A House Divided - Johnny's Journey
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Summary

Just when the lives of the men of Station 51 seem to be returning to normal, their youngest member experiences his own crisis. What secrets from Johnny's past lead him on a journey to connect the past to the present? Will Johnny's journey take him into a future without the rest of 51's A-shift? This is the sixth and final installment in the "A House Divided" series.
Chapter 1

A/N: This is the sixth and final installment in the “A House Divided” series and begins where “Stoker’s Scandal” ended. All recognizable characters belong to Mark VII and Universal Studios. Original characters belong to the author.

Johnny’s Journey

Chapter 1

Iris sat on the stool in her workroom at Bloomers, staring at the letter she had received from an old friend. The news was both shocking and frightening. She reread the words, noting how the neat handwriting became sloppier as the letter progressed, and she knew that her friend was becoming more anxious as she wrote down the details of the worrisome tale.

Iris had believed this particular threat had vanished four years earlier, a victim of his own heinous thoughts and deeds. Now, she realized that her fears were being resurrected along with the man who had created them, even if he had returned with a bit of a disguise. ‘Ironic, isn’t it, Thorn?’ She thought. ‘Now HE’S the one hiding his true identity.’ She had no choice but to warn the man she feared would be the recipient of William Waite’s wrath.

The bell jingled on the door handle, prompting her to hastily fold up the letter, shoving it haphazardly back into the envelope. She took a cleansing breath, patted her damp cheeks with the backs of her hands, and stepped out from the workroom wearing a pasted smile to greet her customer.

“Mornin’,” he said with a crooked grin.

“Thorn, thank God it’s you,” she said, rushing to him and enveloping him in her embrace, forgetting to call him by his preferred name.

Johnny was stunned by her reaction. He could tell that she was upset about something. He assumed that only Lily could cause such a tearful reaction. “Ohmygod, wha… What happened? What’s wrong?” He questioned as he pulled away from her, gripping her upper arms with his hands. His dark eyes darted back and forth, crossing her face in search of answers to his questions. “Is it Lily?”

Iris, unable to voice her fears, merely shook her head. She felt herself crumbling into his firm chest, collapsing against the young man she loved like a son. “No,” she finally managed to say.

“What then? Talk to me, please?”

Iris sniffled, sucking in one breath after another. “He’s… He’s, um… I gotta let-letter to-day.”

“Letter? From who? What did it say?” Johnny’s eyes were wide with fear, worried for Iris. He felt her pull away from him, and he followed her as she walked into the work room.

Iris reached the work table, and turned to face him, handing him the letter.

With shaky hands, Johnny flipped the envelope over. His heart nearly stopped beating when he saw the return address. “Aww, no,” he mumbled, forcing his quivering fingers to open the flap and remove the letter. His wide eyes scanned the cursive writing, seeing the smears and smudges of the pencil marks. He moved his hand to cover his mouth, needing to provide at least a semblance of a barrier to prevent the vomit he felt rising from his stomach. “Ohmygod… Damn it,” he muttered from behind his hand. His anxious hand ran up his face and through his mussed up dark hair.
“DAMN IT ALL TO HELL,” he cursed, his voice rising louder than he intended, slamming the letter down on the work table. He saw Iris lean against the table, squeezing her eyes shut, and her image broke his heart.

“I’m sorry…,” he struggled to say. “I… I didn’t mean to yell like that,” he said, reaching out to her. “He… Maybe he doesn’t know where I am. Maybe he won’t come looking for me.”

“He said he would, Thorn. We both heard him,” Iris stated, matter-of-factly.

“But… But I did what he told me to do. I still have them, all the originals. I never sold them or… or even gave them away,” he said, remembering the thinly veiled threats of violence from Waite and his cronies. His face paled as the shock took hold, and he fumbled around for the closest stool to sit on. “Wha… What am I s’posed to do now?”

E!

At Rampart, a worried group gathered in the crowded waiting area, concerned about Bri and their missing comrade.

“Now I see why Gage gets dumped all the time,” Chet snickered, casting his blue eyes around the group. “He’s too slow, or never shows up. I mean, we went to TWO stores and still got here before Johnny.”

Roy spoke up in defense of his partner. “Knock it off, Chet. I’m really getting worried. It shouldn’t be taking this long to pick up a small bouquet of flowers.” Roy stood up, wandering from the waiting room to the emergency entrance, hoping to see the familiar white Rover wheeling into the parking lot. Not seeing the object he sought, he returned to the waiting area. “I need to call and check in with Joanne. She thinks we’re still at the hearing,” he said, fishing in his pocket for a couple of dimes. He was more worried about Johnny than he wanted to let on, and talking to Joanne always helped calm his anxieties where his rambunctious partner was concerned.

“Ask her if we need to come pick up ladybug,” Chet called out after the retreating paramedic, feeling guilty about his snide remark about Johnny.

“And Ant,” Marco called out, hoping the little tykes hadn’t worn out their sitter.

Samford Bennett, who had been sitting quietly in a mustard colored chair, snickered. His worry for Bri becoming temporarily broken by what he had just heard. “Ladybug and Ant? Is Joanne a babysitter, or an entomologist?”

Caroline’s face erupted with laughter, quickly joined by the rest of the group.

Hank was the first to speak up. “Yea,” he said, standing to stretch his long legs. “I guess it does sound more like an insect farm than a daycare, doesn’t it?” Seeing Beverly rise to her feet with her green eyes widening as she looked around Hank’s shoulder, he turned around in the direction she was looking. “Dr. Brackett, how is she?”

“Beverly, I’d like to speak to you privately if I may,” the physician requested, panning the group with his blue eyes before he continued. “She’s going to be fine. We’re really busy today, so it took a little longer than usual to get to her. It took eight stitches, more than I first thought, and she’ll have a scar, I’m afraid. But if the blade had caught her just a couple of inches lower, she might not be with us.” He nodded his head at Beverly, who promptly stepped in his direction.

“Um, Doc?” Sam spoke up. “When can we see her?”
“In just a few minutes… If she wants visitors,” Dr. Brackett added, his sideburn moving slightly as his lip twitched worriedly. “Alexia’s with her now, so she’s not alone,” he commented, unnecessarily.

Inside exam room 4, Alexia held onto her friend’s limp hand. “I’m so sorry, Bri. I just can’t say it enough.”

“Hey… ‘s, okay,” the injured woman said softly, seeing the hurt in her best friend’s eyes. “I jus’ didn’t wanna tell you, or tell an’body.”

Alexia straightened up on the stool she was perched upon. “How’s the cheek feeling?”

“Better… No’ stingin’… But I wanna get this thing out,” she complained, lifting her right arm bearing an IV. “It was jus’ a cut. Don’t need this stuff.”

“Dr. Brackett and Nurse McCall said you did. They know what they’re doing. I was here for a while too, remember? They took good care of me,” Alexia reassured.

“Lex?” Bri asked, closing her eyes.

“Hmm?”

“Don’ leave me in ‘ere,” Bri slurred, unable to completely form her words due to the stitches. “Don’ let ‘em keep me, please?” Bri had heard Dr. Brackett’s stern warning, and knew that he was trying to have her admitted. She also knew that she had the right to walk out of the hospital at any time. She had done it before, and if necessary, she would do it again. She assumed that was why the IV had been established, as a means of tethering her to her exam bed and Rampart General Hospital.

“Dr. Brackett said you needed fluids,” Alexia responded, brushing Bri’s dark hair out of her face. “Just let the fluid do its job, and then we’ll talk about you leaving, but I’m not going to leave you alone here, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Bri opened her eyes briefly, then allowed them to sink closed once more, feeling her body becoming heavier. She hadn’t rested in so long that even the uncomfortable exam table felt relaxing to her.

Down the hallway in room 127, Dr. Brackett closed his office door behind Beverly Marsh. He had grown to respect the counselor over the previous weeks, and he hoped the experienced woman would be able to help him with his dilemma.

“Have a seat, Ms. Marsh,” he said, gesturing to the green chair opposite his desk.

“Thank you, but it’s Beverly, remember?”

The serious physician blushed slightly, dipping his head in acknowledgement as he sat behind his desk. “Yes, sorry about that. I need to ask for your help with Brianna.”

“Brittany,” Beverly corrected. “Her name is Brittany Mendoza. I’ve had to do a little research to find out her true identity. At least she gave me Brittany when she first arrived at The Wellhouse, so I had a little something to go on.”

“Then who is Brianna Olivier?” the physician asked, drawing his eyebrows together.

“A little girl who died in New Orleans years ago, AND a girl in Los Angeles that I hope no longer exists. She’s an alias, a street name. Brittany got it the same way Lexi got hers.”

Kel smirked, thinking back to the episode with Alexia being brought in as Alexandra LeRoux. “Yea,
I kind of forgot about that.” He cleared his throat then looked back up at Beverly with his piercing blue eyes. “She needs to be admitted, Beverly. She’s dehydrated, malnourished, and probably needs some strong antibiotics. I’d like to do a full work-up on her, including a pelvic exam and tests for venereal diseases.”

“And she won’t agree to it, am I right?” Beverly quizzed, having been in the same position as Bri not so long ago.

“No, she won’t. We got the IV started before we stitched her up, so we’ve got about another half hour or so before it runs out. I was hoping you might convince her to stay, eat some nutritious meals, and let us treat her if any of the tests come back positive,” Kel stated, his face hopeful.

“It would be best for her, but just like old habits are hard to break, old fears are hard to overcome,” Beverly said, leaning back in her chair. “Girls like Bri, they don’t like feeling helpless, confined. They have so little control over their environment that to give up even what little bit of control they have is… It’s almost impossible.”

Kel heard the hint in her voice, and he latched onto whatever glimmer of hope he could find.

“Almost?” Beverly gave a wistful smile. “Almost. Let me talk to her. She’s agreed to go back to The Wellhouse when she’s released from here, so maybe I can convince her that she’ll be safe in Rampart for a day or so.”

“Ahh,” Kel commented, wanting to smack his own forehead for missing the obvious. He had been informed by Lieutenant Crockett about the circumstances that had brought both Bri and Hunley into Rampart’s Emergency Department. “She knows he’s here, right?”

“Hunley? I don’t know, but if she does, then that would account for a lot of her fears,” the counselor commented. “Can he get to her?”

Kel leaned back in his brown leather chair. “Not a chance. He’s handcuffed to the rails of his bed, and he’ll be heading up to surgery soon. The only place he’s going when he’s discharged is to jail. He’ll be guarded by a police officer the whole time he’s here. If I tell her that, do you think she might agree to stay?”

“Why don’t we tell her together? I really think she trusts me.”

The dark-haired physician nodded his agreement. “I concur. And, if she’s willing to stay, I’ll be glad to allow anyone she wants to stay with her, just for her own reassurance.”

“I’ll offer my services,” Beverly said, standing. “I’ve spent many nights in hospitals with frightened young women in pain. I’m happy to do it again. Besides,” she continued, turning her head back to face the physician as she started for the door, “Lexi needs to go home. Nothing should interrupt her first night home in over five years, don’t you agree?”

The handsome doctor gave Beverly a knowing grin. “I certainly do.”

E!

Johnny wheeled the Rover into the parking lot of the Emergency entrance to Rampart, the vase of flowers precariously poised between his legs. He parked the dingy white vehicle, glad to see familiar cars in the parking lot. He had been afraid that his delayed arrival might have made the opportunity to give the flowers to Bri impossible. He got out, slamming the door behind him, then loped through the automatic glass doors, heading to the waiting area.
“Hey, how is she?” He asked, hoping his earlier scare wasn’t showing on his long face.

“It’s ‘bout time you got here, Gage,” Chet fussed.

“Shove it, Kelly. It just took longer than expected,” Johnny shot back, not wanting to argue with his coworker.

“Those are really nice,” Sam said, appreciating the beauty of the floral arrangement. “I think she’ll love them.”

“Wow, you folks really know how to get the most for your money!” Barney said with a grin, admiring the gifts purchased for Bri.

“So, is anybody gonna answer my question?” Johnny asked looking around at the assembled group.

“Lexi’s been with her since they got here, John,” Maria stated. “Dr. Brackett and Beverly went to talk to her a few minutes ago. We haven’t been allowed to see her, yet.”

“Your patient is heading up to surgery,” Hank spoke up. “Guess his nose needed just a little more tweaking than what you gave it.” Hank grinned, knowing his junior medic had inflicted pain on Hunley, intentionally.

“Hey,” Johnny offered his lop-sided grin that didn’t light up his normally expressive eyes, “I did my best.”

“So did I,” Mike said, joining in the conversation. “I tried to bash his head in. I’ve never hated anybody in my life, Cap. But, I’ve got to admit, I hate Hunley.”

“Try working for him,” Sam scoffed. “I knew he was rotten to the core, but I just couldn’t prove it. We all owe Bri a big round of thanks, don’t we?”

A chorus of agreements were voiced, just as Beverly and Dr. Brackett returned to the waiting area. Johnny spoke up, being the newest arrival.

“Hey, Doc. Sorry I’m late. How’s the girl?”

“She’s stitched up and getting some fluids. She’s agreed to a thorough exam, and she’s going to stay with us for a day or two.” Dr. Brackett said smiling. “Beverly worked her magic again, and she’ll be staying with Bri until she’s ready to leave us.”

Marco placed a proud arm around Beverly’s shoulders, pulling her into a light sideways hug. “Good job.”

“We’ve got some things to give her. May we see her?” Caroline asked.

Dr. Brackett looked at the group, knowing how close knit the men and families of Station 51 were. Against hospital policy, and his own better judgment because of the size of the group, he made a decision, a decision he hoped would be in his patient’s best interest. “She could really use some company right now. She’s tired, and I gave her something for her anxiety level, so you’ll need to keep the visit brief, but I’ll allow you – all of you,” he said, panning his face around the small circle, “to go in together. I think it’ll do her good to see all the support.”

A uniformed sigh was exhaled, as smiles began to peek out from behind the previously somber faces. Dr. Brackett, feeling that the mood of the group had lightened, decided to poke a little fun at the younger half of his favorite paramedic duo. “So, Johnny,” he began, turning to lead the group down
“I hear you’re considering changing careers?”

“What?”

“Yea, I hear you’re considering becoming an ENT instead of an EMT,” the older man joked. “Personally, I think you’re better at being a paramedic than you are at straightening broken noses,” Kel laughed, grinning at the round of laughter echoing down the corridor as they headed to exam room 4.

Inside the exam room, Bri remained on the edge of sleep. She was more exhausted than she had ever been in her entire life, yet she felt a sense of peace like none she had ever known. She was safe, and could rest in comfort tonight, even if the peacefulness only lasted for a day or two. She thought of the beautiful dress that had been folded up and placed in a plastic hospital bag, handed off to Lieutenant Crockett as evidence because it was stained with her blood. The thought of the ruined garment made her eyes burn. She had only been able to wear it for a short time, but during those few hours, she had felt like a real lady, a somebody, for once in her life. She remembered the way a couple of men had looked at her as she walked down the sidewalk. Their looks were ones of admiration and respect, not lust, or disdain. The women she had walked passed didn’t give her judgmental glares, or disgusted grunts. The way they had all looked upon her made her feel normal, and she liked it. She heard the swish of the exam room door opening and the deep voice of Dr. Brackett.

“Bri, you have quite the entourage waiting to see you. Are you up for a few visitors?”

Her heavy lidded eyes opened, drawing her eyebrows together in confusion. She didn’t have an entourage. Then she remembered that Alexia’s family had followed them to the hospital, and she had already spoken to Beverly. She wondered for a moment if Sam had stayed after carrying her into the Emergency Department. Her features softened as she nodded her approval.

“How are you feeling?” Caroline asked, being the first to enter, carrying a couple of boxes wrapped in white paper with pink ribbons.

“Ca-Caroline?” Bri asked, trying to sit up.

Roy saw her struggling and quickly stepped over to raise the head of her bed. “Glad you’re feeling better,” he said with a smile.

Bri looked around the room, amazed at the number of people who were present. “What’re you all doin’ here?”

“We came to visit you, Bri. You were amazing, and I had to come offer my thanks,” Mike said, grinning at her. “You did it. I got a complete pardon, and Hunley’s going to jail.”

“As soon as he gets outta surgery, thanks to Sluggo, here,” Johnny piped up, wrapping his arm loosely around Mike’s shoulders. He arched an eyebrow at the arson investigator who suddenly snatched the vase of flowers out of his hand.

“These are for you, Bri,” Sam said, setting the vase on the bedside table. He looked around at the glares he was getting, then added, “from all of us.”

“For… me?” She questioned, not believing that such a beautiful arrangement had been purchased with her in mind.

“That’s not all,” Chet said, pressing lightly on Caroline’s lower back to encourage her to move forward.
“We all chipped in,” Barney said, giving the others a stare, daring them to challenge his statement. It was true that he had contributed the most, but everyone had donated a little money to the cause. “We wanted you to know how much you mean to all of us. We wanted to give you something in honor of what you did back at the hearing.”

Caroline presented the boxes to Bri, who sat staring at the flowers and the packages tied up in pretty bows.

“I… I don’t know what to say,” she offered, still stunned, but much more awake in spite of the antianxiety medication she had been given.

“You don’t have to say anything, just open them up. Let us know if you like them.”

Bri looked at Caroline, seeing the beaming face of the woman she had met just a few hours earlier. Carefully, she began to untie the ribbons, not wanting to damage anything on the packages. When she finally opened the first box, she gasped as her eyes widened. Inside, she saw the most beautiful purple dress with an embroidered bodice and flowing skirt. The cap sleeves gave it an extra feminine touch. As she pulled it out, she found a matching jacket tucked in the box beneath the dress. “Oh…,” she began, then was silenced by another garment. Beneath the jacket, she found a pair of jeans and a blouse. “Ohmygod… These are…,” she couldn’t continue, the lump in her throat growing too large as she saw the tags dangling from the newly purchased garments, even though the prices had been meticulously removed. They were new, and they were for her.

“And there’s another one there, too,” Mrs. Lopez spoke up, gently pushing the remaining box towards Bri.

“An-another? There’s more?”

“Yes, dear. There’s more… All for you,” Mrs. Lopez answered, feeling her maternal instincts growing for her daughter’s best friend.

Slowly and methodically, Bri opened the remaining package. Inside, she found a beautiful pair of thong sandals that matched both the dress and the jeans outfit. The exquisite beading nearly took her breath away. “Ohhh,” she whimpered, running her IV-laden hand across the new shoes. “Bea-beautiful,” she stammered, looking up through watery eyes. “Th-thank you… Thank you all so much.”

Beverly stepped forward, sensing that it was time to make a statement for Bri’s benefit, but also for the others to hear. “Bri… These are gifts to you from people who care a lot about you. These are not loans, and there will be no request for repayment.”

“We won’t take any,” Marco emphasized, knowing where Beverly was going with her statement. “We expect nothing in return except that you rest, get well, and stay at The Wellhouse until you are able to make it on your own.”

“I want something from her,” Alexia said, looking around the room for the man in the white coat. When she saw Dr. Brackett, she used her dark eyes to plead with him. “I want her to come to my cookout tomorrow night. Will you let her?”

Dr. Brackett pocketed his hands into his lab coat. He had to choose his words carefully. “Well, if we get enough fluids back into her, and she’s able to eat a couple of good meals-,”

“Ahua, ahua-hua,” Johnny coughed in response to Dr. Brackett’s comment.

“Did I say something funny, Johnny?”
“Ah, no… No, just a cough, that’s all,” Johnny replied, giving the others a slight devious smile. He had had many opportunities to sample Rampart’s cuisine, and the food wasn’t among his favorites.

Kel eyed the paramedic for a moment, then returned his attention to the group. “As I was saying, if she’s feeling well enough by tomorrow night, I’ll release her into Beverly’s care so that she can go to The Wellhouse. If the two of them decide to swing by the cookout, then I’m okay with that, but,” he grew even more serious, looking directly at Bri. “But you’ve got to eat, both here and at the cookout, deal?”

Bri swiped her fingers beneath her eyes. The flow of tears would not be thwarted, no matter how hard she tried to stop it. She nodded her agreement, feeling Alexia immediately pull her into a sisterly embrace.

“Good,” Alexia cried. “I’m so happy.” She pulled back pushing Bri’s dark hair out of her face. “I’m so proud of you, Bri.”

“Alright, let’s postpone this gathering until tomorrow night so we can get this young lady into a room,” Kel announced, looking towards the door as his head nurse walked in. “Dix, is there a room ready, yet?”

Dixie made her way over to the exam table, pushing a wheelchair. “Ready, and her taxi has arrived,” she said in her smoky motherly voice. “I bet with all these strong firemen around, we can find a couple of guys who can help this young lady into the chair,” she said, batting her eyes flirtatiously at the group of men.

Immediately, Samford Bennett stepped forward. “I’ve got ‘er,” he said, cradling Bri into his arms while Roy removed the IV bag from the pole. “Just like we did a little while ago,” Sam said with a smile, easing her into the awaiting wheelchair.

Dixie smiled at Sam’s chivalry, taking the bag from Roy and placing it onto the wheelchair IV pole. “She’ll be in room 419,” she announced, pushing Bri towards the exit. “Beverly, will you bring her things?”

“I’m right behind you,” the counselor said, packing up the boxes and the flowers.

“I’ll help you, Bev.” Marco offered, picking up the boxes for her. “Mama, you and Lexi wait here. I’ll be right back.”

“Rest well, Bri. We’ll see you tomorrow,” Maria said, kissing the young woman on her uninjured cheek.


“I’ll check on you later, if that’s okay?” Sam asked.

Bri looked at Samford Bennett, still unsure of whether she could trust him, or not. “Yea… That’s fine. Thanks,” she responded weakly.

As the door closed behind Bri and Dixie, Maria’s eyes lit up and she clasped her hands together beneath her chin. “Oh, I have a wonderful idea,” she said to those who remained in the room. “Let’s make the cookout tomorrow night a double celebration.”

“A double celebration?” Marco asked, turning back around as he reached for the door handle.

“Yes, we’re celebrating Lexi’s return home, AND Mike’s exoneration!” She exclaimed, her eyes
glistening. “It’s perfect!”

Mike blushed, hugging Mrs. Lopez. Agreements were voiced as the group exited the small exam room. Standing in the back of the group, Johnny was lost in his thoughts. He had watched as Bri had been wheeled away, and he realized that her dark hair reminded him of how Lily had looked sitting in a similar wheelchair many years ago. That thought brought a sad look to his face, something that didn’t go unnoticed by his partner and his captain. Roy and Hank shared a quick glance, and Roy nodded his silent understanding. He needed to talk to Johnny, push the younger man to find out exactly what was going on with him.

Johnny felt a familiar hand clench him along the back of his neck.

“How about some coffee, Junior?” Roy asked, squeezing the back of his friend’s neck. He saw Johnny try to smile, but the effort seemed to be too much for the younger man.

“I dunno. I really gotta lot to do today,” Johnny lied.

“Come on. I’m buying,” Roy said, as the two walked out of the exam room. He pulled lightly on his partner, guiding him to the cafeteria. Roy tossed his captain a quick glance, seeing the older man give a slight nod of approval.

Hank was glad to see Roy taking the lead in dealing with John. It was obvious that something was very wrong with the younger medic and Hank wanted nothing more than to get his shift back in order. There had been discord around the station for months, including his own contribution to the strife, and he wanted to see all six of them working together in harmony, like they had done since the station opened. Now, he feared that his youngest man was going through his own set of challenges, and Johnny was the least likely of all of them to accept help, even if he needed it most. Feeling a hand on his shoulder, the captain turned around to see his engineer smiling at him.

“Cap? How about some lunch? My treat.”

Hank returned Mike’s relaxed grin. “You know, that sounds great to me, but I really don’t want cafeteria food,” he said, not wanting to intrude on the impending conversation between his paramedics.

“Well, since our lives are returning to normal, why don’t we go to our usual spot?”

Hank rocked back on his heels, rubbing his grumbling belly. “I believe I could use some good food from The Pourhouse. Let’s go,” he said, heading down the corridor and making the left turn through the glass doors, waving goodbye to the others as they all parted ways.

E!

Roy watched as his partner used his finger to push his French fries around on his plate. He had been hopeful when Johnny had agreed to eat lunch instead of just getting a cup of coffee. However, his friend had only eaten a few bites of his hamburger, lined up his French fries like they were railcars around his plate, and drank half a glass of milk. He also hadn’t spoken, except for a few grunts of acknowledgement while Roy was talking. Roy finished the last bite of his burger then leaned back in his chair. He had to find out what was bothering his best friend, because if he couldn’t get Johnny to talk, then no one could.

“What’s wrong with your burger?”

“Hmm?” Johnny asked, having heard only part of the question.
His brooding eyes held a mixture of sadness and anxiety, something Roy had only seen one other time. Back then, it was the death of Johnny’s close friend, Drew, that had caused the younger medic to become solemn. This time, Roy had no idea what was going on inside the dark shaggy-haired head of his best friend.

“I asked if something was wrong with your burger. You’ve barely touched it.”

Johnny shook his head slowly, staring at the uneaten food on his plate. He picked up a French fry, dipped it in ketchup, and put the entire piece in his mouth. “Nope, my eyes were just hungrier than my stomach,” he said, chewing as he spoke.

Roy exhaled, reaching for his cup of coffee. “Johnny, ah, you seem distracted. Is something wrong?”

“Nope,” the younger man responded, washing down the French fry with a gulp of milk. “Everything’s right as rain. I’ve just been doin’ a lot o’ thinkin’ lately. That’s all.”

“But this,” Roy waved his hand at the uneaten food, “isn’t like you. Not eating, being so quiet, and thinking all the time. One minute you’re joking around like your usual self, and the next you look like somebody close to you died,” Roy’s blue eyes held the deepest sincerity. “I want to help, but I don’t know how.”

Johnny narrowed his dark eyes at his partner as he wadded up his napkin, dropping it onto his plate. “I’m not allowed to be quiet? I’m not allowed to think?” Something deep inside his soul wanted to cry out, to latch onto his best friend like a drowning man reaches for his rescuer. He flared his nostrils, inhaling deeply. He knew that he couldn’t allow Roy to discover the truth. He loved the entire DeSoto family so much that he did the only thing he could do. He had to protect them from his past, no matter what the cost.

Using a defensive technique he had honed over his adolescence, he decided to go on the offensive, attacking the man he loved like a brother. Johnny stood up, retrieving a few bills from his wallet and dropping them on the table. “I guess you’re assumin’ I don’t have enough brains to think with?” He shot back, uncharacteristically.

“What?” Roy asked with raised eyebrows, shocked by his partner’s behavior. “Johnny, no. I’m not saying that at all, and here,” he said, handing the money back. “I said lunch was on me.”

Johnny glared at the man he had called his best friend for years. “No… John Gage can take care of himself. I always have, an’ I always will,” he said through gritted teeth. “I sure as hell don’t need YOU to do it for me.” He turned, stomping off towards the exit, leaving Roy standing at the table with the money still in his hands.

“I’m not so sure about that, Junior,” Roy mumbled to himself.

E!

“Well, if it ain’t two of my favorite firemen,” Amy called out, looking up at the sound of the jingling doorbell at The Pourhouse. “You fellas know what you want, or do you need menus?” She asked, pulling two menus from beneath the counter without waiting for their response. The question was the same one she asked everyone; it was more of a greeting than an actual question for which she expected a response. She tucked the menus beneath her arm, picked up a pot of coffee, and snagged two white coffee cups with her index finger as she followed the firemen to a corner booth.

“Good afternoon, Amy,” Hank said with a smile as he sat down.

“Thanks,” Mike responded when Amy began filling his cup with the dark liquid. “What’s the special today?”
“Hamburger steak with onions and gravy, two sides, and a piece of pie,” the older waitress rattled off. “And you know you fellas’ drinks are on the house, right?” She waited for the two smiles she knew her comment would elicit. “Gotta keep our firemen hydrated,” she said, retrieving her order pad from her apron and her pencil from behind her ear. “Now, what’ll it be?”

Both men ordered the special, then settled into their conversation while they waited on their food.

