happen, not with all the things that could happen to Johnny in the process. “Do you really wanna play games with me after what I did to your husband? You really think I won’t do the same to you just cause you’re a woman? Pass over the key or I’ll knock you out and take it. You’re still on my property without my permission. I have every right to defend myself and take my property back.”

There must have been something in his eyes that made her realize he was serious and she handed over the key and left in a hurry. He watched her as she went down the street to the house on the end, watched her go inside and close the door behind her before he finally closed the door and hurried over to Johnny, still curled on the ground and shaking badly.

“Johnny?” he said quietly, taking Johnny’s face in his hands.

It was a mask of pain, but he still managed to gasp out, “Back hurts.”

That was all he needed to hear for his anxiety to spike.

“Shit,” Dallas said, scooping Johnny into his arms. “I’m takin’ ya to the hospital.”

The drive to the hospital was short with how fast Dally drove, but it felt twice its actual length with how much he was thinking. He couldn’t stop remembering all the doctor had told him last time Johnny had been there, about how if his back got strained again it could result in a rebreak and if it did the odds of Johnny surviving it were very slim.

What if this is how he dies? He thought, his hands shaking even as they clutched the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip. What if, after everything, this is how he dies? From his own folks? Like I thought he just might all along? Because I didn’t leave the minute I felt somethin’ was wrong? It will still be all my fault. I coulda prevented this and I didn’t.

Guilt consumed him and took up all his free thinking that wasn’t already being taken up by fear and worry. He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost missed the hospital turn and couldn’t even speak to the receptionist as they entered the hospital. She recognized them by this point and pointed them back to one of the emergency bays. After far too long, in Dally’s opinion, a doctor saw them and asked what had happened. Dally quickly explained the situation, pausing only when the doctor asked if they wanted to press charges. He wanted to – oh, did he want to – but he really wasn’t sure if that was a good idea. Plus that would be a whole other hassle he had to deal with and right now Johnny needed him. What happened at the trial at the end of next week would have to be enough.

After x-rays and an EKG to check on his heart, the doctor told him what Dally already knew: Johnny’s back was strained again. This time badly and in serious danger of rebreaking. His heart was over-stressed, beating too fast and too hard for its level of damage. It was also in danger of giving him a heart attack if it wasn’t slowed down, so the doctors gave Johnny the strongest dose of anxiety medication they could legally give him for his size and age, and prescribed him bed rest until the trial and showed Dallas a way to rub Johnny’s back that would help with the strain and the pain.

They left the hospital in far less of a hurry than they came in, Dallas still carrying him since they had forgotten his wheelchair. Luckily they hadn’t forgotten his oxygen.

When they got home, Dally immediately placed Johnny in bed, helping him out of his clothes he’d had to get into to go to the hospital and into something more comfortable. He watched Johnny wince and turn over in bed, feeling guilty and sad for all Johnny went through at the same time.

“You want me to rub your back for you?” he asked quietly. “The doc said it might help with the pain
Johnny was silent and still for a long time, so long Dallas wasn’t sure that he was going to reply. Then finally, he nodded and Dallas got into the bed next to him. Johnny rolled over onto his back and Dallas carefully lifted Johnny’s shirt, straddling him for better access and began to rub his back, his fingers, which had only hours earlier been used to beat the pulp out of Johnny’s father, now gentle and careful as he rubbed Johnny’s skin around the long scar that went up his back.

The place where they had cut him open and put him back together again.

They were silent for a long time as this happened, then, without warning, not even knowing he was going to say it until the words were already out, Dally said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

Johnny was quiet for a moment as he tried to figure out why Dallas had said this before finally asking in a soft, hoarse voice, “What for?”

This time it was Dallas who was quiet for a moment before he finally said, “For not bein’ there sooner. If I’d left work when I had that bad feelin’, I woulda been there when they got there and your back wouldn’t be strained so bad it might break again.”

Johnny reached around, squeezing Dally’s hand for a moment as he said, “You didn’t know it was gonna happen, Dal. It ain’t your fault.”

Dally wanted to argue, wanted to tell Johnny that all of this, everything Johnny was going through right now was his fault, but they’d already had that conversation and he felt that he could predict how it was going to go, so he didn’t bother.

He rubbed Johnny’s back for a long time. Long enough that Johnny fell asleep. When he did, Dallas carefully climbed off him and laid down next to him, placing one hand over the scar. His hand was so large on Johnny’s small, thin back that it covered half of the scar. His hand rested over the exact spot where Johnny’s back had been broken.

He had one job in this life. One and one alone. And that was to protect Johnny. And he hadn’t done that. Not anywhere near as good as he was supposed to. If he had, Johnny wouldn’t be in so much pain. He wouldn’t have broken his back at all. He wouldn’t be covered in burn scars. He wouldn’t be in pain all the time.

*Just how much would be different if I could just do my fuckin’ job?* He wondered.

He didn’t have the answer to that question. Not the exact one anyway, but he could guess the short version and it was something along the lines of a whole fucking lot.

**Chapter End Notes**

pray for me, i'm doin' my best to get stuff out in a timely manner, but it's hard.
A Broken Heart is Not Like You Think

Chapter Summary

Johnny's damaged heart can't take the stress anymore

Chapter Notes

hoo boy i did not mean to take this long to get this chapter out; i’ve been very, very sick lately and very, very stressed, so i ain’t been able to write

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Dallas woke up in the dead of night in a cold bed, Johnny’s space next to him empty, he knew immediately something was wrong. Johnny had a hard time sleeping, he knew this, but that didn’t stop him from spending the whole night in bed or at least in the bedroom. Sometimes he would read in bed until he fell asleep. Other times, he would get out of his bed, push himself to the window, and stare out at the stars. Dallas had never woken up to find the bed empty and with the window open, his heart began to pound, fear filling him as he wondered if maybe Johnny’s parents had come to their house while he was asleep and taken Johnny from his bed.

He dismissed this thought quickly, reasoning that since he was such a light sleeper and there was no way Johnny would’ve gone quietly he would’ve woken up if something like that had happened. Even if he considered the other idea that perhaps Johnny’s parents had drugged him first, that still wouldn’t make sense. He was awake and it was only a few hours since they’d gone to sleep. Johnny’s parents were a lot less stupid than they appeared. They’d know to knock him out for the whole night, not just a few hours while they took their son and then spirited him away out the window.

No. Johnny had to be somewhere in the house.

Throwing back the blankets, Dally got up slowly, looking around the room to make sure he hadn’t missed anything. He went around to Johnny’s side of the bed, but there was nothing there. His wheelchair wasn’t in the room either. He bit his lip. The house was small. He couldn’t have gone far.

“Johnny?” Dally called, leaving the bedroom, walking slowly down the short hallway that led to the living room. “Johnny? You alright?”

The house was silent and still and dark. He looked at the clock, ticking quietly in the kitchen. It was nearly four in the morning. He turned around, heading back in the direction he’d come. That was when he saw the light under the door leading into the bathroom. He went to the door and knocked. “Johnny?” he said again, this time more quietly. “You in there? You okay?”

For a moment, he heard nothing and his heart began to pound again. Then he heard a small, distressed gasping, and he flung the door open, not bothering to even check if it was locked. Thankfully, it wasn’t – however, he was sure with how nervous he was feeling, he would’ve broken it down had it been locked – and froze in the doorway, his eyes widening at what he saw.
Johnny was curled on the floor, gasping for air, his hands clutching at his chest, his fingers curled in
his shirt, his eyes closed tight in pain, his mouth parted slightly to let air through. Even from this
distance, his skin looked clammy, his hair damp with sweat, and his entire body was shuddering. He
must have fallen from his wheelchair, something Dally only figured out, since his chair was sitting
just inside the door. Johnny’s eyelids fluttered as he turned his head, registering he was no longer
alone. He saw Dallas and winced again before saying in a voice shaking as much as the rest of him,
“M-my heart started poundin’ and my chest started hurtin’ when I went to go to the bathroom...but-
but somethin’s wrong, Dal...somethin’s really wrong.”

Dally’s own heart was pounding in fear. He didn’t need Johnny to tell him that something was really
wrong to figure it out, but the fact Johnny mentioned it, the boy who hated to be a bother to anyone
and kept his pain a secret as a result, really proved how serious the situation was.

*He has a damaged heart,* a voice in the back of his mind reminded him. *He could be having a heart
attack. He could die from this.*

No! Dallas replied firmly. *I won’t let him.*

*Do you really think you can stop death?* The voice replied, but Dally pressed his lips into a thin line
and didn’t grace it with an answer. He had more important things to worry about right now than the
opinions of his subconscious.

His lips still pressed together, Dally scooped Johnny into his arms. He returned to the bedroom only
to pull on a pair of pants and shoes before wrapping Johnny in a blanket and running out to the car,
holding him tight against his chest. He set him in the passenger seat before rushing around to the
driver’s side, getting in the car, and gunning it to the hospital.

He barely paid attention to traffic laws as he sped to the hospital, running three red lights and six stop
signs before finally careening into the hospital parking lot. He parked in a handicapped space, not
caring about the warning of a $200 fine if he was caught as he gathered Johnny into his arms and ran
through the emergency room’s double automatic doors, thinking vaguely that it seemed like this was
happening every other week. He was shocked they didn’t know them by name here by now.

“His heart,” Dally said, holding Johnny against him as he stopped in front of the receptionist’s desk.
“There’s somethin’ wrong with his heart. It-it was damaged a few months ago. I...” Dally paused to
look away, swallowing hard, trying to compose him, struggling to keep the lump in his throat from
forming along with the tears threatening to fall from his eyes, “I dunno for sure, but-but I think he
could be havin’ a heart attack.”

Everyone who knew or even knew of Dallas Winston knew that he didn’t cry. He never let his
emotions get the best of him. And for the most part that was true. The only exception, the only one
he’d ever had, was when it came to Johnny’s health and wellbeing.

The receptionist pointed them to emergency bays, picking up a phone in the same moment and
calling for an emergency team to get Johnny immediately. They hadn’t even reached the bays when
the team arrived, wheeling a gurney down the hall at a run. Dally put Johnny on the gurney, wishing
more than anything he could keep him in his arms, especially when Johnny reached out to clutch at
the sleeve of his jacket as he set him down.

