Just What We Expected

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Summary

Sequel to "The List." A year and a half later, just as Mike and Johnny are settling into their new roles in the department, they start to encounter the problems they expected when someone in the department starts harassing them. The problem escalates out of control, with the attacks becoming scarier, more violent, and more personal every time.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own the characters or the show. All names refer to characters on the show, and not the actors of the same names.
Chapter 1

Mike Stoker arrived at his office on Friday morning at his usual time of 0730. He exited the elevator, and walked down to the end of the sixth floor where his office was. His slight limp, which was more noticeable first thing in the morning, when he’d just gotten out of bed, or when he was tired after a long day, would have been invisible to all but the most trained observers.

He stopped short at his office door, keys in hand.

“Shit,” he said flatly.

While he’d always known something like this would happen sooner or later, he wasn’t prepared for how ugly it would look. He was not a man who liked ugly, disorderly things, and this was both. The vandal hadn’t bothered to do a neat job.

“FAGGOT”

The word was scrawled in bright red paint, in a crude attempt at block capitals, right at eye level. Dribbles of paint fell from the bottom of each letter. The brass name plate and numbers on the door were painted over thickly, as an extra added insult. He touched the paint carefully—it was still slightly tacky, suggesting that the perpetrator had done his work earlier in the morning.

Mike silently unlocked his office door, avoiding touching the paint. He set his lunch down on his desk, and picked up the phone. He dialed the extension for the maintenance office, down in the basement.

“Maintenance—Bert speaking.”

Mike sighed with relief—the one maintenance worker he could trust to handle this abomination quietly was Bert Saunders, who Mike had worked with for over a year at his first station. Just a few months after Mike completed his probie year, Bert was seriously burned in a fire and no longer able to work as a firefighter. Like Stoker, though, he declined medical retirement, and went on to serve the department, in his case, as the head of building maintenance for department HQ. “Hi, Bert. It’s Mike Stoker.”

“Silent Stoker! You’re still showin’ up at 0730, I see. What’s up? Somethin’ broke in your office?”

Mike hesitated. “Not exactly. Any chance you could come up?”

“Sure,” said Bert. “Anything in particular I should bring, maintenance-wise?”

Mike snorted. “Not unless you have a whole new office door I could have.”

Bert was silent for a moment. “Huh.”

“Had a little vandalism problem, it seems.”

“Okay, your door open in or out?”

“In, and the hinges are on the left when you look at it from the outside.”

“All right, Mike. I’ll see if I have a spare. I’ll be up in a few.”

Mike laughed. “I was kidding, actually—but if you do have a spare door, well, that would be just the
thing.” He replaced the receiver, thought for a second, picked it up again, and dialed a familiar number.

“L.A. County Fire Department, Station 93, Captain Gage speaking.”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Hey! Everything okay?”

“Uh, not really. Wanted to give you a heads-up—someone did a nasty little number on my office door. Real poetic—they scrawled ‘faggot’ in red paint. And it was obviously someone in the department—paint’s still wet, so it must’ve been done this morning, and it’s way before the main entrance is unlocked.”

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line. “Shit. That sucks. Anything I can do on this end?”

“No,” Mike sighed. “Just wanted you know that the dreaded and expected shit has hit the fan. I doubt any of it will blow your way, since you’re kind of a moving target, but just in case, keep alert for any nastiness from HQ.”

“’kay.” Johnny paused. “Any idea who did it?”

“No,” said Mike, “and I’m actually just going to try to get it taken care of quietly. Not make a fuss, you know?” Mike imagined he could actually hear Johnny’s eyebrows knitting at that remark.

“You mean, you’re not telling anyone about this?”

“No, for now. Bert down in maintenance is coming up—if he can just take care of it quietly, I think that would be best.”

“You should at least take a picture, Mike. I mean, you have a camera in your office—just snap a couple shots.”

“Huh. That’s not a bad idea. I mean, I don’t want to make an issue of it right now, but, if he does anything else, well …”

“Yeah. Shit, Mikey. Watch your back, all right? What are you doing today, anyhow?”

“Don’t know—probably following up on that supermarket fire from last week.”

“See if you can, I dunno, get away from HQ, would ya?”

“I’ll try. I was thinking I would maybe park the truck somewhere else for a while, too—maybe not in the HQ parking lot.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll check in later, all right?”

“Yeah.” Johnny sighed heavily into the receiver at his end. “Fuck, Mike. This is bullshit.”

“Bona fide bovine feces, all right.”

Johnny laughed. “You always do that.”
“Do what?”

“Take something completely shitty, and manage to make me laugh about it.”

“You can’t tell me you didn’t need it.”

“Oh, I did. Believe me, I did. But seriously. Keep your eyes open, all right? And tell someone. Even if it’s not somebody who you think can do anything.”

“Okay, I will.” Mike heard the elevator door open. “Listen, I gotta go. Love you. Have a safe shift—see you in the morning.”

“Love you too.”

Mike replaced the receiver on the cradle, and stepped outside his office. Bert was standing in the hallway, with a cart holding a door that looked identical to the defaced one. Mike helped him maneuver the door against the wall, where they set it down.

Bert stepped back to take in the damage.

Mike watched as Bert examined the paint on the door, feeling it for tackiness just as Mike had a few minutes earlier. The short sleeves of Bert’s blue uniform shirt did nothing to hide the ridged whorls of scar tissue that covered his left arm. Bert turned to look at Mike. The left side of Bert’s face was similarly affected. Though only half his face was able to show expression, that half did its job well.

“That’s ugly,” he said, the right half of his face frowning severely.

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t at the top of my list for things I wanted to see this morning.”

Bert sized up the door. “I should be able to just pop this one out, and put the new one in. Should only take a few minutes.”

“Great! Before you get started, though, I need to take a couple pictures, for evidence.” Mike unlocked his desk, and pulled his camera out of the bottom drawer.

“Oh. Okay,” said Bert. “I don’t hafta be in ‘em or anything, do I?” he asked nervously, backing away from the door.

“No,” said Mike. “I just want to document this in case it gets worse.” He snapped a couple shots, and then put the lens cap back on. “All set.”

“Okay. I’ll pull the pins from the hinges, and I’ll be outta your hair in a jiffy.”

“Man, Bert; you’re amazing.”

“Well, in a building this size? We’ve got spares for just about everything.” Bert looked at the damage again. “That’s … um.” He shook his head. “I guess the thing to do is swap out the old door, and just let it dry, then sand down the whole front of the door. At least you won’t have to look at that in the mean time.” He reached into his tool belt and pulled out a pair of pliers, and pulled the pin from the top hinge.

“Listen, Bert. Is there any way you can keep this quiet?”

“Quiet?” Bert looked up sharply.

“I don’t want to make a stink about it,” Mike said neutrally. “I figured something like this would
happen someday, and I just want to ignore it as best I can.”

“You figured—” Bert pulled out the pin from the bottom hinge. “What?” He looked back at Mike, not understanding.

“I figured,” Mike said calmly, “that someone at HQ was bound to find out I was gay, and that something like this would happen someday.”

“But aren’t you—” Bert’s eyes darted involuntarily to the ring on Mike’s left hand. “Isn’t that—”

“It is. But the person wearing the other one is a man.”

“Oh.” Bert looked away, and tapped the pin out of the hinge in the middle, and the two men pulled the defaced door into the hallway. Mike helped Bert line the new door up with the hinges, and held it steady as Bert tapped the pins in.

“You’re all set,” Bert said. “The nameplate, and the numbers—I can clean those up this morning. I’ll come put them back up as soon as I can.”

“Thanks.”

Bert stared at Mike. Mike just stared right back.

“I never would’ve guessed,” Bert said. “I mean, we worked together for what, a year and a half? And I didn’t ever think …” He hesitated. “You just always seemed like a regular guy, you know?”

“Does it bother you?” Mike asked.

Bert looked away, then back again. “I think, that before this—” he gestured up and down his scarred left side— “it probably would’ve. But now? I think it’s safe to say I’ve learned a thing or two about judging people. And what’s important, and what’s not. So no, Mike. I guess it doesn’t bother me. I just didn’t know, is all.”

“Not exactly a trait that I want to advertise in this line of work.”

“I guess not,” said Bert. “And I guess I can see why you want to keep this thing quiet.” He tipped the defaced door on its side, and pulled it up onto the cart, ready to roll it down to the service elevator.

“Thanks, Bert. I really appreciate it. The replacement door, and the discretion.”

“No problem on either count.” He looked back at Stoker before returning to the elevator. “And Mike?”

Stoker looked back out the doorway. “Yeah?”

“I hope this kind of shit doesn’t happen again, but if it does? You gotta do somethin’ about it.”

Mike sighed. “Sure, Bert. Like what? Most of the people I could complain to couldn’t do anything anyhow. Some of the people I could complain to might have done this.”

Bert frowned. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess they could’ve,” He shook his head. “Well, take care, all right? I’ll clean off the nameplate and numbers and bring ‘em back up ASAP.”

“Thanks, Bert.”
Mike watched Bert roll the cart down to the service elevator. He gave one last wave, and retreated into his office. He sat at his desk, and held his head in his hands for a minute or two. He pulled out his file on the suspicious supermarket fire he’d been investigating, and went to work.

After an hour or so, other people began arriving on Mike’s floor. As was his custom, Mike left his door slightly ajar. He preferred knowing there were other people around—knowing he wasn’t working in a vacuum. On rare occasions—for instance, if he and a co-worker were going over sensitive information before a trial—he might close his door, but it was usually open.

Mike carefully kept nothing obviously related to his domestic life visible in his office. The one photo of Johnny that anyone else could see was a picture of the entire A-shift from 51—Cap, Marco, Chet, Johnny, Roy, and Mike himself—alongside a picture of the A-shift from Station 93. The other photos on his office walls were landscapes and nature photos—pictures that Johnny had taken while they were together. If he couldn’t have pictures of his partner on his walls, he would darned well have pictures by him on his walls.

The upper right drawer of Mike’s desk was a different story. There, tilted at the perfect angle to be viewed from the desk chair, were Mike’s three favorite pictures. One was a picture Dixie McCall had taken of the two of them, in their yard, right after they had exchanged their rings and made their vows before their good friends. Hank Stanley was holding Mike’s crutches, and Mike, in the picture, was being firmly supported and thoroughly kissed by Johnny. Johnny’s hair was blowing into both their eyes—surely that’s why they seemed to be watering.

Another was a framed shot of Johnny in action at a motor vehicle accident scene. This photo and several others were mailed to the station by a newspaper photographer who had been in one of the cars on his way to work—he had been involved in the accident, but was uninjured, and captured all of Station 51’s A-shift personnel at work. No other people were in the shot, and Johnny was just getting ready to call Rampart on the biophone—no big action—but Mike loved the picture, because the photographer had captured Johnny’s intensity perfectly.

The third and final picture was Mike’s favorite of all the shots—Johnny, shirtless and sopping wet in swim trunks, emerging from the ocean in the late evening. Mike had taken the picture with Johnny’s camera on a whim, not really knowing what he was doing, but somehow, it had turned out perfectly. Johnny’s crooked grin was lit perfectly by the light of what the Hollywood directors would call the “golden hour”—that time of day where everything looked perfect. His eyes were looking right at the camera—Mike suspected that if the photo were blown up enough, it would be like one of those paintings where no matter where you stood, the subject’s eyes seemed to follow you.

Someone coming through the doorway might notice that Mike’s drawer was open, but wouldn’t be able to see the pictures. Mike only bothered to close the drawer when someone actually came into the office, which was fairly infrequent.

But just then, there was a knock at the open door.

“Knock knock,” said the man at the door, as he rapped quietly with his knuckles.

“Hey, Wes. Come on in,” said Mike, as he slid his drawer shut, with one last look.

Wes Harris was the other investigator on the supermarket case Mike was working on. Mike’s responsibilities involved certain scientific and technical aspects of the case, while Wes’s were focused on working with the L.A. Sheriff’s office to make sure the aspects of the case related to the suspect and his motives were consistent with the fire department’s technical findings.

“What’s up with your door?” Harris asked. “The numbers are gone—I almost went right past to
Wilson’s office.”

“Oh, maintenance took them off to get cleaned and polished or some such nonsense.” Mike waved his hand dismissively. “They’ll probably take Wilson’s next.”

“Huh,” said Harris. “I wonder why they didn’t just take ‘em all at once. Seems silly to go up, and down, and up, and down—those guys have enough work to do without dinking around like that.”

Mike laughed. “Well, you just said it—you almost went right past my office to Wilson’s—what would happen if nobody had numbers on their doors?” He really wanted to change the subject; move along to actual business.

“Guess so,” said Wes. He flopped down into the chair in front of Stoker’s desk. “So what’d the lab say about that sample from the stock room?”

Mike was relieved to get down to business—he pulled out the lab report and went over the findings with Harris. As they were finishing up, Bert Saunders tapped on the door.

“Sorry to bother you—just bringing back all your brass stuff, nice and polished. Good as new,” said Bert. “I know you arson folks like everything nice and neat.”

“Oh, thanks, Bert. We’re just finishing up here, anyhow, if you wanted to put them back on.”

Wes nodded and stood up. “Yep, we’re done. Have a good weekend if I don’t see you.”

“You too—got any good plans?” Mike had become adept at asking people about their home lives while still sidestepping any questions about his own.

“Sure—supposed to be nice. Melissa and I are gonna work on the yard tomorrow, then there’s some big church lunch on Sunday.” Harris paused—an uncomfortable, tense moment. “How ‘bout you?”

“Oh, similar,” Mike said. “Lots of yard work to be done this time of year. Deck needs a good powerwashing, too, though I don’t know whether we’ll get to it. And a buddy from my days at 51s is coming by on Saturday—Chet Kelly. You know ‘im?”

“Kelly, Kelly—nope; can’t say that I do.” Harris glanced at the pictures on Mike’s wall. He usually avoided looking at these photos, knowing that one of the men was likely Mike’s … well … he didn’t know what to call him. “Which one is Kelly?”

“Short guy with the mustache—quite the station prankster. He’s an engineer at 110s now.”

Harris walked over and inspected the picture, not looking at Chet Kelly at all. The tall man in his late thirties must be the captain—couldn’t be him. One of the paramedics—the blond one—had a wedding band, so that wasn’t him. Mexican-looking guy? Nah, Harris couldn’t see him being the one. His eyes fell on the one it had to be.

“Kelly, Kelly—nope; can’t say that I do.” Harris glanced at the pictures on Mike’s wall. He usually avoided looking at these photos, knowing that one of the men was likely Mike’s … well … he didn’t know what to call him. “Which one is Kelly?”

“John Gage, on your left, and Roy DeSoto.”

Harris just looked. “Nope, don’t know ‘em.” He pulled himself away from the photo. “Anyhow.
Have a good one. I’m off to the sheriff’s for the rest of the day.” Gage, he thought. Have to remember that.

Bert stepped out of the doorway to let Harris through.

“What was that about?” asked Bert, recognizing the oddness and stiffness of that last exchange.

Mike laughed hollowly. “Oh, you know. Every now and then, someone just has to check out those pictures, just has to try and figure it out. I can practically hear what’s going on in their heads. ‘Which one is it? It couldn’t be the captain, but what about the short guy? He looks like he could be gay.’ Then they look at the picture from 93s—I don’t know who they might single out there. But nobody asks—nobody ever, ever, asks. They want to know—morbid curiosity I guess—but they don’t want to actually admit they want to know.

“Aw, hell; I probably oughta just take those pictures down—save everyone the trouble. But everyone in HQ has pictures from their station days—everyone. Especially us guys who can’t go back. Heck, you’ve got one from when we were at 14s, I’ll bet.”

“Sure do,” said Bert, as he finished tacking the numbers on the door, right over the shiny name plate. “And I’ll tell you something—you and me, we both had a lot less gray hair back then.”

Bert inspected his work, put his hammer back in his tool belt, and made sure there were no tacks on the floor. “Okay, all set here,” said Bert. “I’ll just clean up the other one and keep it as a spare.”

Stoker didn’t reply. Bert looked back at Mike, who was sitting at his desk, staring at the two group photos on the wall, shoulders slumped, head slightly down.

Bert stood there for a moment, watching Stoker. Slowly, he turned back into the office, and walked over to the wall. “I’m asking, Stoker. Show me, who is he? Who’s your, um …” he trailed off awkwardly. “I don’t know what the right word is,” he admitted.

“Partner,” said Mike. He stood up, and led Bert to the picture of 51’s A-shift, from over three years ago. “That’s him,” he said, pointing to Johnny. “That’s Johnny.”

“Paramedic, huh?” said Bert.

“Yep—still is.”

Bert looked at the picture thoughtfully. “I might’ve been better off if those guys had been around when I got hurt,” he said. “But back then, they just threw us in an ambulance and got rid of us as fast as they could.”

“They do good work,” Mike said. He pointed to the picture of the A-shift from Station 93. “Yang, right there, and Velasquez—they probably saved my life when I got hit by that car. Broken ribs punctured my lung—back before the paramedics, I probably wouldn’t have made it to the hospital. So who knows, for you—might’ve helped. Burns, though—I don’t know, Bert; from what I understand, there’s not much they can do at the scene.”

Bert shuddered. “They sure as hell can knock you right out, for one thing,” he said. “I’d call that something they can do.”

“Yeah,” said Mike. “Yeah, it is. I was pretty much out of it after the first, oh, five minutes, or maybe a hundred years. Probably five minutes till they hit me with the morphine.”

“I’d’ve appreciated that,” said Bert. “A lot.” He cleared his throat. “Your five minutes were my forty-five. It was a goddamned long way to Rampart.”
Mike looked at Bert. “You know, I think you and I have a lot in common, Bert. We’re both different—in ways that make people uncomfortable to talk about it.”

Bert laughed. “Yeah, that’s for damned sure. ‘Cept mine’s on the outside, and yours ain’t. But yeah, people clam up real good, don’t they? I think maybe you’re the first person who’s ever said the word “burns” in front of me in like two years.”

“And you’re the first person who actually asked about my partner,” replied Mike.

They were silent for a moment. Then, both men jumped as Bert’s radio came to life, calling him to the second floor for a broken light fixture.

“See you around, Stoker,” said Bert. “And I hope you … don’t need me again.”

“Thanks, Bert. Me too.”

Bert left to tend to the needs of the light fixture on the second floor. After he had his office to himself again, Mike opened his upper right drawer once more, and went back to work.
Chapter 2

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Captain John Gage sat at his desk at Station 93, filling out his last piece of paperwork from the just-completed shift. Johnny and his C-shift crew had had a reasonably easy shift—a couple of false alarms, one small trash fire, several rescue calls—until the multi-car MVA they’d been called to late the previous evening. There had only been three cars involved, but two of them were packed full of teenagers on their way home from a high-school football game, and there had been a lot of injuries. So many, in fact, that Johnny had turned incident command over to his engineer, and worked the accident as a third paramedic from their station. But the night-time portion of the 24-hour shift had been easy—just one minor call each for the engine and the squad.

After Mike’s disturbing call first thing in the morning at the start of Johnny’s shift, he’d been worried about him the whole previous day. Johnny wanted to get home, since it was Saturday and Mike would be waiting for him at home, but he knew he’d regret leaving the paperwork from the MVA until his next shift, which wasn’t until Monday. So he bit the bullet, and completed and filed the necessary forms, and was done by 0820. He chatted with the arriving A-shift, who were having coffee in the kitchen, said his farewells, and headed to the parking lot behind the station.

He whistled as he walked through the morning sunshine, keys swinging on his finger. But when he reached his truck, he stopped short. All four tires were flat. He circled the truck, looking carefully at the tires, and found the expected knife marks in each one.

Johnny suddenly felt terribly cold. He looked at the other cars in the lot—they were all fine. Of course, they all belonged to A-shift men. Everyone else from Johnny’s C-shift had already left, meaning their cars were fine. He looked around the parking lot, and didn’t see anything else that looked unusual. Without touching his vehicle, he walked back to the station, set his keys on the table, and sat down silently.

“What’s up, Johnny?” asked Henry Yang, one of the A-shift paramedics. Johnny was well-acquainted with 93’s A-shift, as Mike had worked that shift for over a year, until the accident that knocked him out of active firefighting. Johnny hadn’t gotten to know the men while Mike was working with them—while Mike’s co-workers accepted that he was with a man, Johnny wasn’t ready to be out to the fire department—but got to know them all well during Mike’s recovery and afterward.

“All four of my tires got slashed,” he said curtly.

Cups clattered to the table.

“Shit,” said Washington, one of the firefighters. “And it’s not like we’re in a bad neighborhood here, either.”

“John, you need to call the sheriff, you know,” said Captain Sterling.

“Yeah,” he said glumly.

“Shit, who’d do something like that?” asked Yang. “Everybody likes you, man. Must be some random crank.”

Johnny frowned. “No,” he said slowly. “I think it’s personal.” He looked up at the men around the table. “Mike’s office door got trashed yesterday morning. Probably by someone who works at HQ.
So I don’t think these four tires are a coincidence.”

“That’s a hell of a thing,” said Washington. “You definitely gotta call the sheriff, man.”

“Yep.” Johnny tried to shake off the dirty feeling he had. “Mind if I use the office for a minute, Len?”

“All yours,” said Captain Sterling.

Johnny retreated to the office he’d just left, and picked up the phone. He’d make the harder call first, he decided.

Mike picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.”


“What’s wrong?”

Johnny cut right to the chase. “My tires got slashed. All four of ‘em.”

There was silence on the end of the line. “Probably not a coincidence, timing-wise.”

“No.”

“You calling the sheriff?”

“Yeah. At least for this crap I can file a report with law enforcement. I’m gonna leave it at that, though.”

More silence. “I don’t like this, Johnny. Somebody’s getting to both of us, at the same time. I just have a bad feeling this is gonna get ugly.”

“Well, Mike, in my book it’s already ugly. But who knows—maybe the jerk was stupid enough to leave prints—everyone in the department has their prints on file, so maybe this’ll be it.”

“Maybe,” Mike said skeptically.

“Listen, I should go. I’ll call the sheriff, then I guess I’ll get the Rover towed into town. I’ll give you a call to pick me up when I’m ready, all right?”

“Actually, I’ll just get in the car now, and come pick you up at 93s.”

“Hey, good idea! A-shift’s on—sure they’ll be glad to see you.”

“Okay—I’ll see you in, oh, forty-three minutes or so. Bye.”

Johnny held the phone receiver between his ear and his shoulder, depressed the hang-up buttons on the cradle briefly, and dialed another number.

“L.A. County Sheriff’s office, Deputy White speaking.”

“Hey, Fred. It’s John Gage from Station 93.”

“Johnny! How’s it hangin’?”
“Uh, actually, not so great. I kinda need you to send a car out to the station.”

Deputy White immediately reset his tone from flippant to professional. “Okay. What happened?”

“Some bastard slashed my tires.”

White let out a low whistle. “That’s no good. I’ll be out in a few.”

“Thanks, Fred.”

Johnny replaced the receiver, and got out the phone book. He quickly called Charlie’s towing service—Charlie usually picked up the wrecks from MVAs, so the fire department knew him well—and arranged for a flatbed to take the Rover into Santa Clarita.

Johnny hung up the phone, and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyelids. The weekend was not shaping up the way he’d hoped. He and Mike didn’t get many weekends where Johnny didn’t have to work one of the days, and today, at least, would be half taken up by the logistics of getting new tires on the Rover. Plus, they now had something unpleasant hanging over their heads—the fact that it was almost certainly someone from the department who had vandalized Mike’s door and Johnny’s car. Or, Johnny realized, more than one someone.

Johnny and Mike had kept their relationship extremely quiet for over a year, with only Roy and Captain Stanley knowing about them at first. Some months after Mike had transferred to 93s, he’d told the rest of the A-shift there that he was with a male partner, but not who it was. But when Mike had nearly been killed on the job, their relationship had become apparent to all their friends, as well as to anyone in the department who cared to listen to rumors.

Johnny was aware, when he took his Captain’s exam, that there were probably people in the department who would want to get rid of him, and was mildly surprised, after passing the test, to be assigned a captaincy nearly immediately. Many men would have considered the Station 93 placement a kind of punishment, as the station was way off the beaten path in far northeast L.A. county. The station, like others in far corners of the county, had trouble retaining staff, with many men requesting transfers so they could be closer to the city. But, Johnny hadn’t minded—he preferred being away from the pollution and noise of the city, and the commute from the house he shared with Mike was easier than the one to Station 51. Plus, there was the added bonus of already knowing and trusting the men on one of the other shifts.

But still, Johnny knew that within the department, when his name was mentioned, it was often followed by phrases like “Oh, you mean the one who...” or “Isn’t he, uh, you know?” or other unpleasantries. Mike and Johnny made sure they were never, ever seen at HQ together, even though Mike’s office was there, and Johnny’s position as Captain took him there on a regular basis—even though plenty of people there probably knew they were together, both Mike and Johnny were uncomfortable advertising the fact in their highly conservative workplace. No point in taking a teensy, smoldering fire—maybe a cigarette in a damp garbage can—and throwing gasoline on it. He sighed, and headed to the kitchen table again.

“Okay?” asked Len Sterling.

“Not really,” Johnny admitted. “I guess Mike and I had figured we’d have trouble sometime, but when it comes, you’re not really ready for it.”

Captain Sterling frowned at Johnny’s defeated-looking expression. “Look, John. The sheriff’s coming, right?”
Johnny nodded. “Yeah; Fred White’s on his way down.”

“You don’t need to tell him anything other than the facts—someone slashed all four of your tires. That’s a crime.”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t need to speculate with Fred about why you think this happened, unless you feel like it. No matter why it was done, it’s still a crime. Mike’s office door—now that’s a different story, unfortunately. Can’t really call the law in on that one without stirring up quite a fuss. Did you want to say anything else about that, by the way?”

Johnny sighed. “Bastard painted ‘faggot’ in red paint, still wet when he got there yesterday morning. Mike’s keeping it quiet, but he took pictures before the maintenance guy replaced the door, just in case—well, just in case.”

He slapped the table sharply, just once. “We knew this was gonna happen, Len—I mean, there was no way people didn’t figure out about us when Mike was in the hospital all that time. But you know us—we don’t flaunt it or anything. When I have to be at HQ for any captainy kinds of things, we make sure we avoid each other. I’ve never seen his office. I don’t go to his trials. We made sure never to work together once we got involved. But we knew, Len—we knew that some people just wouldn’t be able to leave it alone.”

Captain Sterling sighed. “To be honest, John, I’m surprised it took this long. It’s been what—eighteen months since Mike got hit?”

“Yeah, ‘bout that,” said Johnny. “Before that? Only Captain Stanley and my old partner Roy knew about me and Mikey.”

“Well, to be honest, John, I figured out who you were about a week after Mike came out to my A-shift,” Sterling admitted. “And Mike didn’t say anything about you when he came out to us, but I overheard him on the phone with you once—don’t remember what he said, but it was enough fireman lingo that I knew you were one of us. And that, plus Hank being Mike’s emergency contact—well, I knew you must’ve been one of Hank’s boys.”

“Huh. Well, thanks for not making an issue of anything.” Johnny paused, and looked back up at Captain Sterling. “Hey Cap, c’n I ask you something?”

Sterling smiled—he was always amused when Johnny forgot that he himself was a captain as well, and fell back into his old habit of calling Len ‘Cap.’ “Sure, Cap, go right ahead!”

“Oh, when I came up for a captaincy, did you have anything to do with my getting the C-shift posting here?”

Len’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, I might’ve suggested you’d last longer than the last guy, is all. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all—I guess with, uh, things bein’ the way they are and all, I feel kinda lucky to have gotten anything, let alone Mike’s old station. Though I’m glad it wasn’t your shift—that woulda been too weird, with how much you all helped us out and all.”

Sterling grinned through his thick mustache. “Well, for it to have been my shift, I would’ve had to be gone, and I ain’t goin’ anywhere any time soon. I like it just fine right here.”

“What, John?”

“Well, I just hope this guy, whoever he is, doesn’t take things so far that Mike and I have to—”

“Now hold your horses, Gage,” Sterling said sternly. “First of all, despite any cowardly vandals who’re lurking in the department, you just remember that you two boys have an awful lot of friends here, too, all right?”

Johnny nodded glumly.

“And second of all—you’re not letting Mike’s anxious tendencies rub off on you, are you? Let’s not assume the worst, all right?”

“Okay. Yeah.” Johnny’s hunched shoulders lowered ever so slightly. “You’re right. If I start getting nervous, Mike will positively explode with anxiety.” He thought about what he’d said, and amended it. “Implode. That’s more his style.”

“Attaboy.”

The two men looked up when they heard a car pull into the lot outside the kitchen door.

“Right,” said Johnny. “Time to go talk to the law.” He stood up and looked down at Sterling.

“Thanks, man. Really.”

“Any time, John. You know that.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Johnny trotted out to the parking lot just as Deputy Fred White was getting out of his vehicle. “White” was a name that suited him perfectly—his hair was so blonde as to be practically white. His skin was pink and freckled under the constant beating of the southern sun, and he had to wear sunglasses on all but the cloudiest of days.

“Hey, Fred. Thanks for comin’ out.” The two shook hands.

“No problem. So show me the damage,” said Fred.

Johnny pointed him to the Rover. “Right there—knife through all four tires.”

Fred let out a low whistle. “Shoot, someone’s wrecked your mornin’ but good. Any idea who mighta done this?”

Johnny was prepared for this question. “Naw, nobody specific. But you know how it is—there’s always someone who’s got a bone to pick, and some people can’t just come right out and pick it.”

Fred nodded, and got his notebook out. “So, what was the shift like yesterday—any extended runs?”

“Just the one—the crash with all those kids.”

Fred shook his head. “Man, that was quite a thing. How many did you end up shipping to Henry Mayo?”

“Five. Three pretty minor—just needed stitches and such. One of the others had a broken leg and arm, but the last one?” Johnny shook his head. “I rode in with him. It was touch and go the whole way. You hear anything?”
“No,” said Fred, “and that’s good news. We hear about it when it’s bad news. Anyhow,” he continued, “sounds like there was plenty of time when there was nobody at the station—plenty of time for this to get done without anyone noticing.

“And the truth of it is,” Johnny added, “it could’ve happened while we were all here—at night—and we wouldn’t have noticed then, either.”

Fred walked around the Rover, and made a diagram of the knife mark in each tire. He flipped his notebook closed. “I’ll be honest with you, Gage. There’s no chance in hell we’ll catch whoever did this, understand? All I can do, really, is take your statement, and give you a copy of the report just in case your insurance will cover the tires.”

Johnny shook his head. “Don’t bother—it won’t. I just carry the minimum coverage on this heap.”

Fred smiled. “Oh, I hear your mouth sayin’ ‘heap,’ but I see your eyes sayin’ ‘baby.’ You don’t fool me, pal.”

“Yeah, okay,” Johnny said sheepishly. “I like my Rover. We’ve had a lot of fun times.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Fred. “Charlie comin’ to get her?”

“Yep—he said he’d set me up with a good tire place in Santa Clarita.”

“All right, Johnny. Well, I oughta go—got some follow-ups from the crash last night. And—if we can arrange it, we’ll try to send an extra patrol up this way for the next couple nights.”

Johnny almost told Fred not to bother unless C-shift was on duty, but then thought better of it. “Thanks,” he said instead. “We all appreciate it. See ya,” he said as Fred was closing the car door.

Johnny went back to the kitchen and finished another cup of coffee before Charlie arrived with the flatbed. They got the Rover loaded up, and Charlie gave Johnny the number of the place he was taking the vehicle. “You’ll get a good deal—guy’s had a soft spot for firemen ever since his shop had a tiny fire that could’ve turned bad real fast.”

After Charlie left, Johnny found himself in the odd position of being at his fire station with nothing in particular he needed to do. He went out to the apparatus bay, just to hang out. Yang and Velasquez were just finishing their inventory of the squad.

“Hey, Johnny,” said Yang. “You get that car taken care of?”

“Yep, Charlie just hauled her off to some place in Santa Clarita where he says I’ll get a good deal. Boy, I’ll tell ya, that’s a good thing about working out here off the beaten path—people know each other, know who to trust with stuff. Down near the city, man, it’s a different story.” He looked over the boxes of equipment the paramedics were putting away, and Yang noticed the path of his gaze.

“You ever miss it?” he asked.

“Yeah, sometimes,” said Johnny. “I get in enough hours to keep up my certification, though. But I’ll tell you, I don’t mind not gettin’ beat up all the time.”

Yang laughed. “Gage, you were a legend in the department for how often you got messed up. I don’t know how you managed it. I mean, we were all rescue guys before going into the paramedic business, and we rescue men tend to take the hits fairly often, but you? Like I said—a legend.”

“Yeah, and that’s the part I don’t miss so much. You get to a certain point, and you realize you’re not
immortal, ya know? Plus, well, I got someone who wouldn’t appreciate being left behind.”

“No, he sure wouldn’t!”

The three paramedics turned to the day room doorway, to see Mike Stoker standing there in his Saturday civvies.

“Hey, Wrong-Way!” exclaimed Velasquez. “C’mon in!” Mike had picked up the unfortunate nickname when he first started at Station 93, because the layout of his new station was an exact mirror image of that of Station 51, and Mike was continually colliding with people by heading the wrong direction.

“Hey, guys. Hey, Johnny.” Mike went over to his partner and gave his hand a quick squeeze—even though the others present were accepting of their relationship, Johnny and Mike were not in the habit of public displays of affection. “You got the Rover taken care of?”

“Yeah, Charlie’s taking her to a good place in Santa Clarita. I’ll give them a call when we get home.”

“Mind if I say hi to Cap real quick? I caught Washington and Armstrong out back already, but I haven’t seen Cap in quite a while.”

“Sure—I think he must be in the office with Holtz,” said Johnny, “since I don’t see either one of ‘em out here.”

“All right—I’ll just be a minute,” said Mike.

“What’re you two up to this weekend?” asked Yang.

“Oh, a pal from 51s is coming by this afternoon, and this pal means beer. How ‘bout you?”

“Not much—or at least, not much that’s gonna be any fun. Baby’s due in another month, and Mindy’s been pretty nuts with getting the room ready and everything. I mean, it’s a baby—they don’t care what their room looks like, for crying out loud.”

“Yeah,” smiled Johnny, “but you gotta admit—that formerly spare room was pretty spectacular, with the golden eagles on the wallpaper.” Johnny spent quite a lot of nights in the Yang’s spare room during Mike’s lengthy stay at Henry Mayo hospital. “Glad you’ll be putting that room to good use.”

They chatted for a few minutes, until Mike emerged from the Captains’ office. Johnny grinned as Mike stopped to give the shining Seagrave engine a little pat.

“She’s doin’ fine, Mike. Don’t worry—I keep an eye out.”

“I know, I know. I just don’t get my hands on real equipment any more, you know?”

Johnny raised an eyebrow at him, and Mike blushed furiously. Neither Yang nor Velasquez seemed to notice that little exchange.

“All right, guys—I’ve had enough of this joint for a couple days. Have a safe shift. See ya next time,” said Johnny.

He and Mike headed through the day room out to the parking lot, where Mike had parked his pickup truck.

“Okay, Gage; say it,” Mike said, grinning widely.
“Let’s get home, so you can get your hands on some real equipment.”

“Walked right into that one, didn’t I,” Mike said happily.
Chapter 3

“Hey, what time did you say Chet was coming over?” Mike asked, as he pulled the pickup truck into their driveway.

“One o’clock,” said Johnny. “He’s bringing beers, and we’re making lunch. Shoot,” he frowned. “I was gonna pick up stuff for burgers on the way home. Guess we should go do that now, huh?”

Mike checked his watch. “No way—it’s not even eleven, and I think you mentioned some equipment that needed checking out,” he reminded Johnny, as they got out of the truck.

“So I did,” said Johnny, unlocking the door and letting them both in. He kicked his shoes off and quickly peeled off his socks, saving an annoying step later.

“Race you,” Mike said as he toed his sneakers off quickly, without untying them.

As always, Johnny made it to the bedroom first. As always, Mike slammed the door shut, even though there was nobody else in the house.

“I win,” said Johnny, already toe to toe with Mike.

“Nuh-uh,” said Mike. “We both win.” He made quick work of Johnny’s belt buckle, eliciting a laugh from his partner.

“Going straight for the equipment, huh?” Johnny said, as he was quickly divested of his uniform pants. He stepped out of his pants, and reached over and stripped Mike’s t-shirt off, quickly sneaking in a kiss.

Mike speedily flipped open the buttons on Johnny’s uniform shirt, and Johnny shucked it off and tossed it aside, letting Mike peel off the white t-shirt underneath.

“Mmm … hellooooo, Captain,” said Mike, running his hands over Johnny’s bare chest. His thumbs each caught a nipple, and worked on them in parallel, while his mouth greeted Johnny’s again hungrily.

Johnny’s hands had found their way under the elastic of Mike’s shorts and briefs at the same time, and he wrangled the offending items out of the way until gravity and then Mike’s feet took care of the rest of that task.

Mike’s hands stroked downwards from Johnny’s smooth chest to catch the waistband of Johnny’s boxers, which he carefully removed, taking care not to bend any of the equipment underneath. As soon as the boxers were clear, they pressed their bodies together, relishing the feeling of skin on skin. Johnny hummed his approval as Mike firmly grabbed an ass cheek in each hand, and pulled their bodies even closer together, at the same time starting the move closer to the bed.

Mike let go briefly to yank the covers off the bed. As soon as the way was clear, Johnny fell sideways across the bed and pulled Mike down with him. They lay on their sides, face to face. Johnny hooked a leg over Mike’s hip, and pulled their lower bodies together as he took Mike’s face in his palms and kissed him. His tongue met no resistance, as Mike’s lips parted eagerly, and their tongues swirled and played, from one mouth to the other, until it was no longer clear where one ended and the other began. Mike’s free hand stroked up and down Johnny’s back, from his neck to
his tailbone, nails and fingertips gently tracing the curves of Johnny’s spine.

Johnny’s thumbs traced Mike’s cheekbones, and his slender fingers combed through Mike’s hair. When their lips finally separated, Johnny rested his forehead on Mike’s for just a moment, before his lips put themselves to good use, nipping gently across Mike’s cheek to his ear. Johnny paused there for a moment, and whispered ever so quietly into Mike’s ear.

“I love you so much. I don’t say it enough; I know I don’t. Love you, love you.” He trailed his lips down Mike’s neck, out to the end of his collar bone, and back across and down towards the center of his chest. He rolled Mike over onto his back, and let his kisses roam freely across the expanse of Mike’s chest, using one hand for balance, and keeping the other entwined with one of Mike’s. Tongue, lips and teeth made their way down six-pack abs, and down the valley where the obliques met the crest of the hipbone. Johnny’s high cheekbone teased at Mike’s cock as his lips followed this valley down, then back up again, and across to the matching valley on the other side. When he reached the end of that valley, he crossed to the center of the landscape again, pulling a groan from Mike as he licked a stripe up the center of his cock, and circled around the head with lips and tongue.

He had to let go of Mike’s hand as he worked his way further down his body, caressing his inner thighs as he parted his legs and gently, smoothly lavished attention on his balls, all the while caressing hips, thighs, and everything in between with his hands, until Mike was panting and writhing, bucking up towards every touch, desperately seeking friction and heat. When Mike finally couldn’t stand it any more, and reached for his own cock, Johnny covered Mike’s hand with his own, moved up Mike’s body to adjust his angle, and tongued the head of Mike’s cock—his trick to get Mike’s hand to let go. And it always worked, clearing the way for his mouth to do what it wished.

Mike’s hands found Johnny’s hair, not pulling or clutching, but carding through it, and smoothing it away from his face and eyes. Johnny paused on an upstroke, to catch his lover’s blue eyes. The desperate, wrecked look on Mike’s face caused a sharp, involuntary intake of breath from Johnny as their eyes met. “God, Mikey. That look shouldn’t be legal.” Johnny couldn’t help himself, and stroked his own cock in time with his mouth’s movements. The vibrations of Johnny’s own low, humming sounds sent Mike to the edge, making him call out.

“Oh, fuck, Johnnyjohnnyjohnny!” And hearing those words, Johnny too came undone, spurting hotly over his own hand, swallowing hard as Mike’s hands clutched involuntarily in Johnny’s hair. And the world, for a moment, went white for the two of them, with nothing present in the universe except each other and their pleasure.

As soon as Johnny could move again, he swiped a tissue out of a box and cleaned up hastily, before moving up to be face to face with Mike again. Mike opened his eyes as Johnny reached his level again, and with a jelly-like arm, pulled Johnny’s face down to his own. Mike groaned into Johnny’s kiss as he tasted himself on Johnny’s tongue and lips, and clutched Johnny to him as they both came down, breathing settling, pulses slowing.

“Here I thought I was gonna be inspecting some equipment,” said Mike, once he could speak again, “but instead I ended up getting blown but good.”

“Couldn’t help it,” said Johnny. “B’sides, the equipment’s not goin’ anywhere, and should be in working order again shortly, so who says we’re done?”

“No me,” Mike replied fervently. “But I don’t think I can even move for ten minutes.”

“Nobody’s gotta move,” Johnny said lazily. “I’m not movin’. See?”
“Mmm, yeah, I see. C’mere,” Mike said, pulling Johnny closer, so that Johnny’s head rested on Mike’s chest. Mike nuzzled his face into Johnny’s hair, breathing in deeply. They lay that way for many minutes, not talking, just being.

Mike started violently as the phone—the one on Johnny’s side of the bed—rang right next to his head.

“Mine,” said Johnny. But he didn’t reach for the phone.

“Ignore, ignore,” said Mike. “I just love answering machines.”

They listened as the machine in the hallway picked up.

“It’s Johnny’s answering machine. Leave a message.”

BEEP!

“Hey, guys, it’s Chet—if you’re there, pick up, will ya? ‘Cause I’m leaving my house now; gotta do some errands on the way, and just needed to check with you about—”

Johnny groaned, and rolled over Mike to answer the phone.

“Hey, Chet; what’s goin’ on?” he said languidly.

Chet chortled. “Gage, you’re either stoned, or well and thoroughly fucked, and I think I can guess which.”

“Geez, Kelly. What’s up?”

“I just couldn’t remember if we said one or one thirty. That’s all.”

“We said one, but if you wanna make it later that’s cool,” said Johnny.

“Could we? ‘Cause I forgot tomorrow’s my mom’s birthday, and I gotta pick her up something.”

“Sure—one thirty—not a problem.”

“Didn’t think it would be, soon as you answered the phone, pal,” said Chet. Johnny rolled his eyes—he could practically hear the smirk over the phone line. “See you guys then—and I’ll make damned sure not to be early!” Chet hung up quickly before Johnny could supply a retort.

“Jesus,” muttered Johnny, handing the receiver over to Mike, who hung it back up. “He was in rare form.”

“I can guess what he said,” laughed Mike, “cause you did sound pretty, um, relaxed.”

“Mmm. We got an extra half hour, too, if you still wanna get your hands on some real equipment.”

“God, I can’t believe I actually said that,” said Mike. “But yeah, babe, you bet I do.”

~!~!~!~!~!

Johnny took Mike’s truck out, just before one, to pick up grilling supplies and ice. It was a sweltering day, with bad smog conditions to the south. His hair was wet from his second shower of the day, so he left the pickup’s windows down to blow his hair dry on the way to the store. He made record time getting into and out of the grocery store, and was just pulling into the driveway again as Chet’s car
“Hey, Gage,” said Chet, as he hauled a case of beer out of the back seat. He looked around. “Where’s the Rover?” he asked.

Johnny sighed, as pulled the cooler of ice out, along with the bag of groceries, and kneeled the door of the truck closed. “Long story—and not a pretty one, either. C’mon in.” He opened the front door, and he and Chet set their burdens down in the foyer.

“Oooh, central air,” exclaimed Chet. “Good move, man. When’d you guys do that?”

“Couple months ago,” said Johnny. “When both the living room and bedroom window units crapped out on us at once, Mike took it as a message from above, and with my captain’s pay we could just do it, so we bit the bullet and went for the central AC.”

“Uh-oh; do I hear a bit of a domestic disagreement here?”

“Nah,” said Johnny, shrugging. “I coulda gone either way, but Mike, he really hates the heat, and it turns out to be more cost effective in the long term to run central air than a bunch of window units, so we did it.”

“Great,” said Chet. “When can I move in?”

Mike emerged from the bedroom, hair still damp from his recent and hasty shower. “Hey, Kelly! Long time no see.”

“Yeah, coupla months, I think—but fear not. You’ll see plenty of me from now on. I’m moving in, now that I know you guys have central air.” Chet started poking beer bottles into the ice in the cooler. “So what’s the ugly story with the Rover?”

Mike looked at Johnny. They hadn’t discussed what, if anything, they were going to say to their friends about the incidents of harassment.

“Chet pulled in just as I was coming back, and noticed the Rover wasn’t here,” said Johnny. He raised his eyebrows, in a wordless query to Mike: *Do we tell him the whole story?*

“Ah,” said Mike. He nodded, answering Johnny’s silent question.

“So what’s the deal?” Chet prodded, noticing the exchange, and never one to leave things alone.

“Well, this calls for a beer,” said Mike. “They’re not cold yet, but I don’t really care.” He popped three bottles, and motioned everyone to the cool living room.

Chet flopped into the recliner, and Mike and Johnny took the couch.

“It’s just what we expected would happen someday,” said Mike.

“Uh oh,” said Chet, knowing where this was going, and not liking it.

“Yeah. I showed up at the office on Friday, 0730 as usual, to find that some genius had artistically destroyed my office door with his own rendition of ‘faggot,’ in bright red paint.” Mike downed half his beer.

“Shit,” replied Chet.

“Shit indeed,” said Mike. “And the paint was still wet, which means it was someone who had a way
to be in the HQ building in the middle of the night.”

“What’d you do?”

“Kept it quiet for now, so we’d appreciate if you kept this between the three of us,” said Mike.

“Not a word,” said Chet. And Johnny and Mike knew he meant it. When push came to shove, Chet was a guy you could count on.

“But how’d you manage for nobody to notice that?” Chet asked. “That sounds like quite a trick.”

“Well, I got some help from an unexpected friend downstairs. The chief of maintenance for the building is someone I worked with at 14s, way back when I was a probie. He took care of it.”

Chet looked at Johnny. “And the Rover?”

“All four tires slashed, right in 93’s parking lot, probably while the station was out on a long call last night,” said Johnny. “It’s in Santa Clarita right now, getting four new tires about a year ahead of schedule.”

Chet shook his head. “Damn. So this guy knows where you work, Gage, and what shift, and what you drive?”

“Sounds like it,” said Johnny.

“And,” said Chet, “it sounds like he was either staking out the station, or had some way of knowing when you were out on a big call. ‘Cause I don’t think anyone would risk getting caught in the parking lot while you were in quarters,” he added.

“Pretty much the conclusion we came to, also,” said Mike. “Not pleasant to think about.”

“No,” said Chet. “Man, that sucks. Anything I can do?”

“Keep your ears open, will ya?” Johnny said suddenly. “You know an awful lot of people in the department, and, well, you might hear something.”

“I can do that,” Chet nodded slowly. “I hate the idea that someone I know would pull shit like that, though.”

“Well, I think it’s fair to say that there are an awful lot of people in the department who would just as soon see me and Johnny gone, to be frank,” said Mike.

“But there’s a fine line—no, not a fine line; a thick dark line—between, well, not approving, and harassing and destroying and such,” said Chet. “People can think whatever the hell they want, but this crap?” He shook his head. “Outta line. Way the hell outta line.” He paused. “Man, I really hate that it’s someone in the department.”

“Us too, Chet,” said Johnny.

There was a clattering at the front door.

“Mail,” said Mike, standing up. “I’ll get it.” He went to the door, and picked up a small pile of envelopes from under the mail slot. He sorted through them, throwing half out immediately, and putting the rest on the kitchen counter. He looked at the final envelope—a plain, white legal-sized envelope with no return address—and frowned. “Huh.” He brought it into the living room. “That’s weird—this one’s addressed to both of us.”
“That is weird—I only ever use my P.O. Box. Who’s it from?” asked Johnny.

“Doesn’t say,” said Mike. He ripped the flap open as he sat back down on the couch. He unfolded the single sheet of paper, and his face fell. “God damn it,” he said flatly, passing the paper to Johnny.

It was a single sheet of plain white paper, with a typewritten message.

“Are you starting to get the feeling someone doesn’t want you around? If so, you’re right. LACoFD is a place for real men. Clear out, fags, or watch your backs.”

Johnny passed it silently back to Mike, and then got up and left the room. Mike handed it to Chet, who read it and let out a low whistle.

Mike and Chet could hear rummaging in the kitchen, and shortly, Johnny came back with a plate of hamburger patties and a spatula. He passed through the living room on the way to the yard.

Mike was glad that sliding glass doors don’t slam very well.

“Um,” said Chet, “not that I would know how this married people stuff works, but shouldn’t you go out or something?”

“No,” said Mike. “He’s really, really pissed. And when he gets that way, and gets quiet like that—especially when he goes outside—it turns out better if I just leave him be.”

“Huh,” said Chet. “Whenever he got mad at me, for one of my pranks or something, he’d usually get pretty loud.”

Mike snorted. “That’s because he wasn’t really all that mad. Trust me—he’s fuming. He never even wanted the world at large to know we live together, Chet. So getting that letter, addressed to both of us, here? Well. Not good.”

Chet looked confused. “But, I mean, it doesn’t seem to me like he’s, I don’t know. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I guess ‘ashamed’ is the word I’m looking for.”

Mike shook his head. “He’s not—that’s not it at all. It’s partly that privacy is a really, really big deal for him, and he’s gone to great pains to keep his actual home address private. He uses the P.O. box for everything—he’s done that for his whole adult life, actually, not just since we got together—so to get a poison pen letter sent to him here? That’s way bigger for him than it is for me.”

“Huh. I guess I can see that,” said Chet. “But you said privacy was just part of it.”

“Yeah—it’s more that he doesn’t trust the world. He doesn’t trust people not to judge him, not to hurt him. He’s been judged and hurt an awful lot more than most people we know, Chet, in ways I’m just starting to understand. Don’t get me wrong—I’m not saying he’s fragile, or damaged, or anything like that—just that it’s really, really hard work for him to trust.”

“That’s the part I don’t get, Mike. I never felt like he didn’t trust us on the job. Ever.”

“See, that’s the thing. The job was the one place, the one environment, where he really trusts the people. He trusted the system not to screw him over, unlike most other systems he’d ever dealt with before. Sure, he took some shit at work about being Native American, especially when he was a boot, but not so much, really.”

Chet sank into his chair, and hid his face in his hands. “Yeah, and I dished some of that shit out, too.”
“A little bit. But it’s water under the bridge, and believe me, he had worse. Nobody at 51s ever lost his trust. Not even Marco, after he made it clear he wasn’t adjusting well to knowing about Johnny and me. Johnny still trusted Marco to have his back, and he was right to. But now? I would say he’s instantly lost his trust in the department, just because one total asshole can’t mind his own business. And the timing couldn’t be worse. He was just starting to believe he would make it as a captain. Just starting to trust that even though there was no way our relationship was completely unknown at HQ, we could both still find our way in the department. And now that fragile trust has been blown the fuck out of the water. And that’s what’s making him so mad.”

“Shit,” said Chet. “I guess it’s more complicated than I can really get.”

“Yeah. Life is a hell of a lot more complicated when you don’t follow the rules.” Mike looked at his beer, and finished it.

“Um, do you think I should, like, clear out?” asked Chet. “Let you guys work this out?”

“No, please stay—normal is good, right? I’ll just see if he’s, um, defusing a bit. I might send him into the garage to pump some iron, or maybe kill the punching bag, and I’ll just finish cooking the burgers myself, so sorry if we disappear on you for a few minutes.”

“No problem, man. I’ll just sit here and enjoy the central air.”

Mike was just about to open the slider when Chet stopped him.

“But Mike, you know what?”

Mike looked over at him.

“If it were me, I’d call the cops today.

“Yeah.” Mike nodded. “That would be the smart thing, and that’s what I’d do if it were just me. He’ll hate the idea—he already had to talk to the sheriff once today, after all—but it seems pretty clear this guy isn’t done.”

“It was a threat, Mike,” Chet said. “‘Watch your backs.’ That’s a threat. You can’t leave that alone.”

“I know. I’ll talk to him.” Mike slipped out the door.

Chet picked up the morning paper, and worked on his beer.

TBC
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Things get uglier, putting Johnny and Mike on the defensive.

Chapter 4.

Mike joined Johnny at the grill. “Hey,” he said quietly.

Johnny flipped a burger on to the platter, and moved another one to the now-vacant spot on the grill. He set the spatula down, and looked up at Mike, not quite ready to say anything yet.

“Why don’t I take over here,” Mike suggested.

Johnny just nodded. He reached out and took Mike’s hand, planted a kiss on its palm, and folded Mike’s fingers over the spot he’d just kissed. Then, he turned and stalked into the side door of the garage.

Mike laid some buns, cut side down, on the edge of the grill, and kept an eye on the burgers. The central air compressor hummed away on the side of the house, just covering the slight hiss of the propane coming out of the tank under the grill. But Mike could easily hear the clank of a barbell being slammed into a rack after a set of something. And he could hear the dull thump-thump-thump of fists connecting with the heavy punching bag hanging from the garage ceiling. Mike listened to Johnny go back and forth between the weights and the punching bag for several minutes, and was relieved to finally hear some swearing. Once the words started coming out, Mike knew, things were winding down.

Just as the burgers were nearing readiness, Johnny emerged from the garage, t-shirt draped over his bare shoulder, sweat coursing down his chest and back. He joined Mike at the grill.

“Thanks,” he said.

“No problem,” Mike replied. “Well, actually, one problem—you’re looking too hot right now for me to keep my hands off of you, and I did just get out of the shower. For the second time today.”

“So just look, don’t touch,” Johnny suggested, grinning.

“Can’t be done, Gage. But this’ll keep me happy for a few minutes.” Mike leaned forward, keeping his body far from Johnny’s sweaty one, and captured Johnny’s mouth in a kiss, then, still keeping his distance otherwise, kissed down his neck to the hollow where his collarbones met, and gave that spot a sloppy kiss that threatened to be outright licking. “There,” he said. “And all without me getting all sweaty again.”

Johnny laughed. “Don’t tempt me, Stoker. You’re lucky Chet’s sitting right there in the living room, or your nice clean shirt’d be my own personal sponge right about now.”

“Yeah—he’s a big boy and all, but I don’t think he’d want to see me do to you what I really want to
do to you right now, so let’s just go feed him,” said Mike, picking up the plate of burgers and buns. “And you need to get fed too.”

“For a change,” said Johnny, following Mike up the steps onto the deck, and into the living room.

“Chow time,” Mike announced. “But no shirt, no service, Gage, so go clean up.”

Chet folded up the newspaper he’d been reading. He did a double-take as Johnny passed by.

“Holy crap, Gage.”

“What? It’s hot out. I sweat a lot. I got gross.”

“No, I mean, you’ve put on some serious muscle. So much for the skinny guy. What the hell have you been doing?”

“Oh.” Johnny pointed to the garage. “We’ve got weights out there. So I guess over the last coupla years, with more lifting, less running—I guess I finally put on those ten to fifteen pounds Brackett was always hassling me about. Plus Jiminy Cricket here doesn’t let me forget to eat.” He went into the kitchen and filled and drained a large glass of water at the sink, and filled it again.

“And ol’ Jiminy makes sure he doesn’t eat nothing but crap,” Mike pointed out. “And don’t call me that.”

Chet shook his head. “I gotta hand it to you, Gage—most of the rest of us, when we hit thirty, everything starts to go to hell.”

Chet went to the kitchen with Mike and Johnny helped Mike take burger fixings to the table as Johnny worked on his second glass of water.

“Guess I oughta see about getting me some of that equipment,” Chet said, looking out towards the garage.

Johnny spluttered and coughed, as the water he was drinking went down the wrong tube.

“What?” Chet said.

“Weight lifting equipment?” Mike asked, winking at Johnny from behind Chet. “Good idea—and if you get the basics, it doesn’t take up much space. We certainly put all our equipment to good use, right, Johnny?”

Johnny crossed his eyes at Mike, out of Chet’s line of vision. “I’m gonna go clean up. Don’t wait for me.”

Mike popped another beer for Chet and himself, and they tucked into their burgers. A minute or two later, Johnny came out in fresh clothes, poured himself a glass of milk, and joined them at the table.

“You know,” said Johnny, after downing half a burger in two bites, “I was thinking I should call Fred White again. He’s the sheriff’s deputy whose beat is up by 93s,” he clarified for Chet. “Since Fred took my report this morning, and this shitty letter is kind of a threat.”

“Good idea,” nodded Mike, casting a relieved glance at Chet. “This isn’t his area, but he probably knows who you could call.”

“The only thing is,” Johnny said slowly, “I didn’t say anything to him about why I thought someone might’ve slashed my tires. And I guess,” he admitted, “I, uh, would rather not.” He took another
gargantuan bite of burger.

“What if you just called the sheriff, like a regular person—not like someone from the fire department—and just got whoever’s on duty around here?” Chet said. “I mean, there’s an awful lot of deputies, and your place isn’t near 51’s district or 93’s, so you’ll just get some deputy you don’t know, just like any other citizen. You pay taxes too, right?”

For some reason, the idea of not using connections hadn’t occurred to either Mike or Johnny.

“That’s … completely reasonable,” Mike said carefully. “What do you think, Johnny? Joe Citizen is about as anonymous as you can get. Plus, cops are like us—they’ve seen it all. They might walk away from the door shaking their heads about how those queers are just asking for trouble, but in ten minutes they’ll be on to something new and different.”

Johnny finished his burger silently, and washed it down with the rest of his milk. “Okay,” he said simply. “I can do Joe Citizen. But after lunch, all right?”

“Sure,” said Mike. “It’ll keep.” He held up the plate of burgers. “Another?” he said.

“You bet,” said Johnny. He took a burger from the plate, and passed it to Chet. “You, Kelly?”

Chet shook his head, and patted his waistline. “Like I said, Gage—wrong side of thirty, hell in a handbasket. Actually,” he continued, “and don’t laugh at this—but I’ve been considering going vegetarian. Seeing how that goes for a while. S’posed to be healthy and all. Couldn’t hurt with the spare tire, either.”

Johnny goggled at him. “Uh, how’s that gonna work at a fire station, man? I mean, you’re not gonna be able to eat anything anyone cooks. And you’re sure as hell not gonna be able to get away with making rabbit food when it’s your turn to cook.”

“I’d probably go part time—you know, eat whatever when I’m at work, and be real careful at home. You know—just to see what happens.”

“Why not?” Mike said. “Can’t hurt, right? I sure have to watch it now, too, since the leg. I used to run some—not like Captain Galloping Greyhound, here, but enough to keep the pounds off—but the pounding just doesn’t work well with all the hardware.”

Johnny looked at Mike through narrowed eyelids. “Now don’t you go gettin’ all hippie on me, man; I’m sticking with what I’m sticking with, all right? You got me eating vegetables, and you got me off Breakfast of Champions, but that’s where I draw the line.”

“Do I even want to know,” Chet asked, “what Breakfast of Champions is? Was?”

Mike shook his head. “You wouldn’t believe it, Chet. The first time I had breakfast at his place, I just about died. Wheaties—great, fine. Wheaties with ice cream? Damn.”

“Ooh, you guys are ganging up on me,” said Johnny. “Not fair, not fair.”

“All’s fair in love and war, babe,” said Mike.

“I’ll stay out of the ‘love’ part,” announced Chet, “but I brought something apropos of ‘war’ that might be amusing after lunch. Perfect for this crappy heat, too. And it should bring back some fond memories of Station 51, especially for you, Gage.”

“What?” Johnny asked suspiciously.
“Water balloons” Chet announced proudly. “Childish, I know, but the kids next door were doin’ it yesterday, and they let me play, and it was awesome! Look in the box I brought the beers in—there’s a whole mess of balloons, just waiting to get filled up and hurled.”

“Excellent!” said Johnny. “I’m in.”

“You’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me,” Mike said. “First of all, aren’t we all over thirty? And second of all, it’s way too hot for—” he looked at the grins on the other men’s faces. “Oh, all right. I’ll make you a deal—you guys clean up, and I’ll call the sheriff, and then we can go play outside in the yard.” He shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

They finished their lunches, and, as agreed, Johnny and Chet cleaned up the kitchen. Mike used the bedroom extension to call the sheriff.

“L.A. County Sheriff, Deputy Price speaking.”

“Hi, uh, I need to make a report about about harassment by U.S. mail—a threatening anonymous letter, actually.”

“Okay, let me get your name and address, and a call-back number. We’re pretty busy this afternoon, but we’ll get someone out to take a report within an hour or two, if that will be convenient.”

Mike was surprised at first by how polite and matter of fact the deputy was, but realized it was no different from how a fireman at the station would treat a citizen who called with a question or concern. “Sure—Michael Stoker, 14318 Harrison Street, 555-5973.”

“And the letter was addressed to you?”

“Yeah, to me and the other person living at this address.”

“Their name?”

“John Gage. And, actually, he filed a report with another deputy farther north this morning, when all four of his tires were slashed overnight at his place of work.”

“Will he be available as well?”

“Yes. Sorry to bug you with this; it seems ridiculous, but—”

“Not at all,” said the deputy. “You’re right to report it, especially since it may be part of a pattern. Does Mr., uh, Gage have a copy yet of the report he filed this morning?”

“No, but he has the name of the deputy who took the report, and a case number.”

“All right. We’ll have someone out this afternoon.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Stoker. “We appreciate it.”

He hung up the phone, and went out to the kitchen, where Chet and Johnny were drying dishes. “Okay,” he announced, “they’re sending a deputy by in an hour or two to take a report. They said it was a good idea to report it. Very polite. I didn’t feel like I was putting them out at all. It was kind of like, I dunno, when someone would call the fire station to get us to inspect their fireplace or something.”

“Huh,” said Johnny. “I guess that’s about how it would be. Something little to us, but big to them, and we take care of it, and they’re happy.” He dried a plate and put it in the cabinet. “Huh,” he
“Yep,” said Mike. “Maybe it won’t be a big deal.” He picked up the box that Chet had brought the six-packs in, and set it on the table. He surreptitiously palmed a dozen or so balloons as he did so.

“Listen, guys,” he said, “I’m just gonna take care of a couple of things in the yard while you finish up here. You guys wanna haul the cooler out when you come out?”

“Sure,” said Chet.

Mike snickered to himself as he headed straight for the spigot on the side of the house, and filled and tied the balloons he’d snagged. He hefted one in his hand and grinned wickedly—perfect. It was heavy and cold, and just waiting to explode onto an unsuspecting target. He found a perfectly sized plastic bin in the garage, loaded his ammo into it, and hid it behind a shrub. He puttered around the yard a bit, just in case the other two were watching, and then returned indoors.

Chet and Johnny were just finishing with the kitchen cleanup, and were getting ready to drag the cooler out to the deck. The bag of balloons was sitting on the top of the cooler.

“You sure you want to run around outside like a bunch of kids?” Mike asked. “It’s about a hundred degrees out.”

“Yeah, well a coupla water bombs will cool us all off real good,” said Chet. “Plus, if we get heat stroke or something we have two solutions: a paramedic, and central AC.”

“Good points,” said Mike. “Spigot’s on the side of the house. Let’s be juvenile.” He cracked another beer open, and grabbed a couple of balloons.

Chet shoved past him, beating him to the tap. He quickly filled a balloon, and ran around to the back of the yard. “I’ll let you guys fill one up too—only fair, since I practiced yesterday with a bunch of ten-year-olds.”

Mike and Johnny each filled a balloon.

“I feel ridiculous,” said Mike, but he didn’t hesitate to hurl his balloon at Chet, hitting him squarely in the chest.

“Oh, he shoots, he scores!” yelled Johnny. He dashed across the yard, and lobbed his balloon at Chet, just as Chet launched his balloon at the former target of all his water bombs. Johnny’s balloon burst right at Chet’s heels, splashing him up the back, at nearly the same time as Johnny found himself drenched by Chet’s well-aimed missile.

“And Stoker, in the corner, is still dry!” shouted Chet, racing towards the spigot. He showed off the previous day’s practice, rapidly filling and tying another balloon, just before Johnny leapt off the deck and landed next to the faucet.

Mike huddled in the corner near the completely defensible position he’d established with his stash of ammo. He ducked behind the shrub, and quietly plucked a water bomb out of the bin. As he stood up from behind his herbaceous fortress, a blue balloon, not quite full enough to burst, bounced off his shoulder and landed at his feet. He hurled it straight back at Chet, missing by inches but catching him in the splash zone very effectively, and threw Chet’s misfire right at Johnny, soaking him as he emerged from the faucet area with a hot pink bomb.

Johnny shook water out of his hair, and hurled his pink bomb unhesitatingly at Mike. He didn’t miss.
“Oh, shit!” Mike spluttered and laughed as Johnny’s bomb caught him right on the chin. He grabbed a lime green globe from his stash, and caught Johnny smack on the rear.

“Oooh, Gage, your partner’s cheating! He’s got a stash!”

Mike’s stash quickly became depleted as Chet and Johnny predictably ganged up on him, soaking him from head to toe. Once his stash was gone, he and Johnny ganged up on Chet for a while, giving him some payback for six years of water bombs and other pranks that he’d perpetrated on Johnny. For the next twenty minutes, the three men frolicked like children, taking turns teaming up on each other, nobody caring how soaked they were getting.

Johnny confiscated Mike’s ammo bin, and filled it with water, dumping it from the deck right onto Chet’s head as Chet filled a pair of bombs at the faucet. Chet pelted Johnny with one of his two bombs, a wicked underhanded shot that passed right between the rails of the deck. Mike was his next target, but Chet’s missile sailed right over Mike’s head, as Stoker slid in the sopping wet grass and crashed into one of the posts supporting the deck, with a wet crunching sound that alarmed Johnny deeply, even before Mike’s yell.

“Time out, Chet! Mike’s down!” Johnny shouted.

He hurried down the steps of the deck to see what the damage was. Mike was lying half under the deck, clutching his right knee, and already panting through clenched teeth.

“Mike? Lemme see, babe. C’mon, you gotta let go.” Johnny was worried to see that Mike wasn’t actually holding his knee, but the bottom of his thigh, just below where the long bone had been broken a year and a half before. “Chet, run in the bathroom and get a couple towels from the closet, will ya?”

Chet didn’t hesitate, and trotted right into the house.

“Something’s fucked up, Johnny. Shit, oh shit oh shit, not again!” Stoker forced his words out from between his teeth, as Johnny gently pried Mike’s fingers away from the injured leg.

“I know, okay, take it easy,” Johnny said, as he gently felt the long bone for fractures. “Let me know if I hit something bad.” He started above the painful area, and worked his way down. Mike didn’t say anything until Johnny got to the place where he could clearly feel the heads of the two screws that held the metal rod in place inside his femur.

“Fuck-that’s-it-right-there,” he gritted out. “It’s the screws, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, Mike—it seems like it might be, but I don’t know how to tell. I don’t feel any obvious fractures, though, which is good.”

Chet returned with several towels, just in time, as Mike was starting to shiver. Johnny started drying Mike off.

“All right, Mike; we gotta get you inside. I don’t want you to put any weight on this leg, all right? Chet and I are gonna get you in the front door—only two steps that way. Chet, you go in and make sure the front is unlocked, ‘cause I don’t think it is.”

Chet nodded and headed back into the house.

“Okay, Mike, I’m gonna pull you out from under the deck, here. Don’t help, all right? Just let me do it.” Johnny was relieved that moving Mike didn’t seem to cause him additional pain—that was a good sign that perhaps the bone was not fractured.
Once they were out from under the deck, Johnny could see the injured area better. “Can you bend your knee?” he asked. “Stop if it hurts too much, but try.”

“Okay.” Mike experimentally flexed his knee ever so slightly. “Yeah,” he said shakily, “I can move it. It hurts like a sonofabitch right where the screws are, but moving it doesn’t make it a lot worse.”

“All right,” said Johnny. “That’s good—but let’s get you inside and get some ice on there, all right?”

Chet emerged through the side gate to the yard, propping the gate open with a brick. “How bad are you busted up, Stoker?” he asked eloquently.

“How bad are you busted up, Stoker?” he asked eloquently.

“Okay, Mike,” said Johnny, “I don’t see a point in splinting, because I really don’t think it’s broken, and moving it doesn’t make it worse, right?” Mike nodded. “No weight on it, though, all right? Chet, you get on that side, and we’ll do up after three. One, two, three, up!” They hauled Mike to his feet, and he hopped through the side gate and up to the front door, supported on either side.

“This is ridiculous,” Mike said, as he entered the house.

“The fact that you can say that makes me feel a lot less worried,” said Johnny. “Five minutes ago I was sure we were heading straight for Rampart. Chet, we’re gonna get him to the bedroom first, so he can get dry clothes. By the way, need a set for yourself?”

Chet shook his head. “Planned ahead; got a spare outfit in the car, ’cause I figured I’d need it. I’ll run and grab it while you guys are changing.”

Chet and Johnny sat Mike on the edge of the bed, and Chet left the room, closing the door behind him.

“This is turning out to be an extremely shitty day,” said Mike, as he assisted in divesting himself of his sodden clothing. Johnny plucked dry underwear, shorts, and t-shirt from Mike’s bureau, and set them beside Mike on the bed, then swiftly changed himself into a dry outfit as well.

“I think this is my fourth shirt today,” Johnny commented.

Mike was just about dressed. Johnny helped him balance as he maneuvered the rest of his dry clothing into place. “Shitty, shitty day,” Mike repeated.

“Yeah, well, at least eleven a.m. to one p.m. was pretty damned un-shitty,” Johnny commented.

“Mm, good point,” Mike admitted, as he hopped down the hall, supported by Johnny. He eased himself onto the sofa, and put his foot up on the coffee table. “Okay,” he said, partly to himself and partly to Johnny, who was crouched next to him on the floor, “I guess this isn’t as bad as I first thought. Sorry I freaked out on you,” he said, taking Johnny’s hand.

“No, I know how it is—when you break something real bad, every time you even strain it even a little after that you’re sure it’s busted again.”

“Yeah. I was half expecting to look down and see it, um, looking like it did before.”

Johnny felt the shudder that passed through Mike’s body as he recalled the original accident in which his leg was broken so badly. He looked up at Mike, who had turned an alarming greyish shade. Johnny got up on his sofa so he could reach better, and put their foreheads together, kissed him, and spoke to him gently. “Hey, none of that,” he said softly. “You’re not going back there, all right?
Whatever this is, it’s probably just a minor setback, right?” He slid his arm behind Mike’s back, and was relieved to feel Mike lean into him, putting his head on Johnny’s shoulder.

Mike took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Yeah. Okay. See, sorry—I did it again. Freaking out.”

“You don’t need to freak out,” Johnny said into Mike’s hair. “Whatever happens, we’ll be okay.”

Chet felt terrible. He’d meant the water balloon fight to be a ridiculously fun, childish way to beat the Southern California heat, and had been extra glad to be able to get Johnny’s and Mike’s minds off what had happened to them in the past couple of days. But now it seemed that Mike had re-injured his leg, maybe badly, and Chet felt like it was all his fault. Just what they needed, he thought. A little more crap to deal with.

He sat on the edge of the bed in the spare room for a minute, trying to think what he could do to help salvage the afternoon. He thought he should probably just go—unless they still wanted his company for some reason. He put his sodden clothes in the plastic bag he’d brought the dry ones in, and left the guest room.

Chet stopped in his tracks when he reached the living room. Johnny had himself wrapped around Mike like an octopus, and Mike had his face buried in Johnny’s chest and was clutching his shirt. Chet wasn’t shocked—he couldn’t have cared less that both people tangled together on the couch were men—but he was surprised, because even around close friends, Mike and Johnny had a habit of keeping their distance from each other physically. The only time Chet had ever seen them kiss in public was either a quick peck hello or goodbye, in the hospital room when Mike was recovering, or for the real thing, after they had exchanged rings and vows a little over a year ago in the yard that was now littered with scraps of neon-colored rubber balloons. Chet imagined that when you had to always be on guard in public, it might be easiest just to keep all physical affection private, so no habits would slip out when you didn’t mean them to.

“Um, anything you guys need?” he asked tentatively.

“Oh, yeah—I meant to get some ice on that knee,” Johnny said, starting to disengage so he could get up.

Chet waved his hand in a “stay put” gesture. “I’ll get it—least I can do, since this is all my fault.”

“Uh, Chet?” Mike said. “That’s ridiculous. We were all having fun, and I skidded in the grass, and that’s all.”

“But—”

“Look, don’t make me get irritated, all right?” Mike said. “Enough about anything being anyone’s fault. If it’ll make you feel better, though, you could get the bag of frozen peas with all the duct tape on it, from the bottom shelf of the freezer. That’s our household ice pack.”

Chet retrieved the bag, wrapped it in a kitchen towel, and handed it to Mike, who mashed it up against the side of his leg just above his knee.

“It’s not broken or anything, is it?” Chet asked nervously.

“Nah, but I may have a screw loose,” Mike joked, feeling better, and trying to relieve some tension. “Seriously, I don’t think it’s that bad. Let’s just, I don’t know, drink beer and play cards, or
The doorbell rang. Out the bay window, a sheriff’s car was visible parked in front of the house. “I’ll get it,” said Johnny, actually disengaging and standing up this time.

“I should go, right?” said Chet.

“Sit! Stay!” said Mike. “Geez, Kelly—this’ll take five minutes, probably, and then we can do something less awkward and more interesting than worrying about loose screws and hate mail.”

Johnny answered the door. A short, slim dark-haired man in a sheriff’s deputy uniform stood on the doorstep.

“I’m Deputy Price—I believe we spoke earlier about a threatening letter you received? Sorry it took so long to get out here; tempers flare in this weather.”

“Oh, hi. John Gage,” said Johnny, shaking hands with the deputy. “You talked to Mike—he’s inside. Come on in.” He showed the officer to the living room.

“Mr. Stoker?” Price looked back and forth between Chet and Mike.

“That’s me, sorry I’m not getting up, just had a little spill in the yard. Uh, Johnny, you wanna get that crap letter? I put it on the desk.” He looked up to Price. “Have a seat, officer.”

Price sat in the side chair that hardly ever got used, as Johnny returned with the letter and its envelope and handed them to the deputy.

“I gotta tell you, officer, between this and the tires, we’re not so sittin’ so comfy right now,” Johnny said.

Price scanned the letter, and placed it and the envelope into a plastic bag. “I’m going to need to hang onto this—it’s pretty clearly a threat. Anything else unusual happen lately that might be related?” he asked, getting out a small notebook.

“Well,” Mike said reluctantly, “what would you say about, uh, vandalism to fire department property?”

“First,” said the deputy, “let’s clear something up. You and Mr. Gage, you’re both with the county fire department?”

“Yeah,” said Mike. “I’m with the Arson/Fire Investigation Unit, and Johnny’s a captain at a station up north of Santa Clarita.”

“All right—I can take your report on the letter, and link it to the report on the tires. I can add what you have to say about damage to department property if you feel it’s relevant, but investigation of that damage would be an internal matter.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Mike said. “Lemme start at the beginning—that was the department property. Basically, my office door—at department HQ—was vandalized sometime early Friday morning. To be honest, I didn’t report it—I don’t really want to make waves. But it seems relevant to the situation, so it should probably be in your report.”

“Okay—what was the specific nature of the vandalism?” the officer asked, while writing on his
“Um, somebody painted ‘faggot’ across the door,” Mike said.

To Mike’s relief, the officer didn’t bat an eye, but just continued writing.

“And I should add,” said Mike, “the building is locked from eight in the evening until 0730, which is when I came in. The paint was still wet, but not fresh.”

“Uh-huh. And Mr. Gage, I know this is all in the report you filed earlier,” said Price, “but when were your tires slashed?”

“Some time between 0730 on Friday morning and 0820 this morning.”

“And where was the vehicle located during that time?”

“In the parking area at Station 93.”

“And the letter,” Price continued. “When did it arrive?”

“In today’s mail,” said Mike.

Price inspected the envelope. “Postmarked yesterday, in the 90063 zip code.”

Johnny and Mike looked at each other—they hadn’t noticed that.

“That’s where department HQ is located, actually,” said Mike.

“Anything else you would like to add?” Price asked, looking up for the first time.

“Yeah,” Johnny spoke up. “My name is on the envelope, but I don’t ever give out this address, anywhere. I have a post office box that I use for everything. None of my paperwork at the department—or anywhere else—lists this address.”

“What about you, Mr. Stoker?”

“What, you mean the address? Yeah, it’s my address of record everywhere.”

“And who knows where you actually live, Mr. Gage?”

Johnny sighed. “It’s not exactly a well-kept secret that Mike and I are together. Nobody ever says anything to us, but plenty of people know, and I’m sure plenty of people don’t like it.”

“Okay. And, Mr. Gage, do you have the case number from the report you filed this morning?”

“Yep.” Johnny fished his wallet out of his pocket, pulled out the card Fred White had given him, and handed it to Price.

Price copied down the information on the card and returned it to Johnny. He closed his notebook, and looked up at Johnny and Mike. “Okay, gentlemen. What you have here is a concerning pattern. It’s a pattern, because you’ve each been targeted twice—once separately, and once together. It’s concerning because of the phrase ‘watch your backs’ in the letter you got today.”

“So, uh, what do we do?” asked Johnny.

“I would recommend you make extra sure your doors and windows are locked, whether or not
you’re home. I see you have a garage—park your vehicles there, especially at night. Are you on good terms with your neighbors?” Price asked. “Particularly anyone who might be home while you’re not?”

“Yeah, most of ’em,” said Johnny. “Say, Mrs. Daniels across the street is retired, and we help her out with stuff all the time—maybe she could, I dunno, keep an extra eye on the place?”

“Excellent idea—you don’t want your neighbors to expect trouble, but on the other hand, a watchful eye can be useful,” Price said. “On the LASD end, I hate to tell you this, but there’s not much we can do at this point, other than take your report and link it with the one you made this morning with Deputy White. We can send a car past here every so often, but that’s really the best we can offer.”

“We understand that,” said Mike. “We just thought it was important to at least make the report.”

“It is. And, if something else does happen, I’m sure you know to let us know right away—even if it’s so small as to seem insignificant.”

“We will,” said Mike, as Price stood up. “Sorry I’m still not getting up. I think I have a screw loose in my leg, here.”

“A screw loose?” Price peered at Mike’s knee.

“Yeah—I have a rod this long—” Mike held his hands about 18 inches apart—“inside my thigh bone, and I think maybe I busted one of the screws that holds it in.”

Price couldn’t hold back a shudder. “You oughta get that looked at,” he said.

Johnny showed him to the door. “Thanks for your time,” he said. “No offense, but I hope we don’t see you again.”

Price laughed. “And you can bet that everyone whose house you go to thinks that triple, pal.”

Johnny let the deputy out, and returned to the living room. “Well, that’s done. And he’s right, you know,” he added.

“Right about what in particular?” Mike asked.

“You should get that looked at, is what he means, you doofus,” said Chet.

“I know, I know,” Mike said. “But not now, okay?”

“First thing tomorrow, then? Your choice, Henry Mayo or Rampart, but first thing tomorrow, sharp. And crutches till then.”

“Okay, fine, it’s a deal,” Mike said despondently. “Rampart first thing in the morning. But for now—I just don’t even want to think about, see, do, hear, or even smell anything unpleasant, all right?”

“Fine,” said Chet. “I’ll make sure I go in the other room if I fart.” He whipped out a deck of cards. “Gin Rummy and beer, or Go Fish and beer?”

TBC
Chapter 5

Mike just plain couldn’t sleep. When he was still, he had an unnerving, creeping feeling, like he needed to move or else. But when he tried to toss and turn, it caused more pain than it did relief. He found he almost missed the hum of the window AC unit, because he kept hearing—or imagining he was hearing—all manner of little sounds that he couldn’t identify, and each one made him progressively more nervous. He sighed heavily, and flopped his head down heavily on the pillow.

“s matter?” Johnny mumbled, not even half awake.

“Nothing,” Mike lied. “Go back to sleep.” As long as he’d already partially woken Johnny, he figured he could at least try to roll over without having to worry about waking his partner.

“Ow!” Mike growled, as his attempt to get more comfortable backfired. “Fucking ow! All right, that’s it.” He started to sit up, but was pulled back down by a smooth, warm arm.


Mike threw himself down on his pillow, sat up again, punched the pillow into a firm ball, and lay down on it again. Once he was still, Johnny rolled over on his side and draped a leg over Mike’s good left leg, and an arm over his upper body, resting his hand right in the middle of Mike’s chest. Mike sighed and covered Johnny’s hand with his own.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m worried.”

“I know. Keep goin’.”

“I don’t wanna deal with this leg again. It was just starting to feel actually normal again, just in the last few months, and now this. Rationally, I know the bone’s healed. But even if all I did was to fuck up the screws, I really don’t want to deal with whatever that means.” He paused, and Johnny squeezed his hand to show he was still listening. “I was just beginning to be able to forget about the fact that I’m full of metal, and just be glad I could walk around normally and without pain. But all afternoon, what I’ve been thinking is, and this is gonna sound really dumb, but what if the hardware has to come out? Will I be, I don’t know, really breakable or something, without all that metal?”

“Don’t think so, even if they do take it out,” Johnny said, more awake now. “Don’t be mad, but I read up on the whole business of getting the hardware out after you decided you weren’t going back to active duty—not to try to convince you of anything. I just wanted to know, ya know? It sounds like they do take the hardware out sometimes, for various reasons, and it’s not a huge operation, and there’s not a huge recovery. And healed bones are supposedly stronger than before in the spot where they broke.”

“Oh,” said Mike. “Huh.”

Johnny nuzzled into his shoulder. “What else?” he asked.

“Well, our enemy. He’s got me really worried about what he’s gonna get up to next,” Mike admitted. “I mean, ‘watch your backs?’ That bugs me.”

“Yeah. Me too.”
“I mean, damn it, Johnny—the fire service is about saving lives and protecting property, and this bastard is threatening lives, or at least safety, and destroying property. What kind of firefighter would let his personal opinion of the way somebody’s living their life turn around the most important parts of why we do our jobs?”

“The kind who’s gone off the deep end, babe. And that’s why I’m worried too.”

“Oh, god,” Mike moaned, almost pitifully, “you’re worried too? That’s great—that’s just great. I mean, I’m the one who’s supposed to worry, and you’re the one who’s supposed to tell me that everything is fine, or everything’s going to be fine, and then I believe you, and then I can get to sleep at least, but if you’re worried, then—” Mike cut himself off as he was suddenly blinded by the bedside light that Johnny flicked on.

“Mike. Stop,” Johnny said quietly. “Just … look. I can’t promise you this nut isn’t gonna do something worse. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s not done with us. But you know what? If we let him fuck with our heads when he’s not actually doing anything, then he wins, and we lose.”

“Yes, I know. But I can’t stop the brain train, can’t get to sleep.”

Johnny had figured out a while ago that he should never, ever ask Mike a rhetorical question such as “What’s the worst that could happen?” because Mike always had an answer. His answers never failed to out-bad anything Johnny had thought of, and were always scarily possible. Mike was an expert at the “what-if” game, and a disaster at trying not to think about something that was bothering him, especially when he was trying to get to sleep. But Johnny had also figured out, kind of by accident, that the best way to get Mike to settle down was to get Mike wrapped around him—the opposite of how they often fell asleep.

“C’mere,” Johnny said, turning off the light again. He rolled so his back was to Mike, and pulled Mike’s far arm over himself. Mike rolled to his non-sore left side, and pulled Johnny in close to him.

“You got me?” Johnny asked.

“I got you,” Mike said. “I’ve always got you,” he said into the back of Johnny’s neck.

“Yeah, you do. And I’ve always got you,” Johnny said, clutching Mike’s arm to his chest. “Now hang on to me, and you’ll get to sleep, and I’ll get to sleep, and nothing will seem as bad in the morning. Right?”

“Yes.”

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Johnny wasn’t quite correct. Most of their worries didn’t seem as bad in the morning, but overnight, Mike’s knee had swelled considerably, and was stiffer than it had been, so Johnny called in to Rampart to let them know he was bringing Mike in, and that he would probably need to see an orthopedist.

“Dr. Early is here this morning—I’ll let him know you’re coming in, and I’ll pull Mike’s chart and page the orthopedist on call as well—hopefully that should keep the wait time down,” said Betty, a senior nurse who was often in charge of the ER on Dixie’s days off. “It’s Sunday morning, so it shouldn’t be too bad in any case. It’s pretty quiet around here right now, and no, I don’t believe that will jinx the day.”

“Thanks, Betty,” laughed Johnny. “We’ll be there in an hour or so.”

As Johnny hung up the phone, Mike appeared from the bedroom, hobbling along on the hated
crutches that he thought he’d put away for good some time ago. “What’s the scoop?” Mike asked as he got out a box of cereal and poured some into a bowl.

“Just smoothing the way,” Johnny said, pouring himself some cereal as well. “Dr. Early is in today—you’ll like him.”

“He’s the older guy, right?”

“Yes. Always totally calm. Back in the day, I kept wondering when he was gonna finally let it all out in one big explosion, but I finally came to the conclusion that he wasn’t bottling stuff up—it just rolls right off him,” said Johnny, “like water off a duck.” He shook his head. “I’ll tell ya, Mike—I didn’t even know there were really people like that out there. But he’s living proof.”

“Seems like the water off the duck thing would be a handy personality trait, in the ER world,” Mike said.

“That’s for sure.” Johnny worked at his cereal, and sipped his coffee. “Actually, Len Sterling reminds me of Dr. Early sometimes. They both have this calm thing I just don’t get.”

Mike finished his cereal, and crutched over to the sink to wash the bowl. “All right, babe; whenever you’re done, let’s go get this over with.”

“’kay.” Johnny finished up, washed his bowl and spoon, and grabbed the keys to the truck.

In the light Sunday-morning traffic, it took them only 45 minutes to get to Rampart. Johnny dropped Mike off at the main entrance and then parked the pickup in the visitors’ lot. Mike waited for him at the door, and they went in together, through the front entrance, like regular people.

“Hi, Betty,” Johnny said, as they reached the nurses’ station. “You ready for us?” There were several familiar faces there, and Johnny greeted them politely but didn’t stop to chat.

“Sure—Dr. Early will meet you in Treatment 1. Mr. Stoker, come this way, please.”

They entered the treatment room and Mike let Johnny help him up to the gurney. Betty left to go find Dr. Early, and to round up a portable x-ray machine.

“I still feel ridiculous,” Mike said. “I just hope we can keep the water balloons out of the story.”

The door swung open, and Joe Early came in. “Well, well, well! John Gage, you’re a sight for sore eyes! What’s it been—seven or eight months, at least.” Early turned to Mike. “And you must be Mike Stoker,” said Dr. Early.

“Yes,” said Mike. “Nice to meet you.”

“How’s the captaining business up in the north country?” Early asked.

“Oh, it’s pretty fair,” Johnny said, “but I sure do miss comin’ down here all the time. You guys are the best. Don’t get me wrong—Henry Mayo has a fine staff, fine people—but they’re not old friends.”

“Well, John, I’m not so sure how I feel about the ‘old’ part, but ‘friends’ I’ll keep.” Early looked over at Mike. “So, Mr. Stoker, what brings you in today? I read your history—that’s quite a story.”

“Well, Doc, I slipped in some wet grass yesterday afternoon, and something above my knee kind of went. It made sort of a twangy sound—not a pop or a snap, but more like a twang. And now it’s real
sore right by the two screws above my knee. Moving hurts a bit, but what really kills is touching that spot at all.”

“Can you put weight on it without excessive pain?”

“Uh, well, Johnny kinda wouldn’t let me. So I don’t know.”

“Well,” said Early, “that was probably wise. But I have to tell you, it would’ve been even wiser to come in as soon as it happened.”

“Uh, Doc, that kinda wasn’t an option,” said Johnny. “It just, well, wasn’t.”

“Okay.” Dr. Early accepted Johnny’s evasion, and moved along. “Let’s get some pictures, first of all, and we’ll compare to your most recent x-rays and see what’s going on in there.”

Right on cue, a tech wheeled in the portable x-ray unit. While Dr. Early ordered various views of the knee and femur, the tech’s eyes kept coming back to Johnny, as if he recognized him but couldn’t quite place him.

“Are you listening, Ted?” Dr. Early asked the tech.

“Sure, Doc.” He tore his eyes away from Johnny, frowning slightly, and repeated Dr. Early’s instructions.