“Stoker, it’ll be nice to have you back on shift,” Hank said, letting his engineer know how much he had been missed.

Mike blushed at the compliment, his own guilt still weighing heavily on him. “Thanks, Cap. I, uh, I still feel really bad about what I said at my apartment that day,” he mumbled, hanging his head. Rarely did his behavior ever result in the need for an apology, but wishing his commanding officer a speedy trip to Hades certainly qualified as one such event.

Hank waved off the apology with a simple uplift of his hand. “Let it go, Mike. I never gave it a second thought. You’ve had a really rough couple of weeks. It’s understandable.”

“You had every right to reprimand me, but-“

“Reprimand?” Hank asked, puzzled. “I was at your apartment.” He wagged his index finger in front of him. “Now, if you do it at the station, that’ll be another story.”

Mike grinned, feeling much more confident as he reached for his cup. “And what will you do if it happens there?”

Hank leaned forward, stifling his laughter. “Just try it, Stoker. Tell me to go to hell on department time and you’ll see,” he laughed.

“Well, I see you fellas are in a good mood,” Amy said, serving the men their lunches. “Melinda will bring your glasses of tea right over.”

“Melinda?” Mike asked. “Is Gretchen off, today?”

Amy huffed out her breath, blowing a stray tuft of graying hair away from her face. “Gretchen’s gone. Left here to go to some hippie commune, or something.”

Hank nearly spat out his coffee. “Ahua,” he coughed. “Did you say, ahem, hippie commune? I thought those were long gone.”

“Guess not. It’s more of a religious group, I guess. Really, I think it’s a cult, but it ain’t my business, ya know?” She said, smiling when the new waitress walked over with a couple of glasses of iced tea.

“Fellas, meet Melinda. Mel, this is Captain Hank Stanley and Engineer Mike Stoker, two of our regulars.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Melinda said, then turned to walk away.

“She’s learning,” Amy said with a shrug. “She just moved here, a college student. So, can I get you anything else?”

“Um, I think we’re good,” Hank commented, looking at Mike who was nodding in agreement.

“Alright then. You fellas enjoy your lunch,” she said, turning and walking over to a nearby table of customers.
“Wow,” Hank said, scraping the onions off of his hamburger steak. “The whole world’s going nuts.” He took a bite, listening to Mike’s grunt of agreement as the younger man chewed his food. “I mean, look at what happened to you with that bastard Hunley, Hunley attacking Bri at the hearing, now Gretchen’s gone and joined some hippie cult. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, Cap. I thought I saw her selling flowers at one of those road-side tents across town the other day. Now, I’m thinking maybe it really was her.”

Hank thought about Mike’s comment and snorted. “Maybe that’s what took John so long to get those flowers. Maybe the twit went clear across town.”

“Mmm…,” Mike swallowed some tea to clear his throat before continuing. “I was going to ask you about him. He was acting sorta strange at the hospital, don’t you think?”

Hank looked down at the food on his plate, realizing that he and Roy weren’t the only ones who noticed Johnny’s odd behavior. “Yea… I thought Roy and I were the only ones who saw it.”

“No… I saw it, too. One minute he was joking and the next he was just sullen, or something,” Mike stated. “Did something happen while I was gone?”

“He’s been acting either depressed or angry for a couple of shifts. I asked him what was going on, but you know John. He just kind of blew me off. Roy doesn’t know what’s going on either, and if he doesn’t know, then Johnny hasn’t shared it with anyone. Roy’s talking to him now. Maybe he’ll call me later.”

“You know, Cap… Johnny was there for me after the accident. We spent a lot of time together. Maybe he’ll talk to me,” Mike offered.

Hank continued eating in silence for a few moments, his mind working on a possible solution. “Did he mention anything to you, Mike? Anything at all?”

“No, nothing that stood out.” Hank shook his head. “I just don’t get it. Out of all of you men, Johnny is the most outspoken, yet we know the least about him.”

“He talks a lot, but doesn’t really say anything,” Mike agreed. “We know he’s part American Indian, grew up on a reservation, lived with his aunt, likes to rope cattle and ride horses. He strikes out with women, even though he got engaged twice,” Mike snickered, remembering Betty and Valerie. “He hates anthropologists and loves fishing, camping, and photography.”

“That pretty much sums up what we know, doesn’t it?” Hank acknowledged with a smile. “But you left off one thing, Mike.”

The perplexed engineer knitted his eyebrows together. “What’s that?” He asked, unable to think of what he had forgotten.

“He’s one of the best firemen/paramedics in the whole county,” Hank stated, holding respect and admiration for all his men. “Even if he is a bit of a mystery. Now you, on the other hand, are very observant,” the captain said, pointing his fork at his engineer.

“I always heard that still waters run deep. I guess I’m proof of that,” Mike said with a smile, “but Johnny isn’t still water. He’s more of an iceberg, only showing the world a tiny bit of who he really is.”
“Stoker,” Hank began, using his napkin to wipe his mouth. “You have great insight into people. You’ll make one helluva captain one day.”

“Maybe one day,” Mike said, raising his glass. “But right now, I just want to be one hell of an engineer for the A-shift at Station 51.”
Chapter 2

Alexia stepped up behind her mother, wrapping her thin arms around Maria’s plump waist. The two women had been working in the kitchen all day making preparations for Alexia’s ‘Welcome Home’ cookout. Alexia was quietly chopping vegetables at the kitchen table, but suddenly found herself watching the woman who had not only given her life, but who had never given up on her during her darkest days. An overwhelming feeling of love washed over her, and the young woman couldn’t resist the urge to hug her mother. As her arms rested on her mother’s hips, she felt her mother stop her cooking and turn around to envelope Alexia in a motherly embrace.

“Something bothering you, daughter?”

“I just love you so much, Mama,” Alexia whispered, laying her head on her mother’s ample bosom. “I can never repay you for raising Antonio, and for never giving up on me.”

Maria ran her hand down her daughter’s long dark tresses, kissing her lightly on her forehead. “Oh Lexi, you’re a mother now. You understand the undying unconditional love a mother has for her child. You suffered because you loved Antonio more than you loved yourself. That’s a mother’s love, sweetheart. And it’s the love I feel for you and the boys. It only grows as we get older.” This was the kind of tender moment Maria had missed over the last five years, and she was determined not to miss any more opportunities to impart her wisdom to her youngest child. She had five years of lost time to make up for, and she was going to take advantage of every opportunity.

“Do you think they would’ve come even if you hadn’t made it a double celebration for Mike?” Lexi asked, pulling back from the embrace, turning her back to her mother as she returned to her seat at the kitchen table. She tried to keep the quiver out of her voice, but the inflection gave her away.

Maria could see Alexia’s shoulder’s slumping, and knew that the emotional scars of the last five years were going to take a long time to heal. Her daughter’s self-worth had risen only slightly since she had gotten off the streets. Now the fear she was feeling was palpable to those around her. She was afraid that the people she had started growing close to might not reciprocate, leaving her feeling vulnerable to additional heartache. Beverly had warned the Lopez family that self-doubt would likely rear its ugly head at some point. They had hoped that it wouldn’t happen, but Maria and her sons were prepared for the possibility. They had talked to each person they had invited to the cookout, letting them know how important their presence was to Alexia and her recovery. They had gotten commitments from everyone, even Barney Olsen and Samford Bennett. Now, it was just a matter of time before Alexia’s celebration cookout began, and what they hoped would be another huge step forward for her. She needed to understand that she was valued, that people would actually choose to spend time with her because they enjoyed being in her presence, not for what she could do for them in a carnal sense.

“Yes, Lexi,” Maria began, walking over to the place where her daughter sat. She reached out, lifting her daughter’s chin and looking into her misty eyes. “Yes, they would have. They had already agreed to come BEFORE I included Mike in the celebration. They were coming for you, sweetheart. It just seemed right to celebrate Mike’s victory, not just for Mike, but for Bri, too.”

Alexia searched her mother’s face for any signs of deception. She had become well-versed in the ways of liars, able to recognize their behavior and facial features as well as any professional. Seeing nothing amiss, she tried to offer a weak smile.
Maria saw the truth behind her daughter’s question, and decided to put her concerns to rest. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that Mike wouldn’t come unless the celebration was for him,” she stated with a knowing tsk. Maria pulled the younger woman closer, whispering to her. “He was the first one who accepted the invitation.”

E!

In the solitude of his apartment, Johnny sat at his kitchen table. He had been unable to sleep the previous night, and now his stomach rumbled, protesting the omission of breakfast and the lukewarm coffee he was attempting to consume for lunch. Even though he hadn’t eaten, he really wasn’t hungry. His anxiety level seemed to be growing exponentially with each passing hour. He wondered if the next phone call or knock on the door would usher the return of those dark sordid days from his past.

Another stomach rumble forced him to get up and trek across his small kitchen to search his sparse cabinets for something of sustenance. Finding a can of tomato soup, he opened it with his manual can opener and poured the contents into a small saucepan. He added a soup can of water to the red concoction, and stirred it while it heated, his eyes blurring as the swirl of crimson liquid dragged him unwillingly back in time. He felt his body reject the memory, resulting in an almost convulsive retching episode that left him hovering over his trash can, spitting the remnants of his black coffee into the receptacle.

He closed his eyes, running has hand across his sweaty brow. “Damn it, Gage! Get a hold of yourself! He isn’t here. He doesn’t know where you are. You did what he demanded you do,” he mumbled to himself, staggering back over to the stove to finish warming the soup. Being the thinnest man on shift meant he often found himself crawling into the narrowest of spaces to rescue victims. He seemed to always be teetering on the edge of the lower weight limit, and knew that he could not afford to lose weight. He had to find a way to keep his food down, and keep his weight up enough to stay on shift, at least for a little while longer.

As soon as the soup was thoroughly heated, he carried the saucepan by the handle and placed it on a potholder on his table. Living the life of a bachelor had its advantages; he didn’t have to concern himself with proper table etiquette. He crushed up a few saltine crackers into the steaming saucepan and stirred them around until the soup was cool enough to eat. He forced it down, willing his body to hold it in place long enough for his stomach to digest it. He needed the fuel, needed the energy. Leaving the empty saucepan behind, he walked into the living room and sat down on his sofa. He stared at the navy photo album on his coffee table. The album only two other people knew existed. The one that held the memories of his darkest days, and the one that ultimately drove him to a life in California and a career in the fire service. Why had he held on to the photos all this time? Why couldn’t he let go of them, now? The answer was as obvious as the nose on his face. Those days, however dark they had ended up being, were also some of the best of his life. The memories of that trip, the people he had met, the life that became his own… The memories were key to his identity, both then and now. His life was chronicled in that photo album and he couldn’t toss it out like yesterday’s newspaper.

He exhaled loudly, knowing he had laundry to do and a few other minor housekeeping chores, but his body felt as heavy as lead beneath the burden revealed in Iris’ letter from the day before, and the lack of sleep last night. He lay down, crossing his arm over his face, and eventually fell into a fitful slumber.

E!

“Joe, I’d like a consult with you, please?”
The gray-haired physician, who was leaning against the nurse’s station, looked up from the chart he was reviewing. He removed his reading glasses, pocketing them in his lab coat. “Sure, Kel. Your office?”

Dr. Brackett cut his cobalt eyes at his favorite nurse who was perched on her stool behind the nurse’s station. “Actually,” he began with a smile, “I’d like for both of you to come along with me to see our patient in room 419.”

Dixie slipped her hips off the stool. “I checked with her nurse a little while ago. She’s done everything you asked her to do. She’s been eating her meals, and drinking plenty of water. Are you going to let her go?” She asked in her dusky voice, crossing her arms over her chest.

The stance was one that Kel knew well. It was Dixie’s way of saying ‘you better keep your end of the bargain, buster.’ His lip twitched as Joe stepped up behind Dixie, both of them waiting for a response. “That’s my plan, but I’d really like to get your opinions on her condition, first.”

“Why? You’re her physician,” Dixie asked, arching an eyebrow at her former beau. She admired his skills as a physician, but was often annoyed by his bedside manner.

“She’s been lied to for years, Kel,” Dr. Early added. “She’s looking forward to this cookout. Even if she isn’t quite ready to be discharged, I think you need to let her go. If she needs to come back, Beverly will see to it that she’s readmitted.”

“I’m only asking for a consult. I didn’t say I was going to keep her here,” Kel said a little too defensively. “Dixie, I trust your woman’s intuition, and your nursing skills are top notch. You’ll be able to pick up on things that I might miss... as a man,” he muttered, shifting his stance. When he looked back up, his eyes met those of his older colleague. “Joe, I trust your judgment as to both her physical AND her emotional condition. I just want to make sure that I’ve done everything I can for her.”

Acquiescing to Dr. Brackett’s request, Dixie and Joe followed him to the elevator. As they waited for the metal doors to open, Joe looked over at his friend. “Kel, have her tests come back, yet?”

“Some,” he said seriously. “I’m going to have to give her a dose of penicillin before she leaves,” he commented, knowing the other two would understand the meaning behind it. The doors opened, and he sighed in relief that the car was empty. As soon as the doors closed, he began again. “Her pelvic exam was normal, with the exception of some scarring. It’s obvious that she’s been...,” he hesitated, unsure how to relay his concerns. “Well, tortured is the only word that comes to mind.”

Dixie felt herself sink back against the back wall of the elevator. She couldn’t imagine the feeling of helplessness that Bri must have experienced over the last few years. The repeated rapes and assaults that she felt powerless to report to the authorities must have taken a huge toll on the young woman. “Damn,” she mumbled, shocking the two men in the elevator with her. “That’s why you want us to join you, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Kel agreed. “I feel confident treating the physical issues, but the emotional ones will be much more difficult to deal with. I just want to make sure that I’m not missing something.”

Joe placed a consoling hand on Kel’s shoulder just as the bell dinged to indicate they had arrived at the fourth floor. “You’ve done the exam. You’re going to treat her for the venereal disease you know she has. You’ve got to trust that if the other tests come back positive, then she’ll return so that you can treat her for those, too. I’m a neurologist, not a psychiatrist, Kel. You know that. You need reassurance because you really feel inadequate for this patient, don’t you?”
“Are you sure you aren’t a psychiatrist?” Dr. Brackett joked, stepping off the elevator.

As the three friends walked down the hallway, Kel’s chin dropped lower and lower. As they approached their destination, he finally spoke up. “To answer your question, yes, I do feel inadequate, Joe,” the younger man admitted. “But she’s refusing a psychiatric consult.”

“Do you blame her?” Dixie piped up. “She’s been put down and abused, physically, sexually, emotionally…,” she looked away for a moment before she continued. “It’s been going on for years. In her mind, she probably already thinks she’s crazy because of the mess her life has been in. She doesn’t want to hear it again from another stranger - a man, at that.” She looked up at the two men who stood on either side of her. “We really need a female on staff to deal with these kinds of cases. You two, and all men, are at a huge disadvantage in this arena,” she stated, pocketing her hands into her white uniform top with an air of confidence.

“And that’s why I wanted you here, Dix,” Dr. Brackett said with a wink as he knocked on his patient’s door.

“Come in,” was heard by the small group of professionals. Dixie entered Bri’s room first followed by the two physicians.

“How’s our girl feeling this afternoon?” The matronly nurse inquired with a gentle smile.

“I’m good. I’ve eaten every meal, just like you told me to, Dr. Brackett,” Bri informed her physician. “And I’ve been drinking lots of water, right Beverly?”

The counselor, looking well-rested in spite of the night she had spent sleeping in an uncomfortable plastic recliner, nodded knowingly. “She sure has. I believe this is her fourth pitcher,” she said, rattling around the few pieces of ice that remained in the otherwise empty container. “And it’s pretty much empty.”

“Well then,” Dr. Brackett began with a big smile, removing his stethoscope from the oversized pocket of his lab coat. “I guess you’ve been getting plenty of exercise going back and forth from the bed to the bathroom.”

Dixie opened the chart, perusing the notes the nursing staff had been making during Bri’s stay. “I’d say so. Her output looks pretty good, Kel.”

Joe looked at the hopeful young woman with the marked bruising around her stitched up cheek. He gave her a knowing wink as he stepped up behind his colleague who was listening to her breath sounds and heartbeat. “Dr. Brackett, it’s my professional opinion that our patient here is ready for discharge.”

Kel removed the ear pieces, allowing his stethoscope to dangle around his neck. He looked intently at Bri’s injury checking for any signs of infection. “Hmm,” he mused, allowing the dramatic effect of his seemingly inconclusive exam to encourage his patient a little more. “Well, I suppose you’re right, Dr. Early,” he said, tossing his words over his shoulder at the older man. Then returning his attention to his patient. “Bri, I do need to give you a shot of penicillin for an infection that you have,” he stated, matter-of-factly. “There are still a couple of tests pending, but if you agree to come back for treatment if they come back positive, AND promise that you’ll return if you have any pain, discomfort, or signs of infection in this area,” he said, waving his hand along her right jaw line, “then I’ll sign your discharge papers, and get you out of here in time to make it to the cookout.”

“Really?” Bri beamed, the effort stretching the stitches in her tender skin. “Owe.”
“Careful, don’t want to cause any damage to some of my best work,” Kel joked. Then his face turned serious once more. “You’ve done well, Bri. I’m…,” he looked around the room, then back at his young patient. Dixie had taught him a thing or two about people during the course of their working together. “We’re all very proud of you.”

Bri dipped her head, tucking her mussed up hair behind her ear. “Thanks… I… I won’t let you down, not this time,” she said, casting her dark eyes to her counselor.

“You didn’t let anyone down last time,” Beverly reminded her. “You just couldn’t tell us what you were up to, that’s all.”

“Well, if you all will excuse us,” Dr. Brackett said, slapping Dr. Early on the shoulder. “We’ve got some sick and injured people to see, and you, little lady, are no longer one of them.” He turned to his trusted nurse. “Dix, if you’ll see that she gets the antibiotic injection and that the IV is removed, then I believe our young friend here has some new clothes to get dressed up in. She has a party to attend.”

E!

Eyes darted beneath closed eyelids as Johnny lay sleeping on his couch. Exhaustion had finally overtaken him, ushering him into a deep fitful sleep, lasting much longer than he had intended. The afternoon shadows grew long as the setting sun made its pass across his living room window. The images inside his mind matched the shadows creeping along his living room floor. A dog in the small park next to his apartment began barking, sending Johnny’s subconscious back in time.

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Shouts and screams mixed with the barking of dogs and the honking of horns. Steel girders loomed large along the Eastern horizon as the sun rose, its beams struggling to permeate the cool foggy morning. Crowds were gathering for what was sure to be a showdown of force between two opposing worlds, neither of which he belonged in. Lily held tightly to the crook of his arm while Iris blocked her protectively from the melee happening around them.

“Let’s get out of the way,” Iris directed, pushing the two teenagers around the corner of a brick building, shielding them from the worst of the happenings.

Johnny backed up, pressing his skinny frame against the side of the building to allow his two female companions room along the narrow sidewalk. Then a large man bumped against his left shoulder, nearly dislodging his camera from his tight grip. He looked up into the face of William Waite, the grimace on the older man’s face sending chills down the younger man’s spine.

“Don’t do it, boy,” the menacing man growled.

Johnny felt himself cowering beneath the glare of the burly man. His chin dropped, and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he gulped for air. “N-no, s-sir… No sir, I won’t,” he stammered as a hand that seemed larger than his face reached out, wrapping thick fingers around his throat.

“Aarrgh!”

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“Aarrgh!” Johnny groaned, nearly falling off the couch. His breath came in short gasps as rivulets of perspiration weaved their way along his hairline. “Shit,” he cursed, running both hands through his sweat-soaked hair as he struggled to regain control of himself. While the setting of the dream was accurate, William Waite’s presence and his attack on Johnny had been a figment of Johnny’s hypervigilant subconscious. While his threats had been real, Waite had never actually attacked
Johnny. But Johnny knew what the man and his cronies were capable of, and that knowledge frightened him more than running into burning buildings without lifelines and SCBAs.

When his breathing finally slowed down, he glanced at his watch. “Aww, no,” he mumbled, realizing that he was already late for the Lopez cookout and he still needed a shower.

E!

Alexia sat on the porch sipping lemonade while her young son and nieces played in the front yard. She had enjoyed an entire day of catching up with her brothers and sisters-in-law while they made preparations for the evening’s festivities. She saw a van turn down her street, and felt her heart leap into her throat. Her first non-family guests were arriving. She stood up, waving to Caroline as she stepped out of the van.

“Hi,” Alexia called out. “I’m so glad you could come.”

Caroline saw that Chet was assisting Corrie to get out of the vehicle, so she walked on over to meet her new friend. “Hello,” she said, wrapping her arms around Alexia in a friendly hug. “You look good. How was your first night home?”

“Wonderful,” the younger woman stated with a bright smile. “Antonio slept in the bed with me last night. I finally felt like a real mother.”

“You are a real mother, Lexi,” she said with a smile, pulling the young woman into another quick hug.

“You are a real mother, Lexi,” she said with a smile, pulling the young woman into another quick hug.

“Hey, Antonio?” Chet called out, helping Corrie out of the van. “You’re date is here,” he called out with a snicker.

“Corrie!” Antonio yelled, leaving his cousins behind to go join his newest friend.

Within twenty minutes, The DeSotos and the Stanleys had arrived, as had Barney Olsen. The group was growing too large for the front yard, so most of them began to trickle around to the back yard where Marco and his brothers were manning the grill. Alexia remained on the front porch to greet the remaining guests she prayed hadn’t changed their minds about attending. When she heard a car door slam along the curb a couple of houses down, her heart did a somersault inside her chest. The most handsome fireman she had ever seen was walking towards her.

Mike saw the smile that lit up Alexia’s face as he stepped up onto the front porch of the Lopez home. “You’re looking happy, Lexi,” he said, his blue eyes sparkling.

“I am,” she said, nodding her head frantically. She had to restrain herself from throwing her arms around his neck. Even if he was a guest of honor at the celebration, she wanted to make sure he felt welcome. “I’m so glad you could come.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Free food and drink, not to mention the company of pretty ladies,” he said, flirtatiously. “I brought some cookies and some fruit. I really didn’t know what else to contribute,” he grinned sheepishly.

“Oh, Michael, you didn’t have to bring anything but yourself, but thank you.” Alexia stood looking at him as if trying to convince herself that he was real. “Let’s go put these in the kitchen.”

“Have you heard from Bri?” Mike asked, concerned for his exonerator.

Alexia left her hand resting on the door knob as she turned to her side to respond to Mike’s question.
“No, I haven’t. I just hope that things went well last night, and Dr. Brackett will let her come by here this evening. I tried to call her hospital room, but I didn’t get an answer. I hope that means she’s on her-”

Alexia’s abrupt stop in mid-sentence, and her eyes suddenly becoming misty, made Mike turn around to see what she was looking at. Down the street, he saw two familiar faces heading towards them. “Well, Lexi, looks like your prayers were answered.”

Bri walked slowly beside Beverly, keeping one step behind her counselor. While she was excited to see her best friend, she was anxious to be around the other people who were friends of the Lopez family. They all knew her, knew what she had been doing with her life, and shame wrapped its icy fingers around her heart, squeezing tightly. Humiliation silently yelled at her, telling her she should leave this happy celebration and return to the scum of the earth where she belonged.

She dropped her head in disgrace as they made their way up the sidewalk toward their destination. Her dark jeans felt crisp against her legs, and her new sandals were sparkling in the late afternoon sun, gifts to her from people she really didn’t know. She thought of the scene in the Emergency Department exam room where the entire group, the same group celebrating with the Lopezes now, had purchased new clothes and the most beautiful vase of flowers she had ever seen - all for her. Confusion began to cloud her brain. Was it possible that they really cared about her? Was she worth their efforts? Then a familiar voice shouted her name, and the look on Alexia’s face answered those questions.

“BRI!”

Bri looked up, feeling a sense of relief as she saw the look of joy on her friend’s face. “Lexi! He let me go,” she said, unnecessarily, referring to Dr. Brackett, “and I’m going back to The Wellhouse tonight.”

Beverly patted Bri on the back. “And she’s going to complete the program this time,” she said, looking back and forth between the two friends. “Right?”

“Yes,” Bri agreed, finally allowing a smile to light up her eyes. The action caused the stitches to tug on her tender skin, sending her hand flying to cover her right cheek. “Owe!”

“It’ll go away soon.” Alexia grabbed her friend’s arm. “C’mon, I want to show you around Mama’s house, er, I mean my house. We’ve picked out a room for you, when you’re ready to come home,” she said, walking up the steps and giving Mike a big smile.

Beverly stopped at the top of the steps, greeting Mike with a pleasant smile.

“Looks like she’s making a lot of progress in a short time,” he stated as the two of them watched the young women head inside, chatting like any other friends would do when they were together.

Beverly lifted her emerald eyes to meet those of the tall engineer. “I think so, Mike. I think she’s really going to make it this time. She did everything Brackett asked of her.”

“That’s great,” he said, propping one hand on his hip. He thought about all the times he had heard Dr. Brackett give orders to an injured comrade. The thought of his youngest crewmate scoffing at Dr. Brackett’s orders caused him to let his head fall back slightly as he released a deep laugh. “Ahaha… Maybe Bri needs to talk to Johnny then,” he said, still snickering.

Beverly laughed along with him, having heard Marco tell stories of Johnny’s frequent injuries and disdain for hospitals. “Speaking of Johnny, are he and the rest of the gang in the backyard?”
“Marco is,” Mike said with a knowing wink. “And yes, the other guys are here with their families,” he commented, noting the familiar vehicles parked along the street, “um, but I don’t see Johnny’s Rover. Of course, maybe he’s just trying to make a grand entrance.”

Beverly shook her head with a chuckle. “I think I’ll head to the backyard,” she said, wanting to see a certain senior lineman. “It’s good to see you again, Mike.”

“You too,” he said, waiting for her to walk into the house before he craned his neck looking up and down the street. Johnny had not yet arrived, and it wasn’t like him to be late for a gathering where food was offered, especially when the food was prepared by Mrs. Lopez.

E!

Johnny donned his aviator sunglasses, allowing the wind to blow dry his damp hair as he drove his Rover towards the Lopez residence. He wished he hadn’t agreed to attend the gathering, even though he knew that it would upset Mrs. Lopez if he didn’t at least make an appearance. He shifted gears, pulling away from the traffic light, and into the inside lane to pass the slower traffic. His right wrist was draped across the top of the steering wheel, allowing his left elbow to rest on the open window. The evening air was cool, reminding him of that foggy morning from his dream. If William Waite was back, was he after Johnny? Did the older man really intend to make good on his threats from so long ago?

Johnny allowed his mind to drift back in time, wishing he could change the course of history. He thought about how different his life might be if the events from his past had never happened. Would he be a firefighter/paramedic? He knew the answer to that question, because if he had remained on the reservation then he might be a volunteer firefighter, but not a paramedic. Paramedicine still hadn’t made it to Montana, yet.

He ran his left hand through his hair as he slowed down the Rover, preparing to make the turn onto the Lopez’ street. He saw the line of familiar vehicles, and silently cursed his tardiness – a fact that left him parking along the street several houses down from his destination. He pulled into an open spot, grateful that the Rover had a short wheel base so that he could pull into the parallel parking place head on. Walking along the sidewalk ahead of him, he saw a man he hadn’t expected to see at the Lopez cookout – Samford Bennett.

Standing beside the window in the room that would become Bri’s, Alexia was telling her friend about various ways to decorate the room and rearrange the furniture. When she chanced a glance out the window, she couldn’t help but give a slight smile at the two men she saw walking up the sidewalk. They were the last two to arrive at her cookout which meant that everyone who had been invited had come.

“Hey Bri? Come look.”

Bri stepped closer to the window, peeking out from behind the yellow curtains. On the sidewalk below was the man who had convinced Hunley to release her without further harm during her brief hostage situation at Mike’s hearing. He had also been the man who had driven her to the hospital for treatment, and she still remembered how she felt being carried in his strong arms - twice. Her heart gave a brief flip inside her chest, trying to sort out her feelings. Sam had said horrible, yet truthful, things about her, then later told her he hadn’t meant them. Was he telling the truth now, or when Hunley was holding the knife at her throat? She didn’t know, but he was here at Alexia’s party, and she would try to be nice to him while she sorted out her feelings.