The team started to wheel Johnny down the hall and Dally started to follow them, but a doctor
stepped in front of him, placing a hand on Dally’s chest, saying, “You can’t come with. We need to
examine him and then possibly take him in for emergency surgery if he is having a heart attack.”

“I’m not just gonna sit here and twiddle my thumbs in this waitin’ room like some fuckin’ idiot!”
Dally shouted, running shaking fingers through his hair, making it stand on end, not caring who heard, not caring if he were making a scene. If Johnny were going to die, he wasn’t going to die alone and afraid, surrounded by strangers.

Not that he was going to let Johnny die at all.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said, and he sounded like he truly meant it. “But I can’t allow you back there. No one is allowed back there.”

Dally turned away, his fingers back in his hair, pulling at the ends, laughing bitterly before cursing loudly. A few people in the waiting room looked up at him, appalled. He sneered at them and raised his middle finger saying in a loud, emphatic voice, “Fuck you.”

“I do need to ask you,” the doctor said, loud enough that Dally could hear him over the blood rushing through his head, “has anything...particularly stressful happened to him in the last few days?”

Dally turned around again and began shaking his head before he remembered what had happened only the day before. He swallowed hard and nodded. “Yeah, his folks,” he said, “they stopped by. They ain’t good people. They usedta beat him when he lived with them and do a lot worse than that. We hadta come here and make sure his back hadn’t been rebroken cause they pulled him off the couch and it-it hurt him.”

The doctor nodded and said, “It’s very likely that stressed his heart out too much and is the cause of whatever is happening to him now.”

“What is happening to him now?” Dally asked, desperation creeping into his voice over the anger and frustration.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I do,” the doctor replied and with that he was gone down the hall.

Dally watched him go, running his still shaking fingers through his hair again. He waited for the doctor to turn the corner before he ran out of the emergency room into the parking lot and screamed as loud as he could, not caring who heard. He screamed until he had no more breath in his lungs. Then he fell to his knees, not even wincing at the pain as his kneecaps hit the hard concrete beneath him. He bent over, pressing his forehead to the concrete, his mouth still open in a silent scream and began to sob.

How was it that these things kept happening? And to Johnny of all people?

First his parents showed up at the house, hurting his already hurt back. Now, his damaged heart was so stressed that it was very possible he was having a heart attack. With how weak and sick he already was, how was he going to survive that? How could his frail body survive open heart surgery in addition to everything else?

He remembered the one time his mother had needed open heart surgery before she died and even though it had been a full year after that she died, he was certain that was really what had killed her. She had already been so sick and weak. Then she had a heart attack. And that really was the beginning of the end for her.

What if that was what happened with Johnny too?

No, no, no, he thought over and over again, his mind nothing but a litany of the two letters.

It wasn’t until he felt rain on his back, bringing him back to the present that he realized he’d been whispering the words over and over to the ground as well. He sat up, looking up at the sky, letting
the rain fall on his already wet cheeks. It was almost like the world was crying with him.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, staring up at the sky, letting the rain fall on his face, not feeling the wetness or the cold, not feeling anything except the agony in his heart, but it couldn’t have been as long as it felt because the doctor hadn’t come out to speak to him. He realized vaguely he had to go back into the waiting room, so he would be there when the doctor did come to speak to him. He really didn’t want to go in and face the room full of faces that would no doubt be staring at him after his outburst, but he wasn’t going to miss updates on Johnny’s condition. Not for anything.

He got up slowly, shakily, trying to clear his face of tears and make his swollen eyes look somehow less red and swollen before he turned around and went back inside.

He didn’t look at them, but Dallas could feel the eyes of every person on him as he took the seat at the back of the waiting room. He didn’t look up once, but just being in a hospital made him nervous. It reminded him too much of his mother’s last year of life. It was starting to also remind him too much of everything Johnny had been through in the past few months as well.

He stared at his shoes, watching one jiggle as he bounced his leg impatiently. He tried not to breathe too deep, not wanting to breathe in the antiseptic stench of the waiting room, trying to only breathe when absolutely necessary. Somehow it felt wrong to breathe too much anyway when Johnny might only have so many breaths left.

In his head, Dallas saw the operating room, saw a group of doctors in teal scrubs surrounding Johnny, lying cut open on a stainless steel table, saw a machine recording his heart rate, going up and down in time with his heartbeats. He saw it going flat, saw the doctors working to save him, before finally covering his face and calling out his time of death. He remembered vividly the day that had happened with his mother and he began to shake again.

He could not lose Johnny too. He could barely survive losing his mother.

If he lost Johnny, he would lose himself.

He looked up, surveying the waiting room, noticing all of the eyes of everyone there were on the ground and wondered if he’d maybe just imagined them staring at him. No one here looked like they really cared about what some boy might be doing outside. In fact, they all looked like they wanted to do exactly what he had done and run out into the rain and scream. There was a TV hanging on one wall, playing some movie that he’d never seen, but no watched it. It was like the vending machines in the corner and the year old magazines on the old wooden coffee tables: entertaining itself.

Through the haze of fear and pain in his mind, he realized that there was no such thing as comfort in a waiting room, no matter how much the doctors and nurses tried to help. It was full of nervous pacers waiting for bad news. Who wanted to read a magazine or watch TV or get a snack when all they could think about was what was going to happen to the person they’d brought there?

*Maybe that’s what love is*, a voice in the back of his mind whispered.

*What?* He asked. He was too tired to even consider not replying.

*Love is watching someone die.*

It was the truth. He couldn’t even argue. If you loved someone enough to watch them die, knowing there was nothing you could do, then you had to love them a lot. And even as he thought that, he prayed with everything in him that that wasn’t what was happening with Johnny, trying not to think of all the recent hospital visits that told him otherwise.
It was. He had watched his mother die. His father hadn’t, but his father had never loved her to begin with. He’d been the one to go with her to all of her doctor’s appointments. He’d even driven her to the hospital several times, having taught himself to drive at the age of six for that exact reason. He had watched her die, slowly and painfully, and it had hurt, but he had survived it. Yeah, he’d gone to New York for three years and they had been some of the worst years of his life, but he had survived it. Maybe not fully intact, but he had.

But he couldn’t watch Johnny die too.

That he could not, would not survive.

And really, if he were honest with himself, he didn’t want to either.

He heard footsteps then and everyone looked up as the doctor walked into the waiting room. He was wearing scrubs and Dally’s heart skipped a beat, wondering if the nightmare in his head had become a reality. The doctor approached him and he stood, feeling his hands shake as he swallowed hard, preparing himself for what he was going to be told.

“He’s going to be alright,” the doctor said. “His heart was beating too fast and we had to perform and simple procedure to get it beating correctly again. However...if this happens again, there is a strong chance he could have a full on heart attack. It may not kill him, but it would make his heart even weaker and more prone to attacks in the future. It could even potentially shorten his life span.”

Dally nodded numbly, taking the information in stride.

Johnny was alive. But only just. And that seemed to be the way it always was.

“He needs to stay in the hospital for a few days,” the doctor went on. “Just so we can monitor him and make sure that the procedure went alright and that he isn’t going to have more issues with his heart. When he goes home, try to keep his environment as stress free as possible. Like I said: a heart attack may not kill him, but there is also a good chance with how weak he is already it would.”

Again Dally nodded numbly. He felt his vision go out of focus for a moment as he thought about what could happen to Johnny if he did end up having a heart attack.

No part of him wanted to. But at this point, he seemed unable to keep the worst case scenarios from popping into his head every time something like this happened.

“What, um, what room is he in?” he asked finally, bringing himself out of his thoughts slowly.

“One-oh-three,” the doctor replied. “You can see him if you want.”

Dally nodded for a third time and walked quickly around the doctor, finding his way to the room without much trouble. He had spent too much time in hospitals. He knew how they worked, but when he reached the room he stopped in his tracks and had to press his hand to his mouth to keep himself from screaming again.

Johnny wasn’t dying, but for all intents and purposes, he sure looked like it.

He lay on the bed, his eyes unconscious, no longer wearing a tube under his nose, but an oxygen mask. He was shirtless like he had been when he’d been in the hospital the last time. There were sensors on his chest attached to wires that led to a machine beeping, showing his heart rate. He had an IV in the crook of one elbow and another in the hand of his other arm. There was a bandage on
his chest, no doubt covering an incision site. His usually deep brown skin was pale and the scars he’d received from the fire stood out in stark lights coming from the hallway. The lights in the room were dimmed, only just enough to see what was in the room and not much else.

Dally walked with shaking, numb legs to the chair by the bed and collapsed into it. He reached out to take Johnny’s hand in his, but stopped, seeing the IV again. He was scared to touch him, afraid that Johnny was going to shattered into a million pieces that he would never be able to put back together again and instead put his elbows on the edge of the bed, holding his forehead in his hands.

For the second time that night, Dallas Winston, the toughest hood in Tulsa, broke down, but this time his sobs were silent, broken.

“Don’t leave me,” he pleaded in a voice that sounded just as broken. “Please...I can’t lose you, Johnnycake. I can’t...I fuckin’ can’t.”

He cried for a long time, longer than he could keep track. He finally laid his head down on his arms, and, taking the ends of Johnny’s fingers in his own, avoiding the IV, he watched Johnny breathe, listened to the beeping of the machine until he fell asleep. He had no dreams and no nightmares.

It seemed even the world thought Dally’s current reality was enough of one. Maybe even that, for just this one night, he’d had enough.

Chapter End Notes

hnng i will try my best to get chapters out more quickly now that i'm home from visitin' my gf.
also i'm almost done with the fallout always falls on us and i'm thinkin' of startin' my fic bruised cheek broken ribs after, so i have somethin' else big to write.
alsoalso, yes that one bit is from what sarah said by death cab for cutie.
anyway, i hope y'all enjoyed this.
Johnny goes home from the hospital yet again and the gang comes over.

yay i got somethin' else done!! woo!! pray for me i'll be able to get the next part of my writing up soon!!

Johnny was in the hospital for three full days and nights before the doctors finally determined that he was doing well enough they could let him go home. It was only three days and nothing compared to the month he’d spent in the hospital right after the fire, covered in burns with a broken back and yet somehow it felt even more interminable than that stay had. When Dallas finally came to the hospital to pick him up on what would’ve been the fourth morning, Johnny closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief, sending a silent prayer of thanks to whoever was listening. Hospitals had always bothered him, but after spending so much time in one before, he hated them.