Early and Johnny left the room, to avoid unnecessary radiation exposure, and waited in the hall.

“Mike’s, uh, real worried, Doc.”

“Well, that’s understandable—from what his medical records looked like, he must have had quite a bad time of it with his original injury, and the thought of having to go through anything similar again would certainly be distressing.”

“Yeah.”

“Worst case scenario would be having to get all the hardware removed, but the recovery from that operation is nothing like the recovery from the original repair. Not to mention, it would be the only thing he’d be recovering from—last time around, he had multiple trauma, and was in pretty bad shape even aside from the leg.”

Johnny paled. “Yeah. B’lieve me, Doc, I remember.”

Early saw Johnny’s expression, and determined this was the time to change the subject to something more pleasant.

“So, John—on a related note—how’s married life agreeing with you?”

Johnny raised his eyebrows. “Well, Doc, most people don’t think to put it quite that way, but thanks. It’s agreeing real, real well.”

Dr. Early shook his head. “If there had been a betting pool on who of you, me, and Kel Brackett would be the least likely to ever settle down, I might just possibly have picked you.”

Johnny chuckled. “Believe me, Doc; I was as surprised as anyone. ’Cause that contest? I woulda picked me, too.”

“Well, I know a lot of us were surprised when you suddenly stopped trying to date the new nurses,
and then even more surprised when you disappeared for a month and all Roy would say was that you had a friend who was in trouble. But then all became clear when you returned as the guest of one of our rehab patients.”

Johnny looked at the floor, and picked at a fingernail. “Say, Doc. Anyone around here ever expressed any, well, ugly feelings about, uh . . .”

“The fact that you settled down with a man instead of a woman?” Early completed for him quietly.

Johnny nodded, keeping his head down.

“I’ll be honest—there was certainly a lot of talk, given that hospitals are about the worst rumor mills in the world, but nothing that I would classify as truly ugly.” Early tilted his head. “Why, John? Is someone giving you trouble?”

“Yeah, but—aw, forget I said anything, all right?”

“All right, John. But I have a sympathetic ear if you ever need it.”

“Thanks, Doc. The more the better.”

At that moment, the x-ray tech emerged from the room, pushing the portable x-ray machine. “I’ll just go take those down to get developed, Doc, and they’ll page you when they’re done.” He was talking to Early, but his eyes again couldn’t help darting towards Johnny.

“Thanks, Ted,” Early said to the tech.

As Dr. Early swung the treatment room door open, Johnny turned on instinct to look behind himself. Ted was looking at him with an almost vicious glint in his eye—or so Johnny thought. He turned away again and shuddered. *Gettin’ paranoid, Gage. Don’t let ‘im win. That Ted’s probably just havin’ a crummy day.*

Mike looked disgruntled when Johnny and Early returned to the room.

“What’s wrong, Mike?” Early asked.

“Oh, I know he’s just a tech, but his bedside manner could’ve been better. I mean, I’ve had this leg x-rayed plenty of times—more than plenty—but the techs always at least help me a little with how they want my leg positioned on the film. This guy was all ‘No, not like that!’ and ‘Can’t you just do it yourself?’ He finally just turned my knee the way he wanted it, none too gently either, and, well, kind of looked at me in a weird way after. Creepy.”

“I’ll have a word with him, Mike. Sorry about that—I don’t know what could’ve gotten into him. He’s usually perfectly charming,” Early said, frowning. “Well, come on, you two. Let’s have a cup of coffee while those films develop—cafeteria coffee, not lounge coffee, and it’s my treat.”

“All right, you’re on, Doc!” said Johnny. “Man, I can’t remember the last time I was at Rampart’s cafeteria.”

Dr. Early laughed. “Well, I think it’s fair to say that you were always one of their best customers, John. Actually, why don’t you two wait in my office, and I’ll bring the coffees up—you shouldn’t be hobbling around any more than is absolutely necessary.”

“Nah, I’m an expert on these things—like riding a bicycle,” Mike said, grabbing his crutches. “Plus I don’t want to deprive Gage here of a visit to an old haunt.”
“All right,” laughed Early, “have it your way. It’s just down the hall, anyhow.”

They left the treatment room, and made their way down the corridor to the cafeteria. The place was crowded—it seemed that everyone was having a coffee break at once. But Mike was able to claim a table, while Johnny and Joe made their way through the line, and returned to the table.

“Thanks,” said Mike, as Johnny set a coffee cup in front of him.

Johnny scanned the cafeteria for familiar faces. He did see one person he definitely recognized, but not somebody he’d go chat with for old time’s sake. Cindy, a petite blonde nurse from the orthopedics floor, was the last woman Johnny had dated. As was Johnny’s pattern, they’d had several dates, and then just when things seemed to be picking up, she’d dumped him. She was sitting facing towards Johnny’s table. The man she was sitting with had his back to Johnny’s group, and was wearing scrubs, just like half the rest of the people in the cafeteria.

Oh, crap. I’ll just keep my head down, he thought, and if she sees me and acknowledges me I’ll just wave or something.

Cindy didn’t seem to notice him, luckily. But when she and her scrubs-clad break partner rose to leave, Johnny recognized her companion as well.

Ted, the x-ray technician.

Mystery solved, Johnny thought. He ducked his head down slightly and shaded his face with his hand as the couple left. Mike noticed Johnny’s evasive maneuvers, looked towards the departing couple, and gave Johnny a questioning glance. Johnny shook his head, and mouthed “later.”

Dr. Early’s pager chose that moment to beep. “Well, gentlemen, that will be some x-rays, hot off the presses. Shall we continue our coffee in my office?”

“Sure, Doc,” Johnny said. He took Mike’s cup, and they all headed back to the end of the corridor where Dr. Early’s office was. The x-rays were waiting on a clip on his door.

“Come on in, fellows.”

Dr. Early put the first two x-rays—both of the upper femur and hip, including where the fracture was—up on the light box and inspected them briefly. “Proximal screws—the ones up by your hip—they look fine. Femur itself looks totally healed—we’re what, eighteen months post-op?”

Mike nodded. “That’s about right.” He studied the x-rays. “Damn. I was just starting to forget about all that metal in me.”

Dr. Early put the next two views up on the light boxes—the front and side views of the lower femur and knee. He studied them for longer than he’d studied the previous set. Johnny noticed that Mike’s hands were clenched on the armrests of his chair so tightly his knuckles were white. He reached out and covered one of Mike’s hands with his own. Mike jumped at first, but then relaxed his grip slightly.

“All right,” said Dr. Early. “It looks like your instincts were right—something’s going on down by the lower screws. I had a word with Dr. Hansen, the orthopedist on call, before you arrived, and explained your history and the current problem. I think it would be best if he had a look at you and your x-rays, because this sort of thing is really outside my area of expertise.” Dr. Early looked at Mike’s ashen expression. “Please try not to worry too much—even if he thinks it’s necessary to remove all the hardware, that’s a relatively minor surgery, and you could be up and about the next day.”
“Okay,” said Mike, as he relaxed his grip on the armrests a little more, and regained some color in his face. “I’ll try. But not worrying? It’s not my strong suit.”

“In that case, let’s get this ball rolling as soon as possible,” said Dr. Early. He picked up his phone, and dialed Dr. Hansen’s extension.

“Rob? Joe Early. The patient I spoke to you about is here. I have his x-rays, and it certainly looks like one of the distal screws has failed in some way.”

Dr. Early listened to the reply.

“Terrific—we’ll see you in Treatment 1.”

He hung up the phone. “Dr. Hansen will be right down. And if you’ll pardon me, I have to get back to some unfortunate paperwork that’s been accumulating.” He placed the x-rays back in their envelope, and handed the packet to Mike.

Johnny held up a finger. “One thing, Doc.”

“Sure, Johnny, what is it?”

“I, uh, think I may have an answer for you about why that x-ray tech was so surly this morning.”

Dr. Early raised his eyebrows. “Oh, really?”

“Oh, okay, so, this is kinda embarrassing.” Johnny cleared his throat. “If the nurse he was sitting with in the cafeteria is his girlfriend, I think it’s, uh, my fault.”

“She better be his fiancée,” said Mike, “or the guy who gave her that ring wouldn’t be too happy about their coffee break.”

Johnny shook his head. “Trust you to notice that,” he said.

“Well, an eye for detail goes with my job,” said Mike, “but go on—I’m dying to know how that guy’s absurdly bad behavior can possibly be all your fault.”

“Anyhow,” Johnny continued, “the thing is, well, I kinda dated Cindy for a while. About two years ago. And she was the one that dumped me—not like that was all that unusual. And she was still friendly after that. But the thing is—when I was here visiting Mikey a lot, when he was up in rehab, she started giving me the really cold shoulder.” He shivered. “Like, arctic. Like I’d run the other way if I saw her coming.”

“So the way I figure is, she got wind of you and me,” Johnny said, gesturing back and forth between himself and Mike, “and got majorly freaked out. By, I guess, being attractive to a guy who also likes men,” he finished quietly, “which I guess might be kind of a downer if you look at it the wrong way.”

“Hm,” said Dr. Early. “Regardless of the reason for Ted’s behavior, I’ll certainly be having a chat with him.”

“Doc, wait a sec,” Johnny said quickly. “Honestly, I don’t wanna make trouble—hell, I might even be defending him a little, which is kinda dumb, I guess—so, I dunno, could you maybe drop it? Because if he is pissed for the reason I think he is, and you say anything to him, it could just make things worse for us. You know?”
Dr. Early looked back and forth between Mike and Johnny. "Worse for you? I don’t understand."

Johnny sighed. "Look. Some anonymous jerk has been giving us a hard time. You know—poison pen, slashing tires—that sort of thing."

"I see," Dr. Early said, frowning. "And you’re concerned that if I say anything to Ted, you might be rocking a boat."

"Yeah," said Johnny. "That’s kinda somethin’ we’re tryin’ to avoid right now."

Dr. Early’s frown deepened. "I’ll respect your wishes, if that’s what you both want—" Mike and Johnny both nodded— "but I have to say, it concerns me that an employee of the hospital would behave inappropriately towards any patient, for any reason."

"I see your point," said Mike, "but we’re really in a mess right now, Doc."

"All right. I’ll tell you what—I have a file in my desk where I keep notes on things that aren’t really offenses, but that could become part of a pattern. I’ll write myself a note in there, and leave it at that."

Mike and Johnny looked at each other, and then nodded. "Thanks, Doc," said Johnny.

"And as for the rest of your troubles—well, I certainly hope they track down whoever is responsible for the harassment you’ve been experiencing. That’s extremely unpleasant news," said Dr. Early.

"You’re not kidding," said Johnny. "But thanks."

"And now," said Dr. Early, "let’s get you to Dr. Hansen’s capable hands, Mike. It was nice to finally meet you, and I hope everything turns out all right." He stood up to usher them down to the treatment room, but Johnny stopped him.

“Oh, that’s all right, Doc—I think I remember the way,” said Johnny. “It was real nice to see you, and thanks a lot for everything.”

“Likewise, Johnny—I know everyone around here was sorry to see you go when you took the captaincy. Roy, too. The two of you kind of were an institution around here.”

“Yeah, well, onwards and upwards, right?” Johnny waved on his way out. “See ya, Doc—thanks again.”

“Thanks,” Mike echoed.

Dr. Hansen met them in Treatment 1. He looked at the x-rays, and got straight to the point. “This screw here—the one closest to your knee—it’s come partially out. You’ve probably had a low-grade infection brewing in there for a while, which can cause the bone to thin around the screw. Whatever happened yesterday probably gave it just enough of a hit to knock it out a bit.”

Mike got pale again. “So now what?"

“Oh, we take it out, for sure, and start you on a course of antibiotics, to get rid of any infection.”

Mike’s expression faded from grey to green, and Johnny moved closer to the exam table Mike was sitting on.

Dr. Hansen continued, not having noticed his patient’s distress. He turned to the x-rays again. “It’s a very simple procedure—just a small incision—”
“Whoa, Doc!” Johnny called, as he caught Mike before he toppled forwards. “Time out—fainter.”

“Oh dear,” said Dr. Hansen. He took Mike’s legs, and Johnny maneuvered Mike’s upper body, and together they laid him out flat on the table.

“Sorry, should’ve warned you,” said Johnny. “He, uh, doesn’t do so well with blood and stuff.”

“Good to know—removing the screw is usually done with just a local anesthetic, but maybe a little sedative might be a good idea, too.”

“Well,” said Johnny, “he won’t like that, but we can’t have him puking or passing out, either.”

“Oh, shit,” mumbled Mike. “Sorry,” he said, trying to sit up.

Johnny stopped him with a hand to his chest. “Uh-uh, Stoker. You lie right there till the Doc’s done talkin’, okay?”

“Fine. Sorry, Doc,” Mike repeated. “I, uh, don’t handle blood and stuff so well.”

“So I heard,” Dr. Hansen said drily. “Don’t worry about it—it happens.”

“But go ahead, Doc. Removing the screw?” Mike asked shakily.

“Simple. All under local anesthesia—that’s just numbing the area—and then a stitch or two, and you’ll be on your feet again.”

“That’s it?” Mike asked.

“That’s it,” Hansen replied. “Unless you have more generalized problems with the hardware, we can just take out the one screw and leave it at that.”

“Okay,” said Mike. “When do we do it?”

“Well,” said Dr. Hansen, “I don’t want you putting weight on that leg until the screw is out, so sooner rather than later. I’m stuck here for the rest of the day anyhow, so as far as I’m concerned, let’s do it right now.”

“Now?!?” Mike squeaked.

“Or would you prefer to sleep on it?” Johnny asked, deadpan.

“No! I mean, okay, let’s get it over with. But Doc, I have to warn you, I’ll probably throw up.”

“Mr. Stoker,” Dr. Hansen said, “I think we’ll all be happier if you have a teensy bit of something in your system to help you stay calm during the procedure.”

“You’re not gonna knock me out, are you? ‘Cause I hate that.”

“No, the idea isn’t to put you under—look, it’ll just be a touch of Valium, which will really just have the effect of helping you not worry about or think about what’s going on.”

“C’mon, Mike—it’s the way to go,” said Johnny. “We give it to people all the time when they’re really freaked out—like just a couple days ago, Yang had a patient who was totally flipping out about the oxygen mask—he was claustrophobic, and kept ripping it off—and the docs had him give the guy some Valium, and whammo—he was fine the rest of the trip in.”
Hansen looked at Johnny.

“Oh. Paramedic,” Johnny explained. “Captain, now, but I do enough hours to keep up my certification.” He looked back at Mike. “So whaddaya say, Mike? Get it over with?”

Mike blew out a breath. “Yeah. Yeah, can’t really put it off, can I? Gotta be at work this week anyhow, and I’d rather not do it on crutches.”

“Attaboy,” said Johnny.

“Excellent choice, Mr. Stoker. Let me just call up to my office, just to make sure there’s nothing I’m overlooking, and then I can just do it. The whole thing should only take forty five minutes or so, and then you can go home.”

“Great,” said Mike, voice shaking.

“Great!” Johnny said, rubbing his hands together. “Can I watch?”

“Oh, God,” said Mike, closing his eyes again and covering them with his hands.

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True to his word, Hansen got the screw out in under three quarters of an hour—which in doctor time really meant forty-five minutes for the parts he personally was involved in, with half an hour prep time up front and an hour after that before Mike could leave Rampart. Mike left on the crutches, simply because since the anesthetic hadn’t quite worn off, he couldn’t feel anything, and thus didn’t totally believe yet that it was safe to just plain walk on it.

“Well, that was easy,” Mike said smoothly, as he got into the passenger’s side of the truck. “Don’t see why everyone made such a big deal over such a little thing. I mean really, Gage, that was a piece of cake. Nothin’ to it. Hell, next time, you just bring some gear home and we’ll take care of it in the kitchen or something.”

Johnny rolled his eyes, knowing perfectly well that Mike was still mellowed out on Valium. “Sure, Mikey. Sure. C’mon, let’s get you home.”

“Oh, yeah—we should pick up the Rover today. That’s easy too—I’ll just drive you out there in the truck after lunch, and—”

Johnny burst out laughing. “If you think you’re getting behind the wheel at all today, mister, you’re off your rocker. Besides, I’m getting a ride in to the station with Peters tomorrow, and then Emerson’s gonna drop me at the garage after shift to pick up the Rover. Okay?”

Mike looked languidly at Johnny. “Yeah, babe.” He sighed. “Competence is soooo sexy.” And with that, Mike laid his head back and fell asleep for the rest of the trip home.

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“I can’t believe you actually wanted to watch—and no, please don’t tell me how interesting it was to see this and that, because I really don’t want to know,” Mike complained as Johnny unlocked the front door of the house.

“Guess that Valium’s wearing off, huh?” Johnny asked.

Both answering machines’ message indicators were flashing the digit “1” over and over, and their
not-quite-twin beeps were discordantly competing for attention.

“You go sit down and put that knee up,” said Johnny, “and I’ll get those.”

Johnny pressed the “play” button on his machine first. He waited as the tape rewound, and then began playing back the morning’s messages.

The first message began with a crackle of static, as if from a radio between channels. The hiss continued, and a voice, distorted by the static but still intelligible began speaking.

“Well, Captain Gage. Isn’t it handy to have your very own phone number, like a big boy? But we all know you live with the wife—isn’t that right, fellas?” There were what sounded like cheers of agreement in the background, barely audible over the static. “It’s bad enough that we’ve got cocksucking men in the department at all, but a Captain? Now, that’s disgraceful. So here’s my suggestion to you, pretty boy in blue. Your next shift is tomorrow—call the chief and resign first thing, why don’tcha. ‘Cause if you show up for your next shift after that—well, let’s just say things could get ugly. And dangerous. Oh—and by the way—we probably won’t bust the wife up too much; wouldn’t be much of a challenge after what some intelligent motorist did for us already—but we can still make her life tricky.” Click.

Johnny silently looked at Mike, whose head was in his hands. Johnny popped the tape out of the machine, retrieved a new tape from the drawer beneath the cabinet the machine sat on, and put the new tape in the machine. He sighed, and pressed the “play” button on Mike’s machine, pretty sure what he was going to hear.

“Happy Sunday, Investigator Stoker!” a familiar voice proclaimed cheerfully, over the static Johnny expected to hear. “We assume you’ve gotten our first couple of messages to you and your pretty, pretty boyfriend. We’ve seen how you look at him—don’t think we haven’t. Yeah, he sure is pretty, ain’t he. If you want him to stay that way, you’ll just quietly pack up your nice comfy office and shove off. Oh, and Mickey Mouse? We sure hope you take our advice, because it’s really a lot of work to be a home wrecker and a face breaker.” Click.

Johnny silently repeated his routine with replacing the tape. He stood at the counter for a good thirty seconds, not saying anything, just trying to calm himself down. When his hands stopped shaking, he retrieved the duct-tape covered bag of peas from the freezer, plucked a kitchen towel from a drawer, turned the corner to the living room, and sat down next to Mike, who had his feet on the table and his hands over his eyes and ears.

He wrapped the bag in the towel, and rested it gently on Mike’s knee, right over the bandage. He gently, gently peeled Mike’s hands off his face, and took them both in his own. They sat together that way for a long, long time, not moving, not talking, not doing anything.

“What do we do now?” Mike asked, finally.

Johnny leaned his head back on the couch and looked up at the ceiling. “I have no fucking idea.”

TBC
Mike and Johnny sat on the couch, saying nothing, each lost in his own thoughts, until the bag of peas on Mike’s knee was a soggy, sodden, room-temperature mess. Despite the duct tape that had nearly replaced the original plastic bag, there was green water dripping from a corner of the bag onto the carpet.

“I think it’s time to retire our peas,” said Johnny. “We can try corn next time; see if it holds up any better.”

Mike didn’t reply, as Johnny went into the kitchen and disposed of the dripping mess. He pulled the deli drawer out of the refrigerator, and without asking Mike what he wanted, just made one each of his and Mike’s favorite sandwiches and took them out to the living room. He returned with a glass of water for Mike, and a glass of milk for himself.

“Just this once, let’s eat our lunch on the couch,” Johnny suggested.

“Fine,” Mike said listlessly, as he took the plate Johnny handed him. “Thanks.”

They ate their sandwiches with no conversation. Mike looked out the bay window onto the street. Johnny looked at Mike’s knee—he thought the swelling already seemed to be going down. It might have been Johnny’s imagination, but, he thought, imagining positive things was nice for a change.

Next, Johnny’s eyes were drawn to the few pictures they kept on the side table. One of them was a copy of one of the photos in Mike’s drawer at work—the last official Station 51 A-Shift photo where they were all still together. Johnny looked at all the faces—Chet, who they’d just seen the previous day; Roy, who they saw at least monthly, either here or at the DeSotos’ house; Marco, who Johnny hadn’t seen since his last day at 51s; and Hank Stanley, who, along with Marco, still remained at Station 51.

“You know what we should do, Mike?” Johnny said suddenly, mouth full of food.

“What,” Mike said tonelessly, not even commenting on Johnny’s poor manners.

“We should call Cap’n Stanley.”

Finally, Mike sat up taller on the couch. He put his sandwich plate down, and looked at Johnny. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. That’s exactly what we should do.”

Johnny put down his unfinished sandwich, picked up the phone, and dialed.

“Hello, Stanley residence;” answered a deep voice.

“Hiya Cap, it’s John Gage.”

“Captain Gage! Haven’t heard a peep from you since the DeSoto’s barbeque last month. How’s everything? How’s Mike?”

“Uh, Cap, to be honest, everything’s not so good,” Johnny admitted right away. “Mike and I just got back from Rampart—he had to get one of the screws in his leg out all of a sudden—won’t bore you with the details, but that’s kind of a drag.”
“Uh-huh, I’ll bet. Last time I saw you guys he seemed really good—first time I’d seen him walking totally normally since the accident.” He paused. “But I can tell that’s not all, is it. What’s going on, Johnny?”

Mike listened as Johnny gave Captain Stanley the rundown on the harassment they’d been suffering. After Johnny finished conveying their tale of woe, there was a long silence as Cap spoke for a while.

“You will?” Johnny said. “Wow, thanks!”

Another silence, short this time.

“She would? Really? That’s really nice, Cap—that would be great.”

This time Johnny’s face fell a bit.

“Yeah, I know we do. We did yesterday, and the deputy who came was all right. I was gonna, later today, I promise—” Johnny paused briefly to listen. “Okay, okay, you’re right. I’ll do it right now. Thanks, Cap. We’ll see you soon.”

Johnny hung up the phone.

“What’d he say?” Mike asked.

“He’s coming over, and Mrs. Stanley is sending us over a casserole to put in the oven for dinner so we have one less thing to worry about. Her words, apparently.”

Mike laughed. “I think they have a whole freezer of ‘Emergency Food for Hank’s Boys’ in the basement or something.”

“Yeah, probably,” said Johnny.

“So what’s the part you didn’t like? That you’re gonna supposedly do right now?”

“He’s right, I know,” Johnny groaned. “We have to call the sheriff again. I knew we did; that’s why I popped those tapes out, ‘cause they’re gonna want ‘em. I just don’t feel like it, though. Having that deputy look at that letter was bad enough, but those messages? What I’d really like to do is just unspool the tapes and run them through the garbage disposal.”

“Uh, you wanna go to the garage, and I’ll call the sheriff?”

“Seriously?” Johnny’s face lit up at the prospect of being able to take his aggression out on plates of iron and a punching bag.

“Sure. Uh, unless you think I’m still too mellow to make a phone call, but I’m not, am I? I mean, it seems like that stuff is mostly worn off.”

“Naw, I think you’re fine. Still not gonna let you drive today, but a phone call? No problem. Especially since it’s one I don’t wanna do,” Johnny admitted.

“Okay. Scram—I’ll call the law.”

“Damn, Mike. I’m a fortunate man.” Mike’s leg was still up on the coffee table, so Johnny carefully straddled it as he leaned down to kiss the man who knew him so well. Before he left to work out his aggression in the garage, he helpfully handed Mike the phone, as well as the card the deputy had left yesterday.
Mike appreciated the view as Johnny went through the side door to the garage, and then picked up the phone and dialed.

“L.A. County Sheriff, Deputy Price speaking.”

Mike almost sobbed with relief that it was the same person. “Hello, Deputy Price. This is Mike Stoker; you were out at our place yesterday about a letter we got, and you said to call right away if anything else happened. So I’m calling. Because something else happened.” Mike cringed at his awkward wording. *Yep, that Valium is history,* he thought.

“Yes, I remember,” said the deputy. “Can you fill me in on what else has happened?”

“Well, we got home after being out all morning, and both of our answering machines had, uh, unpleasant messages that also had specific threats in them. The guy tried to disguise his voice with static, but we’re pretty sure it’s the same guy on both.”

“Did you save the tapes?”

“Yeah, Johnny popped them out of the machines first thing.”

“And you said there were specific threats?”

“Yes, uh, on Johnny’s he said to resign on his next shift, and that if he showed up for another shift after that, uh, well, he kind of implied I’d get beat up,” Mike said hastily. “And on mine, he said I should pack up my office and get out, and implied Johnny would get beat up if I didn’t.”

“You say ‘implied—’ did he use names?”

“If I remember right, he used each of our names in the beginning of the message, but not in the threats. But it was, um, pretty clear who he was talking about.”

“All right,” said Price. “I’ll come out to take your report, and I’ll need to pick up the tapes as well. It’ll be about an hour—is that convenient?”

Mike’s brain screamed loudly, *No, you fucking idiot, there’s no convenient time for something like this!* “Yes, that’s fine. Thank you,” he said calmly and politely.

Mike hung up the phone gently. He looked at the phone, picked up the receiver again, and slammed it down in the cradle. Hard. He sighed, and put the fortunately undamaged phone back on the side table.

“Time for a test drive,” he said. He carefully bent his knee, and put his right foot on the floor. Using his practiced technique, he levered himself up using his left leg and the crutches, and swung himself out to the open area of the living room. He took a step with a small percentage of his body weight on his right leg, then another with more, and another, and another. A twinge from the carefully bandaged incision, but from the bone itself—nothing. He put his full body weight on his right leg, and took a normal step. His full weight on the leg sent a zap of cold up his femur, so he knew he’d found a limit. He tested, experimented, with two crutches, then one, until he found he just needed a small amount of support to feel no pain at all.

He hobbled to the hall closet with one crutch, and pulled out the cane he still used occasionally. Even though, in his opinion, it shouted “old man,” he preferred it to the crutches, which spoke to him of injury and debility. And, when used properly—which didn’t happen most of the time in real life or on TV, but Mike was taught by experts—it didn’t bother his wrist or shoulder like the crutches tended to.
“Sorry, guys, but it looks like you’re banished to the garage again,” Mike said to the crutches. He picked up the crutches with his non-cane-using hand, and exited the side door to the garage.

Johnny was in the middle of a set of bench presses. Mike watched from the doorway, not wanting to startle him. Once Johnny had clanged the weights firmly into the supports on the rack, Mike interrupted without fear of causing injury.

“Can I work in?” he asked, tucking the crutches back into the corner they’d been retrieved from the previous day.

Johnny ducked under the bar and sat up, staring at Mike. “Uh, should you even be off the couch?” Johnny asked.

Mike shrugged. “I did a test drive. Leg seems okay if I only put ninety percent of my weight on it or so. Obviously I’m not going to be doing squats today, but I don’t see why I can’t do some upper body work.”

Johnny looked at him dubiously. “I don’t know, Mike; Valium’s a muscle relaxant. It doesn’t seem like a good idea to push it.”

Mike sighed. “Yeah, well, I’m so mad I just about broke the phone when I hung it up, so I’ve gotta do something. By the way, Deputy Price is coming in an hour or so.”

“Goody gumdrops,” Johnny snapped. He immediately smacked his forehead. “Sorry, sorry. Thanks for calling him. I’m just not looking forward to anyone else hearing those messages.”

“No. Me neither. But there’s nothing we can do about it, except keep on keepin’ on, for now.”

“Well, we can pump iron, punch the bag, and break shit.”

“Break shit?” Mike perked up at that. “What can we break?”

Johnny pointed to the back of the garage bay. “There’s that dresser from my old place that’s missing two drawers since it fell off the truck when we moved my stuff. I’m not gonna get around to fixing it,” Johnny said seriously. “Are you?”

“No way, Gage,” Mike grinned.

“And it’d be a pain to take it to the dump,” Johnny said, completely straight-faced.

“Definitely. So let’s chop it up—then we can just stuff it in a trash can,” Mike suggested. “Actually,” he amended. “we might get smaller pieces if we hit it with the 10-pound sledge.”

“Very practical of you, Stoker.” Johnny took the plates of the barbell and put them on their rack. “C’mon. I’ll drag it out back, and we can take turns hitting it.”

A cathartic quarter of an hour later, Mike and Johnny stood sweating and panting in front of a pile of kindling.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what Dr. Hansen had in mind when he said to lay low this afternoon,” Mike said, chest heaving, “but damn, that was perfect.”

“Better than Valium?” Johnny asked, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his forearm.
“I don’t know if it’s better, but it’s certainly more manly,” Mike said. “There’s just something about Valium that says ‘frustrated middle-aged housewife.’”

“Yeah, and there’s something about sledgehammers and a pile of kindling that says, what, exactly?” Johnny asked.

“Uh, pissed-off firemen?” Mike suggested.

“Sweaty, filthy, disgusting, less-pissed-off-than-before firemen,” said Johnny, “who really have to get in the shower before the sheriff and their old captain show up.”

“I’d say ‘race you,’ but we both know how that would end,” said Mike, picking up the sledgehammer and leaning it against the deck. “So let’s just avoid any more trips to Rampart, and walk in like adults, and go get clean.” He turned to go in the side door, with Johnny at his heels.

“’kay. Wanna get dirty at the same time as we get clean? ‘Cause you, and a sledgehammer, and a head full of mad? Hot. Very, very hot, Stoker,” Johnny said as he followed Mike into the house.

~!~!~!~!~

After a possibly even more cathartic half hour, Johnny and Mike were clean, dry, clothed, and feeling an awful lot better. Mike was back on the couch with a bag of frozen corn on his knee, when the doorbell rang.

Mike peered out the bay window, and saw the sheriff’s car. “Sheriff’s here,” he called.

“I’ll get it,” said Johnny.

“Afternoon, Captain Gage,” said Deputy Price. “Sorry we’re doing this again.”

“Afternoon, Deputy; come on in,” said Johnny, showing him to the living room again.

“Mr. Stoker,” Price greeted Mike. “Did you get that knee looked at?”

“Yep. Had a screw loose. Got it pulled out this morning,” he said matter-of-factly. “Have a seat—Johnny you wanna grab that tape player off the desk?”

“Sure,” said Johnny, ducking into the spare room and returning shortly with a portable cassette tape player, and picking up the two tapes from the counter by the answering machines on his way back. “We wish you didn’t have to listen to these—we wish we didn’t have to hear them again either. They’re, um, kinda embarrassing.”

“Well, Captain, just like in your job, you see an awful lot of things about people that they wish you hadn’t seen, and I’ll bet that just like me, you walk away and forget about it. Right?”

“Most of the time,” Johnny admitted. “But I’ll tell ya, the ones that stick with me are the ones where people have done something so incredibly dumb that you hafta think a long time about how they even managed it. Like this one time? There was this guy who—” Johnny caught Mike’s look, and interrupted himself. “Sorry. Not the time to start a rant. But yeah.” He popped the first tape in the machine, and pushed ‘rewind.’ “I get it.”

“It’s not my job to pass judgment,” said Price, to make his point clear. “Someone’s threatening you, and our job is to get to the bottom of it and try to keep anything worse from happening.”

The tape reached its beginning, and the machine clicked to a stop.
“You mean you’re gonna try and do something? Not just take a report?” Mike asked.

“Yes indeed. I spoke to my supervisor after I got off the phone with you today, and he agreed it seems to be escalating. Let’s go over the tapes, and then we can talk about what’s next.”

“All right,” said Johnny. He pushed play, and the static and the humiliating message addressed to him played back. Price took some notes, and bagged and labeled the first tape, as Johnny readied the second tape.

Once again, he pushed play, and the hateful words spewed out of the player. Deputy Price took some more notes, and repeated the routine of labeling and bagging the tape. Throughout the ordeal, Mike held his head in his hands, and sank lower and lower into the couch.

When the tapes were packed away, Johnny joined Mike on the couch, but didn’t touch him. There would be time for that later, when they weren’t both feeling so naked and humiliated. Johnny was keenly aware that it was likely that Deputy Price was not particularly in favor of his and Mike’s relationship, but he appreciated that the officer was able to stay professional. Johnny had put aside his own feelings about patients he’d had to treat many a time.

“So what now, Deputy Price?”

“A few things. First, it’s up to you, of course, whether or not you choose to follow through with the extortionist’s demands. I would highly recommend that you not do so—acceding to his demands is unlikely to stop his harassment. However, because both demands pertain to your place of work, you each need to speak with your immediate supervisors and explain the demands and the threats that have been made against you. I appreciate that this is likely to be awkward, but it is essential. You don’t need to explain why you’re being harassed, but you need to explain that threats of physical harm have been made. You can have them call my office for confirmation.”

Price looked at them without blinking, and waited for a response.

“We made pretty sure we haven’t violated any written rules of the department by, uh, living together,” Johnny said. “But unwritten rules? Hell yes. So yeah, that’s gonna be tricky. But, on the other hand, it’s a little hard to believe that I’d be telling my battalion chief anything he didn’t already know.”

“I don’t honestly know what my boss knows, or thinks,” said Mike. “I’m sure the rumors were already flying about us before I got hired onto the arson unit. But I guess I’ll find out tomorrow,” he sighed. “God, I hate this bullshit.”

“So we’ll do our part—what can the sheriff’s office do?” Johnny asked.

“We’re sending a car down your street once an hour, to start with, at random times. We’re going to step up patrols around Station 93 at night, and whenever the C-shift is out on a run. And, we’re going to interview people in the personnel office at the department headquarters about who has access to personal information—specifically, your address and phone number, Captain Gage—and try to get a sense for how difficult it would be to get that information outside of normal channels.”

“Wow,” said Johnny. “I’m not sure about that last one. That seems like it might just stir up more trouble.”

“I’m afraid you need to accept that it’s a necessary step,” said Deputy Price. “The unfortunate fact is that victims of crimes often end up having further discomfort as the result of efforts on their behalf.”

“You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs,” Mike said quietly. “Yeah, I guess I see that.”
“One more thing—it seems likely that this individual has a personal grudge against at least one of you, outside of his objection to your association with each other. Please think about whether there are people within the department who might have some other bone to pick with you, either personal or professional. We’re not making accusations, but we would certainly be interested in anyone who had access to personal information and was also someone either of you had had a past conflict with.”

“Oh, boy,” muttered Johnny. “Considering how old Ted acted today, I might have a pretty long list.”

“Ted?” Price asked.

“Uh, okay,” Johnny cleared his throat before continuing. “I used to kind of, um, try to go out with a lot of girls at Rampart—our squad’s base hospital—and I kind of realized today that at least one of them is probably personally offended by my having gone out with her and then taking up with a guy. If you kinda see what I mean,” he finished.

“But who’s this Ted?” Price repeated.

“He’s her boyfriend. He gave us the evil eye big-time today when we were at Rampart,” Mike said. “But you know, I don’t see how it could be him—Johnny, he checked you out for a long time before I think he figured out who you were. And who I was. And he works at Rampart, not HQ.”

“But that’s the kind of thing you need to be thinking about—people who may hold a grudge against you for something personal or professional, who might have some connection with the fire department,” Pride reinforced.

“All right,” said Johnny. “We’ll think about it. But I don’t really like the idea of getting all, I dunno, suspicious and paranoid.”

“The fact is,” said Price, “you’re going to have to think that way a bit for the time being. Because this isn’t going to quietly disappear until we find out who’s behind what’s been happening.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. “Yeah, I guess I kinda know that.”

“By the way,” Price added, peering out into the yard, “the, uh, destruction in the yard there—is that something I need to look into?”

Johnny snorted. “No, it’s just some stress management.”

“Sorry?” Price looked back and forth between Johnny and Mike.

“You know—taking out your frustrations on helpless inanimate objects,” said Mike.

“Oh—right. I use the shooting range,” Price admitted.

“We break stuff with axes and sledgehammers,” Mike replied.

“Fair enough,” said Price. “One last thing,” he added. “Neighbors. I can’t stress the importance of talking to your neighbors. If you can, please talk to a few today.” He handed them a small stack of business cards. “Give them these—I’m not available all the time, but if they need to call in, they can say I told them to call if there was anything suspicious, and the call will get to the right person.”

Johnny took the cards. “Thanks. We will—today.”

He showed the deputy out. “Well, I hate to say it, but we’ll probably see you again, won’t we.”

“Unfortunately, it seems that way. Oh—I’ll have one of the patrol cars drop off a copy of the reports
from yesterday and today. Probably tomorrow some time.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Johnny closed the door, and joined Mike in the living room again. He sat right next to him, and was relieved when Mike reached out to take his hand.

“I seriously wanted to just disappear when he played those tapes again,” Mike admitted.

“And I wanted to disappear when I had to fess up about all the women at Rampart I maybe pissed off. Though,” he admitted, “it’s not as many as I think most people would assume.”

“How many?” Mike asked, curious to hear an actual figure. “I mean, how many women at Rampart did you, say, get beyond second base with?”

“Not as many as people would assume,” Johnny repeated vaguely. “Partly because ninety percent of the girls I asked wouldn’t go out with me in the first place, and partly ‘cause I was always gettin’ dumped. C’m on, everyone on our shift always heard my sad stories, right?”

“Tally, Gage. Let’s see a scoreboard.”

“Fine, fine. Gimme a sec—it was like six years, right?” He scrunched his face up while he was thinking. “One homer, two—no, three third bases, and another handful of second bases. Geez, it sounds terrible when I put it that way, But that’s it. I swear. And the weird thing is, they were always the ones that dumped me. Except for this one chick, Lynn, an aide in pediatrics—but man, she was weird. I mean, she seemed fine at first, but then she got real weird, real fast.”

“ Weird like how?” Mike asked.

“Hard to describe. I guess, weirdly possessive and obsessive. Not jealous—she wasn’t worried about other girls or anything—but I guess a good way to put it was she didn’t have boundaries. Like for example, one time when the squad was parked in the ambulance entrance, Roy and I came back and there she was, sitting in passenger’s seat of the squad, having her coffee.”

“That’s not so weird,” Mike said. “I mean, maybe she just knew you were around, and didn’t want to bug you in the ER, so she waited for you there.”

“Well, I haven’t gotten to the weird part yet—I said ‘Hi’ to her, and she just up and said somethin’ like she just wanted to sit where I was all day, and then she took off. No ‘hey, how’s your day going,’ or ‘I just wanted to say hi,’ or anything like that—she just plain took off.”

“What else?” Mike asked, beginning to get the picture.

“Well, she started just showing up at my place—sometimes she’d be there waiting in the parking lot when I came off a shift. And even when I explained that I’d been up working the whole night, that I just needed to go to sleep, she’d insist on making me breakfast or something. And I didn’t like to be rude or anything, but after a coupla times of this I finally had to tell her to lay off, that I didn’t want her coming around any more. I mean, I’d’ve steered clear of picking up any guys that behaved like she started to, that’s for sure; so it’s not that I don’t think women should be assertive. It’s just that this was beyond assertive.”

“I think I remember you complaining about her—this was in my last year at 51s, right?”

Johnny squinted and looked up at a corner. “Yeah, that’s about right.”
“She sounded pretty creepy to me even then,” Mike said. “What happened after you told her to quit showing up at your place?”

“Man, she got real bad for a while. She stopped showing up in person, but she kept leaving me stuff — she left cookies in the squad once, and she left all sorts of stuff by my front door, and she even brought stuff to the station a couple times. I remember her saying she knew firemen loved it when people brought cookies and stuff, ‘cause—” Johnny stopped suddenly. “Huh.”

“What?” Mike asked.

“Huh,” Johnny said again, staring off into the distance. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“What?” Mike asked again.

“Her brother,” Johnny said. “Lynn’s brother was a mechanic for the department.”

TBC
Johnny and Mike had only begun pondering the possible ramifications of Johnny’s realization about Lynn Nolan and her brother when the doorbell rang. Mike looked out the window and recognized Hank Stanley’s Oldsmobile Delta 88.

“It’s Cap,” Mike said, as Johnny headed to the door.

“Hey, Cap!” said Johnny, opening the door. “C’mon in!”

Stanley handed Johnny a casserole in an aluminum tray as he toed his shoes off. His size 14 shoes looked absurdly large next to Mike’s and Johnny’s more reasonable pairs.

“Thanks for this, Cap,” Johnny said, putting the casserole on the counter to thaw.

“No trouble—Jane keeps a ton of those in the freezer for occasions where she feels like one of my boys needs a helping hand.”

“We guessed that,” Mike said from the couch.

“Mike—sorry about that leg—that’s a downer.”

“Yeah, well, I think it’ll be all right sooner than I was imagining,” Mike admitted. “I kinda panicked at first, but I’m over it.”

“Seriously? He panicked?” Hank said to Johnny. “What does that look like?”

“He gets kinda green, and swears a lot. Personally I thought it was justified—the crunching sound was pretty ominous.”

“But it was just a screw, right? And it’s out already?” asked Hank.

“Hel-lllooo! I’m right here!” said Mike. “And yes, it’s out, and I’m fine. Just icing it after overdoing it just now. In the yard. With a sledgehammer. For stress management.”

“I see,” said Hank, peering out into the yard at the pile of kindling.

“You guys talk to the law yet?”

“Yeah, the deputy just left,” answered Mike. “C’n I get you a drink? Iced tea? Soda?”

“Sure—tea sounds great. No sugar please. I can’t stay long, but I just wanted to see how you guys are doing, and see how I can help.” Hank took a seat across from Mike. “You guys talk to the law yet?”

“Yeah, the deputy just left,” answered Mike. “He said we have to talk to our bosses, since this guy is likely to try to screw with us again at work.”

“Hm. Mike, I don’t know the Arson unit’s chief,” said Hank.

“Who, Rhodes? Well, he did hire me,” said Mike, “even though I’m sure the rumors were already flying. I mean, Johnny was with me at the hospital for pretty much a whole month after I got hurt, and that kinda let the cat outta the bag. And to be honest,” Mike continued, “I’m pretty surprised nobody’s hassled either one of us until now. Though this crap is beyond hassling.”
Johnny came in with iced tea for everyone. “I can’t wait to talk to Chief Livingston,” he said, naming the head of the County’s northern division, in which Station 93 was located. “He’s real old-school about pretty much everything. You know the type—thinks air packs are for sissies, feels like the paramedic program is a waste of resources, and so on, and so on.”

“Livingston,” said Hank, with a frown on his face, “is an ass. And I’m speaking from personal experience. He was my first captain, and, let’s just say, we didn’t get on. I hate to say it, John, but I think you’d be better off just not saying a thing to him. Just because the sheriff thinks you ought to, doesn’t mean it’s actually the best idea.”

“Yeah, that thought did cross my mind,” admitted Johnny. “I don’t think it’s worth it to get him riled up about something that might not even happen, and that isn’t something I’m responsible for anyhow.”

“You know what you oughta do instead?” Hank suggested. “You oughta tell the other captains at 93s, and any other captains you know who would be sympathetic. That way, if you ever have to arrange a sub, for instance, you’ll have people to help out—though hopefully it won’t be necessary. I’d be happy to help out that way.”

“Seriously? Thanks, Cap,” said Johnny.

“Yeah, and Roy’s on B-shift, and I’m sure he’d help out too,” said Mike. “As for me, I’m just gonna bite the bullet and talk to Rhodes tomorrow. We have this big trial coming up a week from tomorrow, and I think I’d rather risk annoying him off up front than blindsiding him later.”

“I’m not gonna say anything to my crew, Cap.” Johnny said.

“Good call, John,” said Hank. “They’re all young, and fairly inexperienced, and I think it’s important for the Captain to seem, well, indestructible.”

Johnny laughed. “Well, I’m in luck, then—apparently I’m a legend.”

“Oh, good lord, Gage,” groaned Mike. “All Yang said was that you’re a legend for how often you got messed up on the job, not for being indestructible.”

“Same thing, though,” argued Johnny. “I got messed up, and I came back.”

“Repeatedly,” Hank said wryly.

“So? Like I said, Cap; same thing.”

“And what am I gonna have to do,” said Hank, “to get you twits to call me Hank? I’m not your captain any more, and John, you are a captain, for crying out loud.”

Johnny squirmed in his seat, and Mike poked at the bag of corn draped over his knee.

“Or not,” Hank laughed. “Listen, guys—I’ve gotta get going,” he said as he stood up. “Keep me posted, will ya? And don’t forget—you’ve got a lot of friends in the department—a lot. And just one or two crazy enemies.”

“Thanks, Cap,” said Johnny. “And, uh,” he hesitated.

“What, John?” Hank asked, as he tied his shoes.

“Say hi to Marco from us,” he said. “Even if he doesn’t say hi back.”
Hank softened his look. “I will. He misses everyone—I know he does. I think it’s just—”

“I know,” said Johnny. “Everyone’s got their baggage. But it’s up to each person whether or not they can put it down.”

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Mike and Johnny tried to continue their Sunday as if nothing unusual had happened. The problem was, it just wasn’t true, and they both knew it. But groceries were bought, laundry was done, and the pile of splintered wood in the yard went into a trash can. Mike put Mrs. Stanley’s casserole in the oven, and they had an early dinner.

Shortly after they’d cleaned up from their meal, the doorbell rang. Johnny and Mike looked at each other nervously—they weren’t expecting anyone, and they were both on edge.

“I’ll get it,” said Mike, “since I’m not sitting on the couch this time.”

He went to the front door, and looked cautiously through the peephole. He relaxed, and opened the door. “Mrs. Daniels!” he said to their neighbor. “Please, come in! We were just about to have some coffee—will you join us?”

“Hello, Mike,” she said. “and John. I’d love some coffee—as long as you have decaf. At my age, it’s hard enough to sleep, and caffeine after dinner pretty much ruins the night.”

“I was going to make Sanka anyhow,” said Mike. “We’ve both got to be up at the crack of dawn, so the real stuff is no good for us, either. Please, come in and have a seat.”

Mrs. Daniels took a seat on the sofa, sitting with Johnny while Mike set up the Mr. Coffee.

“I don’t mean to pry,” Mrs. Daniels said hesitantly, “but is everything all right over here? I’m afraid that ever since I retired, I have too much time to look out the window, and I noticed a sheriff’s deputy here yesterday and again today, and was a little worried for you.”

Johnny sighed. “The truth is, Mrs. D., we’ve had some trouble. Someone’s been messin’ around with us—slashed my tires at work, messed up Mike’s office, sent us some hate mail, and left us some nasty messages.”

Mrs. Daniels’ hand flew to her mouth. “Well, that’s terrible! Who on Earth would do something like that? Certainly nobody from this neighborhood—everyone likes you boys, and we all feel so much safer with a fireman and a paramedic right here.”

Johnny sighed. “The truth is, Mrs. D., we’ve had some trouble. Someone’s been messin’ around with us—slashed my tires at work, messed up Mike’s office, sent us some hate mail, and left us some nasty messages.”

Mrs. Daniels’ hand flew to her mouth. “Well, that’s terrible! Who on Earth would do something like that? Certainly nobody from this neighborhood—everyone likes you boys, and we all feel so much safer with a fireman and a paramedic right here.”

“Well,” Johnny said quietly, “Let’s put it this way: the fire department isn’t very tolerant of people who don’t follow the, uh, the unwritten rules of life. It’s not exactly a secret that Mike and I live together, but someone seems to have taken exception to us all of a sudden.”

“I see,” she said, drawing her brows together. “Well, you can rest assured that I’ll personally keep an eye out for anything suspicious around here. I don’t consider myself to be the neighborhood busybody—we’ll leave that honor to Mrs. Jenkins up the street—but I do live across the street from you, and as I said, I do look out the window a fair amount.”

Mike limped back into the living room.

“And Michael Stoker,” she continued, “you’re limping.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mike admitted glumly, and repeated the story of yesterday’s misadventure and the
morning’s minor surgical procedure.

“Actually, Mrs. D.,” Johnny continued after Mrs. Daniels had fussed over Mike a bit, “the sheriff said we should give these out to sympathetic neighbors.” He handed her a card from the stack. “In case you have to call, this number will get you to the right person. And there’s the case number from the reports we’ve filed.”

Mrs. Daniels tucked the card into her pocket. “Well, I certainly hope I won’t have to use this, but I will if I have to.”

Mike laughed. “You make it sound like a weapon.”

“Oh, I’m not to be trifled with, young man. You just ask any of my former students—they’d tell you not to get on my bad side.”

“Um, I’m gonna go get the coffee,” Johnny said, thoughts of many hours spent in the principal’s office dancing through his head.

“Guilty conscience on that one?” Mrs. Daniels asked, knowing Johnny could hear perfectly well from the kitchen.

“Lots of fights at school,” Mike replied.

Johnny brought in a tray with three mugs of coffee, milk, and sugar.

“I’m surprised,” Mrs. Daniels said to him as he sat down. “You don’t seem like the fighting type.”

“Well,” he said, passing her a mug, “at the school on the reservation, I got my a—I mean, uh, rear, kicked for being half white, and at schools in L.A., I got beat up for being an Indian.”

“Caught in the middle,” said Mrs. Daniels, shaking her head. “At least as a black child, I knew where I stood from day one.”

They finished their decaf, chatting about neighborhood goings on.

“Well,” Mrs. Daniels said, “I should let you folks finish your weekend. I’m sure you’re needing to leave early in the morning, so I don’t want to keep you up.”

Johnny walked her across the street, and returned home to get ready for an early bedtime, since they both had to be up by five thirty.

“You gonna be able to sleep tonight?” he asked Mike.

“How do I know?” Mike answered testily, tossing his cut-offs into the laundry pile. “I won’t know till I’m asleep how long it’ll take for me to get that way, will I.” He stopped in mid-throw of his Led Zeppelin t-shirt. “Sorry.”

“‘s okay,” Johnny said.

“Man,” Mike said, “I really wish I had that switch in my brain like you do—the one that lets you just not think about what you don’t wanna think about.”

“Well,” said Johnny, “we’re even, tonight—’cause mine’s not working right now.”

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Mike entered the HQ building bright and early on Monday morning—since Johnny’d had to leave extra early to get a ride in pick up his vehicle, Mike figured he might as well get an early start to his day. He was happy to get a good parking spot, since even with the cane, his knee still hurt when he walked. He arrived at the front door just as Bert Saunders was unlocking it so the morning traffic could begin to enter.

“Hey, Stoker,” Bert greeted him. “What’s up with the leg?”

Mike explained; Bert cringed. “Sorry, man. There’s just something about, you know, having metal parts, that kinda creeps me out.”

“No kidding,” Mike said drily. “It creeps me out too. I was just starting to forget about the hardware, too.”

“Well, was the rest of your weekend at least good?” Bert asked.

“Not really,” Mike elaborated, telling him the whole story, if only because it was good to be able to tell somebody in this building.

“Shit,” said Bert. “Ya know, it really pisses me off that someone from the department would be doing this shit. And you know,” he added, “it has to be someone from the department.”

“We know,” said Mike. “We know.”

“Listen,” Bert said suddenly. “I’ll walk you up to your office. Just wanna make sure there’s no other crap getting pulled up there, and then I’ll let you get to work.”

Mike didn’t really feel like he needed protection, but could see that Bert really wanted to help out in any way he could. “Thanks—that’d be great.”

The two took the elevator up to the deserted sixth floor, and Mike unlocked and opened his office door.

They were immediately inundated with the stench of ammonia, and something else as well.

“Shit!” Mike said, stepping back into the hallway.

Bert took a step forwards, towards but not into the office. “Piss, actually. Damn. Looks like you got pee-pucked.” He shut the office door again, and looked at the gap between the bottom of the door and the carpet. “Yep, there’s just enough room.”

“What the hell is pee-pucked?” Mike asked.

“A nasty little trick where you freeze piss into shallow dishes, unmold the results, then slide the pee-pucks under the door. It melts, and it, um, mellows with age. Bet they did this Friday night, from the smell of it.”

“That’s great. That’s just great,” Mike snarled. “I have a fucking lot of work to get done, and my office smells like a men’s room that hasn’t been cleaned in a month, and I just can’t fucking take any more of this BULLSHIT!” He kicked the closed door viciously with his good leg. “Ow,” he complained.

“All right, all right—cool down. Here’s what we’ll do. I’ll go down to the basement and bring up the carpet extractor, and a fan. You’ll go to the break room and make some coffee. I’ll clean your carpet so good you won’t know anything ever happened, and then we’ll spill some coffee on the floor, and
I’ll clean that. Then the fan takes care of the cleaning fluid, which is all that’ll be left, and you don’t even have to fib too hard to explain why there’s a fan in your door, and all anyone’ll smell in fifteen minutes will be coffee. Okay?”

Bert looked at Mike, who still had his back turned. “Okay?” he repeated.

Mike turned around. “Yeah. Okay,” he said. “And thanks. You’re a genius, and a good guy.”

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Johnny rolled into Station 93’s parking lot in plenty of time to go over the previous shift with the B-shift’s captain, Jeff Gilbert. They went over some maintenance issues that needed to be taken care of, and Gilbert described a particularly interesting rescue call that he knew Johnny would appreciate.

“Listen,” Gilbert said as he was gathering his belongings to get ready to leave. “Len said your tires got slashed Friday night.”

“Yep,” Johnny said curtly, not really wanting to explain the rest of his weekend, but also not wanting to ignore Gilbert’s concern. “Mike and I have been getting some real shit.” He gave Gilbert a brief run-down of the problems thus far.

Gilbert looked at him uncomfortably. “You know, you can’t talk to Chief Livingston about this bullshit. He, uh …” Gilbert trailed off uncomfortably.

“What’d he say, Jeff,” Johnny asked, knowing Gilbert had probably been on the receiving end of some unflattering comments about him and Mike.

“He said he would only tolerate having ‘one of them’ at one of his stations because so many other guys had quit, but the first time you screwed up, you were gone.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said sourly. “And I’m sure that in his mind, any of these things constitutes a screw-up on my part. Thanks for the heads-up, Jeff. I’m gonna do my best to not let this crap get in the way of work, but, well, getting in the way kinda seems to be the idea here.”

“Well, lemme know if there’s anything I can do, all right?” said Gilbert, keys in hand.

“Sure, Jeff. Thanks,” Johnny sighed. “Oh, and I don’t want any of the crew to know about this, all right? Just us Caps.”

“As it should be,” said Gilbert. “Have a good shift.”

“Thanks. Have good days off.” Johnny turned to the logbook, and started looking over the rest of the runs from the last two shifts.

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Mike was just finishing reviewing a lab report when there was a knock on his slightly-ajar door.

“C’mon in,” he said.

Wes Harris entered the room and flopped down in the chair across from Mike. “What’s with the fan?” he asked without prelude.

“I spilled coffee all over the rug first thing this morning.” Mike replied, silently thanking Bert for giving him a way to explain without actually lying. “You have a good weekend?” he asked, trying to divert Wes’s attention from the carpet.
“Oh, I can’t complain,” said Wes. “You look like you had a hell of a weekend yourself—though I can’t tell if it was in a good way or a bad way.”

“Well, let’s see. I spent yesterday morning in the ER at Rampart. So I’m gonna go with ‘bad,’” Mike said.

“Shoot,” said Wes. “What’d you do to yourself?”

Mike found Wes’s phrasing supremely irritating, so he decided to make his explanation as unpleasant as possible. “You know I have a metal rod this long in my thigh bone, after it got shattered when that car hit me?” he said, holding his hands about a foot and a half apart.

Wes nodded.

“So there’s four screws that hold it all together. One of them got infected, and the bone got weak around that spot, and the screw popped out of the bone on Saturday. It made a really gross sound, and it hurt like a bitch.”

“Geez,” said Wes, turning paler than was normal for him.

“Then it swelled up like a melon overnight, so I went in to Rampart on Sunday and they pulled it out.”

“Ow,” Wes replied. “I mean, did it hurt?”

Mike was enjoying Wes’s discomfort. He didn’t dislike the guy—not really—but he sometimes got annoyed at Wes’s insensitivity, and was in the kind of mood where he wanted to give him a little taste of his own medicine. He could tell Wes was creeped out by his description so far, so he decided to make it as graphic as possible.

“No, not after they numbed it up. That took like twelve shots, and let me tell you—that stuff burns when it goes in.” He conveniently left out the fact that by that point, he was so relaxed from the Valium that he didn’t really care what was happening. “Then once it was all numbed up, the doc just sliced through, and used an actual screwdriver—just like the kind in a toolbox, except all sterilized and everything—to get the screw the rest of the way out. I could totally feel it twisting and turning—but it didn’t really hurt, just more like, I dunno, pressure and pulling.”

He looked across at Wes, who was sweating and pale.

“And there was quite a lot more blood than I was expecting,” Mike added calmly. “It was pretty gross.” He paused to let that sink in. “Want some coffee?”

“Uh, no thanks,” Wes said quickly. “I was just stopping by to compare notes on a few things—but I can come back later if you’re in the middle of something.”

“Actually,” said Mike, “I do have an appointment to go talk to Rhodes in a few minutes.”

“Huh?” asked Wes. “Whaddaya need to see the chief about? Is it anything about the case?”

“Not directly,” Mike said vaguely. “I mean, I’m just doing the reports on the accelerants and the pour pattern. I’m not doing any testifying in this case or anything like that. So I’m not totally sure what exactly we’ll talk about,” he finished, realizing he didn’t want to discuss his meeting with their boss. “How ‘bout if I come by your office when I’m done?”

“Ohay,” said Wes. “I have an interview to sit in on at the sheriff’s office later, but nothing else this
morning."

Mike made a show of heaving himself up out of his chair and grabbing his cane. Wes watched him without comment.

“Sorry about your leg, man. That stinks.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t the best weekend,” said Mike.

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Mike waited outside his boss’s office for a few minutes before the door opened and Rhodes ushered him in.

“So what’s the big mystery, Stoker? You said you needed to talk to me today,” Rhodes said. “Must be something about that leg—I haven’t seen you use that cane in a while.”

“I had kind of a setback this weekend,” Mike explained. “But, I just want to start by saying that, uh, I appreciate you taking me on in the AFIU. Considering everything.”

Rhodes stared across his desk at Mike. “‘Considering everything?’ What’s that supposed to mean? The department makes it a priority to keep men on who could have gone for a medical discharge but still want to do work they’re able to do. I was happy to have you come on board—I don’t care if you have to use that cane every now and then to get around. Why would you think I’d have a problem with that?”

“That’s, uh, not the ‘everything’ I was thinking.”

“Oh,” said Rhodes. “You mean the other thing.”

“Yeah—that I’m—”

“Hold it!” Rhodes said, putting both hands up, palms out. “We don’t really need to discuss that, all right? It’s not relevant to your job. I don’t care what happens at home, as long as it doesn’t get in the way of the job.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly acceptance, Mike thought, But I’ll take it anyhow. “But here’s the problem, sir. It might. Someone in the department has it in for me and Johnny, and threatened us both if we don’t resign.”

Rhodes just stared at him. “Go on.”

“And I’m not resigning,” Mike said strongly. “I don’t quit from work I’m good at—work that’s important—just because some crazy bastard has a hangup about my personal life and wants to beat the shit out of me. Sir.”

“This has to be the first time,” Rhodes said slowly, “that one of my men has come storming into my office and angrily announced that they’re not quitting. So I ask you, Stoker, why is it that you’re telling me all this instead of just keeping things to yourself?”

“Because whoever this bastard is, he’s in the department, all right? He wants me out, and he’s almost certainly going to be trying to make things difficult for me around here. So I thought it was fair to warn you of that, just in case anything really, uh, dire or weird happens because of him. The sheriff recommended I tell you anyhow.”
Rhodes sighed heavily. “Fair enough. But please tell me one thing—no cops are coming here, right?”

Mike shook his head. “Sorry, sir. Cops are going to be checking in with the personnel office—this guy got hold of some personal information that’s on file here but nowhere else, and used it to make threats via U.S. Mail.”

“Jesus.” Rhodes rubbed a hand over his face. “All right. Just make sure the case doesn’t get fucked up, all right? Have the girls in the office make copies of everything—and I mean everything—before it leaves your hands, all right? And get Wes to look at all your stuff, too.”

“Yessir,” said Mike. “Copies of everything, and Wes checks it all over.”

“Not that I don’t trust you,” Rhodes said. “It’s just that if something weird happens to your reports or anything, I wanna make sure he’s seen what was supposed to be there.”

Mike didn’t really see how having Harris look at his reports would solve anything, but he wasn’t going to argue. “Sure thing,” he said. “Two sets of eyes are better than one any time.”

“And Stoker,” Rhodes added, as he started to send Mike out of the office, “whoever this idiot is, they didn’t do that to you, right?” he asked, pointing to Mike’s leg.

“No sir,” Mike said. “Just a complication. It’s taken care of.”

“What kind of complication?” Rhodes asked, uncharacteristically curiously.

Mike decided to spare him the graphic depiction he’d presented to Harris. “One of the screws holding the rod inside my femur came loose. Had to get it out yesterday. Not a big deal.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, go do your work,” Rhodes finished, making shooing motions. “And keep me posted,” he said vaguely.

Mike worked late, as he often did when Johnny was on a 24-hour shift on a weekday. As he pulled into the driveway, he considered Deputy Price’s advice, and parked his truck in the garage for the night. He pulled the overhead door down, and locked it.

He was relieved to see that the house looked perfectly normal—he’d half expected to come home to broken windows or some other vandalism, but everything looked the way he’d left it that morning. He turned the key in the lock, and looked forward to the rush of cool air he expected from the central air.

He walked in the front door, and immediately gagged at the terrible stench that assaulted him. Rather than continuing inside, he stepped right back outside, caught his breath, and held it as he went back through the door a second time.

There was a flat paper bag—the kind you might put a book or magazine in—on the floor right under the mail slot. Mike dashed into the kitchen, put on some rubber gloves, picked up the bag, and got it out of the house as quickly as he could, plopping it onto the driveway in front of the garage. From the feel and smell of the bag, Mike could tell it was shit, but he was absolutely not going to open the bag to get any further information.

He restrained himself from shouting obscenities on his quiet residential street, and instead, went inside, turned off the air conditioning, opened all the windows, and called the sheriff. Again. For the
third day in a row.

While he was waiting for a call back from the sheriff’s office, Mike took the mail—the real mail—outside on the front step. Luckily, it didn’t seem to have been affected by the package delivered on top of it.

Once again, there was a plain white envelope with no return address. This time, it also had no stamp, and was addressed, simply, “Ass Fuckers.” Mike sighed, and opened the envelope.

There was a single sheet of paper, with a typewritten message on it: “Here’s a little something to go with the present we delivered to your office. They’re a matched set of gifts. Aren’t we clever? Enjoy!”

Mike put the letter outside, next to the bag, and weighted it down with some rocks. He didn’t want that filth inside his house any more than he wanted the bag of shit it came with. He went back in the house, pulled some fans out of the hall closet and set them up in the windows to push air out of the house. He changed out of his work clothes, pulled a Guinness out of the fridge, and sat on the back porch with a book, waiting for the sheriff to call.

After a few minutes, Mike heard the doorbell ring. He set his beer and his book down, and limped out to the front of the house. There was no way he was letting anyone inside the house until the smell cleared.

Mrs. Daniels was standing on the front step, holding a piece of paper.

“Hi, Mrs. Daniels,” Mike said from the gate. “There’s been kind of a problem in the house, or I’d say come on in.”

Mrs. Daniels frowned. “I was afraid that fellow was up to no good,” she said.

“Uh, what fellow?” Mike asked.

“A fellow came by, mid afternoon, and put something through your mail slot. Looked like a paper bag. Anyhow, I didn’t recognize him, but I took down his plate number, just in case there was a problem.” She paused. “Was there a problem?”

“Yeah,” Mike nodded. “There was a problem, and the sheriff’s probably gonna want to talk to you. You said you got his plates?”

Mrs. Daniels nodded. “I’m no good with makes and models and all that nonsense, but I’m not so old I can’t write down a license plate number. So I’ll have something good for the sheriff when he comes.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Daniels. Really—thanks,” said Mike.

“You boys need anything? I mean, I don’t mean to pry, but is your house inhabitable?”

“Oh, it will be once the air circulates for a while,” Mike said, not really wanting to discuss the details. “So I think we’re okay for tonight. It’s just me, anyhow—Johnny’s on a twenty-four hour shift till the morning.”

“Well, you let me know if you need company, all right? For now, I’ll hang on to my paper here—I’ll give it to the sheriff when he turns up.”

Mike would’ve been happy to spare her the trouble, but he could see she was proud of her work, and
didn’t want to take it away from her. “Thanks for keeping an eye out. I’ll let the sheriff know you may have cracked the case.”

Mrs. Daniels laughed. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” she said.

“I would,” said Mike. “So far all we have is speculation. Now we have evidence. So thanks,” he said again.

“You’re welcome. All y’all firemen keep us safe, so keepin’ an eye out is the least I can do.” She waved, and headed back across the street.

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Station 93’s C-shift was sitting down to dinner. Emerson, the shift’s engineer, had made roasted chicken, potatoes, and broccoli. He was a good cook, and the evening meal seemed like it would live up to expectations. The men joked and teased throughout the meal, as usual. Johnny listened to the carefree chatter, but didn’t join in.

“Uh, Cap?” asked Emerson.

Johnny didn’t reply at first—he still wasn’t totally used to that form of address.

“Cap’n Gage?” Emerson repeated.

“Huh? Who, me?” Johnny winced inwardly, but managed not to show the expression outwardly.

“Your food okay? ‘Cause you’re not eating, and that’s not like you,” said Emerson. “In fact, my momma would say you’ve been off your feed all day. You still mad about your tires?” Word had spread from A-shift, to B, to C, about Friday night’s sabotage.

“Naw,” said Johnny, tucking in to his dinner. “Just distracted. Food’s great, as usual.”

“Well somethin’ must be bugging you,” said Tompkins, C-shift’s senior paramedic. “You’ve hardly said a word all day.”

Johnny sighed, and said another silent apology to Mike, who was going to be his scapegoat. “Oh, just worrying about Stoker.” He’d explained at lunch about Mike’s weekend misadventure, just so the crew would have something to blame any odd captainly behavior on. “He hates having to use that cane, but he’s stuck with it again for a while.”

That explanation seemed to satisfy the men, who went back to their dinners, and left him to his brooding. Johnny returned to his office after supper, not because he had so much paperwork to do, but because he just wanted to be left alone. His men’s jokes and antics suddenly seemed petty and inane, and tired him out, which he didn’t need after the poor night’s sleep he and Mike had had.

The engine had a short, straightforward call right after the dinner dishes had been washed—a small fire in a garage, which the homeowners had mostly extinguished before the engine arrived. It was fortunate that they had still called the fire department, however, because there were still some hot spots that could easily have reignited during the night, turning a small accident into a huge disaster. The engine company was back in quarters by nine p.m. Johnny decided it was still early enough to try to call Mike, so he retreated to the privacy of his office to make the call.

The answering machine picked up after the first ring—they’d decided to screen all their calls, since neither one of them particularly wanted to actually speak to their tormentor.
“Hey, babe—you there? Just checking in. We had a boring day—”

“Hey.”

“Hi. Everything good?”

“No.” Mike related the incidents of the day. Johnny could feel his blood pressure surging as Mike talked about the disgusting presents he’d been left at work and at home.

“But the sheriff said they can trace the plates by tomorrow,” Mike concluded, “so maybe they’ll be able to stop this.”

Johnny was silent for many seconds.

“You still there?”

“Yeah. Ya know, I was thinking—maybe you should see if you can crash at Chet’s or something—just for tonight. I just don’t like the idea of—”

“I knew you were gonna say that. No, I’m not leaving the house. Remember—we cave, they win, right? Besides, they haven’t done anything violent. So far, everything’s been downright cowardly. So no, I’m not going anywhere. Plus, it’s too late. I was just about to turn in,” Mike said. “And I’m the one that’s supposed to be doing the worrying, right?”

Johnny snorted. “I think there’s enough to go around. I’ll be sure to leave some for you.”

“Thanks. That’s a great comfort.”

“Lock up good, all right?”

“I will. Love you. Have a safe night—I guess I’ll see you when I get home tomorrow.”

“Love you too.”

Johnny sighed, and hung up the phone. He went back out to the day room. “I’m turning in early. Lights out at 2200 as usual, all right?”

“Sure thing, Cap.”

Johnny set his boots and bunker pants by the side of his bunk, stripped down to boxers and t-shirt, threw his arm over his eyes, and fell asleep right away.

TBC
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Johnny meets a friend of an old friend. The harassment situation devolves into violence. Warnings for depiction of mugging-style assault.

Chapter 8.

Mike slept fitfully all night, waking at every small sound. At one o’clock he got up for a while, and made himself some herbal tea. As he sat at the table, drinking the supposedly calming beverage, he reflected on how sleep was another aspect of life he could divide into “before” and “after.” Before his accident, he was the one who got teased about sleeping through the station’s tones; he was the one who woke in nearly the same position in the bed as he’d drifted off in. He started having trouble sleeping in the hospital—where they don’t make it easy, anyhow—and had been dismayed when the difficulties persisted after he returned home. Along with beginning to forget about the metal hardware in his leg, sleep was something else that had just recently begun to improve—until the harassment started. Since Friday, Mike was back to his immediately-post-hospital pattern of feeling like he was awake all night, even though he knew he must have been sleeping some of the time.

He finished his tea, and went back to bed. Like he always did when Johnny was away, he slept right in the middle of the bed, clutching Johnny’s pillow to him as a pathetic substitute for the real thing. He finally drifted off into a sound, deep sleep at five a.m.—not nearly early enough for him to wake feeling like he’d slept at all.

When the alarm sounded at six o’clock, Mike swore at it uselessly, but rose blearily and headed for the kitchen to put the coffee on. He took a quick shower, and was sitting at the table with the paper and a bowl of cereal when the phone rang at six thirty, right on schedule. He answered, not bothering to screen, since Johnny always called right after the wake-up tones if he was on duty and not out on a run.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me. Everything good?”

“Same as it was yesterday, at least, which I wouldn’t say is ‘good,’ exactly, but no, nothing else happened.”

“I guess that’s good. Nothing here, either.”

“Thank heaven for small favors.”

“You sleep okay?”

Mike snorted. “No. Your pillow was even complaining. ‘C’mon, Stoker, quit tossin’ around or neither one of us is gonna sleep a wink,’” he said, in his best imitation of Johnny’s voice.

Johnny didn’t laugh. “Listen, I’m gonna crash at the station for a little while this morning before I drive home—we didn’t have such a good shift.”
Mike immediately felt contrite. “Sorry, I should’ve asked, instead of whining. What happened?”

“House fire, two districts over, right on the edge of the county. One fatality—a kid.”

“Shit, babe. I’m sorry.”

“It was tough. Emerson took it real hard—it was the first fire he’d worked where there was a child fatality.”

“You all right?”

“Yeah,” Johnny sighed, and Mike heard him yawn as well. “I tried to do my best Captain Stanley talk with him. I wished he’d been there instead of me.”

“I’ll bet you did fine,” Mike said. “I’ll bet someday Emerson will do his best Captain Gage talk with some kid.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. “Maybe he will. Listen, I gotta go. Have a good day. How ‘bout we chill out with pizza and beers tonight? No cooking, no nothing.”

“Sounds good. You want me to pick it up on my way home from the office?”

“No, what I want is for you to come straight home.”

Mike smiled. “I can do that. I oughta be able to leave by four.”

“Good. Love you.”

“Love you too. See you later.”

Mike hung up the phone, cleaned up after breakfast, and went to work.

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Johnny napped for a couple of hours at 93s before driving home. He arrived at the house just after noon, and was dismayed to see a sheriff’s car parked just past the driveway. He pulled the Rover into the driveway, and saw the man standing at the front door turn to look. Johnny got out of the Rover, and met the deputy at the door.

“Afternoon, Deputy. I’m John Gage—I live here. Is there another problem?” he asked, as calmly as possible.

“I’m Deputy Houlihan; I’m just dropping off a copy of the report Mr. Stoker filed yesterday,” the deputy stated. “But there was also something else I wanted to fill you in on.”

“Sure—come on in.” Johnny unlocked the door, and let the deputy in, pointing to the living room. “Have a seat. It’s another scorcher—can I get you some tea, or some ice water or anything?”

“Actually, ice water would be fantastic,” admitted the deputy, as he picked the side chair in the living room. “I’m a new guy, so I get an old car, with no AC, and on a day like today, rolling down the windows almost makes it worse.” The deputy was an unlikely-looking Irishman, with dark skin, hair and eyes. Again, Johnny caught himself wondering about the fellow, and was reminded of his own
mixed heritage and the problems it had brought him.

“Yeah, I hear ya,” said Johnny, cracking some ice cubes out of their trays and into glasses. “The day fire engines get air conditioning—well, I’ll probably be retired by then.” He brought the glasses out to the living room, and took a seat on the couch across from the deputy.

“Thanks,” said Houlihan, taking a long pull from his glass and setting it down on the coaster. “So let me fill you in on a few things. First, we’ve been to the personnel office at fire department HQ, and we got a copy of the logs of who has accessed confidential personnel information in the last two weeks. We’re not expecting that these names are going to help us a lot, mostly because whoever went in to your files probably didn’t exactly do it by the books. Either that, or they routinely have access to personnel information, and their names would not be out of place on the logs. In any case, we have the logs, so we can cross reference with anything else that comes up.”

“Okay. But man,” Johnny continued, shaking his head, “I bet they weren’t happy to see you.”

Houlihan laughed. “Well, it wasn’t me—it was a deputy from one of our stations closer to your department’s HQ building. But no, people usually aren’t happy to see us.”

“You said ‘first’ a minute ago—was there something else?” Johnny asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. The license plate number that your neighbor provided us with has opened another can of worms. The plate came back as belonging to the County Fire Department’s general motor pool. We had them check their sign-out records, and nobody had that vehicle signed out yesterday. But, the odometer reading was significantly higher than it had been at the end of the last authorized trip—enough to account for a round-trip between HQ and here.”

Johnny sighed. “I have to say, I’m not all that surprised,” he said. “There was something that occurred to me that I think I oughta mention.” He related the story of Lynn Nolan, and his recollection that her brother worked as a mechanic for the fire department.

Houlihan wrote the information down in a small notebook. “Did you ever meet the brother?”

“No,” replied Johnny. “I don’t even know his name. I’m pretty sure she said it was her brother, but I could be wrong—she coulda said cousin, or somethin’ like that.”

“And you’re no longer in touch with Miss Nolan?”

“No way,” said Johnny. “She finally quit bugging me—stopped leaving stuff at my apartment, that sort of thing—but it took a while. Come to think of it,” he continued, frowning, “I don’t recall seein’ her around the hospital after that time either.”

“We’ll check in to that, see if we can get in touch with her. And we’ll see if there are any Nolans on the list of people who have access to personnel files or the motor pool at your HQ.”

“Like I said,” Johnny reiterated, “I don’t even know his name, and I’m not sure if Lynn said he was her brother, or cousin, or what. But yeah, if she has any family as weird as herself, and they’re in the fire department, they’re definitely worth checking out.”

“Speaking of family in the fire department—I know it’s a huge department, but my mother’s cousin’s son is a fireman. I doubt you know him, but there’s a chance—Lopez. Marco Lopez?”

“No shit?” Johnny grinned. “Man, I worked with him for seven years at 51s, and Mike was there for six of ‘em! Solid guy, real solid. Wow,” Johnny shook his head. “Marco’s your cousin? Sometimes this county doesn’t seem so big after all.”
“Not exactly my cousin. His mother is married to my mother’s cousin—my mother’s the Lopez side of the family, obviously. But I don’t know what you call it in English—it’s *primo segundo* in Spanish, so maybe second cousin?”

“Beats me, man—I don’t have hardly any family, so I don’t even know what a second cousin is.”

“I don’t know him real well—we maybe see each other a couple times of year at these crazy big family parties. But, you know—our jobs are enough alike that we get to talking. How’s he doing, anyhow? I haven’t seen him in a few months,” said Houlihan.

“I, uh, I haven’t either. I moved to 93s when I got promoted. I haven’t seen him since my last day at 51s—six or seven months ago. Sounds like you’ll probably see him before I do,” Johnny admitted. He thought for a second. “Listen—if you see him, please don’t tell him about, you know, any of this.”

“Wouldn’t think of it,” said Houlihan. “This is nasty stuff, and the sheriff’s office tries to preserve the peace, you know? Not send rumors flying all over the county.”

Johnny started to have an uncomfortable feeling that perhaps Houlihan was misreading the situation. He probed cautiously. “It is nasty, and Mike and I are already on shaky ground with Marco. He hasn’t exactly, uh, come to terms with us.”

“Come to—uh, you mean, um, you’re actually …” Houlihan looked flustered. “Oh. Price didn’t say that it was—oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry. I just wouldn’t have thought …” Houlihan trailed off nervously.

Johnny didn’t say anything; he just let the young deputy stew in the mess he’d made for himself.

“It doesn’t change the facts of the case,” Houlihan said, partly to himself.

“No, it doesn’t,” Johnny said calmly. “From our point of view, actually, it kinda makes it all worse.”

“I … guess I can see that,” the deputy said. “Sorry. I’m not uh, against your … own personal business and stuff. And even if I was it wouldn’t make a difference in how I handled your case.”

“I know,” Johnny said. “I’ve had to treat guys with swastikas tattooed on their bald scalps. I still patch ‘em up just fine. I’ve had to treat guys who say they want the blond guy workin’ on ‘em, not the redskin. I manage.”


“Really?” Johnny said. “Sorry, now I’m messin’ with you. I should know better—I still get carded sometimes myself. Want a refill on that ice water?”

“That’d be great. Thanks.”

Johnny refilled the glasses, and they both downed their cold water.

“Oh, and here’s the copy of yesterday’s report,” said Houlihan, passing Johnny a photocopy of a form that was becoming unnervingly familiar.

“Thanks,” Johnny said drily. “I’ll file it with the rest of them.”
“You know,” Houlihan said, “the information you gave me today could really help us get this guy.”

“Sure,” said Johnny, “if his name is Nolan it’ll be easy. But I’ll bet you anything it’s not. And,” he continued, “I’ll bet you anything the folks at Rampart aren’t gonna be able tell you a thing about Lynn Nolan’s whereabouts.”

“Well,” Houlihan replied, “that’s why we have detectives. And on that note,” he said, standing up, leather belt and holster squeaking, “I better get back to the station and get this name to the detective who’s working the case.”

“Wow,” said Johnny. “We have our own detective?”

“Yep—Tom Devito. You’ll probably never see him, but he’s the one who went to your HQ, and he’ll almost certainly try to pull some info out of Rampart about this Nolan girl. He’s working on other stuff, too, of course, but we try to keep the same guy on a case from open to shut. You should still call us deputies, though,” he cautioned, “for anything that comes up.”

“Sure,” Johnny said. “Hopefully we won’t have to.” Though that’s not seeming likely, he thought, walking the young deputy to the door.

“Nice to meet you, Houlihan,” he said. “If you do see Marco, I don’t know, tell him you met me on the job or something. He’ll probably get a kick outta that, even considering.”

“Probably,” said Houlihan. “Have a good afternoon. Thanks for the ice water.”

“Welcome. You too,” said Johnny, closing the door.

~!~!~!~!~

Johnny went for a run after lunch, and then spent the afternoon puttering around the house. One project he wanted to finish before Mike got home was covering over the mail slot in the door, and putting a letter box up by the doorbell. It would probably confuse the postman for a few days, but he’d survive. He took down the brass flap over the slot in the door, and patched the hole with a piece of wood he cut with a jigsaw. It wouldn’t look perfect, but once the wood paste around the edges of the wooden patch had dried, he could sand it down and repaint the whole door.

Just before five o’clock, as Johnny was finishing gluing the patch into the door, Mike’s truck pulled into the driveway. Johnny grinned, and held the door open for Mike to come in. Mike grinned right back, and had a glint in his eye that Johnny had learned to recognize and appreciate. He stepped aside to let Mike stride in.

“Hiya! Don’t slam the—”

Too late. Mike dropped his bag and cane unceremoniously onto the floor, and had Johnny pressed up against the foyer wall in no time flat. He wasn’t shy about getting what he wanted, which was his body pressed up against Johnny’s, their tongues tangled together, and his hands between the wall and Johnny’s ass. They kissed, urgently, until Johnny finally had to come up for air.

“…door,” he finished, catching his breath.

“Missed you, Gage,” Mike said huskily, going back to get some more of what he’d hurried inside for. The object of his affections didn’t object—not one bit—giving as good as he got, arching forwards so there would be no mistaking his interest in the proceedings.

“You gonna finish this, Stoker, or are ya gonna make me wait till after dinner?”
“Who says it has to be either/or?” Mike said, peeling Johnny away from where he’d put him on the wall, spinning him gently by the hips, and urging him down the short hallway to the bedroom.

Johnny wasted no time in undoing Mike’s tie, unbuttoning and peeling off his shirt, and stripping him of the t-shirt underneath. Mike had an easier task, since Johnny had chosen his favorite battered t-shirt and cut-offs for his afternoon chores. In short order, there was a pile of clothing on the floor, and, mindful of his sore knee, Mike backed onto the bed and pulled Johnny down with him, and they worked their way into the center of the bed, face to face on their sides.

“Mm, you smell great,” Mike murmured, “like you’ve been doing stuff outside.”

“No stalling, Stoker,” Johnny said, rolling Mike onto his back and straddling him. “And any more talking better be sex talk, ‘cause I’m gonna shut you up if I hear anything else outta you.”

“Oooh, bossy!” Mike teased. “I can work with that. You—”

True to his word, Johnny shut Mike up in a hurry, mouth-to-mouth style. He managed to grab the lube and get it all over the parts that mattered, one handed, while still not letting Mike get another word out. Johnny pulled his face away from Mike’s to look him deeply in the eye as he lined their cocks up together between them and began moving, slowly at first, and finally Mike cooperated with his use of language.

“Uhn, fuck, babe … yeah, just like that …”

They rutted hard and slick against each other, Johnny as wordlessly intense as usual, and Mike flowing freely with the dirty talk his partner adored hearing, becoming less and less coherent. And when Mike finally fell apart completely, coming hard with a sound between a whine and a moan, blue-grey irises nearly taken over by pupils, Johnny froze momentarily as they locked eyes. “Ah, Mikey,” he groaned, moving once more, twice more against Mike’s hand, and Mike held him close as his climax hit him hard.

Johnny managed to roll himself over, but Mike held on tightly enough that they ended up remaining face to face, still locked together, but able to breathe.

“Mmm,” said Mike, nuzzling Johnny’s neck at a rapidly bounding pulse point.

“Yeah,” Johnny replied, “that about covers it.”

They recovered slowly, unhurriedly, laz ing under the slowly spinning ceiling fan. Johnny’s fingertips traced lines in the sweat on Mike’s back, from nape to tailbone. Mike worked his lips up from Johnny’s neck to his mouth. Now their kisses were languid, no longer urgent as they’d been when Mike had first burst in through the front door. Twilight was just starting to set in, and the clouds rolling in from the west made it darker than it normally would have been so early in the evening.

Eventually, Johnny stretched, cat-like, and started to pull Mike out of the bed towards the bathroom. “C’mon, before we get glued together.”

“And that would be bad how, exactly?” Mike asked, turning the water on in the shower.

“Only ’cause I wouldn’t be able to go out and get us a pizza, and get us fed so we can get it on again after dinner, is all.”

They rinsed each other down, and towelled off. Johnny headed to the bedroom to retrieve his clothes, while Mike just put a towel around his waist and went out to the kitchen to get a drink. Johnny emerged, clothed once again, and joined Mike in the kitchen. He dialed the number of their favorite
pizza place, and ordered their usual pie.

“Mmm, now that’s a good look on you,” Johnny said as he hung up the kitchen extension.

“What is,” asked Mike. “The towel, or the ‘please do that to me again as soon as possible’ look?”

“Both,” said Johnny. “It’s a good combination.”

“So hurry up and get that pizza, Gage.”

“Yep—shouldn’t take long at all.”

“Good.”

As Johnny pulled the Rover out of the driveway, he didn’t notice the grey sedan behind him. He didn’t notice that it followed him to the corner, out of the neighborhood, and onto the main road. He wasn’t thinking about anything at all, except wondering why the hell they didn’t have a pizza place that delivered, for cryin’ out loud. He parked in front of the pizza takeout joint right at the time they’d said the pie would be ready, but decided to first make a quick trip through the alley to the convenience store around the corner. A cat yowled and hissed, fleeing towards the other end of the alley, its hiding place disturbed by Johnny’s approach.

The first inkling Johnny had that anything was amiss came when he was grabbed from behind and slammed viciously against the brick wall of the alley behind the pizza shop. One arm was twisted behind him, with his hand jammed hard between his shoulders. A strong hand grabbed him by the hair, and a gloved hand covered his mouth, pressing the side of his face into the wall so hard Johnny could tell exactly where each brick’s corner was.

Johnny struggled to free himself, kicking backwards so hard that his attackers were forced to hold his entire body weight up, but to no avail. He couldn’t see his assailants, but could tell that at least two pairs of hands held him pinned against the wall. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see, even in the dim light of the alley, that the men both wore ski masks.

“You didn’t listen,” a voice growled right into the ear that was not being ground into the wall. “You were supposed to quit, bail, scram, but you didn’t, pretty Captain.” As the voice said that last word, the hands holding his head pulled him back and slammed him into the bricks again.

“You wanna see us?” said the other voice. “Turn around, and take a look.” The hands wheeled him around, slamming his back against the wall this time. Johnny began to take in a deep breath to yell for help, but before he could, the larger of the two figures punched him in the gut, hard, twice, knocking the breath out of him and putting him face down on the ground, unable to move his diaphragm to pull air into his lungs.

As a black sneaker approached his face, all Johnny could think about, absurdly, was that since he couldn’t breathe, the dumpster across from him didn’t smell at all. The toe of the shoe hit him just over the eyebrow, and his head recoiled with the impact. White sparkles filled his field of vision briefly, but he wasn’t even close to passing out from the blow. These guys obviously knew just how to get the effects they wanted—a helpless but conscious victim who would be aware of everything happening, but unable to do a thing about it.

Johnny tried desperately to pull in a breath, even just a little, but whoever had delivered the sucker punches had known exactly what he was doing. Still unable to breathe, Johnny felt a kick to his kidney, and another—this time from a sharper toe, maybe a cowboy boot—right into his ribs. He felt a sharp crack in his ribcage, and knew that his next breath, if and when it came, would be agonizing.
“Hey!” a voice shouted, from the other end of the alley, down by the convenience store. Two different sets of feet ran out of the alley towards the pizza store, leaving Johnny lying on the pavement. “Hey! What the hell is going on?” An engine started, and tires squealed out of the parking lot.

More hands, gentle this time, rolled Johnny over, off his belly and onto his side. He involuntarily curled into a fetal position, as if trying to protect his midsection from any further blows.

“Hey, man! Shit, you okay? Oh, fuck, it’s you! I know you—you the dude who always gets a six of Bud, and a six of somethin’ fancy for the other guy. It’s just me—Robert from the beer store, ya know? Don’t move—I called the cops soon as I saw them guys pull you into the alley. Can you breathe? You ain’t breathin’! Damn, they knocked your air out bad, huh? C’mon, man, just breathe, I don’t know that mouth-to-mouth shit.”

Just as his vision started to close in, Johnny regained control of his breathing musculature, and finally, finally, heaved in precious air, just in time to prevent himself from passing out. His ribs—he was now sure that at least one was cracked—protested violently at the movement.

“Yeah, buddy, that’s it. Breathe that air. You gonna be all right. Can you say somethin’?” Robert looked down at Johnny, shaking his head. “Fuck, man, they got you bad!”

Johnny struggled to roll into a sitting position, but Robert held him down, firmly but gently. “Nuh-uh, you ain’t s’posta move hurt folk. You lay back down, and the cops’ll be here any second.”

“’m okay,” Johnny said. “Need to sit up, need some ice, be fine.”

“No way I’m lettin’ you get up, man. Not s’posta move hurt people, all right?”

Johnny wriggled his wallet out of his pocket, and pulled out his paramedic card. “Look—I know it’s okay for me to move, all right? And I gotta sit up to breathe better.”

“All right, ‘f you say so,” Robert said dubiously.