Walking along on the sidewalk, Johnny’s long strides helped him quickly catch up with Samford. “Hey, Sam,” he said, stepping up alongside the arson investigator. “Wasn’t sure you’d make it.”
Samford turned around just as Johnny stepped up beside him. “Hi, John. Mrs. Lopez was insistent,” he explained, not willing to publicly state that he had another reason for showing up at the cookout.

“Yea, well you won’t be disappointed. Mrs. Lopez has got to be one of the best cooks in the state of California,” he joked, reminding himself that there were many states between himself and William Waite. He was doing everything he could to distance himself from the man he still feared.

Together the two men walked onto the lawn of the Lopez home, following the happy sounds of their friends and the smells of delicious food wafting from the backyard. They greeted the others, migrating across the backyard to the place where several ice chests were lined up. Finding a couple of bottles of beer, both men began drinking the soothing ale and participating in the small talk with the others.

An hour later, the large group was enjoying tortillas filled with a variety of meats, beans, vegetables, and various condiments. Desserts including brownies, sopapillas, pound cake, and ice cream were giving the children a jolt of energy, and adding even more smiles to the faces of the adults. Johnny leaned against the privacy fence, one knee bent with his foot against the board, watching the group of people mingle. He couldn’t help but snicker to himself as he watched Samford Bennett stealing every opportunity he could to talk to Bri. Johnny wondered if he seemed as desperate to the employees of Rampart whenever a new nurse was hired on. He hoped not, but he knew that he probably did. In his heart of hearts he wanted nothing more than to find the right woman and settle down, but he knew there was only one right woman for him, and she was over one hundred miles away being brainwashed by a religious fanatic.

He stole a quick glance at his watch, noting that he had spent over an hour at the cookout. He hoped that was enough time to allow him to exit without seeming rude. Using his bent knee, he pushed away from the fence and headed over to Mrs. Lopez.

“You’ve thrown quite a welcome home party,” he said, using his best Gage charm.

“Gracias,” Maria said, brushing a graying strand of black hair away from her face. “I hope Lexi understands how special she really is.”

Johnny waved his arms around him as he spoke. “Well, if this doesn’t do it, I don’t know what will.”

Marco saw Johnny talking to his mother, and decided to walk over and join the conversation. Beverly joined him, content that Bri was doing well at the moment.

“Did you have enough to eat, John?” Marco asked, knowing that something had been bothering his young friend. He had also noted that Johnny’s long face seemed a little more hollow than usual. Everyone on shift knew that Johnny’s thin frame needed more food than the rest of them.

Johnny switched his warm bottle of beer from his right hand to his left. “Oh, yea man. The food was fantastic, as all Lopez food is,” he said, rubbing his flat belly. “But we’ve got shift tomorrow and I’ve got a few things to do before roll call,” he snickered, pointing to his shaggy hair. “I really need to do a little touch up before Cap gives me latrine duty for the whole month.” He extended his hand, shaking firmly the hand of his senior lineman. “I really enjoyed this. Thanks for the invitation,” he grinned, turning to leave. “I’ll see ya in the mornin’, Marco.”

“See you then, John,” Marco called out to his retreating friend. He cast his worried eyes between his mother and Beverly. Both women held questioning expressions on their faces.

“Spill it, Marco,” Beverly chided, her hand resting in the crook of his arm. “You’re worried about something.”
Marco welcomed the tender gesture of the woman beside him. Having her so near his side felt right to him. “Something’s wrong with him,” he said, pulling Beverly closer to his side. “I just don’t know what it is.”

“Does Roy know?” Maria asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll have a chance to talk to him before he leaves” Marco replied, just as a new song came on the radio. Several people began dancing to the catchy tune, while one shrill voice was heard crying out above all the others.

“Mizzer Phet! Dance me, Mizzer Phet. Dance me!” Corrie cried, racing up to her future stepfather.

“You bet, ladybug,” he said, swinging her up onto his shoulders. “They’re playing our song!” Chet used one hand to hold onto Corrie while using the other to dance with Caroline.

Marco followed suit, lifting Antonio onto his broad shoulders and reaching out for Beverly’s hand.

All of those in attendance were singing and dancing as they partnered up, or chose to dance alone. Even Mrs. Lopez tried her hand at the newest dance craze.

As Johnny walked down the sidewalk towards his Rover, he was humming the tune to himself. Allowing the limited lyrics to speak to his soul.

“Ooooo, ooo, ooo, ooo, ooooooo, Do it. Do the hustle.”

“Do it,” Johnny said to himself, climbing inside the older sport utility vehicle. “That’s it, man. Like the song says – do it,” he mumbled, convincing himself to follow through with his plan he had developed over the last twenty-four hours. It wouldn’t be easy, but it was necessary. He cranked up the Rover, driving down the street towards his apartment. He did have to get ready for shift, but there were other things he had to get done as well.
Chapter 3

Bri watched Beverly gracefully accept Marco’s inviting hand as the two made their way to the middle of the impromptu dance floor in the middle of the Lopez backyard for another dance. She had watched them dance a couple of other times since arriving, and she couldn’t help feeling a twinge of jealousy at the way the couple seemed to speak with their eyes. It was obvious that they were happy when they were together. Would Bri ever find that kind of happiness? As the music built to the crescendo, she found her fingers tapping against the side of her thigh, her voice humming to the catchy tune. Suddenly, there was an inviting hand reaching towards her, and it was attached to the same arson investigator who had been treating her so kindly since helping her escape from Hunley’s grasp. Her dark eyes looked up into the eyes of Samford Bennett, whose bright smile lit up his face.

“May I have this dance?” He asked, blushing slightly as he went on to confess his embarrassing weakness. “Although I should warn you that I’m no Fred Astaire.”

“Ahaa,” Bri cackled, feeling more comfortable around Sam as the night had progressed. “I, uh… I don’t really know how to dance very well, either.”

“Good, then maybe I won’t embarrass you too badly,” he snickered, feeling a little lighter on his feet when she accepted his proffered hand.

The two stepped out among the crowd, mimicking the motions of twirling bodies and pointing fingers. Laughter and smiles seemed to fill the entire backyard. As the music continued to play, the two youngest dancers found each other. They watched the older dancers, and began to copy their movements. Antonio jutted his hips from side to side while Corrie remained a couple of counts off beat as she spun around, flaring her dress out around her knees. The two youngsters were oblivious to the fact that they had become the entertainment for the evening’s festivities. As the last notes faded away, the two preschoolers clapped and squealed with delight, feeling as grown up as the adults who were watching them.

“Way to go, Ladybug!” Chet laughed, swinging the precocious little girl onto his shoulders once more. “I think you’re ready for American Bandstand.” He laughed at the way Corrie grabbed two handfuls of his curly dark hair, holding on as he turned to the side to speak to his partner. “I hate to be a drag, but I guess my girls and me better split. We do have to be on shift in the morning, Marco, and it’s getting late for this little princess,” he remarked, shifting his eyes upwards to the grinning little girl.

“True, and you better not be late,” Hank remarked, overhearing his linemen talking.

Beverly joined in the conversation with her own remarks about the lateness and the need to get Bri settled into The Wellhouse.

Marco felt Beverly’s nearness, wishing the night didn’t have to end. “I’ll walk you and Bri to your car.”

“Thank you,” she said, reaching out to clasp Maria’s hand as she walked by. “I had a wonderful time, Mrs. Lopez.”

Maria returned the gesture, cupping Beverly’s hand in both of hers. “I’m glad you and Bri were able
to make it. We’ve got a room ready for her when you feel she’s ready.”

Before Beverly could respond, Alexia stepped up beside her mother. “Thank you for coming and for bringing Bri.”

“You’re welcome, Lexi. Thank you for being one of my success stories,” the counselor responded.

“And Bri will be the next one,” Sam said, walking up with Bri beside him.

“We’re certainly going to give her all the support we can,” Beverly commented, “and I know she’ll do well.” She reached out, patting the back of her newest rescue. “You’re a strong young woman, Bri.”

Bri’s blush was obvious. She didn’t feel strong; she felt nervous. But she also felt ready to move on with her life – off the streets.

Marco caught Roy’s eye, mouthing to him that he needed to speak to the paramedic before he left. Roy nodded his agreement, then turned in search of his wayward daughter who had been last seen running with Marco’s nieces through the back door of the Lopez home.

Beverly and Marco headed for the gate that would allow them access to the sidewalk. They were a few steps ahead of Bri, but they both overheard the brief exchange between her and Sam as they headed for Beverly’s car.

“Um, I don’t know if you’re allowed personal phone calls while you’re at The Wellhouse, but if you are, may I call you sometime?”

Bri sucked in her bottom lip, still feeling a bit apprehensive with such a personal request. “I don’t know if I can or not, but... Why don’t you give me your phone number and if I’m allowed to make calls, then I’ll call you?” She suggested, knowing that this would give her time to sort out her feelings, giving her control of the situation.

Sam wasn’t sure if he was being brushed off or not, but he decided to give Bri a chance. He pulled out his wallet, withdrawing a business card. “Um,” he patted his shirt pocket. “I don’t have a pen.”

“There’s one in my car.” Beverly tossed the comment over her shoulder, sure that she had caused the investigator to blush, knowing that his conversation with Bri had been overheard.

“Oh... Okay, thanks.”

As they walked down the sidewalk beneath the glow of the street lamps, Marco’s hand brushed the back of Beverly’s softer one. He felt his heart flutter when she didn’t jerk it away. They continued their strides, walking closer to each other than they ever had before. Her closeness encouraged him further.

“Would you like to go out with me again, sometime?”

Beverly smiled up at the man beside her. She wasn’t ready to admit to him that she had rearranged her work schedule to coincide with his shifts, hoping that this would allow them to spend more time together. “I’d really like that. I’m working tonight and tomorrow, but I’m off on Sunday.” The inflection in her voice let him know that it was more than just a statement – it was a suggestion.

“That’s perfect,” he said, the excitement in his voice evident. “Decide what you want to do, and I’ll call you after Mass on Sunday.”
“Oh yes, this will be the first one for Lexi in a long time, right?”

Marco squeezed her hand. “Yes, and our family is going to attend together – if I get off shift in time,” he said, knowing that the possibility always existed for a last minute run just before shift change.

“Then we’ll pray for a quiet shift,” she stated, turning to face him as they reached her car. Had Bri and Sam not been walking behind them, she thought he might offer her a tender kiss. She had grown much more comfortable in his presence, feeling as if she could actually lower her guard completely with him at some point in the not so distant future. Yet, he simply smiled at her as he reached to open her car door.

Sam followed suit, opening the passenger’s door for Bri. “I enjoyed talking to you and, uh, stepping on your toes,” he laughed.

“I enjoyed it, too. It was a great way to start my new life.”

Back at the Lopez home, Roy was helping Joanne corral Jennifer and Chris. He wondered what Marco had wanted to talk to him about, but seeing that Johnny had made an early exit, he thought his partner might be the topic of conversation. When he saw Marco returning to the back yard, he relinquished his search for his daughter to his wife, heading towards his shift mate.

“Something wrong?”

Marco cast a concerned look at Roy. He cut his eyes from side to side to ensure that their conversation would be a private one. “I don’t know, Roy. Did Johnny seem, uh, distant to you?”

With that comment, Roy knew that Johnny’s unusual behavior had been noticed by someone other than himself. “Yea, he’s been acting like that for a couple of shifts now, but…” Roy hesitated, wondering how much he should admit to Marco. Deciding that they all trusted each other with their lives on every shift, he chose to press forward. “Tonight was worse than when he’s been on shift. Something’s up, but he won’t say what it is.”

Both men stood with their arms crossed, neither one looking directly at the other as they contemplated the behavior of their crew mate. “Well, if he hasn’t told you, then he hasn’t told anybody. Do you think maybe you should talk to him?”

The innocent comment felt like a slap in the face to the worried paramedic. “Don’t you think I’ve tried?”

Marco, realizing that his question had struck a nerve, tried to smooth it over. “Roy, I didn’t mean to imply anything by-“

“Oh, I know what you meant, Marco, but Johnny’s a grown man. He can take care of himself. If there’s something wrong with him then it’s not my responsibility to find out what it is and fix it. I’m not my partner’s keeper.” Roy knew he wasn’t being fair to his senior lineman, but he felt frustrated by his partner’s behavior and the way his shift mates seemed to assume that he could fix whatever Johnny’s problem might be.

“That is NOT what’s going on, Roy, and you know it.” Marco’s dark eyes were seething. He had merely been concerned about a friend; he hadn’t done or said anything to Roy to deserve the response he had gotten.

Hank overheard enough of the heated conversation to know that he needed to try to diffuse it. He stepped over to the place where his two men were standing, facing each other. “Hey… Everything alright?”
“Fine, Cap,” Roy stated flatly. “Just letting Marco know that we had a good time, and I’ll see you both in the morning.”

Marco and Hank briefly locked eyes as Roy stormed off to round up his family. Marco exhaled a sigh, not knowing what he had done to upset Roy.

“I’m sorry, Cap. All I did was ask him what was wrong with Johnny, and he went ape on me.”

“I take it he didn’t have an answer for you?” Hank asked worriedly.

Marco merely shook his head, then nodded quickly to let his superior know that someone was walking up behind them. Hank turned around, meeting the gaze of his engineer. The fire captain reached out quickly to shake Mike’s hand.

“See you in the morning, Mike. Go get a good night’s sleep so you’ll be well rested.”

Mike grinned, his face seemingly much more relaxed than it had been for a few weeks. “A good night’s sleep is something I’ve been missing,” the engineer admitted. The previous day’s exoneration had left him too excited to sleep last night. He had really enjoyed himself at the Lopez cookout, and was beginning to feel a sense of normalcy. “But after this party, I think I’ll sleep just fine.”

Thankfully, Alexia had seen Mike shaking hands with Hank and Marco, and knew that he was preparing to leave. She couldn’t let him go home without thanking him for attending the celebration. She gently tugged on his elbow. “May I speak to you, Michael?”

Mike’s toothy grin seemed to get just a little wider. “Excuse me, fellas. I’ll see you both in the morning.”

Marco and Hank returned to their previous conversation, each one concerned for the welfare of both of their paramedics. The worried fire captain agreed to speak to them privately while they were on shift, if the klaxons allowed it. Hank began to pull his family members together so that they could head home.

Mike and Alexia walked around the house, stopping along the side of the porch.

“I’m so glad you were able to join us tonight, Michael, and I’m really glad that you can go back on shift tomorrow.” Alexia felt inadequate, unsure of how to carry on a meaningful conversation with a man like Michael Stoker.

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Besides, where else could I have gone for such great food, not to mention the company?”

“And the dancing?” She laughed, remembering how Mike had been reluctant to dance, but once she had gotten him moving with the rest of the crowd, she discovered that he was a really good dancer.

He rolled his blue eyes at her, flirtatiously. “And the dancing… If that’s what you want to call it.”

“You’re a wonderful dancer, Michael.” The compliment was followed by an uncomfortable silence.

Mike cleared his throat, unsure if he should ask her what was on his mind. When she didn’t volunteer any more conversation, he chose to speak up. “Ahem, would it be okay if I, uh, if I call you sometime?”

Alexia felt as if the ground had just shifted beneath her feet. Had she heard him correctly? “Call me?”
“Yea, you know… On the telephone?” He laughed, feeling as if he were about to be rejected. “If you’d rather me not, then don’t worry. I understand that.”

“Of course. I’d really like that,” she interrupted, her voice light and her eyes beaming with excitement.

“Good. That’s good. Um, well… I’ve got shift tomorrow, so it might not be until Sunday afternoon, if it’s a really busy shift. But I’ll, ah, I’ll call you,” he stated, feeling ridiculous for repeating himself like a nervous teenager.

“Okay.”

“So, ah, good night, Lexi,” he said, unsure of whether to give her a hug, or simply walk away. He decided to take things as slowly as possible, and gave her a simple nod of his head as he turned to walk to his car. Perhaps he was reading too much into how she was acting and what she was saying, but he had the distinct impression that she really did enjoy spending time with him. He certainly hoped that was true. Because ever since he had stopped spending time with her as a part of her rescue, he had been missing her company, more so than he wanted to admit.

E!

Johnny made several unnecessary turns on his way back to his apartment, lengthening his commute considerably. His mind was reeling with worry, and he wanted to ensure that no one was following him. He pulled into the parking lot of his apartment complex, parking in a place far away from his usual spot. He turned off the engine, but simply sat in his Rover, glancing in all the mirrors, making sure that he was still alone. Then, as if realizing just how paranoid he was being, he slammed his right fist against the passenger’s seat.

“Damn it!”

He stepped out of the vehicle, slamming the door, and loped up the stairs to his darkened apartment. He needed to think, needed to see if there was any other way to cope with his predicament than what he was thinking. Dropping his keys into the bowl on his coffee table, he turned on a small lamp and took a seat on his couch. He exhaled hard, leaning his head against the back of the couch as he stared at the ceiling. He had been trying to find another way out of his situation, but his tired brain seemed to have given up. For nearly an hour he thought about all that had happened during that month back in 1965. Ten years was a long time, but not long enough for the images to be forgotten – an eternity wouldn’t be enough time to erase the horror.

E!

On Saturday morning, Marco pulled into a parking space behind the station. Seeing Roy already there and sitting in his gold Porsche convertible reminded him of the heated exchange between the two of them at the cookout. He pressed his lips into a thin line, grabbed his duffle bag from the passenger’s seat, and stepped out of his burgundy sedan.

“Marco, can I talk to you?”

Marco wanted to roll his eyes, but instead he walked over to Roy’s car just as the paramedic was getting out of it.

Roy saw the frustrated look on his friend’s face, confirming that his remarks the previous night had been out of line. “I owe you a big apology for what I said last night. I’m really sorry. I know you’re just concerned for Johnny, and I’ve been worried about him, too. That’s no excuse for how I reacted
to your comments, though. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Marco swallowed hard. He could see the sincerity in Roy’s blue eyes, seeing that the paramedic was feeling guilty. He knew that the heart-felt apology had to have been difficult for Roy. He cut his eyes down at the cement parking lot for a moment, then back up at his friend. “It’s okay, Roy. I know you’re worried about him, same as me. Apology accepted.”

Relief washed over Roy, and a slight smile crept across his face. “Thank you… I mean it,” he said, extending his hand.

Marco returned the strong handshake, also feeling a sense of relief, just as Chet drove up. The two men stood in their places, ready to greet their shiftmate. Chet was in a different frame of mind as he got out of his van, slamming the door hard. He shouldered his bag, stomping off towards the locker room without even acknowledging the presence of Roy and Marco.

“Uh-oh.”

“Yea,” Roy agreed, raising his eyebrows in Marco’s direction. “Looks like my partner isn’t the only one having problems.”

E!

Johnny glanced at his watch, hoping that the deity in charge of the 405 would smile down on him, otherwise he was going to be late for roll call. He had spent most of the night trying to figure out a way to keep his past from ruining his future. Yet, he hadn’t been able to figure out a way to salvage his present life. He had reluctantly come to the conclusion that the only thing he could do was leave behind those he loved the most. More than anything, he wished he could sit down with his brothers at 51’s and explain to them what had happened all those years ago, but he was too ashamed of his past to share it with anyone, even his best friend. He knew what William Waite was capable of, and the man’s threats still rang loud and clear in Johnny’s memory. He had no doubt that Waite would carry out those threats, and that his surrogate family would try to help him if they knew the he was in danger. Johnny couldn’t allow his friends to become Waite’s next victims. There was only one way to prevent harm to his friends, and that was to remove himself from their lives, permanently.

Johnny used his free hand to wipe the moisture from his eyes as he approached the exit ramp that would carry him to Station 51. He wasn’t prone to tears, but what he had to do over the next few days and weeks would be as difficult as leaving his parents had been. He remembered hearing Marco explain that his sister had suffered by remaining in prostitution in order to keep her baby safe. Johnny had understood that better than anyone, although he had been unable to explain to the other men why. He had been forced to do the same thing, leaving behind his parents in Montana. Now, he was about to leave behind the closest friends he had ever had, all because he wanted to keep them and their families safe.

E!

Back inside 51’s locker room, Chet dropped his duffle bag on the bench in front of his locker. Using his left hand to support himself, he leaned against the wooden cabinet, staring at the floor. He had anticipated a romantic interlude with Caroline after they had returned from the cookout and put Corrie to sleep. Instead, the night had ended in an argument between the engaged couple. When he heard the swish of the opening locker room door, he straightened himself and began unbuttoning his shirt.

“Good morning, Chet.”
“Mornin’, Marco,” he said flatly, discarding his shirt with a toss into the back of his locker.

Marco and Roy exchanged knowing looks as they, too, began to change into their uniforms.

“You okay?” Roy asked.

“Swell,” Chet commented sarcastically, toeing off his sneakers and removing his jeans. He huffed, shoving his civvies into the locker recklessly, not caring that they would be wrinkled when he changed back into them after shift.

“Just say it, Chet. I know you want to.”

The Irishman looked up at his partner, noting that the older man was being sincere. He pulled out his light blue shirt, threading his arms through the short sleeves, leaving the shirt flopping unbuttoned as he pulled out his navy blue uniform pants. He wasn’t sure he wanted to tell his friends what had happened between himself and his fiancée, but he did need to talk to someone. Unlike Johnny, Chet had never been the kind of man who could keep his worries hidden.

“Caroline, right?” Roy asked, recognizing the frustration he was seeing in Chet. “Only the woman you love can upset you like this.”

Chet sighed, buttoning up his shirt and tucking it into his pants as he thought about how to answer the question. He plopped himself down on the bench, pulling out his work boots. “Yea….” he sighed, hesitating before continuing. “DeSoto, when you and Joanne got engaged, was she ashamed of you?”

Assuming that the younger lineman had overheard his exchange with Marco the previous night, Roy dropped his head. Was Chet trying to infer that Roy had embarrassed Joanne at the Lopez cookout? The senior medic wondered if perhaps his uncharacteristic behavior had somehow resulted in an argument between Chet and Caroline. Roy cleared his throat; he hadn’t anticipated the need to apologize to someone other than Marco, but now it seemed he should. “Look, I’m sorry you overheard what I said last night. I was wrong, and I apologized to Marco as soon as I got here, so can we just drop it?”

The curly-haired man looked back and forth between his two colleagues, his bushy eyebrows crawling together between his eyes. “Huh?”

“It was just a misunderstanding, Chet. Nothing for you to get all bent out of shape over,” his partner explained, looking over at a contrite Roy, thinking he understood where the conversation was going.

“What the hell are you two talkin’ about? You asked me what was wrong and I’m tryin’ to tell ya.”

Again, Marco and Roy exchanged glances, even more confused by Chet’s remarks. Marco’s forehead wrinkled in puzzlement.

“Let’s start over. What has you so pissed off this morning, Chet?” Marco asked.

Chet shifted his gaze between the two men once more, feeling the beginnings of a headache. He pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head. “Caroline,” he grunted, bending over to tie his boots. Once that task was completed, he leaned back against the locker, realizing that his friends were waiting on him to elaborate.

“What did she do?” Marco questioned.

“What did YOU do?” Roy asked at the same time, his years of marriage had taught him a thing or
two about relationships with women. It didn’t matter who was right, or who was wrong in an argument. If the woman in the relationship wasn’t happy, then neither was the man.

“I didn’t do anything,” Chet shot back. “And neither has she, for that matter,” he mumbled, looking back down at the floor.

“Ahhh, no action in the bedroom, huh? It happens, Chet. And it’ll get worse after the wedding,” Roy added with a snicker, turning to face his open locker. He needed to get dressed, and he knew that Chet was about to begin a tirade about his fiancee.

“That’s just it, DeSoto,” Chet said, his crystal blue eyes becoming reddened. “She won’t even talk about the wedding. But that isn’t the worst part.” He ran his hands through his hair, then leaned over resting his forearms on his knees. “She hasn’t even told Greg and Mim that we’re engaged. I’m wondering if she’s ashamed of me.”

“Why would she be ashamed of you?”

“I dunno, Marco. Maybe ‘cause I’m just a fireman.”

Roy, who had always seemed to have more insight into human behavior than the rest of the crew, spoke up using his most compassionate voice. Now he understood why Chet was worried. “Look, it sounds like maybe she doesn’t quite know how to tell her former in-laws. I mean, she was married to their son, her daughter is their granddaughter. Maybe she feels like they wouldn’t approve of her remarrying, yet?”

Seeing where Roy was heading, Marco added to the conversation. “Or are you thinking she might still be in love with Corey?”

“No, no… She was never in love with-,” Chet gulped, realizing he had revealed far more than he had intended. “Let’s just say… that isn’t it, alright? Besides, Greg and Mim have already given me their blessing, so why would she be afraid to tell them she accepted my proposal?”

“Wait, you asked her former in-laws for her hand in marriage?” Marco questioned, a slight smile peeking out from beneath his dark mustache.

“Yea, what of it, Marco? I don’t intend on doing this but one time, so I wanted to… You know,” he shrugged, “do it right.”

“I think that’s great,” Roy offered. “Joanne’s father died before I proposed, and I sure wasn’t going to ask her mother,” Roy chuckled, “or I’d still be single.”

“Does Caroline know?”

Chet looked at Marco with a questioning look. “Know what?”

“I know you said that they pretty much raised her so she’s more like a daughter than a daughter-in-law to them. So, does she know you asked them for their blessing?” Marco asked. “And that they approve of the marriage?”

“I guess not,” Chet replied, stroking his bushy mustache as he stared into the nothingness in front of him. “I never said anything to her about askin’ them.” He thought for a moment while his friends finished getting dressed. “Maybe that’s it. Maybe she thinks they won’t approve, and-.”

“And she’s afraid of losing another set of parents,” Marco spoke quietly.
“Do you think I should call them, and let them know what’s goin’ on?”

“That’s up to you,” Roy said, patting Chet on the shoulder, “but you don’t want to end the engagement without a wedding, do you?”

“No way, man. I nearly died askin’ her the question. I want to make the most of it,” he grinned, remembering his panic attack at the restaurant. He considered the possibilities as well as his options. It all seemed to make sense. Perhaps he could call Mim and explain his concerns, and maybe Mim could reach out to Caroline. It was worth a shot. He decided to make the call after roll call. Then, the thought of roll call led his mind to ponder chore assignments, which led him to look around the room.

“Ahaa-ha,” Chet laughed. “I know who’s got latrine duty, and for once, it ain’t me.” He headed out of the locker room in search of a cup of coffee. His sleepless night was beginning to wear on him, and he feared the next twenty-four hours might be sleepless, as well.

Chet exited the locker room with Marco on his heels. Roy was lagging behind, neatly hanging up his street clothes before getting his morning coffee. When the locker room door swung open again, he looked up into the serious face of his partner.

“Good morning, Johnny,” he stated, missing his partner’s usual greeting in triplicate. The only response he received was an incoherent mumble.


Johnny set about changing as quickly as he could, oblivious to Roy’s question. Roy watched for a few moments, leaning against his own locker, crossing his arms over his chest. He narrowed his eyes at his partner, studying the younger man’s rigid movements.

“Earth to Johnny.”

“Hmm?” Johnny’s dark eyes looked up at his partner. “Did you say somethin’, Roy?”

Roy pushed off from his locker, walking around behind Johnny before leaning his forearm against the right side of Johnny’s locker as Johnny continued rushing through his dressing routine.

Roy eyed his partner suspiciously. “I was just wondering what’s going on with you. You don’t seem like yourself. Is something wrong?”

Johnny stared solemnly at his best friend, searching the familiar face for some hint of understanding, some semblance of safety. He pressed his lips into a thin line, frustration and fear clouding his thought processes. He wished he could trust Roy with his darkest secret, but if Roy knew what had happened, would he still be his friend? Would he consider him a coward, or something even worse? He cut his sad eyes away, knowing that if Roy pressed him for information, he might not be able to keep what he knew safely hidden away.