The drive home uneventful and Johnny spent almost all of it staring out the window, watching the world flying by. It was going to be fall soon. Already he could see some of the tips of the leaves starting to change from green to yellow. But he really wasn’t thinking about the changing leaves. He was thinking about everything else.

So many times throughout the last few weeks, he’d been certain he was going to die. Last night especially he had been convinced he was going to have a heart attack and die right there on the bathroom floor. And somehow, yet again, he’d survived.

How many more times would the doctors be able to save him before his good luck ran out and he simply died? Maybe it had run out already and next time would be the time he died. The doctor had almost said as much when he’d been discharged, warning him that if he got too stressed out and he had a full on heart attack, there was a good chance he would die with how weak his body had become.

And what would happen if he did die of a heart attack? How bad would it hurt him to die? How badly would it hurt Dallas and the rest of the gang?

Frankly, he knew how bad it would hurt Dallas. He’d told him that he would kill himself if Johnny died. And Johnny knew that was true, no matter how much he begged and pleaded for him not to, even though he also knew damn well if the situations were reversed he would do the same.

He was so lost in his own mind and thoughts that he hardly noticed when they were pulling into the driveway behind the house he shared with Dallas. Dally had been silent the entire drive, but now when Johnny turned to him, he could tell Dallas had been thinking the same things he had. He was white as a sheet, his knuckles gripping the steering wheel stiffly like a life line, his lips pressed so
For a moment that felt like hours, they stayed there, sitting in the car. Johnny staring at Dallas, Dallas staring out the windshield, his eyes glazed over. Finally, Dally blinked and turned to Johnny, looking more lost now than panicked. He took a breath and said, “C’mon. Let’s go inside.”

Dally carried Johnny into the house, since he no longer had his wheelchair, and set him down on the couch once he got in. Then he went back out and got Johnny’s oxygen tank and tube, unable to carry both Johnny at the tank at the same time.

When all of that was done, Dally stood there, hands on his hips, looking down at Johnny with a frown on his face. Johnny knew that the frown wasn’t directed at him, not really, but it still made him feel bad, like he’d done something wrong. Eventually, Dally turned, staring towards the hallway that led to the bathroom and their bedroom, and said in a lost voice, “I’m gonna go get changed. Want me to bring ya some clothes to change into? And a book to read?”

“Yes,” Johnny said, swallowing hard, feeling too guilty to say no.

Dally nodded once and then turned, heading in that direction.

Johnny watched him go, chewing on his lip, his brows drawn together.

Deep down, he knew none of this was his fault. It wasn’t his fault he was so sick. It wasn’t his fault he kept getting worse. And it wasn’t his fault, really that Dallas was hurting.

But it was his fault he’d gotten paralyzed and burned in the first place. He had been the one to choose to go into the burning church to help save the lives of those children, which had then resulted in a beam falling on him, breaking him in two, burning him at the same time. And if that was his fault, then everything else that was happening – his illness now, him getting worse, Dally’s pain at seeing him this way – then the rest must be his fault too.

Once, a very long time ago, Darry had told him he was too kind and sensitive for his own good because he blamed himself for everything and spent too much energy trying to make things better. Johnny appreciated the sentiment, but he felt Darry was wrong. He still felt that way.

Besides, that would’ve only applied if Darry had been right and Johnny knew he wasn’t.

* * *

The three days Johnny was in the hospital were as never-ending for Dallas as they had been for Johnny. He wasn’t allowed to spend the night. It was one of the many rules of the hospital. So every night he’d had to come back here to this house and sleep in the bed he should’ve been sharing with Johnny, walk by the bathroom he had found Johnny collapsed in. And that had been too much.

Dally hadn’t drank since Johnny was hospitalized the first time and his survival wasn’t assured, but the night after he first brought Johnny to the hospital, he went to the nearest liquor store and bought the largest, cheapest bottle of tequila he could find and downed the whole thing.

He hadn’t cut himself either in a long time, but after he’d finished his bottle of tequila, he had wandered around town in the dark, unable to force himself to go back to his Johnny-less home, until he got to the deserted drive in. He sat in one of the chairs where he usually sat with Johnny and Ponyboy when they went to see movies and smoked a cigarette, thinking about all that had happened, about how it was all his own stupid fault and none of this would’ve happened if he’d just stopped Johnny from running into that church to begin with.
He watched the smoke disappear into the darkness surrounding him and then pulled his blade out of the pocket of his jacket. He flicked it open without really thinking about it, rolled up his sleeve, and began to carve up his own skin, one mark for every time he’d let Johnny down.

He’d done that the next two nights as well, going somewhere different each time and making more scars, making his skin look like it was covered in fish gills.

His arms were covered now.

He had lied to Johnny when he said he was going to get changed. Well, not entirely. He was going to do that too, but after setting him down on the couch, his first stop was the bathroom. He rolled up his sleeves, staring at all the fresh scars for a long time, refusing to look up into the mirror. He was only going to hate himself more if he saw his own reflection.

Again, he pulled out his blade and added to his already vast collection of scars. As he watched the blood bubble up and spill over the side of his arm, he couldn’t help thinking that now his arms would look as bad as Johnny’s did. It was less than he deserved. He deserved worse. He deserved to be the one sick and dying, not Johnny.

He was just putting the blade away, intending to go get the clothes when he heard the front door open. His heart began to pound as he remembered he’d forgotten to lock the front door behind them. Who would be coming to visit them now? What if it were Johnny’s parents come for round two?

Flinging open the door, he started down the hall, but stopped short when he heard a chorus of whistles and closed his eyes, pressing one hand to his chest, and letting his breath out all at once.

It was only the gang. There was nothing to worry about.

As he turned on his heel and headed for the bedroom, he could hear everyone talking to Johnny, telling him they were glad he was home and asking him how he was doing. Johnny replied politely enough, but Dally wondered if anything Johnny was saying were true. Johnny Cade didn’t lie. Not to anyone. And besides, he wasn’t very good at it anyway. The only time he even attempted to lie was when people worried about him and even then it was only because he felt like he was a burden to everyone. Dallas had told him many times before that wasn’t true, but no matter what he said or did, it seemed he couldn’t convince Johnny of this.

He changed quickly and, instead of getting Johnny a full outfit, he got him a blanket and one of Dally’s sweaters. He returned to the living room, trying his level best to keep his expression neutral as he handed the blanket and sweater to Johnny before turning to nod to the rest of the gang.

Within a few minutes, Steve, Two-Bit, and Soda were playing poker at the kitchen table, all of them trying to cheat. Ponyboy was sitting on the couch next to Johnny, talking about the latest books they’d read and Darry stood in a corner, his arms crossed over his chest, looking at the ground, his expression as surly as ever. However, when he saw Dally enter the room, he straightened up a bit and said, “Alright everyone, I have an idea.”

To Dally’s surprise everyone stopped speaking and turned to Darry in unison.

“Dally still hasta go to work,” he began, seeming just as surprised as Dally was to have gotten everyone’s attention so easily. “And Johnny’s folks ain’t in jail yet, so we gotta protect him. What if, on each of the days we have time off from school or work, we each take turns stayin’ here with him? Just in case his folks tryta show up and hurt him again? We can even ask Evie and Sandy to help on the days when all of us have got somethin’ to do.”
The unspoken reason this was necessary hung in the air around them like a dark raincloud, keeping all of them silent for a long time and, when they finally acknowledged Darry’s suggestion, it was with a chorus of nods rather than spoken words.

They knew that if they didn’t do this, Johnny could possibly get so hurt he would die and, as much as they all believed everyone in the gang was important, they also all knew that Johnny was the glue that kept them together. Without him, the gang would fall apart. It nearly had when he and Ponyboy had run off to Windrixville.

But at that time, they’d known he was alive, safe, and eventually coming back.

There was no such thing as coming back from death.

Everyone went back to what they were doing a short time after that, but Dally stayed where he was, staring at nothing, thinking things he had thought many times before.

Johnny could only get lucky so many times. What was going to happen when that luck ran out?

Then none of this would matter. And, like he had so many times, Dally would’ve let down someone he loved more than anything. It was his fault his mother had died. He’d always believed that and if Johnny died? Well that would be his fault too.

He wanted to go back to the bathroom, slash up his arms some more, but he seemed to be rooted to the spot, unable to do anything other than think.

And it seemed that would be his undoing, his inaction.

Johnny would die because he couldn’t do anything right.

He never would because he loved Johnny too much to leave him, but, in that moment, a part of Dallas wanted to slit his wrists, let himself bleed out and die, so he wouldn’t have to live without Johnny when the time came for him to die.

Then maybe he would be able to finally atone for every way he’d failed him.

Chapter End Notes

i initially planned to make this a longer chapter, but i couldn't think of anythin' else to put in it, so yeah.
Friends in Unlikely Positions

Chapter Summary

The gang continues to protect Johnny while Dally is at work. Evie and Sandy pitch in too.

Chapter Notes

i don't wanna be like all of the fanfic writers on instagram that turn every girl into somethin' they're not to make them self inserts full of tragedy, so i rly hope i accomplished the dead opposite of that in this chapter. i don't know anythin' about evie and sandy besides what's in the book (i ain't ever read that was then, this is now or any of s.e. hinton's other books, so i'm just goin' off of what we know from the book/movie, which rly ain't much).

anyway i hope this ain't total shit

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first day the gang came over to hang out and make sure Johnny was okay was really just the first of many more days exactly like that. Like Darry had suggested, they all came over in shifts. Two-Bit and Steve or Soda would come in the mornings (depending on which shift Steve or Soda had and sometimes when they both worked, Two-Bit came alone). Then Ponyboy and either Steve or Soda again would come in the evenings (or, again, Ponyboy would come alone). On the weekends, Darry would come, sometimes with one of the other boys, but very often by himself. Even Evie and Sandy came by when no one else could. Two-Bit almost always could and had said plenty of times that he was happy to, but everyone – including Johnny – insisted he needed time for himself to, so Evie and Sandy picked up the times that were considered his off hours.