Johnny hissed as Robert helped him sit up. He revised his estimate to two cracked ribs, and added a bruised kidney to the list. He put a tentative hand to his forehead, and felt the expected lump forming on his eyebrow.

“Yeah, you gonna have a helluva shiner, dude. I seen ‘em kick you—you busted up bad on the insides?”

“Not too bad,” Johnny said, having completed his inventory of damage.

“Uh-huh,” said Robert. “Says you. I bet you gonna piss blood for a couple days, and you still can’t breathe right, can you.”

Johnny didn’t answer—he was working too hard on each breath to try to convince Robert he was fine. Which, Johnny reflected, he really wasn’t. “Fuck,” he croaked, feeling a wave of nausea hit him. He really didn’t want to puke—the involuntary muscle contractions would be hell on his cracked ribs. He tried to breathe slowly and evenly, hoping to let the nausea pass by without making waves. He focused on the siren he could hear approaching—sheriff, he could tell from the sound—and hoped that dispatch hadn’t sent a squad as well. “Shit,” he added, cringing at the thought of being scraped off the pavement by one of his colleagues.

The siren drew nearer, and Robert leapt to his feet as the black-and-white car pulled into the parking lot. “Stay right there,” he said unnecessarily, as he went to the end of the alley. “In here!” he shouted,
waving frantically to the figure emerging from the car. “They busted this dude up real bad!”

Johnny agreed silently, as he finally had no choice but to give in to the nausea. His ribs screamed as his chest and abdominal muscles spasmed, relieving him of nothing but watered-down acid in his stomach. He clutched at his midsection, willing his muscles to unclench, but dry heaves wracked and tore at him for what seemed like hours. When his own body finally stopped dishing out treatment nearly as bad as he’d received at the hands of others a few minutes ago, he let himself fall to his side again, away from the pool of hot acid he’d just spewed out.

“Sir?” a confident voice inquired. “Just hang on, help is on the way.”

Johnny turned his face up as best as he could, to see who was talking to him this time.

“Holy crap! It’s John Gage!”

Johnny looked up into the face of Deputy Houlihan, who still looked like a teenager to him, and closed his eyes, and practiced breathing.

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Johnny was aware of a hand on his shoulder, just resting there, as he tried to listen to the conversation happening above him.

“But you didn’t see the car, and you can’t describe the men?” Houlihan, Johnny thought. That’s whose hand was on his shoulder, from the nearness of the voice.

“No way, man. It was dark early tonight, and both them dudes were in all black.”

Another siren was approaching—this time, it was the familiar slow wail of an L.A. County Fire Department rescue squad. “Shit,” Johnny managed.

Houlihan misinterpreted. “It’s okay—the rescue guys are on their way, all right? They’ll fix you up.”

Really the last thing Johnny wanted was for any of his colleagues to see him curled up on the ground next to a puddle of his own puke. No, he revised, the last thing he wanted was to have to explain to his colleagues why he’d been beaten up. But then, he got inspiration from Robert.

“I tell ya, officer, I ain’t never heard of anyone gettin’ mugged around here. But I guess we goin’ to the dogs, just like the resta L.A. County,” the clerk sighed.

Mugged. Yeah, that was it, Johnny thought. I got mugged.

“But that was the craziest mugging I ever seen,” Robert continued. “You ask me, it looked personal.”

Johnny tried to sit up—better for his ego to be found upright than huddled in a heap. He braced his ribs the best he could, and swung himself to a sitting position with Houlihan’s help. He heard the familiar sound of compartments on a squad opening up, and knew exactly what equipment whichever paramedics were running Squad 47 that day would be bringing over.

He looked up at Houlihan. “Just mugged for now, okay? Talk later,” he croaked.

Houlihan blinked, twice, but understood Johnny’s meaning as he saw his eyes on the approaching medics. “All right.”

“Sir, I’m Kurt Slavinski, I’m a paramedic with the fire department. Can you tell us what hap—holy shit, Captain Gage?”

“Yep. Two cracked ribs, bruised kidney, shiner. That’s it,” he said hoarsely.

“All right, Captain—but somebody back there said you weren’t breathing.”


Slavinski looked at his partner. “Well, you know we can’t make you go to the hospital. But—Cap, cracked ribs? Can we at least tape you up?”

“Kay,” he said, realizing he’d feel better when that was done.

Slavinski’s partner set up the biophone, and contacted their medical base in Santa Clarita. “Henry
"Mayo, this is Squad 47. We have a male patient, uh..."

"Thirty three," Johnny supplied helpfully.

"Thirty three years old, victim of an assault. Patient is an off-duty paramedic, and states he has two cracked ribs and a bruised kidney. He was reportedly in respiratory arrest due to a blow to the abdomen, but is breathing now, with difficulty, apparently due to the ribs. Vitals are—" Slavinski passed a paper to his partner— "BP, 120/80; pulse 90, respirations 22 and shallow. Patient also has a large contusion over his left eye, but reports no loss of consciousness. Uh, Mayo, patient has already stated he’s refusing transport."

"Understood, 47. Is he allowing treatment?"

"Affirmative, Mayo; he’ll let us tape up his ribs."

A heavy sigh was audible over the radio. "Proceed, 47. And please remind your stubborn patient that he needs to be seen, at his earliest convenience."


"Patient states he’ll visit Rampart tonight," the second paramedic reported.

"Copy, 47. Have him sign off, and advise us of any change. Mayo out."

"All right, let’s get you taped up, Cap," said Slavinski. "Can I help you get your shirt off?"

Johnny reluctantly allowed Slavinski and his partner—B. Rose, Johnny read off the nametag—to do their jobs. Rose popped a chemical cold-pack, and handed it to Johnny to put on his already-obvious black eye, as Slavinski began binding Johnny’s rib cage. The squad had blocked the alley, keeping bystanders at bay. Houlihan was busy asking the gawkers and the gapers whether they’d seen the car leaving the scene, but nobody was able to help.

"Dude, I gotta get to the store," Robert said. "I was s’posta be there fifteen minutes ago. You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, man. I think you—ow—scared those guys off just in time."

"I’ll say," Robert nodded. "They looked like they was just gettin’ started on you. Hey, you want I should call your friend?"

Johnny considered. He was already late, and surely wasn’t going to be driving himself home. But he owed the sheriff a report, and could probably get a ride home from Houlihan. "Thanks, but no—I think I’ve got a ride with the sheriff."

"Okay," Robert said, shaking his head. "Whatever you say. See ya round, man." He headed up the alley to the convenience store.

"All right, Captain Gage," Slavinski said after another minute or two, "you’re all set." He handed him a form on the clipboard. "You know the drill—you’re signing off that you refuse transport to the hospital, despite a physician’s recommendation that you go in."

"Yep," Johnny said, signing the form and handing the clipboard back. "Good job on the ribs, guys. Nice an’ tight."

"Yeah, well, you really oughta get in to the hospital, okay? ‘Cause it’d be real bad if you punctured a
lung later or somethin’,” Slavinski replied.

“Don’t worry. Tonight—I promise.” Johnny knew that the chances Mike would let him get away with anything stupid—like not visiting the ER—were slim to none, with the odds leaning heavily towards the “none” end of the range.

Slavinski and Rose packed up their equipment, said awkward goodbyes, and pulled the squad out of the alley. Houlihan shooed the few remaining bystanders away, and returned to the alley.

“Well, Captain,” said Houlihan, “looks like it’s just you and me. What do you say we get you home, and have a chat about what happened just now?”

“All right. Gotta get up, first,” Johnny realized, dismayed.

“Oh—how do we do this?” Houlihan asked.

Johnny reached his right hand up—the hand on the side without the broken ribs. “Just pull—fast.”

He couldn’t restrain a yelp as the young deputy hauled him to his feet. “Sorry,” Houlihan said.

“Had to be done,” Johnny said. He looked at the Rover in the parking lot. “Guess I’ll get that picked up tomorrow,” he noted.

“Need anything out of it before I get you home?” Houlihan asked.

“No, I have—shit,” he realized. “The pizza. That’s what I came here for—the pizza place there. I’ll go grab it, be right back.”

“You think you’re carrying a pizza?” Houlihan asked. “C’mon, I’ll give you a hand. See if they saw anything, too.”

The unlikely pair trooped into the pizza shop, where the teenaged girl at the register immediately looked up in alarm. “Geez,” she said. “Police brutality, or what?”

“Yeah, miss, I beat him up, and now we’re getting pizza. Actually, he just got attacked in your alley. Two guys. You see anything unusual?”

The girl shrugged. “Heard a car peel out of the lot about, oh, fifteen minutes ago. Didn’t see nothin’.” She looked back and forth between the two men. “You guys want anything, or what?”

“Gage,” Johnny said. “I guess I’m late picking up my pie.”

“Oh, yeah,” said the girl. “I was just about to give up on you. Called the number you left—got your machine.”

“Mike’s prob’ly shittin’ himself by now,” Johnny realized. “Uh, c’n I use your phone real quick?”

“Pay phone’s outside,” the girl said. Houlihan glared at her sternly, and she rolled her eyes and sighed heavily. “Fine,” she said, handing the phone across the counter to Johnny.

Mike answered right away. “Hello?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m on my way home—I, uh, ran into our friends.”

“What?”
“Look—I’m okay, uh, mostly. Sheriff’s bringing me home.”

“Jesus, Johnny, what happened?”

“They kinda, um, beat me up a little…”

“Geez, can’t I come get you, babe?”

Houlihan motioned for Johnny to pass him the phone. “Mr. Stoker? This is Deputy Houlihan. I’m here already; I can get him home with no problem. I need to take a report anyhow.”

“Thanks, Deputy. Uh, how bad is he actually hurt? He said “a little,” but he’d say that for, I don’t know, pretty much anything where he could still talk.”

Houlihan sensed a domestic dispute coming on, and wisely stepped out of the way. “He’s up and walking, but he needs to get seen at the hospital tonight. We’re on our way, all right?”

“Okay. Thanks, officer.”

Johnny pulled a twenty out of his wallet, and the girl shoved the pizza across the counter and gave him his change. “Not our fault it’s cold,” she said.

“Yeah, no shit,” Johnny said. Definitely time to find a place that delivers, he thought.

Houlihan picked up the pizza, and they left the store. The pizza rode in the trunk, and Johnny got the front seat of the black-and-white.

They didn’t talk on the five-minute drive back to Harrison Street. Johnny held the rapidly-warming cold pack to his eye, and wished for something in the opiate family to magically appear in his system. Mike was sitting on the doorstep when Houlihan pulled the car into the driveway. He opened the passenger-side door of the black and white sedan as soon as it had pulled to a stop, and knelt in the door of the car to get a look at Johnny.

“Oh god, what’d they do to you? Here, lemme help you get out—” Johnny allowed Mike to help him out of the car. He stood shakily at the edge of the driveway for a minute while Mike looked him over. “You’re all hunched over—what’d they do, babe? I’m gonna fucking kill them, I swear!” Mike looked nervously at the deputy, regretting the words as soon as they were out of his mouth.

“Let’s go in, all right?” said Houlihan, ignoring Mike’s angry threat. He pulled the pizza out of the trunk, and motioned towards the front door. Mike opened the door, and followed Johnny and Houlihan inside. Johnny propped himself on a bar stool at the kitchen counter. Mike headed straight for the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, seeing that Johnny was going to need something from their considerable stash of painkillers.

“Don’t you want to sit somewhere more comfortable?” Houlihan asked.

“Nope,” Johnny said. “Anything lower is just gonna be harder to get up from later.” He opened the pizza box. “Want some?”

“No thanks. I ate right before I got the call from the convenience store guy.”

Johnny plowed through most of a piece of cold mushroom and black olive pizza before Mike returned with three pill bottles for Johnny to choose from. He set them down on the counter in front of Johnny, went to the fridge, and poured a glass of milk for Johnny to wash his chosen medication down with.
“Thanks,” said Johnny. He picked three round white tablets out of a bottle, and chased them down with the milk.

Mike inspected the bottle Johnny had selected the pills from. “Uh oh. Going straight for the big guns, huh?”


Mike ignored the pizza, and ignored the deputy standing in his dining room. “What’d they do, babe?” he repeated, voice shaking this time.

Johnny sighed. “Put me up against the wall, punched me in the gut—you know, the kind of punch that knocks your wind out, and you wonder if you’re ever gonna breathe again—and threw me down in the alley and kicked me a few times. Eye, ribs, kidney,” he summarized.

“Broken ribs? Aw, shit—shouldn’t you get x-rayed?”

“Just cracked,” Johnny amended. “Squad 47 guys taped ‘em up real good.”

Mike laughed, despite himself. “They recognize you?”

Johnny nodded.

“Bet they were good and nervous, huh?”

“Mostly ‘cause I wouldn’t go in.”

“You’re going in, you know,” Mike added.

“Yeah, I know I’m goin’ in.”

“When?”

“Soon as the meds kick in, you get to take me to Rampart.”

Mike nodded. “Okay,” he said, apparently satisfied.

Houlihan cleared his throat, to remind the two men that he was still there.

“Oh, Captain Gage, I do need to get a statement from you while your head is still clear.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Pull up a stool. You sure you don’t want a slice? Or some water or something?”

“I wouldn’t say no to some ice water,” Houlihan replied.

“I’ll get it,” said Mike, as if finally noticing the deputy. “Uh, sorry—I forgot to introduce myself. Mike Stoker.”

“Deputy Ben Houlihan. I met Mr. Gage this afternoon, when I was dropping off a report.”

“He’s Marco’s cousin,” Johnny added. “Sort of.”


Houlihan pulled out his notebook, and started with his interview. Mike placed a glass of ice water in front of him, and then put the rest of the pizza in the oven on a baking sheet. He took the stool next to Johnny, on the side opposite Houlihan.
“Okay—I’ve heard some of this already, but let’s do it in order. First, how many guys were there?” Houlihan asked.

“Two,” Johnny answered succinctly. “I didn’t get a good look at either one of ‘em—they both had those ski masks on, but one was about my height and build, and the other was maybe five eight, five nine, and stockier. I could see around the eye holes of the masks that they were both white. The tall guy had blue eyes, and the other guy had dark eyes. They both had on all black, and the shorter guy had black sneakers, and the taller guy I think maybe had cowboy boots.”

Houlihan wrote this all down. “Can you describe the sequence of events for me, starting from when you first noticed anything unusual?”

Johnny shook his head. “Didn’t notice a thing till I got shoved up against the wall in the alley. Makes me wonder, how did they know I was there? I mean, they were definitely after me, from what they said—it wasn’t a random thing.”

“What did they say?” Houlihan asked. “As close as you can remember to the original wording.”

“Uh, the taller guy said that I was supposed to scram, quit, bail, but that I didn’t listen to them. He called me Captain,” Johnny said, leaving out the “pretty” that he remembered perfectly well, “so I’m sure they knew who I was. The other guy said I could look at them all I wanted, just before he gut punched me. I guess he was pretty confident that I wouldn’t recognize them.” Johnny didn’t object as Mike quietly and discreetly moved his stool closer, so their hips and legs touched under the counter.

“Did either man look familiar?”

“No,” Johnny said slowly, “but I think—I wouldn’t swear to it—but I think the taller guy was the one on the answering machine messages. He had that same kind of, I dunno, cheerfully sarcastic voice.”

“Okay, then what?” Houlihan asked, still writing.

Johnny fiddled with a piece of pizza crust, and didn’t look at anyone. “The taller guy, uh, punched me in the gut real hard, twice. He knew exactly what he was doing, too—popped me right in the solar plexus, just where all the nerves for the breathing muscles are. They tossed me on the ground once I couldn’t breathe any more, and the guy with the sneakers—the shorter guy—kicked me in the face and the other guy got my ribs real hard, and I, uh, don’t know which one kicked me in the kidney.” Johnny looked up at Mike’s sharp intake of breath during his narrative, and saw Mike’s hands clenched in tight fists, knuckles white, on the counter. He quietly took one of Mike’s hands with his own, pulled it under the counter, and wrapped it tightly in both of his hands.

“Then what?” Houlihan prompted.

“Someone shouted from the other end of the alley—Robert, I guess—and they took off. I didn’t see the car.”

“Robert—this is Robert Washington, the clerk from the convenience store who called us in the first place?”

“Yeah—I didn’t know his name till tonight, but we go there all the time, so I knew who he was, and he recognized me too. I guess he kinda saved my ass,” Johnny said. “I don’t think those guys were done with me.”

“And you’re sure he wasn’t one of the assailants?”
“What?” Johnny looked up. “No. No way. He was definitely at the other end of the alley, and when he yelled, they took off. Plus, the two guys were definitely white. Like I said, he saved my sorry ass.”

“All right, okay,” Houlihan said. “I just have to check, you know? Sometimes an assailant will come back as a rescuer, to stay in on the action, admire his work, so to speak.”

“Not a chance,” Johnny repeated. “He’s totally the wrong build to be either of those guys, anyhow.”

“Anything else you can add?” Houlihan asked.

“No. I’m just really wondering, though, how they knew I’d be near that alley, is all.”

Houlihan flipped his notebook closed. “Do either of you recall seeing any unfamiliar vehicles parked on the street this afternoon or evening?”

Johnny thought for a second. “I was working on the front door this afternoon, outside, and I for sure woulda noticed any strange cars sittin’ around. Kinda got the jitters, ya know?”

“Mr. Stoker? You were at work today, correct?”

“Yeah, got home around five, maybe a quarter till. I didn’t notice anything unusual, but I wasn’t really looking. Then we were, uh, inside, mostly at the back of the house, until Johnny went out for the pizza, at like what, six fifteen or so?”

Johnny shrugged, and winced. “‘Bout that.”

“That fits,” said Houlihan. “Dispatch logged the call from Mr. Washington at 1832.” Houlihan looked out the front windows, and then out the kitchen door, frowning.

“Captain Gage,” he said, “do you recall whether you left from the front door, or whether you could’ve left from the side door?”

“Uh, call me Johnny,” he answered, “and definitely the side door—I remember, ‘cause the Rover was parked in the driveway, so I just went out the kitchen door.”

“So you might not have noticed,” Houlihan said slowly, “if there was a car parked in front of the next house over.”

“Probably not,” Johnny admitted.

“And a car parked there wouldn’t be visible through the living room windows,” Mike added. “And I was in the kitchen when he left, anyhow, and you can’t see anything from here.”

“And you didn’t see any cars following Captain Gage?”

“No—I think I was in the back of the house right after he left—bedroom, or maybe bathroom.”

Houlihan frowned. “I think I’m going to pay a visit to your sharp-eyed neighbor who took down the plate number the other day. Mrs. Daniels?”

“That’s right,” said Mike. “If anyone saw anything, it’d be her—and her living room window is right across from our front door, so she would’ve been able to see anything parked in front of the house.”

But Houlihan didn’t need to cross the street—just then, the doorbell rang, and Mike jumped up to answer, limping slightly on his way to the door, and letting Mrs. Daniels in.
“Come in, Mrs. Daniels,” Mike said. “Deputy Houlihan here was just about to come ask you something.”

“Well, I was just about to come tell him something,” Mrs. Daniels said. “Good Lord,” she said, as Johnny turned around. “Now that didn’t happen all on its own,” she said disapprovingly, looking at his swollen and rapidly blackening eye.

“No, ma’am,” Johnny replied. “Had some help with that. That’s why the sheriff is here. Again.”

“What I came to say, Deputy, was just a while ago when young John here pulled his big white vehicle out of the driveway, there was a grey—or maybe silver—car that started up and trailed right along behind him. I didn’t get the plates, this time, but it was a new car, very shiny—one of those little Japanese ones that are so popular now. Starts with an ‘H,’ I think.”

“Honda?” asked Houlihan.

Mrs. Daniels snapped her fingers. “That’s the one. Logo’s a big H inside a sort of roundish rectangle, right? That’s what it was. Not a little hatchback, either—one of those bigger ones, with all four doors on it. Still a smallish car, though.”

“If someone brought some pictures by later,” asked Houlihan, “do you think you could pick it out from a group?”

“Sure,” said Mrs. Daniels. “Any time before ten p.m.”

“Thanks, Mrs. D.,” Johnny said.

“You’re welcome,” she replied. She looked at Mike. “You’d best get him to a doctor, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Mike. “That’s next on tonight’s menu.”

“Uh, I’m going to walk Mrs. Daniels back to her house, and then get this report filed,” said Houlihan.

“Thanks, man,” Johnny waved vaguely. “And thanks for scrapin’ me off the ground. Yer a pal. You sure you don’t want some pizza? ‘Cause there’s plenny, right Mikey?”

Mike and Houlihan exchanged glances. “Uh, you’re welcome. But no, I need to get on my way. I’d say have a good evening, but, well.”

“Yeah, sucks, don’t it. ‘S always hard to know what to say when you’re leavin’ someone in a pile of shit. Oops. Sorry, Mrs. D. What I always say is, you know, sorry ‘bout what happened, or somethin’ like that.”

“Well, I am sorry about what happened. Hopefully next time I see you, it’ll be at a Lopez fiesta, and not in an alley.”

“Ya know what? You’re all right, Houlihan. Nineteen, maybe, but all right.”

“All right, Gage, let the man off easy, okay?” said Mike. “Thanks, Mrs. D., and thanks, Deputy,” he said, showing them out the door. “I have a patient to get to the hospital.” He closed the door, and returned to the kitchen.

“I don’ wanna go,” said Johnny.
“You’re going,” said Mike. “We’re having some pizza—warm, this time—and then we’re going to Rampart. In fact, I’m going to call them to let them know I’m bringing them a present.”

“I don’ needa go, Mikey. I’m feelin’ a lot better already.”

“That’s cause you’re high on oxycodone,” Mike said reasonably, putting a plate with two slices of pizza in front of Johnny, along with another glass of milk. “You still have broken ribs.”

“Oh, yeah. Prolly gonna piss blood, too,” he scowled. ‘Fuckin’ bastards. I didn’t even get one lick in, they got me so fast.”

“Like you said, they knew what they were doing.”

“Yeah, but Mikey? I shoulda been better, I shoulda not got beat up so bad. I tried—man, I tried—but they got me anyhow, didn’t they.”

“Well, there were two of ‘em.”

“And ya know what else?”

“What, Johnny,” Mike replied patiently.

“The big guy? He called me ‘pretty Captain.’ I didn’t tell the cop that, did I?”

“No.”

“Was it wrong, to leave that out?”

“I don’t think it matters.”

“’Cause I really didn’ wanna say it.”

Johnny ate another slice of pizza, while Mike did the same. Mike watched Johnny carefully the entire time, not sure what he was keeping an eye on, but doing so nonetheless.

“D’you think I’m pretty?”

Jesus, Mike thought. “I wouldn’t use that exact word—that’s way too, um, feminine for you.”

“What word wouldja use then?”

“Uh, are you done with your pizza?”

“Huh?” Johnny looked down at his plate. “Oh. Yeah.”

“Me too. So let’s get you down to Rampart, all right, before they get all the late-night crazies.”

“Okay.” He looked down at his cutoffs and t-shirt. “C’n I go like this?”

“Last time I checked, there wasn’t a dress code. But they do keep it kinda cold in there—you want some pants?”

“I guess.” He made no move to get up and change.

“You know what? I think shorts’ll be fine, Johnny. C’mom, let’s get you in the truck.”

Mike helped Johnny out to the truck, and got him into the passenger’s seat. He reached over to
buckle the shoulder belt.

“This thing kinda hurts,” Johnny said, frowning at the seat belt.

“I know, believe me, I remember how a seat belt feels on sore ribs, but you gotta wear it.”

“Okay.”

Mike sat in the driver’s seat, and started the truck. Just then, he realized he’d forgotten to call ahead. “Shoot,” he said.

“What?”

“Forgot to call Rampart to tell ‘em you were coming.”

“It’s okay. You don’t need an appointment for the ER.”

“True,” said Mike, backing out of the driveway.

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

“You know what I don’t get?” Johnny asked suddenly.

“What, babe.”

“What I don’t get, is, why should anyone care who sleeps with who? Who’s in love with who? Who lives with who? I mean, whose business is it anyhow? Why does anyone even give a shit about us being together? Does it make me less of a good fireman? Make you any worse of an arson guy? I don’t think so—prob’ly better, actually—at least me, that is. So why are these assholes messin’ with us?”

“I don’t have a good answer for you on that one,” Mike admitted.

“Well why not? You’re supposed to be the smart one.”

“Uh, what do you mean by that?” Mike asked, and immediately realized that was a mistake.

“Okay, so here’s how I see it: you’re waaaaay smarter than me.”

Mike waited for more explanation, but apparently that was the depth and breadth of what Johnny had to say on the topic in his current condition. “I wouldn’t say that,” Mike said.


Mike sighed, realizing Johnny wasn’t going to just let this one go. “All right—I think some people have to have someone they can hate. Maybe it’s because they really hate themselves, and have to let it out somehow. Or maybe they feel small, and have to hate someone else to make themselves feel bigger. And there are less and less people that it’s okay to hate. So for these guys, this year, it’s us.”

“See?” Johnny replied. “I told you so. I knew you’d know.”

Mike decided to see what would happen if he remained silent. Sure enough, Johnny dozed off for twenty minutes or so—most of the rest of the way to Rampart in the light evening traffic. When they got off the freeway, and stopped at a red light, Johnny woke with a start.

“So?”
“Uh, so what?” Mike asked.

“So what word would you use?” Johnny asked, suddenly back to the “pretty” topic.

Mike decided to let Johnny help him get out of this one. “I don’t know, Johnny. What word would you like me to use?”

Johnny scrunched his brow in thought. “Well, sometimes when we’re, you know, and you’re all talky—and god damn, I love that, Mikey—sometimes, you say I’m beautiful, or gorgeous. And those words are okay. Plus you say I’m hot. That’s definitely okay. So I don’t really know why ‘pretty’ sounds so bad.”

“How ‘bout if we stick with those other words, then, just between the two of us?”

“Kay.”

Johnny closed his eyes for the rest of the way to Rampart, opening them once again when Mike turned the engine off in the ER parking lot.

“And you know what else?” Johnny picked up right where he’d left off.

“What else, hon?”

“You’re all those words, too.”

“Uh, glad you think so.”

“No, really. You’re beautiful, and gorgeous, and definitely hot.”

“Okay,” laughed Mike. “Really, I’m glad you think so, but we’re kinda right in the parking lot at Rampart, all right? So let’s get out, and be serious for a little while.”

“I was bein’ serious.”

“Okay, so that’s the wrong word, then. Discreet. How about that?”

“Oh. Like I should shut up?”

“No, like you should put the brakes on a little bit, is all.”


“All right. I’ll be your brakes.”

“Okay.” Johnny fumbled with his seat belt, as Mike walked around to the other side of the truck.

“C’mon. Lemme help you get out.”

“I think maybe I took too mucha that stuff,” Johnny admitted.

“Maybe, yeah. The bottle did say one to two tablets, and I’m pretty sure you took three.”

“I’m pretty sure I took three, too, hon.” He laughed, hugging himself around his ribs. “Three. Two. One. Get it?”

“Oh, lord.”
“Whoops. Brakes, right?”

“Right,” said Mike, steering Johnny into the ER entrance towards the desk.

They didn’t make it ten steps into the building before a familiar voice stopped Johnny in his tracks. “Well, Johnny Gage, as I live and breathe!”

Johnny spun around, and doubled over and clutched his ribs as the movement caught him by surprise. “Hiya, Dix,” he croaked.

“I guess this isn’t a social call, is it,” Dixie pronounced after looking him over for two seconds.

“Hi, Dixie,” said Mike. “No, afraid not. Looks like he’s got some cracked ribs, maybe a bruised kidney, too, he thinks.”

“Plus a beaut of a shiner,” Dixie said. “You look like you went ten rounds with a pro.”

“Definitely pros,” said Johnny, “but only one round. Two guys, though. In an alley. Got scraped up by a twelve-year-old sheriff’s deputy and two fourteen-year-old paramedics from 47s.”

“Brakes,” Mike muttered, catching Johnny as he wobbled a bit.

“All right, Johnny,” said Dixie, “we’re not busy at all right now, so why don’t you just come on in to Treatment Four, right here.”

“Ooh, Treatment Four, my favorite! I love the—”

“Brakes, Gage. Brakes,” Mike repeated, steering him into the room. He fished the pill bottle out of his pocket and handed it to Dixie. “He took three of these on an empty stomach, about ninety minutes ago.”

Dixie looked at the bottle, and looked back up at Mike’s serious eyes. “Voluntarily?”

Mike looked back at her, appearing confused. “Uh, yeah. I got out these, and some Tylenol 3, and some aspirin, and he picked out these and downed three of ‘em.”

“Well, it was hurting. A lot,” Johnny said petulantly.

“How’d you get him to do that?” Dixie asked.

“Uh, I didn’t.” Mike still looked confused. “He just took ‘em.”

“Huh,” said Dixie. “Wait’ll Kel hears that.”

“What?” Mike asked, dying to be let in on the secret.

“Getting this fellow to take pain meds? Well, let’s just say we sometimes had to go the IV route even though it wasn’t strictly necessary, just because he was so resistant to actively taking anything that made him feel ‘silly and foggy,’ as he would put it. So, taking this stuff? And maybe even a little too much of it, and voluntarily?” Dixie shook her head. “That’s a new and different John Gage.”

“Honest, I don’t think I did anything special,” Mike said.

Dixie shook her head again. “Wow. Okay, Johnny—you know the drill. Up on the table, shirt off. Mike, maybe you can help him with that, while I page Dr. Bracket.”
Mike helped Johnny off with his t-shirt, moving his arms as little as possible.

“You’ve definitely got some nasty bruising there in your left kidney area, but I can’t see what’s going on under all the tape they’ve got on your ribs.”

“Aw, Dix, x-rays’ll see right through the tape, right? Can’t we just leave it on? It smarts like a sonofabitch when you take it off, you know.”

“We’ll see what Kel says, all right?” She handed Johnny a plastic cup with a lid, and pointed to the bathroom attached to the treatment room. “Fill ‘er up, pal.”

“Okay,” said Johnny, “but you have to go out to the hall, or I won’t be able to do it.”

“All right,” said Dixie. “Mike, why don’t you come get me when he’s done, all right?”

“Sure thing.” Mike helped Johnny get down from the table, and ushered him into the bathroom as Dixie waited in the hallway.

“Holy shit,” Johnny announced.

“What?” Mike said, alarmed.

“Lotsa blood in my pee. Like, a lot. You wanna see?”

Mike took a deep breath, trying to steady his stomach. “Uh, no thanks.”

“Oops—right. Course ya don’t.” Mike heard the toilet flushing, and then the faucet running, and Johnny emerged, holding the plastic cup, which was full of what looked to Mike like something that really ought not to happen.

Mike rushed out to the hallway. “He’s done,” he announced to Dixie, who was standing next to Dr. Brackett.

“You all right there, Mike?” Dixie asked.

“Uh, lotta blood in that pee,” he said. “I don’t do so well with that kind of thing.”

“You need to wait out here?” she asked.

“No,” said Mike. “Just, if someone could get rid of the, uh, sample, that’d be good.”

“No problem,” said Dixie, going back into the room and emerging with the jar, discreetly covered in a towel. “He’s all yours, Kel.”

Mike and Dr. Brackett entered the treatment room, to find Johnny sitting hunched over on the exam table.

“Hi, Doc,” he uttered between clenched teeth.

“Hello, Johnny. Sounds like you got quite the working over,” Brackett said.

“Short, but intense,” Johnny said. “Two guys, too. And lemme tell ya—if you can’t breathe, you can’t fight back.”

“Nobody’s suggesting you should’ve been able to, Johnny,” Mike said.
“Yeah, well, I still feel dumb about it.”

“I got mugged, once,” confessed Dr. Brackett. “About ten years ago. I ended up with a shiner like yours—had to take three weeks off work, since nobody in the ER wants to see a doctor with a black eye.”

“I wish this was just a mugging,” Johnny complained. “Somehow it’s worse, I guess, when it’s personal.”

“Personal?” Brackett’s eyebrows rose and met between his eyes.

“Yeah. Um, maybe Mike can explain while I’m getting x-rays?” Johnny’s eyes met Mike’s, desperately seeking a way out.

“Sure, Johnny, that’s fine,” Brackett answered, also realizing Johnny was suddenly close to the end of his emotional rope. “Let’s get you over to x-ray right away.” He summoned an orderly, and Johnny was whisked off to radiology, leaving Mike with Dr. Brackett.

“So what’s this all about? Why would someone have it in for Johnny?” Brackett queried.

Mike took a deep breath, and explained as concisely as he could what had been happening over the last week. “And, Doc—one more thing. A detective from the county sheriff’s office is gonna be asking some questions over here about this woman named Lynn Nolan—she and Johnny dated for a while a few years back, and she went kind of nuts, and she’s got a relative in the fire department who might very well be behind all this bullshit.”

“Lynn Nolan—the name doesn’t ring a bell,” Brackett said. “Wait, though—was she the one who was leaving him presents all the time?”

“Yeah, that sounds like her,” Mike said. “They wanna know how to find her, so they can figure out whether her brother or cousin or whoever is behind all this.”

Brackett rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “You know,” he said slowly, “the sheriff won’t have any luck in our Personnel department without a warrant, which I doubt they could get at this point. But I’ll see if I can get anything out of them—I’m not above being sneaky, and I know some other people who’d be happy to help out, too.”

“Thanks, Doc,” said Mike. “But don’t get yourself in any trouble on our account, all right?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’ll get by. You have to learn to fly under the radar around here sometimes if you want to get things done.” Brackett paused. “And speaking of getting things done—good job getting Johnny to take pain medication. What’s your secret?”

Mike shrugged. “I didn’t know he had a problem with that. But I guess,” he hesitated a bit, and then continued— “I guess he trusts me enough to let his guard down.”

“Well, Mike—I have to say, you’re the first person I’ve ever heard of him trusting that much. Almost nobody can resist Dixie—and she got as close to him as I’ve ever seen, but Johnny still wouldn’t let go, not even for her.”

“I kind of knew, getting together with him, that trust would be a big thing. So I guess you could say it’s something we’ve been working on. And, speaking of trust, I think that’s really all I want to go into about this, actually. No offense, Doc, but that’s all I’ve got to say.”

“None taken,” Brackett said. He got the picture, though—the untrusting, extremely private man he
knew John Gage to be fit perfectly with the reserved, thoughtful person he was learning that Mike was. And he understood that one thing Johnny trusted Mike with was not talking about him when he wasn’t around. So he changed the subject to a safer topic.

“How’s the leg doing, Mike? Joe said he saw you and Johnny over the weekend, but didn’t go into details.”

“It’s okay.” He filled Brackett in on the story of the loose screw.

“If you want, I can look at those stitches while we’re waiting for Johnny’s x-rays.”

“Sure, thanks.” Mike hopped up on the exam table and peeled the bandage off. Dr. Brackett examined the stitches carefully, and replaced the bandage.

“Looks fine,” he said. “They can come out in two or three days—no need to come all the way here, any office can do it for you.”

“Well, I work over at HQ, so I’ll probably pop back in here anyhow,” said Mike. “Otherwise, I’m afraid Johnny would want to just do it himself, and that’s not happening.”

Predictably, the door swung open, and Dixie backed in with Johnny in the wheelchair. She handed Dr. Brackett an envelope of x-rays, and a sheet from the lab. “What would I wanna do that’s not happening? Besides what we were supposed to do after dinner.”

“Taking my stitches out yourself,” said Mike, blushing.

“Oh.”

Johnny craned his neck to see the x-rays that Dr. Brackett had just put up on the light box.

“Shoot,” he said. “It’s three of ‘em, ain’t it.”

“Seven, eight, and nine,” confirmed Dr. Brackett. “Just cracked—no complete fractures, luckily.”

“So what do we do with those, Doc?” Mike asked.

“I’ll get to that in a minute—but first I want to tackle the more serious issue,” Brackett continued. “That kidney is bleeding a lot—I wasn’t happy with the lab report at all.”

Johnny’s face fell. “You’re gonna make me stay, aren’t you.”

“Johnny, think about your history, here. It’s your left kidney—and when you ruptured your spleen a few years ago, that kidney took damage then, too. Not enough to have to remove it, but enough that there’s certainly some scarring. So I’m afraid I do want to keep you at for at least twenty-four hours, to monitor the bleeding. And to do that properly, we have to monitor fluid intake and output as well.”

“Shit,” Johnny said flatly.

“Please, Johnny—listen to the Doc, all right?” Mike pleaded.

“I’m not refusin’,” Johnny said, “just complainin’. I figured I’d hafta stay as soon as I saw my pee was half blood. Oops, sorry, Mikey. So okay, I’m not happy about it, but I know I gotta stay. Feel like shit anyhow,” he grumbled.

“I guess I’ll go back home and get you some things, all right?” Mike said quietly.
“Yeah. Thanks, Mikey.” Johnny frowned. “But you know what?”

“What?”

“I really think you oughta not stay at the house tonight, okay? These guys are gettin’ dirtier and dirtier, and I don’t like it.”

“Johnny,” Mike said patiently, “we talked about this. We cave, they win.”

“Yeah, but you know what? I’m gonna play the selfish card now. I won’t be able to sleep if I know you’re at home by yourself. So, what we’re gonna do is, I’m gonna call Roy, and see if you can stay with them while I’m stuck here. They live halfway between Rampart and HQ anyhow, so it’s a good deal, Mike,” Johnny said. “And by the time you’re back here with some stuff for me, and some stuff for yourself, I’ll have it all worked out.”

Mike looked at his feet, and sighed heavily. “Okay. I guess you’re right. I don’t like caving in, though.”

“Think of it this way,” Johnny said, sounding more lucid by the minute. “You’re not giving in to them—you’re giving in to irresistible old me. That’s not so bad, is it?”


“I’ll tell you what,” said Dixie. “I’ll take care of all the phone calls, okay? And by the time you get back here, Mike, you’ll have a place to stay, and you can tuck Johnny in for the night, and everyone can get some rest. All right?”

“Yeah,” said Mike. “Thanks.”

“Thanks, Dix. You’re the best,” Johnny added. And he frowned again. “But boy, this was not how this evening was supposed to go. I was supposed to get the pizza, is all, and then we were gonna have a nice, quiet dinner, and a really nice evening, and now it all just sucks.”

TBC
Chapter 10

Roy DeSoto was reading a magazine, enjoying some quiet time to himself, while Joanne was having a rare evening out with a friend and the kids were miraculously in bed a bit on the early side. He was planning on turning in shortly, as he had a shift in the morning. Just as he reluctantly put his magazine down, trying to follow the advice he gave to his kids about getting to bed at a sensible time so you wouldn’t be sorry on a school morning, the phone rang. He instantly felt anxious—it wasn’t terribly late, only nine o’clock or so, but most people they knew worked on fairly early schedules, and didn’t call past early evening. So, it was with some mild anxiety that he picked up the phone on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Roy? It’s Dixie McCall—and I promise, it’s nothing really serious.”

“Hi, Dixie—what’s going on?”

“Well, Johnny and Mike kind of need a favor.”

Roy’s mind spun—he’d heard about Mike’s setback with the screws, and he’d heard about the troubles they’d been having. And of course, there was always the possibility that his ex-partner had gotten hurt on the job. “Okay—what happened? What can I do?”

“Well,” Dixie hesitated slightly, not knowing how much of the story Roy knew. “Well, Johnny’s in for observation, to start with. He took a blow to the kidney, and cracked a couple ribs, and he’s passing enough blood that we need to keep an eye on him for a little while.”

“Geez,” said Roy. “What happened? B-shift was on today, so it wasn’t on the job, was it?”

“No,” Dixie replied, again hesitating. “Roy, some thugs beat him up in an alley this evening. He and Mike are pretty upset about it—I don’t know how much you’ve talked to Johnny recently, but …”

“I talked to him enough to get a nasty picture,” Roy said, fury building. “I heard about the tires, and the letter, and the phone messages, and some things that happened at Mike’s office. But this is a whole new level. Is it the same people?”

“Johnny’s pretty sure it is, from what they said to him, which he isn’t repeating.”

“Dix,” Roy began, but found himself unable to continue speaking.

“He’s going to be fine,” Dixie said soothingly. “You know I wouldn’t say that if it weren’t true. Kel just wants to make sure that the bleeding in the kidney subsides before sending him home, all right?”

“Yeah,” said Roy, though inside, he was screaming ‘no, it’s not all right, damn it!’ “But Dix, I’m home alone with the kids—Joanne’s gonna be out till late, and I can’t come in to Rampart. I just can’t.”

“It’s okay, Roy—Johnny’s resting comfortably. I actually called you for a different favor—Johnny doesn’t want Mike staying at home. Not with those thugs still out there. And to be honest, Roy, I’m afraid I agree with Johnny on this one. These guys have crossed the line into blatant violence.”
“Mike can absolutely stay here,” said Roy. “I’ll make up the bed in the spare room, and it’s all his. Or theirs, when Johnny gets out.”

Roy could hear Dixie’s sigh of relief over the line. “That’s great, Roy. It might be a while till he gets to your place—he went home to pick up some things for Johnny and himself, and he’s coming by here again next, of course—but thanks. I’ll send him over as soon as I can.”

“I’ll be here. And if Joanne were home, I’d come over right now. And I have a shift tomorrow, so I probably won’t make it in. I’ll be sure to call sometime tomorrow, though.”

“He’ll appreciate that. I’m guessing he’s not going to want to talk about any of the things that’ve been going on, though.”

“No,” Roy replied, “I’m sure he won’t. But we always seem to find plenty to talk about.”

“Mike had a hard time getting him to shut up, actually, so you’ll probably have some interesting conversations if he’s still on painkillers.”

“Oh, definitely,” Roy said. “I’ll count on it. Anyhow—say hi to Johnny if you see him again this evening, and thanks for not hesitating to call—you know Jo and I will always help out with any of the guys.”

“Thanks for helping, Roy. I’ll talk to you later.”

Roy put down the phone, and went upstairs to start making up the bed in the spare room. While he was working, he thought about how he could possibly explain to his teenaged son and eleven-year-old daughter what had happened. He had sworn early on never to lie to his children, but he also didn’t want to expose them to such ugliness. He sighed, passing the doors to their rooms. Better they know an ugly truth at a tender age, he thought, than learn as adults that their parents were too afraid to talk to them about real life.

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Mike pulled the truck up to the house, and left the headlights on to light a path as he went to the front door. He had very mixed feelings about not staying at his own house for the night. On the one hand, he truly believed that by staying elsewhere, he was somehow letting those bastards win. But on the other hand, he knew he wouldn’t sleep a wink, and, excessive anxiety aside, it wasn’t out of the question that Johnny’s attackers might not be done for the day.

Once inside, Mike turned the AC off, so the empty house wouldn’t be sucking down energy. He gathered some comfortable hospital wear, toiletries, and some light reading for Johnny, and packed a couple days’ worth of things for himself. He grabbed his cane, which he’d forgotten earlier, and was regretting not having had. He checked all the doors and windows, but stopped himself from checking them again. He loaded the bags into the truck, got in, and started the truck. The dashboard clock read 9:25.

Mike looked across the street at Mrs. Daniels’ house, and turned the truck off again. She’d told the deputy she’d be up till ten, and there were still lights on in her house. Mike got out of the truck, walked across the street, and rang the bell.

Mike saw the peephole darken, and then brighten again. The door opened, and Mrs. Daniels’ concerned face appeared.

“Mike? Come in. What’s wrong?” she asked.
“I’m really sorry to bother you at this hour, but I just wanted to let you know a couple things. They’re keeping Johnny at the hospital for a little while—he’d kill me if I told you the details, but they need to keep an eye on him for a bit, and for once he’s not making a fuss about it.”

“Oh, the poor dear! Even though I don’t know him all that well, I’d bet he just hates it there.”

“You’ve got that absolutely right. He should be fine—but he’s in a lot of pain, and they need to see a few lab results get better before he can come home.”

“Oh, my. Well, please send him my best. Will he still be there tomorrow? I’ll take him some food—I know he likes to keep well fed, and hospital food doesn’t do that, now, does it?”

“No, ma’am, it sure doesn’t. He’s at Rampart—it’s a little farther than Henry Mayo up in Santa Clarita, but he knows the people there, so it’s a little easier for him.”

“Now, I hope you’re going to tell me that you’re staying somewhere else tonight, young man,” Mrs. Daniels said.

“I am,” Mike admitted. “To be honest, I don’t like the idea of leaving, but I like the idea of sticking around even less, so there we are.”

“Why don’t you give me the number where you’ll be staying, just in case something comes up around here? You know I’m not going anywhere—well, except to Rampart, of course.” Mrs. Daniels handed Mike a pad and pen from near her phone, and Mike wrote down the DeSotos’ names and numbers.

“I’m pretty sure this is where I’ll be,” he said, handing the paper back.

“Oh, and Mrs. Jenkins asked me why the sheriff had been around so much. I have to confess, I didn’t tell her the entire truth—I told a little white lie, and just said that you boys had been having some trouble with pranksters. But she told me she’d keep an extra sharp eye out, and you’d better believe she will, too. As will I.”

“Thanks a lot, Mrs. Daniels—really. I appreciate it. We both do.”

“I certainly hope they catch those thugs soon,” she replied.

“Yeah. We do too. We’re pretty much at the ends of our ropes,” Mike admitted. “And now Johnny’s gonna be off work for a few weeks, too, and I can’t even begin to tell you how crazy that’s gonna make him.”

“Have faith—it’ll all work out in the end.”

Mike silently disagreed with the “faith” part, since he didn’t personally believe there was much of anything to have faith in at this point, other than shitty human nature, but he knew she meant well, so he responded in kind.

“Thanks. Have a good night, and thanks again for all your help.”

“Good night, Mike.”

Mike got back in his truck, and began the drive back to Rampart. Again. Forty minutes of mind-numbing driving later, he pulled into a visitor’s spot, and decided to go in through the ER rather than the main entrance. Squad 51 and an ambulance were parked in the bay. Mike struggled to remember which shift would be on tonight, but the complex calendar had gotten lost in all the other things Mike
had to keep track of. All he could be sure of was that the squad wasn’t manned by Johnny and Roy. Cane in one hand, and Johnny’s bag in the other, he slipped in through the ER entrance and went in search of Dixie, who would surely know where Johnny had been taken.

Oddly, the ER was dead quiet. Nobody was in the waiting room, and nobody was at the nurses’ station. Mike decided to peer into the staff lounge to see if Dixie was in there. He poked his head in the door, and saw Craig Brice and Bob Bellingham sitting at the small table. B-shift tonight, then, Mike concluded, as he hastily retreated, not wanting to start an awkward discussion. He decided he’d be better off going back to the main entrance, and checking with the admissions desk. He went back down the ER corridor, heading for the double doors back to the main lobby of the hospital.

“Mike!” a voice called from the other end of the hall. He turned, and saw Dixie emerging from the elevator. “I just took him up—come on, I'll show you up to his room.”

Mike gratefully joined Dixie in the elevator.

“Thanks, Dixie. I just had a close encounter with Bellingham and Brice—I don’t think they saw me, though.”

Dixie laughed. “They’re perfectly fine gentlemen, but I can bet Johnny wouldn’t want them to know he’s here, so I understand your trying to escape.” She pushed the “5” button, and the elevator lurched upwards. “Oh, you’re all set with the DeSotos—Roy said they’re happy to have you.”

“Thanks. That’s a relief, actually. I’ll just say good night to Johnny, and then head right over. I know they turn in early—I’m probably already keeping them up.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened on the fifth floor. Dixie led Mike to room 521. “I’m afraid he’s got a roommate,” she said, “so I’ll just pop in first to make sure it’s okay for you to come in.”

Dixie knocked and entered the room. Johnny’s roommate, a middle-aged fellow with an arm and a leg in casts, was already sleeping. The curtain was drawn around Johnny’s bed already.

Dixie stepped back out to the corridor. “His roommate’s sleeping, so just sneak on in,” Dixie said. “And Roy said just to come when you can, and knock instead of ringing the bell. He said he’ll be up.”

“Thanks, Dixie. I really appreciate everything. I know Johnny does too.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “I’m selfishly glad he wanted to come here instead of Henry Mayo. Tell him I said good night.” And with that, Dixie headed back to the elevator, to return to her slow evening in the ER.

Mike slipped quietly into room 521, and found the opening in the curtain around Johnny’s side of the room. Johnny’s eyes were closed, but it didn’t really look like he was asleep.

“Hey, love,” Mike whispered.

Johnny’s eyes opened. “Hiya,” he smiled sleepily. “Dixie says you’re all set at Roy’s.”

“Yeah. I brought your stuff—you want anything from it now?”

Johnny frowned. “Nah. Might as well sleep in this stupid thing,” he said, indicating the hospital gown he was wearing, “since they’re gonna be prodding me all night anyhow. And can you believe,” he continued, “I have to pee in a pitcher, so they can measure every drop? And any time I drink anything, it has to be in front of a nurse, so she can measure it exactly?” He shook his head.
“But hey. I guess I don’t really care.”

“You sound a little less doped up,” said Mike. “Are you feeling okay?”

Johnny nodded. “Yeah—the first stuff started to wear off, and they gave me a little less this time. I guess I kinda overdid it, huh?”

“It’s possible,” Mike said. “But it doesn’t really matter—I mean, you were really hurting, so I’m glad you took something. That’s what it’s for.”

“Yeah. Well, sorry if I said anything weird.” He looked up anxiously. “Did I say anything weird?”

Mike tittered quietly, trying not to wake the roommate. “You very kindly gave me permission to call you gorgeous, beautiful, and hot.”

“In front of people? Did I say that in front of people?” Johnny asked, struggling to sit up, and then giving up and flopping back down. “Ow.”

“No. Just in the truck,” Mike replied. “Don’t worry—I managed to stop you when I thought you were about to say something embarrassing in front of people. Most of the time.”

“Oh,” said Johnny. “Yeah—that’s right. You’re my brakes.”

“You bet.” Mike sighed. “Another shitty day, Gage.”

“No day is that shitty when it’s with you.”

Mike rolled his eyes at Johnny. “You’re definitely still high.”

“Yeah.”

“But gorgeous, beautiful, and hot, too.”

Johnny laughed, doubling over. “No fair—no making me laugh.”

“Sorry,” Mike smoothed Johnny’s hair off his forehead, and gently kissed him above his swollen eye, and then on both cheeks, and finally on the lips. “I better go.”

“Yeah.” Johnny pulled him down for one more kiss. “I’m glad you’re staying at Roy’s.”

“Me too. Love you. See you tomorrow. Is it okay if I come by on my lunch hour?”

“You bet—as long as you bring food.”

“It’s a deal.” Mike kissed Johnny one more time. “G’night.”

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Mike arrived at the DeSotos’ house at around a quarter to eleven. He parked the truck in front of the house, and knocked quietly at the door. Roy answered the door a few seconds later, dressed in a robe over pajamas.

“Hi, Mike. C’mon in.”

“Hey, Roy. Thanks a lot for putting me up—sorry I kept you up.”

“Don’t worry about it—I wasn’t really all that tired anyhow. How’s Johnny doing?”
Mike shook his head. “He’s—well, he’s got three cracked ribs, but what they’re keeping him in for is a bruised kidney. Dr. Brackett said something about it maybe already being scarred from when he ruptured his spleen a few years ago?”

“Yeah,” said Roy. “Man, that was touch and go for a while,” Roy recalled, shaking his head. “But yeah—the left kidney is just behind the spleen, so it almost certainly took some damage from the impact of that car, too. So I’m not surprised Brackett is worried.”

Mike paled. “He, uh, didn’t sound *that* worried,” he said shakily. “More, just, precautionary. Roy, is he worse than they’re saying? I mean, nobody told me it was *that* bad—though I guess there really was a *lot* of blood in his pee. A *lot*. All right, that’s it—I’m going back to get some straight answers.” Mike turned back to the door, but was stopped by Roy grabbing his arm.

“Mike. Calm down, all right? I mean, the worst that could happen is—”

“What, Roy? What’s the worst that could happen?”

Roy sighed. “Look. Come sit down, all right?” He led Mike into the living room, and pushed him gently into a chair. “Here’s what they’re doing. They’re probably just keeping track of how much liquid goes in, and how much comes out. Okay?”

“Okay,” Mike said warily. “He *was* complaining about having to pee into a pitcher.”

“And if they know how much is going in and out, then they can tell whether the amount of bleeding from the kidney is subsiding, which they couldn’t tell if they didn’t know how much it was being diluted, all right?”

“Yeah—but what were you thinking of, just now? The worst that could happen?” Mike’s eyes were wide, and his hands were clutching the arms of the chair.

“Mike, the worst that could happen—which almost certainly won’t, all right? The worst would be if the kidney was bleeding too much, and they couldn’t repair the bleeding, they would have to take it out.”

“Oh, God,” said Mike, “See? I should go back.”

“Now hang on,” said Roy. “If Dr. Brackett thought it was bleeding that much, he’d have sent Johnny in to surgery first thing, okay? Did that happen?”

“No, but—”

“Did he even mention that?” Roy asked patiently.

“No, but—”

“He would’ve, if he thought it was likely to happen, okay? Dr. Brackett is the bluntest guy I know, and he wouldn’t beat around the bush, especially with a guy like Johnny, okay?”

Mike didn’t answer.

“Okay?” Roy repeated.

“Okay,” said Mike. “But Roy, what if he didn’t tell Johnny, because he didn’t want to alarm him, or because he thought Johnny was so high he wouldn’t get it anyhow, or, or …”

“Look,” Roy said. “That’s not how Brackett works. Plus, you have Johnny’s medical power of
“Right,” Mike nodded. Roy knew that perfectly well, since he’d been the keeper of that power for many years, and happily transferred it to Mike a few years ago. Unlike Roy, though, Mike had never had to make any medical decisions for Johnny.

“So even if he’d thought Johnny was too drugged up to make decisions for himself, which, by the way, I’d like to hear how you managed, he would’ve asked you.”

“But what if he didn’t know I had power of attorney?”

“He knew. I told him when Johnny transferred it from me to you. But if he’d forgotten about that somehow, and thought it was still me, then he would’ve called me,” Roy said calmly. “And he didn’t. All right?”

“Okay,” Mike said, letting out a breath. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Roy said. Johnny had mentioned once, in passing, that Mike tended to get, well, overly anxious sometimes, and could talk himself into obsessive worrying, but this was the first time he’d seen it in person. “But I’m sure if you had any questions, you could call Dr. Brackett right now and he’d answer gladly. Do you want to do that?”

Mike thought for a second. “No. I think you straightened me out. Thanks.”

“Any time,” Roy said. “Now, let’s have some tea or something, and then call it a night.”

“Okay,” said Mike. “Are you on, tomorrow?”

“Yeah. You?”

Mike nodded, as they went into the kitchen. “Monday through Friday, nine to five. Well,” he amended, “seven thirty to four, actually.”

“How’s the arson unit working out for you these days?” Roy asked, trying to keep Mike’s mind on something safe.

“Good, actually. I didn’t think I’d like it as much as I do. But it’s good. We’re working on that supermarket fire from a couple months ago—remember that one, near Palmdale, that went to five alarms, and the whole block went?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Roy. “Way out of my area, but I bet every guy in the department heard about that one.”

“Well, I can’t say too much about it—we go to trial next week—but we’re all hoping the bastard gets nailed. I’m still pretty new at this, but the other guys say it’s looking good.”

“That’s great, Mike. Do you think you’ll have to testify?”

“Not for this one. I’ll sit in on the whole trial, though, because pretty soon they’re gonna have me going in that direction.”

“Wow.” Roy poured boiling water over tea bags in two mugs. “I don’t know if I could do that.”

“The funny thing is, Roy, I don’t mind talking in front of people if it’s about technical stuff. Work stuff. I mean, while I was on light duty, they made me teach some pump operations units at the academy, and at first I thought I’d pass out from nerves, but once I remembered I knew what I was
talking about, and they were only gonna ask me about that, and not about anything personal, it didn’t bother me.” Mike shook his head. “Weird, huh?”

“From the guy who was famous at our station for two word sentences? Yeah. But good for you, Mike. Good for you for getting into something new, and taking it by the horns.”

“Well, at the time, Roy, it was either that, or take medical retirement, and go stark staring mad from boredom. So taking the bull by the horns seemed less scary, actually. Plus, well …”

“What?” Roy asked.

“Never mind,” Mike said.

“Okay …” Roy was dying of curiosity, but knew not to pry. “This is chamomile, by the way. I have no idea if it’s true, but Joanne says it’s supposed to be soothing to the nerves. She makes it for us every night.”


Roy laughed. “When Jenny was little, she misunderstood the name, and thought it was “can of mild.” It’s mild, the tea bags come in a can—totally reasonable.”

Mike laughed. “That’s cute.”

They took their tea back to the living room.

“What I was going to say, was, I knew I needed something to keep me busy, so I wouldn’t go nuts,” Mike said quietly, “but I didn’t care—not at the time. I didn’t care if I went nuts or not. But I knew Johnny did, so that’s how I was able to take the bull by the horns. I was petrified—but I did it for him,” he concluded, almost in a whisper.

Roy sat silently for a moment. “You guys are good for each other,” he said.

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Yeah, we really are. And right now, Roy?” Mike looked up from his tea, right at Roy. “If I found those guys that hurt him, I’d take ’em apart. I honestly don’t think I could stop myself.”

“You could,” Roy said. “You might not want to, but you could, and you would.”

“I would? What’s one reason I’d want to stop?”

“I’ll give you two,” Roy said. “One is, you wouldn’t lower yourself as far as them. And two, Johnny wouldn’t like it.”

Mike froze. “No,” he said, putting his mug down on the coffee table. “No, he wouldn’t, would he. I knew that, too. I’m just so … mad.”

“I don’t blame you,” Roy said. “You guys have gotten a bad deal—from society, from the department, from an idiot driver who was too busy rubbernecking at a wreck to see a guy in reflective turnouts holding a big orange flag, and now from a couple of jerks who’ve gotten way out of line.”

Mike couldn’t disagree, but didn’t have the energy to add to what Roy had said, so he just nodded and sipped his tea.

“He’ll be fine, Mike.”
“I know.”

The front door opened quietly, and Joanne stepped in.

“Roy, are you still up?” she asked in surprise as she entered the living room. “Mike? What—oh, no,” she said, realizing why Mike was likely here. “What happened?” she asked, sitting next to Roy on the sofa.

“He—Joanne, the guys who have been giving us all this trouble? They followed him, and they dragged him into an alley, and beat him up pretty bad,” Mike said, rubbing his brow. “He’s at Rampart, at least overnight—he’s got some cracked ribs and a bruised kidney, and they need to keep an eye on the bleeding for a while.”

“Oh, no,” she repeated. “Oh, Mike, I’m so sorry. That’s just—” she couldn’t finish. Tears sprang into her eyes. “I’m sorry—I’m not a crier, really, but that’s terrible. I’m so, so sorry.”

“He’s gonna be okay, Joanne,” Mike said, believing it this time. “I know he’ll be okay.”

“He always is, isn’t he,” she sniffed, laughing a little despite herself. “Though he has seemed to keep himself out of trouble since the two of you got together.”

“Until now,” Mike said. “Huh.”

“What?” Roy asked.

“Oh, I just remembered something he said a long time ago—way before my accident, back when I’d dislocated my shoulder, which seemed like such a big deal at the time, but looks like nothing now. Anyhow, I said something about how he was always taking care of me, and he laughed and said he was sure I’d get my turn. Well, I guess it’s my turn,” Mike said sourly.

“I wish we could do something—tell us what we can do, Mike—we’ll do anything we can to help,” Joanne said.

“You guys are doing something—you’re giving me a convenient, safe and friendly place to stay.”

“But that’s nothing, Mike—we’re happy to have you, and Johnny too, when he gets out, for as long as you want,” said Joanne.

“That’s not all you’re doing. The really big thing you’re doing,” Mike continued, “is you’re raising your kids not to hate people for any reason. And right now—that’s the biggest thing I can imagine.”

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“Mr. Gage?”

Johnny woke up suddenly, the pain in his ribs and kidney reminding him instantly where he was. He couldn’t see out of his right eye, which had swelled shut overnight. He made do with peering through his left eye, and saw a nurse standing next to his bed.

“Mr. Gage?” she repeated.

“Yeah. I’m awake,” Johnny said groggily. The room was dark, except for a small bedside lamp the nurse had apparently turned on. He had a headache—but that was nothing unusual for waking in the hospital.

“I’ve got your next dose of pain medication, and I also need to get a urine sample.”
Johnny groaned and sank into the bed. “All right—do I at least get a little water to wash these down with?”

The nurse handed him a minuscule paper cup containing at most an ounce and a half of water, and another cup containing two pills. “I’m sorry; we have orders to keep your fluids down to a minimum, to let that kidney rest.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Johnny grumbled. He put the two pills on the back of his tongue, and sipped the water to swallow them, praying the small amount of liquid would get both the tablets all the way down. He returned the two cups to the nurse, sat up, and swung his legs off the side of the bed. “What is it, like two a.m.?” he asked, letting his blood pressure adjust to his being upright.

“All right,” said the nurse. “Can you get to the bathroom on your own, or do you need a hand?”

“I can do it,” he said. The nurse handed him a plastic jar with a lid.

“Don’t forget, the rest still needs to go in the pitcher,” she reminded him.

“Yep.” Johnny made his way into the bathroom, turned on the light, wincing at the glare, and closed the door. He followed the nurse’s instructions, and noted that maybe, just maybe, this sample looked a little less bloody than the last one.

“Here ya go,” he said, handing her the jar. “Hot off the presses.”

“Thanks for cooperating,” she said. “Sorry I had to wake you.”

“’s okay,” Johnny said. He rolled back into the bed, thought of Mike sleeping in the DeSotos’ spare room, with the floral patterns that Mike would surely hate on the bedspread and curtains, and was asleep again almost instantly.

“Huh,” the nurse said. “He wasn’t difficult,” she thought, thinking of the dire warnings she’d gotten from co-workers who’d tended to this patient in the past. “Far from it. A total puppy dog. Didn’t even come close to hitting on me, either.”

Elenora Daniels woke with a start, unsure what had brought her to wakefulness. She put on her glasses, and looked at the bedside clock. Four a.m., she thought. Not a good time for anything. But, awake is awake, she thought. Plus, I’m pretty sure I heard something. Time for a look-see out the ol’ front window.

As she made her way to the front of the house, she was sure she heard a metallic clanking sound—something like a metal can, perhaps. She peered through a small opening in the living room curtains, and immediately stepped back.

The silver Honda was there again—she was sure of it. She went quickly to her phone table, and grabbed the pencil and paper she kept there. She knew she couldn’t stop whatever they were doing, but she also knew nobody was at the house anyhow. She strained her neck and her eyes as hard as she could, but only got the first two symbols from the plate: F9. Maybe it would be enough.

She put down the pad, and went straight back to the phone, where she had the deputy’s card ready and waiting.

“L.A. County Sheriff’s Department, Deputy Price speaking.”
“This is an emergency,” Mrs. Daniels said. “I’m calling from 14319 Harrison Street, and somebody is doing something to my neighbor’s house, across the street at 14318 Harrison. This may be related to an ongoing incident, and I was given this number to call.”

“Is that the Stoker/Gage residence?”

“It is, and I know for a fact that nobody is home. The car in front of the house was the one that followed Mr. Gage earlier. There are two men outside the house. I can’t see what they’re doing over there, but—” There was the sound of breaking glass. “They just broke some glass. It’s still too dark to see exactly what they’re doing.”

“Ma’am, stay inside your house. I’m sending a car right now. Can you give me your name and number please?”

Mrs. Daniels supplied the information, hung up the phone when the deputy told her to, and waited.

Two minutes later, the silver car pulled away from the house across the street.

Three minutes after that, a black and white sedan pulled up in front of the house, lights blazing and sirens screaming. The officer in the passenger’s seat trained a floodlight on the house. Mrs. Daniels could see the damage now—bright pink paint had been thrown all over the brick front of the house, and the plate glass window in the living room was shattered.

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Mike limped in to HQ a little later than usual—closer to eight o’clock—but still earlier than most of his colleagues. There was a pink message slip clipped to his door, with the “Urgent” box checked: “Mr. Stoker—please call Deputy Price ASAP.”

“Shit,” Mike said. He sat down at his desk and dialed the number on the message slip.

“L.A. County Sheriff’s Department, Deputy Price speaking.”

“Deputy, this is Mike Stoker returning your call.”

“Mr. Stoker, I’m afraid there’s been an incident at your home overnight.”

Mike couldn’t think of what to say.

“Mr. Stoker?”

“Yeah. I’m here. What kind of incident?”

“Your neighbor, Mrs. Daniels, phoned us at 0410 stating there was a silver sedan in front of your house, and that there were two men doing something at the house. We arrived at 0416 to find that the intruders were gone, but the large living room window had been broken, and that paint had been thrown on the front of the house.”

“Fuck,” Mike swore loudly. “Just—damn it. That’s just the last fucking straw. I guess I’ll go home and put a board up over the window or something.”

“No need—Mrs. Daniels explained your situation—that Mr. Gage is in the hospital, and that you were staying with friends near there, so we took care of boarding up the window.”

Mike’s jaw dropped in astonishment. “Seriously? That’s … extremely kind. Sorry I lost my temper.”
“Understandable. Don’t worry about it. The good news is, Mrs. Daniels was able to get part of the plate number, and she confirmed the make and model of the vehicle, so there’s a fairly good chance that we should be able to get the owner in for questioning today.”

“That woman is a saint,” Mike said instantly. “I’m calling the Pope today to tell him.” He thought for a second. “Are you allowed to tell me who the car is registered to?” he asked.

“Let me see … James Torrelli. Does that name mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing.” Mike had a sudden inspiration. “Hang on a second—I have my Department HQ phone book right here—but that would be too easy, wouldn’t it.” He thumbed through the booklet. “Nope, no Torrelli that I can see at HQ.”

“We’ll pick him up,” Price said confidently. “Also: is Mr. Gage in the hospital as a result of yesterday’s assault?”

“Yes,” Mike said. “It turned out he had some bleeding from his kidney, and they need to keep a close eye on it.”

“Do you think he would be up to signing a release form?”

“A release form? What for?” Mike asked.

“We’ll be increasing any potential charges from assault and battery to aggravated assault and battery, based on the seriousness of injury. We need medical documentation of that, and we need him to sign off on a release so we can get the records from the attending physician.”

“Oh,” Mike answered. “I … don’t know if he’ll do that.”

“It’s up to him,” said Price. “But we probably can’t prosecute it as a felony unless we have those records. It would just be records of this injury—nothing else.”

“I’ll talk to him at lunchtime—please don’t send anyone to see him until then, if that’s possible.”

“That’s fine. Someone will come by this afternoon.”

Mike had a sudden thought. “You know, do you think you could send an officer by the name of Vince Howard? I’m pretty sure he still works in the district that Rampart is in. He and Johnny worked together a lot—I’ll bet Vince might have a better shot than a stranger.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Price. “And I’ll let you know of any developments. Will you be staying at the number Mrs. Daniels gave us this morning? We tried to reach you there earlier, but were told you’d left for the office.”

“Um, I’m not sure. I’ll let you know.”

“That’s fine. We’ll keep you posted.”

“Thanks. And—thanks an awful lot for taking care of the window.”

“No problem. We’ll be talking to you soon.”

Mike hung up the phone, and put his head down on his desk for a long, long time.

After a while, he picked himself up, went into the break room, and made a pot of coffee. He stared at the coffeemaker while the pot was brewing, trying not to think about anything. It didn’t work. He
poured himself a mug of the brew, and sat back down at his desk. He opened his top right drawer—the one with his pictures—and felt a tiny bit better.

He picked up the phone and dialed a number he called frequently, but for a different purpose than usual.

“L.A. County Fire Department Station 93, Captain Sterling speaking.”

“Hi, Cap. Mike Stoker.”

“Howdy, Mike,” said Sterling. “I’m guessing this isn’t a social call, from the sound of your voice.”

“No. No, it’s not. Look—there’s no good way to do this, so I’ll just say it. Johnny got beat up last night by the guys who’ve been hassling us. He’s in the hospital. He’s got three cracked ribs, among other things, and that’s gonna mean probably three weeks sick time. I know he’s got it, but I also know Chief Livingston has it in for him, and this isn’t going to go over well with him.”

“Like a fart in church,” Sterling agreed. “So you’re wondering what advice I might have about how to smooth things over with him, is that it?”

“Pretty much,” Mike replied sheepishly.

“Well, first off, I’m happy to work a double—take John’s shift tomorrow. That’ll be a good start, as Livingston likes advance warning when people have to take sick time. As if people should be able to schedule illness and injury.”

“Really? That’s great—thanks. I know Johnny was dreading calling in today, but being able to name his sub for tomorrow will help a lot. Thanks a million, Len.”

“ Entirely my pleasure,” replied Sterling. “I’m guessing Hank would take some shifts, and maybe DeSoto, too? They both work A-shift as well, if I recall.”

“Yeah—I’m pretty sure they would. I’ll talk to them both today, too. Man, Johnny might kill me for meddling, but I gotta do something.”

“Son, he’s not gonna kill you. He may fuss and grumble about you mindin’ your own damned business, but he’ll know you’re doin’ it ‘cause you love him.”

“You’re probably right. It’s my turn, anyhow.”

“Your turn?” inquired Sterling.

“My turn to take care of him for a change. I just have to get him to let me, is all.”

“I don’t think it’ll be as hard as you think, Mike.”

“Maybe not.”

“Anyhow—I’ll talk to Jeff Gilbert on B-shift. He isn’t in a position to pull double shifts, but he could probably stick around and wait on someone comin’ up from down south if that would help. I know it’s quite a trek to get up to this neck of the woods from most of the rest of the county.”

“Thanks, Len. Thanks a lot. I’m about to call Rampart to see how Johnny’s doing—I’ll keep you posted, okay?”

“You do that. Take care, Mike.”
“Mr. Gage?”

“Go ‘way.”

A hand gently shook his shoulder, and the room lights came on, bright enough Johnny could see red through his eyelids—or at least, through one of them. “Mr. Gage, I’m sorry to wake you, but it’s time for another dose of your medication, and I need another urine sample.”

“Yeah. Okay. Gimme a minute.” He opened his eyes, or at least, the one that would open enough to be useful, and saw the same nurse who’d been in every three hours during the night. “Shouldn’t you be off?”

“My replacement called in sick; I’m just staying a few extra hours until her sub can come in.”

“Oh.” He repeated the drill of sitting up, adjusting to being upright, taking his pills, and filling the sample jar.

“I let you sleep through breakfast—you looked like you needed the rest more than the hospital food—but can I get you something now?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. But I’m guessing coffee is right out.”

“Right out,” the nurse agreed. “No diuretics while you’re resting that kidney.”

“At least the painkillers will keep me from having a caffeine withdrawal headache, though.”

“Ah, the voice of experience.”

“Yeah. Been here a lot. Bet I have a big capital “D” in my chart for “Difficult,” too.”

“Well, keep up this behavior, and I’ll bet it gets removed from your record.”

“Juvenile records are supposed to be sealed anyways, right? What’d they say about me, anyhow? I know you nurses share notes on repeat offenders, and us firemen have gotta be the worst of all.”

“Oh, you’ve got the big “D,” all right, and they said to watch out for incurable flirting, avoiding medication, juvenile behavior, and general stubbornness.”

“Sounds about right.”

“So what happened?”

“Grew up, I guess. Finally.” He absentmindedly spun the ring on his finger.

The nurse smiled. “Well, I’ll be back with a nice, well-behaved, grown up breakfast. The orders are for a low protein diet, with fluids still restricted, but you didn’t have much at night, so we can probably manage some orange juice to go with the toast.”

“Uh, thanks, but I can’t stand the stuff—just water would be great. Or maybe decaf—fool my brain into thinking it’s had coffee.”

“Decaf it is, then,” said the nurse. “Someone will be in shortly with your meal.”

“Thanks,” said Johnny. “Oh—could you shoot me the phone before you go?”
The nurse moved the phone from Johnny’s nightstand to the table she swung over the bed, and left.

~!~!~!~!~

Mike still hadn’t mustered the willpower to do any actual work. He sat at his desk, intermittently brooding and making a list of things to do that had nothing to do with his work assignment.

1. Thank-you gift for Mrs. Daniels.
2. Locate a sandblaster to rent.
3. Lunch for J.
4. Call docs.
5.

Before Mike could add any more to his list, his phone rang.

“Arson/Fire Investigation, Mike Stoker speaking.”

“Hey Mikey.”

“Hi babe! How are you?”

“Maybe not so bad. Ribs feel better, a little, I guess. Kidney’s not so achy, and I think the pee looks maybe not so bad, but only the lab can say for sure. Doc’s s’posta come in soon.”

“They let you sleep at all?”

“Yeah, actually, I kinda just got up. They woke me up a million times—all right, maybe three—but in between I actually slept okay. Pretty foggy, though. Gonna see if maybe I can cut back on the pain meds.”

Mike sighed. “You know what I’m gonna say, right?”

“Yeah. I’m just thinking cut back a little—not quit entirely, all right? Oh, and here’s the really crummy part—they have me on restricted fluids, and a low protein diet, to try to rest that kidney. So I guess that pretty much rules out you bringing me decent food for lunch.”

“Well, I’ll come by after, then, just to hang out.”

“Great! So you stayed at Roy’s right?”

“Yeah. Um, it’s probably a good thing, too.” Mike relayed the information Deputy Price had passed along earlier.

“God damn. Why can’t they just leave us alone? What do they get outta this shit, anyhow?”

“Beats me, Johnny. Something, I guess.” Mike sighed. “Listen—two more things. One, the cops want to get a report from Brackett—and they need you to sign off on a form for that. Will you do it? Please?”

“I guess—long as it’s just for this one thing, right?”

Mike was relieved. “That’s what they said—just this incident. They need a medical report to justify
to the D.A. to increase any potential charges to a felony.”

“Okay. What’s thing two?”

“Well, don’t kill me, okay, but I talked to Len. He’s gonna cover your shift tomorrow, so don’t worry about Livingston coming down on you for short notice for a sub, all right?”

“Shit—I wasn’t even thinking about that. Thanks. And why would I kill you for doing me a favor?”

“Uh, I dunno,” Mike fumbled. “Maybe ‘cause I’m meddling in your business?”

“Way I see it, most everything that’s my business is yours, too. Hey—doc just came in—I gotta go. Love you.”

“Love you too—see you around one?”

“Great. Bye.”

Mike put his phone down, and, cheered by Johnny’s acquiescence, started in on his actual work.

~!~!~!~!~

Dixie had one last stop to make before going home after her twelve-hour night shift. She entered the office of the Personnel department, still wearing her uniform, and hoping that the right person would be seated at the desk in front of the locked files.

She was.

“Good morning, Laura!”

“Dixie! What brings you to the dungeon of despair?”

“To be honest, I need a huge favor,” Dixie admitted.

“Well, after you found me those volunteers for the new hospice program, and steered me clear of that walking disaster who wanted the head nurse’s job in pediatrics, you can pretty much name it.”

“I need some information I can’t have,” Dixie said quietly.

“Oh,” Laura replied. “That’s, um, harder.”

“Nobody will ever know where it came from—if what I need is even still here, I’ll pass it along anonymously to where it’ll do the good it needs to do. I swear, Laura, I would never ask this if it weren’t really important. I have a good friend who’s in trouble, and if we can find an ex-employee it could make all the difference.”

“Is your friend in trouble because of something she did?”

“No, it’s a he, and he’s in trouble maybe because of something the ex-employee did. Or, more likely, the ex-employee’s brother.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“The kind of trouble that makes you spend time in this joint,” Dixie said. “I’m sorry, I really wish I could tell you the whole story, but I can’t.”
Laura sighed. “I need to go to the bathroom,” she said. “Would you mind watching my office while I’m out? I’ll lock the door, and put the “back in ten minutes” sign on the door, but if you could keep an eye on the files, that would be great, because the key’s right there in my top drawer, right where anyone could get it.”

Dixie sighed with relief. “Thanks a million, Laura. It’s for a good cause—honest.”

Laura shook her head. “If it were anyone else, Dix …” She went out the office door, and Dixie heard it lock.

Dixie went to work on the files, looking over her shoulder even though she knew nobody could possibly be watching. Two minutes later, Dixie was silently cheering Lynn Nolan for thoroughly and completely filling out her emergency contact form. She wrote down some information, replaced the file, and was sitting innocently in a chair far from the files when Laura returned.

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Deputy Jim Price was at his desk, finishing the report from the latest Stoker/Gage incident. Another pair of men was out tracking down this James Torrelli character, who turned out to have a warrant out on him anyhow, for a variety of parking and traffic infractions. Price sighed—it seemed likely that this bozo was just a hired heavy, or maybe a friend of the brains behind the harassment, because there was no apparent connection between him and either Stoker or Gage.

The phone rang, just before Price was about to take a coffee break.

“L.A. County Sheriff’s Department, Deputy Price speaking.”

A female voice came on the line. “I have some information that might be helpful in a case you’re working on.”

“All right—your name, please?”

“No can do—this has to be anonymous. You can talk to me now, and have the information today, or I can put it in the mail, and you’ll have it tomorrow. Your choice. And, I’m calling from a pay phone, so don’t bother trying to trace this call.”

Price rolled his eyes. “Okay—go ahead.”

“This pertains to a case regarding the assault of a man named John Gage, and the threats that have been made to him and his partner, Mike Stoker. You should look for a man named Bill Staib. He’s the half brother of Lynn Nolan. His most recent address was 3634 South Marydale. His most recent place of work was at the County Fire Department in the motor pool. Can you repeat back what I just said?”

Price’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead as he repeated the information he’d written down. As soon as he’d finished speaking, he heard a click and the line went dead.

As much as he wanted to laugh his head off at this civilian’s cloak-and-dagger behavior that suggested too much time in front of the TV, he couldn’t, because she’d probably just busted his case wide open for him.

TBC
Chapter 11

Just after one thirty on Thursday afternoon, Mike knocked on the door of room 521 at Rampart.

“Come on in,” said an unfamiliar voice, just loudly enough to be heard through the door.

Mike entered the room quietly.

“Afternoon,” Johnny’s roommate said quietly. “You must be here for him,” he said, pointing over to the other side of the room, which was enclosed by the curtain. “He’s sleeping, I think. He’s pretty much been asleep the entire time he’s been here, lucky bastard. Anyhow, don’t mind me. Carry on. Oh—and his doctor came in a little while ago, but he told the nurse he didn’t want to wake Mr. Gage up quite yet, but that he’d come back soon.”

“Thanks,” Mike said. “Sorry to bug you.”

“No problem,” said the man. “Just wish I could sleep like him,” he said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, me too,” Mike said.

He parted the curtain and stepping into the enclosed area. Johnny’s one mobile eyelid was fluttering. Mike didn’t really want to wake him, so he just brushed a gentle kiss on his forehead and took the chair next to the bed, leaning his cane up against the nightstand. Seeing Johnny sleeping made Mike realize how exhausted he was himself. He took Johnny’s left hand in both his own, moved the chair as close to the bed as possible, and laid his head down on the mattress near Johnny’s chest. Twenty seconds later, he was fast asleep.

Fifteen minutes after that, the door to the room opened, and a physician in a white coat came in, nodding to the roommate, and going straight into Johnny’s enclosed area. Johnny was wide awake, holding a finger up to his lips in the “sh” sign and then pointing to Mike. “Gimme one minute, okay?” he whispered.

The doctor looked back and forth between Johnny and Mike, who was still sound asleep with his head on the mattress, nodded, and stepped out of the enclosed area.

Johnny ran his hand through Mike’s hair and down his neck.

“Mike,” he said quietly. “C’mon, Stoker. Gotta wake up.”

Mike slowly picked his head up off the mattress. “Hey,” he said. “Uh, sorry.”

“’s okay,” Johnny said. “Doc’s here, though. You pretty much awake?”

Mike rubbed his eyes, and blinked a few times. “Yeah.”
Johnny quickly and quietly kissed Mike’s hand, and then let it go. “C’mon in, Doc.”

The doctor pulled the curtain back, letting a great deal more light into the area. “Mike, this is Dr. Nash—he’s a kidney guy. Doc, Mike Stoker. Anything you have to say to me is for him, too,” using the same phrase Mike had always used during his time in the hospital.

The doctor nodded. “Pleased to meet you. All right, Mr. Gage—how are you feeling this afternoon?”

“A lot better—no lie, Doc. I cut back on the meds for the last two doses, and the ribs are still plenty sore, but I really think that kidney is feeling better. I mean, I can still tell exactly where it is an’ everything, but it’s more of a dull ache than outright pain like it was last night.”

“Good,” Nash nodded. “The labs are looking better, too. Less blood in the urine—quite a bit better, there. And there was nothing grossly abnormal in this morning’s kidney panel—those are the blood tests that look at kidney function. Last night, there were a couple values that were outside the reference range, but today, everything looks fine.”

“Does that mean I can get sprung any time soon?” Johnny asked, trying not to appear too eager.

“Twenty four hours,” said Nash, watching as Johnny’s face fell. “Sorry to disappoint you, but let me clarify. The amount of blood in your urine has gone down considerably, but there’s still significant bleeding. I want you on total bed rest, except for getting up to use the bathroom, for another twenty four hours. And as for getting home—do you live by yourself?”

“With me,” Mike volunteered.

“Okay, good,” said Nash. “If the bleeding has continued to subside, after twenty four hours, I’ll feel comfortable sending you home, with the understanding that you’ll continue to rest for at least three more days. And I mean seriously rest. You don’t have to stay in bed, but lie down on the couch or sit in a recliner. No housework, no cooking, no nothing. Mr. Stoker,” Nash continued, eyeing the cane, “is that going to be okay for you? I’m sorry, but I have to ask.”

“Sure, Doc. No problem. I can take care of that stuff.”

The doctor unhooked the chart from the foot of the bed, and made a few notes. “All right then—we’ll continue with the fluid restriction and the low protein diet until tomorrow morning, and then see how things progress during the day tomorrow. I’ll still need to see urine samples every four hours, and we’ll run another renal panel tonight. And you can taper the pain medication as you wish at this point—in fact, if you cut back on the opiates, you’ll be able to tell more easily if you’re doing something that will bother that kidney. How would you feel about trying to taper off the oxycodone by tonight?”

“Any time, Doc. Can’t stand being silly and foggy,” Johnny said, not for the first time that day.

“Fine. I’ll leave orders for just plain Tylenol for your next dose, which is in—” he consulted the chart — “two hours. Absolutely no aspirin, though—not for quite a while. We’ll discuss that further before you leave.”

“Yeah, I know—blood thinner,” Johnny said. “Might make the kidney bleed more, right?”

“Exactly,” replied Nash. “Before you leave, I’ll give you a list of foods to avoid for the next week or so as well.”

“And one last thing—I see in your history that you’re prone to developing pneumonia when you’re hospitalized. As of right now, have you had any coughing, or even a tickle? Any feeling of shortness
of breath?"

“Nope, none of that, except it hurts to breathe too deep, from the ribs,” Johnny replied.

“Yeah, but he’s still gotta try some deep breathing, though, right, Dr. Nash?” Mike asked. “I mean, I had a whole bunch of broken ribs too when I did the leg in a couple years ago,” he said to Dr. Nash, pointing at the cane. “and they’d come in and torture me every so often with these deep breathing and coughing exercises.”

“You’re absolutely correct. Let’s skip intentional coughing—that could jar the kidney excessively—but I want you to shoot for several really deep inhalations, a couple times an hour, if you can. It’ll hurt, but a lot less than the coughing that comes with pneumonia would.”

“Yeah, I know it,” said Johnny. “One time I had pneumonia I’d just had my spleen out, and man, that was a helluva thing.”

“All right,” said Dr. Nash. “So just so I know we’re clear, repeat back to me what’s happening.”

“Next dose of pain meds is plain Tylenol. Deep breathing a couple times an hour, even though it’ll hurt like a sonofabitch. Urine sample every four hours, kidney panel tonight. Low protein and fluids till the morning, then see how it goes. Maybe get sprung tomorrow afternoon.”

“And when you get home?”

“Rest. He does everything else for me except eat, sleep, piss, shit, breathe, and talk,” Johnny answered, pointing at Stoker.

“Interestingly put,” said Nash, laughing. “All right. I’ll see you in the morning, unless there’s a change.”

“Thanks, Doc,” said Mike.

“Thanks,” Johnny echoed, as Dr. Nash departed.

“Shit, babe,” Mike said. “Another day?”

“It’s okay. I figured this morning that’s what he’d say. Pee ain’t supposed to be that color. You okay at the DeSotos’ another night?”

“Yeah. They say hi, by the way. Roy’s got a shift today or he’d come by. Oh, and Mrs. Daniels said she might show up.”

“Oh, yeah—didn’t have a chance to say—she showed up this morning and brought cookies. I saved ‘em for you and other visitors—off limits for the likes of me. Didn’t tell her that, though.” Johnny pointed to the bedside table. “Right there in that white box. Go for it.”

“I’m not gonna eat ‘em in front of you,” Mike said indignantly.

“Suit yourself—maybe take ‘em with you then?”

“Okay—only ’cause I’m not letting anyone else eat ‘em in front of you either. That’s just cruel.” Johnny laughed, and winced.

“What’s so funny?” Mike complained.
“You. Goin’ all mother hen and protective.”

“Yeah, well don’t let it go to your head, Gage.”

“Not a chance, Stoker.” Johnny looked at his watch. “Hey, when do you hafta go back to work, anyhow?”

“Fifteen minutes or so. Nobody really cares when I come and go, but I’ve got some stuff to get done before I leave tonight, and I don’t wanna mess up Joanne’s dinner plans. But I’ll tell you what—I’ll come by after supper, too, okay?”

“Great.” Johnny looked over at his roommate, who either was, or was politely pretending to be, immersed in his book. He reached out and took Mike’s hand.

They both looked up, and Mike pulled his hand back, when they heard a quick knock just as the door opened. A nurse came in, followed by a dark, uniformed figure who was doing his best to blend in with the shadows.

“Mr. Gage? This officer insists on seeing you,” she said, looking disapprovingly back at Officer Vince Howard.

Johnny laughed. “It’s all right, nurse. He’s not here for an interrogation. C’mon in, Vince! Join the party.”

The nurse shook her head at the collection of people in the room, and left.

“Well, John Gage! It’s been a quite a while! And howdy—Mike Stoker, ain’t it? You were with 51s quite a while ago, if I recall.”

Mike nodded. “Hiya, Vince. Yeah, I moved up to 93s, then got busted up on a call and couldn’t go back on active duty. Now I’m arson investigation, so we’ll probably cross paths there someday.”

“And I don’t get down to 51’s territory too much anymore,” said Johnny, “so yeah, it’s been quite a while, huh? How’ve you been, Vince?”

“Can’t complain, Johnny. And yourself?”

Johnny shook his head ruefully. “Guess I’m entitled to complain some at the moment.”

“So I see, from the request from Deputy Price up in your neck of the woods. I mean, what the hell, Gage?”

“I tried to fight back, Vince—I really did—but—”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Who’s got it in for you?”

“Not totally sure,” Johnny said. “Someone in the department who doesn’t like me.”

“C’mon, Gage; why would someone not like you?”

Mike looked at Johnny, who shrugged. “Doesn’t like our kind,” Mike said quietly, taking Johnny’s hand.

“I … see,” said Vince. He looked at the two of them. “I guess I didn’t know about that. But I’ll tell you a story some time, about bein’ a black cop, when I first started out, in 1964. Won’t make you feel real good, but … well, I think it’s fair for me to say I’ve been somewhat in your shoes.”
“I bet you have,” Johnny said. “But maybe without the whispering and speculation.”

Vince chuckled. “I dare say that’s true. Anyhow, Johnny—I’m supposed to talk to you about this release form, here. Assuming we catch the guys who did this, we have to get a statement from your doc that you were seriously injured, in order to bring up felony charges.”

“I’m fine with that,” said Johnny. “Just as long as it’s just the records from this incident.”

“There’s a place on the form for the date of the incident. You fill that out, and we’ll only get the records related to the assault. And that’s it. Rampart’s real good about keepin’ people’s privacy.”

“All right. You got a pen?”

Vince handed him the form, and Johnny filled it out, consulting with Mike about a few details of timing. He handed the form to Vince, who checked it over and nodded.

“All right, Johnny. Thanks. I won’t keep you any longer. And I hope—I really hope—that my department is doin’ right by you.”

Johnny nodded. “Oh yeah. I mean, it’d be great if they actually caught these guys, but so far those assholes have been doing a pretty good job of keepin’ outta sight.”