“Nope,” Johnny commented, buckling his belt then pinning his name badge onto his shirt. “Everything’s right as rain, Roy.”

“Don’t lie to me, Johnny.” Roy’s blue eyes pierced Johnny’s soul, making the younger man feel even more uncomfortable.

“Don’t call me a liar,” Johnny said curtly, closing his locker door and turning away from his partner, heading for the door.
Roy reached out, clutching Johnny’s upper arm. “Wait,” he asked, feeling the slight tremble beneath his fingers. He felt Johnny’s body stiffen and saw his head bow, but the younger man made no move to get away from him. “Did I do something to offend you?”

Johnny felt as if his heart was slamming around inside his chest. He had to slow his breathing, willing himself to calm down enough to talk. This was it, the opportunity he had wanted to create. It was the chance to create a proverbial smokescreen to hide behind. He steeled his nerves, wishing there was another way out, but he had spent the last two days searching for alternatives. Nothing else would work. He had to do this – not so much for him as for his friends, especially his best friend. Slowly, he turned to face the man who had been more like a brother than a coworker, his best friend. They had saved each other’s lives on several occasions since they had become partners. With lightning speed, he thought back over everything they had been through, both on the job and off. Now he had to do something that he would always regret, but it might well be that it saved Roy’s life again, even if no one would ever know how, or why.

Johnny gritted his teeth, remaining stoic as he looked directly at his best friend, preparing to tell the biggest lie he had ever told in his life. “Yea…”

Roy was stunned by Johnny’s proclamation, waiting for his partner to elaborate on how Roy had hurt him. “What?” The older man asked, his blue eyes searching for answers. “When? What’d I do?”

Johnny swallowed hard, wishing there was an easier way out. “Nothin’, Pally,” he offered, his lips dripping with sarcasm. “You didn’t do a damn thing.” He backed up, knowing his words were both confusing and hurtful to the one person he felt closer to than anyone else on Earth. “That’s just it. Nobody did a damn thing… Including me,” he stated cryptically, referring to his inaction all those years ago. He turned his back to his partner, realizing that his words and actions would further frustrate and confuse his best friend. “And I’ve got to live with that fact for the rest of my life,” he added with recrimination. He pushed his way through the locker room door. He knew it was time for roll call, and he also knew that Roy was going to have a lot of questions for him as the shift progressed. However, he had just set his plan into motion, a plan to save those who meant the most to him. He was on a course that couldn’t be altered. His only regret was that he couldn’t tell his friends why.
Chapter 4

A/N: I want to thank everyone for reading and especially those who have shared your thoughts with me. I appreciate the encouragement and the constructive criticism. Your feedback helps me improve my writing, and I am so grateful to you all.

Chapter 4

Roy stood stunned inside the locker room as he watched his partner walk out of the door. How had he offended Johnny? Swallowing hard, he followed the younger man out into the apparatus bay, raising his voice at Johnny’s back.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Roy couldn’t stop the volume of his voice from rising as his partner walked away.

“Drop it, Roy,” Johnny said, raising his right hand slightly as he walked away, waving off his partner. “Just forget I said anything.”

“Forget it? No way. You started it, now FINISH IT! HOW DID—” Roy rounded the back of the engine, hesitating when he realized the others were already in formation. The entire engine crew was staring at him, having heard every word of the exchange.

The older medic coughed nervously into his closed fist. “Ahua, um….” He took his place in the morning line-up, his face reddening in shame. “Sorry, Cap.” His blue eyes met those of his superior. “Ahem… Misunderstanding.”

Hank held the clipboard at his side, wondering what had transpired in the locker room. “I see. Roy, how about you and John keep your domestic disputes out of the station. Is that understood?” The captain’s eyes darted between the paramedics.

“Yes sir.”

“Got it, Cap,” Johnny added, standing at attention, his dark eyes staring through the opening beneath the rolled up front bay door.

Roy took his place beside his partner, feeling the cold shoulder the younger man was giving him.

“Mike, I think I speak for everyone when I say that we’re all happy to have you back with us.”

Mike, being a man of few words, glanced at his feet, fighting the lump in his throat. “Thank you, Cap. I just, ah… Ahem, I wanted to tell you all how much I appreciate all your support over these last couple of weeks. I really…,” he scrubbed his open palm down his face. He had mentally rehearsed what he was going to say, but now it was as if he had lost his train of thought. He struggled to string together a few words of gratitude. “I thought I had lost everything when I got put on administrative leave, but… After a couple of days alone and trapped in my wrecked truck, I began to realize that… Well, that what I have here, with you fellas, is… It’s what matters most. Friends and family – if you’ve got those two things, then you’ve got it all. And I believe that we…,” he waved his hand around the six of them, “here at 51’s, are both – we’re friends AND we’re fa… uh, family.”

“Well said,” Hank added, realizing that Mike was about to choke up, and he wanted to save his
engineer the embarrassment of losing control of his emotions in front of the other men.

“I agree, Mike,” Marco said, patting his friend on the back. “I completely agree.”

“Not so long ago, I thought I had lost both – my friends and my family,” Chet mused, staring at the gray cement floor. “I’m grateful to have gotten it all back, and more,” he said, thinking of Caroline and Corrie. At least he hoped he still had the ‘more’ part. He would know after he made the call to Mr. and Mrs. Marks.

Hank thought about his own struggle, the one that nearly cost him his family and his career. He knew exactly what Mike was referring to because he felt the same way.

Johnny pressed his lips into a thin line. Hearing Mike’s comments was only making him more anxious about what he had planned to do. The only consolation he had now, was that if he lost his career and his surrogate family at 51’s, perhaps he would be reunited with Lily. At least he wouldn’t be completely alone… And he would know that his coworkers and their families wouldn’t be in danger because of what he considered to be the biggest failure of his life.

Roy barely heard his captain’s voice, still stunned by his early altercation with Johnny, while Hank continued with roll call by reading a thank you card from the parents of a child who had recently been rescued from a car accident. His head jerked up when he Roy heard his name called out along with the word ‘dorm’ and knew that that was his assignment for the shift. He also heard Captain Stanley announcing that Rebecca had baked a cake in honor of Mike’s return.

Suddenly, the line broke up and most of his shiftmates began heading to the kitchen for coffee and cake before beginning morning chores. He saw Johnny following Captain Stanley towards his office and wondered if that was at Hank’s request, or Johnny’s.

Marco waited for the apparatus bay to clear before he stepped up to the senior medic, leaning in a little closer than usual to ensure that no one else overheard their conversation. “Did he say anything?”

Roy merely shook his head, his eyes slowly moving from the captain’s office to the lineman standing beside him. “No… I mean, he said I had offended him, and that I didn’t do anything,” Roy said, his mind replaying Johnny’s words as he stared blankly at his friend. “I don’t know what he means.”

“How could you offend him without doing anything?” Marco questioned. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know, but that’s what he said.”

Marco scratched the back of his head, trying to figure out what Johnny could’ve been talking about. “Well, you must’ve done something.” He quickly lifted his hands, palms out. “Don’t get mad at me, but something had to have happened, right?”

Roy pressed his lips into a thin line. He felt his ire rising, again, but his brain took over, tamping down his rapidly beating heart. What Marco was saying was true.

He blew out his breath. “I guess… But for the life of me, I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

Marco patted his friend’s shoulder. “Well, if there’s anything I can do, just let me know,” he said, turning toward the kitchen. “Let’s get some of Mrs. Stanley’s cake before Chet eats it all,” he snickered. “Then will you move the squad for me?” He tossed over his shoulder.

“I’ll go ahead and do it now. I need to cool off a little before I drink hot coffee,” Roy said with a
strained smile. He stepped to the driver’s door of the squad, cranked up the vehicle, and moved it onto the apron. As he walked past Hank’s office, he wondered if the two men inside were talking about his earlier outburst.

Inside the captain’s office, Johnny accepted the proffered seat Hank was gesturing towards. He wondered what his superior was going to chastise him for.

Hank silently watched his younger medic who sat uncharacteristically still. Normally, the young man would have been squirming around, or spouting off a barrage of questions about why he had been called into the captain’s office. What the experienced captain saw was concerning to him.

“John, are you alright, Pal?”

“Yes, sir. Have I done something wrong?”

Hank, knowing how to turn a conversation around on his men, reversed the question. “I don’t know. Have you?”

“No, sir.” Johnny didn’t elaborate, but he also didn’t look Hank in the eye.

The fire captain leaned back in his seat, studying his youngest man. “Well, do you wanna tell me what that was all about?”

Johnny thought for a moment before he spoke. “Cap, has Roy complained about my work performance?”

Hank’s eyebrows crawled up into his dark hairline. “No, he hasn’t. No one has. Are you telling me that your work performance has suffered from whatever is going on between you two?”

“No, sir. I’m not saying that at all. I was just wondering why I was called in here if my work performance is satisfactory,” he questioned, his face remaining stoic.

Hank leaned forward, beginning to feel frustrated at Johnny’s attempts to brush off their conversation. “Because I hope that our relationship goes beyond just that of a captain and his paramedic. I’m also your friend, John.” Hank’s worried hazel eyes scanned Johnny’s chiseled features as the younger man stared blankly at the floor several feet in front of him. “I remember you being there for me when I was in a bad place, a few months ago. In fact, you were there for both me and Becca. And I’m here for you, anytime, day or night. I know you and Roy are as close as brothers, hell we all are, but you two are best friends. I don’t like seeing my paramedics struggling to get along.”

Johnny’s dark eyes looked up into the concerned face of his superior. He blinked rapidly, fighting the stinging he was beginning to feel in the backs of his eyes. The reality of losing his friends, his brothers, was beginning to take its toll on him. His relationship with his captain over the last few years had somehow helped him replace what he had been missing with his own father. Although the senior Gage was older than Hank, they shared many of the same respectable qualities. Johnny thought about how much he missed his parents. He hadn’t seen them since he graduated from the Fire Academy. Now he wondered if he might never see them again.

“John?”

Jerked from his musings by his captain’s voice, he cleared his throat and looked up at Hank. “Ahem, yes, sir?”

“Did you hear what I said?”
“That I can talk to you if I need to?” He asked, hoping he hadn’t missed something Hank might have said while he was lost in his reverie.

“Well, yes, that’s pretty much what I meant. Will you let me help you and Roy work out your differences?”

“I don’t need any help, thank you, sir.” Johnny commented. “May I go now?”

“No.” Hank ran his hand through his hair. “Are you alright to work this shift with him?”

“Yes. Sir.” Johnny spat out, a little too angrily, his teeth clenched together tightly.

“Well, then I guess you’re dismissed. Go grab some cake and coffee, but just remember that I’m not your enemy, John,” Hank said, a little more forcefully. “I’m your friend.”

Johnny stood up, glancing once more at his captain, a man he respected more than anyone. The look lasted only a moment. He needed to begin severing his ties with everyone on his shift, praying he wasn’t about to make the second biggest mistake of his life. He turned his back to his captain as he reached for the door, mumbling. “Well, I never asked you to be.”

Hank watched Johnny pull open the door and exit, heading to clean the latrines. He didn’t know what to make of Johnny’s last statement.

Hank was about to call Roy into his office when the klaxons sounded.

“Station 51, unknown type rescue, 2744 East Tyler Street, that’s 2-7-4-4 East Tyler Street…”

As Sam Lanier’s voice continued to repeat the address and cross street, the men of Station 51 bolted into action. Hank passed the address slip to Roy, who then passed it over to Johnny. The two vehicles pulled out into yielding traffic, each man wondering what lay ahead for them.

Johnny somehow managed to compartmentalize his problems during the rescue, leaving William Waite and his memories in the back corner of his brain while he focused on the task at hand. Roy pulled to a stop in front of the ranch-style home where a young man was standing on the front lawn frantically waving his arms. Behind him, a young woman was crying, her hands folded beneath her chin. Both of them were looking up in a very large tree.

“Station 51, at scene,” Hank spoke into the gray microphone.

Mike pulled the engine to a stop behind the squad, casting his captain a worried glance. “Don’t tell me my first run back is to help rescue a cat from a tree,” he mumbled, swinging himself out of the cab.

Chet, having overheard Mike’s comment, snickered as he peered over his shoulder. “If it is, can I please use the reel line, Cap? You know how they hate water,” he chuckled. “I can get the feline down fast.”

Hank didn’t respond to his prankster’s question. His face was too busy surveying the scene, especially the way his paramedics were looking up into the tree. The looks on their faces told him all he needed to know. This was not a pet rescue; there was definitely something that had both of his medics worried. Johnny seemed to be trying to yell at someone in the tree while Roy loped over to the engine, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

“Hey, Cap. We’ve gotta kid stuck up in that tree. He’s got his ankle caught. We’re gonna need a ladder. I’ll get the ropes and belts,” he said, opening up the side compartments on the squad.
“Johnny’s trying to calm him down now, but he’s pretty upset.”

Hank felt his heart skip a beat. Child rescues were always the worst, and this one looked especially difficult. The tree appeared to be dying, making the seasoned fire captain concerned about the welfare of the victim, as well as his crew. He ordered Chet and Marco to assist with the ladder while he jogged over to support Johnny.

“Just hang on, Stevie. I’m gonna come up there and get ya, a’right?” Johnny called out, shifting his position to get a better look at the boy.

“Are you the father?” Hank asked the young man who had flagged them down.

“No. I’m not even sure who he is,” the young man replied. He wrapped his arms around his wife, hoping to calm her down. “My wife, Peg, heard some shouts a little while ago. We just thought it was some neighborhood boys on their way to school. When she came out to see what was going on, she saw some of the older boys running down the street.”

“It was awful,” she spoke up. “I heard a limb break and then this terrible scream. When I walked over here and looked up, I saw that little boy with his leg caught. He was leaning over that limb and crying,” she began to weep again, leaning into her husband’s shoulder. “I – I didn’t know what to do,” she sobbed.

“You did just fine,” Hank stated, watching as Chet and Marco leaned the ladder against the tree.

“How the heck did he get up there?” Chet mused, keeping the ladder steady while Johnny slipped the rope over his shoulder, latching the belts onto his waist.

“I dunno, but we gotta get ‘im down quickly. He keeps movin’ around, tryin’ to get his foot free, and that limb he’s hangin’ onto doesn’t look like it’s gonna hold much longer,” Johnny answered, quickly shimmying halfway up the ladder. The lower limbs were too small and dry to support his weight, so he had to go beyond them to the stronger, greener limbs that were a little higher up the trunk.

“Looks like lightning struck it,” Marco commented, noting the dark streak along the trunk and the dying lower limbs.

“I’ve been meaning to cut this tree down since we moved in, a couple of months ago. I just haven’t gotten around to it,” the man complained, his guilt weighing heavily on his mind.

The crew on the ground watched as the thin paramedic made his way quickly up through the limbs of the dying tree, his eyes remaining on the dangling child overhead.

“Hang on. I’m almost to ya. How old are ya?”

“Ten,” the little boy cried, squirming around. “It hurts.”

Johnny studied the scene as he climbed, noting that a branch had broken off just above the place where the boy was trapped. He quickly surmised that Stevie had been climbing on that limb when it broke, and even though the way he landed had likely caused a fractured ankle, had the limb not broken his fall, he probably would’ve had much more severe injuries, or worse.

“I know it does, buddy, but ya gotta stay still for me, a’right? I’m almost there.”

Carefully, Johnny tied himself off, taking a moment to wrap the rope around the tree trunk. He had to fight the urge to reach out and grab the small child. Instead, he knew that keeping himself safe was
the only way he would be able to help his victim. Once he was secured, he quickly assessed his patient.

“’A’right, jus’ take it easy, Stevie. I’m gonna check ya out real quick so I’ll know the best way to get ya down,” he explained, checking for injuries in the boy’s lower limbs. He noted the swelling and bruising around the child’s ankle, whispering a silent prayer of thanks when he felt a pedal pulse. It was weak, but he definitely felt it.

“Owe!”

“Sorry, kid,” he apologized, knowing that he was going to have to cause even more pain in order to extricate the injured child. “Why’d ya climb up here anyway?”

“Well… ’cause the older boys dared me to, and they’re in the seventh grade,” Stevie sniffled, trying to be brave.

“Ohhh, I get it. Didn’t wanna be called a chicken by the seventh graders, huh?”

The child only responded with a slight shake of his head, grateful that his rescuer understood his reasons for climbing the rotting tree. “Am I goin’ to jail, Mister?”

Johnny used his fingers to push his helmet back off of his forehead, giving him a clearer view of the child who was hanging just above his shoulders. “Jail? Why would ya be goin’ to jail?” He wanted to keep the child talking while he continued his assessment.

“Ain’t you a cop?”

“Nope, I’m a firefighter/paramedic. Know what a paramedic is?” He asked, searching for solid footing that would allow him to stand up, reaching around the little boy’s waist.

“No, owe!”

“I know it hurts. I’m sorry,” he said removing the additional belt he had brought up with him. “Well, a paramedic is a guy like me who knows how to get boys out of trees, and splint up their hurt ankles. Then we take you to the hospital so the doctor can fix you up,” he explained, palpating the child’s ribs. “Where else do ya hurt, Stevie?”

“Jus’ my ankle… and my… my, um, ouch,” he groaned, feeling Johnny’s hand securing the belt around his waist.

“Do you hurt here?” Johnny asked, clicking the carabiners together so that the child was secured to Johnny’s own belt. He patted the little boy’s chest.

“Nu-uh.”

Johnny continued his assessment, checking the little boy’s neck and head. Satisfied that his upper body wasn’t seriously injured, he began moving his hands down the little boy’s body once more. “How ’bout here?”

“Warmer,” the little boy said, trying to put on a brave face for the fireman.

Johnny pressed his lips together, thinking he knew the other place causing the child pain. “Did you get hurt between your legs?” He asked, feeling a sympathetic twinge in his own groin.

“Kinda,” the boy whimpered. “You ain’t gonna touch me there are you?”
“Not while we’re up here in front of all those folks,” Johnny explained, knowing that a testicular exam might be in order. “Why don’t we do that when we get inside the ambulance where no one can see but you and me?”

“Do I hafta?”

Johnny looked into the tear-stained face of the frightened child. “Yea, I’m afraid so. But, I’ve got the same parts you do, so it’ll be okay,” Johnny said, offering his lopsided grin. “Now, Stevie, I’m gonna have to free up your ankle so we can get ya down. I’ll try to be as easy as I can, but it might hurt. Can you be brave for me for just a second?” Johnny hated the idea of hurting the child, but his ankle needed to be freed from its wooden confines.

“Yea,” the child answered, resigned to his fate. He was more worried about what the paramedic would do to him inside the ambulance than he was about his sprained ankle.


“OWE!!!”

“Got it, Stevie. Now, don’t move it, and try not to move around much, okay?”

The child didn’t answer verbally. He feared that if he opened his mouth, everyone would hear him crying so he kept his lips clenched together tightly.

“Hey, Cap?”

“Yea, John?” Hank answered, looking up into the tree.

“I’m gonna hafta lower him down alone. I’m not sure these limbs will hold our combined weight,” he called out. “I’ll set up the rope from here, but I’m gonna need you fellas to lower him gently, a’right? And watch that right ankle, and there’s possible trauma in the groin region,” he said, looping the rope around the tree trunk and over a thicker limb. He trusted his shiftmates to carefully lower the child while he directed Stevie’s descent from his post, higher in the tree.

“I gotta go down by myself?” The whimpering child asked, wide-eyed.

“You’ve got five firemen on the ground and one in the tree with you. You aren’t alone, kid,” Johnny commented. “Besides, you’ve already proven yourself to the seventh grade boys, so this will be a piece o’ cake.” He then removed his helmet, placing it on the dark curly hair of the overweight child, cinching the strap beneath his chubby chin. “There, now you’re one of us.”

“Thanks, Mister,” the child said, his bottom lip quivering as he watched his rescuer prepare the ropes before he separated the two belts.

“My name’s Johnny. My partner is Roy. He’ll take care of you just as soon as you get down there, a’right?”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be right behind you. Just as soon as my friends unhook you from this rope, then I’ll hook myself to it and I’ll be down before you know it.” Johnny looked at the frightened child. “Now, ready?”

“I guess so.”

“A’right, take him down,” Johnny shouted, having re-gloved his hands to prevent rope burn as he
assisted in lowering their victim.

Roy looked up, raising his hands when the child seemed to be within reach. He was careful not to further injure the swollen right ankle, and even more careful as his hands reached up a little higher. He didn’t want to cause any further injury or undue pain for the boy. He could see a jagged tear in the child’s jeans, on the inside of his right thigh. He cradled the chubby boy in his arms, amazed at how heavy the kid actually was. ‘No wonder Johnny didn’t want to try to lower them both at the same time,’ he thought as he held the boy long enough for Mike to remove the belt. Roy quickly made his way over to the place where their equipment had been neatly laid out on a yellow blanket by 51’s linemen.

“Easy does it,” Roy said, kneeling down with the child, removing both his helmet, and the one Johnny had loaned to their young victim. “Looks like you might be on crutches for a while,” he stated, reaching for the boy’s wrist. After checking his vitals and reporting them to Rampart, the efficient paramedic quickly began to splint the injured ankle. He turned to look over his shoulder at the sound of the arriving Mayfield ambulance.

“Hey, Roy?” Hank said, standing over the boy, casting his lean shadow over the round face of their victim to block the brightness of the morning sun.

“Yea?”

“Vince said the boy’s mom is on her way over. Seems he lives just up the street here,” Hank explained, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

“You called my mom?” Stevie asked. “Maybe I’d be better off if I went to jail instead of the hospital,” he moaned, grunting slightly as Roy palpated his lower abdomen. “No!”

“Easy, Stevie. I’m just checking you out. My partner said you might have hurt yourself in your private area,” Roy paramedic explained.

“No I didn’t. My upper leg is burning, not my… you know,” Stevie whispered.

Roy further examined the child’s inner thigh, seeing a deep gash that ran from just above his knee to about two inches below his hip. Realizing that Stevie’s manhood had not been compromised, he released a sigh of relief.

“STEVIE!” A red-faced rotund woman shouted, breathing hard as she ran up to her son. “Oh, my baby. Are you alright?” She turned to Roy before the child had a chance to answer. “Is my baby alright? What happened?” She called out, breathlessly.

“I think he’s gonna be fine. He’s hurt his ankle which I’ve splinted, and-“

“AARGH!” The scream was preceded by a cracking sound, and ended with a thud.

Roy spun around at the sound of his partner’s screaming voice. As much as he wanted to run to the place where Johnny had fallen out of the tree, he knew his first priority was to their victim. “Um, Ma’am, we’re going to take him to Rampart General. You can ride in the front if you’d like.” His eyes darted worriedly to the place where the engine crew was surrounding their downed crewmate.

“Cap?”

“We’ll take care of John,” Hank said, waving Roy off. The captain knew that Johnny was injured, but he was moving his extremities, which was a good sign. “I think he just got the wind knocked out of him.”
“Okay,” Roy said, unconvinced, as he packed up the biophone. In a few moments, the ambulance attendants had Stevie loaded, and Roy crawled in beside him. He could see Johnny writhing on the ground, his feet shifting as he fought the pain.

“Is Mister Johnny gonna be okay?”

Roy returned his blue eyes to the pudgy patient. “Yea, he’s fallen before. He’ll be alright,” he said flatly, trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to convince Stevie.

Beneath the tree, Hank leaned over Johnny, pressing the younger man’s shoulders into the ground. “Stay still, John.” He looked up at his engineer. “Get another squad and ambulance rolling, Mike.”

Mike quickly loped to the engine, keying up the microphone. “LA, Station 51. Respond another squad and ambulance to our location. Code I. Repeat, code I.”

“10-4, 51.”

Mike returned to the place where Johnny lay. “Try to stay still, Johnny. Another squad and ambulance are rolling.”

“H-hurts… like… hh… he-argh!” Johnny cried out, as a back muscle began to spasm.

Hank patted Johnny’s shoulder consolingly, somewhat thankful for the spasm as it cut off his medic’s swear in front of civilians.

“You’ve got a nice cut on your forehead, Pal, and a few on your arms, too.” The captain looked up at his men standing vigil over their fallen comrade. “Chet, get the first-aid kit. At least we can begin to disinfect and bandage these wounds, since John’s the only paramedic still on scene.” He looked back down at Johnny. “You may need a few stitches in your head, but at least you won’t have to start your own IV, this time,” he chuckled, hoping to relieve the younger man’s anxiety as much as possible. They were all concerned about Johnny’s back and ribs, but they didn’t think his injuries were life-threatening, like the snakebite had been.

“Th-thanks, Cap. Th-that’s, argh… That’s a re-relief,” he groaned, panting from the pain.

Sirens were heard approaching, and the men of the engine crew were grateful to have paramedics on the scene to assist Johnny. They backed out of the way to allow Brice and Bellingham to attend to their injured friend.

Johnny looked up into the bespectacled face of Craig Brice. ‘Ah, hell,’ he thought to himself.

Inside the ambulance that was transporting the original victim, Roy was trying to make his hurting young friend feel a little more comfortable. He pulled the blanket back up over the sniffling child. “It’s gonna be okay, Stevie. Everything seems fine down there except for that cut, but you’ll probably be sore for a day, or two.” He patted his young patient on the shoulder, offering his own sympathetic smile. He looked out the window, realizing that they were turning into the emergency entrance at Rampart, and he wondered how his partner was doing.

Back at the scene, Johnny was becoming more agitated with the ‘perfect paramedic.’ “This isn’t necessary, Brice,” Johnny groused, hating the way the backboard made his aching muscles hurt even worse. “I was moving just fine before you got here.”

The ‘walking rulebook,’ as Johnny so often referred to Craig Brice, merely looked down at his colleague-turned-patient as he tightened the straps. “Spinal precautions are imperative when there is a risk of a compromised vertebra, Gage,” he commented, pushing his black rimmed glasses back to the
top of his nose.

“Oh yea? Well I’m gonna compromise YOUR vertebra!”

“John,” Hank admonished, looking over Bellingham’s shoulder. He grimaced for a moment, as if searching for the right words to say. He knew his youngest man was in pain, but he also knew that Johnny was prone to hiding the true extent of his injuries. However, this was neither the time nor the place to address that subject. Instead, he chose to simply play it safe. “Let the man do his job.”

Brice and Bellingham quickly had Johnny ready for transport. When Craig crawled into the back of the ambulance with their patient, Johnny rolled his eyes. He knew that this would be one of the longest rides to Rampart he had ever experienced.

Inside Rampart’s emergency room, Roy stood at the nurse’s station, distracted by the update on his partner that Craig Brice was giving to Dixie over the base station radio.

“We’re backing up to your door now,” Brice announced.

“10-4, 36. We’ll be waiting in treatment room 2.” She picked up her notes, turning around in time to see Roy staring at her. She knew how close the paramedic duo was at 51’s. In fact, she had come to realize that all the men from 51’s A-shift were close. She could see how upset Roy was, and remembered how helpless he had felt the day that Johnny had been bitten by a rattlesnake. They had all felt helpless as they waited for Mike to drive Johnny to Rampart on the back of the engine.

“Roy?”

“Hmm?”

“He’ll be okay. His vitals are good, and Craig is reporting movement and feeling in all of his extremities,” Dixie stated, unnecessarily. “He’s young, strong,-“

“Something’s wrong, Dix. I don’t know what, but something’s wrong.” Roy commented, staring at the white countertop. He really hadn’t meant to say the words out loud.

Dixie knew that Johnny and Roy had a way of communicating that almost seemed telepathic. She had witnessed them working as if they were one person with four hands on many occasions. Yet, she knew that Roy meant something else. “Wrong how?”

“Well, um, just that… See,” Roy stumbled over his words, trying to come up with a plausible explanation for his comment, when suddenly a gurney rounded the corner. Craig Brice was flanking the stretcher, IV bag raised above his head to allow gravity to send the fluids into Johnny’s vein. Craig looked up as the gurney was turned into treatment room 2.