A part of Johnny really liked the company, liked knowing someone was there all the time to make sure that his parents weren’t going to come by and hurt him again, liked knowing that he was going to be safe no matter what. He felt secure and even was able to take naps and sometimes showers or baths without having to worry about the door being broken down and someone unsavory finding him in a vulnerable position. It gave him a freedom he hadn’t known he was missing before.

However, at the same time, he often missed his alone time and missed the silence of the house. There were plenty of times it was silent anyway – Darry liked to read the paper, his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose as he stared down at the printed words. And Ponyboy often had homework he had to get done, so he needed it quiet anyway – plus he and Ponyboy rarely spoke when they hung out anyway, since neither of them really felt the need to. But when Two-Bit, Steve, and Soda were around, the place was in constant chaos. He knew it wasn’t their fault. He knew they didn’t try to be that way and they were doing their best and he wasn’t angry or annoyed with them. It was just sometimes he looked forwards to the quiet that came with seeing Ponyboy and Darry.

The people he was most nervous about and yet pleasantly surprised whose company he enjoyed was
Evie and Sandy. He didn’t know either of them very well and besides that one time he’d hung out with them with Steve, Soda, and Dallas at the barn on the outskirts of town, he’d never spent any significant amount of time with them. However, that changed rather quickly when they started coming to take their shifts watching over him and then he found he quite enjoyed their company.

They were like a mixture between the quiet and calm that came with Darry and Ponyboy and the chaos and noise that came with everyone else. They often enjoyed playing card games the way that Steve, Soda, and Two-Bit did, but they rarely got loud about it. The only time they were loud at all was when they first came in. Then they would want to ask all about Johnny’s day and what was going on. He tolerated it because he knew it came from a place of care and wanting to get to know him and that wasn’t really something he’d ever experienced from girls before, even in a friendly way. Then they would often calm down and turn on the TV while they played solitaire, black jack, and poker at the kitchen table, every now and then slamming down their cards with a triumphant, “HA!” before going back to silently playing their game.

As school became more rigorous for Ponyboy and work became more frequent for Soda, Steve, and Darry with fall rush, Evie and Sandy began spending more and more time with Johnny. Every now and then, Two-Bit would show up to hang out with them too, insisting an able-bodied man should be around just in case, though Evie quite enjoyed showing off her knife collection and Sandy had taken Two-Bit down more than once with her kickboxing techniques.

“We’re rare girls,” she’d said proudly, grinning, while holding Two-Bit on the ground in a headlock between her thighs. “Most girls, even greaser girls, don’t use knives or know how to fight. They think the men will just take care of ‘em.”

“But we know better,” Evie had chimed in from the table where she was shuffling cards.

The two then grinned at each other and Johnny smiled to himself.

They were right about everything they said. They were rare girls and it was rare that greaser girls learned how to defend themselves. It was very rare the Soc would go after the girls instead of the boys – in fact, Johnny had never heard of it happening; he supposed the Socs believed if they didn’t go after the girls they still had some shred of dignity or chivalry – but it did happen every now and then and it was smart of the girls to know how to defend themselves when it did.

Though Johnny was not a girl himself, he had been born one and he knew all too well what men liked to do to girls who couldn’t put up a fight.

He was sitting in the living room today, reading as usual after Dallas had gone to work, promising to be home that evening, when there was a patterned knock at the door and it opened. The girls didn’t know the gang’s whistle. That was the gang’s thing and only the members of it and Shepard’s outfit knew it, so they had a special knock they did instead.

“Hey Johnny!” they called out in unison.

“It’s us!” Sandy added, while Evie shut the door behind them and they came down the short hallway into the living room.

Johnny closed his book on his finger to keep his place – he was just about done with The Return of the King in the Lord of the Rings trilogy now – and looked up, smiling at them as they came in. “Hey y’all,” he said softly. “How are ya?”

Sandy smiled, hanging up a nice pink coat that looked like it belonged to a Soc instead on the coat rack Dallas had gotten for the living room a few days ago after everyone started coming by so often.
“I’m alright,” she said.

She always looked like a fairy to Johnny with golden blonde hair that ran down her back like water in ringlets, bright blue eyes and a smile that lit up her whole face. She dressed like a Soc and looked like one too even though she was considered a greaser, though in the opinion of all the greasers she was really too pretty to be considered one. Everyone who didn’t know her thought she was dating Soda and every straight greaser thought he was the luckiest boy in the entire town. He bragged about her a lot, which Johnny now found ironic considering that he only pretended to be dating her, so he could be with Steve and she could be with Evie. However, Sandy did the same for him and he knew that they really meant what they said about each other, even if it wasn’t in the way everyone else who spoke to them thought they did.

“Yeah, me too, I guess,” Evie replied, but she kept her face turned away, allowing her hair, dark and wavy in contrast to Sandy’s shield the right side of her face.

Evie was like the antithesis of Sandy. She was just as beautiful, but very obviously a greaser. She wore leather jackets, carried around a vast array of knives in different locations all throughout her clothes and she wore combat boots that were very obviously made for men and not women. She also wore dark skirts and tights and thick black eyeliner around her eyes. She often talked about piercing her lip or her nose, something almost completely unheard of. Johnny had seen a few girls and a few guys who pierced other parts of their bodies besides their ears, but most people found them strange and they were ostracized, even in the greaser communities. It seemed, like with Soda and Sandy, that Evie and Steve would be perfect for each other. Steve was weird and Evie was even weirder. To anyone who didn’t know them they seemed – again like Soda and Sandy – that they were very happy together, but knowing what he did, Johnny could tell their relationship was just friendly. They didn’t speak to or about each other the way Soda and Sandy did, but it didn’t matter. Like Soda and Sandy, they were playing their own special game of pretend to make sure they could be with the people they really wanted to and Johnny thought they were all quite lucky to have found each other the way they did.

But none of this was really on Johnny’s mind as the girls came in and Evie pulled out her deck of cards, heading to the kitchen table to play poker with her girlfriend, Sandy asking if they could play solitaire instead or one of the newer card games she’d learned. Johnny bit his lip. Evie was usually standoffish. That was just the way she was – in a lot of ways she reminded him of Dallas if Dallas were a girl. But something was up today. Something, actually, seemed wrong.

“I could even read your tarot cards if you like!” she said excitedly, pointing to the deck. “That’s how the Romani people did it! They didn’t use those fancy decks people have now!”

“You mean gypsies?” Evie asked in a flat voice, still shuffling her cards.

Sandy frowned, putting her hands on her hips. “It’s impolite to call them that, Evie, they don’t like it. My mother is Romani, remember?”

“Sorry babe,” she replied and leaned over, kissing Sandy on the cheek.

Sandy smiled turning pink as she did so.

Evie gave a tight-lipped smile in return and that was when Johnny realized what was wrong.

Evie was hiding something. He knew all too well the smiles and false reassurances that came with keeping a secret you didn’t want anyone to find out, even if you knew they you couldn’t keep it hidden forever. A part of him was surprised Sandy hadn’t picked up on it until he realized something else: Sandy already knew what it was. That was the only explanation. It struck him then how like
him and Dallas the two girls were: one of them hiding something, the other knowing what it was, but saying nothing because she knew that the other girl didn’t want her to.

Johnny bit his lip. A part of him really wanted to ask, wanted to know what was wrong. Another part of him thought that would be rude. If Evie didn’t want people knowing what was wrong, then he shouldn’t be nosy and keep himself out of other people's business.

However, then Evie turned her face as she sat down at the table with Sandy, smiling at her as she did so and the part of her face she’d been hiding with her dark hair was on full display under the stark bright kitchen lights.

It was covered in a dark purple bruise.

“Evie, what happened?” the words came out of him before he could stop them and he immediately regretted it.

Whatever conversation had been going on in the kitchen halted instantly and Johnny froze, swallowing hard, clamping his mouth shut too late, hoping with everything in him he hadn’t overstepped his bounds.

He really hadn’t needed to ask that question to know the answer.

The girls were silent for a long time. The house itself was silent, so much so Johnny felt like somehow time had stopped and they were all waiting for it to start up again. They were silent for so long that Johnny felt certain when they did speak again that they were going to stand up and leave and he was going to be alone, until Dallas came home for the evening.

Then Evie swallowed hard and said, “My old man hit me for taking some of his cereal. He don’t like it when I do that very much. He don’t like it when I do anything much, actually.”

Sandy reached over, placing a hand on Evie’s arm. Evie looked down at the cards on the table.

This time Johnny was the one that swallowed hard. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “My old man usedta hit me like that too. When I lived with him.”

“Yeah, we know,” Evie replied, looking up, her voice laced with venom. “That’s why we’re here, right? Cause little Johnnycake gets beat up all the time.”

Johnny flinched and Evie’s expression filled with regret a moment after. She knew she’d gone too far. She looked down again and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that. I just...get tired of people pitying me. I know my folks suck, but there ain’t nothin’ I or anyone else can do about it, so why can’t everyone just leave me alone about it?”

“It still sucks,” Johnny replied. “But...if it makes ya feel any better, I know exactly how ya feel. I’m...glad the gang cares so much, but...I ain’t a baby, y’know? I can take care of myself. Or, well, could anyway until I couldn’t walk no more.”

Evie looked up again and nodded.

“My old man ain’t the best either,” Sandy chimed in. Johnny noticed only now that she was shaking. She didn’t say anything else, but she didn’t need to. The way her eyes were glazed over, the way she refused to look at any of them, Johnny knew exactly what she meant.

It made perfect sense now, if it hadn’t before, why she’d learned self defense.
His old man wasn’t the best in that way too. He shuddered thinking about his old bedroom, how it had looked in the dark, how it had felt to not be the only person in his bed at night.

“We should make a club,” Evie said, trying to brighten the mood. “The ‘my dad sucks club’. We can have bomber jackets and patches.”

Sandy smiled at that. “Yeah,” she agreed. “We can have custom made knives.”

“And jerseys or somethin’,” Johnny chimed in, smiling. For some reason, it had never occurred to him that the girls might be going through the same things he was. He rarely thought about the fact that anyone else might be. He knew he wasn’t alone in his suffering and yet it sometimes seemed like he was the only person on earth with a life like this. He wasn’t sure how to feel knowing he wasn’t.

They all continued to joke about their fictional club and laugh.