“Well,” said Vince, “as my momma used to say, which my poppa didn’t like too much, some assholes do have a knack for stayin’ outta the light of day.”

Johnny laughed, and clutched at his ribs. “No makin’ me laugh, man. I got cracked ribs!”

“Sorry—missed that. Anyhow—you rest up. I’ll check up on you tomorrow, if you’re still gonna be in this joint.”

“Yeah,” Johnny sighed. “One more day.” He waved as Vince left.

“I guess I gotta go too, babe,” Mike said. “I’ll see ya tonight.” He stood up, looked over at the roommate, who was still politely holding his magazine high, and quickly kissed Johnny before he left, carrying the white box of Mrs. Daniels’ cookies.

“Sorry ‘bout all the racket,” Johnny said to his roommate. “John Gage, by the way.”

“Fred Hermann,” said his roommate. “And no problem. My last roommate was in some kind of biker gang, and they were all here at once. The one before that was ninety six, and kept thinking I was his doctor, and should be helping him. So a cop? Not a problem. Trust me.”

“What’s your line of work?” Johnny asked.

“Boring. I’m a building code inspector for the city of L.A.”

“Oh—you fall through a bad floor or something?”

“No,” Fred laughed. “Fell off a ladder at my own damned house. And what do you do?”

“I’m a Captain in the County Fire Department,” Johnny said. “And I didn’t get busted up at work either. Got laid out flat in an alley by two thugs.”

“I couldn’t help overhearing that. Sorry that happened. Sometimes I think we live in a civilized time, but then something will happen to remind me we don’t.”
“Oh, I dunno,” Johnny said. “Ninety nine percent of the time, ninety nine percent of people are just fine.”

“Yeah—but the other one percent?” Fred shook his head. “Anyhow—don’t worry about me. I’m not gonna give you or your partner a hard time, so just—well, don’t bring in a motorcycle gang, and we’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think you gotta worry about that one,” Johnny said.

Mike was thrilled to make it through the rest of the work day without any contact from either law enforcement or the harassers. He packed up his work, locked his office, and left the building in plenty of time to make it to the DeSotos’ for dinner with Joanne and the kids. He marveled at the short twenty-minute commute, and parked under a tree in front of the DeSotos’ house.

Chris and Jenny were playing with friends in the front yard, though Chris, at fourteen, would certainly object to the term “playing.”

“Hi Uncle Mike!” he said.

“He, kids,” he said. “Your mom home?”

“Yes—and she says dinner’s soon,” said Jenny. “Didja see Uncle Johnny today?”

“I sure did, Jenny. He’s feeling a lot better, but he still has to stay at the hospital one more night.”

“Why?” she asked, inquisitive as always.

“Do you know what kidneys are?” Mike said.

Jenny nodded. “They take bad stuff out of your blood, so you can pee it out.”

Her friend made a face at her. “Eew, gross, Jenn!”

“What?” said Jenny. “It’s true.”

“Do you know what a bruise is?”

“That’s an easy one—it’s when blood gets under your skin. Or, I guess, it could also be a bruise if it got out of your blood vessels someplace else where it’s not supposed to be, right?”

Mike was stumped by a twelve-year-old. “Let’s ask your dad about that tomorrow, but I guess that could be true. Anyhow—he bruised his kidney.”

Jenny thought about that. “Oh, man. Does that mean—”

Joanne poked her head out the door. “Dinner’s ready! Oh, hi, Mike.”

The kids said goodbye to their friends, and Mike, Jenny and Chris headed inside.

Jenny whispered to Mike on the way in. “Do you pee out blood when that happens?”

“Yeah. It’s really gross,” Mike whispered back. “And don’t tell Johnny we talked about that, or I’ll be in really big trouble.”
Mike and the kids pretended to fight over who got to wash their hands first at the sink in the small downstairs lavatory, and then headed to the table in a civilized fashion.

Joanne had made pork chops, a potato salad, summer squash, and some kind of cooked leafy greens, all in huge quantities.

“I wasn’t sure whether Johnny would be out by this afternoon, so I made a lot of everything,” Joanne said, when she saw the children’s eyes bugging out of their heads.

“He’s stuck till tomorrow afternoon—sorry, I should’ve called you to let you know as soon as I heard,” Mike apologized.

Joanne waved him off. “Don’t be ridiculous. You have enough to worry about. Oh, by the way—I assume the deputy who called here this morning after you left reached you okay at work?”

Mike nodded, but didn’t say anything further, as he wasn’t entirely sure how much Roy and Joanne had told the kids about what was going on.

“Well, kids, it’s pretty sad, actually. And kind of scary. But you kids are big enough that I think we can talk about this, okay? It’s kind of important to talk about it, actually.”

Jenny and Chris nodded. “Kim’s mom said I wasn’t allowed to talk about that at her house,” Jenny admitted.

“Some people who really don’t like it that Uncle Johnny and Uncle Mike live with each other have been doing some bad things. Some really bad things,” she continued, “and it’s pretty scary.”

“I’m scared,” Mike added, “and I’m a grown-up.”

“Dad says grown-ups get scared, just like kids do,” said Jenny. “Except about stuff that’s real. And Mom? You’re talking to us like we’re little kids.”

“Sorry, Jenn. I’ll try not to. But you said grown-ups get scared about things that are real, and unfortunately, it’s real that there are some bad people in the world,” said Joanne. “Some people are really angry at your uncles, and they’re trying to scare them and hurt them. And I wish I could tell you grown-ups don’t act like that, but they do.”

“Duh, Mom,” said Chris, around a mouthful of food. “I mean, kids know there’s crime, and wars, and stuff. And we don’t start that stuff. Grown-ups do.”
“Good point,” Joanne said drily. “And please don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Mom? I guess I thought Uncle Johnny was in the hospital because of getting hurt at work, like usual. But … did—did someone hurt …” Jenny’s eyes filled with tears.

“Yes, honey—I’m afraid so. Someone hurt Uncle Johnny on purpose.”

That statement caused even Chris to put his fork down for a moment.

Mike stepped in hastily. “I don’t think they meant to hurt him as bad as they did, Jenny. And he’s going to be just fine—I promise.”

“It doesn’t matter!” she shouted. “I know we’re not allowed to say we hate people, Mom, but I have to! I have to hate people who’d do a thing like that!”

Joanne looked at her daughter seriously. “Jenny,” she said, “I think, just this once, that it’s okay to say that.”

“And you know what I think?” Chris said boldly, not about to let his little sister top him. “I think it completely, totally sucks.”

“Don’t say that in front of your father,” Joanne reminded him, “but I’m right there with you, kiddo. It absolutely sucks.”

Jenny sniffled. “Can I be excused for a minute, please? I’ll come back and finish, I promise.”

“Sure, honey,” said Joanne.

“Can you pass the potatoes, please?” Chris asked Mike. Chris had demolished his entire meal, while everyone else had hardly started.

Mike wordlessly handed Chris the dish of potatoes, and watched in amusement as the teenager piled a mountain of potato salad next to a second helping of meat.

“What I want to know,” Chris asked, “is why the cops haven’t caught these guys yet.”

Joanne looked at Mike.

“We don’t actually know who’s doing these things, Chris. The men who hurt Johnny were wearing ski masks, and other than that, we haven’t been near them.”

“Can’t the cops take fingerprints, like on TV?”

Mike shook his head. “There hasn’t been anything to fingerprint, so far,” he said. “But maybe …”

“What, Mike?” Joanne asked.

Mike sighed. “The deputy who called this morning? He was calling to tell me what they did to the house last night.”

“What?” Joanne gasped.

“They threw a brick through the big window in the front, and dumped paint all over the front of the house. So maybe they left some prints. I don’t know. I’m sure the cops checked. But the good news is, one of our neighbors across the street got the make and model and enough of a license plate number that they tracked down the owner of the car. He’s nobody Johnny or I had ever heard of, and
he’s not in the—” Mike stopped suddenly. He decided not to drag the fire department into this in front of Chris, who had already stated his intention to follow in his father’s footsteps.

“I see,” Joanne said, clearly understanding.

“Not in the what?” Chris asked, predictably.

“You’re gonna have to let that one go, buddy,” said Joanne. “Sorry.”

Chris shrugged. “Whatever. I still say they suck.”

“I still say you’re right,” Joanne said, relieved Chris wasn’t pursuing the forbidden topic.

“I can help you guys clean up, this weekend, if you want,” Chris offered.

“Thanks, Chris. That’s really great. We’ll probably take you up on that, if it’s okay with your folks,” Mike said, wanting to give Chris the power to feel like he was helping, but realizing it wasn’t totally up to him.

Joanne nodded. “We’ll all come.”

“Thanks,” Mike said quietly, as Jenny returned to the table.

“We’ll all come where?” Jenny asked.

“To our house, this weekend, to help clean up a mess those guys made last night. Actually, since you’re halfway to being a doctor, you’d be the perfect person to watch out for Uncle Johnny. When he comes home, he’s not allowed to do anything, and probably won’t even want to, because he has some broken ribs, and those really, really hurt,” said Mike.

“Okay,” Jenny said quietly. “I’m good at that sort of thing.” She worked at her supper for a while, but her heart clearly wasn’t in it.

Mike felt pretty much the same way. The food was delicious—but the knots in his stomach weren’t letting him get much in.

“Uncle Mike? Are you going to the hospital tonight?” Jenny asked.

“I sure am,” Mike replied. “Johnny’s pretty down in the dumps, and I can’t say I blame him. It’s pretty boring being in the hospital. They’re always telling you to rest, but then they keep waking you up all night. And the medicine they give you for really bad pain makes your brain get kind of dumb.”

“Can I go with you?” Jenny asked.

Mike put his fork down. “I think Johnny will have to answer that. I’ll tell you what—if it’s okay with your mom, I’ll call him before I go, and see what he thinks. But honey, if he says no, it’s not because he doesn’t want to see you, okay? He’s always talking about how he misses you guys, and wishes he could see you more. But he’s really not feeling good, and a lot of people, when they’re really not feeling good, don’t really want other people to see them.”

“I guess I understand that,” Jenny said. “It’s like throwing up at school.”

“Pretty much,” Mike said. “Having visitors in the hospital if you’re not really in the mood, it can be pretty much like throwing up at school. Embarrassing and stressful, and you feel really sick.”

“If it’s okay with Johnny, we’ll all come—but only for a really short time, since it’s a school night,
and since he needs his rest,” Joanne said.

They tried to talk about other things for the rest of the meal, but found there really wasn’t anything else on anyone’s mind at the moment. After Chris couldn’t eat any more, and Jenny and Mike had given up on pretending to eat well, they all went to the kitchen and made short work of the dishes.

Mike went to the upstairs phone extension to call Johnny.

“Hey, babe. How are you doing?”

“Thirsty, sick of carbohydrates, tired, and wishing I could just go home. Other than that, just peachy.”

“How’d it go, with just taking the Tylenol?”

“So far not too bad—definitely feeling the ribs, but it’s manageable. We’ll see what happens when I try to get to sleep, though.”

“Maybe they could give you something to help with that.”

“I guess,” Johnny said. “I’ll ask. For sure. You comin’ over?”

“Of course,” Mike replied. “But, uh, Jenny wants to come, and Joanne said they’d all come for just a few minutes, but only if it was okay with you.”

Johnny sighed. “I don’t know, Mike. I look like crap. But—Jenn’s real worried, I’ll bet.”

“Yeah. I told her, though, that it was up to you. I’m pretty sure she gets it, from what she said, that sometimes people in the hospital aren’t gonna want visitors.”

“Why? What’d she say?”

“That it might be embarrassing—like throwing up at school.”

“She’s got that right. But yeah—I know Joanne will really only let them stay for a couple minutes—so why not. Just make sure they know I have this horrendous shiner, though—nothing else shows, but nothing says ‘just got beat up by thugs’ better’n a good ol’ black eye.”

“Chris’ll probably think it’s cool. And Jenny—well, she got really upset when she found out your injuries weren’t from the job, but about blood and guts? She’s unflappable, you know.”

“Yeah. Okay. Lemme just check with Fred—hang on.”

Johnny must’ve put his hand over the mouthpiece of the receiver, because all Mike could hear was muffled rumblings.

“He’s cool. See you soon?”

“Yep—half an hour or so. You need anything?”

“Other than for you to be here? Nothing I’m allowed to have, nope.”

“Mm. I don’t think I’d be helping if I gave you anything you’re not allowed to have. But I’ll show up soon.”

“Kay. Bye.”
On the other side of town, two officers from the L.A. County Sheriff’s department knocked on the door of an apartment, an arrest warrant in the hand of the senior officer.

A stockily-built man, about five feet eight inches in height, opened the door, leaving the chain on.

“Yeah?”

“James Torrelli?”

“Yeah? The fuck you want?”

“Open the door, please.”

He tried to stare them down, and sighed as he realized the futility of his gesture. He closed the door, took off the chain, and opened it fully.

“James Torrelli, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning. If you cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided for you at government expense. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?”

“Yeah, yeah. The fuck did I do this time?” he grunted.

“We have a warrant for your arrest for multiple outstanding traffic violations.”

“Big whoop,” he said.

“And, you are a suspect in some recent incidents, including felony vandalism, and felony aggravated assault and battery. We have a warrant to search your vehicle, a silver 1979 Honda Accord sedan, California plate number F93-4BJ, for evidence relating to those incidents. Do you have the keys?” The officer handed Torrelli the warrants.

Torrelli’s eyelid spasmed over and over, creating a mockery of winking as he scanned the warrants. “I’m sticking my hand in my pocket to give you the fucking keys, so don’t get all twitchy and shoot me.” He handed the warrants back to the officer, removed a ring of keys from his jeans pocket, and held them out between two fingers so one of the deputies could take them. The deputy removed the single Honda key.

“Is this the key to the silver Honda?”

“I fuckin’ said so, didn’t I?”

The officer didn’t respond.

“Yes. It. Is. The. Key.” Torrelli said, as if he were talking to a deaf, non-English-speaking two-year-old.

He put his hands out in front of him, wrists next to each other.

“William T. Staib,” he said. “And that’s all you’re gettin’ outta me. I want my fucking free lawyer, and not one that sucks.”

The two deputies marched Torrelli down the stairs and outside, closing and locking his apartment door and putting the rest of the keys back in his pocket.
“Great—cops are fags now, too?”

“I suggest you exercise your right to remain silent. Please get in the car, sir” said the first deputy, as he opened the rear door and helped Torrelli inside. He closed the car door, and handed the Honda key and the search warrant to a man in plain clothes. “Here ya go, Detective. I hope to hell you find whatever you’re lookin’ for in that car, ’cause this is one major asshole. Did you catch the name he said just now?”

“I did,” replied the detective. “We already had that name, but the fact that he said it is certainly incriminating to both of them.”

“Thought so,” the deputy said smugly. “Fucking dumb asshole, too.”

The deputies drove off, with their evening’s prize in the back seat.

Back at the car, the detective struck pay dirt. Inside the vehicle, he found a paint can lid lifter—the kind hardware stores give out for free—wedged in the passenger’s-side front seat. The tip had a small quantity of hot pink enamel paint on it. The store’s name and phone number were printed on the handle. The detective smiled, and dropped the item in an evidence bag.

~!~!~!~!~

Captain Hank Stanley was engaged in his usual after-dinner routine of finishing paperwork from the daytime part of the shift when the phone on his desk rang.

“L.A. County Fire Department, Station 51, Captain Stanley speaking.”

“Howdy, Hank. Len Sterling here.”

“Len! Everything okay?” After Sterling’s four-a.m. call to inform Hank of Mike’s near-fatal accident eighteen months ago, Len’s voice was one that Hank couldn’t hear on the phone without a sense of alarm.

“With me, sure. With our boys Gage and Stoker, not exactly.”

“Yeah, I was over there the other day. They’re having a rough time of it. It’s, well, appalling, that it seems like it’s someone in the department that’s been doing all this.”

Len paused for long enough that Hank became concerned again. “Hank, when was the last time you talked to either of them?”

Heart thumping, Hank replied, “Sunday afternoon.”

Sterling sighed, and filled Hank in on the things he’d missed, topping it off with Johnny’s assault and hospitalization. Though the paramedics had informed him that you can’t actually feel your own blood pressure, Hank didn’t believe that for a second. His head filled with blood, and for a minute he imagined he saw red around the edges of his vision. He assured Len that yes, he would be happy to take a shift or two over the next couple of weeks, and that he’d work the timing out with his wife. He replaced the receiver, picked it up again, and dialed the switchboard at Rampart.

“Patient phone for John Gage, please.”

“One moment, please.”

A pause, a ring, and another ring.
“Hello?”

“John? It’s Hank Stanley.”

“Oh hey, Cap. I guess you heard about the latest Gage damage, huh.”

“I did. How are you doing?”

“Not too bad, all things considered. I mean, a lot better than some of the times I’ve been here.”

“That’s good, I guess. Listen, I’m gonna sub in on a couple of your shifts, all right? I’ll work it out with Jane, but count on me for two shifts, okay pal?”

“Thanks, Cap. I really appreciate it. I talked to Livingston late this afternoon, and man, he was none too happy.”

“Well, like I said before, he’s an ass. What else can I do to help out?”

Hank heard Johnny’s heavy sigh. “You know anybody who’s got sandblasting equipment lying around?”

Cap knitted his brows together. “Sandblasting?”

“Yeah. Here’s the latest headline: Stoker/Gage residence vandalized. Pink paint thrown on house, brick through window. Fire department assholes suspected. And the bitch of it is,” Johnny added, returning to his regular voice, “it’s a brick house, so we can’t just paint it. We gotta blast it off.”

“Geez. But you know,” Cap said slowly, “I might just be able to rustle something up for you along those lines. It’s a long-shot, to say the least, but I’ll let you know soon.”

“Seriously? I was kind of kidding. I mean, where would you find sandblasting equipment? We were planning on trying to rent it, but I don’t even know where to start looking.”

“Like I said, it’s a real long-shot,” Hank said vaguely. “But I’ll let you know.” He changed the subject. “How long are they keeping you locked up?”

“Might get out tomorrow afternoon, if things are looking better. It’s the same kidney by where my spleen used to be, so they’re being extra careful, ‘cause they said it’s already taken some damage before.”

“Mike doing all right?”

Johnny paused to consider that. “Not so sure, Cap. He’s pretty stressed out by all this. I’m trying to just sit back and let him, you know, take care of me and worry about me and stuff, ‘cause that’s what he wants to do.”

Hank laughed. “So, are you any good at letting him do that?”

“Not as bad as I thought I’d be, actually,” Johnny admitted. “Makes the nurses happy too. I guess I coulda cooperated a little better in my past visits to this establishment, and maybe things woulda gone a little smoother.”

“No, you couldn’t have,” Cap said, laughing slightly.

“Huh? Well why not?”
“Because I’m pretty sure you didn’t have that kind of behavior in you until, say, about maybe two and a half years ago.”

“Two and half years ago? I don’t get it.”

“Think about it, pal. You’ll figure it out. On that note—you rest up, and knock their socks off with your stellar cooperation, all right?”

“You bet, Cap. Thanks a lot. For everything.”

Cap once again replaced the receiver, much more gently this time. He smiled as he finished the last run report on his desk, having enjoyed his conversation with Gage despite the situation that prompted it. He took apart the triplicate form, and put the various copies where they needed to go, and then poked his head out into the apparatus bay.

“Lopez? You out here?”

Lopez appeared from the other side of the engine, holding a red-tipped touch-up paintbrush. “Right here, Cap. What’s up?”

“Give that brush to Jackson and come on in my office for a sec, will ya?”

Marco did as he was asked, and entered the office.

“Have a seat,” said Cap. “I have kind of an odd question for you. I seem to remember you saying something a couple months ago about your brother picking up some sandblasting equipment to start a business or something. Is that right?”

“Sure, Cap,” said Marco. “He’s still just getting started with the blasting business, but it’s picking up a bit. Why?”

“Does he ever rent it out?”

“I don’t know—probably he would, on the weekends. He doesn’t get a lot of business when people are home. People don’t wanna be home when someone’s sandblasting their house. How come?”

“I might just have a weekend customer for him.”

“Really? Who? I mean, why?”

Cap sat forward in his chair, and folded his hands in front of him on his desk. “Let me tell you a story about some old friends of ours, Lopez,” he began.

TBC
Chapter 12.

Friday morning, 0800.

Detective Tom DeVito pulled his unmarked car into the back parking lot of the L.A. County Fire Department Headquarters building. He took one last swig of his fourth cup of coffee for the morning—and tenth or eleventh since they’d picked Torrelli up the previous night. He flicked the butt of his cigarette into the cold remains of the swill, and folded the sun visor down to look in the mirror.

His eyes were bloodshot, but there was nothing to be done about that. But he was glad he’d looked—the five-o’clock shadow was, well, actually a day’s growth of beard at this point. He yanked the glove compartment open, pulled out the battery-powered electric shaver his wife had given him after the last time he showed up at church after an all-nighter at the station, and did what he could. He put the visor back up, threw the shaver back in the glove compartment, and headed to the set of tall garage doors at the back of the building.

One of the bays was open, so he strode in. He prided himself on not looking out of place no matter where he barged in, but it was immediately obvious that he wasn’t wearing fire department blues. He looked around with interest—the bay was fully occupied by firefighting equipment. The near bay contained a fire truck whose cab was tipped up and forwards, exposing the engine beneath it. The next bay housed a huge red truck with an articulating boom. A man on a ladder appeared to be working on one of the joints of the boom. In a third bay, a Dodge utility vehicle was having its front bumper refitted.

“Can I help you, Mister?” asked a fiftyish fellow, who was wearing the blues that proved he belonged where he was.

DeVito showed his gold badge. “Detective Tom DeVito, County Sheriff’s department. I need to talk to whoever’s in charge here.”

“Here, like HQ? Or here, like the shop?”

“The shop, for now.”

“Hang on. Not sure if the boss is in yet. Lemme check.” The man strode to the back of the bay. “Charley?” he bellowed.

“What?” a voice replied. The source of the voice wasn’t immediately obvious.

“Where are you, boss? Cops wanna talk to you.”

A wiry, graying man hopped down from the engine with the tipped-up cab. “Again? All right. Lemme clean up.”
“No need,” said DeVito. He showed his badge again. “Detective DeVito, L.A. County. Is there someplace we can talk? Your office, maybe?”

“Sure,” chuckled Charley. “Right this way. Charley Vicks, by the way—I run this shop.”

Charley led DeVito to the huge Snorkel truck. He opened the door to the cab, and pointed inside. “Step into my office.”

DeVito grabbed the hand-hold at the edge of the door and hoisted himself into the compartment. The cab appeared immaculately clean, but reeked of soot. DeVito sat down on one of the seats, which had a yellow air tank built into its back. Charley hopped up nimbly, and slammed the cab’s door closed. “This about that car someone took without authorization?” he asked.

“No precisely,” said DeVito, “though probably related. I need to ask you about one of your employees—William Staib.”

“Him? He’s on vacation. Since the end of last week. I ain’t seen him. Why?” Charley’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What’d he do?”

“He’s a suspect in a series of incidents, ranging from harassment to felony vandalism and aggravated assault and battery.”

“Whoa, whoa,” said Charley, waving both hands in front of him. “I don’t know nothin’ about any of that kind of stuff.”

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about Mr. Staib, if you don’t mind.”

Charley shook his head. “I dunno—I don’t think I oughta be giving out any personal information. I think maybe we oughta go in to HQ, and maybe have this conversation with my boss. He’s the Deputy Chief for Special Services.”

“That’s fine,” DeVito said. “Let’s go.”

Charley opened the door of the cab, and hopped out like a mountain goat. DeVito climbed down more cautiously, and followed Charley to the back of the bay.

“Hey Joey?” Charley shouted.

The first man that DeVito had approached looked up from what he was doing. “Yeah, Boss?”

“I gotta go inside the house for a while. You hold down the fort here, all right?”

“Sure.”

DeVito stood by patiently as Charley cleaned the black grease off his hands at a sink in the back of the shop, and then followed Charley into the air-conditioned HQ building. As soon as he got into the fresher air of the building, he could tell he smelled of soot, after spending only a minute inside the cab of the truck. He didn’t figure anyone ‘inside the house,’ as Charley had put it, would even notice, nor care if they did notice. He followed Charley up a flight of stairs, and down a corridor to an office.

The door was labeled “Special Services Division.”

Charley opened the door for DeVito, and they entered the suite.

“Hey, Tina,” Charley said to the woman at the desk. “Kinda need the chief, pretty much now.”
“He’s in a meeting,” Tina said.

“Yeah, well, unless it’s with God, I think you oughta call him. This here’s a detective from the sheriff’s office, and he’s asking me some questions about one of my guys.”

“Oh. Okay,” she said. She picked up her intercom, and buzzed into the office behind her. “Chief? I’m really sorry to interrupt, but Charley’s here with a detective, and they need to talk to you right away.”

“What? All right. Give me one minute. I’ll send Pete out, and then you can send them on back.”

“Have a seat,” Tina said, pointing to some chairs.

After a minute or two, a tall man in a suit emerged from the office, and held the door open so Charley and DeVito could go in.

DeVito displayed his badge and introduced himself again.

“Deputy Chief Mark Fields,” replied the man behind the desk. “What can we do for you, Detective?”

“One of your employees in Fleet Services is suspected of some serious crimes.” DeVito repeated the list that he’d already told Charley.

“If I might ask, what does any of this have to do with the Fire Department? I mean, sure, you can look for the guy here, since he works here, but why would Charley be able to tell you anything useful?” Fields asked.

“The victims of the crimes are both members of the department. The harassing letters and phone calls mentioned the department. The victims were both threatened with violence if they did not leave their respective positions within the department, and now a member of the Fire Department is hospitalized as the result of an assault in which Mr. Staib is a primary suspect. The victim stated that one of his attackers mentioned the demand to leave his position during the assault.”

Fields sat back in his chair, fingers steepled. “Well.” He looked back and forth between Charley and DeVito. “I don’t suppose you have a court order that says I need to talk to you, do you?”

“I could get one, by tonight,” DeVito said truthfully. “We have another suspect in custody, and eyewitness information that places that suspect at one of the scenes. The suspect in custody has named Mr. Staib as a person of interest, as has another source. We’ve been unable to locate Mr. Staib, and are concerned that the violence—which I would like to point out has been against two members of this department—may continue unless he’s apprehended.”

“All right,” Fields said slowly. “Charley, you can answer his questions, here and now, on my authority. But Detective, I’m quite disturbed by the implication that one of our employees is attempting to coerce other employees into quitting their jobs.”

“If I understand the organization of the County Fire Department, neither of the victims is under your command. One would be under the Operations division, and the other under Prevention.”

“I see—so what you’re saying is that the two victims and the suspect are in three separate divisions, so the lowest common denominator is the Fire Chief himself? So this is going to have to go all the way to the top, it seems,” Fields said, frowning.

“Not necessarily—the victims didn’t do anything illegal, and have been cooperating with our office,
so I’d just as soon leave them out of it for the time being,” DeVito said neutrally. “All I need now is some information about Staib.”

Fields nodded. “Go ahead. If you don’t mind, I’d like to record this conversation.” He indicated a tape recorder on his desk.

“Fine by me. If I had the equipment, I’d do the same,” said DeVito, “but for now I’m stuck with this.” He pulled out his notebook, as Fields placed a tape into the recorder and turned it on.

DeVito stated the date, time, location, and people present, for the benefit of Fields’ tape recording.

“Mr. Vicks,” DeVito asked, “did Mr. Staib have permission to use a department car, vehicle ID number 26, on Monday of this week?”

“No, he did not,” replied Charley. “Chief, that’s the car I told you the cops were asking about before. That vehicle was not signed out that day, and there was a discrepancy of over eighty miles on the odometer the next time it was checked out. Someone took it without permission, and we don’t know who.”

“Would Mr. Staib have access to that vehicle, such that he could potentially use it without permission?”

“Yes, he would. His job responsibilities include maintenance of fleet cars, and he has a key to the lock box containing keys to those cars. We don’t hold people’s keys when they go on vacation, but I have half a mind to start doing that. Plenty of ‘em at the bottoms of lakes, and now this kind of shenanigans.”

“When was the last time you saw Mr. Staib?” DeVito asked.

“Thursday of last week. He started vacation on Friday morning, and he’s supposed to be off all this week.”

DeVito went on to ask a variety of questions about Staib, his work, and his personal habits at work. Charley hesitated once, when DeVito asked him to supply names of people Staib was friendly with at work, but Fields nodded his permission. None of the names meant anything to DeVito, but he wrote them down anyhow.

“Does the name James Torrelli mean anything to you?” DeVito asked.

“Oh yeah,” Charley said emphatically. “I canned his ass about a year ago.”

“What for?” DeVito inquired.

Charley looked at Fields again, who nodded.

“He got into too many fights on the job. I mean, men will be men, right? But this guy was nothin’ but trouble, from day one. Lousy mechanic, too.”

“Was he a friend of Staib’s?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah, he was.”

“Anything else you have to say about Staib?” DeVito asked, finally. “Anything you can think of that might be relevant, no matter how odd it seems?”

“Here’s one thing that always bugged me,” Charley said. “Most of the guys in the shop—they’ve got
Charley was frowning. DeVito picked up on it, and prodded him a bit. “Is there something else, Mr. Vicks?”

“Yeah, I guess. It’s kinda weird, and it’s from like, I dunno, two, maybe three years ago. I don’t really see what it could have to do with anything, but it’s just so freaky I should probably mention it.”

“Go on,” DeVito said.

“So like I said, it’s a couple years ago, right? But there was this girl—maybe Linda, or Lynn, something like that?—who started showing up at the shop to talk to Staib. She started to come around a lot, and started really buggin’ a coupla the guys. I finally told Staib to get rid of her. He said she was his step sister, or half sister, I forget, and that she just lost her job and was a little nutso. I said no shit, ‘cause she was really wacko, but that he still needed to get her the hell out of my shop. Then the next day, he took off sick, just for the one day, and she never showed up at the shop again.”

Charley watched DeVito scrawling in his notebook, and shook his head. “Like I said, I don’t see what that has to do with anything, but you said to say anything I could think of, even if it was odd.”

“It’s odd, all right, but fits with the rest of the story.” He closed his notebook, and cleared his throat. “Chief, Mr. Vicks—thank you for your cooperation. If and when Mr. Staib returns here, I would appreciate being informed immediately.” He handed a card to each of the men. “Under no circumstances should you try to apprehend him. Just inform me, or whoever you reach at this number, right away.”

“Will do, Detective,” said Charley.

“Are you all done with Mr. Vicks?” asked Fields.

DeVito nodded.

“All right, Charley—you can go back to the shop. Please don’t discuss this conversation with anyone else,” said Fields.

“Sure, Chief,” said Charley, heading out the door.

“Detective,” said Fields, “I understand about protecting the identity of innocent victims, but I would appreciate if you or someone from your office would communicate with the Fire Chief about these incidents. I have to say, I really don’t like what I’m hearing.”

“I’d be happy to talk to him,” said DeVito, “but I’m not at liberty to discuss the victims. You have to understand, this is a sensitive situation. I will tell you, if it helps at all, that it appears Mr. Staib has a personal grudge against one of the victims, and the other by association.”

Fields sighed. “It doesn’t help, really. Half of me appreciates that our men don’t go running around crying about their personal problems at work, but this whole thing seems a little … extreme.” He frowned at DeVito. “And you’re sure that the victims aren’t involved in anything shady, or anything like that?”
“There’s absolutely no reason to suspect them of any crimes,” DeVito repeated. “If they’re not doing their jobs adequately within the department, that would surely come to the attention of their supervisors.”

“It surely would,” Fields replied drily.

“Thank you for your time,” DeVito said, standing up. “I’ll make an appointment to talk with Chief Bragdon.”

“Please do,” said Fields. “In fact, I’ll let his secretary know you’re coming. Because this whole thing,” he complained, “sounds like something that could come down on the department like a ton of bricks.” He watched DeVito leave, disturbed that DeVito didn’t offer reassurances to the contrary.

Five floors above Fields’ office, Mike Stoker was at his desk, head resting in folded arms. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep—hadn’t even meant to put his head down. But a week of sleep that was poor in both quantity and quality had caught up with him in force, and he was out like a light.

Wes Harris knocked lightly on the partly open door as he pushed it open and entered the office. He stopped short at the sight of Stoker sprawled over his desk, navy blue tie spread out across his desk from under his folded arms. “Mike?” he said, and got no reaction. “Stoker!” he said, louder. Still no reaction. Absurdly, Harris was reminded of a prank he’d played on a substitute teacher in seventh grade—the man had fallen asleep at the desk, and the students had stapled his necktie to the wooden desk, and then simultaneously dropped their textbooks on the floor to wake him. He briefly considered reaching for the stapler, but was reminded by the cane leaning against the desk that Stoker had had a rough week, what with having to use the cane again, and probably didn’t need a prank.

The meeting they were supposed to attend would start in two minutes. It wasn’t his problem if Stoker was gonna be a lazy ass, and he was half tempted to just let him miss the meeting and deal with the fallout. But no, Harris concluded, the case they were working on was important, and the trial was going to start next week. So he decided to be a pal and wake the guy up.

Harris tried one more time to wake Stoker up without having to shake him. “Stoker!” he said again. He shook his head. “Unbelievable,” he muttered. He was about to reach over the desk and shake Mike by the shoulder, when a better idea occurred to him.

He went back to the door, took it by the inside handle, and slammed it shut.

Mike awoke with a shout that verged on a shriek. He flew out of his chair, and grabbed the first thing he could reach on his desk, holding it out in front of him like a weapon. His hands shook as he wielded the stapler menacingly.

Harris had already taken three steps back from the desk.

“Holy shit, Stoker! What the fuck is the matter with you? Put that thing down!”

Mike stared at Harris, and slowly lowered the stapler. His hands were shaking, and his eyes were darting back and forth. He was breathing like he’d just run a mile, and his face was pale. He toppled back into his chair, still breathing hard.

“What the fuck?” Harris repeated. “You okay, man?”

“Yes,” Mike said shakily. “No,” he amended immediately, wiping sweat from his brow. “I don’t know,” he concluded.
“Lemme help you out there,” Harris said. “I think ‘no’ was your most believable answer.” His initial annoyance with Stoker’s inconvenient nap had changed to mild concern, deepening as Mike’s complexion changed from pale and sweaty to gray and sweaty. “You look like death warmed over. And the bad news is, our staff meeting is in five seconds.”

“Oh, shit,” Mike groaned, putting his forehead on the desk. “I’ll be there. You go on ahead—I just need a minute to—”

“To conk out on your desk again?” Harris said. “Nuh uh. C’mon.” He went to the side of the desk, and picked up Mike’s cane from where it had fallen when Mike leapt up a moment ago. “There’ll be coffee at the meeting, and you look like you need about a gallon.”

Mike tried to force himself to slow his breathing, which didn’t work. His heart was still racing. But he stood up, if a little shakily, and took the cane from Harris. He picked a folder up off his desk, stuck a pen in his shirt pocket, and stood up. “Thanks,” he said to Harris. “Seriously. It would’ve been bad to miss the meeting.”

“Yeah, well, you’re welcome,” said Harris, as they walked down the hall. “You oughta go see a doctor, though, if you ask me. Cause you look like crap.”

“Just so happens I have an appointment at the hospital over my lunch hour,” Mike said, remembering his arrangement to get his stitches out in conjunction with an afternoon visit with Johnny.

“Good thing,” said Harris. “I still say you look sick, and you’ve been jumpy as a greyhound all week. Plus, you’re limping worse than ever, even with the cane. What’s the matter, anyhow?”

“What’s the matter?” Mike laughed, with a maniacal tinge to the sound, and Harris took a step sideways. “Oh, don’t even get me started,” Mike said, as they entered the conference room at the other end of the sixth floor.

Mike went straight for the coffee, pouring himself a large styrofoam cup full of the black brew. He took his usual spot at a corner of the conference table. He stayed alert and was able to pay attention to the meeting, and was supremely relieved that his part in this particular case was minor. Near the end of the time period set aside for the meeting, though, Rhodes mentioned his name.

“Stoker,” said Rhodes. “Your report was great. Any questions there, from anyone?”

Everyone at the table shook their heads.

“Good. Your piece on this case is done, then. So what I need from you now, is to be the wrap-up guy for a couple of other reports that need to get put together. It shouldn’t be a big deal, but it needs to get done and sent to the typing pool so the girl who’s there on Saturdays will have it by the morning. You’ll work with Harris, Bruneau, and Panella, to put their stuff together with yours into a single brief we can hand to the DA on Monday. You okay with that?”

Mike hesitated, not entirely sure what to say. His heart sank, and the knots in his stomach tightened at the idea of a new deadline, right in the middle of everything. Surely Roy or Joanne could pick Johnny up, assuming they even let him out tonight. And with enough caffeine, he’d make it through. Somehow.

“Mike?” Rhodes repeated.

“Uh, yeah. I can do that. It’s just, I have a doctor’s appointment this afternoon, for the complications with the leg, but I’ll just stay late if I need to in order to finish up.”
“Good man,” Rhodes said. “All right, gentlemen, let’s get back to it,” he concluded, signaling the end of the meeting. Harris followed Rhodes out of the room, but flicked his eyes back towards Mike just once,

Mike sat at the conference table and finished his coffee. It was going to be a damned long day, and there wasn’t a thing he could do about it, except push his way through, the way he would have at a fire, years before. That’s it, he thought. Treat it like a fire. It’s still a fire—just one that happened a while ago—and you’re still fighting it, but with physical evidence and witness testimony, instead of muscle and water.

Cheered somewhat by the realization that he actually had a real task to do—something meaningful—he hauled himself out of his chair, and made his way back to his office. He got out his copies of the drafts of the reports from Harris, Bruneau, and Panella, and started reading. Harris’s report on witness testimony was coherent and reasonably written. Bruneau’s report about the insurance company’s concerns about the fire was impeccable in grammar and mechanics, but was low on substance, and about four times as long as it needed to be.

Mike shook his head as he read and re-read Panella’s draft. The report on the suspect’s statements to the arson investigators was extremely difficult to read, and the utter lack of punctuation, aside from periods, made it impossible to determine what were direct quotes and what was paraphrasing. He’d definitely have to get to Panella first, to sort out which were quotes and which were not. For the umpteenth time since beginning this part of his career, Mike silently thanked his English-teacher mother for drumming good writing skills into his skull from an early age. He went down the hall to make copies of each report, and got to work.

Two hours later, with red pen, scissors, tape, and white-out, he at least had something to start with. He’d given Panella the task of adding quotation marks where they were needed to a copy of his report, and had told him he needed the revision by four p.m. He locked his office door, and started down the hallway. He stopped, suddenly thinking of the mess his house was in, and returned to his office. He made a photocopy of everything he’d done so far, and left it in his own mailbox in the mailroom before he left, just as a backup. He hated feeling so suspicious and paranoid, but as Deputy Price had said, it was necessary. And, Mike reflected, if someone actually is out to get you, it’s not paranoia—it’s reality.

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Mike went straight in to the ER, just on time for his appointment with Dr. Early. A nurse showed him into a treatment room, and Mike sat back on the exam table and closed his eyes—just for a second, he promised himself.

“Mike?” a quiet voice said, what seemed like hours later.

“Mm?” he replied, having no idea who he was replying to.

“Can you open your eyes? Are you awake?”

Mike’s eyes snapped open, and he sat up suddenly. “Uh, sorry. Hi, Dr. Early.”

“Betty said you were here, and that you didn’t look very well. I have to agree with her. Are you feeling okay?”

Mike took inventory. He was exhausted, and now that he thought about it, he felt sick as well. He’d been feeling hot, then cold, then hot again, but had chalked it up to exhaustion and too much caffeine.
“Well, Doc, now that I think about it, I guess I’m not feeling all that great. I think I’m just tired, though.”

“Let’s see about that,” said Early. He stuck a thermometer under Mike’s tongue, and got a set of vitals while the mercury rose. He took the thermometer out after a suitable period of time, and frowned at it.

“Mike, your pulse and blood pressure are both elevated by quite a bit, and you’re running a fever of nearly a hundred and one degrees. Do you have any other symptoms?”

“I haven’t slept more than four hours any night in the last week, for one thing. And, come to think of it, my knee doesn’t feel great. Not my knee, but, you know, where that screw got loose last weekend.”

“Have you been keeping up with the antibiotics?” Dr. Early asked.

Everything lurched sideways briefly, and Mike closed his eyes against the sudden dizziness. He knew he’d been forgetting something important.

“No,” he admitted. “To tell the truth, I completely forgot all about them, what with everything that’s been going on,” he said shakily.

“Mike, it certainly looks like you have some kind of infection,” Dr. Early said neutrally. “Let’s get a shot of penicillin into you, first of all,” he said, as he reached into a cabinet and began loading a syringe. “Drop your trousers, please, and I promise I’ll make it quick, and then I’ll get you some Tylenol for the fever.”

Mike sighed, and bowed to the inevitable. True to his word, Dr. Early delivered the shot with no fuss and minimal pain, and Mike buckled up again. Dr. Early then handed Mike two Tylenol tablets and a cup of water, and Mike wordlessly took the medication and tossed the cup in the trash.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Mike,” said Dr. Early, motioning to one of the chairs next to the exam table.

Mike cooperated, and Early took the other chair.

“I don’t know you well,” Dr. Early said, “but it doesn’t seem like you to simply not take antibiotics that were prescribed to you. You said you forgot all about them, which also doesn’t seem like you, and you mentioned that a lot has been going on. Now, I hear through the grapevine that Johnny’s upstairs, but I don’t know the specifics. And, when you were here on Sunday, you said someone’s been giving you some trouble. Is there anything you want to talk about?”

Mike looked at Dr. Early, and remembered Johnny’s description of him as having the same kind of calmness as Len Sterling. He saw Joe Early’s kind face, and recalled the total lack of judgment he’d felt from the man when he was his patient on Sunday, and something within Mike just gave way. He started talking, beginning with the message on his door a week ago. He went on, and on, crossing back and forth from talking about the harassment, vandalism and violence, to talking about how resentful he was that he had to keep his pictures of Johnny in a drawer instead of on his desk, to his utter rage towards the unknown people who had hurt Johnny. He covered it all, and made no bones about expressing the humiliation that the harassers had desired and achieved. He talked until he became hoarse, and Dr. Early brought him another cup of water. He drank the water, and kept talking, and talking.

“And I feel like total crap, and I have to go back to work and stay late, because there’s no choice—I
have to get that report done. And I don’t even know how I’m getting Johnny home, or where the hell we’re even going, since it’s sure as shit not gonna be our house. And I have to be strong for him, because it’s my turn, and he’s actually letting me take care of him, Doc—he’s letting me, do you have any idea how hard that is for him?—but I’m such a wreck right now I don’t even know if I can take care of him. And I don’t even know how I’m going to make it through the rest of the day, let alone whatever else is coming.”

And, just like that, he was done. There was nothing left to say—it had all poured out of him, onto Dr. Early. Who had listened intently to every word, and who had not interrupted him, not even once, not even to tell him not to be so hard on himself.

“Mike, I’m not going to tell you what to do,” Dr. Early said finally.

“Jesus, Doc, I wish you would, please,” Mike pleaded. “Because I’m at the end of my rope. No, scratch that. I fell off the end of my rope, sometime around yesterday after lunch, and now I’m just plummeting, and I don’t even know where the bottom is. All I know is that at the bottom? There’s not mattresses, or haystacks, or trampolines—it’s sure to be broken glass, or shit, or maybe cactuses. Horse cripplers,” he concluded.

“All right—what I really mean,” Early said calmly, “is that I’m happy to give you some advice, and it’s up to you whether or not you choose to take it.”

“Lay it on me, Doc. I’m begging you.”

“First, you said you were about to go see Johnny. Do that—for as long or as short a time as you need. Then, I’d like you to come back down here. I have a couch in my office, and I think you should sleep for an hour or so. I’ll wake you up—I promise—and you can go back to your office and finish up your report.”

Mike stared at him. “You’re not going to tell me I should just go home, and that I shouldn’t try to finish that report?”

“You wouldn’t take that advice anyhow, would you?”

“No,” Mike admitted. “I have to get it done. There’s just no choice.”

“I understand that, you see,” Early said mildly. “So I’m trying to help you find a way to get through what you’re going to put yourself through anyhow.”

“Oh.”

“And as for Johnny—you mentioned you’ve been staying with the DeSotos. Do you think one of them could pick him up this afternoon?”

“I’d thought about that. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Why don’t we call them right now?” Dr. Early said. He stood up, and took the handset off the phone on the wall. “What’s the number?”

Mike pulled out his wallet, and rattled off the number from a sheet of paper he’d tucked in with some receipts. Early pressed the numbers on the phone’s keypad, and stretched the phone cord across the room, handing the receiver to Mike.

“Hello?”
“Roy? It’s Mike Stoker. Listen—this is ridiculous, and I feel awful, but I just got a new deadline put on me at work, and I’m supposed to pick Johnny up later, and I can’t, and I don’t even know if they’re letting him out tonight or not, and I feel terrible even asking, but—”

Roy interrupted him gently. “Mike, relax. I can pick him up, all right? Have you talked to him? They’re letting him out at four, and he wasn’t sure if you’d be done at work by then, so it’s all arranged. I’ll pick him up, and take him to our house, and you can come over whenever you’re done at work.”

Mike let out a huge breath, and sat up a little straighter. “Thanks, Roy. Thanks a lot. I’m just kind of—well, thanks.”

“Are you okay? You sound kind of frazzled.”

“I’ll make it,” said Mike. “I’m running on too little sleep and too much caffeine and adrenaline. Frazzled doesn’t even begin to cover it, but I’ll make it. And don’t tell Johnny, all right? I’m about to go see him, and—aw, hell, he’ll figure it out anyhow, so forget it. Just—well, thanks, okay? I don’t know what time I’ll show up, but I’ll show up. Probably late. So people shouldn’t wait up.”

“No problem,” said Roy. “There’s a jade plant on the front steps—I’ll leave a key underneath it for you.”

“I don’t even know what a jade plant is,” Mike said. “Is it one of those juicy ones, or one of those leafy ones? Or flowers, or what? As long as it’s not a cactus, because I can’t stand the—”

Roy interrupted again. “It’s the only plant on the porch. And it’s not a cactus. It’s perfectly harmless. Take your time—show up whenever you can. And don’t worry, all right? Joanne and I are pretty good at taking care of Gage, even if we’re a little out of practice.”

“Thanks, Roy. Thanks a million. See you later—well, probably tomorrow.”

Mike stood up, hung up the phone, and felt a little lighter than before.

“Sounds like it’s all taken care of,” said Dr. Early. “Now, hop back up on that table, and roll your pants leg up, and we’ll see about those stitches.”

“Stitches?” Mike had completely forgotten about the actual reason for his visit to Dr. Early. “Oh. Sure.”

Dr. Early looked at the stitches, and went to the cabinet for supplies. “I’m just going to clean around the stitches with some Betadine, and then I’ll snip them out. You’ll feel a little sting when each stitch pulls through, but that’s all—I promise.”

“Okay,” said Mike. “I’m not gonna look, though.”

“That’s fine—just sit back and relax, and I’ll be done in about two minutes.”

Again true to his word, Dr. Early took the stitches out with minimal discomfort to Mike. In fact, he noticed that the most uncomfortable part of the procedure was the annoying tickle of the Betadine swab. Dr. Early placed a new bandage over the area, and rolled Mike’s pant leg down for him. He returned to the cabinet, and fished out several bottles. He set one bottle on the counter, and then put a few tablets from another bottle into an empty pill bottle. He wrote something on the blank label of the second bottle, and then handed them both to Mike.

“All right, Mike. Here’s a new course of antibiotics. Please, try to remember to take them, one tablet,
three times a day, until they’re all gone. You can start tomorrow. If you find they upset your stomach, take them with some crackers or bread.”

“I think I’ll remember this time,” Mike said sheepishly. “What’s the other one? Cloridria … something or other?”

“The other one is a mild sedative—just four tablets, total. Take one at bedtime, just for the next few days. If you want to.”

“I don’t love the idea, Doc, but I’m a total wreck, so thanks.”

“I’d like you to try to avoid caffeine for the next few days, as well. It seems like you’ve had an awful lot today, and it sounds like you’ll use some more to make it through the evening. But it’s a bit of a dangerous road,” he cautioned, “to use a stimulant to keep yourself going during the day, and then a sedative to get to sleep at night. So tomorrow—and the whole weekend, in fact—no caffeine. If you get a headache, which you probably will, take some Tylenol.”

“Got it. No caffeine tomorrow or Sunday. Not a drop. Roy’s got this chamomile tea. I’ll drink that instead.”

“Perfect,” proclaimed Early. “Just what the doctor ordered. Now—go upstairs and see Johnny, and then come back and take a nap.”

“If it’s all the same to you, Doc, I actually think I’d be better off if I skipped the nap and just plowed through. Some people can nap and wake up refreshed, but not me.”

“Up to you,” said Early. “You know yourself better than I do, so if that’s what sounds right to you, that’s probably what’s best for you.”

“Thanks, though, for the offer. And—thanks for listening. It really helped. A lot.”

“You’re welcome. Any time—and I mean that.”

“Thanks. And Doc, I promise—I’m not going to do anything stupid.”

“Good. Now go see Johnny—and tell him I said hello.”

“I will.”

An hour after he’d arrived at Rampart for his ten-minute appointment, Mike took the elevator up to the fifth floor.

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By 1:20, Johnny was starting to wonder whether Mike was going to be able to make it after his 12:30 appointment or not. It was always possible that the ER was running busy, and he’d had to wait to get his stitches out, but if that was the case, he could’ve waited in room 521, where he was supposed to be right now anyhow. Fred was downstairs getting one of his casts replaced, and Johnny had the room to himself. He was tempted to get up and pace for a while, but decided the risks outweighed the benefits. Just as Johnny was about to pick up the phone to dial Mike’s office, there was a quick knock at the door, followed by the distinctive footsteps of someone walking with a cane.

The curtains parted, and Mike swooped in. He stood at the side of the bed, and stared at Johnny for a second, bloodshot eyes quivering slightly.
Johnny looked back, his own right eye getting wider as he took in the rest of the picture. “Wow. Are you okay? You look mmfff—”

Mike let his cane clatter to the floor, and, taking Johnny’s face gently in his hands, kissed him hard. His tongue immediately sought—and found—entrance, and his hands roamed through Johnny’s hair, to his neck and shoulders, arms, and carefully, softly, over his rib cage.

Johnny imagined that Mike was checking to make sure he was there, and solid. He put his own hands to Mike’s face, caressing his cheeks, ears, the back of his head—reassuring him, yes, yes, I’m here. He heard, and felt, the frantic pace of Mike’s breathing slow to something approaching normal, echoing the slowing of Mike’s movement of his hands and tongue. Slowly, the frenetic spicy-hot kiss settled into a sweet, intoxicating treat, like a mint julep on a sweltering day.

Johnny opened his eyes again when Mike pulled away, and could once again believe he was looking at the same person he’d been living with for the last two and a half years.

“That’s what he meant,” Johnny said aloud.

“Huh?” Mike raised an eyebrow, not sure he’d understood what Johnny had said. “What’s what who meant? If that’s even a real sentence.”

“Never mind—just something Cap’n Stanley said on the phone yesterday, is all. You okay?” he asked again.

“Strung out on waaaaay too much coffee. Got my stitches out, though,” Mike said proudly, “without fainting.” He intentionally omitted the shot of penicillin and the forty-minute verbal purge he’d laid on Dr. Early. “You look a lot better—a lot.”

“Yeah, I got to have protein and plenty of liquids today, and that sure made me feel better. Best news is, the bleeding is way down, so they’re springing me at around four. I, uh, hope you don’t mind, but I arranged with Roy for him to pick me up—I wasn’t sure if you’d be done with work by then, and you didn’t answer your office phone.”

“No, I definitely won’t be done by four. Ten, maybe, or nine if I’m really efficient—but not four.” He explained his new deadline. “But then that’s it for the heavy lifting for a while—the case goes to trial next week, and I’m not involved in that part.”

Mike sat down in the chair next to Johnny’s bed, and immediately wished he hadn’t. Getting up again, and leaving, was going to be challenging. “Oh, sitting down was not a good idea,” he sighed. He leaned over to take Johnny’s hand, but absolutely did not allow himself to put his head down. “I hate to say it, but I gotta go.”

“Already?” Johnny looked at Mike with concern. “You just got here.”

“Yeah. But honest to god, Johnny—I’m so tired, and I have so much work to finish tonight, that I think every minute I sit here is gonna turn into ten minutes later I’m at the office. So I gotta bite the bullet, babe, and go back to the office. But all afternoon, I’ll be thinking about getting back to the DeSotos’ tonight, and finding you sleeping all spread out all over that flowery bed in that flowery room, taking up the whole damned mattress so I have to rearrange you like a rag doll before I can climb in next to you and wrap myself around you like a jellyfish, and feel your warm skin all over mine so I know you’re alive, and I’m alive, and damn, I’m gonna stop right there, babe.” Mike groaned and fought gravity and inertia as he forced himself up out of the chair.

Johnny clutched Mike’s hand, pulling him back a bit. “One for the road?” he asked, hopefully.
“Just try and stop me,” Mike said, and went back in for a kiss that turned into a mirror image of their last one, starting slowly and gently, but spiraling upwards until Mike had no doubt that Johnny was feeling better, and that he himself would make it through the day.

With supreme willpower, Mike finally pulled himself away. He straightened up, and reached down to brush Johnny’s hair off his forehead. “That’ll keep me going till I’m done. I’ll see you as soon as I can.”

“Love you,” Johnny said quietly. “Drive safe, okay?”

“Love you too. See you tonight. Probably late.”

Johnny watched Mike swish through the curtain, and listened to his uneven footsteps as he walked to the door. He got out of bed, and opened the curtain partition so the sunlight from the window over Fred’s bed could make it across to his side of the room. He got back in the bed, and sat there, waiting for whatever was going to happen next.

TBC
Chapter 13

Chapter 13.

3:30 pm, Friday.

Mike had just received Panella’s revised report, with quotation marks added as requested, and was transferring them to his pasted-up version of the brief that would include all four of the reports that Rhodes had asked him to integrate. Mike thought that maybe by six or so he’d be done with the major work of integrating the pieces of the documents in ways that made sense, and would then take a dinner break to clear his head before proofing the final version he’d send to the typists. Despite being loaded with coffee and Tylenol, he had a splitting headache, and was definitely noticing throbbing near his knee.

He set everything aside for a moment, and pressed the heels of his hands against his temples. He was absolutely, positively not putting his head down on the desk, because that would be it.

The ringing of the phone sent Mike a foot in the air, even though he was seated and felt less on edge than he had all day.

“Go away,” he said to the phone, as if it would magically stop ringing.

It didn’t. Mike realized he really didn’t care who it was, or what they wanted, as long as it didn’t add to tonight’s workload. The double ring of a call from an outside line persisted, so Mike gave in.

“Arson/Fire Investigation, Mike Stoker.”

There was a short pause on the line.

“Hello?”

And then the static started, and a familiar, hated voice came on.

“Well, hello! We’re sure you’ve noticed our redecorating and renovations by now. How do you like them? We thought the color was very fitting. Hopefully your poor neighbors won’t be any more disturbed than they already are.”

Mike said nothing. He wasn’t sure why, but he didn’t hang up.

“Come now, don’t be shy! We’d love to know what you think! We tried to reach the pretty Captain today, but for some reason, he wasn’t at his station. Maybe he’s not so pretty right now, hmm? Or maybe he finally got our message, even though we really didn’t have a chance to deliver it properly.”

That did it.

“LISTEN UP, YOU SICK FUCK! If you ever, EVER go near him again, you’re gonna wish you were never born! You’re gonna wish your parents were never born! And if you think the cops aren’t about one day away from busting your sorry asses, well, you’re stupider than I think. So if you know what’s good for you, you will stay the fuck away from him, and our house, and if you can’t stay away from me, then you’ll find out a thing or two about dirty fighting.”

“Oh, you think a gimpy fag like you will be a challenge? At least Gage put up a little bit of a fight—
but we’ve seen you, and you need a cane to even walk, and—"

But Mike didn’t hear the rest. He threw the phone across the room, not realizing that Wes Harris was standing in his doorway.

“Holy fuck, Stoker! Jesus! What the fuck is the matter with you?! Why are you such a lunatic all of a sudden?”


Wes wanted to flee, but he also wanted to know what could have possibly pushed this extremely mild-mannered person into a manic rage the likes of which he’d never seen in his life. So he went into the office, shut the door, picked up Stoker’s phone, and replaced it on his desk. He sat in the chair in front of the desk, and waited.

“You wanna know why?” Mike yanked his picture drawer open, and pulled out the picture of Johnny in action at an MVA scene, and slammed it down on the desk in front of Wes. “That’s why. He got the crap kicked out of him two nights ago, by some people from our very own County Fire Department, who don’t like that ‘one of us’ is a Captain. He’s getting released from Rampart in about fifteen minutes, and I can’t pick him up and take him home with me, because I’m stuck here till God knows when. And even if I could pick him up, I still wouldn’t be able to take him home, because our fine colleagues trashed our house.”

“You wanna know why I threw my phone across the room? Because our colleagues—yours and mine, Wes—even though I don’t know who they are, I know they work with us—just called me to gloat, is why. And you know what? We don’t know them, and we don’t even know how they got a hold of our address, our phone numbers. Someone who doesn’t even know us, hates us so much that Johnny’s in the hospital and our house is boarded up.”

Wes started turning a greenish shade of pale, but Mike didn’t notice, and wouldn’t have cared even if he had been aware of his colleague’s change in coloring.

“And you know what else? I’m sick of hiding these,” Mike shouted, stabbing his finger at the picture he’d put in front of Wes, and then setting the photo up on the desk. “So this one is going here, and that one—” he reached into the drawer and brought out the beach photo, setting it on the desk— “is going there, and this one—” he pulled out the photo of the two of them kissing in the afternoon sun in their back yard, and practically shoved it in Wes’s face— “is going right the fuck here, front and center, just like everyone else’s goddamned wedding picture. And if people don’t like it?” He gestured to the sixth-floor window. “There’s the fucking exit.”

Mike locked eyes with Wes, and swiped his hand across his face to clear away the sweat that had beaded up on his lip. He sat back down in his chair, and did his best to slow his breathing.

“Now you know why I’m pissed. So the least you can do is tell me why you came down here in the first place,” he said, suddenly and chillingly back to his usual calm voice.

“Uh ...” Wes started. “I, uh, wanted to see how your draft was coming, because, uh, Rhodes wanted me to check up on you.”

“It’s going fine,” Mike said, with supreme calmness. “I got what I needed from Panella, and I’m maybe an hour and a half or two from finishing the pasted-up version with everything all put together. Then I was going to take a break, before I read the whole thing over, start to finish. Are you on your way out?”
“Nnn … not quite yet,” Wes said shakily. “I, uh, have some things I need to take care of.”

“Well. You know where to find me if you need anything,” said Mike. “And, by the way—you’re looking a little pale, Wes. Sorry I blew up like that. I hope I didn’t freak you out.” Mike neither looked nor felt sorry, but he figured it was the right thing to say.

“No. Uh, not really. I just—” Wes stood up and backed away. “I have to make a phone call. I’ll see you later.”

Mike watched him go, and went back to work.

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Wes hurried back to his office, not quite running, but not quite walking either. He entered his office, and slammed and locked the door. He sat at his desk, hands shaking, and flipped through his Rolodex until he got to the name he was looking for.

“Hello?”

“Staib, you fucking liar,” Wes said without preamble.

“Uh, Harris? What’s going on?”

“You’re not his friend from high school. You’re not pulling harmless pranks, are you!”

“What are you talking about, Wes?”

“Don’t play dumb, you piece of shit. You and your flunky—you put John Gage in the hospital, did you know that?”

“Oh, come on, Wes. Don’t pretend you actually like these fags.”

“It doesn’t fucking matter who or what I do or don’t like, Staib! You used me—I see it now—you’ve been getting me to feed you little tidbits here and there, and then you’ve used it to fuck with Stoker and Gage!”

“Wes, Wes, Wes. Now really, tell me the truth—did you actually believe my schtick about a prank war? Did you really think this was all in good fun? You can’t possibly be dumb enough to have actually believed that crap. And you feel the same way as I do about having them in the department.”

“You trashed their house, and you put Gage in the hospital!”

“An eye for an eye, Harris—after all, look what happened to Lynn. She’s still in the hospital.”

“What the fuck are you talking about now, Staib?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. Huh. Okay, so maybe you did actually believe I was just having a little fun with your new buddy Mike. My ‘old friend,’ right?” Staib chuckled. “You’re awfully trusting, you know. But too bad for you, Wes—you’re in it up to your neck. Who’s gonna believe you thought this was all for fun and games? Hell, I don’t even think I really believe it.”

“Well, believe it, Staib. We’re through.”

“Oh, really? Are you going to call the cops and tell them all about how you ‘just realized’ how you’ve been so terribly, terribly used? What a sad story. And so unlikely, too. Sadly, I think you’ll
find that if I go down? You go down too. So think about that before you do anything even stupider than you’ve already done. Think about whether protecting two limp-wristed queers—and why they made one of them a Captain is completely beyond me—is worth your career. Think about whether you really didn’t know what I was doing when I asked you all those questions about my ‘old buddy’ Mike. Think about it, Wes. Because we’re not ‘through,’ and you know it.” Staib paused. “See you around the department, Harris. And don’t work too late—it’s Friday. You should go out tonight and have some fun. I know I will.” Click.

It was Wes’s turn to put his head on his desk, and wonder how the hell he was going to fix his life.

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An hour later, HQ was nearly deserted for the weekend. Wes Harris emerged from the sixth-floor break room with a fresh pot of coffee and two mugs. He knocked on Mike Stoker’s door, which, unusually for him, was completely closed.

“Come in.”

Wes opened the door, and was relieved to see that Mike was sitting calmly at his desk, every available surface covered with pasted up pages of the report he was working on.

“I just made a fresh pot of coffee—you want some?”

Mike looked up. “Sure. Thanks.” He stood up, and limped over to a small table on the other side of the room. “I don’t dare drink coffee at my desk when I’m so fried like this,” he said, as Wes set the mugs on the table and poured coffee into them. “I’d spill it. For sure. All over everything.”

“Good thinking,” said Wes.

“What are you still doing here, anyhow?”

“I, uh, realized I’d made a mistake in, um, another project I’ve been working on. I’m gonna have to stick around to make sure I take care of it properly this time.”

“Huh.”

“So, I’m probably going to be around for a while. I can read your brief when you’re done, if you want.”

Mike raised his eyebrows. “Seriously? I mean, I’m probably not gonna be done pasting it up for another hour, at least. I’m not exactly at my best right now, you know. I think this is my twentieth cup of coffee today. Literally.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure I’ll be here at least as long as you, so it’s no problem. We could look it over together—maybe even get you out of here a little sooner.”

“Oh, Mike said. “Really—that’d be great. To be honest, I’m so fried that it would be really good to have another set of eyes on it before I send it to the typists.”

“I’ll do that, then. And hey, I was about to maybe get some dinner—order a pizza or something. You wanna go in on something?”

Mike shuddered. “Anything but pizza, all right? I guess I’m kind of … pizzaphobic right now.”

“Uh, do I even want to know how you can become a pizzaphobe?”
“Probably not, but it looks like I’m telling you anyhow. Johnny was picking up a pizza when he got the shit beat out of him the other day. That did it.”

“Chinese, then? I know a place that delivers to HQ.”

“Chinese I can do.”

“Okay—I’ll order it. The guy knows me, so I’ll just get him to deliver it to the front entrance, and I’ll grab it down there. Whaddaya want?”

“I don’t care. Chicken something or other. The spicier the better.”

“All right. I’ll see you in like an hour or so.”

“Great.” Mike set his empty mug back down on the small table, and looked up at Wes. “Really. Thanks a lot. And, uh, I hope your problem with your other project isn’t too serious. Let me know if there’s anything you need a hand with, all right?”

“Thanks,” Wes said, looking green around the gills again. “I’ll let you know.”

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Fifty minutes later, Mike had assembled nearly sixty pages of cut-and-pasted, margin-noted, heavily edited reports into a thick sheaf. He put a binder clip at the top to hold it all together, and went down to the copy room and carefully copied each page. He took the copy and the original back to his office, and set them both on the desk. He picked up the phone, and dialed the DeSotos’ number.

“Hello, DeSoto residence,” a female voice answered. Mike had no idea whether he was listening to Joanne or Jenny.

“Hi, it’s Mike Stoker.”

“Uncle Mike! Guess what—Uncle Johnny’s here, and he’s way better! I made sure he had a good dinner, and now he’s watching TV with Dad.”

Mike smiled. “That’s great, Jenny. Do you think there’s a phone that would reach to where he is? I don’t want him to get up.”

“You bet. This one has a really long cord, so I can stretch it alllllll the way out there. Here he is.” Jenny didn’t put her hand over the receiver, and Mike listened with amusement as she announced, “Uncle Johnny, it’s Uncle Mike. He wants to talk to you, but you’re not allowed to get up. Daddy, please turn the TV down so he can hear, okay?”

“Hi, Mike! You hangin’ in there?”

“Pretty much,” Mike said. “I had one kind of, um, explosion, but I think it’s all okay now. I’m about to have dinner. Chinese. From a place that delivers.”

“Great—you know, we really oughta find a pizza place that delivers.”

“Babe, I don’t think I’m gonna want pizza again for a really, really long time.”

“Oh. Well, Chinese is good too.”

“Yeah.” Mike smiled. “Remember when you snuck Chinese in when I was on the rehab unit at Rampart?”
“Uh-huh.” Mike could tell just from those syllables that Johnny was grinning.

“That was a pretty good lunch, babe.”

“Yeah, it sure was.”

“Especially the dessert course.”

“Especially that,” Johnny agreed. “I call do-overs.”

“Too bad you’re under strict orders to rest,” said Mike.

“I won’t be forever, you know. See what your fortune cookie says about, say, Monday.”

“You’re on, babe.” Mike looked up to see Harris waving some white cartons in through the partially open door. “Listen, I gotta go. What is it, like seven o’clock?”

“Yeah.”

“I might, just might, be done by nine or so. But don’t wait up, all right?”

“Okay—I think I’ll be in big trouble with Dr. Jenny if I say up past nine anyhow. But promise me you’ll wake me up when you come in, all right?”

“It goes against my grain, but okay. See you later.”

“Bye.”

Mike put the phone down, and heaved himself out of his chair.

“Chow’s here,” Harris said unnecessarily.

“Great—how much do I owe you?”

“I don’t know—like five bucks?”

Mike followed Harris to the break room, leaning heavily on his cane. Before he sat down, he pulled out his wallet and passed a five dollar bill over to Wes.

“Your leg worse than the other day?” Wes asked, figuring that was potentially a less volatile topic than anything else he could think of.

“Yeah,” admitted Mike, digging in to his carton of food. “What with everything, I forgot I was supposed to take the antibiotics, and now there’s some kind of infection.”

“That sucks,” Wes said.

“I think it’s getting better, though. I got a shot of penicillin this afternoon, and I don’t feel as sick as I did this morning. I guess Rhodes must’ve noticed I was off my feed, if he asked you to stick around on a Friday to look over my stuff.”

“Yeah,” Wes said nervously. “Well, you did look pretty tired.”

“Twenty-one cups of coffee later, though, I’m ready to do a final read-through. Hopefully when you look at it, it won’t turn out to be in Italian, or Japanese, or secret code or something.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. You’re the best writer of anyone in our group, you know. When Neil Broker
retired and Rhodes hired you—well, I was a little worried about how you’d be, since last time we got
someone who was invalided out of active firefighting, it was a disaster. He wasn’t really into the
work—just wanted something to do,” said Harris. “He quit and went to teach at the academy instead,
I think.”

“Huh,” said Mike. “Well, I’d been thinking about this field even before I got messed up. I knew I’d
be a lousy Captain, and when you hit your mid thirties, you kind of start to think about what’s next. I
mean, even just standing around in turnout gear and an air pack is a lot of work after a while.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Wes.

“I sometimes think,” Mike said, picking through his carton of food, “the department oughta make
anyone who’s not in Operations put on some gear and get into the training facility for a live burn. Or
do a ride-along with a paramedic squad when they get ten runs in a row over night. Then maybe
there’d be a little less bitching about how firemen get to just sit around the station watching TV half
the time.”

“Maybe,” agreed Wes. “I guess I’ve been at enough scenes while they were still doing overhaul,
though, that I got a little idea of the stress of the job, even though I did come here straight out of
college.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean you,” Mike said. “Sorry. I should just tape my mouth shut with duct tape until
I’ve had at least one decent night’s sleep. Whenever that might happen,” he added. “Or wherever.”

“Where are you staying, anyhow?”

“Oh, with another buddy of ours from 51s. He was Johnny’s paramedic partner back in the day. He
and his wife are putting us up till we get things straightened out.” Mike finished what he could of his
meal, and tossed the carton in the trash. He noted Wes appeared to be done as well.

“Well, I’m gonna get back to it,” Mike said. “You said you could read over the brief—you still up
for that, or do you have something to do with your mysterious other project?”

“No, I’m, kind of stuck here waiting for something on that one. So I’m all yours.”

“Thanks. Maybe with two sets of eyes on this, it’ll turn out to be coherent after all.”

Mike let Harris back into his office, and handed him the photocopy of the pasted-up brief. “This was
a total pain in the ass,” he said, as he settled down at his desk with the original. “Maybe someday
they’ll invent a better way to do this. Maybe, I don’t know, move paragraphs around on a TV screen
or something. I don’t even know, but there has to be a better way.”

“You know what would be cool?” Wes said. “If you could just talk into a microphone, and what you
said would come out all typed up.”

“In your dreams, man. Anyhow, give me a yell if you see something weird, and I’ll fix it on my
copy.” Mike shook his head, looking at his document. “I don’t even know how the typists are gonna
be able to decode all this garbage.”

Wes looked the document over. “Well, your handwriting is neat, at least. And if I can follow it, I’m
sure they’ll be able to, also. Still, you should probably put the name and number of the people you’re
staying with on the typing order, just in case they need to ask you anything.”

“I’ll do that,” Mike said. And then, they got down to the business of proofing the brief.
Mike made it through the first page. He thought he was awake, until his neck suddenly jerked his head up, and he realized he’d fallen asleep briefly. He sighed, picked up his papers, and started pacing the room as he read.

“Uh, what are you doing?” Wes asked nervously.

“If I stay sitting down, I’m just gonna keep falling asleep. I don’t think I’ll pass out if I’m up and moving,” Mike explained.

“I don’t know how you did it,” Wes said, shaking his head. “This is all perfectly coherent. Even the parts I know came from Panella. And if you can make his shit coherent—well, you deserve a medal. There was this one thing on page three, though.” Wes went on to point out a small inconsistency, which Mike fixed.

Two hours and three coffees later, Mike was satisfied that he’d done the best he could. He photocopied everything one more time, and put the original, along with the typing pool request form that included his temporary contact information, into a huge binder clip.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” Mike said. “Thanks a lot, Wes. You caught a lot of things I missed.” He handed the packet, with the typing request form on the top, to Wes. “Can you hold this for a second?”

Wes took the packet, and glanced at the form while Mike locked up his desk and grabbed his cane. Mike was lucky indeed—the friend he was staying with lived really close to HQ.

“So,” Mike asked as Wes handed the packet back. “Do you still have to hang around for your other project, or can you get out of here too?”

“No, I’m getting out too. C’mon—let’s get this thing down to the typists, and then get the hell out of here. It’s nine thirty,” said Wes, “and my wife is gonna kill me.”

They took the elevator down to the first floor, and put the packet in the file holder on the door of the typing pool’s office suite. Together, they went out the front entrance of HQ, to the staff parking lot.

The lot was nearly deserted late on a Friday night.

“Shit,” said Mike. “I’m all the way in the back. There were no good spots when I got back from the doctor’s appointment earlier.”

“Bummer,” said Wes. They walked three quarters of the way down the lot, and Wes stopped at a Ford sedan. “This is me.”

“Thanks a lot, Wes,” Mike said. “And—I’m really sorry I totally lost it with you earlier. To say it’s been a bad week would be the understatement of the decade.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Wes. “See you Monday.”

Wes got in his car. Mike wasn’t thinking about anything other than how he was going to stay awake for the short drive to the DeSotos’, and didn’t notice that the Ford’s engine didn’t come on. He trudged down to the very end of the parking lot, where there was just his pickup truck and one other vehicle. He made it to his truck, and blindly jabbed his key at the lock on the driver’s door.

He missed the lock—he was high by about four inches. He looked down to try again, and realized why he’d missed.
All four tires were flat.

“It figures,” he said aloud. “It just fucking FIGURES!”

He looked around the area, and his eyes lit on a pay phone at the corner of the lot. Mike sighed, and fished in his pocket for a dime as he walked to the phone.

Three quarters of the way there, he tripped over something invisible, and fell flat on his face. He lay there, stunned. For a minute, he thought he’d just stay there, have a nap, and worry about it all later.

Then he heard the footsteps, and the voice.

“See? I told you you wouldn’t be much of a challenge.”

Mike lifted his head, and saw a tall blond man he’d never laid eyes on before in his life standing just in front of him. The man took a step forward, and another step. From his resting place on the pavement, Mike noticed that the pointed toes of the man’s cowboy boots curled slightly upwards from wear.

“And I told you that you’d learn something about dirty fighting,” Mike said. He swung his cane upwards, as hard and as fast as he could, which wasn’t very, from his awkward position on the ground. But it was enough to make an impact—Mike was rewarded with a thwacking sound and a shout from the man, who took two steps backwards, clutching his thigh. Mike struggled to his feet, all thoughts of exhaustion immediately gone.

“That’s it, you fucking queer!” The man put his head down, and his fists up, and charged at Mike.

Mike was ready with his cane—he would use it like a bat, or an axe, he thought. But he never got a chance.

A dark streak flew in from the corner of Mike’s vision, and suddenly his attacker, with another body on top of his, was on the pavement.

“Wes?!” Mike exclaimed, as his co-worker rolled the attacker onto his belly and wrenched one of his arms behind his back.

Wes pinned the man onto the ground. The more Mike’s assailant struggled, the harder Wes twisted his wrist up between his shoulder blades. “Go call the cops,” Wes said.

Mike stood there and stared for a moment.

“Go!” said Wes.

“I’ll go call the cops,” Mike agreed, heading for the payphone. He was more careful this time, and could now see a thin wire stretched from a tree near the phone to the bumper of the other car parked near his. He carefully stepped over the wire, and made his call.

“All right already,” said Staib. “You can let me up now. Clever idea, that—sending him off to the phone. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Wes gave the blond man another slam onto the ground for good measure, and said nothing.

“Oh,” Staib said mildly. “Is that how it’s gonna be? Do you really think the cops are going to believe that you had nothing to do with any of this? Don’t forget—we’re still in this together, Wesley.”

“Shut the fuck up,” said Wes. He put his knee in the small of Staib’s back, and put most of his
weight on his knee. There was no way Staib was going anywhere.

Mike returned, again stepping over the tripwire.

“They’re on their way,” he said. “Man, Wes—you saved my ass. That was a great tackle.”

“College football,” Wes said. “Keep your eyes on this guy—I think I’ve got him, but he’s an oily snake.”

Mike held his cane ready, and the three men, each apprehensive in his own way, awaited the arrival of the police.

Ninety seconds later, two black and white sheriff’s cars screeched into the parking lot. One of the vehicles trained its spotlight on the three men. Two officers emerged from each vehicle.

“Everyone freeze!” said one of the officers. “You—” he said, pointing at Wes. “Off of him. Now. Hands where I can see ‘em. All of you.”

Wes reluctantly climbed off of Staib, who wisely didn’t move. Mike dropped his cane, and put his hands up at mid-chest level. Wes did the same. Each of them was grabbed and pushed up against the side of Mike’s truck. An officer frisked each of them down, and took their wallets out of their pockets. He removed their IDs from the wallets, and replaced the wallets in their back pockets. “Stay right there,” the officer cautioned.

Two other officers hauled Staib up off the ground, and spread-eagled him up against the hood of the truck. One officer frisked him, reached into a front jacket pocket, and held up a switchblade. “Looks like you were looking for some trouble, pal.” He continued his frisking, and pulled Staib’s wallet and ID.

“All right,” said the officer who appeared to be in charge. “Who called us?”

“Me,” Mike said, not moving.

“What happened, here?” the officer continued.

“I was working late. I came out to my truck, and all the tires were flat. I was walking to the payphone to call a cab, and something tripped me. There’s a wire between the bumper of that Chevy and the tree by the phone. I didn’t see it at first, but if you look carefully, you can see it.”

The officer in charge gestured for one of his colleagues to verify that statement. One of the deputies knelt on the ground, and looked back up. “Yep—looks like heavy-gauge fishing line,” he said.

“Go on,” the officer said to Mike.

“Then the guy on the hood of the truck, who I’ve never seen in my life, well—I was on the ground, and he started towards me. He said I wouldn’t be much of a challenge. I hit him with my cane, once, and then Wes tackled him, and I called 9-1-1 when Wes had him on the ground.”

“So you don’t know this guy?” the officer asked Mike.

“No, but somebody vandalized my house, and somebody beat up my partner two nights ago, and I think this is probably the same guy. I have about four reports filed with your branch up near my house. If you talk to Deputies Price or Houlihan, they can verify my story.”

The officer picked up his radio. “Dispatch, this is Satcher in Car 87. Do you have a Deputy Price or
Houlihan on the board tonight?”

“Affirmative,” the radio answered a moment later. “Price, at Station 5.”

“Dispatch, get him on my channel, please.”

“Copy.”

While he was waiting, Satcher turned to the officer who was holding Staib. “You got an ID on that one?”

“William Staib.”

Satcher’s radio came to life again.

“Satcher, this is Price. What’ve you got?”

“I have a physical altercation in the parking lot of the County Fire Department headquarters, three individuals. I’ve got a Michael Stoker, who claims he’s got multiple reports with your office, and who claims one of the other guys assaulted him, and he thinks this guy is the subject of your reports. The alleged assailant is William Staib. The other guy is Wesley Harris. Any of this mean anything to you?”

“That’s affirmative,” replied Price. “Hold on to Staib—Tom DeVito just got a warrant for him on the incidents Mr. Stoker mentioned. The warrant includes aggravated assault and battery and a list of other charges. Stoker is the complainant on several of the charges.”

“Copy,” said Satcher. “And Harris?”

“Got nothing on him,” replied Price. “His name hasn’t come up in the investigation.”

Staib chuckled. “Yet,” he said.

“Miranda,” Satcher said instantly to the officer holding Staib. “And cuff him and get him in a car.”

Mike was still frozen up against the side of his truck. He could hear Staib being read his rights, and shortly, heard a car door close.

“All right,” Satcher said to Mike and Wes. “You two, turn around. I’m afraid I need you to come down to the station so I can get your statements. Then you’ll be free to go.”

“All right,” said Mike. “Can I get something from my truck?”

“What is it?” Satcher asked.

“Medication,” Mike replied. “I’m supposed to take antibiotics.”

“Fine. You need that cane?” Satcher asked.

“’Fraid so,” Mike said.

“I’ll put it in the car. You can’t have it in the back. Sorry, but that’s the rules.”

“It’s all right.”

Mike retrieved his pill bottles from the truck, and put them in his pocket. He and Wes were ushered
into the back of the sedan, and whisked off to the station. Thirty seconds after the car started driving, Mike fell asleep, and Wes had to shake him awake when the car stopped at the station. He and Wes were ushered into separate interview rooms, and their statements were taken.

A long hour later, Mike had explained the evening’s entire sequence of events again, and again, and again. A courier must have brought copies of all his and Johnny’s previous reports, because someone came in and handed the deputy a stack of copies, and the deputy then began questioning Mike about each of the previous incidents. Several times, the deputy left the room, came back in, and asked more questions.

Finally, after Mike had relived the entire last week’s events over and over, he was told he was free to leave.

“Uh …” He stood dumbly outside the interview room, wobbling on his feet. “What about Wes? Did he go home already?”

“No quite yet,” the deputy said vaguely.

“Oh,” Mike assumed that since Wes had actually physically knocked Staib down, they might be holding him for longer. “You know, he doesn’t have anything to do with any of this. He just happened to be there, and he saved my ass.”

“All right,” the deputy said. “Come on—I can take you back to your car, but that’s it.”

“Okay,” Mike said dubiously. “I guess I need to take care of that, anyhow.”

“Wait—your tires all got slashed, didn’t they?” said the deputy. “All right—if you’re not going too far, I can take you someplace else. Just as long as it’s not too far outside this district.”

Mike told him the DeSotos’ address, praying silently to whoever was listening to let that not be too far.

“All right—c’mon. Get in the front this time.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, well, you look like shit. If I were a cabbie I’m not sure I’d pick you up.”

“Thanks,” Mike said drily. “I probably wouldn’t pick me up either.”

It was after midnight by the time the black and white sedan pulled up in front of the DeSotos’ house. Mike got out wearily, and trudged up to the porch. He looked at the one plant on the steps, and tipped it up to find the key. He let himself in the house, locked the door, and went to the kitchen. He opened the bottle of antibiotic tablets, and put one pill on the counter. He looked at the second bottle—was he really going to drug himself to sleep after struggling to stay awake for the last eighteen hours? But now that he was finally done with his ridiculous day, he suddenly didn’t feel tired at all. He shrugged, took one tablet out of the second bottle, and set it on the counter as well.

He filled a glass at the sink, and washed down both tablets.

Mike quietly climbed the stairs to the second floor, and slipped into the guest room. Moonlight streamed through the open curtains, falling on the bed. Sure enough, Johnny was sleeping diagonally across the entire bed, face down. He’d kicked the covers completely off of himself, and was lying there in his boxers. Just below the tape around Johnny’s ribcage, Mike could see deep purple bruising from where Staib’s cowboy boot toe had kicked him.
Mike stripped down to his boxers, but didn’t bother with any of the rest of his nightly routine. From the foot of the bed, he took Johnny’s feet and moved his legs and lower body just enough that there was room for one more body in the bed. Johnny mumbled something unintelligible, and curled up on his side.

Mike looked at him for a long minute, wrestling with his conscience. For the first time in their entire relationship, Mike decided to break a promise—he didn’t wake Johnny up. Instead, he lay down next to him, his chest to Johnny’s back. He pulled a sheet up over the two of them, and curled himself around Johnny’s body, throwing a leaden arm around him. Stirring slightly, Johnny pulled Mike’s arm in tightly, and mumbled again. Mike smiled, closed his eyes, and was asleep in five seconds.

**TBC**
THOMAS DEVITO: This is Detective Thomas DeVito conducting interview number one with subject William Staib. It is 2210 hours on Friday, May 16, 1980. Present in the room are the subject, myself, and Deputy Eric Price. Mr. Staib, I am going to read you your rights again. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney, and to have an attorney present during any questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you at government expense. Do you understand each of these rights as they have been read to you?”

WILLIAM STAIB: Yes, I do.

TD: Do you wish to have an attorney present?

WS: No, I do not.

TD: You may change your mind, and request an attorney at any point in these proceedings.

WS: I doubt that will happen, but fine. I’ll let you know.

TD: Mr. Staib, are you acquainted with John Gage, either personally or professionally?


TD: Do you know who he is?

WS: I sure do.

TD: (sigh) What is the nature of your acquaintance with Mr. Gage?

WS: We both work at the fire department.

TD: But you don’t actually know him?

WS: No. But I know enough about him, let’s put it that way.

TD: What do you know about him?

WS: I know he’s a queer, a fag, a homo. He and his boyfriend? Both in the fire department. Makes me sick. There’s plenty of real men around, but they take a guy like that, and make him a captain—unbelievable.

TD: Who is the other individual you’re referring to?
WS: Who, the boyfriend? Mike Stoker. He’s a queer and a gimp. L.A. County’s finest, right? (laughs)

TD: Have you ever had any personal interactions with Mr. Gage?

WS: (laughs.) Oh, yeah. Not as good as I was really hoping for, but I got my point across.

TD: Please describe your interactions with Mr. Gage.

WS: Well, let’s see. First, I think, was the letter. No—I’m wrong. Does it count as an interaction if you slash someone’s tires?

TD: Did you slash Mr. Gage’s tires?

WS: It was the least I could do.

TD: (inaudible) Is that a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’?

WS: That’s a ‘yes.’

TD: Do you know anything about a letter that was sent to the Stoker/Gage residence?

WS: You’ve got it, don’t you? Why do I need to tell you about it?

TD: (sighs.) Did you send Mr. Gage and Mr. Stoker a letter?

WS: I did. I just wanted to make sure he knew where I was coming from, with all my other, as you put it, ‘interactions.’

TD: What did the letter say?

WS: That the fire department is for real men, and that he better watch his back. Him and his boyfriend, both.

TD: Did you intend that letter as a threat?

WS: Of course. But he needed to know, you see, why all the lessons were happening.

TD: Lessons?

WS: I’ve had to teach him a lesson or two over the last couple of weeks.

TD: What kinds of ‘lessons’?

WS: Well, there were the tires, of course. Oh—do you want me to tell you about the lessons I did with the boyfriend, as well?

TD: Who are you referring to?

WS: The boyfriend? Mike Stoker. I told you already. He’s another one. (pause of 3 seconds) You know, you’re looking confused. Lemme start at the beginning. (two second pause.) See, it really messes a girl up, especially if she’s already a little messed up, when she finds out a guy who dumped her is screwing another guy.

TD: What girl are you referring to?

WS: My sister. Half sister, really. Lynn Nolan. Don’t you know all this already?
TD: I want to hear it from you, Mr. Staib.

WS: All right. (sighs) You see, this Gage character was dating Lynn. He dumped her. Not that I can blame him—she was already getting pretty weird at that point. But then, a year later—maybe a little more? She finds out he’s shacked up with a guy. You see?

TD: And this was upsetting to her.

WS: Well, it must’ve been, because it wasn’t too long after she found out about that that she got carted off to the looney bin. So it must’ve been.

TD: What did she say to make you think she was upset?

WS: She was still working at the hospital, you see, and she told me she found out from another girl at the hospital that Gage’s boyfriend was a patient, and that Gage was there with him all the time. And a couple days later? That’s when the thing with the bridge happened, and she got put in the nuthouse.

TD: ‘Thing with the bridge?’

WS: As in, she tried to jump off it.

TD: Did Miss Nolan state that her suicidal behavior had anything to do with Mr. Gage?

WS: No, but it must’ve, right? Because it was right after she heard about him shacking up with this guy.

TD: Did she state that it was what she learned about Mr. Gage that drove her to attempting suicide?

WS: No.

TD: Let’s get back to your ‘interactions’ with Mr. Gage and Mr. Stoker. Did you send them a threatening letter?

WS: Of course I did.

TD: Did you leave messages on their answering machine?

WS: Had to be clear, you know. (unintelligible) is a ‘yes.’

TD: I’d like to ask you about an assault that occurred on Mr. Gage in an alleyway behind the pizza shop at 5524 West France Street on Tuesday, May 13th, at approximately six twenty-five p.m. Can you tell me anything about that?

WS: Sure I can. I wasn’t able to take care of him quite as thoroughly as I’d intended, but yes, I can take credit for that one, too. I did my best, but I only got in a few kicks before that guy called the cops on us. From the looks of him, he’s probably one too. Oh, and just in case you didn’t know this, my helper was James Torrelli.

TD: Did he participate in the assault as well?

WS: Wow, I really have to spell things out for you, don’t I? You know, actually, I’m getting kind of tired of this. I think I’ll take that lawyer now.

TD: You’re asking for an attorney now?
WS: That’s a ‘yes.’

TD: Let the record show that the subject has requested an attorney. This interview is adjourned at 2219 hours on Friday, May 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1980, until an attorney can be present.

~!~!~!~!~

Johnny woke around five, probably because “Dr. Jenny” had insisted he retire just after nine the night before. She’d been right—he was exhausted, and had this feeling that he had whenever he returned from even a short hospital stay, like everything around him wasn’t quite real. And that feeling never went away until he’d had a good night’s sleep at home after being discharged.

At home, or wherever “home” happened to be that night.

He was a little confused when he woke—the room was all wrong, and the warm body he was accustomed to waking next to was on the wrong side of the bed. He rolled over, and was reminded of his cracked ribs by a stabbing pain on his left side.