“Hello, DeSoto,” he said flatly. His mouth opened to offer additional information about Johnny’s condition, but Johnny drowned out the verbal report.

“Roy, get me outta this damn contraption!”

“Now hold on there, partner,” Roy began, following near Johnny’s head as the entourage made its way into the exam room. “We’ve gotta make sure that you’re alright.”

“I’ll be alright as soon as I wrap my fingers around Brice’s scrawny neck!” The hurting paramedic seethed.

“And who are you to be calling someone else scrawny?” Dr. Brackett questioned, having walked
into the treatment room as Johnny was transferred from the ambulance gurney onto the exam table, the backboard making the transfer much easier for the men.

“Doc, I’m fine. Just let me get off this damn board. It HURTS!”

Dixie opened up Johnny’s chart, taking notes as Brice rattled off the update to the emergency room physician. Roy busied himself with taking a fresh set of vitals.

“Pupils equal and reactive, BP is 140/90-“

“Because I’m in PAIN, damn it!” Johnny interrupted.

Roy cut his blue eyes at his partner, never breaking his train of thought. “Pulse 92, respirations difficult to count since the patient is uncooperative,” he stated, removing the stethoscope from his ears, leaving it to dangle around his neck.

Dr. Brackett leaned over Johnny’s chest, ensuring that the paramedic could see him. “John Gage, you know this is necessary because of the distance you fell. Now, we’re going to get Malcolm in here for some x-rays, and then I’ll decide what to do next. We’re trying to treat you, not torment you,” he said, his bottom lip twitching in frustration. “I’ll order the MS just as soon as possible, but I need to get those pictures first. Even though we don’t see a head injury, it’s still possible.”

“Aarrgh!” Johnny groaned, clenching his right hand into a tight fist. He hated the feeling of being restrained, more than anyone realized. He knew they were all following protocol, and that it really was for his own good, but right now, all he wanted to do was get off the bed and out of the hospital.

Malcolm arrived, noisily entering the exam room, bumping the x-ray machine against the door. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Roy exited the room, following Dr. Brackett, Dixie, and Brice, leaving Malcolm to his work.

Brice shook Roy’s hand. “I hope Gage will have a quick recovery.”

“Thanks,” Roy responded, watching as Brice walked back down the hallway to the exit.

Dr. Brackett crossed his arms over his chest. “Johnny isn’t usually this agitated,” the physician commented, looking at both Roy and Dixie as he waited for one of them to respond to his comment. When neither of them did, he pushed on. “Roy, did Johnny hit his head during the fall, or does Craig always bring out the worst in him?”

Roy leaned his back against the wall, his head tilting back enough to make contact with the cold tile. “Maybe… And yes.”

Dr. Brackett lifted his right hand, grasping his chin between his thumb and fingers. “I see. Has he been combative since the fall?”

Roy shook his head slowly, realizing that Dr. Brackett was concerned about Johnny’s mental state having a physical cause. Roy wasn’t so sure. “I don’t really know what to say, Doc. He’s been acting… I don’t know… Difficult for a few days. This,” he cocked his head to the right, in the direction of exam room 2, “may not have anything to do with the fall. It might be something else.” He pushed off from the wall, holding up one hand to prevent the next question he knew was coming. “And no, he hasn’t told me anything, and, no I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

“Okay, fair enough.” Kelly Brackett pocketed his hands into his lab coat. “Looks like I’ll be having a private conversation with him as soon as Malcolm gets through, but just so I’m clear, his current state
of agitation began BEFORE his injuries?"

"Yea… It’s been going on for a few days now."

Moments later, the x-ray machine pushed through the open doorway ahead of Malcolm. “I’ll get these ready ASAP, Dr. Brackett.”

“Thanks,” the physician replied, then looked back and forth between Roy and Dixie. “Give me a few minutes alone with him, will you?”

“Take as long as you want. It’ll give me a break,” Roy stated with a hint of sarcasm, turning to walk towards the staff lounge. “At least he’s still strapped down, so he can’t bite you.”

“He might bite my head off, though,” the doctor snickered, walking past Dixie with his open palm out, ready to push through the exam room door.

“Don’t worry about him, Kel. Johnny’s bark is worse than his bite,” came the sultry reply. Dixie did her best to hide her emotions, but there was no hiding the worry in her blue eyes. “I’ll go talk to Roy,” she said, nodding her head in the direction of the lounge. “You take that one.”

“Thanks a lot, Dix.”
Chapter 5

Inside the exam room, Johnny’s back continued to spasm. He couldn’t prevent the loud hissing noise that escaped his lips as the muscles became rigid once more. He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to breathe through the pain. He heard the door open, but his neck and back were still immobilized. “Whoever you are, please get me out o’ this medieval torture device!”

Dr. Brackett walked over to the exam table, observing Johnny’s bruised torso. He appeared thinner than he had when he had his last physical, even though it had only been two months. He noted the blood seeping through the bandage on his forehead. He reached for the tape, needing to clean the wound thoroughly before he stitched it up.

“Johnny, I know it hurts, but just a few more minutes, alright?”

Johnny lay still, holding his breath until the spasm had passed. When he finally released his breath, he groaned. “Ugh.”

“How much do you weigh now?” Kel asked, shifting the overhead light to get a closer look at the laceration.

“How much do you weigh now?” was the only reply he got.

Dr. Brackett pulled the tray over beside him, grateful that Dixie had set it up with a suture kit before Malcolm had arrived. He began the process of disinfecting the wound, and numbing the skin around the injured area. “Looks like it won’t take but a few stitches. If it was anywhere else, I’d probably just use a butterfly bandage, but when cuts like this are on the face, I prefer to use stitches. It minimizes the scarring.”

“I know.”

While they were waiting for the Lidocaine to take effect, a nurse walked into the room, giving Dr. Brackett the x-rays. “Malcolm said to get these to you STAT.”

“Thanks, Sally,” the physician said with a smile. He quickly popped them onto the light box, happy with what he saw. He turned off the light, returning to his unhappy patient. “Well, I can give you that MS now. You don’t have any broken bones or head injuries.” He walked over to the medicine cabinet, removing the vial of clear liquid and withdrawing a dose into a syringe. He quickly cleaned the IV port, and slowly injected his patient with the pain-killing analgesic. “This should make you much more comfortable.”

Johnny immediately felt the room spin slightly, even though he was still strapped down on the backboard. He blinked his eyes hard, hating the way morphine always made his vision a little fuzzy as it took effect. “Ah, y-yea… Better,” he stated, as both the medication took effect and the straps were removed from his head and body, freeing him to move around a little.

“Slow down there,” Kel ordered. “I’ve still got to stitch you up.”

“He’s ‘k,” the loopy paramedic mumbled as the warmth spread over his entire body.
Kel watched as his patient continued to relax under the effect of the narcotic while he began to carefully stitch up the laceration. When he was tying off the last knot, he once again asked the question to which he had received a smart-aleck answer earlier. Only this time, he asked it in a slightly devious manner. “How much weight have you lost?”

“Dunno… Maybe five poun’s or somethin’ like that,” the drowsy man responded.

“Have you been sick lately?”

“No… Jus’ haven’t been feelin’ like eatin’ as much. Nothin’s wrong, Doc, so stop worryin’ ‘bout me.”

Dr. Brackett had gotten the answer he needed, although it wasn’t the one he wanted to hear. Johnny had only been a couple of pounds above the lower weight limit at his last physical. He had needed to GAIN five pounds, not lose them. Kel looked at the skinny man lying on the exam table, his skin nearly as pale as the sheet on which he lay. He considered his options carefully before he spoke. “Alright, I’m taking you off shift for the next week. Come back and see me on Friday, and if your back is healed enough that you can work, then I’ll sign your release papers.” He didn’t mention that he planned on weighing Johnny as a part of the exam.

“Mmm ’k,” Johnny mumbled, smacking his dry lips. “Do you want Dixie to call Joanne to take you home, since Roy is still on shift? I’m assuming you’ll go there like you normally do, right?”

Johnny thought for a moment, struggling against the morphine. “Uh… Nah, I’ll… Um, I’ll call a… call a fr-friend.”

“Okay,” the physician said, patting the naked shoulder of the paramedic, assuming that Johnny’s latest young flame would become his nursemaid for the next few days. “You just take it easy for a few minutes and let that MS do its job. I’ll write a prescription for some oral muscle relaxers for you to take at home. I’ll ask Dixie to fill it at the hospital pharmacy, and then have her come in and get the number of that friend you want her to call to come pick you up.”

“Mmm, ‘k, Doc,” Johnny slurred, his heavy eyelids finally drifting closed. It seemed like only seconds later, Dixie was shaking him awake. “Hey, Tiger… Johnny, I need for you to wake up for a minute, alright?”


“I need to know who you want me to call to come and get you. I’ve got your pills ready along with your discharge papers. I’ve let you sleep as long as I could, but we’ve got to use this room for sick people,” she said, grinning as she brushed his bangs away from his forehead. Her touch was rewarded with sleepy brown eyes squinting up at her. “Atta boy. Now, who do you want me to call to come and get you?”

“I-Iris… Iris C-Campbell… She’s at… Um, Bloom-Bloomers,” he slurred, closing his eyes once again.

Dixie straightened up, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion. She had met Iris on a couple of occasions when the florist had dropped off flowers at the hospital. Now, her curiosity was piqued. ‘How did Johnny know Iris Campbell, and how were they close enough friends for him to prefer that she pick him up, instead of Joanne?’
Iris closed and locked the back door of Bloomers just as the business line began to ring. Normally, she only opened the shop on Saturdays when she had a wedding or funeral to prepare for, but today she needed to get her fall decorations put up. It was already mid-September, so she decided to decorate while the business was closed.

“Whoever you are, you’ll just have to call back on Monday,” she commented to herself as she turned to walk towards her car parked behind the store. She sat down behind the wheel, cranking up the aging vehicle, and pulling out into the noonday traffic. A quick stop by the grocery store, and then she would be on her way home.

Back at Rampart, Dixie’s brow creased as she lowered the telephone back into its cradle. She flipped away from the yellow pages where she had been scanning the florists section for the telephone number to Bloomers and switched to the white pages. She blew the bangs out of her eyes while perusing the listings of Campbells.

“There’s too many of them here, Johnny,” she complained out loud, frustrated by the number of Campbells who were listed only by their first initial. She needed more to go on.

“Looking for a date?”

The emergency room nurse looked up into the round face of Joe Early. “Humph. I wish. I think I’d have an easier time finding a date than finding the phone number I’m looking for.”

“Can I help?” He asked, stepping behind the nurse’s station to pour himself a quick cup of coffee.

“Not unless you know Iris Campbell’s phone number,” she murmured, continuing to scan the tiny numbers on the page. Suddenly, she looked up, craning her neck at her colleague. “Hey, didn’t Joanne DeSoto work there for a while?”

“Work where?”

“At Bloomers, the florist shop. Johnny said that Iris Campbell was who I should call to come pick him up. Says she’s a friend of his.” Dixie reached for the telephone, dialing the DeSotos’ number from memory.

Joe stood behind her, enjoying his coffee break and appreciating how hard his friend worked. He smiled as he brought the coffee cup to his lips, sipping the warm liquid during an unusual respite from the activity of the busy emergency department.

“Joanne? This is Dixie,” she said, straightening her back as she rushed through her speech. She didn’t want to cause the wife of a fireman any undue alarm. “Roy’s fine. He’s not even here,” she spat out quickly, avoiding telling Joanne what she really wanted to tell her – that even though Roy wasn’t at Rampart, Johnny was. “I’m trying to get in touch with Iris Campbell, and she isn’t at the shop. I know you used to work for her, and I was wondering… Do you know her home phone number?”

On the other end of the line, Joanne assumed that Dixie was needing to contact Iris related to her floral business, so she didn’t hesitate giving the nurse Iris’ phone number.

Dixie quickly took down the information, and politely ended the call. “Thanks, Joanne. You’ve been a big help.” She was about to dial the number she had written down on the pad, when the base
station squawked to life.

Joe pushed himself off the counter he had been leaning against, stepping over to take the call. “Go ahead Dix. I’ve got this.”

She gave her friend a wink, but just as she was reaching for the telephone, it rang. She picked it up, placing the receiver against her ear, with a slight eye roll. There never seemed to be a dull moment in the Emergency Department of Rampart General Hospital.

“Rampart Emergency, Ms. McCall speaking.” She listened to the familiar voice on the other end of the line. “Alright, I’m ready for the relay,” she began, responding to Sam Lanier.

Seeing Sally walking past the nurse’s station, Dixie covered the receiver with her hand. “Sally, page Dr. Morton for a relay with LA County, please.” She nodded her head towards the base station. “Joe’s already taking a call, and Kel is with a patient.”

“Yes, Ms. McCall,” the pretty blonde nurse responded, quickly following the orders of her supervisor.

It was nearly forty minutes later before Dixie had a chance to dial the telephone number Joanne had given her. As the ringing began, she couldn’t help wondering once again how Johnny was connected to Iris Campbell.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Campbell?”

Iris felt her stomach flip. She had no idea who was calling her. “Yes, who’s calling, please?”

“My name is Dixie McCall. I’m a nurse at Rampart General Hospital. I was given your name by John Gage. He says you’re a friend of his...” Dixie let her voice trail off, waiting for confirmation from the woman to whom she was speaking.

Nervously, Iris dropped her purse and groceries onto the counter in her kitchen. She had just been walking into her house when the telephone rang. “Yes, is... Is something wrong?” Her mind sent her heart into a tailspin. Had William Waite somehow hurt Johnny?

“Well, he was on a call earlier, and he fell. Nothing’s broken, but his back is hurting, so we’ve given him a narcotic for pain. He can’t drive himself home, so he gave us your name to call as someone who might be able to come and pick him up.” Dixie tapped her pen against the counter as she waited for an answer.

“Oh my, yes, of course I can. Rampart you said?”

“That’s right.” Dixie confirmed, using her most professional voice. “Just follow the signs to the Emergency Room and ask for me, Dixie McCall, at the information desk.”

“Okay, I’ll be there as soon as I can. It’ll take me about 15 minutes,” Iris remarked. “Thank you for calling.”

Dixie hung up the telephone, shaking her head. She looked up at Joe who had finished the call with Squad 99, treated the patient, and had returned for a warmer for his cup of coffee. She grinned, seeing him watching her with a sparkle in his eye. “I guess we’ll solve the mystery soon. She’s on her way,” the nurse remarked, slipping her hip off of the stool. “I better go get Johnny ready.”
Johnny lay sleeping peacefully on the uncomfortable exam table. His fatigued body had given in to the morphine, allowing him to slumber deeply. Dixie admired the sleeping man, noting the dark circles that were noticeable beneath his closed eyes. She stared at his long eyelashes and disheveled hair, allowing her maternal instincts to overwhelm her. Gently, she reached out to shake his shoulder, bringing him back to consciousness.

“Hey there, Johnny,” she cooed softly. When he didn’t stir, she used a little more pressure. “Johnny, time to wake up.”

Those long eyelashes she had been admiring began to flutter, blinking rapidly to clear his vision as he fought his way back to the surface from the darkness. His dark eyes looked up into her lighter ones, and a forced lopsided grin spread over his face. “Heeyy,” he slurred.

“Welcome back. Your friend is on the way to pick you up, so I need to help you get dressed.”

Johnny grimaced at the thought of his favorite nurse helping him out of his hospital gown and into his work pants and ripped shirt. “Ugh, do ya gotta?”

Dixie looked down at her young friend. “Yes, I ‘do gotta,’ John Gage,” she snickered, mimicking his choice of words. “I can’t let you leave here half-naked, can I?”

“Weeelll…”

“Oh no, you don’t. What you and your friend do when she gets you home is one thing, but you will leave here with clothes on, young man,” she chastised, wondering if her comment might get a response from Johnny that might explain his relationship with Iris.

Johnny raised one eyebrow, confused by her comment. “What are you talkin’ ‘bout, Dix?”

“I’m talking about your friend, Iris. She’s on her way to pick you up, and I’m trying to have you dressed and ready to go when she gets here.” Dixie raised the head of the bed, then reached for his upper arm. “Alright, swing your legs off the bed and let’s leave you there while I get your clothes. I know how morphine makes you a little unstable, so we need to make sure you have your land legs back before you step down.”

Johnny gulped, his mouth feeling dry again. “D-did you say… Iris?”

Dixie set his clothes down beside him then reached around his neck to untie his gown. “Yes, Iris Campbell. I called her, like you asked me to do, and she’s coming to pick you up.” She quickly removed his gown, amused by how quickly he covered himself with the sheet. “Sorry, Tiger. I forgot Kel had us strip you down, completely. Let me help you get into your boxers first.” She had to bite her tongue to keep from chastising him about his obvious weight loss, but she knew that Dr. Brackett had already addressed it with him.

Johnny stared at Dixie’s white nursing cap, not really seeing anything. Had he really asked her to call Iris? How was he going to explain his relationship with Iris to Dixie, and anyone else who may find out?

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“Alright, think you can stand up enough for me to pull your boxers up?”

“Um, oh yea, yea,” he retorted, slipping his hips off the exam table, leaning against Dixie more than he wanted to. The move caused his back to ache, and he unwittingly tightened his grip on her arm. “Umph, sssss,” he hissed, sucking in his breath. He felt his face redden as the nurse’s hands skillfully pulled the elastic waistband of his boxers up over his hips, snapping the boxers in place along his thin waist.
“Okay, let’s get these pants on while you’re standing, then we’ll get you a shirt. Raise your right foot,” she ordered, kneeling down in front of him.

Any other time, Johnny would have found the humor in her position, but not today. He was stiff and sore, even with the morphine circulating in his system. He knew that the next couple of days were going to be miserable. The act of looking down stretched his upper back and neck muscles, the same muscles that were already screaming at him. It was just as well, he really didn’t want to watch Dixie dressing him as if he were a little boy.

“There you go,” Dixie said, straightening up. “Okay, let’s get you in this wheelchair,” she said, pushing the required mode of transportation towards him. “You can wait with me by the nurse’s station while housekeeping gets this room ready for its next occupant,” she said in her smoky voice. “Oh, and here’s your prescription,” she added, pulling the pill bottle out of her pocket as soon as she had helped Johnny into the wheelchair.

“Thanks, Dix.”

E!

Iris pulled her car into the emergency entrance, parking as closely as she could to the door. “Oh, Thorn,” she whispered to herself, biting her lower lip in worry. “What have you gotten yourself into now?”

She pushed a few graying strands of hair out of her face as she exited the vehicle, hurrying towards the automatic doors. Once inside, she glanced around the waiting area in search of the information desk. She saw a pretty young woman sitting behind the desk, and hurried over to her.

“Um, excuse me. I just received a call from Ms. Dixie McCall. She said to ask for her when I arrived. I’m picking up my, um, a friend of mine.”

The ebony-skinned woman gave her a warm friendly smile. “Yes, Ma’am. If you’ll walk down that hallway,” she said, pointing down the corridor behind Iris, “the nurse’s station will be on your left, just before you reach the elevators. Ms. McCall should be there.”

“Thank you,” Iris answered, turning around and hurrying down the corridor. As she neared the elevators, she caught sight of a young man with dark hair, slumping in a wheelchair near the nurse’s station. Her heart skipped a beat as she recognized his mussed up hair. “Tho… There you are,” she called out, covering for the name she had almost allowed to escape from her lips.

Johnny’s eyelids were heavy. “Heeyyy, ah, Iris,” he said sleepily, recognizing Iris’ voice before she came into focus. “Thanks for… Comin’ o get me,” he slurred.

“You must be Iris,” Dixie stated, rounding the corner of the nurse’s station. “I’m Dixie McCall. I’m the nurse who called you.”

“Yes, and I want to thank you for doing that.” Iris took another look at the limp young man resting in the wheelchair. “I definitely see why he couldn’t drive himself home.”

“No, not this time. He’s had some strong pain medication, and they always seem to do a number on him,” Dixie said with a knowing wink. “I’ll get someone to help you with him.”

Ten minutes later, Iris and Johnny were leaving the parking lot with Johnny leaning against the car door, but sliding to the left when Iris made the turn onto West Carson. When his shoulder bumped up against Iris’, he apologized. “Umph, sorry,” he commented, trying to straighten back up. “Thanks for pickin’ me up an’ takin’ me home.”
Iris cut her green eyes at her loopy passenger. “You’re welcome, Thorn, but I’m not taking you back to your place. I’m taking you back to mine.”

“Huh?”

“You need to sleep off whatever it was they gave you, and I don’t think you need to be left alone for a while. I have a couple of spare rooms, remember?”

Johnny couldn’t stop the smile that tugged along the left side of his mouth. “Yea… I ‘member.”

It took some work, but Iris managed to get Johnny inside her house. She felt like she was supporting more of his weight than he was, but fortunately, he was just as thin as she remembered him being. A scowl crossed her face as she realized that he should probably weigh more now than he did when he was a teenager.

“C’mon, Thorn, just a little farther.” She got him over the threshold, allowing him to plop down in the middle of the sofa. “Okay, just lay down here for a little while. I’ll put fresh sheets on the bed for you. Maybe after you eat something, you’ll feel like…,” she stopped mid-sentence, hearing the soft snores coming from her unexpected guest. “Never mind, sweetheart. Just rest right here.”

She set about putting freshly laundered sheets on the double bed in the blue guest room. She fluffed up the pillows, and quickly dusted off the furniture that hadn’t been used in years. She cleaned the picture frames, removing the dust from the faces of those she loved, who were peering back at her through the glass. They were younger then, much younger, and life had not yet introduced them to the ugly side of humanity. But those dark days came a short time later. She shook her head, dislodging the painful memories that threatened to take her under with them. She had relived those days too many times, not with regret for what she had taken part in, but with remorse for the consequences that had resulted from that trip. “Oh, baby. Momma misses you so much,” she said, running her fingers over the edge of the frame. “And you, too, Thorn.” The man asleep on her couch was so different from the bright-eyed young man who grinned crookedly through the glass from the past. She turned on the lamp beside the bed, then walked back into the living room.

Johnny remained sleeping soundly on her sofa, as she went through the living room and into the kitchen. She had a few containers of homemade vegetable soup in the freezer. She knew that he needed something on his stomach before he took the next dose of pain medication, so she set about heating up the food. She wanted to have it ready for him when he woke up. She smiled to herself wistfully as she ran hot water into the sink to thaw out the soup. It had been so long since she had cooked a meal for more than just herself. Even though her heart was broken for her wayward daughter and for Johnny, who was injured, she had to admit that she would enjoy taking care of him for as long as he needed it.

“Just like old times, Thorn.”

E!

Back at 51’s, Roy and Dwyer were on a run, while the engine crew finally had enough of a break to complete their chores. Chet had offered to finish making up the beds in the dorm to help Roy out. By the time the senior medic had returned to the station after leaving his sleeping partner at Rampart, Dwyer had already arrived. Since then, the squad had been on non-stop runs. Chet was more than happy to spend a little time alone, and he needed the privacy of the dorm to make the call to Mr. and Mrs. Marks.

He did a quick survey of the apparatus bay, noting that Marco and Mike were in the day room and Hank was in his office. He let the dorm door drift closed, then took a seat at the desk. He pulled the
phone closer to him and dialed the number, hoping for an answer on the other end of the line.

“Hello, Marks residence.”

“Ahem,” he cleared his throat, hoping his voice wouldn’t sound like a prepubescent boy. “Uh, Mim?”

“Yes. Chet? Is that you?”

“Yes, Ma’am, um…”

“Chet, what’s wrong?” Mim asked nervously, anxious for news about the well-being of Caroline and Corrie.

“Oh, uh, nothing… I mean, well, it isn’t nothing, it’s something, but it isn’t Caroline and Corrie. I mean, they’re just fine and all…”

“Chet.”

“I’m rambling. I’m sorry,” he huffed, scrubbing his face with his open palm. “It’s just that… Well, see…”

Mim felt her knees growing weak as she waited for Chet to get to the point. She wondered if maybe he needed another man to talk to. “Would you feel better talking to Greg?” She asked, worried that Caroline had turned down Chet’s proposal.

“Oh, uh, nuh-uh, not really.”

Mim pressed the receiver tightly to her ear, cutting her eyes over at her husband. Greg had been listening to her end of the conversation and knew that the caller was the man he hoped would be his future son-in-law, of sorts. He stood up, folding the paper he had been reading and laying it aside, he then headed over to sit beside his wife. He reached out, holding her trembling hand in his own. He was grateful when Mim pulled the receiver away from her ear, enough so that he could hear Chet’s incoherent ramblings.

“Chet, whatever it is, just say it,” Mim encouraged.

“Um, h-has Caroline talked to you, yet? About us being engaged?” There, he had broken the ice by asking a question, even though he already knew the answer.

“She accepted your proposal?” Greg asked.

Chet was a bit startled by the deep voice, unaware that the older man had been listening. The lineman shifted his position in the chair, running his finger beneath his nose; a habit he had picked up from Johnny.

“Yes, sir, she did, but…”

“But what?” Greg inquired when he realized that Chet was stalling. “Chet, are you having second thoughts about marrying her?”

“NO! I mean, no, sir, not at all. I love Caroline and Corrie with all my heart. I swear it! I want us to be a fa-family more than anything else in the world, but…”

Greg rolled his eyes, his frustration growing exponentially as Chet continued to delay telling them the reason for the call. “Why did you call us to tell us about the engagement? Why didn’t SHE call
us?” Greg was beginning to question his approval of the marriage. He raised one eyebrow at his wife who was nudging him with her elbow.

“That’s just it… We’ve been engaged for a couple of weeks now, but… I mean, my folks are all excited… But she hasn’t even told you about it, has she?” Chet hung his head, shame forming a shadow that crossed his face.

“No… No, she hasn’t,” Greg stated, accepting the telephone receiver from his wife. He saw her wiping her face, and knew that she was crying. If Caroline truly loved Chet, then there was only one reason why hadn’t she been excited enough to tell them about their upcoming nuptials – she was afraid they wouldn’t approve of it.

“I think… I think she’s ashamed of me,” Chet stated, his heart growing heavier as the difficult conversation continued. “I don’t make much money, and… Well, I couldn’t buy her a big diamond like she deserves, and—”

“Hold it right there, son,” Greg said, feeling his temper beginning to flare, although he wasn’t sure who he was the most upset with.

Mim smiled inwardly at the term of endearment her husband chose to use at that moment. He really had grown to accept Chet as a part of their unusual family.

“What Caroline…,” he began, wrapping his free arm around his wife, pulling her into his side. “What our daughter deserves is to be happy. She comes from very humble beginnings, Chet. She isn’t the kind of girl who wants flashy things.” He stroked Mim’s sleeveless arm as she leaned her head against him. “She had nothing when we took her in as our foster daughter. We gave her the things she needed, but you know that we aren’t wealthy people. I mean, we’re doing okay, but we’re not rich.”

Chet was silent, feeling a lump forming in his throat.

“All Caroline’s life, she’s just wanted to be happy – that’s all. Mim and I knew from the beginning that she was a compliant child. When other teenaged girls were out with their boyfriends, wearing lots of make-up, drinking, and smoking grass… Caroline never did those things. She always stayed at home, helping Mim take care of the house, and….” Greg couldn’t get the words out of his throat, his own lump was blocking his voice. He swallowed hard, forcing back the tears that he rarely felt threatening to dampen his cheeks. The last time he had cried was when Corrie had been born.

Chet sniffled, his own eyes growing misty and his throat beginning to tickle. This was uncomfortable, but he needed to hear the words and, obviously, Greg needed to say them.

“And being a friend to Corey when… When he needed one. I’m sure she’s told you that story.” Greg hoped he wasn’t going to have to explain the details of his granddaughter’s conception.

Chet nodded to himself, then cleared his throat as he realized that his head motion wouldn’t be conveyed over the phone. “Ahem, ye-yes… She did. I’m n-not judgin’ her, though… Not, uh, not judgin’ your son, either.” His voice trailed into a whisper as he fought to contain his emotions.