But they didn’t talk about it again. None of them wanted to. They might be able to joke about how horrible their families were, but deep down each of them wished they didn’t have to make jokes about how much they wished their lives were different.

Chapter End Notes

hnng i still feel like i fucked it up, but i hope i didn't. only three more chapters before part 3 is over!! i rly wanna write part 4, but i also feel like this fic could end with part 3 and everythin' else after part 3 is filler, so idk yet. i wanna write it, but i also don't. if y'all wanna see part 4 lemme know. otherwise this might end with part 3 and i'll add part 4 later as a sequel fic. i have lotsa other fics i wanna write as well and it might just be time for this oneta be over.
The weekends were different from the weekdays. During the weekends, Darry didn’t work and Ponyboy didn’t go to school. Soda, Steve, and Dally still worked, in fact, they were all more likely to work at once, since that was when the garage was the most busy. However, there were rare instances where one or two of them wouldn’t have to work and they could all hang out at Johnny and Dally’s house, watching whatever was on TV while Darry cooked and Two-Bit and Steve cheated at poker, sitting at the kitchen table together.

Today was one of those days. The only person working was Dallas ironically enough. Evie and Sandy had declined an invitation to hang out in favor of going on a date just the two of them, so the house was full of just the gang. Johnny wasn’t a talkative person and didn’t particularly enjoy being around people, but the gang was different. He liked being around them. He felt wanted, loved, safe, things he had never felt around anyone else, not with the kind of life he’d had up to this point.

As predicted, Two-Bit, Soda, and Steve sat at the kitchen table, playing poker, using cigarettes as their betting currency, yelling at each other every now and then as they realized one of them was cheating. Darry stood in front of the stove, stirring a stew in a pot he was making for everyone for dinner. Ponyboy didn’t participate, he wasn’t a good poker player, something Johnny had learned while they were stay in the church in Windrixville. Johnny sat on the couch, smiling, reading and listening to his friends talk. He wanted to participate more in the conversations than he was, but he couldn’t really move from where he was sitting, so he only listened, smiling, feeling grateful despite everything for the boys he was lucky enough to call his friends.

“They’re never gonna get through a game if they keep thinkin’ about how everyone else is cheatin’,” a voice said. Johnny felt himself move as someone sat down on the other end of the couch. He looked up and saw Ponyboy, grinning, smoking a cigarette. “Or maybe they should all just man up and stop cheatin’ and play fair.”

Ponyboy turned to him and smiled again and Johnny thought how much more grown up Ponyboy looked since they’d come back from Windrixville. He wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing. When they’d left, Ponyboy had been barely fourteen and, in terms of how much time had passed, he still was, but he didn’t look like it anymore. He really did look older, closer to Johnny’s age or maybe even Dally’s.
Johnny’s smile faltered at the thought.

It was a stark reminder that he wasn’t the only one that had gone through a lot in the last few months. Ponyboy’d had to watch his best friend kill someone, run away with him to what amounted to a foreign country for two boys who had never been anywhere else, then had to watch that same best friend get seriously injured and nearly die multiple times. Now he was having to watch that best friend be sick and get better so slowly he might as well not have been getting better at all.

It was less maturity than horrible experience that had aged Pony so quickly.

Swallowing hard, Johnny forced the smile back onto his features as he said, “Like Steve or Two will ever quit cheatin’,” he replied, closing his book on his finger to mark his place. “They dunno howta play the game any other way. They’d be in trouble if they hadta play and couldn’t cheat.”

Ponyboy grinned wider. “Yeah, probably,” he said.

But Pony’s smile faltered as well and Johnny immediately felt guilty. Was he really so transparent? And so selfish? Why did he have to ruin every good time his friends had? The last few months had been hard on everyone and, no matter what any of them said, he knew it was all his fault. If he hadn’t killed Bob, if he had done literally anything else other than stab him, so much would be different. Everything would be different. Sure, he probably wouldn’t be with Dallas and they wouldn’t be living together, but maybe that would be worth it to spare everyone else from the agonizing worry and stress they went through on a daily basis because of him.

But then Pony bit his lip and said, “I had this real bad nightmare last night, man.” He spoke quietly, quiet enough that no one in the kitchen looked up from what they were doing to acknowledge he was speaking, which Johnny quickly realized was what he wanted.

Johnny swallowed again. “What was it about?”

Ponyboy looked up. “I dreamt that ya died,” he said. “Not in the fire, but now cause your body just couldn’t take the strain of bein’ so sick anymore. I dreamt I was havin’ a great old time with Darry and Soda and Steve and Two-Bit and then Dallas came into the house and he looked like...well, like you’d died and I knew what he was gonna say before he said it and...it ruined my whole life. I woke up cryin’ cause it took me a minute to remember it weren’t real.”

For a moment, Johnny was startled.

Was this really everyone’s worst fear?

He knew it was Dally’s. He’d found himself wrapped in Dally’s arms, half awake, many nights after Dally had a horrific nightmare of him dying. He was usually too asleep to truly realize what was happening, but he remembered often feeling Dally shake as he held him or hearing him choke back sobs he was clearly praying Johnny wouldn’t hear, so he pretended he didn’t.

He wasn’t sure about Two-Bit, Steve, and Soda. He knew that it would hurt them, maybe even break them. He knew it would hurt Darry. But would it hurt them that bad? Did they all have nightmares? He supposed it shouldn’t have surprised him anymore that the gang cared so much about him, but after a lifetime of living with his parents, people who had convinced him that he wasn’t lovable and only worthless, it still did.

“I’m alright,” he said quietly, trying to smile. He reached across the couch, placing a hand on Ponyboy’s wrist. “Really. I ain’t gonna die anytime soon or nothin’.”

Ponyboy shook his head, taking a long drag on his cigarette, blowing the smoke at the ceiling as he
said, “How d’you know that, though? You’re in and outta the hospital constantly. When’ll be the last straw? How much more can ya take before everythin’...falls apart? I really thought ya were gonna die after the fire. Ya were already so weak and sick from everythin’ your folks were doin’ to ya. I didn’t see how ya could survive that too, but...somehow ya did. Honestly, at this point it feels like a miracle that you’re still alive, Johnnycake. And...that ain’t all.”

Ponyboy took a deep breath and looked at the ceiling, blinking rapidly, surprising Johnny more than he already was.

Pony only did that when he was trying to keep himself from crying.

“I can’t help thinkin’ all of this is my fault,” he went on. “I was the one that jumped outta the car. I was the one that first ran into the church. You ran in after me cause you wantedta make sure I was gonna be okay. I mean...maybe that ain’t what it turned out to be, but that was why ya followed me at first. And...I know how ya think, Johnny. I know the reason ya were so worried was cause ya couldn’t live with yourself if ya killed Bob and then also killed me and...I don’t blame ya for killin’ Bob, I really don’t. No one does. Not anyone who really knows what was goin’ on anyway. But I know ya woulda felt guilty and even worse if I got hurt or somethin’ and I didn’t get hurt...cause of you. You pushed me outta the church before it collapsed. And...I dunno. I can’t help feelin’ like it’s my fault ya are doin’ so poorly now. If I hadn’t run into that church...if I hadn’t talkedta Cherry...if I hadn’t insulted Bob and his friends...none of this woulda happened.”

Johnny was silent with shock at how similar what Pony had said was to what everyone else had. Finally, he closed his mouth, swallowed, looking down at his hands in his lap, and said, “Y’know...that’s how Dallas feels too. So do Steve and Two-Bit. I dunno about Soda and Darry exactly, I ain’t really talked to em about it. Maybe they feel the same, but...” He looked up again, “I don’t know why any of y’all blame yourselves for what happenedta me.”

“But you blame yourself,” Pony said. It wasn’t a question.

Johnny nodded, his eyes having gone back to his hands fiddling with the loose strings of his sweater. “Yeah, I do, but that’s cause it’s my fault, man. I was the one that killed Bob. I was the one that decidedta run into that church and...while I would take back what I did to Bob for the world, I wouldn’t change what I did in that church for anythin’...even if I knew what was gonna happen, even if I knew that I was gonna die and not live or somethin’. I would still run in and save those kids.”

Pony let out a soft laugh. Johnny looked up. “That’s why I know ya ain’t a bad person, Johnnycake,” he said. “Even if ya killed Bob. I think Bob asked for it. So do the rest of the gang. So did a jury. But even if they didn’t think that, ya still would wanna give up...so much of your health and comfort and life to save these kids ya don’t even know. You’re a good person, Johnny. Ya needta forgive yourself for bein’ a person.”

Ya needta forgive yourself for bein’ a person.

Johnny had never heard it put that way before, but as Ponyboy said it, he knew it was the truth, even if it was a truth he didn’t entirely agree with and couldn’t quite see yet.

Objectively, he could realize that what he had done was the exact same thing anyone would’ve done in his position. He had defended himself and maybe if Bob hadn’t hurt him so many times before, maybe he wouldn’t have felt the need to kill him. That didn’t make it right or okay, but it did explain it, it did make it make more sense. Maybe the whole situation wasn’t as black as white he thought.
He gave a small smile, bit his lip, and said, “Can I have one of those cigarettes?”

This time Pony laughed so hard he threw his head back. “Nice try, kid,” he replied. “But you really think I’m gonna give ya a cigarette when ya can’t even breathe on your own?”

Johnny let out a huff of frustration. “Well, it was worth a shot.”

“I’m tryin’ ta quit anyway,” Ponyboy replied even as he blew smoke at the ceiling. “I wanna join track this year. Soda said I got a real shot at bein’ a runner if I stop ruinin’ my lung capacity.”

“Good luck,” Johnny replied, his voice teasing. “If ya stop smokin’, I’ll eat my own shorts.”

Pony grinned in reply. “Better fry em up then. I’m down to half a pack a day.”

Johnny laughed, still smiling.

He missed who he used to be before the church fire a lot of the time. Hell, a lot of the time he missed who he was before Bob and his friends started jumping him. But he was slowly beginning to realize that it wasn’t like he couldn’t be happy despite all of that.

And, as he leaned against Ponyboy, feeling sleepy, watching the smoke of Pony’s cigarette curl towards the ceiling, listening to the soft droning of the television in the background, smelling Darry’s food cooking slowly on the stove in the kitchen, he wondered if maybe that wasn’t the point of life after all: going through all of it’s horrors and still finding happiness in it anyway.