To add to Johnny’s disorientation, Mike had promised that he’d wake Johnny when he returned home, but Johnny couldn’t recall that having happened. It was so unlike Mike to not do something he’d said he would that for a moment Johnny was concerned. But, he was here, and looked fine, so he’d probably just forgotten. Or, worse, perhaps it had been so late when Mike returned that it could better have been considered early morning, in which case perhaps Mike had been afraid that if he woke Johnny, he wouldn’t get back to sleep.

No matter. Between Johnny’s shift schedule and his unscheduled nights at Rampart, it had been many days—Johnny wasn’t even sure how many—since they’d woken up together. So he decided just to stay put for a while to see what would happen.

The first thing that happened was that Mike managed to get onto his back, and started snoring like a K-12 that had been started cold. Not wanting the entire DeSoto household to suffer, Johnny grabbed Mike’s far arm, and pulled him over. It certainly wasn’t easy, with three cracked ribs, but he managed, somehow. Happily, the arm Johnny had pulled over himself decided to clutch him tightly, reaffirming Johnny’s decision to stay right where he was.

The next thing that happened was that Johnny fell asleep again. The next time he opened his eyes, he and Mike were in exactly the same position they’d been in before, but the clock on the nightstand read 8:10—an absurdly late hour for two people who were usually up before six. Johnny tried to recall if he remembered Mike ever still being asleep at this hour, and couldn’t come up with a single sure instance. Seven, or even seven thirty, but eight was unheard of.

He lay there for a few more minutes, taking inventory. The ribs—yep, they were still pretty sore, and it was way past time to get some more Tylenol on board. That could wait, though. The morning wood—well, there wasn’t much to be done about that given various aspects of the current situation, so that was just going to have to go away on its own. But there was really nothing he could do in his current position about his uncomfortably full bladder, which certainly wouldn’t go away on its own. So Johnny waited long enough for the middle problem to subside, so he could leave the room to take care of the last problem and then the first problem.

He wormed his way out from Mike’s clutches, and braced his ribs as he sat up. Before he got completely out of the bed, he inspected his bedmate. Mike was in deep sleep, deep enough that he didn’t even stir when Johnny brushed the hair off his forehead and planted an experimental kiss there, and another on his cheek. Johnny gave up for the moment, threw his favorite shabby robe on over his boxers, and went out into the hall, hoping to god there was nobody in the bathroom ahead of
There wasn’t—and the aroma of bacon and pancakes wafting up the stairs likely had something to do with that. Johnny took care of his bathroom needs, and washed up a bit. The downstairs was enticing, but not as enticing by himself, so he went back to the spare room.

He knelt down next to the bed, and put his face right up next to Mike’s, foreheads touching. “Hey, Mikey,” he said quietly, near, but not right into, Mike’s upward facing ear. Nothing. “Huh.”

Johnny sat on the edge of the bed, and rubbed Mike’s back—that usually did the trick. Sure enough, Mike stirred, and opened his eyes.

“Hey, sleepyhead!” Johnny said in a normal tone of voice.

Mike groaned. “Hey,” he managed.

“You really awake?”

“No.” Mike closed his eyes again, but then suddenly opened them with a snap, and shot bolt upright in the bed.

“Johnny!” he exclaimed.

“Uh, yeah? That’s me,” Johnny said, the corners of his lips turning upwards of their own volition.

“They got him! They got the guy! Or at least a guy,” Mike said excitedly.

“What? You mean, the guy who did all that shit?” Johnny asked eloquently.

“Yes! Two guys—I couldn’t get the details out of the cops, but I’m sure it was him!”

Johnny looked concerned. “How do you know it was him?” he asked suspiciously.

“Well, his voice was exactly right, for one thing. And then, once I was down on the ground—"

Johnny interrupted, waving his hands back and forth in front of himself. “Whoa, wait, wait! Whaddaya mean, ‘once you were on the ground?’"

“Oh. Uh, he kinda slashed my tires, and set a tripwire between my truck and the pay phone, so— boom. I mean, I was pretty sure as soon as I hit the ground that I was in trouble, ‘cause I figured he’d be right there, and he was. But once I was down, he repeated something he’d said on the phone, and then I knew for sure it was him.”

“Are you okay? He didn’t hurt you, did he? ‘Cause I’ll kill him, Mikey; I swear I’ll—”

“No, no! I whacked him real hard with my cane, and then Wes tackled him and I called the cops. But Johnny, it was definitely him! So that’s it! Everything’s over! Well, except fixing the house, and my truck, and your ribs, and …” Mike rubbed his bloodshot eyes. “Okay. So maybe everything’s not over. But at least they got the guy.”

“Wow. Who was he?”

“All I got was a name—William Staib. I’d never seen him before in my life, but I heard on the deputy’s radio that the detective looking into our cases had just gotten a warrant for his arrest in your assault, so it’s gotta be him!”
“This is so weird. I mean, who is this guy?” Johnny asked.

“Honestly, you know as much as I do, now. They took him and me and Wes down to the police station, and put me in a room, and one of the deputies asked me a thousand questions—and that was like something out of a movie, let me tell you. And around midnight, they let me go. Not Wes, for some reason, because he obviously had nothing to do with any of this. But maybe because he actually tackled the guy.” Mike threw his hands up. “I don’t know. But in any case, they’ve got him.”

Johnny perched at the edge of the bed. “So what now?”

“I don’t have a clue. I’ve watched as much Adam-12 as the next guy, but in real life? I have no idea what happens next. Last night they wouldn’t answer any of my questions—not one. But to be honest, I didn’t really care at the time. Maybe if I call today, someone will talk to me.” Mike paused, sniffed the air, and sent the conversation on a giant leap sideways. “Do you smell pancakes?”

“And bacon,” Johnny agreed. “And coffee—man, that’s gonna be great. But hang on a second—there were two guys.”

“Well, I also heard on the deputy’s radio that they had another suspect in custody, and that he’d named Staib. And that someone else named Staib as a ‘person of interest’ as well. And I’ll bet—I’ll just bet,” Mike continued, “that the other guy they have is that James Torrelli guy—you know, the owner of the car Mrs. Daniels got the plate number off of?”

Johnny shook his head. “This is just really weird. I can’t imagine what connection we have to either of these guys.”

“Here’s what I think,” Mike said. “One of the things they asked me last night was whether I knew anyone named Lynn Nolan. I said I didn’t know her, but I repeated what you’d said.”

“Shit,” said Johnny. “So it could actually have something to do with her? How the hell did they even find her, and even if this Staib character is her brother or whatever, how did they know what his name was, and—” Johnny shook his head. “Maybe this will all make sense after breakfast. C’mon, let’s go get some coffee.”

Mike shook his head. “I’m not allowed.”

“You’re not allowed? I thought you said he didn’t hurt you! What happened?”

Mike sheepishly described his encounter with Dr. Early, and equally sheepishly admitted the total quantity of coffee he’d consumed between 5:30 the previous morning and midnight last night. “So none for me,” he said, “but let’s go be really annoying houseguests and eat all their pancakes. Hell, they know you’re here, so I’ll bet they made a ton.”

“In a minute. Lemme just look at you a minute—you sure you’re all right?” Johnny checked Mike up and down, almost as if he were doing an initial patient assessment.

“You wanna get my vitals while you’re at it?” Mike said drily. “Really. I’m fine. Well, there’s the caffeine OD, and the infection, but other than that—right as rain.”

“Yeah, well you’re still gonna hafta wait another minute or two for your pancakes, because—c’mere, Stoker. Don’t make me twist my ribs.”

“Aaw, c’mon, Gage. I’ve got morning breath like you wouldn’t believe, and—mmf. Mmm,” he concluded, and didn’t try to talk for a minute or two.
“Missed you a lot, last night, and the night before, and the night before, and the night before that,” Johnny said breathlessly, after letting go.

“Me too, babe.” Mike leaned in and kissed Johnny once more, quickly this time. “All right—I gotta get in the shower before I can show myself downstairs, but you go ahead down. I’ll just be a minute.”

“Okay—I won’t say anything about, well, anything, till you’re there, since we’re not really sure what it all means, or anything.”

Mike shook his head at Johnny. “You definitely need some coffee. That sentence didn’t have a single noun in it!”

Johnny grinned and swatted Mike’s rear as Mike exited the room for the bathroom. Johnny didn’t mind going downstairs with bedhead and robe—he’d spent so many nights at the DeSotos’ place that he was like one of the family, and many, if not most, of those nights had been when Johnny was not at his best. But Mike felt less comfortable, plus he’d had a horrible day yesterday and probably wanted to wash it away.

Johnny went carefully down the stairs, and rounded the corner to the dining room. Joanne, Jenny, and Roy were at the table, and Chris was in the kitchen cooking some bacon.

“Mornin’, everyone!” Johnny said cheerfully. “Wow—this looks great!”

“Uncle Johnny, did you notice you can open your eye now? It’s not so puffy!” said Jenny.

Johnny experimentally screwed up his face to close his good eye, and realized that he could in fact see slightly out of the blackened one. “Well, awright!” he said.

“Where’s Mike?” Roy asked. “I know he said he’d be working late last night, but wow—I was up till eleven thirty, and there was no sign of him.”

“Well, I dunno what time he got in for sure, but let’s just say yeah, it was real late. He’s grabbin’ a shower, so he oughta show up lookin’ all neat and clean-cut in about five minutes. Oh—and he can’t have coffee—I could make him some tea, though,” said Johnny. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

“Can’t have coffee?” Roy asked. “Hmm, would this have anything to do with how manic he sounded yesterday? Maybe hit the coffee pot a few too many times, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Johnny said, from the kitchen. “Man, I felt awful for him yesterday. I mean, we’ve all been there, with a brush fire, or when you get to overhaul on a big structure fire or something, where you feel like you just can’t take another step, but at least there you’ve got the adrenaline to keep you going. But working in an office and bein’ that shot?” Johnny shuddered. “I can’t even imagine.”

Joanne laughed. “You know, most people would think exactly the opposite of that, Johnny.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, most people would say, yeah, a tough day in the office is one thing, but I don’t know how those guys are still standing up after this brush fire, or that structure fire, or that MVA,” Joanne said.

“Well, everybody’s different, I guess.” Johnny poured boiling water over a chamomile teabag, and put the mug at Mike’s place.

“What’ve you guys got goin’ on this weekend?” Johnny asked, after loading his plate with pancakes.
and bacon, and settling down at his spot at the table.

“Uh, well, after breakfast we thought we’d head over to your place and see what needs doing, remember? Oh, wait,” Joanne recalled, “you were still at Rampart when we talked to Mike about that. You two don’t need to come—I mean, you can just stay here, but we’re all headed over in about an hour.”

“And my job is to make sure you don’t do anything if you come with us,” Jenny said.


The stairs squeaked, signaling Mike was on his way down. “G’morning everyone,” he said. He stopped behind Johnny, resting his hands on Johnny’s shoulders.

“Hey!” Johnny said. “You smell a lot better.”

“Well, next time you spend three hours at the police station, I’ll give you a sniff and tell you how you smell, how ‘bout that?” Mike said, grinning broadly to remove any possible sting from his words.

“Police station?” said all the DeSotos at once.

“Mike, what happened?” Joanne asked.

“Uh, well, among other things, they picked up a couple of guys who might be involved in all that … stuff,” Mike said. “We’re trying not to get too wound up about it, since their names mean nothing to us, but I’m pretty sure at least one of the guys is a good catch. I think maybe we should, um, discuss some of it later,” Mike continued, looking at Roy and Joanne.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Chris. “We get it, right Jen?”

“No problem,” Jenny waved the adults off. “Just tell us when to scram, and we’ll scram. But no fair banishing us till after breakfast.”

“I do have one problem,” said Mike. “No car. Among other things, the truck’s tires got slashed. And, we left Johnny’s car by the pizza place four days ago—I thought I’d just get a ride to pick it up the next day, ha ha, right?—so we’re at your mercy.”

“How about this,” said Joanne. “I’ll take Chris and Jenny and Johnny over to the house, and we’ll get started looking around, and Roy, you can take Mike to get his car towed or whatever it needs.”

“That okay with you, Mike?” Roy asked.

“Okay? It’s great. You guys are just saving our as—um, behinds. And,” Mike sighed, “I wish I’d bought stock in Goodyear. Oh, well. So yeah, stopping by HQ and dealing with the truck would be great. And then maybe instead of going straight to the house, we can stop by where we left the Rover and gee, maybe it’ll still even be there.”

“Good, that’s settled then,” said Joanne. “If we leave by ten, that’ll give us plenty of time to get there to meet Hank.”

“Captain Stanley?” Mike asked. “Wow—that’ll be two thirds of our old crew, right there!”

The phone rang. “I’ll get it,” said Roy, heading to the living room extension.

“Hello?”
“Roy? This is Joe Early. I’m sorry to bother you, but I know Johnny and Mike are staying with you, and I wanted to speak with Mike for a second if he’s available.”

“Sure, Doc—he’ll be right there. How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been quite well. And yourself?”

“Can’t complain, Dr. Early. Kids are healthy and growing up fast, and being a Captain isn’t as stressful as I’d thought it might be.”

“That’s good, Roy. And—before you get Mike—I just want to thank you for helping those two out. I was really quite concerned about them both, but I know they’re in good hands.”

“It’s our pleasure, Doc. Lemme get Mike for you.”

Roy set the receiver down on the coffee table, and returned to the dining room.

“Mike? Dr. Early for you.”

Mike frowned. “Oh. Thanks. Uh, could I maybe take it upstairs?” he asked.

“Sure—phone’s in our room,” said Roy. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Mike felt awkward walking into Roy and Joanne’s room, but less awkward than he would’ve answering the questions he imagined Dr. Early might have within earshot of the entire DeSoto family. He could hear footsteps behind him, and Johnny came into the room with him, closing the door behind them. That, he didn’t mind one bit.

Mike sat down on the bed. He picked up the phone with one hand, and squeezed Johnny’s hand with the other. “Hi, Dr. Early, it’s Mike.”

“Mike! I was just calling to check up on how you’re feeling today,” said Dr. Early. “I was really quite concerned yesterday.”

“Thanks, Doc. I’m doing a whole lot better. Yesterday—well, it wasn’t pretty, but I made it through. And I’m taking your advice—no coffee today or tomorrow. In fact, after yesterday, I’m considering kicking it completely. It wakes me up, for sure, but I’m not so sure it does good things for how my brain works.”

“And your fever? Is it down?”

“Um, to tell the truth, Doc, I haven’t even had a chance to check. But I’m guessing it is—I don’t feel ill; not like I did yesterday.”

“Were you able to sleep last night?”

Mike laughed. “Well, I was so wired when I got back here—after midnight, I might add—that I did end up taking one of your magic pills, and I got right to sleep, and I didn’t wake up until after eight. Which I can’t remember the last time I did. So now I feel sort of hung over, and I’m pretty sure I’m still working out some of the caffeine, but I’m a lot better.”

“Good. Well, be sure not to forget your antibiotics this time, all right? And I’d like you to see someone again about that infection, on Monday, if you can. I checked the call schedule, and Dr. Hansen—the one who took out the screw—is on for Monday. He may want to take an x-ray, just to
compare with the one from last weekend, to make sure there’s no infection in the bone itself.”

“All right—I’ll call the hospital today to set that up. And Doc? I really can’t thank you enough. Honestly, I think you maybe saved my life yesterday.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far!” Early chuckled. “But it’s my pleasure, Mike.”

“Seriously, Doc. See, what happened was, the guy tried to take me down in the parking lot last night, after I finally got out of the office. And he was crazy, and mean, and he was serious. And if I’d still been completely unhinged, the way I was earlier that day, before I talked to you? Well—I don’t think I would’ve come out of it okay, to say the least. So thanks.”

“My goodness,” said Dr. Early. “Has there been any progress by the sheriffs?”

“Yeah.” Mike explained the apprehension of the two men. “So if they’re it, then maybe this is all behind us.”

“Well, keep us posted,” Dr. Early said. “And is Johnny well?”

“Yeah, Doc—he’s a lot better. I’d hardly seen him till this morning, but yeah. He’s good. Thanks.”

They said their farewells, and Mike replaced the phone.

“Whew,” said Johnny. “Good thing you took that upstairs.”

“Yeah—I was thinking in the shower that I oughta call him, but I didn’t figure his number was listed. I guess Roy’s in the phone book, huh?”

“Joanne is, actually. Roy was for a long time, but all it takes is one inappropriate call from someone you’ve taken care of, and that’s that.”

“I guess so,” said Mike. “Not a problem that engineers tend to have, I suppose.”

“Probably not. But listen—I don’t wanna push, or anything, but this whole unhinged thing—can we talk about it some more, some other time?”

Mike looked at the floor. “Yeah. Some other time. It was pretty, um, ugly. I got really freaky with Dr. Early, like I told you earlier, but I also got weird with Wes Harris—like really weird. I was kind of worried maybe I was cracking up—hell, I think I was cracking up—but today, I think I’m okay. But I’m going to keep an eye on me, because it was pretty scary, actually, coming unglued like that. But I think—right now, I just don’t want to think about it.”

“Some other time,” Johnny reiterated, “we can talk about it more.”

“Okay. And if we weren’t in someone else’s bedroom, I’d smooch you up real good right now, but we are, so I won’t.”

“We can do that some other time, too,” Johnny reminded him. “But for now, let’s go massacre some DeSoto pancakes.” He got up from his seat on the edge of the bed, hesitated for a moment, and continued. “I love you lot, Stoker.”

Mike’s heart leapt at this uncharacteristically spontaneous admission. “Me too, Gage. I love you right back.”

They went back downstairs together, feeling like maybe, just maybe, they were ready to face the day.
After the pancakes were completely demolished, Mike and Chris washed the breakfast dishes, as Jenny ushered Johnny to the recliner in the living room. “I’ll let you take a shower, eventually, but there’s no hot water upstairs when they’re washing dishes anyhow, so you’ll just have to rest for a little while,” Jenny said firmly, following him into the living room. “So for now, name your card game, or I can get you the paper, or we could even watch Saturday morning cartoons if you want, even though we’re both too old for that, really. At least, I am,” she said, frowning at him as his expression brightened at that last suggestion.

“Oh, Doc,” Johnny said. “See? Here’s me, sitting in the recliner.” He’d long ago figured out the DeSotos’ trick of having Jenny be his keeper when he was at their house recovering from the injury of the year. He had to admit—it was a good trick. It was easy to protest or wheedle to an adult, but not to a kid. And even when Jenny was a tyke of five or six years old, she was perfectly capable of understanding that sick and hurt people needed to rest and take their medicine, and was proficient in getting this typically uncooperative patient to follow her orders.

When she was little, Johnny enjoyed humoring her, so he played along. Johnny looked back to the last time he’d been a “patient” at the DeSotos’—over three years ago, when Jenny was not yet nine. She’d easily bamboozled him into following all her instructions, and to him it had been a pleasant, diverting game. Plus, he hadn’t wanted to hurt her feelings by being uncooperative. But this time, he realized, she was taking on a serious role as a caregiver, and was clearly willing to sacrifice her own fun for his well-being. So, rather than “playing along,” Johnny found himself cooperating because he knew she was right. Just as he knew the doctors and nurses at the hospital were right, and had always been right.

“What?” Jenny said, as Johnny looked at her seriously.

“Oh, just thinking about how everyone grows up.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Oh, puh-leeze.”

Johnny laughed at her expression, which looked so much like Roy’s did when Johnny was engaged in one of his rants. “I meant me, actually,” he admitted.

Jenny squinted at him. “So, no cartoons, then?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Johnny said. “Because it’s nine o’clock, and that’s Looney Tunes time, kiddo.”

An hour later, Mike and Roy pulled into the deserted parking lot of the headquarters of the L.A. County Fire Department. There were only a few cars in the lot, all parked near the entrance to the building. Mike’s truck was just where he’d left it, in the same debilitated condition. In the daylight, Mike could clearly see the knife slashes on each of the tires. He was about to head to the payphone to call a towing company, but then stopped.

“You know,” he said to Roy, “We work for this place. Let’s go inside the house, where it’s air conditioned, and call from there, on their dime. I’m sure someone can let us in.”

“Sounds reasonable,” said Roy.

They headed for the front door, and Mike rang the bell that said “Press once for after-hours admittance.”
A minute later, a figure strode up to the double doors. Mike couldn’t see who it was, because the glaring outdoor sunlight made it impossible to see any detail inside, but shortly, the door opened.

“Stoker! What’re you doing here on a Saturday?” asked Bert Saunders.

“Hi, Bert—I just gotta get into my office, make a phone call,” said Mike. “I also have a document at the typist’s now that I oughta check up on. By the way—this is Captain Roy DeSoto, just so you know you’re not letting in an ax-murderer or something. Roy, this is Bert Saunders; he was at my first station, way back when, and he works here now.”

“Captain,” Bert said politely, shaking Roy’s hand. “Mike—I gotta tell you; I don’t know if the ax-murderer thing is quite it, but I heard from the security guy who was here last night that there were cops all over the place last night—out in the parking lot, in here, down at the motor pool—I don’t know what the hell is going on, but it was sure as shit something.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t claim to know much about it,” Mike said, “but I think maybe they got the guy who did in my office door, and who made that other mess in my office. At least, I hope that’s who they got,” he amended.

“Seriously?” said Bert. “That can’t be all, though—Jimmy—he’s the night watchman—said that he heard one of the cops say something about an assault on fire department property?”

Mike squirmed uncomfortably. He really didn’t want to talk about it, but Bert had helped out an awful lot, and seemed concerned. “Me again. The guy tried to take me down last night. Um, did take me down, actually, but didn’t get a chance to do as much damage as I think he wanted to.”

Bert gaped at him. “Man, I thought this thing was gonna go sour, but I had no idea. Who was the guy, anyhow?”

Mike cleared his throat. “Look—the cops grilled me like crazy last night, and I kinda got the impression I’m not supposed to say too much. And to be honest, the whole thing doesn’t make a lotta sense to me right now, anyhow. But I’ll tell you when I can.”

“Geez,” Bert said, shaking his head. “Well, glad to see you’re all right. You need a hand with anything while you’re here?”

“No,” Mike said. “I’m just calling a tow-truck—looks like I’m in the market for four new tires. Do you know who’s trustworthy and fast, who could get my truck on a flat-bed this morning?”

“Sure—in fact, I’m here all day, for some painting that needs to get done when this place isn’t crawling with people—so if you want, you can leave your keys with me and I’ll take care of it, so you don’t hafta wait around. No sense in everybody standin’ around all Saturday morning.”

“Seriously?” Mike asked. “I mean, I don’t want to make your job take longer today—I know you probably have better things to do on a Saturday.”

“No problem!” Bert said. “I get two days off for coming in today, so I don’t mind at all.”

“Once again,” Mike said, “Bert Saunders saves the day. Let me just call them myself, and explain the situation,” he said, working the truck’s key off his key ring and handing it to Bert.

Bert wrote something on a slip of paper and handed it to Mike. “That’s my pager—they should call that, and I’ll call them right back. And that’s the name of the place you should call—they do towing and repairs and everything. They’ll fix you right up.”
“I owe you big time,” Mike said to Bert. “I have a lot of work to do to fix up the house after what this guy did, and Johnny just got out of the hospital, and,” he said, slapping his forehead with his hand, “I’m not supposed to be talking about any of this so forget what I just said. But seriously—this whole week has been a nightmare, so people being nice to me? It’s a huge thing.”

“Okay, I won’t ask,” said Bert, his one remaining eyebrow raised. “But really—it’s no problem. Like I said, I’m here all day anyhow.”

Mike thanked Bert again, and they went their separate ways.

“He seems like a really good guy,” Roy said, as they took the elevator to the sixth floor.”

“You have no idea,” Mike said fervently. “When I call the Pope to nominate my neighbor for sainthood, I think I’ll add Bert’s name to the list too.”

Mike let himself and Roy into his office, and called the company Bert had recommended. He made sure to give Bert credit for the referral. The garage said they’d have a truck out within an hour.

“So yesterday,” Mike said, noticing that Roy had seen the photos on his desk, “I decided to put these on the desk. I used to keep ‘em in a drawer—don’t tell Gage that, all right?—but I figured by this point, everyone knows anyhow, so what the hell.”

“Hmm,” Roy said. “Seems like there still might be people who’d think, I don’t know, that you’re flaunting it or something.”

“I’m honestly not sure if I care, Roy. But,” Mike sighed, “you’re right. And I guess I do care. I don’t know. I hated having to keep those pictures in a drawer, you know?”

Roy studied the room. “What if,” he said thoughtfully, “you made an ‘L’ with the low bookcase on the wall, and put the desk over here, so it faces out into the room. That way, people would see the backs of the pictures, and, well, if they picked them up to look, that’s quite different from walking in and seeing someone’s family pictures that are pointed outwards.”

“Huh,” said Mike. “I like it! Then I could also be facing the door, so I might get startled less.” He looked around the room again. “Yeah. I think I’ll do that—first thing Monday. Thanks for the idea. C’mon, let’s get down to the typing pool real quick, just so I can check up on my stuff, and then we can get outta here.”

Roy and Mike reversed their journey, heading towards the typing pool’s office suite on the first floor. They entered the suite, and Mike headed to the one occupied station.

“Uh, excuse me…” he said.

The woman at the typewriter nearly jumped out of her chair.

“Sorry,” Mike said. “Sorry to startle you.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said the woman. She looked to be about fifty. Mike could see she was working on his own document. “What can I do for you?” she asked.

“Well, I’m Mike Stoker—I see you’re working on my brief right now. I was coming in for something else, and just wanted to check that I’d left everything in order for you.”

“Oh, yes, thank you very much. If it were a weekday, us ladies would be fighting over who got to type your things for you—you’re always so thorough, and tidy, and we never have any trouble
reading your handwriting. Really—it’s a pleasant way to spend my Saturday.”

“Oh,” said Mike. “Well. Thanks for taking care of it all. Let me give you another number where you can reach me today in case there is something that comes up, because I was here really late working on this last night, so I’ll be surprised if there isn’t something that’s impossible to read.”

“I doubt it,” said the woman, “but here—write the number right there, just in case.” She slid the request form across the desk to him, and Mike added his home number to the form.

“Thank you,” said the woman, taking the form back. “I doubt I’ll have to call, but thanks for stopping by. Really—it’s a pleasure typing your work. You wouldn’t believe the state of some of the things we’re given, and then they get annoyed when we call to ask questions!”

“I believe it,” said Mike. “Well, thanks again. Have a good day.”

“You too, Mr. Stoker.” And with that, she went back to her work.

Mike retrieved Roy from the waiting area. “Everything’s too easy today,” Mike said, frowning and shaking his head.

“What do you mean, easy?” Roy asked.

“I dunno, I guess it’s just that if everything’s been horrible and crazy, once things are back to normal, and people are nice, it seems unreal, somehow.”

“I guess I can imagine that,” said Roy. “Come on, let’s get out of here. I feel all wrong, being in here in my civvies. Makes me nervous.”

They went back to the parking lot, and hopped into Roy’s convertible. The traffic was light, so it took them just over forty minutes to get to their next destination: the parking lot of the pizza place that used to be Mike and Johnny’s favorite. Mike heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that the Rover was still in the lot. He’d thought for sure it would’ve been towed away, simply for sitting innocently in the lot for a couple of days. Mike waved to Roy, and then unlocked the Rover and pulled himself in. He sat in the front seat for a second, frowning and thinking. “It’s worth a shot,” he said to himself. “Why not.” He got out again, and headed around the corner—not through the alley, the sight of which made him shudder—to the convenience store.

The sleigh bells on the front door jingled as he walked in, and the young African-American man at the cash register looked up.

Mike recognized the fellow as the clerk who was often there when he picked up the odd beers he favored. “Uh, you wouldn’t by any chance be Robert, would you?” Mike asked.

“I would,” said Robert, grinning. “And you wouldn’t by any chance be the boyfr—uh, sorry, the friend of that John Gage dude, would you? He’s Budweiser, and you’re Guinness, right?”

“Guinness,” Mike agreed. “But actually, Mike Stoker. And—the other thing? You had it right the first time.”

“Uh huh,” said Robert. “He okay?”

“He’s gonna be fine,” Mike said, “thanks to you. He spent a couple nights in the hospital, but he’s home now.”

“See, I knew he shoulda gone straight in, but he wouldn’t have none of that,” said Robert. “I told
him so, but nuh-uh. I’ll bet he’s plenty stubborn, ain’t he?”

“He is, and thanks to you, he’ll live to be plenty stubborn for a lot longer. I can’t thank you enough for what you did.”

“Well, soon as I saw them guys in the alley, I called the cops,” said Robert. “I just wish I coulda stopped them before, you know.”

“You did great,” said Mike. “Those were some seriously bad guys, and I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t’ve stopped where they did if you hadn’t come out.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re right,” said Robert. “The cops who talked to me later thought so too.”

“I’ll be back in a second,” said Mike. “Just gonna get some supplies.” He grabbed a cart, and loaded it up with sodas for the kids, several sixes of different beers, and a variety of lunch supplies. He headed back to the counter, and Robert rang him up.

“Thanks,” said Mike. “Really. Thanks a million. From Johnny, too.”


“You bet I will,” Mike laughed. “See you ‘round.”

~!~!~!~

Mike pulled the Rover into the driveway, and got out and stared in dismay at the front of his house, which he hadn’t seen since the latest vandalism. “What a fucking mess,” he said.

Two four-by-eight sheets of plywood were nailed up over the front window—not neatly, but effectively. The front door, and most of the brick front of the house, were covered in splashes of hot pink paint. It looked like a giant had swallowed several gallons of Pepto Bismol and then vomited all over the house.

Mike sighed, and reached into the Rover to pull out the bags of groceries. He left his cane on the front seat, not being able to manage it and the bags at the same time. The front door swung open just as he got to it, and he gratefully entered the blessedly cool house.

“Here, lemme take that,” said Chris, who had opened the door.

“Thanks,” said Mike. He bypassed the living room, which he was dreading looking at, and went straight to the kitchen and dining room area.

“Hi, guys,” he said to Johnny and Jen, who were at the dining room table playing gin rummy. “I see you’re both doing your assigned jobs,” he added.

“Yeah, and I’m getting my butt kicked,” Johnny added.

“Good news,” Mike said. “I got the Rover—it’s in the driveway.”

“Thanks heavens for small favors,” said Johnny.

“Gin,” said Jenny, laying her cards out on the table.

“Damn,” said Johnny, scowling. “Er, I mean, darn. That’s the third time in a row.”

“It’s okay—it’s not like I don’t hear swear words on the school bus every single day,” Jenny said,
“which Dad pretends he doesn’t believe. Plus, I’m pretty sure you’re letting me win.”

“Not a chance,” said Johnny, shaking his head. “Because I know you’d catch me. I’ve just had shi—uh, crummy cards, is all. I’ll get you next time—you’ll see.”

Mike finished putting the groceries away, and then looked closely at Johnny. “You doing okay, babe?” he asked.

“Yeah—” Johnny noticed both Jenny and Mike looking sternly at him. “Uh, I guess I’m kind of achy,” he admitted.

“Thought so,” said Jenny. “You’re all tipped over to one side, you know.”

“Just trying to get these ribs more comfortable,” Johnny said. “I can’t seem to find a way to sit that doesn’t bug ‘em today.”

“Then you oughta go lie down,” Jenny said. “Right, Uncle Mike?”

“Hm,” Mike said neutrally, not wanting to push it.

Johnny laughed, and clutched his ribs. “All right, all right—I’m gonna go lie down, okay? Maybe grab a fast nap before lunch, since it’s only eleven or so, right?”

Jenny nodded in satisfaction. “That’s a good idea,” she said. “And maybe you need some more medicine, too.”

“So Jenny, maybe I’ll tuck him in, all right?” said Mike. “And I’ll make him take something.”

“Good,” said Jenny. “He said he had two extra-strength Tylenol at eight o’clock, so it’s too soon for more of that, right? I’ll check. Dad?!” she hollered, causing both Johnny and Mike to wince.

Roy rounded the corner from the living room, dust pan in hand. “What’s up?”

“How long between Tylenols?” Jenny asked.

“At least four hours, even for him,” Roy said, pointing at Johnny. “Mike, you got anything else around? No aspirin,” he cautioned.

“Yeah, we got plenty. Between me and Gage, I think we can sort out what’s what, right?” said Mike, noticing Johnny was starting to look irked at being talked over like he wasn’t there.

“I’m pretty sure we can handle it,” said Johnny. “C’mon, Stoker; you tucking me in, or what?”

Roy shook his head, grinning.

“What?” Mike asked, defensively.

“Just thought you guys would be on a first-name basis by now, is all.”

Johnny stuck his tongue out at Roy, causing Jenny to giggle.

“It’s just a thing we do,” Mike said, blushing. He followed Johnny down the hallway, stopping at the bathroom to grab some assorted painkillers from their home pharmacy. He filled a mug with water, and crossed the hallway to the bedroom, where he found Johnny already stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt, sitting on the edge of the bed.
“Whatcha got?” Johnny asked, looking at the bottles Mike was holding. “Tylenol 3, nope; Vicodin, nope—that has Tylenol in it; Percodan, nope—that’s got aspirin; geez, why do they have to mix all this stuff up? Aha! Hydrocodone, all by itself. It’s old, but this stuff doesn’t go bad.” He read the label. “One to two tablets, every four to six hours, blah blah blah,” he said. He looked up at Mike. “Whaddaya think—three?”

“No!” Mike said, alarmed.

Johnny smiled. “Yankin’ your chain, Stoker. I’m just taking one, all right?”

“Oh. Okay.” Mike handed Johnny the mug of water, and Johnny washed down a single tablet. Mike returned the mug and their painkiller pharmacopeia to the bathroom, and went back to the bedroom, shutting the door on his way in.

Johnny had already flung the bedspread back, and was lying on his side under the sheet. Mike got in next to him—just for a minute, he promised himself—and spooned himself up against Johnny’s back.

“Mmm,” Johnny said, as Mike nuzzled the back of his neck. “You takin’ a nap, too?”

“Nope. Just a break.”

“’Kay,” Johnny said sleepily. “Can you wake me up in like an hour?”

“I can try,” Mike said.

“Har de har.” Johnny yawned, and grumbled as that reflex caused a sharp twinge in his ribs. He adjusted his position, leaning up against Mike a little more. “Any way you can get any closer, there?”

Mike snuggled himself in closer. He reached his top arm over and gently around Johnny, being sure to avoid the area of the cracked ribs. He slipped his hand under Johnny’s shirt and let it rest on his upper abdomen, relishing the warmth of his skin and the feeling of his breathing, which soon became deep and regular. When Johnny rolled over, mumbled something, and pushed his pillow onto the floor, Mike knew he was out cold, and went back to the rest of the house to join in on the work.

TBC
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Bamboozlepig for yet more advice on police procedure.

Chapter 15.

Mike closed the bedroom door quietly, and returned to the living room, where the DeSoto clan was cleaning up the broken glass and other damage caused by the brick thrown through the window. Glass had gotten everywhere—everywhere. For the first time, Mike was regretting the tile flooring throughout the house. In the L.A. heat, it was the perfect thing for staying cool, but anything glass that was dropped on it shattered and spread over the entire room. Of course, a knee-to-ceiling sized plate glass window created enough glass that there were shards spread far beyond the living room. Mike imagined that even with a good clean-up, they’d still be finding slivers and sparkles weeks from now.

Joanne had disposed of the few large pieces of glass before any of the other adults had arrived. Roy and Chris, both wearing heavy leather gloves, were working on sweeping shards into piles in the living room, while Joanne and Jenny had whisk brooms and dustpans and were moving piles into doubled paper grocery bags.

“Wow—you guys are efficient,” Mike said, as he entered the living room.

“Teamwork,” said Roy, “is key in a job like this, right kids? And speaking of teams—is the other half of the home team asleep?”

“Yes,” confirmed Mike. “Even before the drugs could’ve kicked in.”

“Well, that’s what he does, isn’t it.” Roy said.

“What do you mean?” Mike asked.

“Huh,” Roy said. “I keep forgetting that the whole time you guys have been together, Johnny hasn’t once really gotten hurt. See,” he explained, “we’d always make him come stay at our house for a couple of days whenever he’d been discharged from the hospital for one of his various catastrophes. And he’d seriously sleep about sixteen hours a day. I think that was his secret for how he recovered so fast.”

“Oh,” said Mike. He was trying not to feel miffed that Roy knew something about Johnny that he, Mike, didn’t. But once he put it together that the reason why he didn’t intimately know Johnny’s injury recovery patterns was that he hadn’t been injured since they’d been together, he was easily able to just let it go. “Good to know,” he said.

For a moment, he felt sad that he hadn’t been with Johnny for any of his previous ‘catastrophes,’ as Roy had so aptly put it. But Mike had had this conversation with himself many times over the last couple of years—what if they’d learned of each other’s preferences earlier; what if they’d gotten together when they’d first met at Station 51; what if, what if, what if. But, the reality of it was, Mike had been involved with someone else for the entire time that he and Johnny had known each other.
And Mike just plain wasn’t the cheating type. So he decided to be grateful for the fact that the DeSotos had taken care of Johnny all those times.

After about forty-five minutes of careful sweeping, scooping, dumping, and then mopping it seemed that most of the glass had been removed from the floor of the living room. Mike looked at the clock—it was nearly noon.

“Looks like that glass is history. Thanks, everyone,” said Mike “I’ll start calling around to see if there are any glaziers that will come on a Saturday.”

“Uh,” Roy hesitated. “You may want to wait until Captain Stanley comes by to do that.”

“Oh?” Mike raised his eyebrows. “Why’s that?”

“Um, I’m, uh, not supposed to say, actually. Just—take my word for it. You don’t want a glazier to come today,” Roy said.

“O … kay,” Mike said, “but this is awfully mysterious.”

“Trust me,” Roy said. “I know you’ve been thrown some crummy surprises in the past couple of weeks, but this is a good surprise.”

Jenny was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet with the strain of keeping the secret. “Really, Uncle Mike—it’s gonna be great!”

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it, Jenny!” Mike laughed. “Anyhow, Johnny said to wake him up around now, so I’ll go do that, since I’m very mysteriously not allowed to do what I was going to do.”

“Good plan,” said Roy. “We might take a break in the yard or something. It’s not so bad out today.”

“Make yourselves at home,” Mike said. He turned down the hallway and quietly entered the bedroom. Johnny was all the way over on Mike’s side of the bed, curled around Mike’s pillow. Mike toed his shoes off and got in on the wrong side, and spooned up against Johnny’s back. Johnny immediately rolled himself over towards Mike, pulling the pillow along with him. Mike plucked the pillow out from between them, gently enough that he didn’t risk jarring Johnny’s cracked ribs, but quickly enough that Johnny opened his eyes to see what had happened.

“Hiya,” Johnny muttered, eyes opening more fully. He stretched, and winced, and, noting Mike’s expression, reassured him. “Just a twinge,” he said. “Honest. And speaking of twinges, gotta take this tape off later. It’s starting to curl up around the edges—won’t be doin’ a whole lotta good by tonight, is my guess. But I sure do hate peeling the stuff off.”

Mike helped Johnny sit up, and Johnny accepted the assistance without protest. “Are you less sore than before you lay down?” Mike asked, sitting next to Johnny on the edge of the bed.

Johnny considered the question. “I guess,” he said. “ kinda fuzzy, though.”

“You okay to come out, or do you wanna stay in here?”

“Out, definitely—gotta get some grub, and plus, Cap’s comin’ over in a little while, right?”

“Yeah,” said Mike. “And here’s something weird—I was gonna call a glazier, to come and fix the window, but Roy said not to do it yet, but he wouldn’t say why. Any ideas?”
Johnny shook his head. “Not a one,” he said, standing up from the edge of the bed. As he did so, one of the bedside phones rang.

“You mind getting the other extension?”

Mike handed the phone to Johnny, zipped down the hallway, and skidded back into the bedroom, having forgotten his shoes, which he would still want for going anywhere near the living room.

“All right, I think we’re all here,” Johnny heard Mike say on the extension.

“Okay—I’ll start over, since Mr. Gage didn’t hear the beginning. I’m Detective Tom DeVito, L.A. County Sheriff’s Department, and although we haven’t met, I’ve been working on your case. The upshot is, we’ve got two guys in custody. One of them—William Staib, who works in the motor pool at the fire department—has given a partial confession to some of the crimes one or the other of you were victim to. Mr. Gage, that includes the assault of a few days ago. The other one—James Torrelli—has indicated his own involvement in several misdemeanor charges, but denies any involvement in the felony charges, including the assault, which he claims was perpetrated solely by Mr. Staib, who in turn states that Mr. Torrelli was indeed involved.”

“No,” said Johnny. “Is there, uh, is there gonna hafta be a trial, or anything like that?”

“The arraignment will be on Monday,” replied DeVito. “Unless they plead guilty to all charges at that time, which is highly unlikely, the process will continue.”

“But you said the one guy already confessed,” Johnny continued. “Wouldn’t that mean he’d plead guilty?”

 DeVito sighed. “It’s not always that simple. He might plead guilty. Or he might go for a plea bargain, or he might just decide to plead not guilty and see what happens.”

“Cause the thing is,” Johnny said, “I pretty much just want this whole thing to be over and done with, all right? So what if, I don’t know how this works—but what if I just didn’t press charges for the whole assault thing, and we just kind of left that part out? I mean, get them for the rest of it, but kinda, I don’t know …”

Mike, on the extension in the living room, couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Johnny, what those two did to you is by far the worst part of this whole thing! How can you even think of just letting it go?”

Johnny held the phone to his ear with one hand as the other arm instinctively tried to brace his ribs. “But you don’t understand! I don’t care about that—I just want this all to be done.”

DeVito interrupted. “Mr. Gage, I’m sorry, but I need to get back to what I actually called for, which
to let you know that I need to get another statement from you."

“Aw, c’mon,” Johnny protested. “I already talked to Houlihan, and you guys already got my medical
records, right? How come we need to do this again?"

“I know you already answered Deputy Houlihan’s questions, but there are some new questions now
that we’re pretty sure we have the right guys. There are some things that they said that we need to
follow up on with you. It has to happen before the arraignment, and the sooner, the better. Either
you can come out to my station, which isn’t all that far from your place, or, since you did just get out
of the hospital, I can come out to your place, if that would be easier.”

Johnny hesitated. “The thing is, I just took some pain meds. And they make me kinda stupid. And I
don’t think you want a stupid statement, right?”

“Completely sober would be better, but I certainly understand the necessity for pain medication.
Broken ribs hurt a lot.”

“How about this,” suggested Mike, who was suddenly feeling extremely protective of Johnny.
“What if you, or whoever it’s gonna be, came out here in the early evening—six, seven, something
like that. That’ll give make the timing for different pain meds work out all right, don’t you think,
Johnny?”

“I don’t even know,” Johnny said crossly. “Whatever.”

“Early evening would be fine,” said DeVito. “Just give me a call at the same number you have for
Deputy Price, about fifteen minutes beforehand, if that’s not going to work. Is that all right with you,
Mr. Gage?”

“I guess. I just don’t even wanna think about it any more,” Johnny complained.

“So what’s this arraignment thing all about?” asked Mike. “Can you explain that?”

“Sure,” said DeVito. “Now that the two men I told you about have been apprehended, they need to
be charged with all the crimes listed in all your complaints.” DeVito rattled off a lengthy list of
charges. “The charges happen in the arraignment, which will happen on Monday. The judge will set
bail, which will probably be pretty steep, since one of the charges is for a violent felony. They either
make bail or they stay in jail until the trial. If either one is released on bail, there will be an order of
protection that forbids them to come within a certain distance of either you or your home, and
forbids them to contact you in any way. Someone will let you know the outcome of the arraignment
on Monday. Do either of you have any questions about that?”

“I guess not,” said Mike. “Johnny?”

“I just want this all to be done,” he repeated.

DeVito sighed. “I understand that. But what you have to understand is that when a crime’s been
committed—particularly a violent crime—it can’t just disappear. I know that’s unpleasant for the
victims. But that’s the way the law works, and for good reason.”

Nobody said anything for a few seconds.

“All right, Detective,” Mike said finally. “Thanks for letting us know about all of this. We appreciate
everything you’ve done.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said, reluctantly but politely. “Thanks. Sorry I got mad, but … well.”
“Understandable, Mr. Gage. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to finish up a few things around here.”

“Sure,” said Mike. “See you this evening.”

After everyone hung up, Mike returned to the bedroom. He found Johnny still sitting on the edge of the bed, hanging his head low and pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. Mike sat down next to him and waited.

Johnny didn’t move. He didn’t say anything, and he didn’t look at Mike. He didn’t do anything at all for over a minute. Mike knew not to push him to talk, but couldn’t just let him sit there like that. He reached out a broad, tanned hand, stroking it up Johnny’s back and resting it on his neck.

For the first time that Mike could recall, he felt Johnny flinch under his touch. It was a subtle movement, but to Mike, it was as if he’d just touched a live electrical wire. He yanked his hand back, and folded his hands in his lap, heart pounding. His stomach suddenly felt like he’d drunk a quart of vinegar, with a pint of hot sauce as a chaser. He sat there, frozen on the edge of the bed, three inches from Johnny, but somehow miles away at the same time.

They sat like that for a long, long time.

Finally, Johnny sighed. He didn’t look up, and didn’t move. “I just don’t think I could take it, Mike.”

“Take what?” Mike asked guardedly.

“Sitting there in court, for everyone to see and hear, telling all.” Johnny looked up, but not at Mike. “Anyone who wants can show up for a trial, you know. Anyone in the world can come see somebody’s personal, private life become a matter of public record.”

“So you’d rather let them get away with it? Maybe do it again, to us, or someone else? You’d rather end up in jail for contempt of court?”

“What I’d rather,” Johnny said, voice raised, “is that this whole mess just go away! That’s what I’d rather!”

Half of Mike wanted to flee—just run away. Most of the other half wanted to pull Johnny close, gently kiss away everything that was bothering him. But the tiny piece of Mike that was actually in control knew that either one of those choices would be wrong, wrong. He still had no idea what to say or do, though.

Johnny continued. “You know I like to keep my business to myself. And now—some of the dirtiest laundry I’ve got is about to be strung up the flagpole, for everyone to see.”

If Mike had frozen before, he was now so cold and still he thought he might shatter into a million pieces. “Is that what we are to you? Dirty laundry?” He couldn’t keep the chill from entering his voice.

Now Johnny recoiled. “What? No! Why would you even think—”

“Why would I even think that?” Mike interrupted. “You made it pretty clear, just now—I never thought you were, but you are. You’re ashamed of us. You’d rather let these guys walk, maybe end up in jail yourself, than admit to the world that we’re together. I didn’t think you felt that way—I really didn’t—but I’ve been wrong before, haven’t I.”

“Mike, that’s not it!” It was Johnny’s turn to feel the acid rising in his stomach. “That’s not what I
meant!” He turned to sit cross-legged on the bed next to Mike, ignoring the pain that movement caused in his ribs.

“Well, what did you mean then?” Mike shouted. “Because that’s sure what it sounded like to me!”

“Fuck,” Johnny swore. “Another classic Gage screw-up. Unbelievable.” He took a deep breath, and this time couldn’t ignore the pain. He yanked a pillow off the head of the bed, and clutched it to his midsection to brace his ribs before he continued.

More than anything in the world, Mike wanted to take Johnny in his arms, but if he did that, and was pushed away, he knew he would fall apart completely.

“It’s like this,” Johnny continued after a few seconds. “Here’s me—a big tough guy. Indestructible—hell, I’m a legend, right? I’ve been blown up, run over, knocked down. I’ve fallen off ladders, down cliffs. Been bit by a snake, made sick by a freakin’ monkey. I’ve breathed down air bottles till they were so empty that I felt like the bottle was sucking air outta me instead of the other way around. I’ve been pretty much buried alive. I’ve leapt head first out of windows of rooms that were flashing over more times than I care to remember. I can’t even count how many times I’ve ended up as an overnight guest at Rampart, and, well, treated and released? Those don’t even make it into my conscious brain.”

“But this time?” Johnny forced himself to look at Mike, and Mike forced himself not to look away. “This time, it was two guys in an alley. They only had me for a minute, Mike—less than a minute—and I couldn’t do a fucking thing about it. And if that guy from the store hadn’t shown up, I guarantee you it would’ve been a lot worse than it was. So yeah, Mike—I’m ashamed. Of myself,” he finished, turning away again. “For letting something like that happen. For being so … weak. Not of you, not of us. Never that,” he concluded in a whisper, holding Mike’s pillow against himself tightly.

This time, Mike couldn’t stop himself, and he didn’t care. Mindful of Johnny’s ribs, he gathered him up, pillow and all, and pulled him close. He kissed Johnny’s face, his hair, his shoulders—anything he could reach without letting go. “I’m sorry,” he whispered into Johnny’s ear. “I’m so sorry. I was so caught up in everything, so freaked out, I didn’t even stop to think about how you’d be feeling. I got it all wrong—I’m sorry.”

Johnny pulled the pillow out from between them, and unfolded his crossed legs to wrap them around Mike, who was now kneeling on the bed. Johnny seized Mike and pulled him down, smashing their lips together in a kiss whose blazing intensity was bright enough to wash out the physical pain screaming from his cracked ribs, as the rest of him, mind and body, shouted out, this—this is what I needed.

When Johnny pulled him down, long legs wrapped around Mike’s waist, Mike instinctively let his weight fall onto his own arms, on either side of Johnny. But Johnny kept pulling him downwards, insistently. Not wanting Johnny to allow himself to be crushed, Mike rolled both of them so Johnny was lying on the side without cracked ribs, and Johnny stretched his legs out so they intertwined with Mike’s.

Johnny let Mike’s lips go free for just long enough to repeat what he’d said. “It was never that,” at the same time as Mike said, once again, “I’m sorry.” And they pulled towards each other again, this time with an embrace that was tender and affirming, as the chemicals of stress gradually disappeared from their systems.

“You were right before, about letting them get away with it. I won’t let them win,” Johnny said, finally. “No matter what it takes, Mike, they won’t beat us.”
Mike traced Johnny’s eyebrows, his cheekbones, and his lips with a gentle fingertip. “You’re right,” he said. “They won’t.” He kissed Johnny once more, and helped him sit up.

Johnny tried and failed to bite back a yelp as he sat up. He’d definitely aggravated those ribs just now, but it had to be done. “I’ll just hit the home pharmacy and the latrine real quick, and then let’s go, I don’t know, see if we scared off the DeSotos.”

Mike laughed. “Everyone but Roy was outside while we were on the phone, and I’ll bet he headed for the door the second there was a raised voice. You gettin’ some more Tylenol?”

“Yeah. Can’t imagine how I mighta stressed those ribs.”

Johnny disappeared into the bathroom, and Mike went to the yard. Everyone was sitting on the deck, drinking sodas and taking a well-earned break.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Mike said. “We really had to take that call. It was the detective on our case, and—it’s all just getting to be … a little much.”

“But they’ve got the guys, right?” Chris asked. “In jail?”

“They’re in jail, yes,” Mike nodded, opting to leave out the ‘for now’ that he knew the adults would understand.

“Mom, should I start to make some lunch for everyone?” Jenny asked. She was practically bouncing up and down with the effort of not spilling the beans about whatever the surprise was that Roy had alluded to.

“Sure, Jen—I think Mike brought in some supplies, so maybe if you laid everything out on the counter, we could do an every man, woman, and child for him or herself assembly line,” said Joanne.

Everyone headed back into the cool of the house. Johnny was just easing himself down into the recliner as they came in. Jenny was in the kitchen getting lunch supplies out, when there was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it.” Mike trotted to the door, and opened it to reveal Hank Stanley. “Hey, Cap! C’mon in!”

“Hi, Mike. I’ll pop in to say hi to the gang, but I’m here to work, so I’ll be headed right back out.” Cap stopped in the foyer to take off his shoes, but Mike stopped him.

“Hold it—still might be some shards around,” he said.

“Whoops—good point. Hey, there he is,” Cap said as he rounded the corner into the living room and greeted Johnny, who was looking slightly bleary in the recliner. “How ya doin’, pal?”

“Hey, Cap. Way better ‘n last time we talked, that’s for sure. Kinda tired, though,” he admitted.

“Not surprising,” Cap said, “considering you’ve only been home from the hospital for less than twenty four hours. That’s quite an impressive shiner you’ve got there, by the way.”

“Well,” said Johnny, “I wish I could say ‘you should see the other guys,’ but they probably look just fine.”

“Maybe,” said Mike, “but they’re looking just fine sitting in jail, though. Keep that in mind.”

“Yeah.” Johnny changed the subject. “Thanks for coming, Cap. I’m sure we’ll be able to put you to work somehow, even though the glass is all cleaned up.”
“Oh, I don’t think I’ll run out of things to do,” Cap said, with a wide grin on his face and a sparkling glint in his eyes. “Say, Johnny—can I borrow the keys to your Rover? We need to get the driveway cleared out. Roy, that means your car too. Looks like you guys are sitting down to lunch, so just toss me those keys and I’ll move the vehicles.”

Roy handed Cap his car keys, and Mike handed him the key to the Rover. Cap left the house again, and Mike just shook his head.

“This is really mysterious,” he reiterated, watching Cap move the Rover, then Roy’s convertible.

After the cars had been moved, Cap stood in the driveway near the garage, and started making backing signals to an as yet unseen vehicle.

“Okay, I gotta see what’s going on out there,” Mike said.

“Wait! Me, too,” said Johnny, folding the recliner into a more upright position. He let Mike help him up, and squeezed Mike’s hand one extra time before letting go to head outside.

Johnny and Mike stepped outside, where they could see Cap assisting the driver of a white box truck backing into the driveway. The truck was emblazoned with a logo of two cartoonish-looking chalkboard erasers, and the phrase ‘¡Los Borradores!’ One of the cartoonish erasers was wearing a superhero cape, and flying across a path of graffiti on a brick wall, leaving a clean streak behind. Johnny and Mike looked at each other, and Mike shrugged. “Beats me,” he said.

The back-up beeping ceased, and the truck’s engine cut out. The driver, face obscured by the large side mirrors of the truck, opened the door and stepped down. Hank stood back, either doing something or pretending to do something at the back of the truck, and let the driver approach Mike and Johnny on his own.

“Marco,” Mike said softly, as the driver approached. Johnny’s eyes widened, as he realized Mike was right.

Marco approached them, hesitantly at first. He stopped on the walkway, about a yard away from them. His eyes were downcast, and his hands were behind his back.

Nobody said a word for a few seconds.

Then Marco spoke. “I heard some old friends of mine were in trouble. And I heard they might need a little help with some sandblasting. I can do that, if they’ll let me.”

Nobody was sure what to say for a couple of seconds, so Marco went on.

“Cap told me about what happened. And … I know he didn’t mean it that way, but while he was telling me about everything that happened?” Marco shook his head, looking at the ground. “I felt like I was no better than the guys who did it.”

Mike interrupted him, very quietly. “Marco, no. You’re not like that. You would never do any of those things—not to anyone, not for any reason. We know that, and we hope you know it too.”

“No, I know I wouldn’t. But I kind of felt like I … contributed to what they did.”

Johnny spoke up for the first time. “But you didn’t.”

“No.” Marco looked up again. “No, I didn’t.” He looked at Mike. “There was something you said, when you were still in the hospital after your accident. When I first learned you two were, uh, a
couple,” he said awkwardly. “You said I should try to remember you’re both still the same people I’ve always known. And…” Marco’s eyes returned to the ground briefly, but rose again. “And I’m ashamed that this—that all those things that someone did to you both—is what it took for me to remember that. Because you’re two of the finest people I’ve ever known.”

They all looked at each other for a few seconds, trying to figure out what to say, what to do.

Finally, Mike broke the silence. “Marco, will you come into our house with us, and have some lunch?”

Johnny let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. He crossed over to where Marco was standing, and clapped him on the shoulder. “C’mon, man; I’m starving. How ‘bout you?”

Marco’s eyes looked maybe just a little bit darker and shinier than usual as he nodded. “Yeah. I’m starving too. Let’s go eat.”

Captain Stanley watched the proceedings surreptitiously from behind the truck. He couldn’t hear what was being said, but he smiled in satisfaction as he saw Johnny put a hand on Marco’s shoulder, and saw the three men walk into the house together.

“Okay, Chet—looks like we’re gonna get to do our job,” he said. Chet, who hadn’t moved from the passenger seat of the van when they pulled into the driveway, sighed with relief and hopped down.

“Thank goodness, Cap. I think it woulda just about killed Marco if they’d turned him away.”

“They wouldn’t have, Chet,” Captain Stanley said. “Not in a million years. C’mon—look at who we’re talking about here.”

“True. I guess I never heard of Gage ever holding a grudge, except against that professor or whatever he was who tried to study the reservation when he was a kid. And Stoker—well, he’s put up with Gage for a looooong time now, so I think he must be a lot more resilient than he seems.”

Hank shook his head. “You have a unique way of putting pretty much everything, Kelly. C’mon—let’s go see the whole gang, all together in the same place.”

Kelly and Stanley let themselves in the front door, and could instantly hardly hear themselves.

“Chet! When’d you get here?” Johnny asked from the recliner in the living room. The nine people in the house were spread out in the kitchen, dining room, and living room. Marco was sitting on the couch across from Johnny’s recliner, and Roy and his family were in the dining room. Mike was assembling sandwiches for Johnny and Marco in the kitchen.

“Holy smokes! Mike—ya know what?” Johnny shouted from the living room.

“What, babe?” Mike asked, bringing Johnny a glass of iced tea and a sandwich, and handing another plated sandwich to Marco.

“It’s all six of us! All in the same place! You know when the last time that was?”

Mike knew exactly when it was, but didn’t feel like reminding people of that last party at his house, when some of the people in the room didn’t know that he and Johnny were together, and had thought Mike was transferring to another station just because of the commute. “Probably about two and a half years ago, right?”

“You guys should take a picture,” said Jenny. “Uncle Johnny, where’s your camera?”
“Nuh-uh,” Johnny said, shaking his head. “No pictures till this shiner is totally gone.”

“Vanity, thy name is John Gage,” Chet jabbed.

Mike winced anticipatorily at where this conversation could go. Now that he really understood the full extent of the damage those two goons had done in such a short time, he wanted to protect Johnny from any discussion of the assault or its aftermath.

“Hell, I don’t care about that,” Johnny said, waving a hand as if to brush the suggestion away. “I just don’t wanna remember how I got it, is all. So let’s just be sure the six of us get together some other time, soon, and we’ll do it then. How ‘bout that, Marco?”

“Sounds good to me,” Marco replied.

Johnny snapped his fingers. “Marco! I forgot—we met your cousin Ben.”

Marco’s eyes widened. “Ben Houlihan? Really?”

“Yep—he came by our place a couple times for this business. And, he responded to the, uh, assault. Called my fellow paramedics on me, thank you very much. But other than that, he’s a great kid. Guy, I mean.”

Marco laughed. “Yeah, he’s got the same problem you did at that age, Johnny. He’s twenty three or twenty four, you know.”

“I figured,” Johnny said, rolling his eyes. “I guess I’m gettin’ old, huh, if I can call a grown man—a cop, no less—a kid.”

“Look at it this way,” Mike said. “At least now, you look like you’re an adult, even if you do still get carded.”

The old friends ate their lunch, good-natured bantering flying through the house. After lunch, Joanne insisted that she and Chris do the clean-up from the meal, even though Chris protested mightily that he was far more interested in the sandblasting. Jenny happily stayed with Johnny. This time, their diversion was Johnny teaching Jenny how to take a BP reading, listening for the different sounds through the stethoscope.

The rest of the men were outside, getting started on the task of blasting the pink paint off the front of the house. Marco had explained most of the procedure and assigned tasks to the men.

“And the last thing is—and this is weird—we’re not actually using sand. We’re gonna use ground up almond and pistachio shells. They’re softer than brick, but harder than paint, so they’ll take off the paint without wearing away any of the brick.” He clapped his hands together. “Okay, everybody ready?”

As soon as the machinery started up, Johnny and Jenny couldn’t hear themselves think. They retreated to the dining room, but found that the noise was just as loud anywhere in the front of the house.

“I don’t know, kids; I think we should probably just go home,” Joanne said. She looked at Johnny’s drooping eyelids. “Johnny, do you want to come back with us so you can get a quiet nap?”

Johnny shook his head. “Thanks, Joanne, but then someone would just have to bring me back here later, so I’ll just use some earplugs and sleep while the guys are working. I feel like a jerk napping while they’re all out there working, but there we are.”
“There we are indeed,” Joanne said. “Well, what did you think of Hank’s surprise?”

“The equipment, or who brought it?” Johnny asked.

“Either, or both.”

“Both. Both those surprises—well, they were just what we needed,” Johnny admitted. When he’d first seen Marco, and realized what was happening, he felt something inside him get glued back together again—something that had been broken for a long time.

“And now what it looks like you need,” said Joanne, “is a nap. So I think, kids, it’s definitely time for us to head home, since there’s not much more we can do here.”

“Okay, Mom,” Jenny said. “Uncle Johnny, are you sure you’ll be able to sleep? Cause you really need to, you know.”

“I’m sure. In fact, I’m not so sure I’ll be able to stay awake much longer.”

“All right,” said Joanne. “Chris, you ready?”

“Yeah.” Chris was sulking, not having been invited to work on the sandblasting project, which already had far more hands than were needed.

“How about the back door?” said Johnny. “That way you won’t get blasted on the way out.”

“Good thinking,” said Joanne. “C’mon, kids.”

“Bye,” said Johnny, as he stood up to head for his nap. “Thanks a lot for helping out—all of you.”

“You’re welcome,” they each said.

Johnny struggled into the bed, and shoved a pair of earplugs in. He could still hear—or perhaps feel—a low-pitched vibration, but all the high-frequency noise from the process was blocked by the earplugs. He wished he could be helping—especially since he was the only one of the original Station 51 A-shift who wasn’t out there right now—but it just wasn’t an option. He hadn’t told Mike, but he’d taken another hydrocodone after their make-up making out had aggravated his ribs, so it was high time to hit the hay before he got silly and foggy.

Johnny’s next-to-last thought, as he was lulled to sleep by the rumble coming up through the floor, was a sinking reminder of how one tiny misunderstanding—one poor choice of words on his part, one small leap to an incorrect conclusion on Mike’s part—made him feel worse than he’d ever felt in his entire life. His last thought, though, was one he had most nights in the last year or so as he drifted off to sleep. Or at least, he’d thought it most nights, until the last week or so, when it had been muted by the stress of the harassment and then the assault. And that last thought, which was finally allowed to surface again, was one of his favorites of all times: I’m a luckier, happier man than I ever thought I’d be.

TBC
Chapter 16

The sound of the sandblasting—Mike couldn’t bring himself to think of it as “nutshell blasting”—was irritating, more than deafening, at least from the perspective of people used to working with fire equipment. The compressor was noisy, no doubt about it, but the sound of the particles hitting the brick face of the house wasn’t nearly as grating as Mike had thought it would be.

The men took turns manning the business end of the blasting equipment. Being experienced with handling the pressure of firefighting hoses, none of them had trouble managing the comparatively mild pressure the sandblasting equipment created. Still, they all enjoyed seeing the ugly pink paint seem to evaporate, so there was some squabbling over whose turn it was next.

After his second turn with the end of the sprayer, Mike noticed Hank Stanley giving him a frown.

Hank approached Mike and addressed him quietly. “Mike,” he said, “you’re still hobbling a bit. Why don’t you go inside and put that leg up for a while? We’ve obviously got more people out here than we really need, anyhow.”

Mike was grateful for Cap’s discretion, but had to decline. “Thanks for asking, Cap, but I really want to be out here with you guys, you know? Partly since Marco, you know, really put himself out there to help us out, and partly because I’m just so sick of not being able to do anything about all this crap.”

Cap nodded. “I can see your point, on both counts. Just try not to overdo it too much, okay? Because honestly, you look like you might be coming down with something, which I sure as heck would be if I’d had the kind of week you guys just had.”

“Actually, you just reminded me to go take my antibiotics,” Mike said ruefully. “Because I did get sick—turns out that screw came loose last weekend partly because I had a low-grade infection brewing in there, and what with everything that happened, I forgot to take the antibiotics Dr. Early sent me home with. So I guess it’s not surprising I look sick.”

Hank’s frown deepened. “Go take that pill, and do yourself a favor while you’re in there, will you, and drink a huge glass of water or something. And stand in front of an AC vent for a few minutes, too. Seriously, pal, I understand why you need to be out here, but you gotta take care of yourself.”

Mike nodded, ducking his head sheepishly at even a mild chewing out from his old captain. “Okay, Cap. Will do. Thanks for the reminder.”

Mike took another look at the front of the house, which was more than halfway cleaned off, and went through the gate to enter the house via the kitchen door. He reflexively toed off his shoes and left them at the side door, and traipsed down the hallway to the bathroom, where he picked up the bottle of antibiotics. He took the bottle back to the kitchen, realizing that if he left it in the medicine cabinet he’d certainly continue to forget to take the pills. He opened the bottle, took out a tablet, and downed it with a large glass of water.

From the kitchen, Mike had a flash of anxiety when he noticed that the message light was flashing on his answering machine. He wondered, briefly, how long it would be before he could see that flashing light and not expect to hear static-covered and horrible words. He pressed “play,” and laughed at himself when he heard the message from the garage that his truck was all set with new
tires and could be picked up any time before five. He could probably get a ride back into town from
Roy or Chet, both of whom would be passing close to the garage on their way home. He called
back, thanked the garage for their quick turnaround, and assured them he’d be there by five.

Mike took a quick physical inventory of himself. He realized he was still thirsty, and got another
glass of water, adding some ice this time. He sat at a chair at the dining room table to drink his water.
He felt sluggish and heavy, but that could have been either from the infection, the caffeine
withdrawal, or still being short on sleep and long on stress. And, he realized, he was developing the
headache Dr. Early had warned him to expect.

It wasn’t like other headaches he’d experienced. It didn’t start at the back of his neck, reaching up
from tense neck muscles to latch onto his scalp and squeeze through his skull to his brain. This time,
it felt more like there was too much blood in his head—like there was pressure expanding from the
inside, rather than squeezing from the outside. He decided to nip that in the bud, and rose from his
chair to head back to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom for some Tylenol. As he stepped forward,
a glint of light from the floor caught his eye. He instinctively moved his bare foot slightly to the right
of where he’d been going to step, and bent down to take a closer look.

An inch-long diamond-shaped piece of glass was sticking straight up from a crack in the grout
between two tiles on the floor. He’d missed it with his foot by only a fraction of an inch.

That would’ve just taken the cake, Mike thought, as he carefully plucked the glass out from the crack
in the grout. He tossed it in the kitchen trash, and went to the bathroom to get the Tylenol, picking
his shoes up from the side door and slipping them back on along the way.

The bathroom mirror revealed to Mike why Cap expressed concern about his well being. He had
dark half-circles under his eyes, and his eyeballs were still as bloodshot as they’d been the previous
day when he was on his caffeine binge. His cheeks were tinged with pink, but that color looked
unhealthy sitting on top of an overall greyish tone that was by no means Mike’s normal coloration.
He opened the medicine cabinet and got himself two Tylenol tablets. He grabbed the thermometer,
and took it with him back to the dining room.

Mike waited a few minutes before placing it under his tongue, since he’d just drunk ice water. But,
after a few minutes, he got a believable reading: 100.5 degrees. He sighed, washed the thermometer
at the kitchen sink, and left it in its case on the counter next to the antibiotics. He finished his ice
water, and returned outside to rejoin the guys.

In the short time Mike had been inside, the house was another quarter of the way closer to being
finished. Chet was joyously and enthusiastically manning the wand of the blasting equipment, and
Marco stood by the compressor with protective headphones on, while Roy and Hank stood back,
watching. Mike joined them.

“I think of the six of us,” Cap shouted over the noise, “Chet might just officially be the least grown
up now.”

“Or the best at having fun,” Mike suggested. “You should’ve seen him over here last weekend with
the water balloons.”

After another few minutes, Chet relinquished control of the wand to Cap, who demolished another
third of the remaining paint before he handed control over to Roy. Roy then stopped when there was
another small portion to be erased, and handed the wand off to Mike.

“It’s all yours, Mike,” Marco shouted over the compressor. “Kill it off!”
Mike gleefully erased the remaining splashes of pink enamel. When the final traces were gone, Marco shut off the compressor and everyone cheered.

Mike stood back and looked at the house. “Wow, guys. Thanks a lot—except for the plywood over the window, it’s like nothing ever happened.” He turned to Marco. “I can’t thank you enough, Marco. We seriously had no idea how to even figure out who could do this job. And we sure didn’t think it would be done any time soon.”

Marco flashed a brilliant smile. “It was my pleasure, Mike. I’m glad I could help. We all felt really rotten for you guys.”

“Anyone need a drink?” Mike asked.

Four hot and sweaty men replied in the affirmative. Everyone pitched in to load the equipment back into the truck, and then trooped indoors.

“I guess we should be quiet,” said Cap, “if Johnny’s still sleeping.”

“Nah,” said Mike. “He can pretty much sleep through anything, and I’m pretty sure he had earplugs in for the sandblasting noise anyhow. Oh—and leave your shoes on—I just had a near miss with a huge hunk of glass.” He turned to the guys to get drink orders. “Marco, what can I get you? We’ve got OJ, beer, and soda.”

“Just a 7-Up for me if you’ve got it—I have to drive the truck back to L.A. pretty soon, actually.”

Mike handed a green can to Marco, and then took care of the rest of the orders. Everyone settled into the living room.

“So, uh, what’s next, Mike?” Chet asked. “Roy said they got the guys—are they the same guys who did all this bullshit?”

“We think so,” said Mike.

“Who the hell are they, anyhow?” Cap asked, frowning.

“The weird thing is, we don’t know either of the guys. Johnny dated the sister of one of ’em, real briefly, way back when. But we’d never laid eyes on either of the two guys before,” Mike explained. “And I’ll tell you,” he admitted, “when I first saw that guy standing over me last night, it was all I could do to not just … well, do some really serious damage. I think if my co-worker hadn’t taken him down, the creep would be in a world of hurt right now.”

“Well, he woulda deserved it,” Chet said darkly.

“Yeah, but then I’d probably be in jail now instead of him,” said Mike. “Because I’m not entirely sure how far I would’ve gone with that creep.”

“How’s John doing?” Cap asked quietly.

Mike knew he wasn’t asking about the physical healing.

“Uh, not so hot. And that’s all I’m gonna say,” Mike said carefully.

“Just one thing—does he want people to ask him if he’s okay, or is it better not to ask him?” Cap pressed.

Mike looked at each of the guys in turn. “I … don’t know if it’s the best thing in the long run,” he
said slowly, “but for now, he’s made it clear that he’s pretty much had it with the whole topic.”

“Understandable,” said Cap. “I mean, he’s used to getting beaten up by forces of nature and inanimate objects, on the job, but, well, this is entirely different.”

“That’s … very perceptive,” Mike said. “But guys? Can we talk about something else? Please?”

Marco came to the rescue, for the second time that day. “I’d love to hear about what you’ve been working on in the Arson unit,” he said. “If you’re allowed to say.”

Mike was relieved to talk about something safe—and had plenty to tell the guys about the more interesting aspects of his job. He laid out all his job duties, and told some stories about some of the more interesting experiences he’d had. “I think my favorite part,” he concluded, “is going out to a scene, during overhaul, and gathering physical evidence. But to tell the truth, I also don’t mind the writing—it kind of, I don’t know, suits me, to be able to put it all neatly together at the end.”

“You think you’ll ever do any testifying?” Marco asked.

Mike nodded. “It’s only a matter of time and experience, really. But eventually, yes.”

“I can see you being good at that,” said Marco. “Back when we were all at 51s, you never talked much, but when you did, you were always clear—especially about technical stuff. I remember one time, when there were some scouts visiting the station—teenagers, I think—you pretty much taught them half of what they’d need to know to operate the pumps on Big Red,” he recalled. “You had their undivided attention for a really, really long time.”

Mike laughed. “Well, that’s not exactly a jury of our peers, but I’ll take it,” he said. “Honestly, testifying in court is probably the last thing anyone from any of my old stations would imagine me doing, but there we are.”

“Listen,” said Marco. “I hate to say it, but I really have to get going. I have to be back home by five, to help with one of my mother’s parties, and it’s almost four now.”

“You know what?” said Mike. “Lemme go get Johnny. I know he’ll want to see you before you head out. And he oughta be getting up anyhow. I think he’s up to twelve hours of sleep since midnight.”

“Okay,” said Marco. “As long as you’re sure it’s okay to wake him up.”

“It’s definitely okay to wake me up,” said Johnny, appearing from around the corner. He sat on the arm of the couch next to Mike. “What’s goin’ on, guys?”

“We finished getting rid of that paint, Johnny,” Marco said. “And unfortunately, I gotta go, or I’ll be in big trouble at home. But come on out—take a look!”

“Sure thing,” said Johnny, walking Marco to the door.

“Holy smokes,” Johnny said, staring at the house. “Man, you really did it!”

“We really did it,” said Marco. He shifted back and forth from foot to foot as he watched Johnny looking at the front of the house. “Johnny,” he continued tentatively, “I, uh …”

Johnny turned to face Marco, and waited for him to continue.

“I hope we can be friends again,” Marco said quietly.
“I’m not sure we ever stopped being friends,” said Johnny, “depending on your definition. Mike and I—well, we missed you, after I left 51s, but we never stopped … well, being fond of you, wondering how you were doing, that sorta thing. Cap kept us up to date some. But it was pretty hard, knowing that someone we liked and respected didn’t seem to … be able to be around us any more.”

Marco looked down at the ground. “When I first found out about you guys—it was the morning Mike had his accident. The wake-up tones sounded, and you and Roy were gone, and Cap was just sitting there, at the big table in the day room, when Chet and Ed and I came out. I didn’t remember hearing the squad get called out, so I asked Cap what was going on. And man, he just sat there, staring at his coffee, and me and Chet looked at each other, figuring someone had bought it, and we were just waiting to hear who it was.

“And then Cap said it—all he said was, ‘Mike Stoker got hurt last night, and he’s in real bad shape, fellas.’ And you know what it was like? It was like when I heard Kennedy had been shot—one of those moments that just burns itself into your brain. And Chet—he understood right away why you and Roy weren’t there, but me? I didn’t have a clue. I asked Cap what he knew, and he told us. And then Chet said something like ‘So Roy took John out there?’

“But I didn’t get it. I forget what I said—something like ‘Huh? That’s not even close to our district—why would they go out there?’ And Chet—he just looked at me, and looked at Cap, and then he dragged me by the arm back into the dorm, and sat me down on my bunk, and laid it all out in black and white.”

Johnny sat down in the grass, and motioned for Marco to join him. Marco sat cross-legged in front of Johnny, and continued.

“And man, you know what the first thing I thought was?”

“That you didn’t get it?” Johnny asked. “That you couldn’t believe that a guy like me, and a guy like him—”

“No!” Marco said. “I mean, yes, I thought that too. But the first thing I thought was, seems like everybody knows about this except for me.”

Johnny didn’t have anything he could say in response. Because it was true. They’d intentionally told Cap about their relationship, and Roy and Chet had figured it out on their own. But Mike and Johnny had never told Marco, largely because they were afraid he wouldn’t be able to accept it.

“And the second thing I thought was, ‘It’s a good thing they didn’t tell me, ‘cause I don’t see how I could have worked with them.’”

Johnny digested that for a second—it wasn’t an entirely unexpected revelation. But he knew it wasn’t where Marco wanted to stop, so he moved along. “What was the third thing you thought?”

“The third thing was, ‘How could they tell everyone else, but not me?’ And the fourth thing: ‘Because they knew I wouldn’t understand.’ And the next thing? ‘But they’re my friends, so it shouldn’t matter.’ And I went back and forth, back and forth in my head.

“But then, I went to see Mike in the hospital, when he could first have visitors other than you. The first time I went, the nurse said to go on in—that Mike would probably be pretty tired, but he was okay for visitors. So I went in, and sure enough, Mike was out cold. You were there, and you were asleep in a chair, with your head on the bed, and his arm was around you, and he had his other arm kind of across himself, and you were holding on to that hand. And you know what I did?” Marco looked Johnny right in the eye. “I turned around, and walked right back out again. Because as many
times as I told myself it didn’t matter, I just …”

“You were uncomfortable,” said Johnny. “I know. But you came back, right? Maybe not that same
day, but you came back plenty of times.”

“I tried to go back in—a bunch of times. I just sat there on a bench outside his room, and I’d get up
every so often, and go to the door, and then I’d just quit and sit back down again. And then I saw
some guys who I guess were from Mike’s station go in, and they stayed in for a while. So when they
came out, I thought, ‘why can’t I do that too?’ So I did it. I could hardly look you in the eye, but I
went in, and you left after a minute or two, and I just sat with him for a little while.”

“You’re lookin’ me in the eye now,” Johnny said.

“Cause now I see—there’s plenty of stuff I … don’t get, but it shouldn’t matter. Doesn’t matter. All
right?”

“All right,” said Johnny. He plucked at the dry grass in the lawn. “You know, I had some thinkin’ to
do, too, about this whole thing.”

Marco looked confused. “Like what?”

“Like, did we do the right thing, or the wrong thing, by not saying anything to you after the other
guys knew? And something I wanna say about that—the only person we flat out told was Cap. Roy
figured it out on his own, and so did Chet. And Cap knew something was going on, but we kinda
had to tell him what, so he’d understand Mike’s transfer request. And until Mike got hit? We didn’t
tell anyone else, man. And even after that, we didn’t go around sayin’, oh, by the way, did you know
we’re Involved, with a capital ‘I?’ It just … became apparent. So just so you know, it’s not like we
were going around telling everyone except you.”

“But Johnny, even Ed Jackson knew—and he didn’t hardly even know Mike, being his replacement
and all,” Marco said.

“Well, how did he know? What did he say to you?” Johnny asked patiently.

“I don’t know—I asked him if he’d known about you guys, and he said he’d kind of figured, but
didn’t wanna bring it up,” Marco admitted. “So that made me feel real dumb, Johnny—I thought I
knew both you guys real well, and I didn’t have a clue.”

Johnny cleared his throat. “All I can say, Marco, was that it seemed to us, at the time Mike was
transferring, that it was, I dunno, the less bad of two bad choices to not say anything to you. But then
—as after Mike’s accident—it was kind of a moot point. And, after, I could tell you still cared, because
you came to see Mikey in the hospital, and stuff, but when I got ready to come back to work, you
know what I was most worried about? Not whether Mike would manage all right at home. Not
whether I’d be physically up to the job after taking a month off. But whether you’d still trust me, still
let me have your back on the job. And as soon as I saw we still worked together as good as always,
even though we sometimes couldn’t look each other in the eye during down times, I knew it’d be
okay someday. I really hoped everything would be okay by the time I left 51s to take the captaincy
up north, but …” Johnny shrugged. “It wasn’t.”

“Is it okay now?” Marco asked. “Because I’d like it to be.”

“Yeah, Marco. And you know why it’s okay now? Because you know, in your heart, that ‘it’
doesn’t matter. Even if the ‘it’ is somethin’ you might never be able to look in the eye, you can look
me in the eye, and you can look Mike in the eye.” Johnny let the grass he’d been plucking at blow
away in the breeze.

“And you know one more thing?” Johnny continued. “We’ve been sayin’ how we’re the same two guys you always knew—but we’re not, really. I mean, I’ve learned how to behave like an adult—most of the time, anyhow. And a lot of that—well, the Stoker influence can’t be taken too lightly.” Johnny punctuated that remark with a grin. “And Mike? Well, I heard him from the hallway, telling you guys stories about his job. I don’t think he woulda done that three years ago, do you?”

“No. I don’t think I ever heard him say much of anything about himself before,” Marco said. “It’s like—I don’t know—maybe he’s more comfortable with who he is. And could that be the Gage influence?”

“It’s possible—but I think also, nearly getting killed, and having to work your way back to life from the kind of damage he took …” Johnny shook his head. “It changes you. And going through it with him changed me, too.”

“You guys have been through a lot of shit together,” Marco said.

“We sure have.” Johnny shook his head, thinking about the last week. “But normally, when people aren’t giving us the kind of shit we’ve taken in the last couple weeks, we’re real damned happy.”

“I’m … sorry that I’ve only been around for the bad times,” Marco said, again hanging his head. “But—and this is a promise—that’s over and done with.”

“Good—because lemme tell you, when this shit is all over, and those bastards are in jail? It’s party time, my friend.”

“And even before that, I guarantee there will be some kind of Lopez fiesta. Or fiasco, depending on how much alcohol is involved.”

“Drop us a line, and we’ll be there,” said Johnny.

“I’ll do that.” He stood up, and offered Johnny a hand up.

Johnny braced his ribs, and took Marco’s hand from his own uninjured side, wincing as he stood up.

“See you later, Marco. And—we can’t thank you enough for everything you did to help us today. I know we woulda gotten things sorted out eventually, but Mike—well, you know, he likes things to look right, and this place sure as hell didn’t look right. And having you show up, with this equipment—it was great to see the equipment, but it was even better to see you.”

“It was good to see you guys, too, Johnny. I’m glad I could help. I’ll drop you guys a line real soon to see how you are.” And with that, Marco climbed back into his brother’s ‘¡Los Borradores!’ truck, and drove off.

Johnny watched the truck disappear down the street. He stood out in the blazing sun for a minute or two, collecting his thoughts. He didn’t figure Marco would ever be truly comfortable with ‘it,’ but he was relieved that it seemed like maybe he could at least look past ‘it’ and still see his friends there.

The rest of his friends—or a lot of the rest of his friends—were inside, so Johnny headed in. Mike met him at the door with two extra-strength Tylenol, a glass of milk, and, even better, a discreet kiss in the foyer where nobody could see.

“Hey, babe,” Mike said, after letting him go. “Everything all right?” He handed Johnny the glass and the tablets, and Johnny washed them down.
“Yeah.” Johnny took another couple of gulps of the cold milk. “Yeah—I was just chatting with Marco a little. It was good. I think—well, we can talk about it more later, but I’m pretty sure we’re all okay.”

Mike nodded. “I think so too. And not just because he saved our asses today.”

“Nope. Not just ‘cause of that.”

“C’mon. Rest of the guys are still here,” said Mike. “Let’s go shoot the shit for awhile before they have to take off.”

“‘Kay.” Johnny stopped at the kitchen for a refill, and joined the rest of the gang in the living room. Chet heaved himself out of the recliner, and gestured to Johnny. “All yours, pal.”

Johnny grinned, but shook his head. “Nuh-uh—you just saw how hard it is to get outta that thing. I get in there, and I ain’t never gettin’ back out again. So shove over, Mikey—I want some couch.”

Mike obligingly made just enough room for Johnny to squeeze in next to him. Johnny rolled his eyes and squeezed in, even though there was still plenty of room for Mike to have moved over farther.

“House looks good as new, guys. Thanks a lot for comin’ out.”

“No trouble at all, John. Actually,” Cap admitted, “I haven’t had that much fun in a long time.”

“Wish I coulda played too, but, you know,” said Johnny. He blew out a breath.

“It really was fun,” said Chet. “Not as much fun as water balloons, but at least nobody ended up at Rampart this time.”

“Anything else we can do for you guys before we clear out?” Roy asked.

“Actually,” Mike admitted, “if one of you guys could drop me at the garage where my truck is, that’d be great. It’s just near HQ.”

“I can do that,” Roy said. “Chet, you live around there too, so why don’t I drop you off too. Then Cap can get home.”

“That’d be good,” said Hank. “I’m splitting a shift with Len Sterling tomorrow, so I oughta spend at least a little while at home this weekend. You okay on your own for a while, John?”

“Yep—I think most of the heavy stuff is outta my system by now, and I wouldn’t mind some time to collect my thoughts before that detective guy shows up later,” Johnny said.

“Okay, then—I should get going,” said Cap. “Oh—and I almost forgot—Jane sent along another one of her frozen casseroles. It’s in the fridge, with instructions and everything.”

Johnny grinned. “We’re probably cleanin’ out her freezer for her this week, what with one thing and another, huh?”

All the guys stood up to go.

“Thanks again, guys,” said Johnny.

They all trooped to the door, Cap in the lead, Roy and Chet following, with Mike trailing. Cap opened the door, and they all stepped out into the sweltering heat.
“Oops, forgot something,” Mike said, immediately ducking back inside.

Chet rolled his eyes. “Uh huh,” he said. “And what do you guys wanna bet that he comes back out with nothin’ he didn’t have before, except a stupid grin plastered on his mug?”

Mike dashed back in to the living room. “Don’t move,” he said to Johnny, who lowered the magazine he’d just picked up. He straddled Johnny, with his knees on the couch, and, cupping Johnny’s face in his hands, kissed him thoroughly. He let go after a minute or so, and studied Johnny closely. “Try not to get too worked up about this thing with DeVito, all right?”

Johnny laughed. “That’s the pot calling the kettle black if I ever heard it, but yeah. I’ll try. Love you. Now shoo!”

Mike grinned widely as let himself out the front door again, locking it behind him. Yes, things were starting to look up again in the Stoker/Gage household.

Chet looked smugly at Cap and Roy as Mike emerged from the doorway. “See?”

TBC
Johnny was on his own in the house for the first time since earlier in the day of the assault. It was a little after four, and Detective DeVito was coming at six. Johnny fervently hoped that Mike would be back by the time DeVito showed up—he didn’t relish the idea of being grilled by this guy without someone else present. He briefly toyed with the idea of telling DeVito he needed to cancel their appointment, but decided that no, he preferred to get the interview out of the way. It would just be rehashing the same old shit anyhow, he reminded himself, so no big deal. And he wasn’t a suspect, so it wasn’t like he needed a lawyer.

Johnny’s mind was swirling with the events of the day. It was a bit difficult for him to believe that it had only been twenty-four hours since he was released from Rampart, but it was true. He’d gone straight to Roy’s and slept until supper time, and then had stayed awake until around nine, when Jenny had sent him to bed. And eleven hours later, when he and Mike had finally gotten out of bed, he only made it a few hours until he needed to sleep again.

And it was after that morning nap that Johnny had his worst misunderstanding with Mike ever. Sure, they’d fought about things before—but usually minor things that could be easily repaired. And for sure, Johnny had seen Mike angry before—usually he fumed, but sometimes he yelled, too. But that morning was the first time Johnny had ever been the object of Mike’s anger.

“Is that what we are to you? Dirty laundry?”

The icy coldness of Mike’s voice when he’d hurled those words back at Johnny was nothing close to anything Johnny had ever experienced from him before. Johnny had explained what he’d meant, and Mike had been suitably apologetic about misunderstanding, and about not recognizing the emotional toll of the assault. But the substance behind Mike’s angry retort left Johnny with some things to think about.

Johnny was happy with Mike—of that, he had no doubt whatsoever. He couldn’t imagine living without him; didn’t want to think about how he’d be now if the accident eighteen months ago had been just a little worse, if the car had been going just a little faster, if Mike had been thrown a little farther, or landed a little harder. But when he was brutally honest with himself, Johnny had to admit that even though he was happy, his life was nothing like how he’d imagined it would turn out.

Perhaps it was the influence of being close friends with Roy, the quintessential, All-American Family Man. He had a wife with whom he had a solid and loving relationship, he had a satisfying career, great kids, a nice house—the whole package. And even though Johnny was only a little younger than Roy chronologically, he always considered himself to be Roy’s junior in many ways. So in a sense, Johnny had “grown up” with Roy as a model for how a satisfied and happy adult should live. And certainly, when Johnny had been twenty-three years old, and had imagined what his thirty-three-year-old self might be doing in ten years, his current life was nothing like what his younger self would have sought.

He’d always imagined that he’d finally find a girl who could take him seriously for who he was, and would understand his job, and who would find him physically attractive. He’d imagined that she might be a career woman, and might want to wait a while before having children. He’d imagined that maybe she’d be a nurse, or a teacher, or a chef, or an accountant, or any number of things.

But never, ever did his younger self seriously entertain the idea of settling down with a man.
He’d never denied his own sexual orientation. In fact, he’d realized early on in his adulthood that his encounters with men were easier, held less pressure, and were generally more successful than his encounters with women. Perhaps it was because when he got together with a man, in Johnny’s own mind—and usually in that of his partner’s as well—the hook-up was for fun, for mutual gratification, for stress relief, but not for keeps. Twice in twelve years, Johnny found himself dating the same guy for a few months in a row. The longest he’d ever dated one woman exclusively was three months, and those relationships had all petered out on their own. He’d had a near miss with a woman he’d considered asking to marry him, after having known her for only a few weeks, but had found out in the nick of time that she wasn’t who he thought she was. And other than that one time, he’d never really considered settling down.