“Good… That’s good. I ap- uh, we appreciate that,” he said, pulling Mim tighter to him, hearing her sniffling, too. “Anyway, Caroline isn’t the kind of girl who wants fancy jewels, or expensive things – she’s a simple girl. A simple woman, I should say. I guess I can’t call her a girl anymore, ‘cause she’s all grown up. But she loves very strongly, Chet.” He inhaled deeply, trying not to blow his breath into the phone. “She feels things down to her very core. She’s a good mother to our little angel. And,” he sniffled, remembering how he felt when he had first seen Chet holding Corrie in his
lap. “And she trusts y-you,” Greg’s breath hitched, but he fought hard to push past it and regain his voice. “She loves you, and she trusts you with Corrie. They n-need you, Ch-et,” he gasped, feeling Mim pulling the phone away from him just as an odd sound echoed through the phone.

“Um, I’ve gotta go,” Chet said in a husky whisper, drying his own eyes when the klaxons sounded, “Um, thanks… For everything.”

He hung up the phone, wishing he had had the courage to tell Greg how he really felt about him and Mim. Truthfully, he loved them. He stood up, scraping the chair against the desk in his rush out the dorm door to take his seat behind Hank, thankful he didn’t have to face the other men as he climbed on board Big Red. He didn’t want them to know that he had been crying.

E!

By mid-afternoon, Mim and Greg had discussed their options and had decided to arrange to take Caroline, Corrie, and Chet out for Sunday lunch. It would be a long drive down to Los Angeles, but one they hoped would be worth it. Mim picked up the telephone, using her index finger to dial the rotary phone. As she heard Caroline’s phone ringing, she reached beside her, grasping Greg’s hand. Both of them silently prayed that their scheme would work.

“Hello?”

“Hi, sweetheart. How are my girls?” Mim asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

“Oh, we’re doing fine. I just put Corrie down for a nap. I’m just sitting here relaxing. How are you and Dad?”

Mim squeezed Greg’s hand. “We’re good, just missing you and Corrie.”

Caroline felt her eyes beginning to burn. She missed them, too. She also knew that she needed to tell them about the engagement, but she wasn’t sure how the news would be received. Why did she feel like she was betraying them by marrying Chet? “We, ah, we miss you, too. Corrie was just asking me about her Pop and Grammy this morning,” she chuckled softly, trying to find a way to broach the subject.

“Um, Greg and I were wondering if we could come visit you, maybe take Corrie to Disneyland?” Her heart pounded in her throat, as she waited for the response.

“Um, when?” Caroline asked nervously.

Mim exchanged a glance with her husband. “Well, we were thinking that maybe we could take the three of you out for Sunday lunch tomorrow, and then we’d take Corrie to Disneyland on Monday. I’m sure you and Chet would enjoy a little time to yourselves, right?”

“Um…”

Mim’s worried eyes found those of her husband, and she sucked in a breath. “Caroline? Is everything okay with you and Chet?”

“Well, I…” This was it. Caroline had to tell them. She closed her eyes, fighting against her fear of being rejected by her foster parents, the ones she loved more than her birth parents. “I have some news.”

Mim allowed a slight smile to part her lips. “Is it what I think it is?”
“I don’t know. What do you think it is?”

“Welllll, Greg and I are hoping that one day you and I will need to go shopping for a very special kind of dress… And flowers, and…”

Caroline couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Was it possible that the Marks wouldn’t be upset if she married Chet? Could it be that they might actually accept him? “Um, maybe….” She hesitated, still unsure of herself.

“Oh Caroline, just tell us! Are you and Chet getting married?” Mim tried to sound happy, hoping that her approving voice would be conveyed through the long-distance phone lines.

“Um, yes,” came the meek response.

“Oooohh! Oh, Greg, Chet proposed and Caroline accepted! Oh, isn’t it wonderful?” She called out, even though her husband had been right beside her through the entire conversation. She didn’t want Caroline to know that this telephone call had actually been a set up. Returning her attention to Caroline, she spoke into the phone again. “Congratulations, sweetheart, we are so happy for you.”

“Really? You… You aren’t upset about it?” Caroline curled her hair behind her ear, feeling her cheeks burn with her tears. “You’re really happy for me?”

“Of course we are. Chet is a wonderful young man, and Greg and I have been hoping he would ask you to marry him.” She heard the slight hesitation in Caroline’s voice and asked her next question with a bit of trepidation. “Do you love him enough to spend the rest of your life with him?”

“Yes, yes I do. I… I can’t imagine my life without him,” she said, admiring her sparkling engagement ring through her tears. “I’m just so relieved that you’re both okay with this.”

Greg overheard her comment, since he had been sitting so close to Mim, and he spoke into the phone. “We more than approve, sweetheart, we give you our blessings…. And our checkbook.” He grinned at Mim, knowing she was thinking the same thing.

“What?”

“That’s right. Mim and I are paying for everything, so you don’t worry about a thing. We’re going to make you a princess for the day. You deserve it, and nothing would make us happier than to be there for you.”

Caroline’s bottom lip began to quiver uncontrollably. “You’d… You’d really do that for me?”

“Of course we would. We want to show our support for you, all three of you. Mim and I love you, darling. We love you, Corrie, and yea, even Chester,” he snickered.

Caroline felt as if her chest would explode with emotions. “Um, can I ask you a question, then? And if you say no, then I’ll completely understand, but… Um, I was wondering if … Would you…” Her words lodged in her throat, unable to find an avenue to the surface.

Greg, for the second time today, felt his own cheeks moisten. He had hoped that he might one day have the privilege of escorting her to the altar. It hadn’t happened the first time, not with the unexpected pregnancy and the rushed courthouse marriage. Now, he thought perhaps Caroline wasn’t the only one being given a second chance. Hearing the hesitancy in her voice, he somehow pushed past his own tears, giving her the answer to the question she hadn’t been able to ask. “Sweetheart, would you…allow me… the honor of…,” he gulped, running his hand across his mouth, removing the salty tears. “Ahem, walking you… down the… aisle?”
Caroline cupped her hand over her mouth, unable to stop the gut-wrenching sobs. This was it, her dream was coming true. She sucked in a couple of gulps of air, unable to regain her composure. “Y-Yes, I’d really… I’d love that… Thank you. I love you… both so much.”

“I love you, too, baby girl. We both do,” he said, kissing his wife’s forehead. “We’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay, thank you. I’ll make sure to… tell Chet when he calls… me tonight,” she said, still sniffling while she tried to catch her breath.

“Good, and tell him that Mim and I are happy about this, alright?”

“I sure will. I can’t wait, ‘bye.”

“Goodbye, Caroline.”

E!
Chapter 6

Iris sat quietly in a chair by the sofa and read while waiting for Johnny to wake up. When she heard a soft groan, she closed the magazine and stepped over closer to him, unable to resist the temptation to brush his bangs off his moist brow.

Johnny felt the gentle touch, and his eyes began to flutter open. He had assumed the sensation came from his favorite emergency room nurse, having grown accustomed to Dixie’s tender caresses whenever he was hospitalized. He blinked his eyes a few times, becoming more aware of his surroundings. Seeing the familiar face staring down at him reminded him of where he was. “Oh… Yea, hey…”

“Are you hurting?” She asked, assuming that the light sheen of sweat on his face was the result of his discomfort since the temperature in the room was cool.

He stretched his aching back, his grimace answering her question.

“You can have more pain medication as soon as you eat something.”

“Thanks,” he stated, forcing himself into a sitting position. “Argh, this hurts.”

“I know it must. Dixie said you took quite a fall. Wanna talk about it while I heat up the soup?”

Johnny quirked one eyebrow at her, grinning lopsidedly. “Soup? Your homemade vegetable soup?”

“I’ve got it thawing out in the kitchen. It’ll be ready as soon as I can heat it up.” She smiled at the young man, enjoying his obvious appreciation of her culinary skills.

“It’s been a long time since I enjoyed some o’ that,” he said, slowly rising to his feet. “Um, do ya mind if I soak in a tub of hot water while you heat it up? Maybe that’ll loosen up these stiff muscles.”

“That’s a good idea. Everything is in the same place,” she said, offering him her shoulder to lean on. He politely declined, choosing to use the furniture to ambulate across the room and down the hallway. “I’m a creature of habit,” she called out to him.

“I know, and I love ya for it,” he said, flipping on the light in the aqua colored bathroom. Johnny opened up the cabinet, removing a towel, then reached for the hot water faucet. “Shit!” He cursed, bending his knees to lower himself enough to reach the water faucets. Eventually, he had them turned on, then set about slowly removing his clothes. When he looked down at his shirt, he realized his light blue shirt had been replaced with a white one normally worn by orderlies. He remembered that his uniform had been torn as he was falling through the protruding limbs of the tree, then had been cut up by Brice who had examined him. “Oh well…”

As the water continued to run, he heard a gentle knock on the bathroom door.

“Thorn?”

“Yea?” He responded, opening the door only a crack to hide his nakedness.

“If you’ll hand me your clothes, I’ll wash them for you.”
“Um… Okay,” he hesitated momentarily, then used the side of his foot to push the pile of dirty laundry through the doorway. “Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” she smiled, bending over to pick up the dirty garments. She knew that he was unaware that his nude backside was being reflected in the bathroom mirror, displayed for her to see. She would’ve giggled, had it not been for the bruising along his back and across his buttocks. The discoloration was a reminder that she needed to get the soup heated. She wanted to feed him something healthy and then help him get to bed.

“I know you’re modest, Thorn, but just wrap a towel around your waist when you get out of the tub. I’ll have the soup ready so you can eat and take another pill. You’ll rest better on a full stomach. It’ll take at least an hour or more for your clothes to be ready, and I’m sure you don’t want to sit in the tub that long.”

“Ahh… Okay,” he mumbled, realizing he had no other choice.

Half an hour later, Johnny was slowly drying himself off, cursing in whispers at the pain the action caused. “Ssshhhhht!” He hissed, hoping Iris had not overheard him. Eventually, he managed to wrap the towel around his waist, easing down the short hallway a bit easier than before his bath. His muscles, though still aching, felt less tense.

“Soup’s hot.”

He grinned at her, feeling the need to cover his bare chest, but having nothing except his own arms to use. “I feel a little, ah, underdressed.”

“No worries. It’s just the two of us,” Iris responded, pouring him a glass of tea, placing it on the kitchen table as he pulled out the chair nearest the wall.

“Mind if I sit here?” He asked, gesturing to the place where he used to eat when he had stayed with Iris during his younger years.

“The last rear end that sat there was your skinny butt,” she chuckled, pushing his bottle of pills towards his bowl. “And I’ve got some saltine crackers, too. Want some?”

“Nah, I’m not that hungry,” he said, tentatively taking a bite of the steaming meal. “Mmmm, delicious.”

Iris smiled at him, bashfully nodding her head. She cleared her throat, taking a seat with her own bowl and glass of tea. “Ahem… So have you decided for sure what you’re gonna do?”

Johnny swallowed hard, reaching for his glass of tea to soothe his throat. “Yea…,” he hesitated, taking another bite as he tried to figure out how to explain it to her. “I’m gonna hide out for a while, at least until I know Waite isn’t after me.”

“How will you hide out? You’re a public servant, Thorn, so you can’t just disappear.”

“Why not?”

“Because taking some time off to go talk to Lily is one thing, but you make it sound like you’re gonna go hide out with that bunch of religious freaks! How long are you talkin’ about, hiding out? What will you tell your captain? Your friends?” She pushed her reddish gray hair off of her forehead in frustration. “You can’t just go into hiding for another ten years!”

Johnny took a few more bites, quickly finishing the soup and downing his pill with the remainder of
his tea. “I don’t know how long it’ll take, but I’ll stay up there as long as I have to.” Carefully, he leaned back in his chair. “I have friends and coworkers today, but I won’t have ‘em for much longer,” he said, blinking hard to hide his emotions.

“You can’t be serious!”

“I can’t exactly tell them the truth, can I? What would they think of me?” He shook his unruly hair. “No, I’d rather have ‘em hate me, than for ‘em to know the truth.” He stared at the scratches on his hands, reminders of what might have been his final rescue. “It’s just better for everyone this way.” He didn’t want to mention the fact that if Waite came after him, then those he loved could be in danger. “Better for you, too.”

“I’m not afraid of that sonofabitch.”

“You would be if you had seen what he did to Phillip.” Johnny worried a finger across his upper lip. “Why don’t you come with me?” He asked, sincerely worried for her safety.

Iris could tell that Johnny was trying to change the subject of their conversation from himself to her. She reached over, grasping his thin hand in her own and redirecting their talk. “Thorn… Don’t. There’s no shame in the truth. You’re not at fault. Waite and his cronies did it, not-“

“And I could’ve sent them to jail, but I was too damn scared to do the right thing.” He looked up at her, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I’m just a damn coward. A good for nothing, goddamn coward.” He bowed his head, in a silent apology to her for his cursing outburst.

“You’re a firefighter and a paramedic. You run into burning buildings when everyone else is running the other way. That’s not a coward, Thorn. That’s a hero. You’re a hero!”

“NO!” He nearly shouted, slamming his open palm down on the table, regretting how the action made Iris jump back. “S-sorry,” he mumbled. “Just don’t call me that. Don’t ever call me that.”

Understanding made its way across Iris’ pale face. She finally began to see why he had made his career choice a few years ago. She raised her trembling fingers to cover her gaping mouth. “Ohmygod,” she murmured. “That’s why you went to the Fire Academy. That’s why you’ve been doing this dangerous work all these years. Risking your life is some sort of penance, isn’t it?”

Johnny didn’t answer her, staring at the table for a long moment as he pondered both her question and his response. “I saw a man die before my eyes, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. All I’ve been tryin’ to do is help others who are injured or trapped. I can’t save ‘em all, but…” He stood up slowly, carrying his dishes to the sink. “But at least now, I try to do somethin’. ” He began running hot water, pouring a little dish soap into the stream. “I’ll wash up the dishes while my clothes get ready. Then you can… Um, you can take me home.”

“I won’t do it.”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “Please, I need to be in my own bed. I don’t need to be… leachin’ off you, again.”

“I’ll take you home, if that’s what you want, even though you know you need someone to stay with you tonight. But I won’t let you lose what you’ve worked so hard for. You’ve accomplished too much to just throw it all away because of your ego!”

“My EGO?” He shouted, twisting his torso to look at her, immediately regretting the painful action. His entire career had been spent pretending to be macho and self-confident while he performed his duties. Never did he imagine that the façade he was hiding behind might be misconstrued as
“I don’t have an ego!”

“The hell you don’t,” she retorted with fire in her eyes. “You’re more worried about what your friends will think of you if they knew the truth, than you are about hurting them by walking out on them. So I guess you’re right. You ARE a coward.” She turned her back on him, preparing to step out of the room, but hesitating just long enough to say what he needed to hear. “What you did ten years ago was out of necessity, but what you’re doing now is the definition of cowardice.” She walked out of the room, patting her cheeks with the backs of her hands. She needed to wash her face before she took him back to his apartment. Her time with him had not gone as planned.

Sniffling, he whispered to himself. “I’m not walkin’ out on ‘em... If I make ‘em hate me, then I’m not walkin’ out on ‘em.” He looked up, seeing that he was alone in the small kitchen. As he rinsed the bowl and spoon, hot tears burned streaks down his reddened face. With that task completed, he dried his hands on a dish towel, then leaned against the counter, his palms flat against the porcelain basin. He sucked in a ragged breath, squeezing his eyes closed, forcing out the remaining tears. “It’s best if everyone I love hates me. My family at 51’s and… And my family here, too,” he whimpered, his sad brown eyes staring longingly down the empty hallway.

E!

Johnny waited for over an hour, hoping Iris would emerge from the bedroom she had prepared for him. When she didn’t, he decided to go find her.

“Hey,” Johnny said, leaning against the doorframe of the bedroom. Iris was sitting on the bed, looking at the framed photograph, the one with both Johnny and Lily standing on a river bank with the afternoon sun shining on their smiling faces.

“Are you ready to go?” Iris asked, running her finger along the glass as if the action somehow connected her to her estranged daughter.

Guilt from his earlier behavior had overwhelmed Johnny, and even though he had gotten dressed, he realized that he needed to stay with Iris, at least for one night. It seemed that she needed his presence as much as he needed her assistance.

“No... Is the offer of this bed still available?”

Looking up from the photograph, her green eyes locked with his remorseful brown ones. “Always, Thorn. For you, always.” She stepped away from the bed, allowing him to gingerly sit down. He toed off his shoes and slowly leaned back against the pillow.

“What changed your mind?”

Johnny tried to lace his fingers behind his head, but hissed at the way his sore muscles protested the movement. Grunting with the effort, he shifted his position and rested his arms at his sides. He stared at the ceiling, choosing his words carefully.

“I guess...” he sighed, struggling to explain himself. “I guess I realized that I needed to spend a little time with you, if you don’t mind.” He turned his face to his left, seeing Iris’ eyes blinking rapidly. “I’ve missed you, this place... Spending time here with you.”

“I’ve missed you, t-too,” she replied in a hitching whisper.

“How long has it been since you talked to her?”

Iris inhaled deeply, thinking back to her last conversation with her daughter. She sat down beside
him as she calculated the time. “It’s been nearly two years,” she replied, her eyes staring at the picture on the nightstand. “She called me on my birthday.”

Johnny didn’t make a sound. He realized that Iris was struggling to tell him the story of her last contact with Lily.

“I begged her to come home… But she said she couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t… Or wouldn’t?” He asked, curious about what Iris meant.

Iris shifted her gaze away from the picture and into the face of man she had grown to love since he was a teenager. She knew that he had been thrust into a grown-up world overnight. He had been a witness to the cruelty that humans can inflict on each other, and she could still see the pain in those caring eyes. He looked at her, waiting for an answer to his question.

“I don’t know… I honestly don’t know, Thorn.” She stood up, walking over to the window and staring out at the sherbet colors of the setting sun. “I don’t know which I’d rather it be, you know?”

Johnny tried to turn his face to follow her as she walked around the foot of the bed, but he stopped the movement, tracking her with only his eyes. The pain was still there in his upper back and neck.

“What do you mean?”

“Well… If she CAN’T come home, then that means that she’s being held against her will. But if she WON’T come home, then it’s her preference to stay away from me.” She turned to look down at Johnny. “I don’t know which is worse.”

“Oh… Well, maybe I can find out.”

Iris closed her eyes, damning the flow of tears that threatened. “Thorn, please…” She sighed, opening her eyes and taking a seat on the edge of the bed. “I can’t lose you, too.”

“Heyyy,” he drawled out, reaching over to grasp her hand. “You won’t lose me. It’s the perfect place for me to hide out for a while. Waite won’t look for me there.”

“Thorn, he isn’t looking for you HERE. He’s just returned back THERE himself. That means he thinks he’s free and clear. He has no reason to come after you, so you have no reason to leave,” she said, her voice pleading for Johnny to see her point of view. “Or to continue to distance yourself from your parents.”

“You don’t know that,” he countered.

“What does he have to gain? What purpose would it serve to come after you?”

“He said he would.” Johnny felt her grip tighten on his hand and knew that she didn’t want to hear what he had to say. “We’ve been through this before. I saw what he did, and I know what he told me he’d do to me and my family if I ever told anyone.” He released her hand before he continued. “I can’t take the chance.”

“Thorn, you aren’t making any sense. You moved out here to keep him from finding your parents when you didn’t even give him your real name. You’ve been living a great life here, out in the open, for the last ten years and you NEVER worried about him finding you until now. Why? Are you planning on staying in Tehachapi for eternity?”

“I made the mistake of telling him I was from Montana. I had to lie about my identity, so I just used
the name you and Lily had been calling me. I figured he’d never find me in California, especially if he didn’t know my real name, but I couldn’t risk going back to Montana, even under an assumed identity.”

Iris wanted to laugh out loud. “I KNOW all of this, Thorn. He won’t find you, not here, not anywhere, because I don’t think he’s looking for you.”

“You don’t THINK… But you don’t KNOW!” He said, his frustration growing. He knew she was right, but he was still afraid, and that was something he didn’t want to admit.

“What’s the real reason, Thorn? What’s the real reason you want to leave everything behind and go hide out in the wilderness with a… a cult?”

Johnny stared at her, wondering if it was time to tell her the truth. His breathing rate increased and his heart began to pound.

Iris, sensing his distress, reached over and caressed the side of his face, just as she had comforted him on that fateful night. “Please, Thorn, please tell me what it is that you’re hiding.”

He closed his eyes, leaning into her caress. The warmth and softness of her hand reminded him of his mother’s touch. He needed to reconnect with his parents, but there was one thing stopping him – William Waite. He swallowed back the bile that burned his throat, and took a cleansing breath before he began.

“You won’t get mad at me?” He asked, his eyes making his face look more like a scolded puppy than a grown man.

“Never,” she whispered, feeling as if she was finally making progress with him.

“I already knew that Waite had resurfaced.”

“You WHAT?”

Johnny grimaced, knowing that she was going to feel lied to. “I said… I already knew that Waite had returned. I knew before you got that letter from Kizzy.”

Iris felt like a bucket of cold water had been thrown in her face. “Wha… But… How?”

Johnny gripped the bedspread, kneading it nervously in his hand. “I had already been contacted… By, uh… By Lieutenant Crockett.”

Iris’ chin dropped at the revelation. If what Johnny was saying was true, then why had he reacted the way he did in her shop when she had shown him the letter from her friend? Why hadn’t he told her then? And, more importantly, why was he telling her now?

“I’m sorry… I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you the whole thing when you showed me that letter, but… I hadn’t decided what to do then.”

“And now you have? You’re gonna run away from everything you’ve worked so hard for and everyone who loves you? You’re gonna let that sonofabitch take you away from me, too? No, Thorn. NO!” Iris cried. Her hand flew to her mouth and her shoulders began to heave.

“Hey, hey, I’m not leaving you,” he soothed, rubbing the back of his hand down the side of her arm. “I just need some time to think… A peaceful place to think.”
“To think about what?” Iris’ eyebrows pulled themselves together, narrowing her eyes. “Wait a minute… Why did a Lieutenant contact you?” She asked, suspiciously.

Johnny knew that he had to explain himself to her, so he inhaled deeply and forged ahead.

“Lieutenant Ronald Crockett is a detective with the LA Police Department. The District Attorney back there found out my real name, AND searched the records of the DMV and found my address here in Los Angeles.” He stared hard at Iris, knowing that what he was about to say was going to upset her. “Only three people back there knew my real name. Three. You, Lily, and Kizzy. I know that you and Lily didn’t call the DA and tell him, so that means that Kizzy did it.”

“Kizzy, but why? Why would she do that?”

“Because she wants him to pay for what he did, and the DA won’t prosecute him unless I’m willing to testify.”

Johnny waited for understanding to appear on her face. Slowly, she rose to a standing position, turning her back to him. When she spoke, her voice hitched.

“Testify? At Waite’s… trial?”

“Yes… It’s on the docket for February, but there won’t be a trial unless I testify.”

“Trial?” She repeated. “For… Murder?”

“Yes… It seems that the other man who was with him that day made some sort of death bed confession. He told the DA the whole sordid story about what they did to Phillip. I’m assumin’ that when the DA told Kizzy that they had gotten a break in her son’s case, she told him about me. Don’t you see? Kizzy told the authorities how to find me because she knows they need all the evidence they can get against Waite.” He turned his face away from Iris slightly, swallowing hard to control his emotions. “There were three people who saw what he did to Phillip. Two are dead, including Phillip, and that leaves me. I have the only evidence against Waite for the crime.”

“Murder, Thorn. You witnessed Phillip’s MURDER.” Iris bowed her head, remembering the sound of Kizzy’s wails of grief when her son’s body had been found.

“If I testify, Kizzy’s gonna know that I had the proof all along. She’ll be devastated.”

“Do you still have them?” Iris asked, knowing that a lot of time had passed since that day.

Johnny only nodded, thinking about the small cylinder he had kept hidden all these years. “Yea… Still in my old camera bag.”

E!

“1-2-3-4 CLEAR!”

‘Zzchunk.’

“No conversion,” Roy shouted as Chet resumed CPR and Marco assisted with artificial ventilation.

The three-alarm fire had been blazing strong for over two hours before the responding stations finally got the upper hand. Just when it appeared that they would have it under control, part of the upper floor of the apartment complex gave way, sending three firemen into the smoldering abyss. They
were quickly dragged to safety within seconds of the collapse, but the last man brought out had been unresponsive.

Dwyer had left the scene with one of the injured men from 99’s, while another squad had taken care of the second code I. Roy was left with the most seriously injured man, a boot from Station 69. His partner had tried to keep him from falling, but had been unable to hold onto the younger man as the roof gave way.

“Again!” Roy shouted to Mike, while Hank manned the biophone.

“1-2-3-4 CLEAR!” Mike shouted, his voice sending Marco and Chet leaning back on their heels, relinquishing all contact with their victim.

The steady rhythm on the data scope let Roy know that the young lineman was trying to stay with them. “He’s back. Let’s get ‘im out of here.”

The trip to Rampart was fraught with anxiety. The lineman coded again, just as the ambulance was beginning to back into the bay at the emergency entrance. Roy rode the rails of the gurney, giving the young man chest compressions while the orderlies rushed him down the corridor.

“Three,” Dixie directed, seeing Joe Early rushing from the elevator doors as soon as they opened. “In here, Joe.” It had been a long shift for not only the fire department, but the hospital staff, too.

Twenty minutes later, a dejected Roy stepped tiredly into the hallway. His once light blue uniform shirt now saturated with his sweat. He looked into the smut-covered face of Chet, who had driven the squad to Rampart to retrieve both of 51’s paramedics.

“Roy?”

Roy merely shook his head, leaning his back against the wall. “We tried but… We couldn’t bring him back,” he said in a husky whisper. “He was only 23 years old.” His head fell back against the cold tile wall, sending a chill down his spine. “Just a damn boot.”

Chet swallowed back the bile he was beginning to taste. He was exhausted, frustrated, and now a sense of defeat blanketed him. “I’m sorry, man. We gave him all we had,” he said, trying to console his shiftmate.

“Yea, well… It wasn’t enough,” he groused. “Where’s Dwyer?”

“Bathroom, tryin’ to clean up a little. Dr. Brackett thinks his guy will recover, but he’s gonna have some bad scarring.”

“At least he’ll go home to his family,” Roy said, exhaling loudly. “Let’s go.”

The two men lumbered down the corridor, meeting Dwyer as he exited the bathroom. He recognized the look on Roy’s face, and simply gave him a sympathetic look. The ride back to 51’s was quiet, each man silently praying for their fallen brother, and grateful for those who had survived the disaster.

As Roy backed the squad into the bay, Chet glimpsed at his watch. It was a couple of minutes until nine o’clock. He and Caroline had an agreement that he would never call after nine o’clock, as he didn’t want to wake Corrie. If he didn’t call her while he was on shift, then it meant that he was out on a run. He still had a couple of minutes, but he had no idea how the conversation between Caroline and the Marks had gone, and he didn’t think he could handle any more bad news tonight.
He shuffled towards the locker room, hoping to get cleaned up and have a peaceful night, but the klaxon gods had other plans. As the two red vehicles pulled out of the apparatus bay on another run, he tightened his chin strap. This was going to be a very long night.

E!

The following morning, an exhausted but excited Marco Lopez rushed out of the station as soon as his relief arrived. He didn’t want to miss attending Mass with his family, and Beverly had agreed to go with them. His heart was pounding with joy and excitement knowing that today he would be surrounded by those who meant the most to him.

Chet didn’t feel the same sense of urgency to get home. He yawned as he dragged his duffel bag onto his shoulder, and walked towards his van. Because he hadn’t called Caroline last night, he had no idea what awaited him when he returned home. He needed sleep and food before he talked to her. He just hoped that Mim and Greg had been able to talk to her and explain their views on the engagement, and that Caroline hadn’t changed her mind about wanting to marry him.

Opening the door, he tossed his bag into the passenger’s seat, remembering the day he had taken Corrie for tacos. The child had sat in his passenger’s seat, wearing his Station 51 baseball cap, her eyelids drooping beneath the oversized cap. He smiled wistfully as he drove away from the station, his heart aching for what he might have lost - the beautiful woman he loved more than life itself and the chance to be the earthly father of the little girl who had him wrapped around her finger.