*Careful, kid,* a voice whispered, *think like that and you’ll be happy.*

He smiled and silently replied, *I’m ready to be happy.*

Chapter End Notes

i have decided what to do about the last few chapters of this part: i am going to finish this part and then i am goin’ to work more on my other fics. i am goin' to work on this one still, but i ain't gonna work on it as much. i really wanna start one of my other fic ideas and i wanna finish some of the other one shot and ficlet ideas i have, so this fic is gonna be updated not as regularly. i am also gonna mark it as complete Just In Case. it ain't finished quite yet, but after part 3 it could almost be finished, so we'll see how this goes.
More Sick Than You Can Imagine

Chapter Summary

Johnny gets sick again and, once again, is recommended to be hospitalized. But he doesn't want to be.

Chapter Notes

second to last chapter y'all!! i meant for this to be a bit longer of a chapter, but i have had little to no energy lately, so i wrote this the way i could, since i wantedta get SOMEthin' out for y'all rather than nothin'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Johnny got sick again, Dally blamed himself. He knew even before going to the doctor the cause was the carnival he had thought was so innocuous, but how could he have? There were hundreds of people there, children with colds, the flue, and everything in between. It hadn’t mattered that Johnny wore a surgical mask like was recommended when he was there. He’d still taken it off to eat, to kiss Dallas, to take a breath of fresh air every now and then, and Dallas, being the idiot that he was, had let it happen, wanting Johnny to be happy rather than healthy.

His hands clenched into fists in the doctor’s office and he grit his teeth, the man in the white coat sitting in front of them telling them that the cough Johnny had wasn’t from any sort of simple cold: Johnny had pneumonia and with his already damaged lungs that made it dangerous. It was recommended he was hospitalized again for his own safety until the pneumonia was gone and Dallas hated himself even more as he saw Johnny’s entire body slump in his wheelchair.

The kid hated the hospital and now, because of Dally’s stupidity, he’d have to go back yet again.

The doctor left shortly after that, not looking at them, perhaps able to tell some of the agony that they were both going through in that moment and wanted to give them some privacy, but a part of Dallas wished he had stayed. Leaving meant he was going to have to face Johnny head on and his desperation head on and he just wasn’t sure he could do that at the moment.

The minute the door clicked shut behind the doctor, Johnny turned to Dallas and said, his voice high and pleading, “Don’t make me go back into the hospital, Dallas, please. I’m alright. They’re just overreactin’ and I don’t wanna be stuck in a sterile white room for who knows how long. Please.”

Dally didn’t look at Johnny, his fingers fiddling with the ends of his leather jacket the way Johnny usually fiddled with his own sleeves as he said in an uncharacteristically quiet voice, “You gotta, Johnnycake. You’re real sick and...you heard the doctor...with your damaged lungs it could be dangerous if ya don’t.”

From the corner of his eye, Dallas watched as Johnny vehemently shook his head. “No,” he gasped out, swallowing hard. “No, I don’t gotta. If-if I get worse, I can go in, but...if I don’t, I getta stay home, okay? Please, Dal...I don’t wanna go back. Please.”
Now Dally did turn to look at Johnny and he felt his heart break.

Johnny was shaking like a leaf, nothing different, but there were tears swimming in his eyes and he was blinking rapidly, his hands clenched in his lap as he struggled to keep them from falling. Johnny never tried to stop his tears from falling. And something about the fact he was going to the effort to do that now made Dallas want to die more than he already did.

And that was what broke him.

He let out a heavy sigh, closing his eyes briefly, praying he wouldn’t regret this as he said, “Alright. But if ya get even a little bit worse, I’m drivin’ ya straight to the hospital, okay?”

Johnny nodded and when he slumped in his chair this time, it was from relief.

The doctor seemed concerned with their decision to not admit Johnny immediately and told them all of the risks and dangers that came with trying to treat this at home. Dally tried not to listen too closely to them and say quickly, forcing a smile onto his face, “We’ll be careful. Promise. I already told him at the first sign of him gettin’ worse, I’m bringin’ him straight back.”

The doctor’s expression said he wasn’t convinced, but he nodded without speaking and let them go. Even if Johnny was still a minor, they couldn’t make him stay and no one except his own folks could make him stay, but everyone knew Johnny’s folks couldn’t have possibly cared less about his health, so Johnny was going home and Dally, the entire drive home, tried to convince himself that he’d made the right decision this time.

They were both silent on the drive home. Johnny staring out the window on his side, watching the world fly by, while Dallas stared out the windshield at the road in front of them, his lips pressed into a thin line, his hands gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white, unable to stop thinking about the carnival and how the last time he had made a decision directly not recommended Johnny got pneumonia. As if to punctuate this fact, Johnny let out a particularly horrible cough and Dallas almost slammed on the break and spun around to take him back to the hospital right then. But he didn’t.

Even though he knew Johnny could get far worse.

Even though he knew that his decision could end in Johnny’s death this time (And what if it did? What if Johnny died because he wanted to make him happy rather than healthy? Could he live with himself after that? Could he live at all?).

He still didn’t.

Johnny had begged him with tears in his eyes and Dally couldn’t say no to that.

I’ll take him back if he gets worse at all, he told himself as he parked on the street outside of their house and numbly helped Johnny out of the car and into his wheelchair. I’ll take him back no matter how much he protests. I won’t even look at him and then he can’t make me stop.

He wasn’t sure he believed what he was telling himself. He just hoped it was the truth.

He pushed Johnny into the house and helped him onto the couch. He mumbled something about making tea and started towards the kitchen, but Johnny caught his shirt in between the tips of his fingers and said, sounding almost as desperate as he had in the doctor’s office, “Wait!”

Dally turned to look at him, trying not to let his misery show through. “What is it, Johnnycake?” he
asked, his voice a broken monotone.

Johnny swallowed hard. He looked miserable too in his own way and Dallas didn’t know what to say or think about that. A part of him felt guilty. He was so lost in his own sorrow he kept forgetting who all of this pain was really happening to. It was Johnny who had been burned and broken in the church fire. Not him. It was Johnny who had nearly died over and over again. Not him.

But you have too, a voice reminded him. If Johnny dies, you die too.

And that much was true. Dallas had no intention of living if Johnny died. But it wasn’t the same and whatever voice was in his mind seemed to know that too and said nothing else.

“Will you lay with me?” Johnny asked in his typical quiet voice, his hands beginning to shake. His voice broke on the last syllable.

Dally looked into Johnny’s eyes and nodded once. He had to help Johnny move so he could get under him and let Johnny lie on his chest, but once he had, Johnny took his hand and placed it over his scar on his back and, for just a moment, Dally flinched away. Not because he found the scar disgusting or gross or anything like that.

No.

The reminder just made him feel even more guilty.

All of this is your fault. And it wasn’t even a voice in his head saying it this time. It was himself. None of this needed to happen. You coulda prevented all of it.

Johnny let out a soft sigh as Dally pressed his hand against Johnny’s scar, feeling the place where they put him back together again, the proof on his skin that, even if he didn’t have his oxygen, he would never be the same as he had been before the church fire. Nothing about him ever would be.

This time it was Dallas who had to look at the ceiling and blink rapidly to keep the tears in his eyes from falling because he knew he was right in his assumptions.

This really was all his fault.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter is gonna be the last one for a while, this fic is far from over as i have said before. it WILL return. it's just gonna be a while, since all of the other chapters are seasonal and i wanna write em durin' the season.

i have recently come up with an idea that i am rly attached to, even more so than my other ideas i originally posted, so i will probably be writin' that one next rather than the other ideas i told y'all about.
Put on Trial for All Your Crimes

Chapter Summary

The day of Johnny's parents' trial

Chapter Notes

normally i don’t post two chapters of this in a row, but i wanted to finish this and welp!!!! this is the end for now!! <3

also i have rly no idea how courts run, so if any of this is wrong....that's why.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Johnny woke up and realized it was the day of his parents’ trial, he felt a strange sense of vertigo and unreality. So much had been happening in the weeks leading up the trial that had he almost forgotten all about it he’d had so much else on his mind. First it had been his parents showing up trying to take him back home, then it had been getting sick over and over again afterwards. And that wasn’t even counting all the times he’d hung out with the gang while they stayed with him to make sure his parents didn’t come back for round two while Dallas was at work.

He wasn’t sure how to feel if he were to be quite honest with himself. The obvious emotions – anxiety and fear – seemed almost irrational as this was something he’d prayed to happen since he was a little kid and knew what the police did when they found out there were parents like his. He’d stopped praying for it when he realized how little the police cared for people like him in this town. But now they had no choice. They had too much proof and the state had brought it to their attention when that social worker came to speak to him while he was in the hospital and now something had to be done whether they wanted to do it or not.

But he still felt anxious and fearful, even knowing that he finally had the law on his side.

What if something went wrong? What if by some morbid twist of fate the judge and jury and everyone that could do something about what had been done to him in that courtroom decided his parents were the ones telling the truth, not him? What if the medical records didn’t mean anything and the scars on his body were a moot point and it turned out that no matter what he did or what he said or how honest he was being he was still seen as a liar in the eyes of everyone that mattered?

And worst of all, what if, after all of this, they sent him back to them?

He was still a minor. Still sixteen. He wouldn’t be an adult for another year and a half still. And if the sentencing was that he had to go back to living with them, he would have to do it. Or he would be put in juvenile prison for going against a judge or something like that. He didn’t know what the charge was exactly called. He just knew it existed. He’d read about it when he’d done research about this before. It was why he’d never tried to get away before now. If he had to go back, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to survive it. Especially after the hope of getting away, however briefly.
He still felt that way.

Especially now that he was living with Dallas, living with the love of his life.

The thought alone made his hands shake and he reached for a pack of cigarettes that wasn’t there. His hands closed on thin air and he cursed silently, not wanting to wake Dallas who was still asleep in the bed beside him.

Today was his judgment day. It sounded dramatic, but it was true.

Today he would find out if he was going to live or if he would be sentenced to damnation.

* * *

The atmosphere was subdued as Dally and Johnny both woke up and got ready to head to the courthouse. There wasn’t such a thing as a downtown Tulsa. Not really. It was a small town and everything was within a few miles of each other, but the courthouse was as close to what someone might call a downtown as you could get in a town like this.