Until Mike.

They’d come together almost by accident, when, in a moment of stress, Mike had said something about himself that could have been interpreted any number of ways, and Johnny had taken a huge chance and followed that remark with an unambiguous statement about his own sexual orientation. From that moment, when the invisible wall between them had been lifted, it was like they’d never not been together. And, for about a year after they got together, Johnny was too happy, too caught up in love, to question whether he would feel fulfillment in a life that didn’t come close to meeting what he’d imagined.

Johnny had always imagined he would get married someday—and he’d always imagined that defining moment, where he would ask a woman he loved to commit herself to him for the rest of their lives. He’d imagined they’d have children, and that maybe he’d get some nieces and nephews in the bargain, and of course some in-laws, who probably wouldn’t like him.

But it didn’t work out that way. A year after that invisible wall had disappeared, Mike had nearly gotten killed when an inattentive driver hit him on the scene of an MVA. As soon as Mike was out of the woods, and Johnny could think about something other than whether Mike was going to live or die, Johnny realized he’d settled down without even noticing. He’d settled down with Mike, and, after nearly losing him, Johnny was desperate to have some promise of permanence, some symbol of the fact that they both knew that only death would separate them. And he’d gotten it, when Mike said ‘I do’ and slipped a ring onto Johnny’s finger.

Johnny knew his life was great, but it wasn’t anything like what he’d imagined.

There were parents-in-law, who surprised Mike by showing up for their backyard ceremony. and surprised Johnny by actually seeming to like him. There were a niece and a nephew, who Johnny would probably never meet, as Mike’s brother had made it completely clear he wanted nothing to do with him. There was a sister-in-law, who lived in New York and only made it to California once a year.

There wouldn’t be any children, of course. And every now and then, Johnny found himself thinking about that cold, hard fact of life. Sitting on the couch right now, thinking about how different his life was from how he’d imagined it would be, was one of those times. Every now and then, Johnny found himself mourning the loss of something he’d never had.

It didn’t happen often—usually Johnny could think of some trigger that brought up the thought. And today’s trigger was his fight with Mike that morning, which was causing Johnny to do some serious thinking.

Was he ashamed of the fact that he’d settled down with a man instead of a woman, like he’d been supposed to do? No, he could answer himself honestly on that one—definitely not.
Did he have some regrets? Possibly, but none that were even close to making him want to leave and start over somewhere else—not even close.

Was he acutely aware, on a daily basis, that he wasn’t following the rules of society? And did his breaking of the rules lead to consequences, pain, awkwardness, and frustration? Every single damned day.

So, he asked himself, had he been honest with Mike that morning? Yes, he had—he wasn’t ashamed of them. But were there things about settling down with Mike that bothered him? There were, and they weren’t likely to ever go away. Would he ever leave Mike to try to fix any of those things? No chance in hell. Did they still bother him, even though he knew he’d never try to change them? Yep.

Johnny sat on the couch, head spinning with a dizzying matrix of ups and downs, highs and lows, satisfaction and regret, for over an hour. The sun had crossed behind the house, and, with the plywood over the window, it looked more like it was eight thirty in the evening than five thirty. Johnny was so immersed in his own thoughts that he didn’t realize how dark it had gotten in the room.

Johnny became dimly aware of the sound of a vehicle in the driveway. He was jolted out of his reverie by the realization that it could be the detective, but then the front door opened and Mike came in. Mike stopped short in the living room when he saw Johnny, sitting motionless on the couch in the exact place Mike had left him ninety minutes earlier.

“Uh-oh. Sitting in the dark and brooding, huh?” Mike said. “That’s a bit of a turnabout. Should I be worried?”

Johnny gave an honest answer. “I have no idea. It’s usually you doing the brooding, so I’m stumped.”

Mike snorted. “I’ll remind you how it goes. When it’s me brooding, it usually ends up with you talking me out of a funk, and then me talking you into the bedroom, and then us having scorching hot sex.”

Johnny squirmed. “I bet we can manage the first part, but, uh …”

“Geez—no, I know. Sorry, that was a dumb-ass thing to say.” Mike sat down next to Johnny, and brushed his too-long hair away from his eyes. “A penny for your thoughts.”

Johnny considered evasive maneuvers, but realized Mike deserved to know what he’d been thinking about. “Not sure they’re worth that much. Just kind of going over our, uh, misunderstanding this morning. Thinkin’ about life, and stuff.”

Mike nodded. “I was thinking about that in the truck on the way home. I’m really sorry about what I thought, and what I said—I should’ve known that wasn’t what you meant.”

“Nah, I’m not worried about that any more—I was more, just—ah, I dunno. It’s dumb. Never mind.” Johnny shook his head. “Just brooding, I guess.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s gotten you pretty down. Would you please tell me? I doubt I’ll think it’s dumb—remember, you’re looking at the grand champion of looking on the bleak side,” Mike reminded him.

Johnny considered that fact. “All right. But don’t take this the wrong way, okay? I don’t want you to think I regret being with you—because I don’t. It’s just that … my life didn’t turn out the way I thought it would.”
“You mean you never thought you’d settle down?”

Johnny hesitated. “I kinda did, actually. I kinda figured, someday I’d find a girl who didn’t think I was an idiot, and get married, and, well …”

“Have some kids?” Mike added quietly. “I know you think about that.”

“Do you think about it?” Johnny asked. “I mean, it’s pointless, because we can’t, but do you?”

“Not really—I always knew I wouldn’t be with a woman. I mean, I know there’s plenty of guys like me who get married, have kids, the whole nine yards—but I just couldn’t do that.” Mike shook his head. “It’d be a total sham, and I don’t do shams.”

“Me neither,” said Johnny. “But, you know, I go—went—both ways, so I coulda done it, and it wouldn’ta been a sham.” He rubbed a hand over his face, trying to clear away the cobwebs. “And like I said—I don’t regret being with you. Don’t ever think that.”

Mike captured Johnny’s slender hand with his broad one. “But a consequence, for you, of our being together, is that you won’t have children,” Mike said. “You can regret that, and not regret us. I can understand that.”

“You can?” Johnny looked at Mike. “You really can?”

“I really can,” Mike assured him.

“Man, you’re one step ahead of me, as always. I’m still tryin’ to wrap my head around all that stuff.”

“Well,” Mike said, turning Johnny’s hand over in his own, “I’ve had a lot more of my life to think about it. You always thought you’d settle down with a girl, but then—surprise!—you ended up with me, and there’s some consequences to that. I’ve had my whole adult life to think about the results of not following the rules of society, but you never thought you’d have to deal with any of those things. And now the very ugliest, the sickest consequences have been piled on us over the last week—Jesus, has it only been a week? So it’s no wonder you’re thinking about that stuff right now.”

“I’m glad I ended up with you,” Johnny repeated. “No matter all the shit that happens.” He sighed heavily. “Like that detective coming soon. Man, I hope we didn’t make a mistake, having him come here insteada us goin’ there.”

“I’m pretty sure we didn’t. For one thing, if it’d been there, it wouldn’t have been ‘us.’ He would’ve put you in an interview room, and it would’ve been you and him. Here it’s both of us, and it’s our turf.”

Johnny frowned. “You’re talking like you’re expecting there to be a problem. I’m just dreading it because I don’t wanna hafta dredge up all that shit yet again. I mean, does he think I’m gonna have anything new to say?”

“Well, he did say there were some new questions that came up after they talked with the suspects. So maybe one of ‘em spilled something that they need to follow up on, or something like that,” Mike said, still hold Johnny’s hand.

“I guess. But why just me? Why did he say he just wanted to talk to me, and not to us?” Johnny could feel his heart rate increasing, and scowled as he realized how worked up he was getting.

“Sorry, babe; I just don’t know. But I’ll be here, all right?”
“I know you will.” Johnny carefully, but shakily, drew in a deep breath, partly to calm himself, and partly to try to relax the muscles in his torso that had tensed up and were tugging on his sore ribs.

Mike leaned in and put his forehead to Johnny’s, and kissed him gently. “I’m gonna make coffee for this cop—don’t have any donuts around, so the coffee’s just gonna have to do it. You want any?”

“Yeah—I’m gettin’ sleepy again already, if you can believe that. And I guess it would be poor form to fall asleep during the interview, right?” Johnny looked up at Mike. “You’re still not having any, huh?”

“Nope—doctor’s orders. Plus—well, I still never really filled you in on the whole coming unhinged thing,” Mike said from the kitchen, loudly enough that Johnny could hear him without getting up. “I mean, I told you about my rant to Dr. Early, but I never really told you what I did to Wes Harris—I was thinking about that on the way home, too.” Mike finished setting up the coffee maker, and, suddenly remembering they would have to eat eventually, stuck Jane Stanley’s casserole in the oven, and sat back down with Johnny.

“I’ll tell you, I really freaked him out—freaked myself out, too. He walked into my office right as I was throwing my phone across the room because that asshole had just called me. Static and everything. So, I nearly pelted Harris with the phone, and all he did was to ask me why I was acting like such a lunatic. And what did I do? Good old calm Mike Stoker practically shoved poor Wes down into a chair and ranted to him about how some asshole from the department who doesn’t like that you and I are together has been fucking with our lives. And I put all my favorite pictures of you and of us right in front of him on my desk, and said if he didn’t like it, he could jump out the window, and so could everyone else in the department.”

Johnny’s eyes were wide. “Okay. Wow. That’s not like you at all.”

“Nope. And the next thing—this was really weird—five seconds later, I was deadly calm again, and got right back to business as usual.” Mike shook his head. “It’s like it was a movie I saw, not actually something I really did.”

“That’s like how it was when those guys took me down in the alley,” Johnny admitted. “It was like I was standing there watching, from the other end of the alley, but also feeling everything at the same time.” He shuddered. “And in about ten minutes, I get to go through it aaaaalllll again. Goody.”

Mike didn’t say anything for a few seconds. He knew this interview, no matter what DeVito asked, was going to be really hard for Johnny. “What do you want me to do, I mean, while he’s here? Would you rather I were in the other room, keeping an eye out and an ear open from a distance, or —”

“No!” Johnny exclaimed. “No. In fact …” Johnny looked around at the arrangement of the living room. “You know what? Let’s move things around a little. Let’s put the recliner way off on the side, and the other comfortable chair way on the other side, and then we’ll put the uncomfortable chair right there across from the couch, and give him that one.”

Mike raised an eyebrow.

“I mean,” Johnny added, “not to be mean, but if we give him a cushy chair he might stay forever. And I guess we can’t not give him coffee, if I’m having it, but no ashtray.”

Mike started moving the chairs around. “We don’t let people smoke in here anyhow, Johnny. We don’t even have any ashtrays.”
“Yeah, I know, but, like, if there’s not one there, then he knows he shouldn’t get too comfy, right?”

Mike shook his head, smiling. Johnny wasn’t making a whole lot of sense, but was sounding more like himself. “I guess so.” He pushed their least comfortable chair into position across from the couch. “How’s that?” he asked.

“Perfect!” Johnny glanced at the clock in the dining room. “I guess he could be here any second. I oughta take a leak before he gets here.” He laboriously rose from the sofa, and headed down the hall to the bathroom. He took care of business, and was relieved to see that although there was still blood in his urine, it didn’t look any worse than it had the day before, despite the fact that he’d been moving around a lot more. As he was washing up, he heard the doorbell. He dried his hands and shuffled back down the hallway, feeling odd wearing his shoes in the house.

Mike answered the door, with Johnny standing just behind him.

“Detective DeVito?”

The man nodded, but didn’t move forward, as Mike was standing in the middle of the doorway. “I’m Mike Stoker. No offense, but can we please see your ID? Anonymous harassment has a way of making you paranoid.”

The man pulled an ID wallet from his pocket, flipped it open, and handed the gold shield to Mike. He looked at it and passed it to Johnny, who stepped forward and passed it back to the detective. “John Gage,” he said, extending a hand.

“Tom DeVito,” the detective said, shaking hands with Johnny, then Mike, who stepped aside and let him in.

Mike showed him to the living room. “Watch your step—there might still be some glass around,” he said, ushering DeVito to the chair Johnny had selected for him. “Coffee?”

The detective looked surprised. “Sure, thanks. Black. Probably had too much already today, but that’s the way it goes.” He turned around to look at the boarded up window. “Too bad that happened on a Friday. Probably no chance of getting it taken care of till Monday, right?”

“Not unless we wanted to pay triple,” Johnny said.

“I did notice the paint is gone from the house—I was out here yesterday morning, and it looked pretty awful. How’d you get rid of it so fast?”

Johnny grinned. “Buddy from the fire department borrowed sandblasting equipment from his brother, and with an entire shift of firemen, we made quick work of it. I mean,” he amended, “they did. I’m still not supposed to do anything.”

Mike came back in and set a mug in front of DeVito, and another next to Johnny on the side table, where he wouldn’t have to bend to reach it. He sat down on the couch next to Johnny, and watched as DeVito opened the notebook he’d been holding since he came in.

“All right. Let’s get down to business,” said DeVito. “We interviewed both of the suspects in your case thoroughly last night, and are satisfied that we have the right people in custody, and that there’s nobody else we need to be looking for. The first guy we picked up, Torrelli, claims no personal knowledge of either of you, and also claims that he had nothing to do with the assault. He admits he was there, but denies laying a hand on you. So the first thing I want to hear from you, Mr. Gage, is as detailed a description as you can give of the assault, with emphasis on anything you can recall clearly about who did what.”
Johnny shook his head. “Man, I don’t think I can tell you anything new. I already told Houlihan everything I remember—everything. There was the taller guy, who was wearing cowboy boots with pointy toes. The shorter guy was wearing black sneakers.”

“All right,” said DeVito, “those are good details. What happened first?”

“They both grabbed me—I’m sure of that. There was one guy on one side of me, and the other guy on the other side. I got, uh, slammed up against the wall, and—”

DeVito interrupted. “Were they both touching you at this point?”

“Yeah, definitely. Look,” Johnny sighed. “I told Houlihan all this before, all right? Why do you have to ask me again?”

“Because I need to establish exactly which parts of the assault had both men involved, all right? So let’s continue. You were up against the wall, and you’re sure they were both in physical contact with you at that point?”

“Yes! Jesus. All right. At that point I kicked out backwards, with both feet, hard enough that both my feet were off the ground, and there’s no way just one guy coulda held me up against the wall for that, all right? And plus, I could tell one guy had one side of me, and the other guy had the other, all right? So yeah, it was definitely two guys.”

“And you did try to fight back,” DeVito said as he wrote something in his notebook. “I didn’t have that detail before.”

“Of course I fucking tried to fight back! Jesus Christ! Did you think I was just gonna stand there and take it?” Johnny was breathing hard, his ribs stabbing him with pain on every breath.

“You didn’t mention it before,” DeVito said. “Let’s move along. You kicked backwards from the wall. Then what?”

“They pinned me up against the wall even tighter. The tall guy talked right in my ear.”

“How do you know it was the tall guy?”

“Because,” Johnny said, starting to sound like he was talking to a preschooler, “he talked right in my ear. I’m six one. The shorter guy was maybe five seven, five eight. He wouldn’ta reached.”

“Okay—that’s another good detail. What did the tall guy say, as best as you can remember?”

Johnny looked at Mike—he really didn’t want to recount the exact words, but he knew he had to. Mike nodded. “It’s okay, Johnny. They’re just words.”

Johnny sighed, and continued. “He said—and I don’t know if this is exact, but it was something like this: ‘You didn’t listen to us. You were supposed to quit, and scram, but you didn’t listen, pretty Captain.’ And that’s how I knew it was the same guy—because of what he called me, and because he was repeating what he’d said on the answering machine.”

“Did you recognize the voice?” DeVito asked.

“It was hard to tell,” Johnny admitted. “But the other guy—he talked next—I knew when I heard his voice that he wasn’t the one from the messages.”

“Okay—let’s make sure we’re not skipping ahead. So the taller guy talked, and then what?”
“That’s when they slammed my head into the wall real hard. At the same time as he said ‘Captain’—bam!”

“Could you tell who was holding, and who was slamming?”

“No,” Johnny admitted, “but there were definitely four hands on me.”

“All right—then what?”

“The other guy said something like I could try to get a look at them, and right after that, they turned me around and slammed me into the wall again.”

“They turned you around—so your back was to the wall?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“That might’ve been a good time to try to fight back again,” DeVito added unhelpfully.

“Now, wait a second!” said Johnny.

“Detective, that was completely unnecessary,” Mike said coldly.

“Mr. Stoker, I’m asking the questions here,” DeVito said, without looking at Mike.

“That wasn’t a question,” Mike pointed out. “And I think there wasn’t time to fight back, from what I heard.”

Johnny continued. “Yeah, I woulda fought back if there’d been more than half a second before they punched me in the gut and knocked my wind out.”

“They?” asked DeVito. “Did they both hit you?”

“It was the tall guy. He hit me in the gut, twice. Knew exactly what he was doing, to knock the breath right outta me. The short guy shoved me down on the ground after that, and I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. Then they started kickin’ me.”

“Do you know who kicked you where?”

“The eye was definitely the sneaker, because I saw it comin’. I don’t know what kind of shoe got me in the kidney, but the ribs—that was definitely the cowboy boot. It was sharp, and hard.”

DeVito wrote some more in his notebook. “Okay—so you’re sure that each one of them definitely kicked you at least once?”

“Positive,” Johnny said.

“We’ll need to talk to the doctor who treated your rib injuries, see if the injury is consistent with being kicked by a cowboy boot, since you couldn’t see that one coming,” DeVito said. “The medical records we got reported on the injuries, but not about what kind of shoe could’ve caused them.”

“Fine by me,” Johnny said. “Dr. Kelly Brackett, at Rampart.”

“Then what happened, after the three kicks?” DeVito continued.

“I knew my ribs were broken, and I still couldn’t breathe. I heard someone shout at the other end of the alley, and then I think the guys left.”
“You didn’t see them leave?”

“No—I hadn’t breathed for a while, and I was pretty close to passin’ out. You know—when you start to kinda get tunnel vision?”

“And did you lose consciousness at any point?” DeVito asked.

“No—I was able to breathe again shortly after that guy Robert showed up.”

“All right,” DeVito said. “I think that’s all I need in that area. Let’s move on.”

Johnny frowned. “I don’t get it—what else do you need to ask about? They didn’t do anything else to me after that, and I was at Rampart pissin’ half my blood out when they trashed the house.”

DeVito looked up from his notebook. “When we interviewed Mr. Staib, we were trying to get an idea of what his motives were for the series of crimes. He told us a lot before he lawyered up, but there were some things we wanted to follow up on with you.”

“Okay, like what?” Johnny asked guardedly.

“First of all—you reported to Deputy Houlihan that you’d remembered that a girl you’d dated had a brother with possible ties to the fire department.”

“Yeah, Lynn Nolan.” Johnny shook his head. “Man, she was weird.”

“We’ll get to that,” said DeVito. “Your association with her may be relevant. Staib is her half brother, and he mentioned that you dated her quite a while ago, and that you broke off the relationship, and that some time after you did so, she discovered that you were in a relationship with Mr. Stoker, and she was apparently quite upset by that. We need some clarification on the sequence of events, please.”

Johnny squirmed. “Look—this is getting awful personal. Is it really relevant?”

“We need a timeline. When you were dating Ms. Nolan, were you already involved with Mr. Stoker, or not?”

“No,” Johnny said coldly. “Jesus. What kind of person do you think I am?”

“We just have to nail these things down,” DeVito said, “because a jury, especially with your type, is —”

“My type?” Johnny interrupted. “Excuse me?”

DeVito looked at him sharply. “You dated women, and now you’re living with a man. One of the suspects is convinced that your behavior towards his sister contributed to her mental breakdown, so in order to understand his motives, we have to understand exactly what happened between Ms. Nolan and yourself, Mr. Gage.”

Mike interrupted again. “What, to see whether he deserved to get the shit beaten out of him in an alley? Is that it?”

“Juries need to like the victim, Mr. Stoker. If this case goes to trial, I can guarantee you the defense will do everything they can to paint Mr. Gage in a bad light.”

“And are you trying to get a head start on that task?” Mike asked, looking calm but sounding deadly.
“No,” DeVito said. “I’m trying to get a picture for whether a jury is going to be sympathetic to Mr. Gage or not, and for that, I need to understand his perspective on the events with Ms. Nolan.”

“Look,” said Johnny, wanting to defuse the situation, “here’s what I can tell you. I asked her out, and we went out a couple times. I wasn’t dating anyone else at the time. But we didn’t exactly hit it off. I like to have my privacy, have my space, and she wouldn’t let me. I didn’t call her any more, but she kept showing up at my place, managing to run into me at the hospital, that sort of thing. She started leaving presents for me—in the hospital, at my apartment, and she showed up at the station a couple times, and stuff like that.”

“This was after you broke off the relationship?”

“Yeah, and I kept tellin’ her to lay off, but she wouldn’t. I finally told her I’d call the cops if she kept showing up at my place or puttin’ stuff in the squad while it was parked at the hospital, and she finally got the message.”

“And you weren’t involved with anyone else at that point?”

“No!” Johnny said, obviously frustrated. “I mean, I probably had some dates during that time, but nothing serious.”

“Did she know you dated men as well as women?”

“Are you kidding me?” Johnny said. “Nobody knew that—not then.”

DeVito wrote something in his notebook. “Mr. Staib claimed that some time after you broke off the relationship with Ms. Nolan, she discovered that you were, and I quote from his interview last night, ‘shacked up with another guy.’”

“It woulda been probably a year and a half later, if she found that out the way everybody else did,” Johnny said, “which she probably did if she was still working at Rampart.”

“And how did she find out?”

“I don’t know—I didn’t have any contact with her, of any kind, after I told her I’d call the cops if she didn’t quit. And, I know you’re gonna ask, so here’s the timeline. Six months after I told her that, more or less, is when I got together with Mike. Then a year or so after that, he got hit by a car at an accident scene, and got busted up real bad—woulda died if the paramedics hadn’t been right there already—and when he was at Rampart, I was there too, of course, and people started to put it together, all right? And that was eighteen months ago. Is that enough?” Johnny asked, figuring he knew the answer already.

“A couple more questions. Before Mr. Stoker’s accident, I assume it was not common knowledge in your workplace that you two were involved with each other?”

“No,” Johnny said. “Not exactly something you’d advertise, right? A couple close friends, is all.”

“And you hadn’t planned on making your relationship common knowledge?”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “Look. You’re a cop. Not such a different line of work from ours. Would you, if you were us? How many gay or bi cops you know who are out?”

“Uh, I seriously doubt that any of my colleagues are—”

Mike actually laughed aloud. “Seriously?” He shook his head. “Sorry—go on.”
DeVito cleared his throat. “What I’m trying to establish here, Mr. Gage, is whether it was reasonable for Mr. Staib to attribute his sister’s mental instability to anything in your treatment of her.”

“I’d say, from my experiences with her,” Johnny said drily, “that she seemed pretty mentally unstable already, what with pretty much stalking me. I seriously doubt that finding out I swing both ways would have pushed her over the edge all on its own—that’s quite a stretch.”

“Let’s expand on that point,” DeVito said. “You said you ‘swing both ways’—does that mean you have interest in both men and women?”

“Yes,” Johnny sighed, “that’s what that means. I don’t see how it’s relevant.”

“If you’d had no interest in Ms. Nolan, but had used her to, say, cover something up, that would look bad to a jury. Make them less sympathetic to you.” DeVito wasn’t looking up when he said that, or he would’ve had his eyes poked out by the needles Mike was shooting at him with his glare.

“Jesus, I feel like I’m the one on trial here,” Johnny muttered. “This is fucking ridiculous.” He wriggled around to try to get into a more comfortable position, but didn’t find one that worked.

“Regardless,” said DeVito, “let’s continue. When you first approached Ms. Nolan, did you ask her out on a date because of genuine interest in her?”

“Yes, though I wish I never had,” Johnny said. “No, I never asked a girl out as a cover. That’s not the kind of guy I am.” He grabbed the couch pillow next to him and hugged it to his chest, bracing his ribs.

“And since you’ve been involved with Mr. Stoker, have you dated any women?” DeVito asked.

“Hold it,” Mike interrupted. He turned to Johnny. “Your ribs okay?”

“Nope, still broken,” Johnny said from between clenched teeth. “Let’s just get this over with, okay?” He looked back at DeVito. “In answer to your question, no, I have not. Because (a), I don’t cheat, and (b), you can ask my coworkers from that time—some of them pestered me constantly about how I must’ve given up on ever getting a date again. And no, the ones pestering me didn’t know I was off the market. That good enough for you? Or do you want names of the guys who were giving me shit? Or would you like the name of every girl in L.A. that I haven’t gone out with in the last two and a half years?”

“No need to get hostile, Mr. Gage,” DeVito said, shifting slightly in his chair. “I just need to establish the facts.”

“I have a question, actually,” Mike said. “Why do you need to establish these particular facts right now? These guys haven’t even been arraigned yet. We don’t even know if there’s going to be a trial, so why are you worried about this stuff now?”

DeVito put his notebook away, and sighed. “Look. I don’t have anything personal against you.” Johnny snorted, but DeVito chose to ignore him. “It’s just that when my boss looked at this case, one of the first things he said was, these guys aren’t gonna be popular victims.”

“So, you have to be ‘popular’ to be protected by the law?” Mike asked, voice completely cool.

“No—the law protects everyone equally,” said DeVito.

Johnny scoffed out loud that that statement. “Man, you’ve never been to a reservation, have you—no, never mind, I don’t wanna know. But I get it—what you’re sayin’ is, jury’s gonna think a couple
“fags were askin’ for it anyhow, right, so why should the DA put much effort into the case?”

“I didn’t say that,” said DeVito, who was silently wondering what the hell he’d gotten himself into here. He hadn’t been expecting these guys to be so sharp, based on the transcript of the interview with Stoker last night. Frankly, he’d come across in yesterday’s interview as a bit crazy, but seemed perfectly normal today. And—meeting these two in person for the first time was … enlightening. They weren’t anything like what he’d imagined. He shifted again in his chair, which was about as comfortable as the ones they put suspects in in the interview room. And then, he looked around the living room, and realized there was no way this was the normal placement for such a chair. His estimate of the intelligence of his victims just rose another notch as he realized how he’d been set up.

“Can I offer a suggestion?” DeVito said.

Johnny raised an eyebrow that he was sure was so loaded with skepticism he was amazed he could lift it, but Mike replied verbally. “We’re all ears,” he said, arms crossed.

“If this case comes to trial—which it will, unless both the suspects go for a plea bargain—be prepared for questions like I just hit you with, and worse. The defense attorney will try to run you both through the mud. But if you answer him just like you answered me now, but without being as pissed, he won’t get far. Okay?”

Johnny and Mike stared back at him, not totally understanding.

DeVito tried again. “I don’t blame you for being pissed at my questions, but I had to ask them. But if you’re prepared for that, or worse, from the defense attorney, and you can answer them honestly, as you did, and without emotion, which I don’t blame you for, you’ll paint a good picture for the jury, of a couple of mostly-regular guys who just got handed a lot of shit by a couple of maniacs, all right?”

Mike frowned. “In the courtroom, shouldn’t the prosecuting attorney try to quash any lines of questioning by the defense attorney that aren’t relevant? Like anything at all about our relationship?”

DeVito shook his head. “It’s a game, Mr. Stoker. Both sides play the same game—try to make the jury like their guy better than the other guy. And sometimes the game is played by allowing irrelevant lines of questioning, if your side thinks it will paint a better picture.”

“Stupid system,” Johnny muttered.

“It certainly comes across that way at times,” DeVito said, again trying to adjust himself into a comfortable position in the chair.

“One question for you,” Mike said. “How likely do you think a plea bargain is at this point? I mean, they both confessed to a lot of stuff, right?”

“Hard to say,” DeVito said. “I can’t say too much about it, but I wouldn’t be surprised either way. Right now we’re trying to play them off each other. But we won’t know till Monday.”

“Fair enough,” Mike said. “Are we done here?”

“Not … quite.” DeVito looked at Mike this time. “Wesley Harris,” he said. “Do you work directly with him?”

“I do,” Mike said, not sure where DeVito was going with this.

“You need to not discuss anything about this case with him. You can work with him, but keep your
conversation topics off of this case or anything having to do with it,” DeVito said.

“Why?” Mike asked.

“I can’t say, right now. I just need to tell you that you shouldn’t talk with him about the case.”

“Okay,” Mike said. “I won’t. But what if he asks me something? I mean, he did me a huge favor by taking that guy down last night. Seems like he deserves to—”

DeVito interrupted. “He’s been instructed not to speak with you about the case either, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“All right!” Mike threw up his hands. “Okay! My lips are zipped.”

“Thank you,” said DeVito. “And now, unless you have any questions for me, I think we’re done.” He looked back and forth between Johnny and Mike. “Okay. Someone will be in touch after the arraignment. Please don’t get up, Mr. Gage; I’ll see myself out.”

But Mike walked him to the door. “Johnny will be at home on Monday, and I don’t know if I’ll be in my office much, so if someone can call here after the arraignment, that would be great.”

“We’ll do that. Have a good evening.”

Mike watched as DeVito walked to his unmarked sedan. He really had no idea whether to hate the guy, or to thank him. He stopped in the kitchen, turned the oven down, and set a time for forty-five minutes. He went back into the living room, and sat down with Johnny again.

“Well, that pretty much sucked,” Johnny said. “I just want this to be fucking done, Mike.”

“I know ya do, babe. So do I.”

Mike maneuvered himself to one end of the couch, and propped a large cushion between the armrest and the end table. He positioned himself sideways, with his back against the armrest, and his outside leg off the couch. “C’mere,” he said, helping Johnny scoot backwards, so his back rested against Mike’s chest and his feet were towards the other arm of the couch. Johnny leaned back into Mike’s body, and let out a sigh.

Mike folded his arms around Johnny, making sure to avoid the area of the cracked ribs. He could feel Johnny starting to relax the muscles of his ribcage, starting to breathe normally instead of from his shoulders and upper chest, the way he knew he always did when his broken ribs were bothering him what seemed like decades ago. Johnny put his forearms over Mike’s, twining their fingers together on one pair of hands.

“Better?” Mike asked.

“Yeah,” Johnny said through a yawn. “It’s turnabout day, for sure—me sitting in the dark and brooding, you being the human chair for the guy with busted ribs.”

Mike laughed, but gently, so he didn’t jar Johnny. “I forgot we called it that, back when you used to do this for me.”

“Mm,” said Johnny. Mike felt him relax even further, and just held him as he drifted off into sleep. And, seeing and feeling how peaceful Johnny was, Mike wished that a timer was not going to go off in forty-five minutes, because he wanted to sit just the way the were, forever.
Chapter 18

The kitchen timer clamored annoyingly, the sound of the loud bell echoing frantically off the tiled floor. Mike didn’t want to get up, didn’t want to move Johnny from the “human chair” Mike had made to support him, but it would be pretty embarrassing to set their kitchen on fire by ignoring the casserole. And it would be pretty necessary to have an edible dinner ready, and soon. So, Mike started gently extricating himself from behind Johnny so he could go tend to dinner. He sat Johnny upright, being sure not to hold him near his cracked ribs. At the same time, pulled his own inside leg behind Johnny, and squeezed himself off the couch. Amazingly, Johnny slept through the entire series of contortions Mike went through to get off the couch.

Mike let Johnny back down gently onto the sofa, shaking his head at the man’s ability to sleep through anything, and headed to the kitchen. The casserole was indeed ready, and not a second too soon, as Mike suddenly noticed he was absolutely famished. Mike threw together a salad to go with Mrs. Stanley’s chicken and rice casserole, and served himself up a portion of each. He felt mildly guilty about not waiting for Johnny, but knew that no offense would be taken. He quietly ate his supper, while reading a magazine that had been sitting on his pile of mail for the entire week. Things had been so stressful and chaotic that it felt like a vacation to be sitting at his own table, eating a meal in peace and quiet, and not having to worry about when the next “incident” would occur. He even remembered his antibiotics, washing down a tablet with a glass of water once he was done with his meal.

As he finished, he heard rustling from the living room, and then Johnny appeared behind him, putting his hands lightly on Mike’s shoulders.

“Hey,” Johnny said.

“Hi—sorry I didn’t wait, but I figured it wouldn’t do either of us any good if I passed out from hunger. You want some of this? It’s good.”

“Sure—I’ll get it,” Johnny said, moving towards the kitchen.

“Hold it, babe. Remember? Total rest.”

Johnny opened his mouth, as if he were about to protest that it wasn’t a big deal just to go to the kitchen and put food on a plate, but wisely closed his mouth and sat down. “Okay. Thanks.”

Mike served him up a plate of food, and brought a glass of milk over as well.

“Thanks,” Johnny said again, as Mike put everything down on the table and returned to his seat, across from Johnny.

Mike watched Johnny eat for a minute or two. He’d found over the years that he could tell a lot about what was going on inside Johnny’s head from how he dealt with his food. He wasn’t wolfing his food down, but he also wasn’t picking at it, or rearranging it, or making patterns on his plate—he was just eating. But he also wasn’t talking.

Mike was never uncomfortable with silence—sometimes, people just didn’t feel like talking, and that was more than fine with him. Mike’s guess about Johnny’s current silence was that he was just plain talked out. The interview with DeVito had been miserable, for both of them, but Johnny’s private life had been badly violated by DeVito’s lines of questioning. So, although Mike knew the topic needed
to come up again, this particular moment was not the right time. He picked a safer topic.

“You chatted with Marco for a while, huh?”

Johnny brightened a bit, and looked up. “Yeah. It was good. I mean, he’s not comfortable, but he’s not ignoring us any more either. He, uh, apologized for only being around for the hard times, and said that’s not how he wants it to be anymore. I thought that was a good way to put it. Also, and I kinda don’t feel great about this, but what choice did we have? He was upset about how we hadn’t said anything direct to him, you know, about us, before your accident.” Johnny took a gargantuan bite, and started chewing.

Mike nodded. “Yeah. I know. I thought a lot about that, especially once right after he visited when I was at Henry Mayo. It must not have been the first time he visited—I don’t think I really remember anything from that first week, and I know all the guys from 93s and 51s came at some point that week. It’s all kind of foggy, but I remember he was kind of upset that he didn’t know, but also kind of said something weird about how he wished he didn’t know. It was … uncomfortable for both of us. I was kind of surprised he came back.”

Johnny finished chewing, and swallowed. He took a gulp of milk, and put his glass back down on the table. “Well, I think he knows he couldn’t have it both ways—that’s one thing we talked about this afternoon, sort of. He was upset we hadn’t said anything, but he also knew he woulda freaked out if we had. It was a no-win situation, and he knows it. Nothing we coulda done differently woulda been any better or worse than just keeping our traps shut.”

“I guess not,” Mike admitted.

Johnny took another bite, and talked while he chewed. “DeVito sure pissed me off. That bullshit about ‘my type’ and whether I was just using girls to cover my tracks—” he shook his head. “None of his damned business, even if I was, which I wasn’t. And hell, the whole ‘type’ thing—I don’t even think I am a type. And I hate it when people try to figure me out—figure out which box to put me in, so everything can be all neatly arranged.”

“I know you do,” Mike said quietly. “But here’s what I think. I think he’s a good cop. I think he wants those guys to go down, and I think he’s trying, in his own clumsy way, to help us out.”

“Clumsy is right,” Johnny said. “Man, I wanted to pop him right in the nose a couple times. The whole thing seemed like it was starting to smell like ‘the victims asked for it,’ ya know?”

Mike nodded. “And that was his point—that’s a card that the defense attorney is surely going to play, right? It’s a dirty card, but we’ll be ready for it.”

Johnny pushed some food around on his plate. “Yeah. Well, I’m just gonna keep my fingers crossed that there’s not gonna be a trial. Not cause I want them to get away with shit—I don’t, and I’ll do my part in court if it comes to that. But I’ll say it for the millionth time—I just want this all to be done. So let’s just hope these shitheads plead guilty tomorrow, or whatever the hell they have to do to just have this mess be over.”

“Yeah. Me too, babe.” Mike stood up and pushed his chair away from the table. “And now, ya know what? I think we oughta lay around on the couch, and watch some stupid TV—no cop shows, either—and bitch about how all the shows really suck. And we can make popcorn, and drink beer, and belch, and just be total idiots for the rest of the weekend. Because I’m sick to death of being a responsible adult.”

Johnny grinned, and handed Mike his plate. “I love it when you pretend you’re a loser.”
“Yeah?” Mike turned to look back at Johnny.

“Yeah—it’s hot. Can we make out during the commercials?”

“No,” Mike said matter-of-factly, putting the plates in the sink and turning on the water.

“Um,” said Johnny, “did you just say ‘no?’”

“Yeah. You’re still working on regular breathing, right? So—heavy breathing? Nuh-uh.”

“You’re no fun,” Johnny complained.

Mike picked the receiver up off the phone in the kitchen. “Should we call Dr. Brackett, right now, and see if it’s okay if you—”

Johnny laughed, and wasn’t able to avoid a tell-tale clutch at his ribcage. “All right, all right. I guess it’d be hard to explain at my follow-up on Monday why everything looked worse instead of better. Ya see, Doc, it’s like this: I just couldn’t keep my hands off my boyfriend, because he was pretending to be a loser, which is really hot—and one thing led to another, and …”

“You see?” Mike replaced the receiver. “I’m perfectly reasonable.”

“As always, Stoker. As always. C’mon. It’s almost eight o’clock—I’m sure something dumb is starting on the idiot box by now.”

Mike finished cleaning up the kitchen, and he and Johnny retired to the living room. There were, as they had imagined, any number of horrible shows on television that evening, so they had no difficulty in finding something completely mindless to occupy themselves until bedtime.

Nine o’clock rolled around, and both Mike and Johnny found themselves flagging.

“Man, I’ve been sleepin’ half the day, and I’m already beat again,” Johnny remarked, stifling a yawn.

“I’m completely wiped out too. Guess I’m still catching up after this stupid week. I hope I can actually get to sleep. Whaddaya think,” Mike asked. “Should I go straight for one of Dr. Early’s magic pills, or see what happens?”

“Uh, what magic pills?” Johnny asked. “I know he gave you more antibiotics, but did he prescribe you something else, too?”

“Oh. I guess I forgot to tell you about that part,” Mike said uncomfortably. “When you were on shift the other night, and then when you were in the hospital, I, uh, wasn’t sleeping well. Kind of not really at all, actually. And that’s kind of what started me on the whole caffeine OD, and so he gave me just a couple pills, just for a couple nights, to break the cycle. I don’t even know if I need it or not. I don’t really like the idea, but …”

“Huh. Maybe that was why it was so hard to wake you up this morning. You take one last night?”

“You better believe it—after a few gallons of coffee, and then a little parking lot assault, and then three hours with the cops? I was wound tighter than a … a … I don’t know—name something really tight.”

“Chief Livingston’s ass?” Johnny suggested.

Mike grimaced, and pretended to shudder. “Now there’s an image I didn’t need. So yeah, I took one
last night. Maybe I can skip it tonight, though.”

“How ‘bout this,” Johnny suggested. “We turn in, and if you’re not asleep after what, twenty minutes? Get up and take it. But I’ll bet you won’t have to.”

“I’ll bet not, either. We’re back in our own house, and you’re here, and those assholes are sleeping in jail tonight—nope. Not gonna be a problem.”

And he was right.

~!~!~!~!~!

Sunday passed in much the same way as Saturday evening had. Mike was starting to feel more like himself, and his temperature was nearly down to normal. Johnny was still dutifully following the prescription of serious rest, much to Mike’s relief. He was not only truly and voluntarily resting, and not trying to do things he wasn’t supposed to do, but he readily asked Mike for help when he needed something.

Mike took care of the household chores, including finally wet-mopping the entire living room area to pick up any last shards of glass. He went grocery shopping, and managed to get in touch with a window repair business that could come the next afternoon to replace the large front window. He arranged with Mrs. Daniels to let them in when they arrived.

Mike had already decided he’d take Monday afternoon off—he’d go into the office in the morning, and then get to his follow-up with Dr. Hansen, which was conveniently scheduled for around the same time as Johnny’s follow-up visit, where they would just be taking a blood and urine sample anyhow. Mike was amused to hear Johnny’s story about making his followup appointment. He’d joked that the way things were looking, they could probably do both tests with just his urine, but his joke earned only a stern glare from the discharge nurse.

The question was, though, what Johnny should do between when Mike had to be at the office, and when their appointments were. It made no sense for Mike to come all the way back to the house for Johnny, but there was also no good place for Johnny to relax while Mike was at work in the morning.

“The library,” Johnny finally announced. “I can just hang around in the library at HQ. Heck, I wouldn’t be the first guy on medical leave to hang out there for a while, I’m sure, just to have something to do.”

“Yeah, but you might be the first guy who’s hanging out there because his boyfriend is busy upstairs.”

For the umpteenth time, Johnny wished there were a better word for their relationship. “Boyfriend” sounded so juvenile, “partner” was so formal and stilted, and its more typical business-like meaning was relevant in Johnny’s life too. He had to face it—it wasn’t ever going to be comfortable to use the same word for the relationship he and Mike and, as he did for the work relationship that firefighters or paramedics working together had. “Spouse” was again too formal, and “husband” just plain seemed wrong. Everything else was right out. So they were stuck with “boyfriend,” even though they both disliked the word. When people asked what the right word was, Mike would say “partner,” but that wasn’t the word they used between themselves.

“Hey, Mike?” Johnny asked, as they were ironing out their plans.

“Uh huh?”
“Could I see your office? Just kinda peek in, first thing?”

Mike was surprised by this request. They had a firm rule, which they both thought was for the best, that they not be seen together at department headquarters. But, considering the topics of Johnny’s brooding the day before, Mike realized Johnny’s request represented an important shift in his perception of their relationship, and an acknowledgment of the reality that people did actually know about them.

“I think that would be great,” Mike said.

“Good,” said Johnny. “I mean, hardly anybody’ll be there anyhow at the hour that you like to get in. So I can just peek in, and then head down to the library.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Okay. Let’s do that.”

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Monday, 0730

“I don’t think I’ve ever been above the third floor in this joint,” Johnny said, as he and Mike exited the elevator on the sixth floor of the L.A. County Fire Department headquarters building.

“Believe me, it’s real exciting up here,” said Mike, as he led the way down the hallway to his office. He opened the door, and showed Johnny in. “It’s small,” he said, as he and Johnny entered, “but it’s all mine.”

“Small?” Johnny laughed. “I mean, you’ve seen the office at 93s, right? And I share that with Jeff and Len, too, so I can’t even leave a mess on the desk! Man, this is great!” Johnny wandered around and looked at the pictures on the walls. He knew Mike had had enlargements made of several nature photographs Johnny had taken, and he knew they were for this office, but still, seeing them on the walls gave him a warm glow.

Mike started to feel tense as Johnny made his way to the desk. Mike had impulsively decided to leave his pictures of Johnny out on the desk after his verbal explosion at Wes Harris on Friday, but he’d planned to rearrange the office furniture so that the desk was facing outwards and people would see the backs of the frames unless they actually went behind the desk. He wasn’t sure what Johnny would think of a somewhat public display of himself, so he held his breath as Johnny got to the desk.

Johnny stopped just behind the desk. “I, uh, didn’t know you had these in your office,” he said.

“I’ve always had them here. But until Friday, they were in my top drawer, like this.” Mike sat at the desk and demonstrated. “I, uh, kind of left them out when I freaked out on Wes Harris on Friday, and then kind of thought about maybe leaving them out. I dunno, what do you think? I was gonna turn the desk this morning, to face the door, so I could see who was coming in, and so everything would be a little less public. Roy suggested that, actually. But I can put them back in the drawer if you want. It’s up to you.”

Johnny hesitated. Mike could see tension in his neck, his shoulders.

“I dunno, Mikey. I mean, it kinda seems like it’d be rocking the boat. Ya know? I just … it’s not what you were thinkin’ before—I’m not ashamed of us. It’s just …”

“I know. It’s kind of asking for more trouble, when we’ve just had a whole viper’s nest of it.” Mike sighed. “I guess you go back in the drawer, then, at least for the time being.”
Johnny exhaled, and ran a hand through his hair. Mike could see some of the tension leaving
Johnny’s upper body. “Yeah. Okay. Sorry to make a big deal of it—I just think it’s … not time for
that yet.”

“It’s not a big deal. I sure wish I didn’t have to keep you in a drawer, but I see where you’re coming
from. Roy said pretty much the same thing, oh-so-diplomatically, and it’s not even him sitting up
there on the desk.”

Mike put the photos back in their original discreet location, and then looked around the room. “But
you know, I think I’ll still rearrange. I hate having my door completely closed, but people are always
startling me without meaning to. If I face the door, that won’t happen. I’ll just shove the desk over
here, like this—” Mike grabbed the edge of the desk and started to try to turn it.

He gave the desk a good tug, but the solid 1950’s-era oak desk on top of modern industrial carpeting
refused to yield to just one man’s strength. Johnny stood by uncomfortably, wanting to help but
knowing it was completely unreasonable to try.

“Shit, that’s heavy,” Mike said after a few seconds of fruitless straining. “I guess I’ll wait till Harris
or someone else shows up around here to move this sucker.”

As if the universe was listening to Mike, and trying to make up for the last ten days, there was a
knock at his office door. “Hey, Stoker, you in there?”

Mike grinned. “Hey, Bert! C’mon in!”

Bert came in and stopped short. “Oh—good morning. Sorry, I didn’t know you had company. I can
come back later.” He squinted slightly at Johnny, and his eyes darted briefly to the Station 51 picture.

“Nah, we’re just finishing up. Johnny, this is Bert Saunders; we were at 14s together waaaay back
when I was a probie. He’s head of maintenance for HQ now. Bert, John Gage.”

Johnny shot Mike a raised eyebrow when there was no more to the introduction, but recovered
quickly. “Nice ta meet ya,” said Johnny, shaking Bert’s hand. “I heard you worked wonders on all
the crap that got pulled on Mike up here. Great trick with the door, just replacing it like that.”

“Well, like I said to Stoker here, in a building this size, we gotta spare for just about everything.
Anyhow, Stoker—just came up to check on you—you were lookin’ a little rough when I saw you on
Saturday.”

“Yeah—I was pretty wiped out from all the bullshit with the cops and those guys, and sick as a dog
to boot. But—the assholes are in jail, and the antibiotics seem to be vanquishing the bacteria, so
things are starting to look up a bit. Thanks for checking in—because really, it could’ve gone either
way.”

“You’re welcome. Glad you’re doing better,” said Bert.

“Say, while you’re up here, could you give me a hand moving this desk? I just want to swing it
around like that—” Mike gestured the intended movement—“so I can face the door and not
constantly get the shit startled out of me.”

Johnny felt he had to provide an excuse. “I’d help out, but I’ve got three cracked ribs.”

Bert winced. “Man, those have to smart. How’d you do that?”

Johnny looked at Mike, and Mike nodded. “Uh, those same guys caught up with me in an alley and
did some damage. Spent a couple days at Rampart.” Johnny squirmed inwardly; he disliked talking about the incident, but it was clear that Bert was sympathetic.

“Holy fuck.” Bert shook his head. “Man, I hope they put those guys away for a long, long time. I know you still can’t say who they were, or anything, but it pisses me off to no end that people from the department—from the department!—would behave like that.” His asymmetrical glower was somehow even more intense than if he’d had the ability to move his entire face equally—perhaps because of the stark contrast between the immobile side and the expressive side.

Bert shook his head again. “Damn. Makes me ill. But anyhow—let’s move this desk. You sure that’s okay on your leg, Mike? Cause I could get another guy from downstairs.”

Mike took his place on one side of the desk. “Nah, it’s fine. I probably shouldn’t go for a run, but giving a desk a good shove should be fine.”

“All right, then.” Bert took the other side of the desk, and they moved it into the position that Mike wanted.

“Great,” Mike said, rubbing his hands where the edge of the desk had bitten into them. “Thanks a lot, Bert. Once again, you saved the day.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Bert chuckled. “You woulda found someone, eventually. Just not at 0730. Anyhow—I gotta get to it. And, lemme know what happens with those bastards, will ya?”

“I will. Thanks again, Bert.”

“Nice to meet you, Bert,” said Johnny. “Thanks for your help.”

“Hey, good meetin’ you too. Take it easy on those ribs, and they’ll be right as rain in a couple weeks.”

“Will do.”

After Bert left, Mike shoved a couple smaller pieces of furniture around until he was satisfied with the arrangement. Johnny watched silently, feeling guilty that he couldn’t help out. He mulled over what Bert had said—his indignation, and the genuine anger at the criminals.

“Hey Mikey?”

“Uh huh?” Mike said, moving some things around on his newly placed desk. He pulled a spare chair over to the desk for Johnny, and they both sat down.

“He knows about us, doesn’t he.”

Mike looked up. “Yeah, babe, he does. That first day—when my door got painted—well, he misunderstood.”

Johnny cocked his head. “Huh? I thought you said they painted ‘faggot’ on the door—that’s pretty clear, I’d say.”

“Yeah, well, I kinda asked him to keep it quiet, and said something about how I’d figured something like this would happen someday—you know, ‘cause someone at HQ would figure out I was gay. I’m not really sure why I said that—I guess because I just really didn’t feel like trying to fake like it wasn’t true. And he was still confused—he looked at my ring, and so I explained that the matching one belonged to another man, and then he got it. And then we had quite an interesting chat about
how other people react to people who aren’t like everyone else, and I knew he was gonna be all right
with everything.”

“How’d he know it was me, though?” Johnny asked. “I mean, I guess I don’t mind, ’cause he’s all
right, you know. But how’d it come up?”

“Oh, well, here’s a lovely thing that happens around here. Sometimes, people who’ve heard the
rumors? When they’re here, in the office, they just love to look at my station pictures—you know, to
try to figure out which one is ’him.’ Bert was there—kind of invisibly working on fixing the door—
and saw the guy quizzing me, trying and failing to be subtle about figuring out which one was ’him,’
and asked me about what was going on. And I made some kind of remark about how nobody ever
bothers to just ask me which one is ’him.’ So later, he asked—in a nice way, like he really cared. So
I showed him.”

Johnny didn’t say anything for a few seconds. Mike felt his heart rate rising, and watched Johnny for
signs of shut-down or anger. None appeared.

“I guess,” Johnny said slowly, “I never realized how it’d be a lot harder for you than for me.”

Mike tilted his head. “What would be harder? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“The whole keeping the open secret thing. I mean, when you were in the hospital, everyone from all
the shifts at 93s came by at one point or another—and they’re who I work with now. So everyone I
work with on a daily basis already knows what there is to know. And sure—there’s assholes like
Livingston to contend with, but I just stay out of his way and things are fine. But for you?” Johnny
shook his head. “Doesn’t work that way, does it?”

Mike shook his head minutely. “No. It’s like there’s this unwritten rule: they don’t ask me, and I
don’t volunteer information. But I think I can usually tell who’s heard rumors and who hasn’t, just
from how they react when they meet me. So, I was actually kind of pleased when Bert stepped
outside of that invisible box, and expressed interest. I don’t think for a second that he’s perfectly
comfortable with all this, but he said it himself—there are people who make others uncomfortable
because of something about them, and he’s one, and I’m one.”

“Huh,” Johnny said.

They sat together behind Mike’s desk, and Johnny watched as Mike put the pictures back in the
drawer, adjusting the brackets on the backs of the frames to set them at a good viewing angle.

“There you are,” Mike said, “back in your drawer.”

“You’re in my locker, you know.”

“Yeah?” Mike smiled. “Which pictures?”

“Well, that one, of course,” Johnny said, pointing to the picture taken just after they’d exchanged
rings. “And the one where you’re shooting me the finger for taking your picture when you’re all
sweaty from mowing the lawn. And the funny thing is—the other two are from the same days as
your other two. That same day at the beach—the picture I’ve got is you holding that huge horseshoe
crab up by its tail. And then the one from that newspaper photographer. He only got the one of you, I
think.”

“The one where I’m in the driver’s seat, talking on the radio, and my arm’s out the window?”

“Yes—that’s the one.”
“That’s not that great of a picture, I didn’t think,” said Mike. “It’s pretty boring.”

“Ya know why I like it?” Johnny executed a grin that encroached on the ‘leer’ end of the smile spectrum.

“No, but I’d sure like to.”

“Your hands, man. C’mom, you know I’ve got a thing for your hands. And it’s like they’re the centerpiece of the photo. It’s almost like he meant it that way.”

There was a knock at the door.

“I should probably go, huh?” said Johnny.

“Come in,” Mike called, at nearly the same time.

Wes Harris walked in, looking pale and tired.

“Wes!” Mike said. “Hey, come on in. You all right?”

Wes stood in front of Mike’s desk, and looked back and forth between Johnny and Mike. He didn’t say anything, just stood there with his mouth slightly open and his eyes wild. He stared at Johnny’s impressive black eye.

Johnny looked over at Mike. “I really oughta get going, right?”

“Hang on,” Mike said. “Wes?”

“Uh,” Wes said intelligently.

“You probably haven’t met Johnny,” Mike continued, wondering what the hell was going on with Harris. “Wes Harris, John Gage. Johnny, Wes is the one who took Staib down in the parking lot on Friday night.”

“Wow, man—we owe you one, big time,” Johnny said, assuming Harris probably also knew he was Mike’s boyfriend. “If it weren’t for you, Mike might be in pieces by now. That guy is seriously dangerous. So thanks a lot, Harris.”

“Uh,” Wes said again, still staring at Johnny. He took in Johnny’s slightly hunched-over posture, and his eyes traveled up and down Johnny’s lanky frame, as if trying to divine what other damage was present.

“You okay, Wes?” Mike asked. “I don’t know about you, but I had a pretty uncomfortable time with the cops on Friday night. They treat you all right?”

“Um … yeah, they were fine, all things considered,” Wes replied after a long pause.

Mike frowned. “Wait a second—they didn’t give you a hard time because you tackled that piece of shit, did they? Because he really needed to be tackled, and I sure told them that. Man, I was totally freaked out when they pulled that switchblade out of his pocket.”

Wes looked at the floor. “No—they, uh, kind of understood that part.”

Mike tilted his head. “That kind of sounds like there was another part they didn’t understand.”

“Yeah. Uh, did they tell you not to talk about the case?”
“They did,” Mike confirmed.

“Me, too. But, the thing is, I just have to apologize, to both of you, all right? It’s stupid, because I can’t tell you what I’m apologizing for, but—I screwed up, a while ago, and—and—and that messed things up for you, and I’m sorry.” Wes looked back and forth from Mike to Johnny, his eyes finally settling on Mike’s desk.

“Okay …” Mike said, his rising intonation and eyebrows betraying his curiosity. “We’re not talking about the case, so I can’t ask you what the hell you mean, but I can’t imagine what you had to do with any of—”

Wes cut him off. “Look—just … don’t ask me anything, okay? I’ll, uh, try to tell you sometime, when I’m allowed, but—damn, this is so lame—for now I just have to apologize so I can sleep at night, okay?”

“Okay,” Mike said. “That’s fine, Wes,” he continued, carefully neither accepting nor rejecting the apology.

“Okay. Good. I, uh, oughta get to work,” Wes said, effectively ending the conversation.

“All right,” Mike said, not protesting. “Say, do you know if Rhodes is in yet?”

Wes nodded, glad to have a safe topic. “Yeah—I ran into him on my way in. Almost forgot—he said he wants to see you.”

“That’s handy, because I have to go see him anyhow, and now I have an excuse,” Mike said.

“Yeah—he’s weird about people just showing up. Anyhow—uh, see you later Stoker.” He looked back at Johnny. “Gage—I, uh, hope you’re feeling better. Nice to meet you.” And without a second glance, Wes flew out the door.

Johnny looked at Mike incredulously. “That’s the guy you work with all the time? He seems like a total nut job!”

Mike frowned, shaking his head. “He’s not usually like that at all. That apology thing? That was … mysterious. I mean, he’s usually a bit, I don’t know, I guess ‘abrasive’ would be a good word. And, well, I told you about my freak-out with him on Friday, so I was expecting an awkward chat of some kind today, but … not whatever that was.”

“Yeah—that was kind of weird,” Johnny said. “Look—I oughta go down to the library, right? Let you get on with your day.”

“What, you mean before someone even more insane comes barging through my door? I swear, it’s not usually like this—it’s usually really boring around here.”

Johnny laughed. “I believe you—but still, I’m gonna head downstairs.”

“Can’t say that I blame you,” Mike said. “So I’ll come get you at like 11:30, and we can grab a quick lunch at Rampart before our appointments.”

“Sounds good. Maybe I’ll read some arson stuff.”

“Hmm.” Mike scribbled something on a notepad, ripped the top sheet off, and handed it to Johnny. “That’s a good one to start with. Won’t put you to sleep, but also isn’t too dumbed down.”
“’kay.”

Mike looked at the door. “You wanna close that for a second?”

Johnny peered out into the hallway, which was empty, and closed the door. He immediately found himself on the receiving end of what he was sure was the chastest kiss ever in the history of their relationship. He unsuccessfully attempted to stifle a laugh, and ended up snorting instead.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think that was too bad, for the office,” Mike said, scowling.

Johnny wiped the scowl off Mike’s face by returning the kiss, equally chastely. “See ya later, Stoker,” he said, opening the door and disappearing down the hallway.

Mike gave him a good head start, idly rearranging the items on his desk, and then, when he was sure to catch a separate elevator, headed downstairs to see what Rhodes had lined up for him.

Mike knocked on Rhodes’ door, and was immediately summoned in. Rhodes was holding a thick sheaf of paper—at least twenty-five typed pages, bound at the corner with a heavy-duty staple.

“Stoker,” said Rhodes. “Have a seat. I just looked over your brief—good job. Sorry you had to stay late, but you were definitely the one for the job.”

“Uh, yessir,” Mike said. “Glad it came out all right.”

Rhodes looked at another piece of paper. “The typing lady even thanked me for having you do this—I guess they get a lot of crappy-looking stuff, ’cause she wrote me a note that it was much easier to type your stuff than anyone else’s in the unit. She said you even came by on Saturday to make sure everything was okay.”

Mike, uncomfortable with anything resembling praise, squirmed slightly in his chair. “I kind of had to be here to get my vehicle anyhow,” he said, and instantly regretted bringing up the topic.

“What, your truck? What happened?” Rhodes squinted at him, and barged on. “Say … I heard something about a bust-up in the parking lot. You didn’t have anything to do with that, did you?”

“Well, some jackass slashed my tires, is all,” Mike said evasively. “I, uh, couldn’t deal with it that night, so I had the thing towed on Saturday.”

His answer seemed to satisfy Rhodes. “Anyhow—the reward for a job well done is another job to do well.” He handed Mike a packet of papers. “Here’s your next assignment—it’s a fatal from up in the far northeastern part of the county. Monday night of last week. Bruneau and Panella went out to the scene the next morning. No suspicion of arson, and they think the cause was electrical, but you know the drill—we have to report a cause on any fatal incident. Bruneau and Panella did fine work at the scene, but their reports stink, as usual, so, anything you can do to clean them up would be appreciated.”

Mike skimmed the initial incident report with a sinking feeling. He could tell from looking at the first page that it was the house fire Johnny’s crew had worked, where Emerson had to deal with his first child fatality. “Uh, boss, I … don’t know if I should do this one.”

Rhodes frowned. “Why not?”

Mike paused, not sure how much to say. “I’ve already heard a bit about the incident, and I’m, uh, well acquainted with the Captain of one of the stations that responded.”
Rhodes drummed his fingers on his desk. “Right … you used to work up in that neck of the woods, right? I see—was there a crew from your old station. I don’t see why that would be a problem—I mean, we all have ties to our old stations, and nobody ever has a problem with that.”

Mike sighed heavily. “Maybe I should have said, um, extremely well acquainted.”

Rhodes glared impatiently at Mike. “What’s with the secret code? So what if—” he cut himself off abruptly, and his jaw dropped slightly and closed again. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Rhodes folded his arms, and echoed Mike’s sigh. “I don’t want a name, but what station, and what shift, just so this doesn’t happen again.”

“Station 93, C-shift.” Mike felt himself getting lower in his chair, as if he were physically shrinking.

“Fine,” Rhodes said curtly. “I’ll give it to Harris, even though he looked like crap this morning. I suppose it’s only fair, since I dumped that project on you on Friday, and you obviously weren’t well.”

“Sorry.” Mike said, not entirely sure what he was apologizing for. “Uh, about that—I have a doctor’s appointment this afternoon, so I’m gonna have to be out. It’s for the leg again.”

“Fine,” Rhodes said again. “Other than the thing you can’t work on, I got nothin’, so just go. Don’t bother with sick time—you were here half the night on Friday, and we’re not busy, so it’s not worth the paperwork.”

Mike sat up straighter in his chair, recognizing the gesture for a sort of peace offering. “Thanks, Boss. And—well, sorry about the other thing.”

Rhodes waved a hand through the air. He rose from his desk and consulted the large Operations Department map on the back wall of his office. ‘Best not to have any hint of conflict of interest. I just won’t give you any assignments in the territories of say, Battalions 11 and 17, and that should cover it, right?’

Mike looked at the map as well. “Yeah. That should do it. I don’t think 93s ever gets anything outside those areas. I’ll ask him to let me know if and when he ever does, just so we can keep things on the up-and-up.”

“Let me know if, ah, anything changes, in that respect,” Rhodes said, resorting to code himself to avoid using frank language.

“Will do,” Mike agreed. “And—I should be fine for the rest of the week. I’m feeling a lot better, so I don’t think they’ll want me to come back for another appointment.”

“Good,” said Rhodes, ushering Mike out. “Come see me first thing tomorrow—I’m sure I’ll have something for you then.”

“All right,” said Mike. “And—thanks for this afternoon, and sorry about, you know.”

Rhodes opened the door. “Good thing you said,” he stated, “so it didn’t get screwed up.”

Mike restrained himself from rolling his eyes at Rhodes’ own use of ‘secret code’ rather than plain language. He returned to his office, and busied himself with reading a journal article he’d photocopied the previous week. Nobody else visited his office, and his phone didn’t ring all
morning, which was fine by him. At eleven thirty, he tidied his already-neat desk, and went down to the library. Johnny was leaning on the wall outside the library door, with a couple books under his arm.

“A little light reading?” Mike said, reaching out and taking the heavy-looking tomes from Johnny.

“Yeah. Gotta have something to do, ya know,” he said, as they walked down the first-floor corridor to the lobby. “Makes me crazy—probably two more weeks with these ribs,” he complained.

“You know,” Mike said, as they exited the building, “you’re moving a lot easier today than even on Saturday. I think your strategy of sleeping it off must be working.”

“It’s not exactly a strategy,” Johnny said as he heaved himself into the passenger’s side of Mike’s truck. “It’s more like, I can’t help it.”

True to his word, Johnny nodded off on the short trip to Rampart. Mike dropped Johnny off at the front door, and then parked the truck and met him there. They headed to the cafeteria, which was crowded at lunch time. Johnny’s black eye continued to draw stares, which he mostly ignored. He and Mike both suppressed snickers when a boy of about five loudly told his mother that “that man drew on himself with markers just like I did. But he shouldn’t do it on his eye.”

“So where should we meet after my appointment?” Mike asked Johnny, whose appointment was the earlier of the two, and would also most likely be shorter, since he was just leaving samples.

“I dunno—I might go check out the ER, see who’s down there. I guess look for me in the staff lounge. If it’s crazy or if none of my old friends are down there, I guess I’ll sit in the lobby.”

“Okay—I’ll check the ER lounge first, then the lobby if you’re not there. I honestly don’t know how long this will take—though I’m imagining not too long, since I’m really feeling just fine, and I hardly even notice where that screw was,” Mike said. “I’m still annoyed I had to start thinking about it again. I’d honestly started to forget about all that metal, and now it’s fresh in my mind again.”

“Yeah—I know. Remember that gas explosion, where I busted up my right leg?” Johnny said, as they headed to the elevator.

Mike shuddered. “Yeah—that was, uh, pretty hard to forget. You know, all four of the rest of us had to hold you down while Roy was splinting you.”

Johnny shook his head. “I’m happy to say I’ll probably never remember any of that. But anyhow, it wasn’t even two years after that when the drunk hit me after that bullshit call with the lady in the bar, and I’d just started not thinking about favoring that leg when it got busted again. I mean, it was nothing like the first break—just a minor fracture, really—but it really got me thinking about the original injury again, which really freaked me out. So maybe I guess I know what you mean. It stinks—but I’ll bet you a buck that in another six months you’ll forget about it again.”

“Bet me something more interesting, and maybe I’ll take you up on that,” Mike deadpanned, as the elevator arrived.

They had the elevator to themselves. “Oooh—you’re on! I’ll think of something super good while I’m waiting for my appointment,” Johnny said, giving Mike an exaggerated leer.

They parted ways when the elevator dropped Johnny on the third floor, and Mike continued on to the fifth, where the orthopedist’s office was. He went to the receptionist’s window.

“Hi—Mike Stoker, for one thirty. I know I’m kind of early, but I’ll just wait.”
The receptionist checked her list. “Actually, today is your lucky day, Mr. Stoker—the patient before you just canceled, so we can just bump you up. Have a seat—it won’t be long at all.”

“Great—thanks,” Mike said. Good luck still felt odd to him after the recent turmoil, but he didn’t complain.

After a short wait, the nurse called him back to the exam room.

“Let’s see,” she said. “We’re just looking at your progress with the bone infection today. Your last x-ray was nine days ago; the doctor said he doesn’t need another one now.”

“Oh?” The nurse looked at him disapprovingly. “Well, that might change things. How are you feeling now?”

“A lot better,” Mike said truthfully. “I had a bit of a fever still yesterday morning, but not today.”

“All right,” said the nurse. “Let me just get your vitals and your temperature, and then the doctor will be in to see you. You can put this on after I’m done here. He just needs to be able to get at your knee, so you can leave everything on but the pants,” the nurse said, handing him a gown.

She got a blood pressure reading, which made her frown again, but seemed satisfied with the reading from the thermometer. She exited the room, leaving Mike to put the gown on and to brood again on the stupidity of forgetting to take the antibiotics. He mentally rehearsed the speech he’d prepared about why he forgot his medication.

There was a quick knock at the door, and Dr. Hansen came in.

“So—what’s this I hear about not taking the antibiotics?” he said without preamble.

“I know, I know—it was really stupid. But I had a terrible week—someone vandalized my house, and I had a family member assaulted to the point of hospitalization, and I just plain forgot,” Mike said.

“Oh my,” said Dr. Hansen. “I suppose that might account for your blood pressure being a bit elevated—it’s 145/90, which is higher than I like to see. You should follow up with your regular doctor about that.”

“I can get it checked at home some time when I’m not stressed out. Would that be a good start?”

“Ah yes,” said Hansen. “Your paramedic friend who was there last weekend. Yes,” he said, “that would be a good idea.” He pored over Mike’s chart, and then closed the folder. “Let’s have a look at that knee,” he said. He probed the area around the lower screws, and Mike was relieved that it didn’t cause the cold, sharp pain it had just on Friday.

“Still a little tender,” Mike said, “but nothing like Friday, when I got the stitches out. I think my temperature was about a hundred and one, and I felt like crap, but I thought at the time it was just from not sleeping and from all the stress.”

“That certainly could have contributed, but what I’m concerned about is the possibility of a lingering infection at the site of the screws. I want to take another set of x-rays today, to compare to last weekend’s, just to make sure nothing looks worse. What can happen is that the white blood cells that attack the infection release an enzyme that breaks the bone down. I’ll be able to see on the x-ray whether that looks like it’s happening.”
Mike got pale. “What if it is?”

“Well, first of all, the good news is that I cultured the bacteria that came off the screw I removed last weekend, and the antibiotics you’ve been given should take care of the that infection. So let’s just look at the pictures first, before we get into anything else, all right?” Dr. Hansen said.

“Okay,” Mike said weakly.

The technician made quick work of taking the ordered pictures, and Dr. Hansen returned to the exam room after about fifteen minutes, holding the new and the old x-rays.

“Good news,” he said right off the bat. “Nothing looks different at all.”

Mike heaved a huge sigh of relief. “Boy, Doc, I can’t tell you what a relief that is. This week has been—well, unbelievable.”

“It looks like your own immune system must be pretty strong, since you already had an infection brewing in there for some time. It may actually have been a lucky accident that you jarred that screw loose when you did—it might have allowed us to catch the infection early enough that you didn’t develop major complications.”

“So what now?” Mike asked.

“Finish the antibiotics—actually, I’m going to write you a prescription for a slightly higher dosage, and a longer course, just to be on the safe side. Get the prescription filled as soon as you can, and then throw out the old ones and take the new ones until they’re gone. And I want to see you again in six weeks, for another set of x-rays. At that point, the infection should be completely gone.”

“All right,” said Mike. “Since it’s feeling better, can I go back to all my regular activities?”

“Sure—just use your discretion. If it hurts, don’t do it.”

“Good advice in general,” Mike said.

“True. I’ll see you in six weeks,” Hansen said.

Mike changed back into his pants, put the prescription in his wallet, made his appointment, and left the office suite feeling twenty pounds lighter than when he’d arrived. He took the elevator down to the first floor, and went to the ER staff lounge. As Mike walked in, he could hear Johnny talking.

“And so the arraignment is this afternoon. I’m just hoping they both plead guilty so this whole thing can be over with,” Johnny said to Dixie, who was across from him on the couch. The lounge was empty except for Johnny and Dixie, so Johnny turned as Mike walked in.

“Hey! How’d you get done so fast? I thought your appointment wasn’t even s’posta start till now.”

“Just my lucky day, I guess,” said Mike, sitting down next to Johnny. “Hi, Dixie. How are you?”

“I’m a lot better, now that I see you two looking more normal. You’ve really been through the wringer,” she said, “so you deserve your lucky day today. Does the luck extend to everything being okay with your leg? Johnny said you were upstairs with Dr. Hansen.”

“It does,” said Mike. He explained what Hansen had told him, leaving out any reference to having forgotten his antibiotics. “And how ‘bout you, Gage?”

Johnny shrugged. “Just left some samples, is all. Only surprise was, they did a quick screen of my
hemoglobin—just like they do if you’re gonna donate blood—and I failed that miserably.”

“So liver and onions for dinner, then,” Mike announced. “I’ve got Joanne’s recipe somewhere. We’ll stop at the store on the way home. I gotta get a prescription anyhow.”

Johnny beamed at Dixie. “See? Ain’t he great? My mom woulda made me drink water she soaked a rusty nail in. But Mikey? Nope.”

“All right, Sunshine,” Dixie laughed. “I know you’re in good hands.”

“I even do windows,” Mike said, “which reminds me—we need to get home and see how that repair is going.”

“Aw, but—”

“Actually, Johnny, I have to get back to work,” Dixie said. “Don’t be a stranger, huh? And I don’t want the next time I see either of you guys to be for business—we’re doing just fine here without you two coming in any more as customers. Which is my nursely way of saying take care of yourselves.”

“That’ll be a lot easier with that Staib asshole locked up,” Johnny said.

“So it was him,” Dixie blurted.

“Huh?” Johnny said. “How’d you know about him? We didn’t even know who he was till they caught him.”

For the first time that Johnny could remember seeing, Dixie looked flustered.

“Uh, let’s just say … I, uh …” Dixie shook her head and blushed heavily. “I guess maybe someone in this room got their hands on some information they shouldn’t have been able to get. And I shouldn’t have said a darned thing, but it’s too late now.”

“The anonymous source!” Mike said. “I wondered who that could’ve been.”

Johnny looked back and forth between Dixie and Mike. “What are you guys talking about?”

“In my, uh, interview at the police station on Friday night, someone said something about a tip-off from an anonymous source leading them to look into Staib,” Mike explained.

“Shoot, I really shouldn’t have said anything,” Dixie said.

“Don’t worry—our lips are sealed, right Johnny?”

“Tighten’a drum,” Johnny declared. “I didn’t hear a thing. Besides,” Johnny said, as a group of interns poured into the lounge, “all you said was ‘someone in this room,’ and there’s lotsa people here, right?”

Dixie laughed. “All right, you two—get yourselves home. And you—” she pointed to Johnny—“eat that liver, and some steak, and stay on the couch for the rest of the week.”

“Yes ma’am,” Johnny said, saluting her.

“Call me if he’s not behaving himself,” Dixie said to Mike. “I have Wednesday and Thursday off, and I could come babysit.”
“Now wait a second!” Johnny said, as Mike opened the door for Dixie, let her through, and then steered Johnny out of the lounge.

“She’s just kidding,” Mike said.

“No, she’s not,” Dixie said. “But, somehow, I’ll bet you’ve turned over a new leaf, and you might actually be following the doctors’ orders. Am I right?” she asked, looking at Mike.

“That’s what it looks like,” Mike confirmed. “C’mon, Gage—let’s get you home and on the couch.”

“Fine,” Johnny pretended to grumble. “See ya, Dix.”

“Take care, boys.” She watched them go, shoulders bumping together as they walked down the corridor, closer together than most people would walk, but not close enough to seem odd. She had a pang of sadness for them—they couldn’t hold hands, like Roy and Joanne could while walking down the same corridor, and couldn’t even have the casual hand on the shoulder, like she and Kel could, even though they kept their on-again, off-again relationship out of the workplace. But then, she had a surge of pride—maybe, just maybe, her amateur detective work contributed to the fact that they could go home tonight and be safe and sound in their own home. It was, after all, the least anyone could ask for.

TBC
Chapter 19

Johnny woke abruptly as the truck’s engine cut out. He opened his eyes to see that they were parked on the street in front of their house—the glazier’s truck was still in the driveway, right next to the Rover.

Johnny looked over to Mike. “Hey,” he said. “Sorry I slept the whole way.”

“No problem,” Mike replied, picking the books up off the seat. “It’s almost three—you wanna go back to bed and sleep till dinner?”

“Nah—I think I might be able to actually stay awake for the rest of the day. C’mon—let’s go see our new window.”

They got out of the car. The new window was in place, and the glazier was just cleaning up from the job. The house finally looked the way it had before Staib and Torrelli had started their campaign to make life difficult for Mike and Johnny.

“Looks great,” Mike said to the workers. “Thanks for fitting us in today.”

“No problem,” said the guy in charge. “How’d that happen, anyhow? It’s pretty hard to break one of these accidentally.”

“Two guys with a grudge and a hammer,” Mike said drily.

“Shit,” said the worker. “Any chance the cops’ll get them?”

“They already have. Sheriff’s department did a great job. Plus, Mrs. Daniels, who let you in this morning—she saw the vandals at work, and got a partial plate number.”

“Huh,” the man said, closing his toolbox. “Well—we’re off to our next job. I’ll send you a bill; maybe insurance will cover it.”

“We’ll see—thanks again,” Mike said.

“You’re welcome.” The two workmen got in their truck and drove off.

As Mike and Johnny walked into the house, the phone began to ring.

“Mine,” Johnny said, recognizing the ring as belonging to his phone line. “I’ll get it.”

“Hello?”

“Mr. Gage? It’s Detective DeVito.”

“Oh—hi.”

“I just got back from the arraignment, and wanted to fill you in on what happened.”

“Hang on—let me get Mike on the extension.”

Mike, who had been listening to the local end of the conversation, gave Johnny a “thumbs up” and
trotted to the bedroom to pick up the extension.

“I’m on the line now,” Mike said.

“So here’s the news. Torrelli’s arraignment was first, since he’d been in custody longest. He pleaded ‘not guilty’ to all charges.”

“Shit,” Johnny said angrily. “Does he seriously think he can get away with this crap?”

“You’d be surprised what some people can delude themselves into thinking, but hang on a second; there’s more. Staib pleaded nolo contendere to all the charges, which means his lawyer is going to try to make a deal with the D.A.”

“Is that a plea bargain?”Johnny asked.

“Exactly—and one thing that’s likely to happen is that Staib will offer to testify against Torrelli as a piece of his part of the deal. Because of that, it’s not out of the question that Torrelli’s lawyer would advise him to change his plea.”

“He’d plead guilty,” Johnny asked, “so he’d get a lower sentence or something?”

“No, he’d probably do just what Staib did—plead no contest and make a deal with the DA.”

“So what you’re saying is, this could still all get done and over with without a trial?” Mike asked.

“It’s possible,” DeVito said. “If I were Torrelli’s lawyer, I’d be trying to convince him to change his plea as we speak.”

“When would we know?” Mike asked.

“That’s the unfortunate part. Torrelli has up till the date of the trial to change his plea, and the trial was set for ten weeks from now.”

Mike felt like he could hear Johnny’s heart plummeting to the floor.

“Ten weeks?” Johnny said. “That’s forever!”

“It’s actually incredibly soon. It’s often twice that long.”

“Well, keep us posted,” Mike said. “And thanks for everything.”

“You’re welcome,” DeVito said. “I’ll be in touch if anything changes.”

Mike hung up the bedroom extension and went back to the living room. Johnny was sitting on the couch, with his head tipped back and his eyes closed. Mike sat down next to him, and Johnny reached over and took his hand.

“I can’t stand this, Mike. I mean, if there’s a trial, well, that’s the two of us, forcibly outed to the world by our legal system. And if there’s not, then these guys probably walk away with some bullshit sentence, and kind of get away with it.” Johnny sighed heavily. “We might as well just start packing if there’s gonna be a trial.”

“How so?” Mike asked.

“No matter what anyone says, I don’t believe for a second that if there’s a trial, the whole world isn’t gonna know about us. And if they do—well, do you think the Fire Department is gonna make any
efforts to keep us around? I doubt it. I bet there’s plenty of others who feel just like Staib, but aren’t
dumb enough or mean enough to actually do anything about it.”

Mike just sat next to Johnny for a couple minutes, not sure what to say. He settled for honesty.

“I don’t think we should start packing just yet—let’s wait to see what happens. You’re probably right
about one thing: if there’s a trial, then our little ‘open secret’ becomes a lot more public.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said bitterly, “and then we’re history. They’d find some way to get rid of us, I’m
sure.”

Mike frowned. “You know,” he said slowly, “I really just don’t know what our employer would do
—I can see them going either way, actually.”

Johnny picked his head up off the back of the couch and looked at Mike like he’d suddenly grown
antennae.

“Huh? Wow, that’s sure not the sense I get.”

“Sure, because you have to deal with Livingston. He’s a prick. But here’s what I see from my boss:
he finds my personal life difficult to contemplate, and is in all honestly probably appalled. But he
pretty much lets it go, because I’m good at my job, and he knows it.”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “How do you figure that? I mean, why does it even come up?”

“Here’s something different about working at HQ versus working at a station. Right now, you hardly
ever see your boss. Am I right?”

“Yeah, fortunately. I think I’d blow a gasket if I had to see Livingston more than once every couple
of weeks.”

“And when you weren’t a Captain, it was totally the opposite, right? At the station, we all pretty
much live in each other’s pockets, so any disputes or tensions get worked out, one way or the other,
pretty quickly,” Mike said.

“That’s mostly true …” Johnny said slowly.

“I know; you’re thinking about Marco. But I’m talking more along the lines of tensions with the
boss,” Mike said. “Captain Stanley always nipped things in the bud, and Len Sterling was the same
way. And I’d bet my bottom dollar that you don’t let crap hang around in the air between you and
anyone in your crew.”

Johnny thought for a second. “True,” he said. “I’ve had to talk to two of the guys about some crap.
Mostly Emerson when he was still a probie, but also a thing came up with Peters once.”

Mike raised his eyebrows. “Perfect Peters? Now that’s a story I’d love to hear, but I know, I know—
none of my business. I sometimes wish I didn’t kind of know half the guys on your crew. Anyhow
—what I mean is, over at HQ, we have a happy medium between living in each other’s pockets and
only seeing each other once a month. And I don’t know why, but I think it maybe makes people a
little more tolerant of differences that can get in the way at either of the extremes.”

“Huh,” said Johnny. “I guess I can imagine that. But when does personal stuff even come up with
Rhodes?”

“Ah—just had one example this morning. That fire your crew worked last week—the one with the
fatality?"

Johnny nodded. “Yeah, that was a rough one.”

“Well, the state needs a cause, of course, so our unit got called in. Two guys from my team did the initial investigation, and Rhodes asked me to put it all together. I told him I couldn’t touch it, since I had a close personal relationship with one of the captains who worked the fire. He was annoyed—I mean, how often would that happen, where the last names weren’t the same?—but didn’t make a big deal out of it. We just worked it out that if there was anything that came up in Battalions 11 or 17, where C-shift was involved, I won’t work on it.”

“Sensible,” Johnny said. “So he didn’t know who I was?”

“No,” Mike said, “and he very specifically didn’t want to know. He just wanted to know what station, and what shift. He actually said not to give him your name. Though with that information, he could look it up if he wanted to. But I don’t see him doing that.”

“Weird,” Johnny said.

“Here’s how I see it,” Mike said. “He’s just a regular guy—a good guy—who’s used to things being the way they’ve always been. He likes things to be familiar and comfortable. So when they’re not? He doesn’t wish me any ill, but he deals with ‘It’ in whatever way keeps him most comfortable, and keeps fuss to a minimum.”

Johnny nodded. “I can practically hear you saying a capital letter and quotes around that word, ‘It,’” he said, making little quotation marks in the air.

“Sounds that way in my head, too. Anyhow—do you see what I mean? I think, for most people, ‘It’ strikes up a certain amount of ambivalence, but doesn’t necessarily inspire instant hatred. Or if it does, it doesn’t inspire an instant need to act on their hatred.”

“Yeah, well, what about Torrelli and Staib?” Johnny said, arms crossed over his chest.

“I said ‘most people,’” Mike corrected mildly.


“But do you see what I mean?” Mike repeated. “I think for most people, it’s not worth the trouble to make a big deal out of things like, say, ‘It.’” This time he purposely made quotation-mark gestures.

“I guess,” Johnny said. “But still—it’s probably not illegal to fire someone because you don’t like who they’re screwing.”

Mike snorted. “Eloquently put, Gage. True—it’s probably not. But is it worth the trouble? That’s all I’m saying.”

“I see your point, but all I’m saying is, I’d just as soon we don’t have to go there. No trial is still my first choice. Not that we get to choose,” he said bitterly.

“I’m with you there, Johnny—believe me, I am. And I wasn’t trying to make a big deal about my point; it’s just odd enough that I’m less worried about something than you are that it kind of stood out.”

“Aw, no big deal, Mikey.” Johnny picked up the hand that was holding one of his own, and kissed each finger individually.
The phone rang—it was Mike’s line, so he picked it up.

“Howdy, Mike. Len Sterling here.”

“Len! How are you? All the guys okay?”

“Everyone’s fine. Mike. I’m just calling because I tried you at work, and the receptionist said you’d gone home sick, and that had me worried.”

“Oh—I’m not sick—not any more. I just had a doctor’s appointment, and so did Johnny, so I took the afternoon off.”

“Glad to hear that. Is John doing better?”

“Uh, a lot, but it’s still a while till he’s back on duty. He’s still supposed to pretty much just rest.”

“Listen, Mike—I was so sure you were going to be awful sick that I planned on bringing you two your supper tonight. If you don’t have plans, could I maybe come by anyhow? I’ll take care of everything—get somethin’ to throw on the grill, clean up—the works.”

“Wow, Len; that’s awfully generous. Let me just check with Johnny—he’s been really tired.”

“I promise I won’t keep you up late, but do check with him.”

Mike covered the mouthpiece. “It’s Len—he wants to bring dinner, and clean up and everything. You up for a visitor? He won’t stay late.”

“Sure,” said Johnny. “Not too many people I could handle, but he’s one of ‘em.”

“Sounds great, Len,” Mike said into the receiver. “We appreciate it—things have been real tough for us lately.”

“So I’ve heard—but I also hear the law has some very bad boys in custody, is that right?”

“Yep—we’ll fill you in later. What time you think you’ll show up?”

“Oh, sixish, I’d say. Give or take.”

Mike laughed, knowing that for Len, that could mean anywhere from five till seven thirty. “All right—we’ll see you when we see you, then.”

Johnny looked at Mike as he hung up the phone. “What time’s he comin’ over?” he asked.

“Sixish,” Mike replied, “with an emphasis on the ‘ish,’ of course.”

“I’m thinkin’, actually, that maybe I got a little ahead of myself when I said I could stay awake till bedtime—mind if I crash for a little while?”

“Not as long as I can lie down with you till you fall asleep. C’mon.”

~!~!~!~

When the bell rang at six thirty, Mike was startled out of an unplanned nap on the couch. He folded up his newspaper and went to the door.
“Hi, Len; come on in.”

“Howdy, Mike. Mind if I set these down in the kitchen? I’ve got chicken for the grill, and green beans and potatoes all set to go on the stove.”

“Wow, that’s great—thanks a lot. Here, I’ll take it.” Mike put the chicken in the refrigerator, and set the vegetables on the counter. “Lemme go get Gage—he’s been sleeping since like three.”

Len nodded. “Some people heal that way, don’t they—sleep it off, just like a sickness.”

“That does seem to be how he works,” said Mike. “Be right back.”

Mike popped into the bedroom, where he found Johnny starting to stir.

“Hey, sleepyhead. Len’s here—you wanna get up?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, definitely.” Johnny sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Geez. It’s like I’m Rip van Winkle or something.”

“Whatever works—and I’d say it’s working, from what I see.”

“Huh? Whaddaya see?” Johnny asked, as he pulled his clothes on.

“You just sat up, got out of bed, and put your pants on without wincing or grimacing in the slightest. And it’s only been a week since you cracked those ribs.”

“Well, whaddaya know?” Johnny said, stretching experimentally. “I guess things are starting to come together.”

“But watch yourself, pal,” Mike said, as they headed down the hallway. “Now’s not the time to get cocky.”

“Who’s gettin’ cocky? I’m not gettin’ cocky! Hey, Len!” Johnny said as he rounded the corner to the kitchen.

“Well, howdy, John. You’re looking worlds better than the last time I saw you. And I have to agree with Mike—it’s certainly not the time to get cocky. Soon as you start feelin’ better, that’s right when you’re likely to set yourself back a step or two.”

Johnny sat down on a stool at the counter. “Well, if you two are gonna gang up on me, then fine. I’ll just hafta not get cocky. Not like I was anyhow.”

“Why don’t I get busy with this chicken,” said Len, “if you’ll point me to the grill.”

“Far corner of the deck,” said Mike. “It’s self explanatory.”

“Well, it’s true that those of us who put out fires for a living are often fairly good at getting them started, as well,” said Len. “So I’ll take your word for it.” He took the tray of chicken out to the deck, and returned a minute or so later. “Piece of cake.”

Len looked around the house. “You sure do have a nice place, here, fellas. Did it come with one or the other of you, or did you go in on it together?”

“Came with me,” said Mike, as he put the beans in a saucepan. “An uncle of mine left it to me. He was a fireman—got me into the business, actually—and left it to me. Well, actually, to any nephews who were firefighters at the time of his death. It was a total shock—I mean, I didn’t know he had
anything like that in his will, and I was like twenty five, and lived in this crummy, dinky apartment. And then suddenly I was a homeowner."

“So that’s what brought you to the fire service,” Len said. “I always wondered, actually. You don’t really seem like the type.”

“Well, it was what I wanted to do. My parents were dead set against it. I actually went to college for a year, just for one last-ditch effort to keep them happy—but I hated it. They pretty much stopped talking to me when I dropped out of school and went to the academy.” Mike looked up from the potatoes. “And speaking of people who don’t seem the type—what’s your story, Len? I have to say, I always wondered.”

Len’s face grew serious. “Well, now, boys, that’s a story for after we’ve got ourselves around a drink or two. It’s … not your usual story.”

Mike stopped what he was doing. “Sorry, Len—I didn’t mean to pry. You don’t have to tell us if it’s uncomfortable. Just seemed like a logical question.”

“No, no—it’s all right. I don’t know as how I’ve told it to anyone before, except my first Captain. And I guess, now that I think about it, I’d kind of like to tell you two about it, if you don’t mind hearing. Might be kind of a relief, in a way, to know that two people I trust and respect know my odd story,” Len admitted.

Mike pulled the fridge open, and set a beer in front of Len, and another in front of himself, and a soda in front of Johnny.

“Here’s to kidneys,” Johnny said, clinking bottles with the other two men. “No coffee or alcohol for me for a while, yet.”

Mike set the beans and potatoes to simmer on the stove, and leaned on the counter.

Len toyed with his beer, and suddenly downed about half of it in one go, as if steeling himself.

“I did some pretty stupid things when I was young,” he began, “but I suppose that’s no different a story from most of us.”

Johnny and Mike both nodded.