Back inside the station, Roy piled his dirty laundry into his bag, dropping it onto the bench in front of the lockers. He then began collecting his partner’s belongings.

“Want me to help you get Johnny’s car to his apartment?”

Roy turned at the sound of Mike’s voice. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Do you have his keys?”

Roy pulled the Rover’s keys out of the side pocket of Johnny’s duffel bag and held them up.

“Alright, you drive it and I’ll meet you over there. Then I’ll bring you back here to get your car,” Mike suggested as the two of them walked across the back parking lot. “Is he at your house, or did he go home?”

Roy shot Mike a glance that let him know the subject was a sensitive one. “At his place, I guess. I asked about him at Rampart on our first run over there after Dwyer got here, and Sally said that some lady had come and picked Johnny up.”

“Ohhh, some lady, huh?”

“Yea,” Roy replied, his voice clearly sarcastic.

E!

Chet pulled his van into his usual parking spot, grateful to have gotten home safely. He was so tired that he didn’t remember most of the drive. He trudged across the courtyard, casting a long look at Caroline’s apartment door. When it opened, he felt his heart leap into his throat.

Caroline had been watching for her fiancé to return from the station. There was so much she wanted to tell him, but the dark circles beneath his eyes and the slump in his shoulders told her that his shift had not been a good one.
“Oh, Chet,” she said, hurrying over to the place where he stood at the base of the stairs. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Realizing how he must look and smell, he stepped away from her when she reached out to him. “Sorry, babe, but…”

His breath hitched when his thoughts ran quickly over the list of disasters that had befallen his brothers. He pinched the bridge of his nose, forcing his breathing to calm. “Y-yea,” he whispered, looking into her worried eyes. “I’m just exhausted, but… But Johnny got hurt.” He quickly held up his hand to settle her down before she could interrupt him. “He’ll be okay; he fell out of a tree. He’ll be out for a few shifts. But…” He hesitated, sighing as the back of his throat burned. “We were at a three-alarm fire and… And the upper floor collapsed and…”

Caroline saw how difficult the conversation was for him. Instinctively, she reached out for his hand, curling her fingers around his palm.

“Station 69 lost their newest man. He was just a boot… A kid,” he said, returning the squeeze he felt her give him. “Just a goddamn kid.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.” She turned her head back to the open door of her apartment. “I need to go check on Corrie, but if you want to talk—”

“Nah,” he said, waving his free hand in front of him. “I just need some food and sleep. I’ll… I’ll be okay.”

“Mom and Dad Marks are coming over today. They, uh… They wanted to take the three of us to lunch.”

Chet heaved a sigh. “I don’t know, Caroline. I’m not gonna be much company.”

“You’re tired,” she said, cupping her small hand along his jaw line, caressing his whiskered cheek. “We’ll bring you take out. Um,” she wasn’t sure that it was the right time to tell him about Corrie’s trip to Disneyland, but she decided to forge ahead. “Pop and Grammy want to take Corrie to Disneyland tomorrow. She’ll be going with them after lunch. We’ll have a couple of days to ourselves… If you feel like it,” she said, unsure of how the last twenty-four hours might have impacted his desires.

“Are you gonna tell ‘em ‘bout us?” He asked in a husky voice.

“I already did.” Her face beamed with joy. “They’re so happy for us, Chet. They even want to pay for the wedding. Isn’t that great?”

Forgetting how dirty he was, Chet nearly collapsed in her arms, inhaling the scent of her shampoo when she threw her arms around him and rested her chin on his shoulder. He enveloped her into his smoky embrace, kissing her lightly on her cheek. He felt the dam behind his emotions begin to crumble, and he allowed himself to cry. He wept in her arms, crying for the life that had been lost the previous night, and the life that he felt had been given back to him by Caroline’s announcement. Tears of joy and tears of pain mixed as they streaked his smutty face, leaving his blue eyes red and his face a combination of soot and damp skin.

“Oh, baby. I love you so much,” he crooned, finally releasing her. “Let me get cleaned up and get a couple of hours of sleep. Then I’ll go out to eat with all of you.”

“Are you sure?”
“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

E!

“Thorn, are you sure you can manage those stairs at your apartment?”

Johnny looked over at Iris sitting behind the steering wheel of her car. They were about to back out of her driveway, and he knew that she wanted him to stay with her a few more days, but he needed some time alone to think about what lay ahead for him. Could he really provide the evidence for the state in William Waite’s trial? Would he be able to stand up against the man that had induced such fear in him as a teenaged boy, so far from home?

“I’ll be fine. I feel a lot better, and I still have pain meds.” He quickly held up his hand to silence her protests. “And I’m not gonna drive ‘til I’ve been off of ‘em for twenty-four hours.” He looked straight ahead, feeling the car lurch when she shifted into reverse. “I know the rules.”

Iris backed out into the street, shifting her car into drive with an exasperated grin. He still had the same personality he had when they had met after she picked him up as a young hitch-hiker years before. “I just don’t want anything to happen to you. I still think of you as a kid, I guess.”

“You always will,” he snickered.

“You’ll let me know when you’re ready to go back to the station to get your car, right?”

Johnny opened his mouth, ready to explain how the guys at 51’s always looked out for each other. When something happened to one of them, the others would rally around him; meals would be prepared, chores completed, vehicles returned to their rightful homes. His mouth snapped shut when he realized that he could no longer count on his shiftmates. Their relationship with him was changing, and that was difficult to accept, even when he knew that his own actions were the cause. “Ahh, yea... Yea, I’ll let ya know. I appreciate everything,” he said without looking over at her.

Traffic was light because it was Sunday morning, so the trip to his apartment didn’t take as long as it normally would have taken. He looked at his watch as Iris turned into the parking lot of his complex. When he looked back up, he saw a familiar sight that elicited a lopsided smile of appreciation, and a lot of remorse. “Oh, I guess Roy must’ve brought the Rover home for me,” he said, noticing his car parked in the corner spot, nearest his unit.

Iris smiled, grateful that Johnny still had friends who were willing to assist him. She knew how lonely he had felt at one time in his life. She hoped that those dark days would never return for him. That’s when she knew that she had to stop him from carrying out his plan.

“Here, let me help you get out.”

“Nah, I’ve got this,” Johnny said, stretching his long legs out of the open car door.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Iris chuckled, opening her own door. “I’m not gonna let you fall.”

Across the parking lot, unnoticed by Johnny and Iris, Mike sat in his rental car waiting for Roy to return Johnny’s keys. He had watched Roy standing in front of Johnny’s door for nearly a full minute, knocking. Suddenly, a familiar face emerged from a vehicle he didn’t recognize. Mike reached for his door handle, preparing to walk over to the vehicle Johnny was exiting, but he saw Roy walking quickly around the corner of the gray building. The senior paramedic stopped suddenly, and Mike was shocked by the curse he could read escaping from Roy’s lips.

Behind the corner of the building, Roy bounded down the stairs, wondering where Johnny might
have spent the night. He ran his hand through his thinning hair, headed to the place where he had seen Mike park his car, but when he rounded the corner of the building, he came face to face with a scene he couldn’t explain. Iris Campbell was helping Johnny out of her car.

“What the hell?”
A/N: Thank you all for reading and for sharing your comments with me. This has been a long journey through this series, and I wanted to let you all know how much your support means to me. I’ve had several moments where I considered abandoning this series, or at least allowing someone else to finish it, but your encouragement has kept me going. I sincerely thank you from the bottom of my heart. This chapter is a little longer than usual. I hope you don’t mind.

Warnings: Sexual innuendos, extreme language, and violence.

Chapter 7

Johnny and Roy stood staring at each other, neither man knowing what to say.

“Duh, um… Hi, Roy,” Johnny stammered, wishing he could think of a plausible explanation for why Joanne’s former boss was returning him to his apartment. “Thanks for bringing the Rover over.”

“Rover over?” Roy repeated. “Geez, you’re a poet and don’t even know it, huh?” He commented, mockingly. He shifted his eyes from his partner to Iris, questioning her silently.

“He’s still on pain meds,” Iris tried to joke. “I, um, I was on my way to work and saw him walking. So, I picked him up.”

Roy’s eyebrows knit together above his blue eyes. He felt a twinge of doubt forming in his mind, not fully believing her story. Slowly, he looked back into the anxious face of his partner. “What? You’re lady friend wouldn’t bring you home?” Roy asked sarcastically, unaware that Iris was actually the woman who had picked Johnny up from Rampart the day before.

“Weell,” Johnny drawled, stepping a little closer to his building. He forced his trademark grin to decorate his face. “You know how ladies want me to stick around longer, but I’m a free spirit, Roy. I can’t stay in one place too long.” He looked at Iris, using his eyes to beg her not to reveal their secret.

“Take care of yourself, John,” Iris said with a wave before returning to her place behind the wheel of her car.

Johnny raised his hand slightly. “Thanks for the lift,” he said, clutching the key that was suddenly thrust into his open palm by Roy. He looked quickly at his best friend, pain filling his heart for what he was going to lose. “Thanks for bringing the car back. I really do appreciate it.”

“Sure thing,” Roy said, watching as Johnny moved stiffly towards the stairs. “Need any help?”

“Nah, I’m good. Tell Jo and the kids I said hello.”

Roy looked back at the parking lot, seeing Mike stepping out of his vehicle with a confused look on his face. He shook his head slowly at the concerned engineer, walking over to the place where Mike was parked. Roy still couldn’t wrap his head around what he had just seen and heard.

“Was that Iris?” Mike asked, his eyebrows lifting, wrinkling his forehead.

“Yea,” Roy explained, opening the car door. “Said she saw Johnny walking home and stopped to
pick him up, but why didn’t he call one of us to pick him up? Did he really think he could make it home by walking in his condition?”

“Good point.” Mike thought for a moment, then looked over at his friend. “Of course that all depends on how far he was walking,” he snorted as he reclaimed his position in the driver’s seat. “Isn’t she out early for a Sunday?”

Roy looked wistfully through the windshield. “That’s just it. She said she was on her way to work and saw him walking. He said his latest fling wouldn’t bring him home…,” he hesitated, thinking for a moment. “But Iris doesn’t open the shop on Sundays.”

“Maybe it’s a special occasion.”

Roy couldn’t stop his mind from reeling with possibilities. “Something’s not right. I don’t know what that partner of mine is up to, but something just isn’t right.”

“Well, do you want to drive by Bloomer’s to see if she’s there?”

Roy thought for a moment. “Yea… It isn’t that much out of the way. Let’s go.”

Inside his apartment, Johnny carefully reached up to the shelf in his closet, hissing at the pain the effort caused. He pushed a couple of boxes aside, pulling out the dusty leather camera bag that he hadn’t looked at in years. At one time, it had been his pride and joy, the result of a year of hard work on a ranch to save up enough money to make the purchase. The zoom lens had been a Christmas gift from his parents, an investment in his future career as a photo journalist.

He carried it over to his bed, took a seat, and stared at the worn case poised in his lap. It held far more than just his first camera; it held memories that he had tried for a decade to bury. Now it seemed that the ghosts from that time were going to haunt him for eternity.

Carefully he unzipped the bag, removing the old camera. He shuddered involuntarily as he thought about the last photographs he had ever taken with the instrument. How he had managed to take pictures under such duress, he didn’t know. Beneath the camera lay the black cylinder that he knew held the images that the DA needed. He also knew that if he turned them over to the authorities, he would then be forced to go back to the place that he had sworn he would never return. He inhaled deeply, rolling the small canister between his thumb and index finger. He remembered every minute of that day he had packed up his camera and undeveloped film, preparing to head west for an uncertain future. He had been so afraid of William Waite and his accomplices back then. Now, he wasn’t as much afraid of them as he was embarrassed by his inaction on that foggy morning. If he had only done the right thing ten years ago, then this nightmare might be over. Lily might never have run away to join a cult. He might have returned to the reservation in Montana, and he would never have missed so much time with his parents.

He stared at the small container for several long moments. He didn’t know for sure that he had captured the images he thought he had. He remembered hiding among the underbrush, zooming in on the activities happening along the bend in the river. His heart was beating so fast and hard that he was afraid that his pictures would be blurry. What if he hadn’t captured the grisly scene on film? What if his running to California had all been for nothing? Still, whether he had documented the events of that day or not, he knew what he had seen and heard. Sound carries well across water, especially on a foggy morning, and he had heard every despicable word.
Johnny had awakened early on that Saturday morning, a habit from his time spent on the ranch during his childhood. He walked outside to breathe in the fresh cool air; mornings had always been his favorite time of the day. The minute he saw the patches of fog in the distance, he knew what he wanted to do.

Quietly, he gathered his camera bag and headed out the door. The place where he, along with Iris and Lily, were staying was only about a mile from a river bridge. With his knowledge of the outdoors, he knew that the fog would be a little thicker near the water. He smiled to himself as he thought about the pictures he would take of the bridge shrouded in fog. If he was lucky, he might even be able to sell them to a magazine for a few bucks.

Just as he had anticipated, the fog was drifting upwards from the water towards the steel girders arching over the river. He set up his camera on the northern side of the bridge and began clicking the shutter button. He couldn’t help, but grin as he thought about how the pictures were going to look. This would be his best photo shoot yet, the shots that would get him noticed, or so he hoped.

In the distance, he heard mumbling and the creaking sound of vehicle doors opening and slamming shut. Having visited the bridge before, he knew that there was a small boat ramp on the southern side of the bridge. He assumed that someone was out early to do a little fishing on this peaceful Saturday morning. Then the strangled sound of a painful wail sent Johnny’s heart slamming around inside his chest and lodging in his throat. He left his camera atop the tripod and stepped behind the underbrush. Fear enveloped him, sucking the breath out of his lungs and leaving him unable to move his feet. His dark eyes widened in horror as he realized what he was watching.

He wanted to rush to the aid of the victim, but he was frozen in place, grateful to be hidden from the view of the men gathering at the tailgate of the pick-up truck, a short distance down the riverbank.

He didn’t know what to do to help the young man, knowing that he was about to watch something awful happen. Suddenly, he decided to use the new zoom lens he had purchased. Perhaps he could take a picture of the offenders to help the young victim identify his attackers when he went to the police. Johnny took aim with the lens, focusing it on the red pick-up truck parked precariously close to the river’s edge. The victim left along the edge of the river that morning had not survived. He had died a slow painful death, and young John Gage had witnessed it all.

Back in his bedroom in Los Angeles, Johnny squeezed his eyes shut, forcing back the painful images of the events of that morning. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t rid himself of the sights, sounds, and smells of that event. His co-workers had always known that he hated water rescues more than any other kind, but they didn’t know why. It was the smell of the water, the feel of the cool damp breeze blowing through his hair, and knowing that someone’s life was on the line... Those types of rescues always brought back the same sense of fear and foreboding, even when the victim survived.

Realizing that he was in a dangerous position and that there was nothing he could do to help the victim, Johnny quickly and quietly gathered up his camera equipment. He looped the straps of his bag across his body, and scrambled up the river bank, cowering down below the level of the underbrush. When he reached the highway, he began walking swiftly in a northerly direction, away from the bridge and the horrible scene of violence and death.

In the distance behind him, Johnny heard the rumble of a pick-up truck, and immediately turned
around to head towards the oncoming vehicle. Because there had been no other vehicles on the road, he assumed that the truck he heard approaching belonged to the men he had seen commit the heinous crime. Not wanting them to know that he had been in their vicinity, he decided to make it appear that he was heading in that direction, not retreating from it. Unknowingly, he had saved his own life by that action.

A few moments later, Waite had seen Johnny walking at a fast pace along the side of the road, and stopped to question him. Seeing the older man, and recognizing him as a local politician he had seen around town, sent a sense of absolute terror like none he had ever known surging through his spine. The deep voice startled him and he turned around to see the two men; the driver was William ‘Bill’ Waite, and the man sitting in the passenger’s seat was the local Chief of Police. The sight of them caused Johnny’s stomach to churn, and he feared he would vomit in their presence.

“Whatcha doin’ out so early this mornin’?” Waite questioned, leaning his rotund upper body out of the open window of the driver’s side door. The man in the passenger’s seat kept silent, allowing his evil sneer to speak for him.

“N-nothin’, sir. I was jus’ gonna take pictures o’ the fog on the river. It… It makes that bridge look kinda spooky,” Johnny said, waving at the structure ahead of him, his voice sounding as shaky as his hands were.

“Mmm hmm… You ain’t from here, are ya?”

“No, sir. I’m from Mon- um, Montana.” Johnny gulped, regretting his answer, but it was too late to take back the words. He had already cut his long hair, before he had arrived, hoping to fit in better with the locals. The last thing he wanted to do was let people here know that he was of mixed heritage. Iris had recommended a crew cut, something he despised, but had agreed to do. After all, he could let it grow out again as soon as he left this area.

“Mmm hmm,” Waite repeated his earlier grunt, eyeing the skinny youngster up and down. “You got a name, boy?”

“J-John, um,” he thought quickly, not wanting to fully disclose his identity to the stranger. Instead, he blurted out the name Iris and Lily had given him along their journey. “Thornapple… John Thornapple.” He swallowed hard, not liking the sneaky grin Waite gave him. “My f-friends call me, Th-Thorn.”

“I see. Well, JOHN,” Waite emphasized, making sure that the teenager understood that they were anything but friends. “I’ve been seein’ ya ‘round these parts for a few weeks now. I know you didn’t come all this way from Montana jus’ to take a few pictures.” He spat on the ground near Johnny’s feet, causing the teenager to step away slightly. “There aint’ no need for you to go pokin’ around that bridge this mornin’, so you just head on back where you came from, ya hear?”

“We’re the law around here. If you go any closer to that bridge, then we’ll jus’ have to arrest you for trespassing,” he threatened, causing Johnny’s thighs began to tremble.

“If you’re here to stir up trouble,” Waite began again, turning his head to give a knowing wink to his accomplice. “You’ll regret it. You jus’ ‘member one thing,” Waite said, pointing his thick index finger at Johnny’s face. “I’m a fuckin’ magician, boy. I can make people disappear… And they don’t get found unless I WANT them to get found. Understood?”

Johnny gulped, unable to find his voice.
“And when somebody pisses me off, they ain’t the ones that disappear. We make their FAMILY disappear.” He pulled his upper body back inside the window of the pick-up truck. “Now, you think ‘bout that while you’re down here takin’ pictures of trees, an’ hay fields, an’ bridges, an’ shit, you hear?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“You got any identification on ya, boy?” The police chief asked.

“N-no, sir.”

“W-Well…,” the chief began, “Bill, I’d say he’s at least eighteen, wouldn’t you?” The officer asked Waite.

“Well,” Waite responded, smirking at his friend before turning back around, seeing the young man they were intimidating turning paler. “Think he needs to spend some time in the hoosegow?”

“Um, no sir, no sir, I ain’t gonna trespass. I’ll jus’ be headin’ home now,” Johnny stuttered in a high pitched strained voice.

“You do that,” Waite laughed, shifting the truck into first gear, glaring at the petrified young man.

Johnny could only nod as he stared at the dragon tattoo on Waite’s forearm. Johnny had never seen anything like it before, and each detail was permanently engraved in his mind.

“Good, now, SCRAM!”

Johnny jerked his head up as if he had heard Waite’s shout again. Even though he was now an adult, Johnny could still hear the command echoing through the years, and the threats were just as real today as they had been back then. He ran his hand through his hair, willing his breathing to settle down, feeling the rivulets of sweat sliding down his temples.

Johnny had seen Waite watching him in his rearview mirror, as he drove away. As soon as the truck was out of sight, he scrambled as fast as he could, his heart pounding inside his chest as he headed back to the place where he had been staying. He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the tears pouring out onto his cheeks. When he made it back to the property safely, he silently thanked God for protecting him. That was when he made his promise to the same deity. He would do whatever he had to do to protect his family, or anyone close to him, from the infamous William Waite.

It had been nearly nightfall when he had found out that the man he had seen murdered, was the son of the woman who had invited them to stay in her home during that month. Many residents in the area had opened up their homes to strangers, and Kizzy was no different. Johnny could still hear her mournful wails when her pastor and the county sheriff had come to her home to tell her that Phillip was dead.

It took a couple of days before Johnny finally broke his silence, revealing what he had witnessed and the threats he had been given. No one encouraged him to go to the authorities with his information, and he was advised not to develop the pictures; it was simply too dangerous. The following week, Iris, Lily, and Johnny had packed up their belongings, saying their tearful goodbyes to the grieving
mother, and set out for California. That was when the three of them had devised their plan, the plan that had changed Johnny’s future forever.

Standing up slowly, Johnny walked across his bedroom and stared out of his window at the cars speeding by on the freeway behind his apartment. He felt just as lost now as he had felt as that lonely frightened teenager. He hadn’t known what to do back then, just like he didn’t know what to do now. One thing he did know for sure – he needed to talk to Lily. Together, they could decide what to do. Carefully, he packed the camera and film canister back into the bag and returned it to its hiding spot in his closet. He needed to lie down and sleep, to let the last dose of pain medication exit his system before he made the trip to Tehachapi. Somehow, he needed to spend some time with Lily.

E!

Across town, on 223rd Street, Mike and Roy stood beside their respective vehicles behind Station 51. The B-shift was on a run, leaving the two men alone to talk.

“Why would she lie, Mike? I just don’t get it.”

Mike, being a man of few words, crossed his arms over his chest, and allowed his azure gaze to drift to the concrete. “I don’t know.”

The two men had driven past Bloomer’s on their way back to the station and found the store to be closed, just as Roy had suspected. The rear parking lot, the place where Iris normally parked, had also been empty, further confirming Roy’s suspicions. A brief moment of silence passed between them before Roy spoke up.

“I’m gonna go home and try to get a little sleep. I’ll go back over to Johnny’s place this afternoon. I really need to talk to him.”

“I understand,” Mike said, turning toward his own vehicle. “Let me know if I can do anything.”

“I will. Thanks, Mike. See ya next shift,” Roy called over his shoulder.

Roy backed out of his parking spot, quickly maneuvering the gold Porsche around the side of the brick building and into the street. He didn’t know if it was sheer exhaustion or his worry about his partner, but the drive home seemed longer than usual. When he finally pulled to a stop in his driveway, he exhaled a deep breath. He needed the comfort and advice of his soul mate.

He pushed through the front door, dropping his duffel bag onto the sofa as he passed it on his way to the kitchen.

“Hey, Jo,” he said, stepping up to the bar that separated the kitchen from the small dining area.

Joanne turned around, holding the dish towel in her hand. She didn’t like the look she saw on Roy’s face, and immediately knew that something was wrong.

“Uh-oh, bad shift?” She asked, seeing the tired look on his face and hearing the fatigue in his voice. She had been a fireman’s wife long enough to recognize the signs of distress in her husband, even when he was trying to hide it.

“Yea… Um, I need to get some sleep for a little while, but then I’ve got to go check on Johnny. He fell out of a tree yesterday morning and got banged up pretty bad. His girlfriend picked him up at Rampart,” he continued, knowing that his wife would wonder why she hadn’t been called to take care of her husband’s best friend. “He’s back at home now, Mike and I just dropped off the Rover, but I feel like I need to go see if he needs anything.”
“Ooh, poor Johnny. Dixie didn’t mention it when she called me yesterday, or else I would’ve gone to check on him myself.”

Roy felt his forehead wrinkle in confusion. “Dixie called you?”

“Yea, said she needed Iris’ phone number for something. What time did he get hurt? Maybe she called me before it happened,” Joanne said, wanting to give Dixie the benefit of the doubt.

“Um, I don’t know exactly, but it was pretty early… Not long after roll call,” he responded, his suspicions growing.

“Hmm, she didn’t call me until noon, so it had already happened,” Joanne said with an exasperated sigh.

“Well, you know how busy ER’s can be. She would’ve told you if she thought she needed to. I guess Johnny’s girlfriend had already picked him up by then,” Roy lied; he was beginning to put the pieces together in his mind, and the picture that was forming was making him uneasy.

“I’m sure you’re right,” she said, turning back around to retrieve his breakfast from the stove. “Here you go, sweetheart,” she said, handing him the plate. “You look like a good meal, a hot shower, and a long nap would do you a world of good.”

Roy accepted the proffered plate, feeling his heart flutter. He knew that he had the best wife in the world, and he felt so undeserving of her.

“He set the plate down, then stepped around the short bar that separated the kitchen from the dining room. She was pouring him a cup of coffee, but he walked up behind her, placing both of his larger hands on hers, stilling her immediately. Her scent was intoxicating, and her nearness gave him such comfort. He had come close to losing her not so long ago. He leaned in behind her, kissing her softly on the nape of her neck. “God I love you, baby.”

Joanne leaned back against him, relishing the feeling of warmth and security his body provided to her. There was also something else she was feeling, and smiled at the thought of her still having such an effect on his lower anatomy.

“I love you, too, Roy.” She released her grip on the coffee cup, allowing it to rest on the counter top. She turned around in his arms, brushing her own body against his and her lips across his bristly face. She pushed her hips forward slightly, skimming the crotch of his jeans. “Think maybe we can do something about this a little later on?”

“Um hmm,” he moaned, taking her mouth with his own, his need to connect with her more overwhelming than his need for food and sleep. He owed his very existence to her, and he wanted to show her just how much she meant to him.

“The kids are going over to the neighbors for a birthday party this afternoon,” she replied, biting her lower lip between her teeth, knowing that the pouty look she was giving him was driving him wild. She was rewarded with a grin and a husky groan as he enveloped her once more.

“Guess I should eat and get a little sleep,” he said, kissing her forehead lightly as he pulled away. “Sounds like I might need my energy for a little afternoon delight.”

“You bet you will,” she giggled. “Then you can go check on Johnny.” She turned back to finish up the dishes she had been drying when he had walked in. “I’ll fix him a little something to eat. I’m sure he won’t feel like cooking… Unless his girlfriend is taking care of him,” she suggested, arching an eyebrow at her husband.
“Yea… Who knows,” he mumbled, returning to his seat at the bar. Images of Johnny and Iris drifted through his mind. Remembering that he had wanted her opinion, he asked her the question that had been plaguing him all morning.

“Jo… Do you think Johnny is the type of man who would get involved in a May/December romance?”

E!

It was nearly noon, when the alarm clock jarred Chet out of a deep slumber, eliciting a mumbled curse from him as he slapped around on the nightstand to silence the offending device. Groggily, he pushed himself upwards, suddenly aware of another presence in the room with him.

“Gah!” He blurted out, hugging the covers around his naked torso, thankful that he had been able to muster up enough energy to partially dress when he had gotten out of the shower. He barely remembered drying himself off and pulling on a pair of boxers before stumbling across the room and falling into his bed.

A feminine giggle offered a light apology. “Sorry, Chet,” Caroline said, stepping closer to him so he could see her better in the darkened room.

“Aw, man. You ‘bout gave me a heart attack, babe.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t’ve given me a key,” she said playfully, sitting down beside him on the edge of the bed.

Her nearness made his heart beat faster, circulating his blood throughout his body, and causing it to pool in the lower region. “You sure are a sight for sore eyes,” he said, reaching out to caress her glowing face.

“Hungry?”

He grinned knowingly, leaning in for a feather light kiss. “Depends… Are you on the menu?” He asked, reaching across and giving her right breast a gentle squeeze. He leaned in closer for a kiss, allowing his hand to wander a little lower, reaching between her thighs. “Mmm, I’d sure like to stay here and sample you,” he mumbled, having something new he wanted to try. He hoped she would agree to indulge him later on.

She slapped him playfully, dodging his intentions. “Not now, silly. We’re meeting Mom and Dad Marks at Niccoli’s.” She ran her hands across his bicep nearest her. “Then we’ll come back here for dessert,” she teased. “They’ll have Corrie.”

Chet allowed his thumb to brush her rosy lips as he pushed her hair away from her face. “Promise me you’ll… come… back here,” he whispered in a husky voice full of desire.