They both dressed nice. Dally wearing a button down shirt that he couldn’t remember ever having worn before and couldn’t even remember where he’d gotten it and a matching pair of slacks that had a similar backstory. Johnny wore a clean t-shirt and his denim jacket, but without the collar popped and the ends of his sleeves buttoned back. He looked like a respectable cowboy in Dally’s opinion. All he was missing was the hat. And a pair of cowboy boots. He had a blanket over his legs, so it really didn’t matter if he wore jeans and his old scuffed converse sneakers.

Neither of them spoke while they got dressed. There really wasn’t anything for them to say.

Little did Johnny know Dallas was just as concerned about Johnny getting sent back to his folks as he was. Dally knew what that would mean. He knew it was the equivalent of a death sentence and, if he were perfectly honest with himself, it was what Dally expected. His life had never gone well and he’d never once gotten lucky when it mattered in his entire life. Why should things start going well now?

It took Dally three tries to tie his own shoes with how badly his hands were shaking.

Because if Johnny was sent back to his parents, he knew it wouldn’t be a quick death. He would die slowly. By inches. Centimeters even. His parents would go back to beating him, go back to abusing him at night in ways no one wanted to know about. They would drag him out of his wheelchair and out of his bed, convinced he could walk or knowing he couldn’t, but either way not caring that their actions were only making him worse. They’d take away his oxygen for the same reason and let him suffocate. And, without Dallas there to stop him, he’d never once gotten lucky when it mattered in his entire life. Why should things start going well now?

It took Dally three tries to tie his own shoes with how badly his hands were shaking.

Because if Johnny was sent back to his parents, he knew it wouldn’t be a quick death. He would die slowly. By inches. Centimeters even. His parents would go back to beating him, go back to abusing him at night in ways no one wanted to know about. They would drag him out of his wheelchair and out of his bed, convinced he could walk or knowing he couldn’t, but either way not caring that their actions were only making him worse. They’d take away his oxygen for the same reason and let him suffocate. And, without Dallas there to stop him, he would go back to smoking, which would only make everything worse. And then something would happen. Something would go wrong. Maybe it would be one day they went too far and Johnny had a heart attack and at least that would be somewhat quick, but more likely he’d waste away, dying slowly in his bed, unable to leave the house. It might be days or weeks before the gang – who would undoubtedly be banned from seeing Johnny if he went back to his parents – finally learned that Johnny was dead and by then it would be too late. There would be nothing any of them could do except go to see his grave and leave flowers – if there were even a grave to go to.

All of this went through Dally’s head in a matter of seconds, but it felt like so much longer and no matter what he tried to tell himself to convince himself that that wasn’t what was going to happen, that he didn’t even have any concrete proof it was going to happen, he couldn’t seem to believe it.
If Johnny went back to his parents – and by all rights it seemed he very well might – he would die and then Dally would die too because he refused to live in a world where Johnny didn’t exist. He refused to even try. He’d thought that before and every time he meant it. Johnny was his whole world. Without Johnny, he truly had nothing left to live for.

They drove to the courthouse in silence and met up with the gang there. Johnny’s social worker had asked them all to come to the trial as they might be asked to testify on Johnny’s behalf, telling the judge and jury what they had seen Johnny’s parents do to him over the years. They all looked as tense and nervous as Johnny and Dally felt. There were steps leading up to the courthouse and not wheelchair access as far as they could tell, so Dally, Darry, Two-Bit, and Steve each took a side of Johnny’s wheelchair and hoisted him up the steps.

“Thanks,” Johnny said in a monotone as they reached the top.

They all nodded, giving tight-lipped smiles, too afraid to even pretend to be happy.

They had to sit in the hallway on uncomfortable wooden benches for thirty minutes, waiting for the previous case to wrap up before filing into the courtroom two at a time through the small doors. The gang sat in the first row of pew-like benches that went across the courtroom and broke in the middle, making an aisle for people to walk through. Dally didn’t want to, but he wheeled Johnny up to the plaintiff’s table, stopping him next to the woman who was his social worker and, apparently, also his lawyer. Dally hoped she was good. He felt like they were going to need a miracle.

She smiled when she saw Johnny and leaned towards him, saying quietly, “Let me do the talking. If they need to ask you something, they will. I’ve been studying your case for weeks now, so I know exactly what to say, alright?”

Johnny nodded numbly, but didn’t speak.

Not speaking was what he was good at. Dally knew this woman’s job was going to be simple if all she required of him was not to speak unless spoken to.

They had to wait another ten minutes for Johnny’s parents and their lawyer to arrive and another fifteen minutes after that for the judge and jury to file into the courtroom.

“The honorable Judge Linden presiding,” someone that Dally couldn’t see said and everyone in the room stood. It wasn’t until now that Dally realized they weren’t the only ones sitting in the benches anymore. There were people from all over town that he knew didn’t know including Cherry Valance and Randy Anderson sitting near the back. He didn’t know what to think about their presence and really hoped that it would affected how Johnny behaved when he was undoubtedly called to the witnesses stand. He instead hoped he just wouldn’t see them.

When the judge sat down, everyone else did too. “Maybe the court please come to order,” she said, smacking her gavel and the case began.

Johnny’s lawyer went first and Dally was impressed with her.

She brought a very convincing case against Johnny’s parents, speaking at length of the years of abuse Johnny endured up to what had happened only a week ago with them attempting to drag him back home after believing his injuries were not real or at least not bad enough to warrant him being in a wheelchair and on oxygen. She presented photo evidence of Johnny’s injuries over the years. Injuries that Dally hadn’t even known the gang had taken pictures of, but the minute he saw them he glanced at Darry. Darry looked at him only with his eyes and nodded once.
“Thank god for him,” Dally thought quietly, glad Darry had the foresight to do that.

“Mr. Cade has been at the mercy of his parents for all sixteen years of his life,” the social worker was now saying. “He never spoke up because the police in this town have always been prejudice against him not only due to his social class, but because of the color of his skin, so there was no way for him to stop this before now. The fact he has a heart condition now – something on his legal medical records as you can see here – as a direct result of the anxiety and stress caused by his parents’ actions as well as a strained already broken back because of what they did only a week leading up to this trial should be more than enough evidence to not only put his parents away for life, but also to keep him from ever being in contact with them ever again.”

Dally found himself unable to agree more.

It took a good forty-five minutes for the social worker slash lawyer to completely present her case and in that time Dally felt his anxiety lessen considerably. This woman really had done her homework and how could anyone in the courtroom argue with such cold, hard evidence?

But then her turn was over and the floor was handed to Johnny’s parents’ lawyer.

“Ms. Lye has presented a very thorough case,” the lawyer began and he leered at the social worker who gave him a sarcastic grin back. “But she has forgotten that, Mr. Cade is an untrustworthy source of information for a variety of reasons. The first being who he is. He hangs out with a bunch of hoodlums and has been known to be seen sneaking into drive-in movies without paying, stealing cigarettes with his friends, and other various ludicrous activities.”

The lawyer went on to bring up a whole rap sheet of everything Johnny had ever done wrong. Johnny had never been sent to jail or caught doing any of these things, but apparently someone had seen him do it and that had been enough. There was no physical evidence of any of it, like there was of the things Johnny’s lawyer had brought up, but that didn’t stop Dally’s hands from beginning to shake again and wishing more than anything he could smoke in this courtroom.

“It’s just his job, he told himself as the lawyer brought up the times that Johnny had lied to his parents, which Johnny’s lawyer objected to, but the judged insisted upon listening to anyway. He’s supposedta defend them in whatever way he can. Don’t mean that what he’s sayin’ ain’t bullshit.

But what if they believe that bullshit, a voice whispered and Dally couldn’t argue with that.

What if they did?

* * *

There was a short break after Johnny’s parents’ lawyer finished presenting his evidence. It took only thirty minutes – fifteen minutes less than it had taken the social worker to present her evidence and Dally tried to convince himself that was a good thing as he wheeled Johnny out onto the front steps of the courthouse, the rest of the gang following behind them, all of them feeling trapped inside and needing a cigarette.

“Fuck that fuckin’ bastard lawyer,” Two-Bit said, lighting a cigarette and pulling out a beer that no one could guess where it had come from as they burst out into the fresh air and muted sunlight of an overcast afternoon. “He don’t know what the fuck he’s talkin’ about.”

Everyone nodded in agreement and Two-Bit passed the beer around.

They all took a swig from it.
They were all silent, all of them smoking, blowing their smoke quietly at the sky except Johnny who none of them would let smoke with his lung condition, though Dallas was seriously thinking of breaking that rule today considering the circumstances.

Finally Johnny broke that silence, asking in a voice barely more than a whisper, “But what if the judge and jury believe that bullshit?”

Everyone looked at him and then at each other.

None of them really knew what to say because they were all thinking the same thing.

What if the judge and jury did believe the other lawyer? What then?

They knew what then. And Johnny did too. And that was the worst part.

But it was Darry who spoke. He swallowed hard, moved forwards and knelt in front of Johnny’s wheelchair, looking him in the eye as he said, “I don’t care what the judge and jury decide, Johnny. If they believe your folks there are things we can do, alright? We can contest it. We can file for an appeal. And-and it might take a bit and you might haveta live with your folks until it happens, but we can get this overturned, okay? We can. And if that’s what has to happen, we’ll do it. I promise. We ain’t gonna let ya go backta them for good, okay kid?”

But Johnny only bit his lip, looking away to hide the tears forming in his eyes, and replied in a miserable voice, “But what if that don’t work neither?”

Darry swallowed again. “Then I’ll take ya and leave Tulsa. I ain’t lettin’ ya stay with them.”

Dally was surprised to hear the conviction in Darry’s voice and knew he meant every word.

No one was kidding when they said that Johnny was the glue that kept the gang together and no one was kidding either when they said they would do anything to protect him.

They weren’t going to let this go wrong. They didn’t care what they had to do. They’d do it if it meant that Johnny would be safe.

* * *

After the break, it’s time for witnesses to be called to the stands. This time they start with Johnny’s parents’ lawyer who calls everyone to the stand he can think of that might have something bad to say about Johnny. However, the social worker gets her turn with the witnesses too and gets all of them to admit that just about everything they’re saying is conjecture.