“Guilty,” Johnny said.

“Oh yeah,” said Mike, nodding his head. “Me too—and don’t look at me like that, Gage; it’s true. But go on, Len.”

“I supposed y’all know that I was involved in, shall we say, alternative ways of living, in the sixties?”

Johnny and Mike both nodded. “Yeah—we’d heard you lived on a commune, or something.”

“That’s pretty much what it was. Communal living, on a farm, in the middle of nowhere up in northern California. Pretty much ran away from home—which was the middle of nowhere in Georgia, in case you were wondering—when I was seventeen. Hitchhiked across the country, and landed at The Farm. That’s the only name we had for the place.”

“Anyhow, that was all dandy and perfect, until, guess what?”
Johnny piped up. “You got tangled up with a girl, and things fell apart, and you couldn’t stay there any more.”

“Got it in one, Gage. Got it in one.” Len finished his beer, and Mike set another in front of him. “Summer of 1965. We were twenty. She got pregnant, I wanted to marry her, but she said she didn’t believe in that old-fashioned sort of thing. I begged her, on my knees—I didn’t want any child of mine to be born out of wedlock. Maybe it was old-fashioned of me. I don’t know. But she flat out refused, so what could I do?”

“Not much, I suppose,” Mike said. “Funny—some of us want to get married, and can’t, and then there’s people who can get married, and don’t want to. Anyhow—sorry. Go on.”

“She flat out refused, every single day when I asked her. And I did—every single day. One day, she got so angry about my constant badgering, that she stormed out into the field to do her work for the day, and was out for a long, long time. Nobody thought a thing of it, until lunch time, when she didn’t come in. Now, she was very careful about the baby—made sure she ate right, and quit drinking and smoking grass as soon as she suspected she was pregnant—so folks were worried when she didn’t come in for lunch. Except for me—I told them how mad she’d been, and how she was surely just avoiding me. So we didn’t go out to look. Not till almost supper time.” Len took a long, long drink.

“When we finally went out to look for her, after she didn’t show up for her kitchen duties, it took a couple hours till we found her. Dave found her, in the strawberry field, lying in a pool of blood. She’d miscarried, and hemorrhaged, and we hadn’t even been looking for her, because I’d convinced everyone she was just mad at me.” Len finished his beer. “Excuse me—I think I’ll go flip the chicken. Be right back.”

Johnny and Mike looked at each other.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to go out,” said Mike.

“No,” said Johnny. “Chicken doesn’t need flipping for quite a while yet, in my book.”

After a minute or two, Len came back inside. “Turns out it wasn’t ready to be flipped anyhow.” He looked at Mike. “You got another beer in that fridge?”

Mike silently passed a third beer to Len.

“So you probably figured this out already, but she was dead. Had been for hours and hours, by the looks of things. I blamed myself—maybe if I hadn’t made her so mad, or maybe if I hadn’t convinced people she hadn’t come back because she was sulking—maybe, maybe, maybe. At any rate, it was convenient that I blamed myself, because the others sure as hell blamed me.

“So that was it for me and The Farm. And that’s when I did the stupidest thing I’d ever done. I ran away from the establishment once, and ended up with heartbreak. So when I ran away from heartbreak, I ended up in the arms of the biggest, most rigid, meanest establishment in the entire United States of America.” Len took a hearty swig from his bottle. “Yes sir, I joined the U.S. Marine Corps.”

“I went through basic training without a hitch, and three months later—even before my child would have been born—there I was, in Vietnam. I suppose just about everyone knows I was in ‘Nam, but I’m guessing mosta y’all assumed I got drafted. But that’s not how it was.”

Len shook his head. “Now, I’m not going to lay the entire sob story on you fellows of everything
that happened over there. Quite a bit of it should just plain stay in my head, and die with me, when that time comes, without ever being let out. But the one piece that’s important here, is what my assignment was. I was with a flamethrower unit. Yes siree Bob, I burned shit down, left right and center. Farms, fields, forests, and the occasional village that we were told was empty of anyone but VC. We burned, and burned, and burned. I don’t know how much napalm my unit went through, but I can tell you one thing: it was a god damned awful lot.”

“And we were so casual about it. Man, you think firefighters have graveyard humor, gallows humor? You oughta try a bunch of Marines who burn everything in their path.”

“And then there was that one time—there’s always that one time, in a story like this, isn’t there? But there was that one time, when they told us the farmhouse was empty, that everyone had moved out already, that nobody was still in there. But it wasn’t true. And we didn’t bother to check whether it was true. I torched the huts myself, and, well … the rest of that story is gonna stay right where it is now.” Len cleared his throat. “And now I honestly believe that the chicken really does need flipping.” He slipped back out the back door.

Neither Mike nor Johnny said anything for a few seconds, and they didn’t look at each other. “Did you have any idea?” Johnny finally asked.

“I knew there was something, but …” He shook his head. “No. I didn’t know how bad.”

“Me neither,” said Johnny. “I mean, I know plenty of vets, and all, but …” he shook his head. “Damn.”

Len reappeared, and started back in to his story as if he hadn’t just left. “When I was done with my tour of duty, I didn’t re-up. I’d had enough. More than enough. But I had absolutely no idea what to do with myself. I don’t know if either of you has ever been in that place—” Mike shook his head, but Johnny nodded vigorously. “Ah, I see there’s a story for another day,” Len said. “So I camped in the mountains for a few weeks, and tried to think of how I could possibly undo any of the things I’d done. I thought about working on commercial boats—after all, water is the opposite of fire. I thought about working construction—since building is the opposite of destroying.

“And then, one day, I was hiking, and happened to come across a brush fire station. It was the strangest thing—it was the middle of nowhere, and suddenly there was this fire station. And then it hit me—the opposite of setting fires is putting them out. I knew what I needed to do with myself. So I knocked on the door of the station, and asked the guys there what I’d need to do to become a firefighter.

“Two months later, I was enrolled in the academy down here in L.A. I didn’t really care where I went—I just went to the place where I could start the soonest. And in 1967, I started my probie year, in a station that I know now was just about the worst possible match for a country hippie like me. I hated it—every single second of every single shift. But I considered it my penance, so I also loved it. If that makes any sense at all.”

Mike nodded ever so slightly, but didn’t say anything.

“Makes perfect sense,” Johnny said, without missing a beat. “But you must’ve gotten out of the station you hated, though, right?”

Len nodded. “I did. After that probie year, I knew I could do the job, but I didn’t know if I could learn to like it. But my first captain—a very smart man, may his soul rest in peace—knew exactly where I belonged, which was not in unincorporated East L.A., at a busy urban station that people
fight to get into, but in the hinterlands, at a station that people fight to get out of. They sent me to a
nice little station north of Palmdale—up in the hills. And I was there until 93s was built in, what,
1972? And there I’ve been, ever since. Worked my way up through Engineer, and then Captain.”
Len sipped his third beer, no longer in a hurry to get the alcohol into his system.

Nobody said anything for a few moments.

“You don’t still hate it, do you? I mean, it doesn’t *seem* like you do.” Mike said, hoping the answer
was “no.”

“No. No, I don’t. As soon as I got out of the big city atmosphere, I discovered I actually *liked* the
work. I mean, *really* liked it. I went from being a just-barely-made-it probie to, well, whoever I am
today.”

“A well-liked, highly-respected Captain who, even if he is reportedly a bit quirky, is one of the best
firefighters around,” Mike finished for him.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” laughed Len, but he was interrupted by Johnny.

“I would. It’s not a stretch, either,” Johnny said. “And don’t try to worm your way out of a
compliment that happens to be true.”

Len mimed tipping his hat to the two of them. “Well, then, I thank you kindly.”

“Did you ever think of giving up?” Mike asked. “I mean, we’ve all had our moments, but—what
about at first, when you were just doing it as penance?”

“No, not seriously,” Len said. “Partly because of the penitential factor, and partly because I was just
too frightened to start over, pick up a new trade again. Perhaps that was cowardly—I don’t know.
But in the past few years, I’ve realized I’ve become something I never hoped to be.” He took a drink
from his beer, and Johnny asked the logical follow-up question.

“And what’s that, Len?”

“A happy man, gentlemen. And really, who can ask for anything more than that?”

Johnny and Mike nodded their agreement, just as the kitchen timer went off.

“Doesn’t sound much like my mama’s dinner bell, but let’s eat anyhow,” said Len.

While they ate, Mike related the rest of their tale, up to and including the news that they would
possibly dealing with a trial in a couple of months. As Mike noticed Johnny starting to pick at his
food, he did his best to change the topic, while trying not to *look* like he was changing the topic. The
conversation eventually swayed back to news about Len’s A-shift crew, Mike’s former co-workers.

“I’ll tell you, Mike,” said Len, “what with Holtz being the third engineer since you had to leave us,
people are sure hoping he starts fittin’ in a bit better.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Mike asked.

“Well, let’s just say that boy needs a little attitude adjustment. Just because you make engineer
doesn’t suddenly make you squire of the manor,” said Len.

“Oooh,” said Johnny, “sounds like he needs a little pranking.”

“Captain Gage, you have a devious mind,” said Len, “and I’m inclined to agree with your
suggestions on this one.”

“I had an excellent teacher, where it came to firehouse pranks,” said Johnny. “I’ll give ol’ Chester B. a call, and see what he might have up his sleeve for an engineer who might just be a bit too full of himself.”

Mike shook his head. “And I thought the Captains were supposed to discourage this kind of thing, not start it.”

“Attitude adjustment, Mikey. All part of the job,” said Johnny, as he dug heartily into his meal.

Mike carefully didn’t allow himself to smile like he wanted to—he was just happy that Johnny’s attitude had just undergone a little adjustment itself.

TBC
Chapter 20

Chapter 20.

A/N: I know nothing about arson investigation or hazardous materials, so please don’t laugh too hard at my mistakes if you do.

Tuesday morning, LACoFD HQ.

Mike was in the middle of reading the background on his new assignment when his phone rang.

“Mike Stoker, Arson/Fire Investigation.”

“Stoker? Rhodes here. I just got a call from Chief McConnike, the Battalion Chief down in one of your old territories. In fact, if I’m remembering right, wasn’t Hank Stanley was your Captain down there? Anyhow—he’s crew is down there now. They just worked a suspicious-looking warehouse fire—it’s under control now, so I want you and Harris to go down there and take a look. Harris doesn’t usually go to the scene when it’s still active, but you can show him the ropes and keep him out of trouble.”

“Sure, Boss. I’ll go grab Wes and we’ll head straight down.”

“Your leg okay for picking through the rubble in turnouts?”

“Yep—the leg’s feeling good as new today, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“You may need to pack up, depending on how far through overhaul they are. None of this smoke-eater bullshit, all right? Good air is good air, and bad air sucks the life outta you. So if you need a pack, wear it. And if you need to be on air, Harris doesn’t go in.”

“I think I can probably remember how the air pack works,” Mike joked. In fact, a year and a half after the last time he’d worn one, he’d be able to don it perfectly in pitch dark, drunk, with one hand tied behind his back, and Rhodes knew that perfectly well.

“Terrific. So grab your gear, and get Harris, and take a car from the motor pool, all right? Stop by my office and I’ll give you an authorization slip and the location of the incident.”

“Will do, boss. Be down in five.”

Mike put away the file he’d been reading, and trotted down to Harris’s office. He knocked on the door.

“C’mon in!”

“Mornin’, Harris. Listen—Rhodes has an evidence gathering job for us, effective instantly. Let’s go grab some gear from the gear room, and stop by Rhodes’s office for a car signout slip, and I’ll drive us down there. It’s apparently in my old stomping ground—I mean my really old stomping ground, down by 51s, so I’ll know my way around there just fine.”

“Okay—I can go right now.”

Wes locked up his office, and the pair headed down to the AFIU equipment room. They picked up evidence collection kits for each of them. Mike grabbed boots in his size and tucked them into the legs of the pants he grabbed from a rack, and grabbed a coat and threw it on top of that bundle.
Finally he went to a rack and grabbed a red helmet with “AFIU” on the shield, and stuck a pair of gloves into the pocket of the coat.

Mike noticed Wes was just watching. “You’ve had turnout gear on before, right?”

“Uh, just a couple times,” Wes admitted.

“All the sizes are listed on the shelf. Go too big rather than too small, except for the inseam—a little too short’s better than too long. Stick the boots into the ankles of the pants—just make sure the lining of the pants comes down over the boots too. For gloves—lemme see your hands—okay, get size large.”

Wes followed Mike’s instructions, and then looked on with interest as Mike automatically went through the various steps of verifying that the air pack was fully in service.

“Should I grab one of those too?” Wes asked. “I’ve only had one on once, and that was just like a demo thing, to show us how heavy all that shit is.”

“Nope—Rhodes said if I need to be on air, you don’t go in. I’ll go in with one of the guys working overhaul.”

“Oh,” said Wes. “Okay. Just doesn’t look like that big of a deal.”

“It’s not hard to learn the basics, but if you’re in a situation where you need an air pack, it’s a dangerous situation, where things could go wrong. And when things go wrong, your responses need to be automatic, and yours wouldn’t be. That’s the only thing.” Mike tactfully didn’t mention the fact that just standing around in turnout gear and an air pack was tiring as hell.

“Makes sense,” said Wes. “I, uh, don’t usually go to the scene when it’s still being worked on like this—give me a holler if I’m about to do something dumb, all right?”

“You bet. Just stick with me, all right?”

They packed their gear into huge duffel bags, and stopped briefly at Rhodes’s office for the vehicle authorization and the location information.

“All right—we’re off,” Mike said. “Down to the motor pool, and then we head to Carson.”

“The motor pool?” Wes said anxiously. “Uh, would you mind checking the car out without me? I’ll meet you, um, I don’t know—where’s a convenient place?”

“Out front, in the flag-pole circle? I can swing around there. What’s up? You forget something?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s it. I, uh, forgot something. I’ll be out there when you have the car.”

“Okay,” Mike said, not wanting to bother with whatever had Wes weirded out about going to the motor pool. He hauled his gear out to the back of the building, and walked to the desk at the back of the garage.

“Mornin’,” said the bored-looking guy at the desk. “What c’n I getcha?”

“Just need whatever you’ve got for two guys and two sets of gear. Gathering evidence at a structure fire, so it might get smelly.” He handed the requisition slip to the clerk.

“Terrific. Okay, Car 112. It’s a Ford wagon. Great family car. Put the smelly crap in the back of the wagon, and we can still be friends.” He handed Mike the keys, and had him sign a few forms.
Mike was about to leave to go get the car and pick up Harris, when a thought occurred to him.

“Say, you don’t know a fellow named Staib, do you?”

The clerk frowned deeply. “Yeah, I worked with him. All I heard is that he’s in the slammer. Which is exactly where he oughtta be, if you ask me, which you didn’t, but I’m tellin’ you anyhow. That guy’s a fuckin’ psycho. Always screwing around with somebody or another.”

“What’s he in the joint for?” Mike asked, feeling slightly guilty. He wasn’t exactly talking about the case, but DeVito certainly wouldn’t approve of this line of questioning.

“Heard he beat a fireman up for being gay, or something. Fuckin’ dipshit. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t like gays any better than you, but beatin’ up one of the brothers? That’s low. I mean, as long as there’s no hittin’ on guys at work, or staring at their asses, I don’t really give a shit. Anyhow, Charley said Staib ain’t comin’ back here regardless.”

“Huh. Who’d’ve thought,” Mike said vaguely. “Anyhow—thanks. Have a good one.”

Mike picked up the car, and swung around to the front of the building. Harris was waiting in the flag-pole circle, so Mike stopped the car and let Wes load his gear into the back. They started the short drive to Carson, and Wes read the summary aloud as they drove.

“Twenty thousand square foot warehouse on a single story. Subdivided into four areas. Two areas stored chemicals in containers, and two areas stored ordinary combustibles. The suspicion is that the fire’s origin was in one of the chemical storage areas, and that it spread to the rest of the building. The place was fully involved.”

Mike whistled. “Boy, I’ll bet that was a bitch. And overhaul is really gonna be a bitch. Always is for warehouse fires.”

“How come?” Wes asked.

“First of all, a warehouse is huge—for a place that size, you’d need upwards of seven thousand gallons of water per minute to put the fire out in a timely fashion. More, depending on what’s stored inside, and more, if there are nearby exposures in danger. That’s a hell of a lot of water. Not always easy to do, depending on your hydrants.”

“What about overhaul? Why’s that so bad?”

“Well, the whole purpose of a warehouse is to store tons and tons of stuff. And it’s often packed floor to ceiling. The whole purpose of overhaul is to find any hot spots and make sure the fire doesn’t start itself up again. So you have to tear everything in the warehouse apart to look for hot spots that could rekindle. And it’s dangerous in there, because of all the stuff piled high that’s then had thousands of gallons of water thrown at it, so it’s heavier than usual, and probably damaged and unstable. But you know all that—so you know we won’t be able to just run in and start poking around.”

“Maybe someday they’ll invent like some kind of binoculars or something that can see infra-red—you know, heat,” Wes said. “That’d sure save a lot of time, wouldn’t it?”

“Sure would—you could even probably see through walls and find hidden hot spots,” Mike replied. “I dunno, though—that sounds awfully Star Trek.”

“I’ll tell you what—in my spare time, I’ll work on inventing some heat binoculars and a thing where you can talk into it and it’ll put what you said onto paper, like I was talking about Friday.”
Mike shook his head. “Like I said, man—Star Trek. Not in a hundred years.”

Mike was glad to see Wes behaving normally—not trying to apologize for something mysterious like he did Monday. They chatted about this and that for the rest of the short drive to the warehouse. As they entered the vicinity, Mike started looking around.

“We’ve gotta be close,” he said. “I can smell it. Look—there.” He pointed out the driver’s side of the windshield. “That’s gotta be it.”

Wes checked the address. “Yeah, this is the cross street here.”

Sure enough, as they turned the corner, they saw multiple pieces of fire apparatus staged all along the block. The street was blocked off with barricades, and would have been impassible anyhow, since there were still several supply lines running across the street from various hydrants, so they parked on the cross street and grabbed their bags of gear and their evidence collection kits. Each man wore his department ID conspicuously on his shirt pocket, so they would be let onto the scene.

Mike stopped to talk to the man at the barricade. He showed his ID. “Can you let the Chief know we’re here?”

“You bet.” The firefighter activated the lapel mike of his radio. “Chief McConnike from Andersen at the east barricade. Your Arson guys are here—Stoker and Harris.”

“Copy. Send ‘em on down—I’m at the overhead door on the Alpha/Bravo corner.”

“Will do.” He turned to Stoker. “Go on ahead.”

Mike and Wes crossed over the barricade. Wes barreled on ahead, but Mike stopped him.

“Hold it—better gear up before we go any further.” Mike set down his bag, threw his office shoes into the bag, and stepped into his bunker pants and boots. He had the coat and helmet on, and the air pack slung loosely over his shoulders, before Wes had even gotten one leg into the bunker gear. He waited patiently and without comment as Wes geared up awkwardly.

“Hang on, Wes—suspenders up before you put the coat on.”

“Oops,” Wes said sheepishly, turning beet red. He finished with the coat, and put his helmet on and tightened the strap.

Mike took one look at him and had to bite the insides of his cheeks—hard—to keep from laughing. “Uh, your helmet’s on backwards,” Mike said, struggling to keep his face impassive.

“Shit,” Wes said, yanking the helmet off and replacing it in the correct direction. “Does everything look okay now?”

“Just fine. Relax, okay? I won’t let you get in trouble,” Mike said. “C’mon, let’s go find the chief.”

He walked along the front of the building, until he got to the far left corner, and found the large overhead door. A man with a white helmet was standing there, next to a very tall man with a black-and-white skunk-striped helmet.

“Chief?” Mike said. The two men turned around. “Cap!”

“Well, Mike Stoker!” said Captain Stanley. “I’d say long time no see, but that’d be a lie. Great to see you on the job. Chief, this is Mike Stoker—he was on my crew for over six years.”
“Sure, I remember Stoker,” said Chief McConnike. “If I recall, you transferred up to the North division, and then got hurt pretty bad. So you’re in Arson now—good for you.”

“And this is Wes Harris,” Mike said. “He usually works with the sheriffs, but he’s with me on the scene today.”

“Harris,” said the Chief, shaking Wes’s hand. “All right—Hank, why don’t you show these two the chemical storage area we’re concerned about so they can get started. And, who was it on your crew that noticed the suspicious circumstances?”

“Lopez—one of my really experienced guys, and Flint, our probie,” said Hank. “They’re loading hose—you want ‘em?”

“Sure,” said McConnike.

“Lopez, from Stanley. You and Flint come on down to the overhead door on the A/B corner, will ya?”

“Sure, Cap—be right there.”

Mike grinned as he recognized Marco’s voice. He looked around the scene as they waited for Marco and Flint.

“Boy, Cap—this looks like it was a real bitch.”

“You can say that again, Mike,” replied Hank. “Every time we thought we had it knocked down, some pile of crap would light up again. We’re all tired as hell and want to get back to quarters, but we’re not done here and we know it.”

Marco trudged up, along with a tall, lanky firefighter wearing a yellow helmet.

“Hey, Marco!” said Mike.

“Mike? How great! Sean, this is my buddy Mike I was telling you about, from the Arson unit. Man, Stoker—I was just saying how funny it would be if we got you on this one.”

Mike and Marco each introduced their co-workers to the other team, and the party headed into the warehouse.

“So, Marco—I guess you’re gonna show us what looked weird to you. But let’s do it this way,” said Mike. “Just take us back there at first, but don’t say anything about what made you suspicious. We’ll take a look, and see if we notice the same things as you, at first. Then we can chat about what we all saw, and Wes and I will get our pictures and samples.”

Marco and Flint led Wes and Mike through the safest part of the warehouse into one of the chemical storage areas.

“Here’s the area where I got worried,” said Marco, pointing Mike to an interior wall.

A large metal drum stood next to a wall, and a dark “V” of black spread up along the wall from above the drum. Several identical drums all showed the same “V” pattern extending up the wall. All the drums were misshapen and blackened.

“I see why you called us,” said Mike. “It looks like there are multiple, simultaneous origins—and that almost never happens by accident.”
“That’s what I thought, too,” said Marco.

Wes inspected one of the blackened drums. “I can’t read the label on this; can any of you?”

Mike, Marco, and Sean Flint all shook their heads.

“It’s definitely strange,” said Wes. “Whaddaya think, Stoker?”

“I think we oughta do what we normally do—get pictures, make a diagram of the contents of the area. And we oughta number each drum and get a sample from each one. Lord only knows what’s in these things,” Mike said, shaking his head.

“You know, I don’t know much,” said Flint, “but I can tell you one thing. I cleaned pools when I was a teenager, so I was around a lot of chlorine, and I’m definitely getting a chlorine smell here.”

Mike sniffed the air. “I don’t smell it,” he admitted.

Marco shook his head. “Me, neither.”

But Wes nodded. “I’m smelling it too—pretty nasty.”

Mike and Marco looked at each other. “I guess a dozen years of eating smoke’ll knock your nose right out,” Marco suggested. “Cause we don’t smell a thing.”

Wes started getting out his evidence collection kit. He put a numbered flag by one of the barrels, and paused for a moment.

“Hey, Mike? Come check this out.”

Mike stepped over to the barrel in question. Wes had his hand on the side of the barrel. Marco and Sean looked on, wondering what Wes had found.

“What’s up?” Mike asked.

“Should this still be so hot? I mean, I know this place was just on fire and all, but … I dunno. Just seems awful hot.”

Mike held the back of his hand near the barrel without touching it, and then did the same with some adjacent barrels. “You’re right—it’s hotter than the rest of them. Something’s really fishy here.” He sniffed the air. “And you know what? I can smell it now—like bleach, except stronger.” He coughed. “All right, Wes—I want you to get out, because whatever this is, it’s nasty shit. Marco, you mind pairing up with me for a minute?”

“Sure thing, Mike. Flint, you take Harris out,” said Marco. He got his radio. “Incident command from Lopez, in the chemical storage room. Be advised we have a possible hazardous gas situation; we’re sending Harris out with Flint.”

Flint and Harris were starting to cough as well. “Nasty,” said Flint. “C’mon—let’s get outta here. You don’t have air, and it’s getting worse and worse in here.”

Mike and Marco masked up and went on air as Flint ushered Harris out.

“Marco, you see labels on any of these drums?” Mike shouted, to be audible through the mask and regulator.

Marco and Mike started looking through the room for any indication of what the chemicals could be,
and found none. All the drums were too badly damaged.

“Not a thing, Mike.”

Mike returned to the barrel that was hotter than the others, and again put his hand near the barrel. “Marco? If this isn’t hotter than before, than I’m a monkey’s uncle. I think we oughta get out of here—something really weird is going on here.” He pulled his hand away—it was burning and itching, and Mike was starting to get nervous about what might be in those barrels.

Marco put an ungloved hand near the barrel, then looked at it and wiped it on his pants. “I’m with you. C’mon.” He pressed in the button on the lapel mike of his radio. “Incident command from Lopez, in the chemical storage room—we have some kind of self-heating chemical reaction going on here—we’re coming out.”

“Copy,” came McConnike’s voice from the radio. “I have a team coming in with a hand line.”

“Look!” Mike shouted to Marco.

The hot drum was starting to exude a yellowish-greenish gas.

Mike grabbed Marco’s arm and urged him to the door. “Chlorine gas!” he shouted. “Get out!” He pushed Marco in front of him, and closed what was left of the door behind him. The two men took off at a dead run.

Halfway through the building, they met the hand-line team and stopped them.

“Chlorine gas!” Mike yelled. “Turnouts won’t protect you. Turn around and get out!” His hands felt like they were burning. He and Marco and the hand-line team raced through the building to the exit.

As soon as they were outside, Mike and Marco instantly started stripping off their turnout gear.

“Hose us down—fast!” shouted Mike. “We’ve been exposed to chlorine gas.”

The team with the hand line set their nozzle to a fog pattern, and sprayed the two men down. The water was ice cold, and Mike and Marco shivered miserably in the freezing spray.

Chief McConnike and Captain Stanley rushed over, accompanied by one 51’s paramedics, and another from Station 10.

“What the hell happened, boys?” the Chief asked.

“I don’t know what’s in those barrels, Chief, but it’s heating spontaneously, and now it’s emitting chlorine gas,” Mike said through chattering teeth. “Harris and your probie should get checked out too—I bet we were all breathing some chlorine in there.”

The paramedics threw blankets around Mike and Marco. “We should wash out your eyes, fellas—I know you were masked up, but better safe than sorry.”

Mike coughed, and waved at them to proceed. He and Marco cooperatively tipped their heads back as the paramedics held their eyes open and poured saline over them.

“Man, that was close,” Mike said to Marco. “I’ll bet that whole room is filled with gas by now. And that stuff—as soon as it hits water, it turns to acid. That’s why our eyes are burning.” He coughed again.

The paramedic from Squad 51, whose name badge read “D. Dunworth,” frowned at him. He set up
the biophone and began contacting Rampart.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me,” Mike said to him. “It’s just a tickle.” He coughed again, despite trying to appear completely healthy.

Captain Stanley raised his eyebrows. “Been taking lessons from Gage, there, pal? I know you’re not under my command, but I’d consider it a personal favor if you’d let these guys do their jobs, all right?” He called over to the other two men who’d been in the room. “Harris? Flint? Come on over here.”

Suitably chastened, Mike submitted to the exam. “Unbelievable,” he muttered under his breath.

Mike overheard Chief McConnike ordering a hazmat unit. “And have law enforcement begin evacuating a one thousand foot radius—we can’t afford to take any chances with this stuff.”

Wes sat down next to Mike, and had his eyes washed out as well. He coughed once or twice. “Remind me never to go out on an assignment with you again,” he said.

“Look at it this way,” Mike replied. “At least you didn’t have to get hosed down. So much for gathering evidence, huh?”

“Yes. Didn’t even get one sample.”

“We can leave that for guys in hazmat suits. ‘Cause I’m not goin’ in there again, I can tell you that.”

Wes thought for a minute. “You know what I’ll bet happened?”

Mike shook his head. “No, what?”

“I’ll bet that stuff is some kind of hypochlorite—an oxidizing agent. Might be used for pools, or maybe for bleaching paper. Maybe it’s calcium hypochlorite. In certain forms, that stuff can undergo rapid decomposition—and when it does, it gets hot, and releases chlorine gas. You wanna bet that’s what started this fire?” Wes punctuated his remark with a cough.

“No bets,” Mike said, coughing again. “Sounds like you have a winner there. If the hazmat guys can get some samples, I’ll bet we’re done—not arson, just inappropriately stored hazardous materials.” He did his best to ignore the paramedic taking his blood pressure, but couldn’t help coughing a few more times.

“You have any history of lung problems?” Dunworth asked.

Mike nodded. “Yeah, actually—I had a bunch of badly broken ribs about a year and a half ago; one of ‘em punctured my right lung, so I have some scarring there. That’s all, though.”

“That’s ‘all?’” replied Dunworth. “Sounds like plenty to me.”

“Yeah, well, that’s one of the reasons I’m in AFIU now, and not still an engineer.”

“What’s the other reason?” Dunworth asked.

“Femur in three pieces, same accident. Hit by a car at a scene,” Mike completed, knowing what question would be next.

Dunworth completed his report to Rampart, and Mike listened in dismay as Dr. Early, whose voice he recognized on the other end of the line, replied.
“All right, fellas. Bring ’em in, just as a precaution.”

“Aw, crap,” said Mike. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” said Captain Stanley. “Look at it this way: if, say, someone at home was resisting getting looked at, would you be annoyed if they decided to brush it off?”

“All right, all right,” Mike grumbled. “Sounds like our fate is sealed, Wes. All four of us, right, Dunworth?”

“Everyone who was in that room,” the paramedic confirmed. “You don’t need to go in an ambulance, but you have to go in the squad or the engine.”

“I’ll tell ya what, Mike,” said Cap. “You ride with us, for old time’s sake. I’ll make the probie take the jump seat. I’ll have Castro—he’s our other paramedic, and where the heck is he, anyhow? I’ll have him take your Department car over to Rampart. Harris can squeeze into the squad—Dunworth, you drive. That way we can all avoid the whole ambulance thing, and you’ll have your ride for when they boot you right back out of Rampart once they see everything’s fine.”

Mike coughed again.

“I guess letting me drive Big Red is out of the question, right? No, don’t answer that; I was just kidding. I’m happy to let Jackson drive. She’s been his baby for two and a half years now, after all.”

“All right—everything settled?” asked Cap. “I’ll throw your gear into the back of the Department car—to me the keys, will ya? And you should probably run all the gear through the washer, and get it all thoroughly checked out—who knows whether that chlorine gas contacted any water and turned into acid in the gear, ya know?”

Mike nodded. “I’ll take care of it. You all right riding in the squad, Wes?”

Wes nodded. Privately, he’d been hoping to ride on the engine, but … oh well.

“Actually, Harris,” said Captain Stanley, noticing as Wes’s face fell, “Flint’s a lot bigger than you—why don’t you take the jump seat, and Flint can get in the squad.”

“Either way would be fine with me,” Harris said casually.

“Okay!” Cap clapped his huge hands together. “Probie—in the squad. Harris, Stoker—you’re with me. And as soon as I find Castro, who’s about to be busted back down to a yellow helmet if he doesn’t show up, we’re on our way.”

“There he is, Cap,” said Dunworth, pointing to the corner. “Bet he was having a smoke.”

Cap shook his head. “Skirtin’ the edge,” he muttered to himself. “All right, men—let’s get rolling. I’ll have Castro take care of your gear so we can get this show on the road.”

Cap trotted over to Castro, and Mike saw, but couldn’t hear, what appeared to be a somewhat heated exchange. Mike, Marco, and Harris headed over to the engine, just as Jackson finished loading up some odd and ends.

“Stoker!” Jackson exclaimed. “You riding in with us?”

“Yep,” said Mike. “Four of us are getting a free ride to Rampart. Ed, this is my colleague Wes Harris. Wes, Ed Jackson. He’s taken real good care of my old baby, haven’t you, Ed?”
"You bet—c’mon, hop in."

It was too loud to chat in the cab, so Mike just sat back and enjoyed the feeling of riding in a fire engine for the first time in a year and a half. He looked over at Wes, who looked like a kid in a candy shop. He was craning his head to see what the front of the cab looked like, and looking all around the back of the cab at the miscellaneous equipment stored within the rear of the cab. Mike just smiled and enjoyed the ride.

At Rampart, the exams were quick and unsurprising.

"Hi again, Doc," Mike greeted Dr. Early.

"Mike! We’ve got to stop meeting like this.” He checked the notes the paramedic had left. “So, you got a whiff of some chlorine gas, is that right?”

"Just a little, tiny bit is all—I swear. I sent out the guy with no air pack, and went on air myself, the second I figured out what was happening."

"How do you know what it was?"

"Well, we’re not totally sure—there were no legible markings on the drums, but we all smelled chlorine. The two guys who hadn’t wrecked their senses of smell by eating smoke for over a decade smelled it first, but we all smelled it eventually. And then there was the yellow-green gas—but we were on our SCBA air by the time we saw that."

Dr. Early put his stethoscope to Mike’s chest. “Breathe in deeply for me, and out, a couple of times.” Mike followed Early’s instructions, as the doctor listened to different parts of his lungs.

“Everything sounds fine, Mike. The reason we wanted you all to come in was that exposure to chlorine gas can have delayed effects—your airways could have swelled up, or you could have developed fluid in your lungs, but I think it’s fair to say that since half an hour has passed, and everything sounds good, there’s no danger at this point.”

Mike sighed. “Great, Doc. I was hoping you’d say that. Honestly, I feel fine, except for a little tickling cough. Oh, and I guess my hands got a little burned.” He held his hands out in front of him, and Dr. Early examined them carefully.

“Very mild acid burns, I’d say.” He opened a cabinet and handed Mike a tube of ointment. “Just use this as needed—it’s a bit messy, but it might help with the sting.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

Dr. Early looked Mike over again. “Everything else all right? I always hate to see someone come in so many times in short succession, but I realize this was a total coincidence.”

Mike smiled. “Right as rain, Doc. I saw Dr. Hansen yesterday, and he said the infection looked under control. I’ve been sleeping fine, since those creeps have been in jail. And Johnny’s doing a lot better, too.”

Dr. Early smiled right back at him. “Isn’t it amazing what four days can do? I recall quite a different conversation with you, just on Friday.”

Mike shook his head. “Man, I really unloaded on you, big time. I was a total, utter wreck. Sorry about that.”
“Don’t worry about it, Mike. There’s all different ways doctors can do our jobs, and sometimes, just listening is one of them. So I’m very glad to hear things are looking up.”

“Thanks, Doc. And—no offense, but geez, I really wanna get out of here now.”

Dr. Early made a sweeping gesture towards the door. “You’re a free man, Mike. Say hello to Johnny from me, all right?”

Mike buttoned up his shirt. “You bet, Doc.”

Mike was the last of the four chlorine victims to be turned loose. Flint and Lopez had been checked over first so they could get Engine 51 back in service. Harris was sitting in the waiting room when Mike came out from the exam room.

“Sounds like we’re all gonna live,” Mike said to Harris. “Come on—let’s get back to HQ. Rhodes isn’t gonna believe this one.”

“Well, look at it this way,” said Wes. “If we were right about what that stuff was, then it’s pretty likely it wasn’t arson, which means a hell of a lot less work for all of us, right? So he’ll probably be thrilled.”

“Thrilled?” Mike asked, as they headed out to the car. “Always kind of seems to me like he’s perpetually pissed off.”

“Oh, he’s just stressed out. I don’t think he handles day-to-day stress so well. You know his story, right?”

Mike shook his head.

“Well, he was a firefighter, just like you, but he got invalided out by a heart attack—when he wasn’t even forty. So the stress thing? Nothing new, is my guess. I’ve been working for him for four years, and he’s looked pissed off pretty much the whole time.”

“Oh,” said Mike. “I guess I always thought he just had something personal against me. You know.”

“What, that?” Wes shook his head. “To be honest? Everyone heard rumors at first. But Rhodes? He pretty much told us to shut the fuck up and mind our own business.”

“Oh,” Mike said again.

They drove in silence for a couple of minutes, and then pulled into the motor pool area at HQ. Mike and Wes got out, and grabbed their large duffel bags of gear. Mike filled out the mileage slip at the desk, and returned the key to the attendant, while Wes, for some reason, hung back by the edge of the parking area, waiting, with his back to the motor pool area.

“You said this job might get messy—anything need taking care of in the car?” asked the attendant.

“Nope—turned out completely differently than it sounded at first. Nothing came back with us,” Mike replied. “Should be clean as a whistle in there.”

“Great. Have a good one,” said the attendant.

Mike returned to where Wes was waiting.

“You, uh, got some bad history with someone in there, Wes?” Mike asked.
“Kind of,” Wes said, looking at the ground as they walked around to the front door.

Mike frowned. Wes had been acting normally all morning, but was returning to the twitchy, almost guilty behavior he’d been exhibiting recently. And yesterday’s half-apology still loomed large in Mike’s mind. He resolved to clear that business up before heading home for the day, one way or another.

“Well—let’s go see Rhodes. I’ll bet you lunch at the canteen that he drums his fingers on the desk and bites his pencil at least once while we’re in there, and says ‘Jesus’ at least twice.”

“No bet,” said Wes. “‘Cause that’s exactly what’s gonna happen.”

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“Chlorine gas? So much that you could actually see it?” said Rhodes. “Jesus!” He drummed his fingers on the desk. “All right—so no samples, then. I don’t blame you for that.”

“We may still get some,” said Mike. “Chief McConnike was calling in the Hazmat team, and they were going to try to get some samples. They probably have to know what it is to clean it up right, anyhow. Chief’s gonna call me later.”

Rhodes gnawed on his pencil. “Fine. But you got pictures, right?”

“Yes. I’ll take the film to the lab to get developed right away. It was interesting to see—it really did look like multiple ignition points, so I see why they called us in.”

“And nearly got you killed. Chlorine gas,” Rhodes repeated, “so thick you could see it. Jesus. Lucky you had your SCBA, and got on air when you did.”

“And he got rid of me just in time, too,” said Wes. “If he hadn’t shooed me out when he did, I’d’ve gotten a lungful of really bad shit.”

“So, what do we have?” Rhodes asked. “Pictures of multiple simultaneous ignition sites, your accounts of chlorine odor and visible gas, and your accounts of increasing heat in that one barrel. It’s not sounding like arson to me. Sounds like some kind of bad shit stored improperly. But we’ll wait on the samples from Hazmat before we write anything up, okay?”

“Sure, boss,” said Wes.

“And good work, boys. I got nothin’ for you, and you took a lot of crap today, so you can head out as soon as you write up your notes, and get the film to the lab. And, Stoker, can you get that gear taken care of over at the training center?”

“Will do. I’ll make sure they check it for acid damage.”

“Okay. All right.” He made shooing gestures towards the door. “See you tomorrow.”

Out in the hall, Wes tittered. “Good thing I didn’t take that bet—you had him pegged.”

“It’s us quiet guys you have to watch out for,” said Mike. “Or at least, that’s what the guys at 51s always said.”

They took the elevator up to the sixth floor. Wes followed Mike to his office, and stood outside the door as Mike entered the office.

“Uh, listen—can I come in for a minute?”
“Sure,” said Mike. He sat at his desk chair, and motioned for Wes to take the chair across from him. “What’s going on, Wes? You’ve seemed really nervous about something recently, and, well, yesterday? I didn’t really know what to make of what you said.”

Wes sighed. “Yeah.”

Mike looked him in the eye. “It’s something about the case, isn’t it? We were told not talk about the case—and so were you.”

Wes looked away from Mike’s direct gaze. “Look: he just told you not to talk about the case, right?”

“Right …”

“Well, I’m not asking you to talk. Just to listen. Nobody told you not to listen. So will you listen?”

“Won’t you get in trouble for talking?”

Wes laughed. “You know what? I don’t really care, to be honest. So—will you listen?” he repeated.

“Yeah. Okay, I’ll listen.”

Wes kept staring at the floor. “I screwed up, all right? I really, really screwed up.” He took a pen out of his pocket and fidgeted with it.

Mike didn’t say anything. He knew this was a time when the famous Stoker silence was the most appropriate response.

“That guy, Staib? He goes to my church. I didn’t ever know him well. I mean, we talked sometimes, because we figured out we both worked in the same place, but that was about it.”

Wes cleared his throat. “At our church, once a month or so, a lay person does a short sermon on a topic of his or her choosing. It was probably about a year and a half ago—about six months before you came to work here—that Staib did one on the evils of homosexuality,” Wes continued, looking anywhere and everywhere but at Mike. “How gays will destroy marriage, family, everything—for the rest of us. He was … vicious. It seemed more personally oriented than religiously oriented, though. Especially when he got to the part about how his sister was ‘used and dumped’ by a gay fireman who obviously was just trying to cover his tracks.”

“All I thought of that, was, there can’t possibly be any gay firemen. I mean, the fire department is the last place you’d look for queers, right? It’s such a man’s world, for tough guys. So I just figured he was full of shit.”

“And then, six months later or so, when you were about to come to our group, I started hearing the rumors. ‘He’s the one who got run over by a car, and his boyfriend was with him at the hospital the whole time!’ ‘Did you hear the new guy your team is getting is a queer?’ ‘Watch your ass around the new guy—I hear he’s a homo.’”

Mike interjected at this point. “My accident pretty much outed both of us. It’s pretty hard to keep it a secret that you love someone when they’re on death’s door and then in the hospital for six weeks. But go on.”

“Maybe a couple months after you moved into this office, I happened to be sitting next to Staib at a
discussion group after church one day. He said something to me about how he’d heard that the queer that messed up his sister was just promoted to Captain, and how gays shouldn’t even be allowed in the department, let alone as Captains. And I said something about how our new guy was gay, but seemed all right.”

Wes paused. “And Staib got all quiet, and just suddenly left. I mean, I already thought he was weird, so I didn’t think much of it, and didn’t see him again for months after that, until I ran into him down at the motor pool one day.”

“He asked me what the name of our new guy was, and I told him. And he laughed, and said how funny it was—he had a buddy at high school who had the same name, but it couldn’t possibly be the same guy. So he asked me to describe you, and I did, and he said you had to be the same guy, and funny, in high school, you didn’t seem like a fag.”

Mike sighed. “And you believed him, that we were buddies in high school?”

“I guess I didn’t really think about it—I mean, you’re about the same age, so it was plausible. He seemed awfully certain of it. And that was it, until just a few weeks ago, when he said he was totally sure you were the same guy, and he wanted to surprise you with a prank you’d pulled on him once in high school, and did I think I could get your address and phone number. I told him something like, do I look like the White Pages, and he should just look you up. But he said there were three Michael Stokers in the book, and he wasn’t sure which one. And he wanted to make sure he had your, uh, boyfriend’s name right. He said he thought he knew, but he wasn’t sure, so he wanted to check first, because it was important for one of his tricks. I told him I didn’t know it—didn’t know who he was, even. And so—that time when I was looking at your pictures from your old station—”

Mike finished for him. “You were just trying to get me to say a name. And I did. So you went back to him and confirmed he had the right guy.” Mike sat there with his elbow on his desk, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He sat there for a good minute before he said anything.

“Do you even know what you did, Wes?” he said, finally.

“I … I know I shouldn’t have said anything to him. I’m really sorry,” Wes said, in a tiny voice.

“But do you know what you did?” Mike repeated, no longer using the level tone he’d employed at the beginning of the conversation.

“No,” Wes admitted.

“You connected the dots for him. Staib never gave a shit about me—he just wanted to get at Johnny. Because, you see, Johnny really did go out with his sister, and he really did dump her—because she was nuts, actually—and Staib had some fucked up personal vendetta against Johnny because apparently she went even more nuts later, and Staib blamed Johnny.”

“But—but—” Wes stammered.

“But me finish,” Mike said. “I don’t know if Staib would’ve found Johnny, would’ve connected the two of us eventually, without your help. But he used you to get to information about me that led him to Johnny. So no matter what you think you did, know this; you helped lead a sick, violent person to a guy he had a personal vendetta against, so he could make his life miserable, trash his house, and, let’s not forget, beat the crap out of him. No, it wasn’t just that shiner you couldn’t keep your eyes off yesterday—Johnny’s still pissing blood, and he still can’t take a deep breath, or yawn, or sneeze, without pain.”
Wes cringed. “I’m really, really sorry. I really didn’t know what I was doing—I swear! If I’d thought he was gonna hurt anyone—”

Mike slammed his palms down on his desk, and Wes jumped.

“You just said, Wes, that his little sermon was vicious! How in the world could you not be suspicious that maybe he was up to no good? How?” Mike shouted.

Wes squirmed in the chair for a few seconds. “He … said something about papering the trees with pink toilet paper, and putting some pink flamingos in the front yard, and stuff like that. High school pranks, but … pink.”

“Well, do you want to know what he did? He slashed all four tires on both our vehicles. He put shit—actual shit—through our mail slot, on one of the hottest days of the year. He painted ‘faggot’ in red paint on the door of this office, and shoveled frozen piss under the door to ripen. He smashed the plate glass window in our living room, and threw eight gallons of hot pink enamel paint on the front of our brick house. And, oh yeah, he and his pal hit Johnny in the gut so hard his breathing muscles were paralyzed for long enough that they could break three of his ribs, kick him in the face, and kick him in the back so hard he had kidney damage! Does that sound like pranks to you?”

“No,” Wes whispered.

“And now it’s looking like we may have to go through a trial, because one of these fucks thinks his lawyer can get him off, and how fun do you think that’s going to be for us? How good for our careers?”

“I’m really, really sorry,” Wes said again. “I wish there were something I could do to make it up to you guys.”

“You wanna pay for eight tires, and a plate glass window? You wanna replace three weeks worth of shifts into Johnny’s sick time? You wanna round up subs for all of Johnny’s shifts—oh, and they have to be Captains, by the way—until he can work again, since you delivered him right into the hands of a sadistic, vicious man and his henchman?” Mike was breathing hard, and couldn’t help coughing a few times. “Because that’s what you did, Wes—you delivered him to that psycho. You did.”

“I know,” said Wes.

“I can forgive the rest of the crap—it’s just stuff, and stuff doesn’t matter.” Mike looked right at Wes. “But honest to goodness, Wes, I don’t know how the hell I’m gonna deal with the fact that you delivered Johnny right into the hands of that psycho. I really don’t.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Wes. “I really screwed up. I never meant for—”

“I know, I know—you never meant for anyone to get hurt. It was all just going to be fun and games, in various shades of pink. Ha, ha, ha—pink, for the queers. Get it?” Mike shook his head in disgust.

“I’m sorry,” Wes repeated for the umpteenth time.

“Get out of my office, Wes. Just—get out, and go home.”

Wes silently got up from the chair he was sitting on, and left Mike’s office. He pulled the door shut quietly on his way out.

Mike sat with his elbows on his desk, holding his head in his hands, trying to decide whether he
wanted to scream, or cry, or both. He finally settled on neither. He tidied his already neat desk, and went home.

TBC
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Mike’s plenty pissed, but Johnny’s feeling better.

Chapter 21.

The bed jiggled ever so slightly—not enough to wake Johnny completely, but enough to bring him to a level where he was aware of the warm body slipping under the covers next to him. He smiled as an arm came over his side and snuggled his back in towards the chest of the familiar body behind him. He sleepily took the hand of the arm that held him close, and started slipping back into the deep sleep from which he’d been partially roused.

But as Johnny’s consciousness started to drift back downwards, he realized something was wrong with the pretty picture he was enjoying. His eyes snapped open as he came to the conclusion that something was indeed amiss. Unless he’d slept all afternoon—which, from the way the light was coming into the room, didn’t seem likely—Mike shouldn’t be home. He shifted slightly, and Mike’s response was immediate—he pulled Johnny even closer, and put a leg over Johnny’s legs, and burrowed his face into the back of Johnny’s neck. It felt to Johnny like Mike was trying to completely surround him, as if protecting him from something.

Johnny didn’t protest, and didn’t try to move away. He twined his fingers into the fingers of the hand splayed across his chest, and felt Mike’s face nuzzle into the back of his neck even more strongly. And then, he felt Mike suck in a deep breath, and let it out with a series of silent shudders. And he felt sudden wetness on the back of his neck.

Johnny’s ribs protested as he suddenly rolled over in Mike’s embrace. As he suspected, Mike’s face was streaming with tears. And as Johnny turned towards him, Mike’s hands flew up to his own face, and he let out an uncontrolled sob.

“Mikey?” Johnny said. He suddenly wasn’t sure what to do with his hands, so just stroked Mike’s hair back from his forehead with one hand, and pulled Mike towards him with the other. “What’s the matter?”

Mike uncovered his face, reached out with both hands, tenderly placing them on either side of Johnny’s face. He kissed Johnny, gently but with intensity, and then cradled Johnny’s head to his chest, breathing into Johnny’s hair as if it were the source of all oxygen in the room.

Johnny allowed himself to be handled in that way for a short time, sensing Mike’s need to be protective. But he needed to find out what that ‘something’ was that had Mike so shaken up. Johnny pulled back slightly, and looked up into the tear-streaked face of his lover, his best friend, his partner in life.

“Mike, what’s wrong? C’mon, babe; you’re scaring me here. Did … did something happen to one of the guys?”

Mike immediately shook his head. “No—no, everyone’s fine.” He let go of Johnny long enough to swipe the back of his hand across his face, removing the tears almost angrily. “Sorry,” he said,
annoyed at himself for letting Johnny think something like that.

“No, it’s okay,” Johnny reassured him, now that he knew the worst hadn’t happened. But over the last few years, Johnny and Mike had been together for some events that were terrible for both of them, and had seen each other at their worst and most vulnerable. Johnny had seen Mike let go in ways that nobody else ever had. He’d seen Mike rage with fury. He’d seen him go utterly silent for hours on end when he was annoyed at Johnny. He’d seen him shed a tear or two after seeing things on the job that nobody should ever have to see. But Johnny had never seen Mike so upset about anything. “What happened, Mikey?” he pressed gently.

Mike still didn’t say anything, but his breathing was settling into a normal rhythm, no longer punctuated by the shudders that came with the attempt to suppress crying. Johnny passed him some tissues, and Mike blew his nose and wiped his face.

“Sorry,” he said again, as he tossed the tissues into the wastebasket. “It’s … it’s all just … too much.” He inhaled deeply, and let his breath out again. “Jesus. Bawling like a girl.” He coughed, with a deep, rattling sound that alarmed Johnny.

Johnny sat up for a moment, fluffed up the pillows, and lay back onto them, gently pulling Mike back down with him so his head rested on Johnny’s chest and shoulder on his undamaged side. They couldn’t look each other in the eye that way, but Johnny knew that when something was really bothering Mike, he could sometimes talk about it more easily if he didn’t have to look at anyone.

Johnny looked at the clock. It was just before three in the afternoon, and Mike should have been at the office. Something happened at work, Johnny realized. Something so terrible that Mike had to leave.

Mike lay on his side, with his head resting on the uninjured half of Johnny’s chest. He found his hand traveling to the injured area on the other side of Johnny’s ribcage. Mike gently laid his hand over the place where three of Johnny’s ribs had been cracked by a blow from the toe of Staib’s boot, just over a week ago. He let his hand rest there for many seconds, and then reached farther down, and slightly towards Johnny’s back, to the place where another kick had severely bruised his kidney. Finally, his hand traveled upwards to Johnny’s face, and Mike gently traced around the orbit of Johnny’s blackened eye.

“I’m doing okay, babe,” Johnny said quietly. “Everything’s a little better every day.” He caught Mike’s hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed the knuckles, the back of his hand, the palm. He patiently waited, until Mike finally spoke.

“Wes Harris handed you to Staib on a silver platter.”

That was not what Johnny was expecting to hear.

“Oh, say again?”

“Wes knew Staib from church. Knew from a guest sermon that Staib did that he was rabidly anti-gay. When I joined the AFIU, Wes apparently mentioned me to Staib, along with all the rumors that come with me, and then Staib started trying to get information about me and you out of Wes. And Wes managed to confirm for him that you were with me, and then he knew how to get to you,” Mike summarized tersely.

“Um.” Johnny wasn’t sure what to say. “Uh, how do you figure that?”

Mike sighed. “That weird business, yesterday, when Wes came up to the office while you were
there, and kind of apologized, but we didn’t know for what?”

“Uh huh?”

“He wasn’t kidding that he had something to apologize for. Today, after a morning you just wouldn’t believe, he just flat out told me that he’d been feeding info to Staib, who’d fed him some bullshit story about me being a long-lost high school buddy of his, and wanted to find me so he could pull some pranks. Wes feels guilty as hell, and he goddamned well should, because it was a stupid, shitty thing to do. And it was pretty clear that if Wes hadn’t thought it might be a little fun to mess with the queers, he wouldn’t’ve said a thing to Staib.”

“Feeding info?” Johnny frowned. “Like what?”

“Wes knew your name, after that little scene I told you about with the station pictures—so he unwittingly verified to Staib that the guy he’d been looking for was in fact connected to me. And Wes knew which of the three Michael Stokers in the phone book was me, so he got our address and phone number that way. So, really, in a way, it’s my fault that Staib found you, since Wes is my dumb-ass co-worker.”

“Now wait just a second, Mike. First of all, it’s not your fault that Wes is an ass. And second of all, you can bet Staib didn’t get my phone number from Wes. Only place my number’s written down in that whole HQ building is in my personnel file. So what about that, huh?”

Mike hadn’t thought of that. “Oh. But that doesn’t let Harris off the hook—or me, for that matter. If I hadn’t played along with his little game with trying to figure out which one you were in the station pictures, he never would’ve—”

“Stop it, Mikey. Put a lid on that, right now. The way you described that conversation to me—he just asked you who the paramedics were, right?” Johnny softened his words by stroking the back of Mike’s hand with his thumb, and nuzzling his cheek in to the top of Mike’s head.

“Yeah …”

“And how weird would it have been to say ‘none of your beeswax?’”

“Uh, pretty strange, I guess,” Mike admitted.

“So yeah, Wes figured out which one of the guys in the station pictures was your boyfriend. I know we try to keep our shit private, but people know, Mike.”

Mike frowned. “Like who? Who, at HQ, besides our friends, do you think knows we’re together?”

“Chief Livingston, for one. He likes to pretend he doesn’t know who you are, but he let it slip once. Said something about ‘you and that other guy Stoker.’ And if he knows, then other people know.”

Johnny paused. “I guess, if I think about it, which I usually don’t, I like to pretend people don’t know too. But anyhow,” he continued, “it’s not your fault. In no way, shape or form is anything that happened in the last couple weeks your fault. So quit with that.”

Mike didn’t reply immediately, and he didn’t try to turn to look at Johnny. He just let Johnny continue to hold him.

“I know,” he said, finally. “I know. But—I came home, right after listening to that weasel tell me about everything he did, and I didn’t see you, and then I figured you must be sleeping, and I came in here, just to check on you. And there you were—lying on your uninjured side, with the sheets kicked all the hell all over the place as usual, so those huge bruises just screamed out at me, ‘look what they
did to him! Look!’ And so I looked, and babe, I just lost it. I stood there, just looking at you, and I cried like a baby—but a really quiet baby, ‘cause I didn’t wanna wake you up—for like, I don’t know—a long time. And then you moved, and you mumbled the way you do, and you frowned like you were hurting, and I just had to get in the bed with you, and protect you, and—and—”

Johnny interrupted, and finished for him. “And here we are, and those shits are in jail, and the cars are fixed, and the house is fixed, and I’ll be good as new in another week or two, and everything is gonna be fine.”

“But Wes—” Mike cut himself off, and sighed.

“About that,” Johnny said. “Did he seem at all pleased with himself today?”

“No way,” Mike said. “He kept apologizing, over and over, and saying how he never meant for anyone to get hurt, and how he wished he could make it up to us somehow, and blah blah blah.”

“Let’s take another step backwards, here, for a second,” Johnny suggested.

“Huh?”

“Just humor me, okay?”

“All right.”

“What if Wes hadn’t said one word to Staib after he started asking for information? What would Staib have already known?”

Mike had to think for a second. “That Wes had a gay co-worker named Mike Stoker. He wouldn’t have had your name, though.”

“Think about it, Mike—Staib was the brother of that crazy chick Lynn. Staib already knew my name. From Lynn. And he already knew, from Lynn, that I was hooked up with another fireman, who just got hit by a car and was in the hospital forever, right? So then a couple months later, Wes gets a new co-worker, who walks with a cane, and oh yeah, he’s queer, do you think Staib couldn’t put two and two together?”

“I guess …” Mike said slowly.

“So all Wes did was tell Staib that yeah, we were an item, right? So Staib knew your name, and my name. And there’s only three of you in the phone book—not three of you, but—aw, you know what I mean—so how hard would it be to figure out which one was you?”

“I guess,” Mike said, “if you weren’t sure, all you’d have to do is make a call pretending you were from the fire department and needed something—” Mike stopped in the middle of the sentence. “Shit—I had this call, like three or four weeks ago, on the weekend, from some guy who said he was updating fire department personnel records, and they read my address, and asked if that’s the one they should have on file, and I didn’t think anything of it! Maybe that was him!”

“Could be,” said Johnny. “So do you think that maybe, just maybe, Wes’s only real role in all this was just to casually mention that his new co-worker was gay? And to set the wheels spinning in Staib’s brain again, that he might be able to find you?”

“Maybe …” Mike said reluctantly.

“And sure, Wes shoulda kept his damned mouth shut about things that were none of his business. He
shoulda seen right through the ‘high school buddies’ bullshit. But he didn’t. Some people will believe anything, and ain’t it funny how it’s often the most closed-minded people who’re the most likely to believe stuff that’s total crap?"

“Yeah,” Mike said, “he seems to not think for himself a whole lot. Even though he’s not dumb. It’s like, I dunno, like he’s used to always having someone tell him what to do and think all the time.”

“And here’s one more thing,” Johnny added. “Don’t forget about my phone number. Wes couldn’t have possibly given him that—so whaddaya wanna bet that Staib got into the personnel records somehow?”

“Not much,” Mike admitted.

“So what it comes down to, is, yeah, Wes screwed up, but chances are, even if he hadn’t even run into Staib since the very first time your name came up in conversation, Staib still coulda done everything he did without one more word from Wes. Right?”

“I guess it’s possible,” Mike conceded. “But that doesn’t excuse the fact that Wes gave out private information to someone he should’ve known was trouble.”

“No, it doesn’t. And the business about ‘he never meant anyone to get hurt’—well, that’s some shaky moral ground right there, if you ask me. What’d you say about Staib? That Wes knew he was ‘rabidly anti-gay?’ Well, I don’t know what he was expectin’ Staib to do, but if he’d’a stopped to think for half a second, he’d’a prob’ly realized Staib was up to no good,” Johnny concluded.

Mike nodded, and coughed a phlegmy cough again. “I think stopping to think for half a second is something ol’ Wes forgets a fair amount. I mean, he’s not a dumb guy—in fact, I think he’s probably real smart. But I think he sometimes gets ahead of himself. Like this morning, at the warehouse fire, he made every mistake you can make when—”

“Whoa, whoa—warehouse fire?” Johnny squinted down at Mike. “And you’re coughing, and you’re home early—these things all go together, don’t they.”

“Uh, yeah.” Mike quickly told Johnny the story of the warehouse fire, and the suspicious multiple points of origin Marco had noted. “But it looks like it’s probably just a case of improper storage of materials. Wes is pretty sure he knows what was in those barrels, just from how the stuff behaved.” Mike frowned. “See, he can be really smart about some things, but so damned dumb about others.”

“That’s the story of life, man. I think the whole IQ thing is really dumb—I mean, there’s lotsa guys who I bet have sky high IQs but can’t carry on a normal conversation, and can’t do stuff like, say, put a patient at ease with small talk. Craig Brice comes to mind, there,” Johnny said, rolling his eyes. “Man—he made Captain the same time as me. Can you imagine being on his crew?”

“I’ll bet they follow aaaaallll the rules. Aaaaaallll the time.”

Johnny hadn’t really meant to change the subject, but it seemed like Mike was calmed down, so he didn’t go back to the topic of Wes Harris. If Mike brought it up again, that was one thing. But for now, Johnny was content to lie there with Mike’s head on his shoulder, and not think about anything from the last two weeks.

“You know what we oughta do?” Mike said, apparently also done with the Wes conversation.

“What’s that,” Johnny replied.

“I’m home so early, we could go to a cheap show at the movies, and still be back in time for dinner.”
“Geez—when was the last time we went to the movies? Sure—why not? We could go to that new Star Wars movie. Title is dumb, but when you think about it, ‘Star Wars’ sounded pretty dumb too, when it first came out.”

“True.” Mike said, sitting up. He coughed wetly as he changed into casual clothes.

“You did get that checked out, didn’t you?” Johnny said, frowning at the sound of the cough.

“Yes, yeah. Funny—even though Cap’s not even remotely my boss any more, I wasn’t gonna go against his orders to get checked out. I’ll probably be hacking for the rest of the day, but Dr. Early seemed to think everything would be fine in a day or so. Plus I’m still on antibiotics for the leg, so it’s not like I’ll get pneumonia or anything.”

“Well, you better believe I’m gonna keep my ear on that cough, mister,” Johnny warned.

“I’d be appalled at anything else,” Mike said. “C’mon—let’s go.”

“You wanna sit in the front like little kids, or you wanna sit in the back like teenagers?”

“How about in the middle, like adults?”

“Aw, Stoker, yer no fun,” Johnny said. But he was smiling hugely as they walked out the door together.

~!~!~!~

“Well, that was actually pretty good.” Mike said, as they walked back out to the parking lot after the movie. “But the ‘I am your father’ part was a bit much, if you ask me.”

“Yes, that’s a bit of a stretch. And the bit about ‘No, there is another—’ whaddaya wanna bet they’re setting the princess up to be his sister?”

“Not gonna bet against you on that one, Gage. But still—I thought it was a good adventure movie.”

“Sure—definitely. Especially the battles. I love a good space battle,” Johnny admitted.

They talked about the high and low points of the movie on the way home.

“Hey, what should we do for dinner?” Mike said, as he backed the truck into the driveway.

“We’ve got leftovers of Len’s chicken—how ‘bout just making some chicken sandwiches or somethin’?”

“Good—that’s easy. I’ve really been a fan of easy, lately,” Mike said, as they went into the house.

Johnny closed the door behind them and toed his shoes off. “That’s good—’cause I’m feelin’ pretty easy right now,” he said, pressing himself up against Mike’s rear as Mike bent down to take off his shoes.

“You are, huh?” Mike left his shoes where they fell, and spun around to be face to face with Johnny, who pulled Mike in and reached his hands around to rest at the small of Mike’s back.

“Mm hmmm.” Johnny nuzzled Mike’s neck, and slowly worked his way up to his lips, catching them with his own. They kissed slowly, almost timidly at first, but just as with the chemicals in the warehouse, heat built up, seemingly all on its own, until they were both breathing hard. Johnny rocked his hips against Mike’s, and Mike countered that movement by grabbing Johnny’s ass and
pulling him in tightly, so their groins ground together.

“This going to the bedroom, Gage?” Mike asked breathlessly, backing away just long enough for Johnny to yank his shirt over his head and toss it aside.

“Course it is,” Johnny said, appreciating Mike’s newly-bared chest with his hands, and nibbling on Mike’s lower lip.

“Don’t wanna hurt you,” Mike mumbled into Johnny’s kiss. They parted again briefly, to let Mike slide Johnny’s t-shirt over his head.

“You won’t,” Johnny murmured, and then sighed as their bare chests touched. He worked his fingers around the waistband of Mike’s jeans, from back to front, until he found the button, trapped between the two of them, and worked it open. He wasted no time in hauling the zipper down, and reaching in, fingers downward, to stroke Mike’s erection through his boxers. He backed Mike into the wall of the narrow hallway.

“Jesus, fuck, you get me so hot so fast, no fuckin’ way we’re even gonna make it to the bedroom before I shoot my load right into your hot hand,” Mike panted out.

“Oh, but that’s not where it’s gonna go,” Johnny said, dropping down on one knee as he worked Mike’s pants and boxers down to the floor. One hand pressed Mike’s hip back so he stayed firmly planted against the wall, and the other hand cupped Mike’s balls.

“Fffuuhhh … oh god—” Mike groaned out as Johnny’s lips closed on his cock, and his tongue swirled around the head. Mike reached a hand down to Johnny’s hair, not to hold on, but to push it back so he could see Johnny’s face.

Mike slid lower on the wall, his thigh muscles trembling with the effort of holding himself up. He slid to the floor, and Johnny’s mouth popped wetly off his hot, hard cock, as his ribcage protested any further bending.

“Up, Mikey,” urged Johnny. “Can’t reach you down there. C’mon, babe; five seconds gets you to the bedroom.”

Mike groaned and hauled himself to his feet, stepping out of the pile that was his jeans and boxers, as Johnny rose from his knee and spun Mike so he was headed the right direction. Three seconds later, Mike was on the bed on his back, and Johnny, moving carefully but quickly, joined him on the soft surface.

The short delay had done nothing to decrease Mike’s arousal, and Johnny paused for a second to drink in the scene. He bent to resume his plan of attack, but was stopped in his tracks by a sharp twinge from his ribs at that particular movement.

Despite the fact that his own body was preventing him from paying much attention to anything else, Mike noticed.

“Don’ hurt yourself,” he cautioned breathlessly. “An’ how come you still have pants?”

“Patience, hot stuff,” Johnny chastised, as he examined his situation and recalculated. He turned a hundred and eighty degrees, covering Mike in a reverse straddle that allowed him access to his target without straining his rib cage. His hands and mouth picked up where they’d left off in the hallway.

He found that at this new angle, he could take Mike in deeply, and easily hold him down at the hips at the same time.
“Aahhn, Johnny—holy shit—” Mike grabbed the denim-clad ass that was right in front of him, and reached one hand between Johnny’s thighs. “Wish this package wasn’t wrapped up so tight—oh, fuck, babe, that’s good—”

Johnny alternately sucked and swirled, then took Mike’s cock in deeply again. He was pleased to note that his normally talky partner had lost the capacity to form real words—not that he minded the words, quite the contrary—but he knew that he was doing his job well when the verbiage degenerated to groans and unintelligible syllables.

“… uhhh … gonna …”

Johnny heeded Mike’s warning, and positioned himself to take Mike as deeply as possible. He felt Mike’s whole body tense up, and heard him shout out, at the same time as he felt heat spurting in the back of his throat. Johnny swallowed once, twice, and sucked the last drops of come away as Mike rode out his climax. Johnny released Mike’s softening dick, and turned himself upright again to be face to face with Mike, who grabbed onto him with jelly-like arms and pulled him in for a lingering kiss.

“Unbe-fucking-lievable,” Mike sighed, once he could form words again. He looked at Johnny with concern. “You sure you didn’t hurt yourself?”

“I’m sure,” Johnny reassured him. “A twinge here and there, but I managed.”

Mike snorted. “I’ll say. You can manage me any day, babe. Fuck. But again, I have to ask, what’s with you still having pants on? I mean, the way you wear a pair of jeans oughta be a crime, but right now the crime is that they’re still on.”

Johnny grinned crookedly. “Well, you oughta get ‘em offa me, then.”

Mike didn’t have to be told twice, and his experience with the task, coupled with the fact that his subject was highly motivated to cooperate, made the job an easy one. Twenty seconds later, Mike looked smugly down at one of his favorite sights in the world.

“Mmm, that’s a lot better,” Mike said. He reached for Johnny, poised to roll him so they’d be face to face, but stopped himself as he remembered he needed to be much more gentle than he’d usually be, and then panicked slightly as he worried about offending Johnny by treating him like he was fragile.

“What’sa matter?” Johnny asked, seeing the deer-in-the-headlights look on Mike’s face.

“I, uh … um … I’m-worried-I’ll-hurt-you-but-I-don’t-wanna-treat-you-like-a-baby,” Mike blurted out all at once.

Johnny rolled to his uninjured side to face Mike, propping himself on his elbow. “Yeah, I kinda remember that dilemma,” Johnny reminded him. “But, you know, we even managed a coupla hot times when you were still in the hospital, if you’ll recall, plus I think I maybe just showed you I’m not totally outta commission, right? So just don’t sqish me and I think I’ll be okay. Now c’mere,” he ordered, “cause I’m real horny, and I’ve missed ya a lot, the last few days, and I don’ wanna—mmf, hmm,” he concluded, as Mike took him at his word and captured his lips.

Though Johnny had assured Mike he wasn’t fragile, wouldn’t break under his touch, Mike’s hands roamed softly, almost timidly, across Johnny’s skin. The feather-light touches were not what Johnny was used to, and his brain couldn’t decide whether the trails Mike’s fingers were tracing felt hot or cold. But his body, one step ahead of his brain, knew it felt good. Johnny’s hand found the back of Mike’s neck, and pulled him closer, deepening their kiss, urging Mike on. He let his hand move
upwards, fingers combing through Mike’s fine hair. He could taste a trace of movie-theater popcorn, and had a sudden flash of memory of one of his and Mike’s first real dates, in which they’d made it through half of an action-adventure movie, sitting in the back of the deserted balcony, before Mike had Johnny up against the wall in a dark corner, and they’d had to leave to finish what they’d started—in the back of the Rover, in a deserted, unlit parking lot, like a couple of teenagers. Johnny couldn’t help himself, and chuckled quietly.

“Whasso funny?”

“We never did see the end of that Chuck Norris movie.”

Mike didn’t need any further reminders of what Johnny meant, and laughed as well. “What made you think of that?”

“You taste like popcorn, just like that time.”

“You don’t taste like popcorn,” Mike said, diving back to Johnny’s mouth to sample it again.

“What, then?” Johnny asked, knowing the answer already, but wanting to hear Mike say it anyhow.

“Me,” Mike replied, moving his attentions to Johnny’s jawline for a moment, and then returning to his lips and tongue. “And sex.” He started working his way down Johnny’s neck.

“Two of my favorite things all rolled into one,” Johnny murmured, stretching his neck up to allow Mike access. He let out a voiceless, whispered moan as Mike’s thigh came up between his and pressed into his erection. He couldn’t help himself, and started slowly rubbing himself against Mike’s leg.

“Now who’s impatient?” Mike asked, teasing Johnny by briefly pulling away from him. Johnny heard the drawer of the bedside table slide open, followed by the clicking sound of a plastic flip-cap opening. Then, Mike’s leg was back, between Johnny’s, pushing them apart this time. Maddeningly, Mike still didn’t touch Johnny with his hands, but worked first one nipple, then the other, with his tongue, dotting his chest with kisses between the two. Johnny felt a twinge from his ribs on each heavy breath, but he hardly cared, as Mike finally took him in hand, working him slowly at first, as Johnny knew he would.

Johnny lost himself in all the sensations of the moment—the subtle scent of Mike’s aftershave mixed with the tang of sex in the air; the sight of Mike’s sharp grey-blue eyes looking up to meet his brown ones, the slightly ragged sound of Mike’s breathing, the delicious sensations Mike’s hands were generating, and underneath it all, a frisson of pain at every breath, lending an edgy quality to the whole experience. He pushed into Mike’s hand, and Mike correctly read that as a signal to ramp things up.

Johnny ceased to be consciously aware of anything other than what Mike was doing, and how his own body was reacting. He threw his head back, and his body arched into Mike’s touch. Pain arced through his ribcage at the sudden movement. Mike caught Johnny’s sudden intake of breath, and let up for a moment.

“Don’t you dare stop!” Johnny demanded breathlessly.

Mike didn’t question Johnny’s response, and continued where he’d left off. After a while, his other hand joined in the action, dipping slickly into the cleft of Johnny’s ass, fingertips tracing a line from tailbone to perineum and back again. Johnny groaned, and lifted his thigh to allow Mike better access, begging for more without saying a word. Mike’s fingertips followed their path again, with
pressure that made Johnny not sure which way he wanted to move his hips. One fingertip found entrance, and nudged just the right spot, in time with the movements of his other hand.

Johnny shouted out as he came, clenching the sheets with one hand and what turned out to be Mike’s shoulder with the other. He breathed hard as he recovered, noticing his ribs again for the first time in several minutes. They stabbed him on every breath, but he didn’t really care. He rested his head on Mike’s chest, and settled his breathing down as Mike’s fingers traced delicate patterns on his back. They held each other like that for a while, neither one of them saying anything.

Finally, Johnny spoke up. “They mighta hurt us. But they didn’t break us.”

Mike’s eyes teared up as he traced the dark bruises on Johnny’s side and back, and he didn’t say anything.

“Mikey?” Johnny said. “I’m fine, honest. Please tell me you’re fine, too.”

“I—I don’t know, Johnny. I think it’s just gonna take me a little longer to let go of all of this. So I guess what I need, is for you to be patient with me. Let me be mad for a while.”

“Okay,” Johnny said simply. “You be mad, and I’ll be here to make sure it doesn’t eat you up.”

“Thanks, babe. I know you will. And I’ll be fine, too—it’ll just take me a while.”

“Okay,” Johnny said again. And then, “Love you.”

“Love you too. More than I can even wrap my head around.”

TBC
Ten days later.

Johnny looked at his watch, and went to the pay phone. He slipped a dime into the slot, and dialed the number.

“Arson and Fire Investigation, Mike Stoker speaking.”

“Hey—just me.”

“Hi, just you.”

“Listen—Brackett’s running late. I’m still waiting. So when you come down, I might still be in the waiting room. If not, Dix’ll steer you in the right direction.”

“Okay. I was just heading out, so I’ll see you in ten minutes or so.”

“’Kay. Bye.”

Johnny returned to the waiting room, and sat, squirming like a kid at his desk on the last day of school, in the uncomfortable chair. Normally, he would wait for Dr. Brackett in the staff lounge, but today it was being used for a meeting. Sitting in the regular ER waiting room felt wrong—he felt like an imposter, sitting with people who were awaiting treatment for themselves or a loved one. Were he so inclined, he might make a list to calm himself down, like Mike sometimes did, and it might look something like this:

Reasons the waiting room is uncomfortable:

1. The chair sucks.
2. I can’t stand waiting.
3. I’m not cleared to work yet, so I couldn’t do anything for all those MVA patients that just came in.
4. The chair really sucks.
5. I don’t actually know if Brackett is going to clear me for duty.

Johnny fidgeted in the vinyl chair for another few minutes. Finally, he sighed heavily, and gave up on the chair, standing up to pace instead. An elderly woman watched him for a few laps, and finally spoke up.

“Don’t worry, young man. They’ll take very good care of whoever you’re waiting here for. They’re the absolute best here. And I should know—my husband has a chronic illness, so we seem to end up here a lot.”

Johnny paused in front of the woman, and sat down across from her so he could talk to her without looking down at her. “Oh, I’m not waiting on anyone; I’m just here for me.”
The woman looked at him curiously. “Really? You don’t look sick, or hurt. Except for that shiner—it’s nearly gone, but it must’ve been a beaut in its prime.”

“I was hurt, but I’m better—or at least I think I’m better. I just come here because—well, it’s complicated. My regular doctor is one of the ER doctors.”

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Isn’t that unusual? I didn’t even know you could do that.”

“Well, I guess it’s just because I used to come here a lot for work—when I was a paramedic—and I kinda ended up on the patient end a fair amount, and I don’t really like being a patient, but Dr. Brackett knows me, and I know him, and … well, it just kinda ended up that way,” Johnny said.

“Oh, a paramedic! I just don’t know what we would do without you fellows. I have to admit, the first time we called for an ambulance and firemen showed up at our house, I didn’t know what to think. But I think you fellows have come to our house probably once or twice a year in the last few years, and one time I’m sure the gentlemen who came saved Walter’s life. But you said ‘used to be’—did you change jobs?”

“Yes, ma’am—well, sort of. I’m a Captain now, so I only fill in sometimes as a paramedic. I’ve been off for a couple weeks, since my ribs got busted up, but I’m hoping the Doc will clear me today.”

“Goodness gracious. Yes, I hope so too. From the way you were pacing just now, I’d imagine you don’t like not being able to go to work.” She looked down at his fidgety hands. “In fact, I’d wager you probably drive your wife absolutely crazy.”

“Uh, that’s pretty close to the truth,” Johnny said. “Let’s just say, it’ll be happier at home once I’m back to work.”

“I suppose your children must enjoy having you at home, though.” The woman must have caught a flash of something in Johnny’s face. “Or—don’t you have children?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I’m sorry—it’s really none of my business. Please excuse my rudeness. I didn’t mean to pry. I should know better—everyone is always asking me when I’m going to get some grandchildren, and I’m so tired of that I could spit. I’m Mildred Rockwell, by the way, speaking of rude.”

“John Gage. You must have kids, then, if people are buggin’ you about grandkids.”

“Oh yes; we have one son. We’re very proud of him—he’s a communications specialist in the Navy. I would say he’s probably about ten years older than you.” She squinted at Johnny. “I think you probably look much younger than your years, just like my son does. Your face says you’re twenty-five, but your eyes say you’re thirty-five. As does your rank.”

Johnny sat back and considered Mrs. Rockwell. “Thirty-three. So I’d say the eyes have it, then.”

Mrs. Rockwell tittered. “Oh my! Witty, too. And there I go, being rude again, speculating about your age, right after assuming about children. Shame on me.”

“Aw, it’s all right. We’re just chattin’, right?”

“Yes, I suppose we are, aren’t we.” Mrs. Rockwell sat silently for a minute or so. “It’s difficult, isn’t it. When people ask us about children, and grandchildren, and we don’t have any. I don’t think Walter’s friends bother him about it too much, but some of my friends … well, they don’t take a hint well.” She looked back up at Johnny. “Do your friends bother you about not having children?”
“Hmm,” Johnny said. “Our friends all know we can’t have children. So no, nobody asks.”

“Well, all I can really tell my friends is that Paul is certain he won’t get married. My friends all just assume it’s because his job keeps him at sea for months at a time. So I let them keep thinking that. And why on Earth I’m blabbing all of this to a total stranger is beyond me,” she concluded.

“Maybe I remind you a little of your son,” Johnny suggested, suspecting from what she said—and didn’t say—that he might be more like Mrs. Rockwell’s son than she thought.

“Maybe that’s it,” she said.

They didn’t speak after that, each lost in his or her own thoughts.

A minute or two later, Mike strode in through the ER entrance. The last traces of the pain from the infection around the screw above his knee were completely gone from his gait. He scanned the waiting room, and his eyes lit on a dark head, with its familiar barely-regulation hair. He spied an empty seat next to Johnny, and plunked himself down, bumping their shoulders together as they often did in public.

“Hey. Sorry I took so long. Couldn’t get a good parking spot.”

“’S okay. Still waitin’, anyhow.” Johnny’s foot, crossed over his other knee, was jiggling wildly.

Mike leaned over towards Johnny so their shoulders touched again. “He’ll probably clear you, you know. You said yourself, the ribs are still a little sore, but not dangerous.”

Johnny sighed again. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. It’d just make me crazy to hafta stay home another week or two.”

“I know.”

“Yeah, I bet you do.” Johnny noticed Mrs. Rockwell looking at them curiously, so he decided to throw her a bone, and confirm her suspicions. “I guess I’ve probably been driving you crazy, huh, with nothing to do all day.”

“I didn’t say that,” Mike said.

“Hmm,” said Johnny. Mrs. Rockwell looked back at him with raised eyebrows, and he grinned at her. “Still remind you of your boy?” he asked, winning a baffled look from Mike.

“More than ever,” Mrs. Rockwell said.

“Johnny?”

Johnny and Mike both turned to Dr. Brackett’s voice.

“Oh, hi, Doc. You ready for me?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. Sorry about the wait, but you know how it goes. Come on back,” said Brackett.

Johnny and Mike stood up, and Johnny looked back at Mrs. Rockwell. “Hope everything turns out all right for your husband. Nice chattin’ with you.”

“Likewise, thank you. Good luck getting back to work.”

Johnny and Mike followed Brackett to the single empty treatment room.
“What was that all about?” Mike asked.

“Oh, I reminded her of her son,” Johnny said. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay.”

“All right, Johnny—hop on up,” Brackett instructed. He pulled the x-rays from three weeks ago out of an envelope and jammed them into the lightbox.

“First of all—how are you feeling?”

“Good, Doc. Still sore, but that feeling that something is wrong or broken is gone.”

“All right. We’ll get a new set of x-rays, and blood and urine samples, and if those look good, then I’ll sign you off.” Brackett handed Johnny a plastic cup. “You know the drill—fill ‘er up.”

Johnny departed into the adjoining bathroom, closing the door.

“He’s really itching to get back, Dr. Brackett. But please—well, I know you wouldn’t, but please don’t let him go if he’ll hurt himself,” Mike said quietly.

“Has he been behaving himself?” Dr. Brackett asked Mike.

“You better believe it. I had to remind him a few times early on, but, uh, yeah. Mostly,” he amended, recalling a couple of incidents where he’d been party to Johnny not entirely behaving himself.

“Nothing risky at all,” he added.

They heard flushing, and water running, and Johnny handed his sample cup to Dr. Brackett.

“I’ll get this down to the lab while you’re getting your x-rays.” Brackett said, just as the door swung open. A scrubs-clad tech that Johnny didn’t know entered with a wheelchair. Brackett handed the tech an order slip, and Johnny was whisked away.

“Uh, Doc?” Mike asked, as Brackett handed the sample and a lab slip off to an orderly.

“Yes, Mike?”

“What are his chances?” Mike asked tentatively. “Because he really, really needs to get back to doing something useful. But, like I said, only if it’s safe.”

Brackett crossed his arms and sighed. “Look, Mike. I know he goes stir crazy when he’s down. But even though he’s a Captain, he could still end up doing the same work he always did, every time he goes on a shift. You know that, and I know that, and he knows that. But, given how many other injuries I’ve seen him through, and the speed with which he always manages to recover, I’d say the chances he’ll be ready today are pretty good. To be honest, I’m more concerned about the kidney than the ribs.”

“He was doing some weights yesterday—nothing really heavy, just testing things out, you know? And he seemed fine. And believe me, I’d be able to tell if he were trying to hide pain.”

“Oh? What’s his tell?” Brackett asked.

“He doesn’t fidget nearly as much. If he’s sitting still, it’s time for a painkiller. I figured that out over the last few weeks. Also, I think he really must be a lot better, because he’s not sleeping all the time any more. The first ten days after he got hurt, this time, he slept probably sixteen or eighteen hours a day. I wonder if that’s why he heals so fast.”
“Could be,” Brackett said, nodding.

The door swung open, and Dixie McCall entered.

“Well, hello, stranger!” she said to Mike. “How are things going? I heard through the grapevine that the guys that did this to Johnny are in jail—that must be a relief.”

“It sure is. One of ’em is going for a plea bargain. The other—well, it looks like the assault charges may go to trial.” Mike shook his head. “That’ll be real hard.”

Dixie frowned. “Yes, it would. I had a friend who was assaulted, a few years ago. She said the assault was the worst day of her life, and the day she had to testify at the trial was the second worst, and the day the guy got out of jail was a close third. It’s all just such an invasion of privacy for the victims.”

“You’re not kidding. You and I both know that Johnny isn’t the anxious type, but he’s practically making himself sick over this whole thing.”

“Hmm,” Dixie said, nodding. “He’s always been a very private person. I can see this being very hard for him.”

Brackett broke in. “Strange as it sounds for a doctor to have a lawyer friend, I have a good friend who works in criminal law. One of her specialties is victims’ rights. Let me know if you need a lawyer in all of this—I’m sure she’d be happy to help. I imagine she’d find your case very interesting.”

“Victims’ rights, huh?” Mike said. He shook his head. “I’ll tell you, sometimes it seems like there aren’t many at all. But thanks, Doc—hopefully we won’t need to take you up on that offer—I mean, hopefully there won’t be a trial. But if there is going to be—well, I think we might just need your friend’s help.”

The door burst open again, and the x-ray tech backed in with Johnny in the wheelchair. “I’ll bring the pictures up as soon as they’re ready,” the tech said.

“Thanks, Chuck,” Dr. Brackett replied. “And now—Dix, I believe you’re the one with the magic touch—let’s get that blood sample for a kidney panel so we can get all the answers we need from the lab.”

Johnny rolled up his sleeve, and Dixie made quick work of getting a tube filled with blood. “Kel, Johnny’s hemoglobin was low last time he was in—should we get that checked, too?”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “I’ve been eatin’ so much liver an’ steak an’ such I think I’m turnin’ into Iron Man. But check it anyhow; gotta know if it’s all right.”

“A couple more things, Johnny. I do want to look at your rib cage, and the bruising around your kidney,” Brackett said.

Johnny cooperatively stripped off his shirt. Brackett watched as he did so, and was glad to see no stiffness or hesitation in his movements. He quickly examined Johnny’s ribcage. “All right—that looks fine.”

“You were just watching how he moved while he took his shirt off, weren’t you. You didn’t really need to see his ribcage,” Mike said.

Brackett’s eyebrows climbed up towards his hairline. “I see you don’t miss a trick, do you.”
“Yeah, Doc; never play cards with this guy. He’ll pick up your tell in five minutes, and has a poker face like you wouldn’t believe,” Johnny said, buttoning up his shirt.

“How long till you get the labs back, Doc?” Mike asked.

“Probably an hour or so. Do you need to get back to work right away, Mike?”

“Nah, I’ve just got a report to finish, but it’ll be quick. Did Dr. Early tell you about how three other guys and I were in here for chlorine gas exposure on a job the other day?” Mike asked.

“He certainly did—we always go over any unusual incidents like that. I was glad to hear you were all okay,” said Brackett. “What did the chemical turn out to be, anyhow?”

“Well, the Hazmat team got samples later, and it was just what my colleague thought—calcium hypochlorite. And get this—there’s two forms of the stuff, and one is less stable than the other. The warehouse owner thought he had the stable kind, but he actually had the unstable kind, and it wasn’t stored properly. It decomposed, and heated spontaneously. So there were several ignition points, which usually points to arson, but in this case was just improperly stored material. So my colleague and I are writing it up for the state and the insurance company. He does the chemistry parts, and I do the fire/arson parts.”

“Sounds like an interesting case,” said Brackett. “So—why don’t you two go get some lunch, and come back in an hour or so. I’ll see in my office with the x-rays and the lab results, and we’ll take it from there.”

“Okay, Doc.” Johnny knew better than to press Brackett for answers before he had the test results.

“C’mon, Mike—we’ve got enough time to grab Chinese or something. Doc, Dix—you want us to bring you anything back?”

They shook their heads. “I brown-bagged it today,” said Dixie.

“And I probably won’t eat till later,” said Brackett. “But thanks for asking.”

“All right,” said Mike. “We’ll see you in an hour or so, then.”

Dixie observed as Kel watched Johnny and Mike leave the ER.

“Kel?” she inquired.

Brackett made a sniffing sound as he shook his head. “I still can’t quite get over it,” he said.

“What, those two? Come on, Kel. They’re perfect for each other. I mean, Johnny’s so happy, and mature. And I didn’t know Mike at all, really, before I figured out that they’d gotten together, but I’m pretty sure he’s mellowed out an awful lot.”

“But Johnny Gage, the terror of the nurses at Rampart,solidly settled down with another man? I know, I know—it’s been over a year and a half since I knew about them, and I don’t disapprove. I guess it just shows how we didn’t really know Johnny as well as we thought we did. I mean, I never thought—you know.” He studied Dixie. “Did you have any inkling? I mean, before they got together?”

Dixie frowned. “Well, I know he was serious about wanting to date all those nurses. But I also noticed there were a few times, a couple of months long, where he didn’t make any moves on any of my girls at all. I always figured there was a reason for those lapses. I teased him about it once, and he gave me some kind of flippant response, like he was giving them a break for a while, but I could tell
I’d made him really uncomfortable, so I let it drop. And then, about, what—just over two years ago— I saw the two of them together for the first time, right after Mike dislocated his shoulder at a brush fire, and the whole thing just fell into place.”

“What, that he’d been dating nurses as cover?”

Dixie rolled her eyes. “No, Kel—that he dated men as well as women—those lapses, remember? And that he happened to find true love with a man that had been under his nose for years. And how that came to pass, I would love to know.”

“Well, I suppose I don’t have your innate, ah, curiosity, Dix, but the two of them are certainly not what I expected.”

“I don’t think they’re what Johnny expected, either. Though, sadly, he did make some kind of comment about everything that’s been happening to them lately being something they’d expected would happen some day.”

“Hmm,” Brackett said. “I heard that the guys that did this were both from the fire department. I have half a mind to call the Fire Chief and let him know what’s been going on in his department.”