The other lawyer calls the gang to the stand and tries in every way he can think of to get them to say something bad about Johnny, trying to get them to admit that Johnny stole, lied, fought, broke the law, was untrustworthy, and, god bless all of them, they do the dead opposite.

“Is it true you, Mr. Curtis, and Mr. Cade used to go to the local drive-in by sneaking it illegally?” the lawyer asked Dallas when it’s his turn on the witnesses stand.

Dally only shrugged. “It’s true we went to the drive-in.”

“What about the legality of how you got in?” the lawyer asked, smirking.

Dally only smirked back, leaning forwards in his seat. “What about the legality of your degree that got you in this courtroom asshole?”
“Mr. Winston, I will not have that kind of language in my courtroom!” the judge said quickly, smacking her gavel on the wood again.

“Apologies, ma’am,” he replied.

“Are you going to answer the question, Mr. Winston?” the lawyer asked.

“Sure,” he replied, shrugging again. “I went in illegally.”

“What about Mr. Cade?”

“Well, yeah,” he replied. “His folks didn’t give him no money for anythin’, so he had no choice.”

The lawyer smirked and, for a moment, Dally felt like a bucket of ice had dropped into his stomach. “No further questions.”

Johnny’s lawyer stood and said, straightening her glasses like some studious movie lawyer, “Mr. Winston, you mention that Mr. Cade’s parents did not give him money for anything. Could you please elaborate on what you mean by that?”

“Certainly,” Dally replied. “Johnny’s real skinny and that’s cause his folks don’t feed him. They always spend their money on booze or cigarettes or whatever else they think they personally need. Sometimes they’d give him a few quarters to spend on food for a whole week, but fifty cents ain’t gonna last that long and lotsa times Johnny went days without food.”

“Could he not just have eaten what was in the house at the time?” the lawyer asked.

Dally shook his head. “Nah. His folks woulda beat him if he did. They always knew what was in the fridge and in the cupboards and if any of it was missin’ they’d beat him. Sometimes they beat him anyway when one of them ate it cause they didn’t know they ate it insteada him.”

The lawyer nodded and said, “No further questions.”

The whole gang did their best to help Johnny out on the witnesses stand, but, when Dally looked back on it later, he knew that it was Darry’s testimony that helped the most. Originally, he was called to the stand by the other lawyer, but once he had finished with him it was the social worker’s turn and she asked the question that got an answer that stunned the entire courtroom into silence.

“Mr. Curtis, you’re twenty years old, correct?” she began.

Darry nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And you have a respectable job at a roofing company, correct?”

Darry nodded again.

“So there would be no reason for you to lie about any of this and compromise your job, correct? Especially if you have two younger brothers to care for?”

Darry nodded a third time.

“So would you please tell me about the events of August 3rd, 1964?” she asked.

Everyone was quiet. No one knew about this date. She hadn’t brought it up in her initial presentation and Dally didn’t think he knew what had happened that night. He glanced at the rest of the gang and they looked just as puzzled as everyone else. He turned back to Darry and saw him swallow
nervously and lick his lips. He glanced at Johnny and something in his eyes seemed to ask permission. Dally’s eyes shifted to Johnny and Johnny nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

This was something just between them and, he supposed, the lawyer too, something the rest of the gang didn’t know about and had never heard about before.

That in and of itself made Dally nervous. Not because he was worried about how the court would receive it, but because he was worried about what exactly it might be.

“It was, uh, late,” Darry began, unable to look anyone in the eye as he spoke, something unusual for him. “I was up cause I’d gotten home from work late, but Soda and Pony were already in bed cause they both were in school at that time. It wasn’t long after our folks died and I was workin’ extra hours so I could get enough moneyta pay for us. I was cleanin’ up in the kitchen cause they forgot to clean up after dinner and I heard a knock at the door. I opened it and it was Johnny.”

“And what state was Mr. Cade in?” the social worker asked.

“He-he didn’t look good,” Darry said, swallowing again.

“Can you please describe what you mean by that?”

“His face was all bruised,” he said, gesturing to one side of his face. “One eye was so badly bruised it was swollen shut and he had a real bad cut across his forehead that had bled all over his face. He had a split lip and a bloody nose too and when he walked he limped. He was cryin’ too. He couldn’t speak cause he was cryin’ so hard and he was shakin’ like a leaf. I didn’t know what had happened, but he looked like someone had beat him with a brick.”

“What did you do then?” the social worker went on.

“I brought him inside and sat him down on the couch and began cleanin’ him up,” Darry replied. “I eventually told him he probably needed a bath cause I could tell that his back and hips were hurtin’ him and he already had back and hip problems. So I brought him into the bathroom and...he asked me to stay with him cause he didn’t wanna be alone, so I did and –”

He broke off. Every one of the gang was stunned to watch Darry put a hand over his mouth as he broke off, unable to speak for a moment. Tears ran down his cheek and his shoulders shook with repressed sobs. That made Dally even more scared.

What could have happened to Johnny that was so bad that he hadn’t wanted anyone to know? That Darry knowing now and speaking about it made him feel this way? Dally could imagine a thousand horrible scenarios, but none of them in the end were as bad as the truth.

“What was it that you saw, Mr. Curtis?” the social worker prompted gently.

Darry took a moment to compose himself and when he could finally speak again, he said, his voice shaking with the force of holding back the sobs even now, “He got undressed and-and he already had back and hip problems. So I brought him into the bathroom and...he asked me to stay with him cause he didn’t wanna be alone, so I did and –”

He broke off. Every one of the gang was stunned to watch Darry put a hand over his mouth as he broke off, unable to speak for a moment. Tears ran down his cheek and his shoulders shook with repressed sobs. That made Dally even more scared.

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Darry took a moment to compose himself and when he could finally speak again, he said, his voice shaking with the force of holding back the sobs even now, “He got undressed and-and got in the bath and...between his legs was...all bloody. There was-there was so much blood. I didn’t know what to do, but I knew what had happened even-even before he told me.”

“And what was it that he told you?”

Darry took a deep breath and looked at the ceiling.

*Here we go, Dally thought, dread and relief filling him all at once. Here is where we learn the horrible truth that will save Johnny from goin’ backta those monsters.*
“He told me that his old man had had his friends over that night and that-that they beat him.” Darry’s voice broke on the word and tears began running down his face again, his face twisting from the effort it took not to cry. “And when they finished beatin’ him so bad he couldn’t walk anymore, they all took turns...assaultin’ him.”

“And when you say assaulting him how do you mean?”

Darry didn’t want to say. Everyone in that courtroom could see he didn’t want to and Dally was certain if he could have seen Johnny’s face right then he wouldn’t have wanted him to either. His shoulders were shaking and he was certain Johnny was doing everything in his power to keep from screaming and crying right there in front of all of them.

But he had to say it. He had to. The social worker wanted to make sure there was no other way to interpret what was being said.

“They assaulted him sexually,” Darry gasped out. “They all did. He said there were thirteen of them and they all took turns. He-he said when they were done the white floor was covered in his blood. And...I know that was true cause when I went over to get Johnny one time while they were gone, I saw the stain cause they never cleaned it up.”

The entire courtroom was silent in the wake of what Darry had said the social worker let the silence linger for a good long time before she finally said, “No further questions,” and sat down.

Everyone knew the case was won after that.

Even after Johnny was called to the witness stand and asked a variety of questions, it all seemed perfunctory to everyone watching. They all knew what was going to happen at that point and there was no longer any reason to pretend otherwise. Therefore, it was no surprise when the jury came back from their break to discuss the case and one of them stood, saying, “We find, the defendants, Mr. and Mrs. Cade, guilty of all charges and find it appropriate to sentence them to fifty years in prison. They must serve at least twenty-five years in prison before they have a chance of parole.”

The judge agreed with this and that was that.

The gang all jumped up at once, whooping and hollering. Darry was still so overcome with emotion that he cried. And Johnny did too, even when the gang all ran up to him, encasing him in one big hug, cheering and saying they knew all along he’d never get sent back to those demons.

The only hiccup in their celebrating was when they left the courthouse and Johnny’s parents tried to accost them.

“You little freak!” his mother shrieked hysterically, managing to get around the escort she had that was trying to lead her to a squad car that would take her to prison. “You little whore! You think you can do this to me?! You’ve ruined my life, you little cunt! How dare you?! How dare you do this to your mother and father?! After all we’ve done for you!”

The gang all got in front of Johnny immediately, ready to defend him as they always had, but to everyone’s surprise, Johnny shouted back, “You’ve tortured me my whole life! You’ve hurt me my whole fuckin’ life! And now I’m free! I’m free and you can’t stand it! And now you’re gonna rot in prison and that’s the way it fuckin’ should be! Stay away from me!”

And he spat at them.

His mother looked at him appalled and shocked as her escort, pulled her away. She continued to shriek after a moment of stunned silence, but no one really heard her. They all turned to Johnny,
proud of him, ruffling his hair, telling him how tough he was and he beamed.

After that they all went back to the Curtis’s house for a celebratory barbecue.

Dally played football with everyone while they waited for Darry to finish cooking dinner, since everyone agreed it wasn’t fair to have him on their team anyway and grinned as Johnny cheered for him loudly every time he scored a goal for his team. Ponyboy also sat out as there would’ve been an uneven number of players otherwise.

Johnny found himself laughing, feeling free for the first time in his life and, as they all sat down to dinner, grinning, happier than they’d been in months, he realized that he could get used to a life like this. He could get used to feeling wanted. He could get used to feeling needed. He could get used to not being scared and full of hatred for himself.

He looked at the sky, smiling, watching a bird fly towards it’s home, feeling for the first time in his life as free as that bird looked. He closed his eyes, still smiling as a breeze blew through his hair.

*I’m ready to be happy.*

Chapter End Notes

that’s all for now folks!!

don’t misunderstand: this fic ain’t completely finished yet. i have an entire part left to write. however i am gonna update more sporadically and wait to write parts of it until the fall. i have other things i wanna work on and a lotta the remainin’ chapters are seasonal, so i wanna write em durin’ their seasons.

anyway thank y’all so so so much for all your support in writin’ this fic!! your support has meant so much to me and has fueled my desire to write it at all <3

this fic will return and i look forwards to finishin’ this completely for ya then <3

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