“You wouldn’t actually—”

“No, no,” Brackett assured her. “I know it would probably just make more trouble for them. I mean, I’m imagining there’s probably no written regulation prohibiting men in the department from being involved with other men, but I would imagine they both feel like they have to watch their backs.”

“Especially now,” said Dixie.

“Especially now,” Kel agreed.

There was a quick knock at the door, and the x-ray tech popped in with a large envelope.

“All right, Dixie; let’s see if we can give Johnny some good news.”

He jammed the x-rays up into the holders on the lightbox, and examined the new x-rays side by side with the old ones.”

Brackett shook his head. “I don’t know how he does it,” he said. “Johnny grows bone faster than just about anyone I’ve ever seen.”

“Looks pretty clean, doesn’t it,” Dixie replied.

“Looks more like six weeks later than three weeks. Now all we need is some good lab work, and we can make Johnny a happy man. C’mon, Dix—it’s pretty slow around here right now. Let me buy you a cup of coffee.”

“You’re on,” said Dixie.

If Dixie had been a bit taller, or Brackett a bit shorter, someone watching them walk down the corridor together might have seen them bump their shoulders together.

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An hour later, Johnny tapped on Dr. Brackett’s office door.

“Come in!”
Johnny and Mike entered the room, and sat down in the chairs opposite Brackett’s desk.

Brackett didn’t waste any time getting to the point. “Good news, Johnny. All your bloodwork looks good, and there was no detectable blood in your urine. You’re cleared to go back to work your next shift.”

Johnny’s face exploded into a grin. “Well, awright! Thanks, Doc! Next C-shift is tomorrow. Roy was gonna fill in for me, but I’ll call ‘im and let ‘im know he’s off the hook.”

“One thing, though,” Brackett said. “If you have any—and I mean any—kind of injury in the next six weeks, I want you to be sure to tell whoever’s treating you about your recent kidney injury, all right? I don’t care if it’s a sprained pinky toe—you tell them.”

“Sure, Doc. I’ll make sure they give you a call,” Johnny said.

Brackett passed a form across the desk to Johnny. “You’re a free man. Now, go enjoy the rest of your day off before you have to go back to work.”

“You bet I will, Doc. C’mon, Mike—let’s get outta here. No offense,” Johnny said, looking back at Brackett, “but—well, you know.”

“Yeah, Johnny, I know.” Brackett smiled as he watched the unlikely pair exit his office.

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Mike was just finishing his part of the report he and Wes had been working on when there was a knock at the slightly-open door. Mike looked up from his desk, which was now facing the door, and waved Wes in.

“C’mon in, Wes. How’s your piece coming?”

“Mostly done. I just have to get a couple more things straight from the distributor that sold the guy that stuff, and I think it’ll be wrapped up.”

The two coworkers sat there silently for a moment. Mike fidgeted with a pencil, and Wes stared down at the floor.

“Look,” Mike said finally. “It’s like this. You screwed up. I know it, and you know it. But the reality is, Staib would’ve found out what he wanted anyhow. After all, he got hold of Johnny’s unlisted number, and he didn’t get that from you.”

Wes didn’t say anything.

“He didn’t get that from you, right?”

“No. He didn’t. I didn’t know it. I didn’t even know he had his own number,” Wes said.

“And I don’t really care what you think of my personal life, all right? But we have to work together, and I think we actually work together pretty well when we’re not walking on eggshells. So what do you say we sweep up the eggshells, and get the hell past this whole thing.”

Wes shifted in his chair, and didn’t look Mike in the eye as he spoke. “I want to pay for your window. The one they broke.”

Mike raised his eyebrows. “I’d let you if I could, but the insurance company already shelled out, by some miracle.”
“Don’t you have a deductible?”

“We do, but it’s only a hundred bucks for glass, so it’s not worth—”

“Yes it is,” Wes said emphatically. “It’s worth it, okay? I can’t undo anything that happened—and I would if I could, believe me—but I can do this. And I know Gage doesn’t get full pay for being out for more than a couple shifts on an injury that wasn’t job related. So it’s worth it, okay? Please let me.”

“Okay,” Mike said slowly. “Thanks. We appreciate it.”

“I’ll bring you a check tomorrow,” Wes said.

“Thank you,” Mike replied.

Just as Wes was standing up to go, Mike spoke up again. “Hang on a second.”

Wes stopped in his tracks.

“You’re not in any legal trouble because of any of this, are you? I mean, I noticed that night at the police station that they kept you longer than they kept me.”

Wes sighed. “No. They’re not charging me with anything. Maybe because nothing I did was illegal. Or maybe because they believed that I knew nothing about the assault. I don’t know. I’m not even sure what I deserve.” He frowned, and continued. “Can I ask you—what caused your, uh, change of heart? Last time we talked about this, I thought you were ready to deck me.”

Mike studied Wes carefully before replying. “It was Johnny. He convinced me that anything you said was probably just confirming to Staib what he already knew, and that I shouldn’t be so hard on you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Anyhow. I’m done with my part of the report,” Mike said. “I just need to look it over, and then I’ll bring it down to your office.”

“Sounds good,” Wes said, turning gratefully to the door.

“See you later.”

TBC
Chapter 23

Ch. 23

Johnny dropped his return-to-work forms off at HQ, and stopped at his Battalion headquarters to leave a copy for Chief Livingston before heading home. He was intensely relieved to be able to go back to work. The last time he'd missed more than one shift was when Mike had been in the hospital, and he'd just been a regular firefighter/paramedic back then, so getting subs wasn't such a terrible burden on the system. Plus, he'd had an immediate supervisor—Captain Stanley—who was entirely sympathetic to his plight.

When he arrived home, he called Roy, hoping to catch him before the family sat down to dinner.

“Hello?” said a voice that could be either Joanne or Jenny.

“Hi, it's Johnny.”

“Hey, Johnny. Everything all right?”

Johnny could tell from the wording that he was speaking with Joanne.

“Sure—just great, actually. I was just calling to tell Roy that he's off the hook for tomorrow—Brackett just cleared me for work!”

“That's terrific! He's out picking up a pizza right now—” Johnny winced, because he still couldn't think of picking up a pizza without being reminded of the assault in the alley—“because I,” Joanne said proudly, “just got back from work!”

“Work?”

“Yes—I got on the list to be a substitute teacher at the elementary schools in the district, and I got a placement today! And if things go well, next year I may be back to teaching full time, for the first time since before Chris was born.”

“Wow, that's great, Joanne! Anyhow—could you ask Roy to give me a call when he gets back?”

“Sure, Johnny. Good luck tomorrow—I'm sure everything will be fine.”

“Yeah, me too. Brackett would never sign me off unless he was sure. And I know for a fact that he and Mike had a word while I was getting x-rayed, so anything I mighta been trying to hide, which I wasn't, for sure didn't stay that way, but I wasn't, so it didn't matter.”

“Riiiiight,” said Joanne. “I'll ask Roy to call you when he gets home.”

“Or, after dinner is fine too—don't want that pie to get cold.”

“Okay. Have a good night. Say hi to Mike.”

“Will do. Bye.”

Johnny hung up the phone, and looked at the clock—five thirty. Mike was running a little late, but not so late Johnny was worried. Just then, he heard engine sounds outside, and saw the maroon pickup in the driveway. He stopped in at the kitchen to check the tuna casserole he'd put in the oven a little while ago, and then went to the foyer to greet Mike.
The door swung open and Mike stepped in.

“Hey, babe.” He caught Johnny for a quick kiss, and took his shoes off. “You're lookin' pretty happy tonight.”

“Well, of course I am,” said Johnny.

“Why’s that?” Mike asked, grinning.

“You know perfectly well why,” Johnny replied, joining in the game.

“Because you know you're gonna get some later, right?”

“Oooh, am I?”

“You better believe it. You're officially off the twenty-one-day disabled list, so I intend to have my way with you. Plus, I believe Dr. Brackett did instruct you to enjoy the rest of your day off before you have to go back to work. So I'll just have to make sure that happens.”

“Oh, that's right—doctor's orders. I still have my paramedic card, so I ain't gonna ignore an order from medical control, now, am I?”

“Sounds like a good policy.” Mike set some papers down on the bar in the kitchen. “I just have one question, though: how close is dinner to being ready?”

“Too close, Mikey,” Johnny said mournfully. “Too close.”

“Hmm,” Mike said, thumbing absently through the papers. “Guess I'll just have to wait till after dinner, and dishes, and maybe the nightly news, and—oh, here it is.” He pushed something across the bar to Johnny.

Johnny frowned at the paper, as if it had been responsible for ending the flirting game. “Huh? A hundred bucks, from Wes Harris?”

“Yep.” Mike tossed the rest of the pile in the wastebasket.

“Okay—uh, what's the story there?”

“I think,” Mike said slowly, “that maybe he and I have come to an understanding. We've shown before that we can work together really well, no matter what he knows about me. But he fucked up, big time, and he knows it. I asked if he's in any legal trouble—they kept him at the police station way longer than they kept me, that night, so I was wondering. But he says no charges are being filed against him. He almost sounded like he wished they were. I mean, I honestly think he really feels terrible, Johnny. But last time he and I talked about this thing, which we've been avoiding like the plague for the last week, I was just so furious that I just couldn't see that. He desperately wants to do something to fix anything he might have caused, I think, because he just blurted out that he wanted to shell out for the window, and I said no, because the insurance company already said they'd pay, but he wanted to cover the deductible, so I let him. We can, I don't know …”

“We can put it towards the two new sets of tires we had to buy, is what we can do,” Johnny said. “I mean, a hundred bucks doesn't begin to cover it, but it doesn't hurt, either.”

“True,” said Mike. “At first—well, I wasn't sure if I even wanted to take the check, let alone cash it. But—I think we should.”
“Definitely. If he wants to try to make amends, and we don't let him, that ain't playin' nice, I think.”

“I guess so,” Mike said. He shook his head. “I dunno. I keep going back and forth between being royally pissed at him, and kind of feeling sorry for him. But what you said, last week, about him probably not actually giving Staib anything he didn't already have—well, I think you were right. So I've kind of been trying to hold onto that, you know?”

Johnny was listening as he drained the broccoli in a colander. “Uh huh. I guess it's easier for me to see, from the outside looking in, I guess, but from what I saw that one day at your office, he really feels awful.”

“Yeah.”

Johnny pulled the casserole out of the oven. “The other thing,” he said, as he set the dish down on a trivet on the table, “is that we had all these crimes done against us, and we never even really saw the guys. You know? I mean, you saw Staib, in the parking lot, but he's in jail now. And sure, I saw the guys, sorta, when they got me in the alley, but they were just faceless thugs. But Wes is right there in front of you, every day. So I kinda wonder—and don't take this the wrong way, okay?—I just kinda wonder if maybe you're sorta puttin' more of your anger on Harris than he really deserves, just because he's right there, and Staib ain't.”

Mike nodded slowly. “You know, I thought the same thing on my drive home.” He put plates and silverware on the table, as Johnny set down a glass of milk at his own place and a glass of ice water at Mike's.

They dished food up onto their plates. Neither one of them said anything for a minute or two. Johnny was chewing really slowly, and not loading his fork up between bites. Mike didn't interrupt the train of thought that was obviously running through Johnny's mind.

“I guess, if our situations were reversed—if it'd been you that got beat up in the alley—I'd be a hell of a lot madder than I am. But as it is, I guess I'm kind lettin' it go. I mean, I'm all tied up in knots about whether there's gonna be a trial, an' all the shit that's gonna stir up for us, but that's kind of a separate thing from bein' mad at those two assholes, who I've never even really seen.”

Johnny pushed some food around on his plate as he continued. “And I guess I'm kinda able to let it go because I've had a lotta times in my life where I coulda been real mad at certain people, for a long time, and I kinda figured out that if I didn't learn to let shit go, it'd eat me up from the inside out. So I don't want you to think I'm taking this thing lightly—I just wanted to kinda say why I maybe can let it go easier than you. And that I don't blame you for not lettin' it go easy.”

Mike nodded. “I understand. I know you aren't just blowing it off.” He chewed and swallowed a bite. “You know I sometimes have trouble not thinking about what I don't wanna think about. Not as bad as I used to, a few years ago, but—well, you've seen me do it—going over, and over, and over stuff. I sometimes envy you for having that on/off switch for shit you don't want to think about.”

Johnny began plowing through his supper like he was in an eating contest. “It's handy. I don't know where it came from. An' I don't really know what happens to the thing I'm not thinkin' about—where it goes when I shut it off. I guess you're just born that way, or not.”

“I guess so.” Mike worked on another bite of casserole, and, uncharacteristically, talked while he was chewing. “But hasn't there ever been a time when there was something you just couldn't get out of your head?”

Johnny nodded. “Sure there was. Like, a while back, when Roy and I had that call where my good
buddy Drew Burke got hit by a car, and he didn't make it. It took me a couple weeks before I wasn't just thinking about it the whole time—what could I have done different, what if the radio channels hadn't been so busy, what if, what if, what if.” He dished himself up some seconds. “And when you got hit—man, that brought up bad shit, partly from Drew's accident, but mostly because—well, 'cause you were hurt so bad an' I just didn't know what to do. I even pried info out of Len and Washington, who saw the guy hit you, about who the guy was and what happened and all. Man, I made a big movie in my head of that whole scene. Played it over and over and over in my head while you were layin' there in the ICU, knocked out, on the vent.”

“What got you out of the cycle?” Mike asked.

“You woke up, and you needed me,” Johnny said simply. “You needed me there, and not running a movie through my head.” He moved some broccoli from one side of the plate to the middle. “So this whole thing? It's a lot easier to turn off.”

“Okay,” said Mike. “It's good to understand why you're getting past it faster than me. Makes me feel less, I don't know … less broken, I guess.”

They ate for a little while.

“Guess I oughta call whoever's on tonight at the station, just to see if there's anything I need to catch up on,” Johnny said finally. “Man, I've been out of the action so long I can't even remember what shift is on today!”

“A-shift,” Mike said. “I looked at the shift calendar before your appointment.”

“Great—I'll talk to Len after dinner.”

“All right—I'll be cleaning up anyhow. But after that, Gage—you are mine.”

“All yours, babe,” Johnny agreed, grinning. “Putty in your hands.”

They finished eating, and Mike began cleaning up the kitchen while Johnny sat in the living room to call Len Sterling at the station.

“L.A. County Fire Station 93, Firefighter/Paramedic Yang speaking.”

“Well, Henry, that sure is a mouthful! How's it goin'? I'm guessin' you're not a daddy yet, or you wouldn't be there right now.”

“Hey, Johnny! Nope—no baby yet, but any second now. I keep telling Melinda that if she's not sure she's in labor, she's not in labor. She still calls me twice a shift. But I can take it. After all, I haven't had to carry a ten-pound basketball around in my abdominal cavity. Ever. So the least I can do is answer the phone twice a shift. And—how are you doing, anyhow? You gonna be back soon?”

“Yep! Tomorrow. So I was just hoping to talk to Len for a minute, just to see if there was anything I needed to catch up on.”

“Tomorrow? That's great! Hang on a second, and I'll get Len for you. See you in the morning,” Yang said, as he set the phone down to get Len.

“Captain Gage!” Len exclaimed. “I hear you're back in service.”

“Yep—good as new. Just calling to see if there's anything I should be filled in on before I turn up in the morning.”
“Well, nothing really spectacular. Well, I take that back. B-shift had a supply line rupture; that counted as spectacular, from Jeff’s description, but nobody got hurt and there didn’t seem to be any damage to the pump. Luckily it happened on a call where there were two other engines supplying attack lines, and the fire was almost under control anyhow. We’ve got the pump testing company scheduled to come out next week just to check her out, so we’re still keeping a close eye on her in the mean time. That’s all I can think of, really. Plus everyone sends their greetings.”

“Man, I’m sure glad I’m gonna be back. Taking time off for something really serious—well, I’ve done that before, and weirdly, that was kinda easier to take than just having to bide my time for a coupla cracked ribs.” He frowned, deciding whether he wanted to say the next thing that was on his mind. “Plus, I hated the constant reminder that I was off work because I got beat up by a couple of thugs from the department. Pisses me off. And there’s not a damned thing to be done about it.”

Len sighed on the other end of the line. “You know what, John? It really pisses me off, too. And it pisses me off that I can’t just go to the Fire Chief and tell him what’s been going on in his department without jeopardizing things for you and Mike. But I did have a thought along those lines the other day. Hear me out on this, all right?”

“Okay …” Johnny said, not entirely sure he was going to like what Len had cooked up.

“I have a meeting with the Chief of Operations next week. I know him well enough to know that he’d be pissed as a pig in a football factory to know that someone from another division caused someone from his division to have to miss three weeks of shifts, by committing a cowardly crime based solely on his personal dislike of that individual’s private life. What I’m figuring to do is get him all riled up about what happened, and then, once he’s furious, spring it on him exactly what the other fellow was objecting to. He can’t exactly back down and say, ‘oh, well if that’s why, then it’s perfectly okay.’ I know him well enough to know that no matter what he thinks of the controversial issue at hand, he won’t do a turnabout once he finds out what it is.”

Johnny thought for a second, and shook his head. “I dunno, Len. I mean, he’d for sure ask you who you were talkin’ about, right?”

“I wouldn’t tell ‘im who you were, or Mike. But I sure as hell would tell ‘im who Staib was. You and I both know that anyone who’s convicted of a felony is out of a job. And you already said he’s copping a plea, so it’s pretty sure he’ll have a felony conviction on his record.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said sourly, “unless they bargain it down to a misdemeanor. Brackett said in his report that I sustained additional permanent damage to an already damaged kidney, which the detective said would make it aggravated battery, which is a felony. But I really don't know what he's gonna end up with.”

“John, I think in any case that you can be sure that Staib will no longer be an employee of the Fire Department after he’s convicted of a violent crime against another member of the department, all right? So that's something I can do.”

“Don't you think the Ops chief could figure out who I was, though? And Mike, too?”

“Probably. But John—you're good at your job. Livingston hates your guts, and he still gave you a good performance review. He never gives anyone better ratings than 'good,' unless they're friends of his. So unless you or Mike really objects, I'd really like to tell the Ops chief about the whole story.”

Johnny sighed. “Okay—I’ll talk it over with Mike tonight, if we have time.”

“Time? It's only 1830, pal. Unless y'all are goin' out for a night on the town before a shift you
Johnny snickered. “Oh, but Len—Mikey's got somethin' up his sleeve. He's just finishing up the dishes, and then I am expected to be putty in his hands.”

“Oh, Lord, I didn't really need to know that, John. I would say don't do anything I wouldn't do, but it's pretty much a foregone conclusion that you will, now, ain't it.”

Johnny laughed out loud. “You said it, not me, Len. Anyhow—he's just drying the last of the dishes, so now's my chance. See ya tomorrow, all right?”

“You bet. See you then.”

Johnny wandered back into the kitchen.

“Were you teasing Len again?” Mike asked.

“Sorta. But then he came out with a real good one.” Johnny quoted Len's admonishment and foregone conclusion in his best Georgia drawl, which was really not very good at all, and Mike burst out laughing.

“I'd say he's officially immune to your attempts to bait him, Gage. But anyhow—all I really heard was that you were supposed to run something past me. So shoot.” Mike dried and put away the last of the dishes as Johnny told him of Len's idea.

“Sure, why not?” Mike said, after a brief moment of thought. “I mean, yeah, he'll probably figure out who we are, if he doesn't already know it, or suspect it, but I don't think there's too many dark corners of the department where the gossip hasn't spread at this point.”

“Yeah. Kinda figures. And at least that way, when the trial comes up—well, our bosses' bosses will already know. Won't get blindsided. But still—it kinda feels like rocking the boat.”

Mike looked at Johnny calmly. “Well, maybe the boat needs to be rocked a little.”

Johnny sighed. “I guess. What's the worst that could happen, anyhow?”

Mike grinned, and shook his head. “I thought you'd've learned by now to never ask me that question. But I'll tell you: the worst that could happen is that we get canned, and we take ourselves up to Seattle, or the Bay Area, or someplace a little more liberal and tolerant than the City of Angels and smog, and go right back to work. I mean, you spent enough time with your ride-alongs and such with the department in San Francisco that you've got some pretty good contacts up there. And, well, it's San Francisco. And about Seattle—I know for a fact there's a guy in the Seattle department who's out, and they haven't sacked him.”

“I s'pose,” Johnny said. He shook his head. “All right. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'll tell Len he can do it. And we'll just see what happens.”

“Good.” Mike hung up his dish towel, and stood in the middle of the kitchen. “So.” He stared at Johnny, penetrating him with his sharp blue eyes. He crooked his finger and gestured for Johnny to come closer.

“Putty-in-your-hands time?” Johnny asked, grinning, but not moving. He leaned with his shoulder on the side of the open doorway from the kitchen to the hallway, arms crossed over his chest, looking at
Mike expectantly.

“Mm hmm. Mine, mine, mine.”

“Come 'n' get it, Stoker,” Johnny suggested, still leaning with his right shoulder against the frame of the doorway.

Mike studied Johnny for a moment. He took two steps closer, but still Johnny didn't move. Mike closed the gap between them, and they stood nose to nose for a moment, before leaning in and nuzzling the provocatively displayed side of Johnny's long neck.

Johnny closed his eyes and uncrossed his arms, letting his hands come down to search for Mike's as Mike's lips and breath trailed hot and cold paths from his ear to his collar. Their hands caught each others, fingers intertwining.

Mike let his kisses trail back up from Johnny's collar to the angle of his jaw. He pulled back to look at Johnny—his eyes were still closed, and his lips were parted slightly, invitingly. Mike felt Johnny respond instantly; felt his breath pick up and his body arch slightly towards Mike's own. Mike let go of Johnny's inside hand, and slipped his own hand around Johnny's lower back. As quick as a flash, he spun Johnny into the hallway, and used his body to press him up against the hallway wall, still holding him by the waist on one side and the hand on the other, pinning him right where he wanted him, the lengths of their bodies pressed together tightly.

Before either of them knew what was happening, Johnny yelled sharply and pushed forward, his shoulder catching Mike squarely in the chest and sending him careening into the opposite wall. Johnny backed himself against the wall, eyes wide, chest heaving, trembling fists clenched at his side. Mike just stood there in shock and stared at him dumbly, mouth hanging open.

“What …” Mike finally said.

Johnny groaned, as he covered his face with his hands and sank to the floor. He sucked in a deep, shaky breath. “Holy shit, Mikey. Sorry. I just … fuck. I—I … I panicked. Up against the wall. Like in the alley. Man, I'm so sorry.”

Mike's heart fell as he understood what had happened. He sat down next to Johnny. He could see Johnny's pulse pounding at his carotid artery, and could see a pallor beneath his normally hearty skin tone. “Sorry, babe,” he whispered, not yet daring to touch Johnny. “I didn't think about … shit.”

Johnny leaned in to Mike, and Mike put an arm around him. They sat there silently for a minute or two.

“I haven't even thought about it in a couple days until just tonight,” Johnny said. “And the wall thing—we do that all the time. I like it,” he admitted. “Reminds me I'm yours, and you're mine. I love it. I think it just … caught me off guard.” He ran his hands over his face. “Jesus, Mikey—I fucking shoved you.”

“No, you didn't,” Mike said quietly. “You were pushing away those guys. And you didn't hurt me—just startled the crap outta me.”


“It's okay, Johnny. C'mon—you look shaky. Lemme get you something.” Mike stood up, and reached a hand down to Johnny, who allowed himself to be helped up. Johnny followed Mike to the kitchen. Mike poured Johnny a glass of milk, and put it into Johnny's shaking hands. Johnny
chugged the milk down, and set the glass in the sink. He turned around, and approached Mike cautiously. Mike opened his arms, and Johnny gratefully allowed himself to be gently enfolded.

“Sorry,” Johnny murmured into Mike's neck. “You know I'd never—"

“Sssshhh. I know. It's okay. I know you didn't mean it.” He held Johnny gently for a little while, and then stepped back a bit, brushing the hair away from his eyes while they both stood in the kitchen. “What would feel good to you right now?"

“You would, babe,” Johnny said without hesitation. “You always feel good to me. It's just that for a second, I couldn't remember it was you.” Johnny pulled Mike closer, and kissed him gently. “Yeah,” Johnny whispered. “You feel real good to me. And we still have some doctor's orders to follow.” He leaned back in towards Mike, kissed him some more, and began pulling Mike's shirt tails from his trousers. He worked his palms under Mike's shirt, and ran his hands around Mike's bare waistline.

Mike let Johnny steer him down the hallway to their bedroom. It was a short distance, but they stopped every step or two for a touch here, or a kiss there, or to shed an item of clothing. Mike flipped the light as they entered the dim bedroom, but Johnny caught his hand and shook his head.

“I don't want you to see the bruises,” he said softly, not looking Mike in the eye. Nothing hurt at all any more, but he was intensely conscious of the lingering, slowly-fading reminders of the assault.

Mike flipped the light back off. “Okay. It's all right.”

Johnny pulled him in fiercely, and made a short project of helping the rest of their clothing to the floor. He backed himself up to the bed, pulling Mike with him. He lowered himself down onto his back, gently encouraging Mike to follow him down.

Mike eagerly followed Johnny's lead, but at the final instant, when gravity had its grip on his body and he was falling towards Johnny, he suddenly caught himself to avoid pinning Johnny on the bed and setting off another panic reaction.

Johnny looked up, and saw insecurity and concern in Mike's gaze.

“God, I love you,” he whispered upwards.

“Love you too, Gage,” Mike said, still hovering over Johnny, but leaning his face down to catch Johnny's lips with his own.

Johnny traced the curve of Mike's spine with his hands. “It's okay, babe,” he said, hooking his arms together around Mike's torso to encourage him downwards. “It's okay. It was just the wall, and I was just startled for a minute, and everything's fine now. C'mon, now; be you. I want you—all forceful and pushy and talky, just the way I like you.”

“You like that, huh?"

“You know I do.”

Mike lowered his weight onto Johnny, and both heard and felt his half-voiced sigh. He echoed it with his own as he felt the residual tension bleed away from the room. He planted a trail of kisses down Johnny's neck to the hollow where his collarbones met, and relished the feeling of Johnny's hands running through his hair, down his neck and back.

“I think I can arrange some forceful and pushy,” Mike said.
“Putty in your hands,” Johnny said huskily. “Show me I'm yours, and I'll show you you're mine.”

It was fortunate that Johnny and Mike had found time to discuss Len's plan for talking with the Ops Chief while they were cleaning up the kitchen, because, as Johnny had suspected, they did not in fact have any time for discussion that evening.

TBC
The alarm clock went off in the Stoker/Gage home at precisely 0545. Johnny, eyes still closed, took in a deep breath, smiling to himself as he remembered the previous night, and, at the same time, remembered he would be starting a shift soon. His smile broadened as Mike stirred and rolled over to face him.

“Mmm, g’mornin’, Captain Gage.”

“Ooh, I even get a salute! C’n I take care of that for you?”

“Seems the respect is mutual, babe. Maybe a dirty shower?”

“I could dig that. You wanna start the coffee, while I get the water goin’?”

“You’re on. No starting the fun without me, though,” Mike said, as he threw on a robe.

Mike went to the kitchen, set up the Mr. Coffee, and then shucked his robe and tossed it into the bedroom on the way to the shower. The coffee maker burbled and bubbled, doing its job noisily and with great gusto. When its task was complete, it waited patiently, holding its product at 190 degrees Fahrenheit. Every minute or so, another drop fell from the filter basket, until finally, there were no more drops left. The full carafe stood silently for some time, waiting to be poured. It waited, and waited, until finally someone came to partake of its brew.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Johnny skidded into the kitchen and yanked a lidded travel mug from a cabinet and filled it to the brim. “Can you throw me some fruit or somethin’ in a bag and I’ll just eat it in the car? I can get some real food at the station but man, I’m gonna be so late to meet Len if I don’t leave in the next thirty seconds!”

Mike laughed as he tossed an apple and a banana in a paper sack, and put the bag on top of the stack of clean uniforms Johnny was trying to manage. “C’mon, babe—you carry your pile, and I’ll bring your coffee and fruit out to the car, so we don’t have a disaster here.”

“Thanks.”

Johnny opened the side door, and groaned. “Aw, man, I forgot your truck was behind the Rover. We gotta move it, an’ I’m gonna be late, and—”

Mike opened the door of the pickup, and set the small bag of fruit on the passenger’s seat. He put the coffee in the cupholder, and relieved Johnny of the stack of uniforms and set them on the narrow back seat. He held the truck’s key out to Johnny, who took it gratefully. Johnny pivoted like a basketball player on the court, but stopped short and turned back to Mike, and nearly knocked him down, since Mike was approaching Johnny with the same thought in mind.

They kissed goodbye like it needed to last a month instead of a day.

“Be safe,” Mike said. “See you tomorrow morning. Glad it’s Friday today, so I’ll be home when you get back in the morning.”

“Love you,” Johnny said, as he hopped into the truck. He stuck his head out the window. “Spare key to the Rover's in the junk drawer!”
“I know!” Mike said, as he waved. He returned to the house to make himself presentable, fix a lunch, and depart the house with a bit more of a sense of order than had been achieved at the previous departure.

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“Mornin', Len!” Johnny said as he strode into the office that the three Captains of Station 93 shared.

“Johnny! Welcome back!” Len looked out the window and frowned. “You're driving Mike's truck—everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah,” Johnny said, grinning. “Just had a little trouble gettin' out the door this mornin’, and the truck was parked behind the Rover, so we switched cars so I wouldn't be late. So here I am, ten shifts later, back in service. Thanks for the shifts you took, by the way. I think between you, and Roy, and Hank Stanley, Livingston only had to scrape up subs for three shifts,” Johnny said.

“Well, your boys will be mighty glad to see you after the fellow they had last shift,” Len said, putting a few last papers into files.

“Oh?” Johnny pictured an aging old-school Captain who didn't fit at all with the crew at Station 93, where they used as many modern and experimental techniques as they could and still stay within the department's SOPs.

“Yeah, the fellow said you and he went way back; that you worked together as paramedics sometimes when Roy was out.”

Johnny laughed. “Craig Brice. Yeah, I can see my crew maybe not having the best time with him. Me an' Roy used to call him 'the walking rulebook' back in the day.”

Len chuckled. “You should tell Roy that the term seems to have made its rounds through the department, because I heard it grumbled under the breath of one of your men, who shall remain anonymous.”

“Hm, would his first name start with Dan, and his last name start with Fitzgerald?”

“You said it, Johnny, not me. By the way—you know Yang's gonna be out on short notice for a few shifts, any time now, with the baby coming. Any chance you could pull a shift as a medic some time?”

Johnny nodded. “That'd be great. I still owe Henry, big time, for puttin' me up all those nights when Mikey was at Henry Mayo. So sure—give me the word. I'm sure Mike'll be fine with that, too. Plus, truth be told, we could use the extra cash, what with all the tires we had to buy, and me only gettin' half pay for mosta the shifts I missed.”

Len frowned. “I forgot about that whole thing—if it's not a line-of-duty injury or illness, you only get, what—three shifts in a row sick time for the same thing, and then you go to half pay?”

“Yeah. Sucks. It's like it was my fault, or somethin'.” Johnny shook his head. “Anyhow—that's done an' over with.”

Len studied Johnny. “Any word on a trial?”

Johnny sighed. “I guess I'm just startin' to assume that it's gonna happen. And it's gonna suck.”

“You know,” Len said, “if I were the second guy—the one who didn't go for the plea bargain—I'd
be having another think about that, right about now. I mean, if the first guy is singin' like a bird, how is this other guy possibly gonna get off?"

“No clue,” said Johnny, hanging his head. “I'm just tryin' not to think about it too much. That's not workin' so hot, though.”

“Well, then, let's at least talk about somethin' else, and see if that helps. Here’s what I'm thinkin' about lately. I've got my meeting with the Ops chief on Monday, Johnny. Like I mentioned before. And remember the real smart captain I had, way back, who sent me out to the boonies instead of keeping me at his urban station? That's him, twelve years later. He ain't dumb, and he is fairly open-minded, for a fireman of his age. So I just want to double check that you and Mike are okay with me putting a bug in his ear that someone from the Special Services division is in the joint for an assault against someone from Ops, and making that someone miss ten shifts,” Len reminded him.

“Yeah,” Johnny sighed, “we're cool with that. Worst comes to worst, and we get canned, we can always head north a ways an' start over.”

“Honestly, John? I don't think that's gonna happen.”

“I dunno. I just don't even know what to expect any more,” said Johnny.

The station's tones went off loudly, sending A-shift's paramedics on one last run, right before shift change.

“Except that,” Johnny concluded.

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Mike parked Johnny's white Land Rover in the HQ parking lot, only slightly later than his usual time. He stopped by his mailbox on the way upstairs, and was glad to see a note about a new assignment for him and Wes to start, along with a file of copies about the case.

Good, he thought. A new project, a fresh start. With any luck, things would get less awkward between him and Wes as time passed, with them both doing the normal things they did in their jobs. Mike put the various papers from his mailbox on his desk, and went to the sixth-floor break room to start the coffee. He grinned to himself as he thought about his extremely delayed first cup of coffee of the morning.

As he waited for the pot to finish brewing, Mike thumbed through some journals lying around the break room. He read the 'case studies' section from one of the journals, in which people submitted interesting or unusual scenarios related to arson or other fire causes. As he read, he thought about his and Wes's case with the multiple points of origin from the spontaneously heating chemicals in the warehouse, and thought it would be an interesting case to submit. As he was thinking, Rhodes entered the room.

“Mornin', Stoker. TGIF, huh?”

“You can say that again, boss.” Mike impulsively decided to test the waters on the thought he'd just had. “Hey, I just had this idea I wanted to run past you. That weird warehouse fire, the one with the chlorine compound that decomposed and started the fire?”

Rhodes nodded. “Yeah, that was a weird one, all right—but what's your idea?”

Mike handed the journal to Rhodes, and pointed to the case studies page. “I was thinking I might write it up.”
Rhodes nodded. “Partly because it's weird, but you know what else? I got a call from the battalion chief who was IC on that one, and he said he was damned glad you knew what the hell you were doing in there, because it was a nasty, dangerous situation, and someone who hadn't kept up their PPE and SCBA skills wouldn't have been able to get outta there safely, and they'd gone from a fire with no casualties to maybe a couple—which looks real bad when the casualties happen after the fire is out and when overhaul is almost done.”

Mike nodded. “Good point. So, what do you think? Can I work on that in between assignments?”

“Sure, why the hell not?” Rhodes said. “Just lemme run it past the division chief before you submit it, okay? Just in case he wants to run it past Ops, ya know? So they don't feel like they look bad in it, or anything.”

“Don't worry—they'll look great. I guarantee a good PR job.”

Rhodes chuckled. “You would, wouldn't you.” He looked at Mike through narrowed eyes. “Speaking of which,” he began.

Oh, shit, Mike thought. Here comes some more crap.

“We gotta get you started on some of the courtroom stuff. I gotta say, when I first read what some of your old captains said about how you hardly ever let out a peep, I didn't see how we'd ever get you turned into an expert witness. But I don't know what the hell they were talkin' about. You talk great at our meetings—and I was purposely looking for how well you explained that warehouse case at the AFIU meeting on Wednesday. You made sense, and you answered people's questions without hemming and hawing, but also without making shit up to look good. And a huge thing—people sit up and pay attention when you talk. It's like that commercial, where when someone says 'E.F. Hutton,' and everyone in the room magically shuts the hell up and listens.”

Mike laughed. “Well, to tell the truth, my first two Caps were totally right. My nickname at my first station was Silent Stoker. I just didn't like to get into the gossiping and firehouse politics, you know? Or talk about my personal life,” he said boldly. “So I just kept my mouth shut and people let me be. So maybe it's like I have a sign hanging over me that says, 'Look! It's Silent Stoker! He's talking, so it must be important!' I don't know.”

“Well, whatever that is, juries like it. So after your thing that you and Harris have now, I want you to get with Bob Fredericks and sit in on the next trial he does.”

“Sure—that'll be great.”

“Good,” Rhodes said. “Anyhow—I got a lotta shit to sift through today. See ya later.”

Mike took his coffee back to his office. He thought about the conversation he'd just had with Rhodes, and realized it was the first time they'd talked individually for more than a minute or two since right after Mike was hired. Mike realized he had even referred to his personal life, just like a regular person, and Rhodes hadn't immediately gotten blustery and agitated. He'd just had a completely normal conversation with his boss, about completely normal things.

Mike started looking through the file for his and Wes's new project. They'd need to get out to the site today, and he hoped Wes wouldn't be spooked by his last experience at a fire site. As Mike read through the incident commander's initial report, the phone rang.

“Arson and Fire Investigation, Mike Stoker speaking.”

“Mr. Stoker? This is Detective DeVito.”
Mike felt a chill settle over him. So much for a normal day, with normal things. “Good morning, Detective.”

“Morning. I have some news for you and Mr. Gage—last night, James Torrelli decided to change his plea to no contest.”

Mike sat there, open mouthed.

“Mr. Stoker?”

Mike snapped himself out of his astonishment. “Uh, yeah—I'm here! I was just really surprised by what you said. That's great, detective—really, really great. I mean, I know they'll get off lighter than if they were convicted in a trial, but honestly, the best thing for us at this point is not to have to deal with a trial.”

“I understand,” said DeVito. “A lot of people feel that way, especially when the crimes committed against them were of a particularly personal or hateful nature.”

“You made my day, Detective—honest.”

DeVito laughed. “Well, I don't get to do that very often in this job.”

“Oh, believe me, I can relate,” Mike replied.

“I tried to reach Mr. Gage at your home earlier, but there was no answer.”

“I'll call him,” Mike said. “He's back at work, so he might be hard to reach.”

“All right. And I don't know if you're interested, but let me give you the date and time of the sentencing hearing, in case you want to sit in on that.”

“Uh, we don't have to, do we?” Mike asked, thinking of Johnny's repeated pleas for everything to be over and done with.

“No—but some people get something out of it. Closure, I suppose.”

DeVito gave Mike the date and times, and Mike wrote them on his calendar. He doubted Johnny would want to have anything to do with the event, but he himself planned to watch with satisfaction.

“Thanks again, Detective. Really—we appreciate everything you've put into this case.”

“You're welcome.”

Mike set the phone receiver down in its cradle, and picked it right back up again. It was his turn to make someone's day.

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Johnny hopped down from the officer's seat on the engine, tossing his coat on the seat and stepping out of his bunker pants and boots, leaving them by the door of the cab.

“Good job, guys—I know, just a little kitchen fire,” Johnny said, “but we kept it from turning into a big house fire. Great work—fast and safe. Now I have the pleasure of doing the paperwork—so carry on.”

Johnny headed into the office to do what was undeniably his least favorite part of his job—
completing the paperwork for each and every run they went on. He quickly learned that if he didn't take care of each report immediately after the run, they piled up, and if it was a busy day, he'd sometimes get the details muddled. He didn't really consider himself a detail-oriented fellow—not like, say, Stoker—but he appreciated the need for clarity.

He also appreciated the need for praising his crew on a regular basis. He was fortunate to have a seasoned engineer, Peters, but his two other firefighters and both paramedics were fairly green. He didn't have any probies assigned to him—new captains didn't usually get probies in their first years—but he suspected that the next time someone from his crew left for any reason, he should expect a probie fresh from the academy. But Emerson had just finished his probationary period when he was assigned to 93's C-shift. He was getting more solid with his skills, but was only twenty—and an immature twenty, at that.

Johnny made his way through the form, practicing his new skill of tuning out the horseplay from the apparatus bay as he worked. He practiced Captain Stanley's habit of leaving the office door open unless he was having a private conversation—partly to show he was available when needed, and partly to keep an ear on the pulse of the station. When he was halfway through the form, the phone rang, and was quickly answered on the kitchen extension.

Dan Fitzgerald, one of the firefighter/paramedics, appeared at the office door a few moments later.

“Cap? It's for you.”

“Okay—thanks. Did they say who they were?”

“It's your, uh—it's Stoker.”

Johnny ignored Fitzgerald's fumbling. “Thanks.”

“You, uh, want me to close the door?”

“Sure—thanks.”

The door clicked shut, but Johnny gave Fitzgerald a moment to step away from the door before he picked up the phone.

“Hey, hot stuff.”

Mike laughed. “Hey, babe. How's your first shift back?”

“Oh, terrific,” said Johnny. “Almost enough action to keep my mind off our action from this morning and last night. Almost, but not quite.”

“So I guess that means your door is closed?”

“Youp.” Johnny put his feet up on the desk. “Why, what's goin' on?”

“Good news—I just heard from DeVito that the other shithead is copping a plea.”

Johnny let out a whoop. “Wooo-hooo! Well awright! Damn, I don't even know what to say to that!”

“Me neither—no trial, no more anything. We can show up at the sentencing hearing if we want, since it's a public affair, but we don't have to.”

“Damn,” Johnny repeated. “You have no idea—well, I take it back, you know perfectly well. I feel like I was carrying Engine 93 on my back, and just put 'er down.”
“I know,” Mike said. “Yeah, babe. I know.”

Neither of them spoke, until a tremendous crashing sound from the apparatus bay interrupted the moment.

Johnny sighed. “Got some hooliganism goin' on I gotta take care of. Thanks for callin’—I really needed to hear that.”

“My pleasure. Hey—you mind if I call a couple of the guys? Like Cap, and maybe Chet?”

“Hell—call everyone. Hey, you know what—we oughta have a party, ya know?”

“We should,” said Mike. “Let's talk about it tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay—yeah. Gotta go yell at the hooligans. I'll call ya after dinner, okay?”

“Love you.”

“Me too. Bye.”

Johnny opened his door, and stuck his head into the bay. “Hell is goin' on out here, guys?”

“Uh, nothin' Cap,” said Emerson. “Just the, uh …” he tipped his head towards the disaster area on the floor that was the overturned rolling tool chest, contents strewn across the entire apparatus bay.

Johnny surveyed the scene far more calmly than he would have fifteen minutes earlier. He noted the basketball languishing guiltily in the corner of the bay, and observed that Fitzgerald seemed to have been heading towards the basketball.

“Get a pushbroom, and sweep all the tools into a pile, so we don't run 'em over when we get toned out. And you'll sort 'em all out and put 'em all back before there's any free time today. Clear?”

“Clear, Cap. Sorry,” Fitzgerald said sheepishly. “Guess we shouldn't throw the basketball around in the bay.”

“You guess right,” Johnny said in his best Captain Stanley voice. “Now get to it.”

He returned to his office, choking on his suppressed laughs. As he finished the paperwork from the last run, he wondered how often Hank Stanley had done the exact same thing after sternly admonishing him and Chet about some foolish behavior or another.

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At around the same time, Detective Tom DeVito was opening his day's mail at his desk. There was the usual variety of important and unimportant memos, and a letter from a lawyer. The mysterious item was a Sheriff's department letterhead envelope, with 'Detective DeVito' typed on the front, but no indication of who the sender was. DeVito opened the letter, which was typed on department letterhead, making it clear it was from a colleague.

Dear Detective DeVito:

There are a couple of us in the Sheriff's department who would like to express our appreciation for your fine handling of the case of the two County firemen who were the targets of hatred from some assholes who didn't even know them. Given what the reason for their hatred was, we were almost expecting these crimes to be poorly investigated, mishandled, or lost in the shuffle. They weren't.
Thanks for not living down to our expectations.

For obvious reasons, we are not signing this letter.

Sincerely,

Three anonymous colleagues.

TBC
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder, in case anyone's forgotten, that I don't own Emergency! Any public figures mentioned in this story are used fictionally. As always, all references to characters who have the same names as the actors who played them are to the characters, not the real people.

Chapter 25.

Len Sterling sat waiting in the reception area of the Operations Chief's office. The Chief had called the meeting so that they could discuss some of the new equipment that Station 93 had tested in the field over the last six weeks. Len wasn't concerned about that part of the meeting at all. He knew exactly what he and the other two captains had agreed on in terms of recommendations for or against the new equipment, and he and Jeff Gilbert from B-shift had put together a list of pros and cons for each item. Johnny had been out for most of the testing period, but Len had made sure to get opinions from the men on Johnny's C-shift. He'd be sure to mention, during the discussion of the recommendations, that the C-shift captain had been out with an injury for three weeks and didn't get to give much input into the recommendations.

What Len was thinking about the most while he was waiting was his plan to also mention to Chief Edison the fact that an Operations employee had been knocked out of commission by an assault by a Special Services division employee who didn't even know the Ops employee but had a personal grudge against him.

“Len?” Chief Edison appeared in his office doorway. “C'mon in. Sorry I kept you waiting—had a tricky situation over in Battalion 14 that I had to deal with. Racial tension in a station, it seems. I mean, it's 1980, for fuck's sake. And you don't even want to know,” Edison said, shaking his head, “what a pain in the ass it is when we have captains who never should've been promoted. Doesn't happen often, but—well. Come on in,” Edison said, ushering Len through the door, “and have a seat.”

They engaged in some small talk, and then Edison got down to business. “So, tell me how your station did with the new equipment.”

“Well, I think the aluminum ladders are going to be a great change, and the fiberglass SCBA bottles were a unanimous success, but we weren't so wild about the new combination tools from Denver or the new style of negative-pressure vent fans. Here,” Len said, handing Edison the neatly typed lists of pros and cons for each piece of equipment. “All three shifts got together and made you these lists.”

Edison read the lists over carefully.

“Who's the C-shift captain?” he asked. “He seems to have hardly given any input into these lists at all. Why's that?”

“John Gage,” said Len. “He's been out on medical leave for the last three weeks. His subs were only there for a couple of shifts each, so they weren't really able to form solid opinions about the new equipment.”
“Gage, Gage,” Edison said, frowning. “I can't quite recall—oh, of course. The paramedic. Young, if I remember right. To be honest, he was one of the ones I worried about promoting—partly because he seemed so young, but partly because he'd been a paramedic for so many years. Wondered if he'd really be able to swing right into captaining fire incidents. Do you have a sense for how he's doing? Of course, I get reports from his battalion chief, but frankly, they're less than useless. Livingston just needs to retire. So I'm curious what your opinion is.”

“He's good,” Len said confidently. “Very good. I had occasion to get to know him fairly well a while before he went for the promotion, and I recommended him for the promotion as well as for the slot at Station 93. Before Gage became a captain, he was a top-notch paramedic, but also the best technical rescue guy you could hope for, and a solid firefighter. And he never lost his touch with the firefighting business after becoming a paramedic. Plus, he's not nearly as young as he looks—he's thirty three, but looks twenty five, and that's only on a real tired day for him. It helps that his crew is pretty young, so he seems old to them. He's got some hooligans to deal with, but he keeps them in line. I also saw him put one of his boys back together again a couple weeks ago when the young fellow was dealing with his first child fatality. So I have no concerns whatsoever. He's only been a captain for less than a year, but give him a couple more years and he'll be a master at the job. No two ways about it.”

Edison nodded slowly. “Okay. Good to hear. Like I said, Livingston seems to dislike the fellow for some reason he won't say, but still gives him “good” ratings in his reviews. Which is the best rating he ever gives anyone.” Edison held up the typed tables Len had given him. “And thanks for these—I'm not surprised about any of the things I saw here, except for the problems with the tension bar on the vent fan—I hadn't used the thing myself, so I didn't catch that. And the Denver tool—well, they're just trying to put too many functions into one tool, and it doesn't do any of them well.”

“That's what we all thought, too,” Len said. He waited in his seat while Edison looked the charts over one more time.

Edison looked up. “Seems to me, Len, that there might be something else you wanted to talk about.”

“What, you mean just because I'm not running for the door already?”

“Well, you hate meetings, and you loathe HQ, but you're still here. What gives?”

Len sighed. “So, if you didn't love the race problem over in Battalion 14, you're really not gonna love this one, especially since it's cross-divisional.”

“Oh, joy. Break it to me gently, Len.”

“It seems,” Len said carefully, “that a fellow from Special Services, and a fellow who recently got fired from Special services, are in jail right this moment, having pleaded 'no contest' to beating the crap out of a fellow from Ops, badly enough to land him in the hospital. That's among other things they did, including vandalizing his home, slashing his tires, and also attacking a fellow from Prevention and slashing his tires as well. Oh, and trashing his office, upstairs on the sixth floor. Twice.”

Edison frowned. “These three have some kind of grudge match going on?”

Len shook his head. “Nope. In fact, the two guys who got dumped on had never even met the two prize specimens who are languishing in the hoosegow right now. But the jailbirds still decided they hated this Ops fellow bad enough to drag him into an alley and kick the shit out of him. Busted his ribs, banged up his kidney, and busted his face up pretty bad, too. He was in the hospital for a couple days. And here's a nifty thing: seems the two goons got some of the personal contact information for
this fellow through the HR department. Not through normal channels, mind you, because there's no way a mechanic from the motor pool would need personal information about a fellow in Ops."

Edison's frown deepened. "I don't think I'm quite following this, Len. This didn't happen when any of these guys were at work, or I'd've heard about it for sure."

"That's right. The Ops fellow was off duty when he was assaulted. Had no idea who it was that beat him up, either. He missed about ten shifts. Just came back the other day."

"And it wasn't just some random thing? The Special Services goons targeted this guy specifically?"

"Yep. They knew exactly who they wanted."

Edison drummed on his desk. "I gotta say, Len; I'm pretty peeved I haven't heard about this before now."

"Well, why would you? The perpetrators weren't in your division. And the victim in Ops—well, he didn't even know who assaulted him until after they caught the guy. Plus, I doubt he wanted to go crying to his boss about it."

"Yeah, but a guy from another division beating up a guy from my division, and costing him a couple days in the hospital, plus ten shifts? I don't like hearing that Special Services is beating up Ops,"

Edison said. "What the hell was this all about? And why wouldn't the Ops guy go to his supervisor with this, one he found out it was someone from the department?"

"He knew his supervisor wouldn't exactly be sympathetic." Len was being intentionally vague, hoping that Edison would be prompted to ask the right question.

"Why would his supervisor not be sympathetic? The guy got put in the hospital, for crying out loud! And … you said the assailants had some kind of grudge against my guy. How could that be, if they didn't even know each other?" Edison frowned. "Is this some kind of race thing, like that bullshit over in Battalion 14? Because that has to end. Right now. I don't care what the Specials guy had against my Ops guy—putting one of my guys in the hospital for a one-sided personal grudge is way over the line."

"I agree."

Len said, finally having heard precisely what he was waiting for: the declaration that the reason for the assault was unimportant compared to the fact that the crimes happened in the first place. "And the Ops guy and the Prevention guy who were the two victims are both good at their jobs—really good at their jobs. But neither one of them feels like they can come forwards and say anything about this to their bosses. And it pains them both greatly that all this damage was done by someone from a department whose mission is to save lives and protect property."

"Okay, Len," Edison said, glowering. "I'm pissed off, just like you want me to be. Now, would you please tell me why neither of the victims is saying anything to their bosses? Because that sounds like a no-brainer if you ask me. And I'd like to get to the bottom of this."

Len sat back in his chair, satisfied that he had Edison exactly where he wanted him.

"You're not gonna like it," he warned.

"What I don't like," Edison snarled, "is that one of my guys got put in the hospital by a guy from Special Services, and this is the first I've heard of it! Now spill it, Len. I don't give a shit if I don't like it—I obviously have to get to the bottom of it, whatever it turns out to be."

Len chose his next words carefully. "The fellow from Ops, and the one from Prevention, have been
lovers for several years. They live together, but they keep it quiet. It doesn't get in the way of their work. They aren't violating any regulations. The Special Services guy got wind of them, and decided to take matters into his own hands.”

Edison stared at him. “You're serious,” he said.

“Yup,” Len said. “And that's why they don't dare say a damned thing.”

“You're totally serious,” Edison repeated.

“As a heart attack.”

Edison narrowed his eyes at Len. “You said this … thing … doesn't get in the way of their work. How could you possibly know that?”

“Ah. You see, the Prevention division fellow was on my crew, a couple years back. And the Ops man—he's at 93s now.”

“And you're not gonna tell me who they are. Jesus, Len—it's not like I'd sack the Ops guy, unless he wasn't doing his job, or if this … thing was getting in the way of the job. Which I would've heard about from Livingston at this point, 'cause I have to sign off on anyone getting the sack. And the Prevention guy—” Edison stopped mid-sentence and paused for a couple seconds, mouth open. “He was your engineer—the one who got hit by the car a couple years back. Almost didn't make it, couldn't come back to Ops, but went into Arson.”

Led nodded. “Yup. Mike Stoker.”

Edison shook his head. “I remember him—his accident was just a couple weeks after I started as Chief of Ops, and he was pretty close to being my first line-of-duty death, wasn't he.”

Len nodded minutely. “Touch and go, there, for a while.”

“I heard the rumors, you know,” Edison continued. “That his boyfriend was a paramedic from his old station, and was at his side the whole time he was in the hospital.”

“I don't generally pay much mind to rumors, but the one you heard turns out to be true,” said Len.

Edison sat back in his chair, arms crossed, looking at Len. “Captain Gage. That's why he was out during the new equipment field testing, isn't it.”

“Got it in one.”

Edison leaned forwards, groaning, and put his head in his hands. “Jesus Christ, Len. What the hell am I supposed to do with this?”

“What would you do about it if the reason Gage got beat up was that he was Native American, which he is, by the way, and the Special Services guy didn't like that?”

“Have a chat with Mark Fields and tell him one of his guys needs to get canned and why. And maybe have a chat with my boss about this whole thing, too.”

“Okay.” Len sat back and looked at Edison. “So?”

“Shit,” Edison swore. He stared at Len, and Len stared at him. Edison picked up the phone.

~!~!~!~
Ten days later: 0630, Stoker/Gage residence.

Mike was finishing his breakfast as the phone rang. He knew it would be Johnny—it always was at 0630 when he was on a shift. Johnny was just finishing up a double shift—first a regular C-shift as captain, and then an overtime shift as a paramedic, filling in for Henry Yang, whose wife had just given birth to a healthy baby girl.

“Hello?”

“Hey—it's me.”

“Hey, you. How was your night?”

“Bizarrely quiet—only one run, and that turned out to be maybe appendicitis, maybe nothing. Which is good, since I'm on again tomorrow. But hey—I called because the Ops chief wants to see me this morning at HQ—and I thought maybe we could have lunch after. Since I didn't see you yesterday, and I won't see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah—let's do that. What time's your meeting? And what's it all about, anyhow?”

“Ten thirty—and all I know is that he wants to look over my last performance review from Livingston. Which was not stellar, but he doesn't do stellar, so I'm not worried. I mean, I know I missed a lotta shifts that quarter, from, you know, but I couldn't help it.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't worry about that. Why don't you just come up when you're done? Doesn't matter to me if it's an early lunch. I'm just in the office all day anyhow.”

“Kay. I'll see ya later. Love you.”

“And since nobody's listening here on my end, I can say I love you too, and I'll add that when I get home tonight, I'm gonna strip you down and have my way with you the instant I walk in the door, and I don't want any arguments.”

Johnny laughed. “No arguments here, as long as turnabout's fair play. See you later, huh?”

“Bye.”

Mike hung up the phone, and put his brown-bag lunch in the refrigerator for tomorrow. He drove in to HQ, and got there just as Bert Saunders was unlocking the front doors for the day.

“Hey, Stoker!” Bert said. “How's it going?”

“Good—haven't seen you in a while. Everything all right?”

“Oh yeah—just took a little vacation. And you?”

“Everything's great. Johnny's been back to work for a couple weeks. That's been really good for him. Oh—I think you missed this part. The two goons who beat him up both went for plea bargains. The sentencing hearing is in a couple weeks.”

“They gonna get put away?”

“The detective seems to think so. He thinks they'll probably let the vandalism charges go, and just sentence them for the assault. That's gonna land them both in the joint for at least a year.”

“Good,” said Bert. “Good. So you guys don't have to testify or anything?”
Mike shook his head. “Nope. We don't have to do a damned thing. I'm gonna go to the hearing, though.”

“And Gage?”

“He's not touching it with a ten foot pole. He's done with the whole thing. I'll just tell him what they got, and then he's never gonna think about it ever again, is my guess.”

“I don't blame him,” Bert said, after thinking it over. “I guess I might do the same.”

“I'd try,” Mike admitted, “but fail. Anyhow—good to see you. I better get to work.”

Mike stopped by the mail room and picked up the papers in his mailbox. One slip caught his attention, as it was meant to. It was a message slip, from Rhodes, marked “Urgent.”

Mike eyebrows climbed his forehead as he looked at the message at the bottom of the slip. “Chief Ryan wants to see us at 1030. See me when you get in.”

“O ... kaaay,” Mike said to himself. He couldn't think of any good reason why the head of the entire Prevention division of the fire department would want to see him. He stopped by Rhodes' office, and was not surprised to see it was still empty. He left a note in the clip on the door, and headed over to his own office.

He called Station 93, to see if he could catch Johnny before he headed to HQ.

“Station 93, Len Sterling speaking.”

“Oh, hey Len. It's Mike. Johnny around?”

“No—he and Velasquez are out on a run, and John said he had to hightail it down to HQ as soon as the shift was done. Can I leave him a message for you?”

Mike sighed. “Yeah, I guess so. We were supposed to meet after his thing at HQ, but something came up. I guess just tell him if I'm not in my office when he's done with his meeting, he should probably give up on me.”

“All right. I'll let him know. Everything okay?”

Mike considered that for a second. “I really don't know, Len. My boss said Chief Ryan wants to see him and me. That's probably not for something neutral.”

“No,” Len said. “Probably not. But John was saying your boss is moving you up, so maybe it's not bad, right?”

“Maybe not. But—Len, you had your chat with the Ops chief last week, right?”

“Sure did, Mike. And I was there in his office while he called the Special Services chief to tell him what his guy did.”

“And, uh, did Chief Edison figure out who you were talking about?”

“All on his own. Turns out you were very nearly his first line-of-duty fatality, so you kept his attention. And he of course heard the rumors that came later.”

“Huh,” said Mike. “Now that you mention it, I sort of think maybe I remember him coming to the hospital. I couldn't figure that out at all, at the time. But—the rumors? Of course he heard them. I
guess he just forgot about them, once it was clear I wasn't gonna croak and be a black mark on his record. But now, I guess it's all caught up with us. I mean, Ryan wanting me, and Edison wanting Gage, on the same morning? Smells to me like the shit is gonna hit the fan, Len.”

“You're the eternal pessimist, Mike,” Len said.

Mike noted quietly to himself that Len wasn't exactly disagreeing with him. “Well, we'll let you know what happens, in any case. Either from my office, if I still have one, or from home, later.”

“You do that, Mike. I …” Len cleared his throat. “I hope I didn't stir up any trouble, with Edison. I mean, at the time, he seemed fairly sympathetic.”

“You said what needed to be said, Len. If there's trouble today, it would've happened anyhow,” Mike said reasonably. “Listen, I've gotta get back to work. I'm supposed to go sit in on an arson trial next week, to get a feel for that, and I still have to go over the case file again. But Johnny or I will give you a call later today, all right?”

“You do that. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Mike hung up his phone, and got out the case file for the trial he was supposed to attend next week. He started re-reading it, but found he wasn't able to get through a single page without worrying about what was going to happen later. He didn't want to pester Rhodes, but he felt he had no choice at this point, so he went down to Rhodes' office and tapped on the door.

“Yep—c'mon in,” Rhodes said.

“Hey, boss. I, uh, got your note about meeting with Chief Ryan. And I gotta ask—am I getting the sack?”

Rhodes looked at him like he was wearing nothing but a purple feather boa. “No, you're not getting the sack. Why would you think that?”

“Just 'cause of … you know. Makes you paranoid when the brass wants to see you.”

“Oh. Nope. It's about your case study you sent to that journal, I think. They took it—and Ryan likes it.”

Mike practically fainted with relief.

“Oh thank God. All right. I was just worried, because, well …” Mike remembered that Rhodes really didn't want to know who Johnny was, so he couldn't mention his concern that he and Johnny were asked to see the brass on the same morning. “I just was, is all.”

Rhodes frowned. “So you didn't get anything from the journal in the mail?”

“Uh …” Mike realized sheepishly that he hadn't opened all his mail yet. “I don't know. I was too busy obsessing. I guess I should go do that.”

“You should,” Rhodes said drily. “I'll come get you in an hour, and we can go shake hands with the big brass, all right? And try to chill out between now and then, all right? I don't care if you get nothin' done. Just … I dunno. Try to relax, all right? Cause you're a nervous wreck right now.”

“I am,” Mike agreed. “I really am. I'll go … not drink some coffee, and try to get some work done,
now that I know I'm not getting canned.”

“Fine. See you in an hour.”

Mike went back to his office, opened his picture drawer, and rearranged the pictures, just to have an excuse to touch them all. Seeing the pictures calmed him, and he went on to finally open his stack of mail. Sure enough, there was a letter of acceptance from the NFPA journal he'd sent his case study to. He set the letter aside, to take home to show to Johnny, and then read the case file on his desk for a while. After what seemed like only a few minutes, there was a tap at his open door, and Rhodes came in.

“You ready?” Rhodes said. “You sure look calmer.”

Mike took one last look in his drawer, slid it closed, and stood up. “Yep. I'm fine. Let's go.”

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At the same time, Johnny was meeting with Chief Edison downstairs.

“Captain Gage—come on in and have a seat.”

Johnny entered the same office that Len Sterling had been sitting in ten days ago, and took the same chair.

“You're probably wondering what this is all about,” Edison said, getting straight to the point.

“That's a fair assumption,” Johnny said.

“I got an interim performance review for you, from Chief Livingston. He was unhappy that you missed ten shifts due to a non-work-related injury.”

Johnny sighed. “It's true. Dr. Brackett, down at Rampart, took me off work for three weeks after I cracked three ribs and bruised a kidney. So yeah, I missed a lot of shifts.”

Edison sat back and looked at Johnny.

“Captain, I'm concerned about some discrepancies between what I'm hearing from Chief Livingston, and what I'm hearing from some other sources. I'd like to hear your take on a few issues.”

“All right,” Johnny said cautiously.

“First of all, I got a stellar report on your work at a house fire a few weeks ago, where your crew was part of a second-alarm assignment at a residential structure fire. You'll remember the one I mean—there was a child fatality.”

“I remember,” Johnny said. “It was real tough for my guys—they're all real young. One guy is just out of his probie year. He took it real hard.”

“I know he did,” Edison said. “But Captain Treadwell, who was incident command on that fire, said in his report that your entire crew did a superb job in all respects. Safe, efficient, and effective. And that you ended up handling the parents—which nobody would want to do—and that you were outstanding in that role.”

Johnny looked away. “It was tough,” he said. “It was real tough. I had to physically restrain the dad from goin’ back in, and the mom—well.”
“I know it was tough. But Treadwell said he'd never seen it done better.”

“Thanks,” Johnny said. “One of my guys—the real young guy—he pretty much lost it, though.”

“But not until the work was done, Gage. He kept it together—you kept him together—until he could fall apart, and then you picked up the pieces when you got back to quarters. Len Sterling filled me in on that.”

“Yeah. Emerson … well, I wasn't sure if he'd make it past that one. But I think he did.”

“And I have another report, here, from a month or two back—I don't know if you'll recall this one, but it was a multi-car MVA, with a car full of teenagers. You were Incident Command on that one, but you turned it over to your engineer so you could work on one of the kids.”

“I had to,” Johnny said simply. “We called for additional units, but their ETA was over twenty minutes. And Peters could handle IC on something like that. He did fine.”

“I know he did—and he turned IC over to the next Captain on the scene, Calhoun, from the next district over. Who I have another report from. He said Peters and your two other firefighters had done everything textbook style, and the scene was already stable by the time they finally got there. All his station did was help with the mop-up. And then, the head of the ER at Henry Mayo sent me a note that if there hadn't been three paramedics at the scene initially, like there were, somebody probably wouldn't have made it. Which confirms what you said—that you had to turn IC over to Peters.” Edison looked up from his papers, and made eye contact with Johnny. “And all of these reports—the ones that I'm getting from people other than your direct supervisor—are painting quite a different picture from the ‘adequate’ reports I get from Livingston.”

Johnny squirmed. “He, uh, doesn't exactly like me.”

“He isn't required to like you,” Edison said sternly.

“Uh, nossir,” Johnny said, cringing.

“But he is required to report accurately and fairly on your work. And that's clearly not happening.” Edison narrowed his eyes at Johnny. “What's your sense for how much his bias against your personal life is affecting his judgments of your work?”

Johnny froze in his chair. “Sir?”

“You live with and are involved with another fireman, correct?”

Johnny shrank into his seat, with a sinking feeling that maybe the rosy picture that Edison had just painted of Captain Gage's finest work maybe wouldn't matter after all. “Uh, yessir, but that doesn't ever get in the way of—”

“I know, I know,” Edison interrupted. “It doesn't get in the way of your work. Relax. I can see it doesn't. But it does seem to get in the way of Livingston's judgment, unless you disagree. Do you?”

Johnny sighed. “No, I don't,” he said, after a moment. “But I'm not asking for any special treatment, all right?”

“I know you're not. But you seem to be getting it anyhow—and not in a nice way. From Livingston, and from Staib.” Edison watched Johnny's face fall even further. “Yes, I know about that. I know why you missed ten shifts, which was a glaring omission at the beginning of our conversation. I also know you didn't complain to the department about it, even though you could've. I also know you
only got half pay after the first three shifts, since it wasn't a line-of-duty injury.”

“Yessir. It wasn't line of duty,” Johnny said. “I was off duty, and I considered it a personal matter.”

“But you see, Gage, I talked to the detective who worked the case, and it's his opinion that these guys got a hold of your address and phone number from HR somehow. Do you agree with that assessment?”

Johnny nodded, reluctantly.

“So do I. So here's what the department is going to do. We can't give you full pay for those seven shifts, because that could set a precedent we don't want to deal with. But, since it does appear that someone in HR either fouled up or deliberately gave out your personal information, which probably contributed to the pattern of behavior you got from Staib, we're going to split the difference. Your next paycheck will reflect an additional quarter of your pay for each of the seven shifts you got half pay for. And I'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself.”

Johnny gaped at him, and finally closed his mouth and nodded. “Yessir. Thank you, sir.” Johnny calculated quickly in his head—the extra pay Edison was referring to would come out to nearly two entire shifts' worth of salary.

“Not at all.” It was Edison's turn to sigh. “Look. I don't understand your … personal life. But it's just that: personal. Livingston has shown that he can't separate his personal opinion of you from his professional one. This appears to be a pattern in his work. So to put things concisely, as of a few weeks from now, you will find you have a new battalion chief. Don't get me wrong: Livingston is not being fired. He's simply being … moved, someplace where he'll do more good and less damage.”

“Uh, yessir. I assume that's something else to keep to myself.”

Edison laughed. “You didn't hear it from me, that's for sure. But nobody's going to be surprised by this move. Not Livingston, and not anyone under him either.”

“Nossir.” Johnny squirmed in his chair again.

“Don't worry, I'm almost done with you. Just one last thing, before I send you off to Chief Bragdon.” Johnny turned a shade paler than he'd been.

“Relax, son—he doesn't bite. And as I said: one last thing. Keep up the good work, Captain. You're going to go a long way.” Edison stood up, and extended a hand.

Johnny regained his color, and managed to get out of his chair without knocking it over, and shook Edison's hand across the desk. “Thank you, sir.”

“You're welcome. Dismissed. And please report to Chief Bragdon's office.”

“Yessir.” Johnny saluted smartly, and exited the room.

He stood in the anteroom just collecting his thoughts. Edison's secretary watched him with amusement. “Captain Gage?”


“Chief Edison asked me to remind you to head to Chief Bragdon's office, at the end of the hall, if you looked lost. Which you do.”
“Oh. Uh, yeah. I guess I do. Thanks.” He gave his head a quick shake, like a dog with a fly on its ear, and left the office.

He went to the end of the hall, as instructed, and opened the glass door to the Fire Chief’s office suite. Without looking at any of the other people in the waiting area, he reported to the secretary. “Captain John Gage. I was sent down here by Chief Edison.”

The secretary nodded. “The Chief will be with you shortly. Please have a seat.”

“Thanks.” Johnny turned, and nearly fell over backwards as he realized he’d just walked right past Mike.

“Howdy, stranger,” Mike said seriously. He patted the seat next to him.

“What’re you doin’ here?” Johnny asked. “You think we’re in trouble?”

“Nah,” said Mike. “I just had a veritable love-fest with Chief Ryan. Remember that case study I submitted to the NFPA arson journal?”

Johnny nodded.

“Well, they accepted it. And Chief Ryan loved it. Gave me a little talk about how he wasn’t so sure about me when the division took me on, especially after all the rumors, but that he basically doesn't give a shit about my personal life, as long as I do a good job. Doesn't want to hear about it, but also doesn't give a shit about it.” Mike paused. “Not in so many words, but that was the gist of it.”

Johnny frowned. “Sounds exactly like the chat I just had with Chief Edison.”

“Yeah, well I'm starting to think maybe someone else put them both up to those little talks,” Mike said, tipping his head towards the closed office door.

“And that maybe our next chat ain't gonna be so comfy,” Johnny said glumly.

“Kinda what I'm thinking, too.” Mike wiped his hands down the legs of his pants.

Johnny jiggled his foot wildly for a minute or so, then, no longer able to help himself, paced the room a few times.

Mike sighed and patted the seat next to him again. “C’mon, Gage; give it a rest. I don't think it's gonna be a comfy chat either, but I also think we don't need to call your friends in San Francisco yet, either. Or our last chats probably wouldn't have happened, right?”

“My own personal voice of reason,” Johnny said, sitting down again. “I guess you're probably right, though.”

Mike bumped his shoulder against Johnny's. “I know I'm right. We're not getting canned, all right?”

“I guess, coming from the guy with the glass that's always half empty, I should believe it.”

“Aw, c'mon now. My glass hasn't been half empty for a long, long time. About two and a half years, if I'm counting right.”

Johnny grinned back at him fondly. “I think you are, Stoker. I think you are.”

They both looked up as a buzzer sounded on the secretary’s desk.
“Captain Gage, Mr. Stoker?” she said.

Johnny and Mike stood up.

“You can go in now.”

“Thanks, ma'am,” Mike said. He led the way, opening the door for Johnny. Chief Bragdon, standing next to his desk, gestured them in.

“Captain Gage?” the Chief asked, looking at the one man in uniform.

“Yessir,” said Johnny, extending his hand. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise.” The Chief extended a hand to Mike. “And Mr. Stoker. Please, have a seat.”

The Chief settled into the large executive chair behind his desk. “I suppose you're wondering why I wanted to see the two of you this morning,” he began.

“Well, to be honest, sir, a couple of things did cross our minds,” Johnny said.

Mike kicked him surreptitiously.

“But, uh, yessir. We did wonder,” Johnny concluded.

“I like to get straight to the point,” Chief Bragdon said. “Three things. First of all, in case you didn't figure this out from your last meetings, you're not getting fired.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mike said.

“Second thing: the Department feels that it bears some responsibility not only for the fact that William Staib got hold of your personal information, but also for the fact that he was one of our employees for as long as he was. Looking through his records, there's been a pattern of erratic behavior and unpleasant incidents of many kinds that should have resulted in termination a long time ago. So he's history, as of this morning.”

Mike and Johnny nodded, but didn't say anything.

“Last thing,” Bragdon leaned back into his chair and considered the two men sitting in front of him. “The last thing is, what to do about the two of you.”

Mike sat as still as a rock, but Johnny sank slightly into his chair.

“Sit up!” Bragdon said. “No Captain in this department should be cringing in front of anyone, clear?”

Johnny sat up straight. “Yessir, sorry sir.”

Bragdon sighed. “Look. I'm not gonna pretend to be open minded, or liberal, because I'm neither. But I'm also a reasonable person, and I have three reasonable Deputy Chiefs working under me who agree with what I'm about to say to you. Which is this.”

Johnny and Mike held their breaths as Bragdon continued.

“You know all about the agency that you work for. Every firefighter in every station of this department is male. Most of us are fairly politically and socially conservative. But: your personal lives are your business. Your bosses, and your bosses' bosses, aren't going to ask you about your
personal lives. But you? You aren't going to flaunt them, either. Which I know you don't. It was an
unfortunate set of circumstances that led to the open secret in this department that you two are
involved the way you are.”

Bragdon continued. “So what it boils down to is this. We do not, and cannot, as a department, have a
policy about what people can and can't do in their personal lives, so long as it isn't illegal. William
Staib being a case in point, here. We also cannot have any formal policies about what our employees
may and may not discuss during working hours. We can and do have policies preventing
discrimination against legally protected classes. Which I feel obligated to point out that you are not
members of. So here's the unwritten rule, gentlemen: your job is to keep your personal lives personal,
which you've been doing. My job is to make sure that your supervisors allow you to do so, by not
delving into your personal lives, and not allowing others to do so, either. My job is also to ensure that
people who do their jobs well are allowed to continue to do so, regardless of anyone's personal
opinions about things that are none of their concern.” He surveyed the pair in front of him. “Any
questions?”

Johnny remained silent, simply shaking his head, but Mike spoke up boldly. “A comment, actually, if
I may.”

Bragdon nodded.

Mike held up his hand and pointed to the gold band on his left ring finger. “I'm not taking this off.”
His voice held no challenging tone; just a matter-of-fact statement of truth.

“Nobody's asking you to,” Bragdon said neutrally.

“So what am I allowed to say, without getting fired, if someone asks me about my spouse?” Mike
continued, out-neutraling Bragdon with his tone and facial expression.

“That's up to you. But it stays short, and it stays neutral.”

“I'm an expert at neutral,” Mike informed him, “but not so good at short, these days. So you're just
going to have to trust that I'll keep things professional.”

“That's all the department is asking.” Bragdon turned to Johnny. “Captain Gage?”

“I mind my own business, and expect people to mind theirs,” Johnny said. “Always have, always
will. I don't see how this is any different. And I don't like ugliness. I learned, a long time ago, just to
walk away from it. Usually, it doesn't follow. Sometimes, it does. When it follows me, I'll defend
myself.”

“That's fair,” said Bragdon. “And as I said, part of the department's job is to try to see that it doesn't.
But, we won't always succeed.”

“Believe me,” Johnny said, “I know.”

“I have no doubt that you do, Captain Gage. On many levels.” Bragdon looked back and forth
between the two men. “Are we clear on all this, gentlemen?”

Johnny nodded. Mike hesitated, and Bragdon noticed.

“I would like to request permission to speak freely and without recrimination,” Mike said.

“Granted, within the scope of this meeting,” Bragdon said, leaning backwards, arms folded across
his chest.
“If my personal business is my own personal business, then I should have the right to discuss it with whomever I choose. Including my co-workers.”

Bragdon considered Mike's remark. “The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution doesn't grant you the right to shout 'Fire!' in a crowded movie theater. What we're talking about here is several times less inflammatory, but of a somewhat similar nature.”

“I'm not planning on baiting anyone. I just think it's reasonable for me to be permitted to supply polite answers to polite questions, and not risk getting fired for telling the truth,” Mike said.

“I understand. And what you have to understand, is that any complaints about your behavior regarding your personal life can land you in some mighty hot water.”

“I don't plan to land there. I can tell when there's a flame under any pot of water I'm considering jumping into, to extend your metaphor,” Mike said calmly. “But I've spent half my life being 'Silent Stoker' so that people wouldn't discover I'm gay, and I'm not going to crawl back into that hole. But like I said before, neutral is my specialty. I'm not going to open the door you're afraid of, but if someone else opens it, I'll comment neutrally, and politely close it again. If they choose to knock at the door again, I'm not going to slam it in their face, unless they're standing outside with torches and pitchforks.”

“That's fair,” Bragdon said. “The point of all this is to keep things professional and civilized in this department.”

“I see where you're going with 'professional,’” Mike said, “and I can agree with that. But 'civilized?’ Sorry, but I have to disagree. It's not very civilized to have special unwritten rules for people who have characteristics you just don't like.”

“And there, Mr. Stoker, is where we're going to have to agree to disagree,” Bragdon said.

“So it seems,” Mike said. “But I can and will follow your rules—up to the point where I have to lie by action or omission. Up to the point where I have to violate my own personal ethical standards so that I can fit neatly into the department's fireman-shaped box.”

Bragdon nodded. “I see your point. That it's not so easy to say, 'just don't talk about it.”’

“Precisely,” Mike said. “And that being said—both Johnny and I are quiet about our private lives. We take our privacy seriously, and neither of us is going to change in that respect.”

Johnny nodded. “Ask anyone we work with, except people who are close friends outside of work. We keep ourselves to ourselves.”

“Fine. That's all I ask. And in return, you can expect the department to stay out of your personal lives. And now, I think we're all clear. Correct?”

“Crystal clear,” Mike said.

“Yeah, I got it,” Johnny said. “Pretty much what we were doing anyhow.”

“As I imagined you were,” Bragdon said. “But in light of recent events, I felt it necessary to at least speak the unwritten rules, and make sure we're all adhering to the same ones. And now, gentlemen, I need to end this meeting, as I believe the Mayor of Pomona is waiting for me. But one last thing: I hear from both your division chiefs that you're doing great work. Gage, you're turning into a fine Captain. Stoker, you got us published in the NFPA arson journal, and you made us all look damned good. Both of you—keep up the good work.”
“Uh, yessir,” Johnny said, shaking Bragdon's proffered hand.

Mike nodded. “We will,” he said, also shaking Bragdon's hand.

“I'm sure you will,” Bragdon said, walking them to the door of his spacious office. “Glad to meet you both.”

Johnny and Mike left the office, and fled to the corridor.

“Not what I was expecting,” Johnny said, finally. “How 'bout you?”

“Actually, that was pretty much exactly what I was expecting,” Mike said. “C'mon. Let's get out of this building—I feel like I'm suffocating.”

“Yeah. Me too, I guess,” Johnny said. “But we're not getting canned. Thirty years ago, we woulda for sure.”

“Progress,” Mike said wryly. “But who knows. Maybe things will be different in thirty more years.”

“Prob'ly,” said Johnny. “But I can't wait that long for lunch, so let's go.”

TBC
A Thursday evening, six weeks later.

Mike and Johnny were finishing cleaning the kitchen after dinner. Johnny used part of his day off to try a new recipe, and the result had been a delicious meal, but a disastrous kitchen. Johnny was putting away dishes, as Mike finished drying the last of them.

“Okay, Stoker—spill it,” Johnny said, as he put a pot into a cupboard by his feet.

“Huh?”

“You've hardly said a word the entire time we've been in the kitchen. So, uh, what'd I do?”

“Oh.” Mike dried the last dish, handed it to Johnny, and hung up his towel. He watched as Johnny put the casserole dish into the cupboard. “Nothing.”

Johnny turned back to Mike. “All right—that narrows it down. I didn't do anything. So what's goin' on?”

Mike sighed. “You're not gonna like it.”

“I guarantee I'll like it a lot less if you keep whatever it is bouncin’ around inside your head so you toss an' turn all night.” Johnny pointed to the living room. “C'mon. Let's siddown, and then you don't look at me so you can say whatever it is you gotta say that I'm not gonna like.”

Mike sat down on the sofa, and Johnny plunked himself down right next to him. Mike stared out the window, looking out towards Mrs. Daniels' house. He took Johnny's hand, and kept looking out the window as he finally spoke.

“Tomorrow's the sentencing hearing,” he said.

“Yeah—I know. That's why our party's on Saturday, right? Because that whole thing will be laid to rest, once and for all, and we can get on with our lives.”

“Yeah,” said Mike.

“So, what am I not gonna like?” Johnny prodded.

“I'm going to the hearing,” Mike said. He instantly felt Johnny tense up next to him.

Johnny didn't say anything for a few seconds.

“I thought we'd decided just to stay out of it,” he said, finally.

“I know we did. And I'm sorry to be changing my mind all of a sudden.”

“Okay—but why? Why do you wanna go to this thing all of a sudden?”
“I guess it seems all of a sudden to you, but I've been thinking about it a lot. I guess,” Mike said heavily, “that with all the time I've been spending in courtrooms lately, sitting in on Bob Fredericks' expert witness testimony ... I guess I'm feeling like it's not gonna seem like it's real, not really over, unless I actually see it happen. Unless I'm there when the judge reads out the sentences. I know, I know—somebody from the D.A.'s office is supposed to call us after. But I just feel like I need to see it. I promise—I'm not gonna make a show of it. I'll sit in the back, and I doubt they'll even know I'm there. Hell, I doubt that Torrelli guy would even recognize me. Okay?” He shifted sideways on the couch, to look at Johnny, without letting go of his hand.

Johnny sighed, and squeezed Mike's hand. “Okay. I guess I get that. I guess it's like me wanting to read everything they put in your chart when you were in the hospital. I could see you gettin' better with my own eyes, but somehow seeing the official documentation made it seem like it wasn't all a trick.”

Mike let out a long breath. “Okay. Thanks. I'm glad you understand. Sorry about the silent treatment just now.”

“'s all right. Now c'mere.”

“Huh?”

“I gotta wipe that sad, guilty expression off your face.”

~!~!~!~

0950, the next morning.

Mike sat in the back row of the courtroom, as he'd promised Johnny. He'd sat quietly through the hearing preceding the one he was there for—a preliminary hearing for a suspect in a burglary case. As he waited patiently for the ten o'clock hearing he was there for, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. A door in the back corner of the courtroom entered, and a tall figure in an L.A. County Fire Department uniform entered quietly.

Hank Stanley made his way to where Mike was sitting.

“Cap!” Mike whispered. “What are you doing here?”

“I should ask the same of you—I thought you guys had decided to sit this thing out.”

Mike and Captain Stanley watched silently as the defendant from the previous hearing was escorted out of the courtroom.

“There will be a ten minute recess before the next hearing,” the judge said, “as there seems to be a bit of a ... disturbance in the corridor.”

“I had to come,” Mike replied to Cap. “I was just feeling like, well, it won't really sink in unless I see it, you know?”

Cap nodded. “I suppose I can see that.” He paused, and looked around. “Well, Mike, I know you don't like surprises, so—sorry about this.”

Before Mike could ask what Cap was apologizing for, his eyes were drawn to the same door Cap had come through moments ago. Four more uniformed men entered, and filed towards Mike and Cap. Marco, Chet, and Roy, followed by Ed Jackson, took seats in the row in front of Mike. They were joined in short order by Drs. Brackett and Early, and Dixie McCall.
The door opened again, and most of the A-shift from Station 93 entered, followed closely by Melinda Yang, who was carrying their new baby. Len Sterling was oddly absent from the group, but Mike didn't have time to wonder why. The B-shift crew followed. Captain Craig Brice entered, accompanied by several other firemen who were acquaintances of Mike's and Johnny's from their days at Station 51.

Mike watched as more and more familiar faces filed into the room. A few civilians dotted the rows, as did several law enforcement officers. Three unfamiliar sheriff's deputies sat together at the end of one row—Mike wondered who they were. Marco's young cousin, Deputy Ben Houlihan, squeezed past Chet and Roy to grab a seat next to Marco. Roy, at the end of their row, shifted everyone over to make room for Bert Saunders.

Finally, after several minutes of admitting men in navy pants and light blue shirts, the courtroom doors remained closed, having let in what looked to Mike like every fireman he knew who wasn't on C-shift. There couldn't possibly be anyone left, Mike thought.

But he was wrong, in several ways.

The door opened one more time, and Deputy Chief Ryan, head of the fire department's Prevention division, came in, along with a man who Mike was pretty sure was Deputy Chief Edison of the Operations division. They sat near the front of the courtroom. The judge nodded to Ryan, and Ryan nodded back politely.

The door swung open one last time. Mike nearly toppled off his seat as Johnny ducked into the room and froze instantly, his deer-in-the-headlight eyes scanning the back row. Johnny's dark eyes locked on to Mike's, and didn't let go. Hank Stanley stood up and scooted past Mike to make room for Johnny on the end of the row. Johnny wedged himself into the narrow space left for him. Mike was about to speak, or possibly about to burst into tears—he wasn't quite sure which—but did neither, as the judge's gavel tapped gently. Mike's eyes met Johnny's again, and Johnny's hand surreptitiously caught Mike's for a quick squeeze.

Mike and Johnny sat silently, their eyes passing over the sea of blue in front of them. They listened as the judge called the courtroom to order, and the rustling of uniforms ceased. They watched as uniformed law officers escorted Staib and a shorter, darker man to their places. They paid careful attention as the judge read the charges, and he and the various attorneys present laid out the bargain that they had already agreed upon behind closed doors.

Mike was unsurprised to hear that the deal included dropping all charges except for the felony assault and battery charges, to which the defendants had agreed to plead guilty. He felt a chill pass through him as the judge discussed how the severity of the injuries in the assault required the D.A. to insist upon the felony charges. Mike was reminded, then, that the two assailants had planned for far worse damage than they'd actually been able to inflict, thanks to the timely intervention of 'Robert from the beer store.' Mike was surprised to find Johnny's hand seeking his again. This time, they didn't let go.

Mike was oddly pleased by the fact that neither defendant chose to take the option of speaking on his own behalf, and wondered if the ocean of uniforms in the courtroom had anything to do with that.

The only time Mike had ever seen Staib, he'd appeared brash and self-confident, as if he were somehow invincible. But today, he looked not at all like a superhero, in his garish orange jumpsuit. In the HQ parking lot, after the police had arrived to start sorting out the near assault, Mike thought Staib's eyes bored into him so sharply they actually hurt. But today, there was no manic glint in those eyes—no look of superiority, no arrogant gleam. He was just a pathetic, thin-looking man, with slightly greasy blond hair and a downcast expression. Torrelli, seated nearby, looked sullen and defeated. The neon orange of his jumpsuit brought out a greenish tone to his skin—or perhaps that
coloration was caused by something internal.

Mike didn't feel sorry for them in the slightest.

He sat on the edge of his uncomfortable wooden seat as the judge read out the sentences: twelve months for Torrelli, and eighteen months for Staib, followed by three years' probation for each upon release from prison.

The occupants of the courtroom remained silent and calm as the defendants—no, Mike corrected himself, the convicts—were led out of the courtroom.

“There will be a ten minute recess before the next hearing,” the judge announced, ending the proceedings on an anticlimactic note.

“I gotta get outta here,” Johnny whispered to Mike.

“Okay,” Mike said quietly. He turned to Cap. “Cap—I …”

Cap looked at him, and at the expression on Johnny's face. “Go,” he said quietly. “Nobody thought you were coming—nobody'll be offended if you have to get out.”

“Thanks,” Mike said. He packed more meaning and feeling into that one word than he thought was possible, and saw from Hank’s eyes that he understood.

Mike and Johnny slipped out the back door, almost before anyone noticed they'd been there.

“Where to, babe?” Mike asked.

“Out,” Johnny said. “Anywhere. Rover's in the parking lot.”

They didn't speak as they walked to the back corner of the parking lot. They got into the vehicle, and Johnny pulled out of the parking lot, only to park again in the deserted back row of a supermarket one block up the street from the courthouse.

Johnny turned the engine off, and rested his head on the steering wheel. Mike put his hand on the back of Johnny's neck, which was as taut as a bridge cable.

“I thought about it the whole way in to the station this morning,” Johnny said, finally. “I couldn't let you sit there all by yourself. I didn't want to go—God, I didn't want to go. But I got to the office, and Len was there, ready to walk out the door—and now I know where he was headed—and I begged him to fill in for me, just for a few hours, so I could be a man and not make you sit there by yourself. He said yes, and I made it, just in time. And when I walked into that courtroom, and saw that sea of blue—I swear, Mikey, if I hadn't found you, right there in the back row where you said you'd be, I woulda panicked and run right back out again. But you were there. And we made it.”

“We made it,” Mike echoed softly. “And we won.”

Johnny picked his head up off the steering wheel, and swiped his wrist across slightly damp eyes.

“Those guys didn't look so big today, did they.”

“Nope. They looked just like the small men they really are.”

Johnny inhaled, and exhaled shakily. “Did you know?” he asked. “Did you know everyone was gonna be there?”

“No,” Mike said. “I had no clue. I thought it was just going to be me, and whoever was waiting for
the next case. I had no idea at all.”

“I guess it's like Len said, back at the beginning, that day when they got your office and my tires. I guess we really do have a whole lot of friends in the department. Somehow, seeing everyone we know in the department, all together like that—I dunno. I guess it made me feel like everything's gonna turn out all right.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Yeah, I think it is.”

The End.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks for reading this saga—all 150,000 words stretched out over four months. Thanks especially for commenting along the way. I really appreciate knowing what people liked, but I also like to know about things that didn't quite work for you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!