“Oh, you’re terrible, Chet… But, yes…,” she said, kissing the end of his nose, “and so will you,” she replied, understanding the double meaning of his comment.

She loved the soft whimper he released when she pulled away from him and stepped over to the window. Slowly, she pulled back the heavy dark curtains, allowing the noonday sun to lighten up the drab room. “Rise and shine, sleepyhead.”

“I’m risin’,” he said, throwing the covers off of his naked legs. “I might not be shinin’, but I’m
risin’,” he said, standing up in front of her with a certain bulge to emphasize his statement. “Do you have any idea what you do to me, Caroline?”

She blushed when her eyes caught sight of what he meant, then she quickly looked back up into the blue eyes of the man she loved. “I hope I can make you happy for the rest of our lives,” she spoke softly and with sincerity. “I’m sorry for how I’ve been acting, Chet. I really am. I love you so much, and I’m…,” she hesitated, feeling the hitch in her voice. “I’m so honored and truly happy to be engaged to you. I just hope… I just hope that I,” she sniffled, trying to maintain control of her emotions. “I want to make you as happy as you’ve made me. I hope that I won’t disappoint you.”

Suddenly, Caroline felt two strong arms envelop her, soothing away all her fears and worries. “I’m the luckiest man on earth,” Chet whispered. “I love you so much it hurts,” he crooned into her ear. “Let’s go eat lunch with your… Ahem,” he corrected himself. “With OUR family, and then come back here for dessert,” he said, nuzzling her neck. “And we can talk as long as you want to about whatever has been worrying you, about our wedding, about our futures together, about… About anything in the world.”

She nodded, leaning her head against his shoulder, unable to find her voice. He loved her, truly loved her, and nothing else mattered.

E!

The lunch crowd was in full force by the time the Lopez family made their way into the busy restaurant. Marco wrapped his arm around Beverly’s waist while they waited to be seated.

“Thank you for joining us today,” he whispered into her ear.

The counselor smiled warmly, enjoying the feeling of closeness with the lineman. It felt good for her to finally be able to allow someone into her personal space, something that had taken her years to achieve. She was still struggling with trust issues, and probably always would, but the handsome man standing beside her was certainly helping her along in her healing.

Maria hugged her daughter close, grateful to her Heavenly Father for giving her her youngest child back. She caressed Alexia’s dark tresses, thinking that the young woman was looking much healthier today than she had since her return. Maria had been concerned that attending Mass might be too difficult for her daughter, making her feel guilty for the life she had been involved in, but her fears seemed to have dissipated. Beverly had worked hard to help Alexia overcome her guilt, helping the young woman to see that she had not chosen the life she had lived – it had been forced on her.

Maria smiled wistfully as she looked around at her family. Each of her children was wearing a smile, especially her eldest. She watched the interaction between Marco and Beverly, pleased with how their relationship seemed to be progressing. Beverly seemed to be bringing Marco out of his shell, and it was obvious that Marco was doing the same for her.

Suddenly, a child’s squeal pierced through the mumbling crowd.

“A’tonio!”

The Lopez family looked around for the source of the high-pitched sound, smiling when they saw Corrie Marks wiggling to get down from the arms of an older man that Marco recognized as her grandfather. The little girl was determined to get to her friend.

“Well, hello there, Corrie,” Marco announced, kneeling down to look at the young girl eye to eye. Corrie gave him a bashful grin, then rushed over to the place where Antonio was standing. Marco
stood up, extending his hand to the smiling gentleman who had just entered the restaurant with the excited little girl.

“I’m Marco Lopez, Chet Kelly’s partner at 51’s. We met at Corrie’s birthday party last year,” he said, shaking hands with Greg.

“Yes, I remember. Chet and Caroline should be along soon. I believe you all had a rough shift, huh?” Greg responded, noting the dark circles beneath the eyes of the tired lineman.

“That we did, sir.” Marco turned slightly, introducing the Marks’ to his family, including Beverly. When he turned back around, he was caught up in Mrs. Marks embrace.

“Thank you, Marco. Thank you again for helping save our girls,” she whispered. “I just can’t say it enough.”

“I’m glad we were there that day, ma’am. I really am. And I, uh, I just want to say that Caroline has been such a blessing to Chet. He and I are best friends and…,” Marco hesitated, wondering if perhaps he was about to say more than he should. Deciding that Chet’s future family needed to know, he pushed ahead. “Well, he was having an episode of self-doubt, considering quitting the department, until Caroline and Corrie came into his life. I’ve never seen him happier than he is now. They’ve been so good for him.”

“That goes both ways; he’s been good for them, too,” Mim added. She looped her arm around her husband’s elbow, leaning her head against his shoulder. “We already love him like a son.”

Marco looked out the large window and smiled. “Speaking of Chet and Caroline…”

Greg and Mim turned around to look in the direction Marco had been looking.

“There they are,” Mim said.

Greg patted Marco on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you again, Marco.”

“LOPEZ,” the hostess called out.

Marco nodded his head at Greg, then turned to follow his family to their seats.

Greg retrieved Corrie, grabbing her hand to prevent her from joining the Lopez family during their lunch. “C’mon, honey, Mommy and Mr. Chet just got here.”

“Mizzer Phet!” The child called out, running towards her future step-father as he held the door open for Caroline.

“Hey there, ladybug,” he said, picking the little girl up and resting her on his hip. “How are you today?”

“I’m good,” she said, wrapping her pudgy arms around his neck.

Mim batted her eyes, forcing back the tears. No one would ever replace her son, but Chet was doing a great job of filling in for the deceased young father. She reached for Greg’s hand, feeling the slight tremble in his fingers. She knew he was thinking the same thing.

“I think congratulations are in order, right?” Greg said, extending his hand to the curly haired man.

“Yes, sir, thank you.”
Mim didn’t offer her hand; she preferred to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Welcome to the family, Chet. Greg and I couldn’t be happier.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I promise to do everything I can to take care of Caroline and Corrie.” He looked at the woman who was standing beside him and wrapped his free arm around her waist. “I want to make them as happy as they’ve made me.”

Corrie, tired of feeling left out of the grown-up conversation, placed her hands on Chet’s cheeks and guided his face toward hers. “Mizzer Phet, I gonna go to dizzy land.”

Chet widened his blue eyes, trying to share in Corrie’s excitement without laughing at her choice of words. “You are? Wow, that’s gonna be fun, ladybug.”

Mim chuckled as she gave Caroline a hug. “I hope you’re writing down these little mispronunciations of hers. They’re so cute.”

“Ohhh, you have no idea,” Caroline replied, exchanging glances with Chet. She leaned in closer to Mim. “You should hear her tell Chet she wants to dance The Hustle, or hear her say firetruck,” she snickered.

“Ohhh,” Mim laughed, covering her mouth with her hands. “I think I know where you’re going….”

“MARKS.”

“That’s us,” Greg stated, as he guided his family, including their newest member, towards the back of the restaurant. This day was turning out to be a great one.

E!

Somewhere in the recesses of Johnny’s subconscious, he heard a knocking sound. Pushing through the fogginess of his dream world, he finally emerged with a groan. “Damn,” he muttered, pushing himself into a sitting position. He heard the sound again.

“A’right! I’m comin’, I’m comin’.”

Roy turned to his left, scanning the parking lot. The white Rover was still parked where he had left it earlier, so he knew that Johnny hadn’t left, at least not driving himself. He jerked his head back to face the door when he heard movement inside the apartment.

When the locking mechanisms were disengaged, a very sleepy looking John Gage peered out the door at him.

“You okay?”

“Roy?” Johnny asked, arching an eyebrow, squinting at his partner. “What’s goin’ on?”

He held up a bowl of fresh chicken salad. “Um, Jo sent this over. You know how she loves to cook for her surrogate brother,” he said, forcing a smile that was not reciprocated by his partner. “Ahem, may I come in?”

Without a mumbled grunt, Johnny opened the door and stepped out of the way. “Sure,” he groused, yawning.

Roy took his usual seat on Johnny’s sofa. “How’re you feeling?”

“Sore. Sleepy. Why?”
Roy wanted to roll his eyes at the absurdity of the question, but he refrained. “I’m worried about you. I mean, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

Johnny snorted, wishing he could unburden himself of his guilt. Yet, even the sight of his best friend sitting in his living room, asking him if something was wrong, wasn’t enough to allow him to open up. “Yea… I guess.”

Roy realized that he wasn’t going to be able to get anything out of Johnny by using small talk. So, he went straight for the jugular.

“Look, yesterday you told me that I had offended you. I’m here to make things right. I don’t know what I did, but whatever it is… I’m sorry.”

Johnny took a seat in his recliner, waving a limp hand in Roy’s direction. “Ahh, ‘s a’right.”

“No… No, it isn’t. Johnny, what’d I do?” Roy stared intently at Johnny, taking notice that the younger man was avoiding making eye contact.

Johnny felt his nostrils flare and the backs of his eyes beginning to sting. Here was a chance to come clean to his best friend, but should he? No, he couldn’t, not now. He couldn’t handle seeing the disappointment he knew he would see on Roy’s face. It would be the same look Kizzy had given him, and there was no way his heart could take it.

“Like I said before, Roy,” Johnny responded, staring coldly at his best friend, hiding behind the stoic facade. “You didn’t do anything.”

Roy slapped his thighs, standing up in frustration. “What the hell do you mean by nothing? Was I SUPPOSED to do something and didn’t?”

“Just drop it.”

“No! No I won’t drop it, Johnny.” Roy watched his friend, wondering what was going on inside the younger man’s head. The old adage, ‘still waters run deep’, ran through his mind. Johnny was sitting as still as Roy had ever seen him, never raising his voice. “I can’t fix what I don’t even know is broken.”

Johnny lowered his head, allowing his voice to speak in a low mumble. “Sometimes the one that’s broken… can’t be fixed.”

“What?”

“Nothin’, Roy. I think you should go home and give your wife and kids a hug. You never know what you’ve got until it’s gone.” Johnny stood slowly, his body still achy. “Give ’em my best. Tell ’em I love ’em. I always will,” he said somberly as he walked over to the front door.

“Johnny… You’re scaring me.” Roy saw the depression and something else that shadowed his partner’s face. Was it hopelessness? “Whatever’s going on… I want to help. Please, don’t you trust me?” Roy pleaded, genuinely afraid that he was losing his best friend.

“You can’t help me, Roy. You just can’t.”

“But Iris can, huh?” Roy stated, more than asked.

“Leave her out of this,” Johnny said sternly, his hand poised on the doorknob.
“Isn’t she a little old for you?” Roy knew he was pushing Johnny’s buttons, but anger and frustration had always seemed to loosen Johnny’s lips. Roy was hoping for the same reaction now.

“I said… leave her out of this. It isn’t about her.”

Roy eyeballed his partner suspiciously, pushing the younger man even further. “But you are seeing her, aren’t you?”

Johnny narrowed his eyes. “Seein’ her? What are you talkin’ about?”

“Look, Dixie said she called a lady friend of yours to come pick you up at the hospital. Then I see Iris dropping you off because she ‘saw you walking home on her way to work’,” he said, using his fingers to form the invisible quotes in the air. “But the shop isn’t open today. It’s Sunday and Mike and I drove by there just to see for ourselves. So, she lied about going to work, and now you’re standing here lying about your relationship with her.”

Johnny felt his hands begin to tremble in anger. Roy was jumping to conclusions and he was dead wrong.

“Hey, I’m a modern man. It’s the ‘70’s and…,” Roy stepped closer to the door, knowing that Johnny wanted him to leave, but he wasn’t leaving until he had said what was on his mind. In one last desperate attempt to make Johnny open up, he made a couple of comments that he would later regret. “Any relationship that leaves you feeling morbid like this… It’s a toxic relationship.” He stood nose to nose with his partner. “I hope a quick roll in the hay with an older woman is worth what it’s doing to you.”

Forgetting his injuries, Johnny grabbed two handfuls of Roy’s shirt and slammed the heavier man down on the floor, both of them landing with a thud that shook the entire apartment. He was incensed by Roy’s disrespectful comment.

“Don’t you EVER say anything like that about Iris again!” He drew back his fist, pounding it into his partner’s jaw. When he pulled his hand back, he saw the blood running down from the corner of Roy’s mouth.

“Is Jo good in bed? Huh? Is she?” He asked, attempting to slam his fist into Roy’s face a second time.

Roy, stunned at the sudden change in his partner’s demeanor, had been caught off guard by the first punch. But he was ready for the second one, blocking it with his own arm. Johnny quickly recovered, ignoring the pain in his back, and leaned forward, pressing his forearm against Roy’s throat. Feeling his air supply dwindling, Roy fought back, reaching up and wrapping both hands around Johnny’s throat, constricting his airway. He felt the jolt of another blow as Johnny’s fist connected again with his head, but the lack of air was making Johnny’s eyes bulge and his face turn red. Eventually, Roy gained the upper hand. He thrust his hips upwards, bucking off the slighter man, and rolling the two of them closer to the front door. He sat on his partner, pinning him to the floor as the lack of oxygen turned Johnny’s face from red to purple.

Johnny clawed at Roy’s hands, trying to remove them from around his throat. He began to see stars floating in front of his eyes as the room started to darken. He tried to cough, but there was no exchange of air with Roy’s fingers digging into his throat. Then, without warning, Roy released his hold.

“Ahu…Ugh, ahua…” Johnny gagged and coughed while Roy pushed himself to his feet, running the back of his hand across his bloody lip.
“I don’t know… what the hell’s wrong with you, partner… but you better get it… straightened out before you come back on shift,” Roy panted, gasping for breath from the fight. He opened the door, stepping over the threshold, then turned back around. Johnny was coughing on his hands and knees, struggling to stand up. When he did, he lumbered over to the place where Roy stood.

“I ain’t…ahua… goin’ back on shift, you as…ahua, asshole,” he said, slamming the door in Roy’s face. He quickly locked it, knowing that when his words sank in, Roy would be trying to get back into his apartment. He was right. He felt his hot tears burning his cheeks as he slowly slid his bruised back down the door, landing in a crumpled pile on the hard wood floor. “I’m s-sorry, R-oy… Oh… God… God he’p m-me…,” he sobbed, feeling the vibrations from Roy’s hand banging against the exterior of the door, and the spasms of pain returning.

Outside the apartment, Roy alternated between slamming his flattened palm against the door and twisting the doorknob in an attempt to get back inside. “Johnny… Johnny, open up!” He pleaded, feeling guilty for what he had done and said. “C’mon, man. I’m… I’m sorry… I just… Please, Johnny… I didn’t mean it… I just… C’mon, Johnny… Please?”

It took nearly twenty minutes for the banging and pleading to cease from outside his apartment door. Johnny knew that Roy was probably waiting for him in the parking lot, but he didn’t care. He would wait as long as it took for his partner to leave the premises. After all, he had nothing but time. He would wait for Roy to leave, and then he would head out in search of Lily.

Eventually, Roy gave up, knowing he needed to get home and explain his injuries to Joanne. He knew that telling her the truth about his uncharacteristic outburst was the right thing to do, and he also knew that he would be heavily chastised by her for his actions. Thinking back on what he had said to Johnny, the man who was supposed to be his best friend, he knew he deserved whatever Joanne said to him. He used his tongue to feel around the tender area of his swollen lip. ‘I deserved this, too,’ he thought, as he drove away from Johnny’s apartment. ‘Just don’t do anything stupid, okay, Junior?”
A/N: Thank you to everyone who has been reading and sharing your thoughts with me. Your suggestions and support are much appreciated.

Chapter 8

Johnny breathed a sigh of relief when Roy stopped banging on his door. The younger man’s entire body ached after the violent, albeit brief altercation with Roy. It took him several minutes to regain his composure enough to navigate his way from his living room into his small kitchen. Gingerly, he walked over to his sink and splashed his reddened face with cold water. He pulled a paper towel off the roll, using it to pat his face dry. He cleared his throat, satisfied that his voice would not betray him, then headed for his telephone. He needed to talk to his captain.

Across town, Hank was pushing his lawn mower along a perfectly straight line giving his front yard the appearance of a miniature football field. He saw Rebecca standing in the doorway, waving her arms at him, then mimicking the motion of talking on the telephone. He understood her signal and turned off the mower, wiping the sweat from his brow as he headed inside the house.

He rubbed his sweaty hands along his jeans before picking up the receiver. “Hello, Hank here.”

“Hey, Cap. It’s Johnny.”

“Well, pal, how’re you feeling?”

Johnny pinched the bridge of his nose. He wished he could tell him the truth, but felt it was best not to do so. “I’m okay, just a little sore. I was wondering… Can I use some of my vacation time next week?”

Hank frowned for a moment. “John, you were injured on the job. You don’t have to use your paid time off for that.”

“I know, but Dr. Brackett’s gonna release me on Thursday… and, uh, I just need a little more time off to take care of some personal business.” There, at least that wasn’t a lie.

“Sure, how many shifts do you need a replacement for?”

Johnny thought for a moment. He had nearly three weeks of leave that he had saved up. He didn’t want to alarm his superior and make him suspicious. “How ‘bout three shifts. That should be enough time.”

“You got it. Let me know if you need anything, and uh, take care of your back, John.”

“I will. Thanks, Cap. I… I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me since you came to 51’s. I’ve always had a lot o’ respect for ya. I jus’ wanted to let ya know that. Um… I’ll see ya later.”

“John? Johnny?” Hank felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, but his calls to his paramedic came too late. The younger man had already hung up the phone. The seasoned fire captain did not like the tone in Johnny’s voice, nor did he like the finality of his words. It was out of character for the goofy, sometimes arrogant John Gage that he knew. His instincts told him that something was wrong.

He stared at the telephone for a few moments, trying to decide what to do. Should he call Johnny
back? Yes, he finally decided, and dialed the younger man’s number. The endless ringing on the other end of the line fueled the flames of foreboding even more.

Hank hung up the telephone, wondering if he should make the trip over to Johnny’s apartment. Then, deciding that he didn’t want to embarrass the younger man, Hank decided to call Roy. He knew that his paramedics were closer than most brothers, and if anyone knew what was going on with Johnny, it would be his partner.

As quickly as the rotary phone would allow, Hank dialed the DeSoto residence.

“Hello?” Answered the perky female voice Hank recognized.

“Joanne, this is Hank. May I speak to Roy, please?”

“He’s over at Johnny’s place. May I take a message?”

“Um, yes, just ask him to call me when he gets back, please. It’s nothing urgent.” Hank cringed a little, hoping that his words were true and the situation with his younger medic wasn’t critical.

“I’ll tell him,” she cheerfully agreed, assuming that her husband was being asked to work an extra shift. With two small children, the extra income would be greatly appreciated. Even though she was babysitting Corrie, the money wasn’t as much as she had been making when she worked at Bloomers.

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Goodbye, Hank.”

Joanne hung up the telephone just as she heard the front door opening. She looked across the room at her husband, stunned by the bruising and swelling she saw on his face.

“Ohmygod, Roy? What happened to you?”

Joanne rushed to his side, then stood staring at her shame-faced husband. “Roy?” She questioned again, reaching out to touch the bruise on his left cheek. “Talk to me, or else I’m going to call the police.” It was obvious that Roy had been assaulted, but she had no idea who would do such a thing.

“No, Jo… It’s nothing like that… I, uh… Let’s just say that I got what I deserved from my partner,” he explained, walking over to the refrigerator to retrieve an ice pack.

“What? Johnny did this to you?”

Roy nodded somberly as he rummaged around for the frozen bag of peas they kept for minor injuries.

“Well… What did you do to him?”

Roy sat down at the kitchen table, resting his chin in the palm of his hand. He lightly pressed the swollen skin around his left orbital socket.

Even though he hadn’t answered her question, Joanne knew that if Johnny and Roy had gotten into a physical altercation, then the situation was bad.

“How much do you know about Iris?” Roy mumbled, grimacing as the bag of frozen peas touched his tender skin.
Joanne rolled her eyes at her uncooperative husband. “Nu-uh, you answer my question first? Besides, this isn’t about Iris, it’s about you and Johnny,” she retorted, crossing her arms to reinforce her stance. “Now what did you do to him?”

Roy sighed, wishing he didn’t have to confess to her what he had done. However, he loved her and respected her; she deserved an honest answer to her question.

“Jo… I think Iris and Johnny are seeing each other.”

Joanne couldn’t stop the chortle that began deep in her throat and erupted from her ruby-red lips. “Exactly how hard did you get hit? Iris didn’t even know Johnny until I introduced them a couple of months ago. Besides, she’s old enough to be his mother.” Understanding dawned on her face, widening her eyes like saucers. “Is that why you asked me about a May/December romance when you first got home from the station?”

Roy knew his words sounded ridiculous. Had he not seen it with his own eyes, he would have had the same reaction. “I know how it sounds. I really do, but I know what I saw at his apartment this morning… And yes that’s why I was asking.”

Joanne’s chuckling faded. Roy merely glared at her, feeling like a scolded child. “Laugh at me all you want to, Jo. I really do think they’re seeing each other.”

“Wait a minute… Is… Is that why Dixie wanted Iris’ phone number?” Finally all the pieces were falling into place for Joanne, just as they had for Roy, earlier. She shook her head in disbelief, taking a seat beside her husband. “No…. No, it can’t… Nu-uh, not Iris and Johnny. They’re… They’re just so… Different.”

Roy nodded, shifting the ice pack. “So then… Oh, Roy… You didn’t, did you?” She asked, suspecting she understood why her husband had received the bruises.

“Yea,” he replied. “I’m afraid I did.”

She tilted her head slightly, aware of how her husband was feeling. “And I take it that Johnny denied your, um, accusations?”

“Emphatically,” Roy groaned.

“Then why don’t you believe him?” She asked, getting up and walking into the kitchen and opening the refrigerator door.

Roy followed her with his eyes. His stomach rumbled when he saw her removing the homemade chicken salad.

“Well… Because it just looked suspicious, that’s all.”

Joanne used her hip to close the refrigerator door, then glared at Roy. “He’s your partner, your best friend. You should believe him.” She set the bowl and condiments on the counter. “Besides, you came in looking like you’d been mugged. You said Johnny did it and I believed you.”

Roy grimaced, knowing that she was right. The two of them continued their debate while sandwiches and iced tea were prepared. She added chips, and pickle spears before setting the plates on the table, returning to the kitchen to retrieve their drinks.
“Roy,” she said, walking back to the table with a glass in each hand. She took a seat before finishing her thought. “I don’t mean to bring up old memories from our past, but… Normally you’re very solid in your decision-making, weighing out all the details before making a determination about something. But this reminds me of how you thought I was having an affair with the plumber.”

Roy set the bag of peas on the table, picking up his sandwich while looking at his wife around his swollen cheek. He took a tentative bite of his sandwich, chewing slowly and swallowing hard. He opened his mouth to disagree with her, but then closed it back without saying a word. Hanging his head in shame, he stared at his partially eaten sandwich. She was right, and he had to tamp down his anger. She had made her point in the gentlest way possible.

When Joanne saw that he was really listening to her, she continued with her observation. “I admit that the evidence you had to go on back then was pretty compelling, but you didn’t get my side of the story before you jumped to conclusions. You decided I was guilty before I even knew what was going on. You never even asked me.”

“I DID ask HIM,” he argued, “and he jumped me.”

Joanne looked at her husband, again trying to make her point without further upsetting him. “Be honest with me, Roy. Did you ask him, or accuse him?”

Roy returned the frozen peas to his aching cheek, as much to avoid eye contact with his wife as to reduce the swelling. He used his free hand to pick up his pickle spear, the vinegar tasting as sour as his mood was becoming.

“Well, I didn’t exactly ask the question.”

“Mmm hmm,” Joanne voiced with her mouth full.

Roy grimaced, knowing that he had made a mistake in how he approached the issue with Johnny. He looked over at his wife, remorse clouding his blue eyes. “He’s injured and I… I upset him so badly that he threw me to the floor and started punching me.”

“I’m so sorry, honey.”

Roy cut his eyes down at the table for a moment. “I choked him, Jo. Damn it, I just… I may have hurt him even worse. What if… What if he misses even more shifts because of me?”

Joanne gently pulled his hand away from his cheek, removing the thawing bag of peas. She leaned in closer to him, placing a feather-light kiss on his cold skin.

“Roy, I love you… And so does Johnny. You two are as close as brothers, and sometimes brothers have disagreements. You’ll apologize, and he’ll accept it, and everything will be right as rain.”

“You sound just like Johnny.” Roy reached for her hand, lifting it to his lips to kiss her soft knuckles. “I’ll call him later, or… Maybe I should go back over there and check him out. You know how he is about hiding his injuries.”

A soft smile was her only response.

“I love you, Joanne DeSoto.”

“And I love you, too. Oh, and Hank called while you were gone. He wants you to call him back.”

“Uh-oh,” Roy grumbled, taking another bite of his sandwich.
“He said it wasn’t urgent,” Joanne added.

“Well, what happened between Johnny and me was while we were off duty. At least I can’t be reprimanded for it.”

E!

Inside his apartment, Johnny stretched through another back spasm. He knew he had to avoid the pain medication with the two hour drive ahead of him. His head was beginning to ache from the ringing of his telephone, but he didn’t want to talk to whomever was calling him. He pulled his packed duffel bag across his chest, turned out the light in his living room then picked up his keys. He took one long look around his apartment, unsure of when he might return. His entire future depended on what happened in the next few days.

The sun was low on the horizon by the time Johnny drove his Rover to the base of the Tehachapi Mountains. As he made his way through the winding roads, he thought about Mike’s accident and how close they had come to losing their engineer. Now these same mountains might be a way for him to escape from the dangers of William Waite and the shame he would face if his coworkers ever found out that he had failed to intervene when another person’s life was in danger. The hypocrisy of his life nauseated him.

He looked around at the solitude of the scenery, fully understanding why people enjoyed spending time in the area. Up ahead, a wooden privacy fence stood tall, connected to a locked iron gate. On the high arch crossing the narrow lane there was a sign that read HOLISTIC UNITY GARDENS. He pulled the nose of the Rover up to the edge, disappointed that the lane rose upwards over a gentle slope that kept everything behind it hidden from view. Unable to open the gate, he looked around for some type of buzzer to allow the occupants to know that they had a visitor. Overhead he saw a large bell with a rope hanging down, coiling around the finial of the closest iron bar.

Johnny pried himself from inside his Rover, his back aching from the long drive. Walking stiffly to the gate, he freed the rope, tugging until he heard the bell clanging. He felt like a mid-nineteenth century fireman alerting the town of a raging blaze. He allowed it to ring a few more times before securing the rope back around the iron finial. He stood around waiting, unsure if there would be a response to the clanging bell.

He was about to leave in search of a place to camp for the night, when he saw an image come over the crest of the pathway; the sight tugging a crooked grin from the left corner of his mouth. A bearded young man was riding in a golf cart that appeared to be a cross between a miniature surfer’s woodie wagon and a three-wheeled vespa. The scooter cruised silently up to the gate.

“Hello… May I help you?”

Johnny propped one hand on his hip, trying his best not to laugh at the other man. The paramedic took a step closer to the place where the man had stopped his tiny vehicle, running a hand across his chiseled chin as he took in the sight on the other side of the iron gate.

“Well, I’m John Gage. I’m a…,” Johnny hesitated. Should he ask for Lily? He had been reading about cults and how family members will often hire men to kidnap loved ones to get them out of the grips of the false religions. Fearing that he would be thought of as just such a kidnapper, he changed his tactic. His hesitation did not go unnoticed by the stranger.

The wind blew open Johnny shirt, revealing the bruising around his neck and collarbone.

“Are you in some sort of trouble, Mr. Gage?”
Johnny exhaled loudly, unsure how to answer the question. Was he in trouble? He wasn’t sure. “I don’t really know, man. I’ve got some problems that… Well, James and I had a long talk a few weeks ago. He was easy to talk to, and… I was kinda hopin’ I could talk to him again.” When Johnny looked back up, he thought he saw the stranger relax a bit. Feeling encouraged, he continued. “Is he here?” Johnny asked, remembering the long truck ride back to Los Angeles when James had given Mike and Johnny a ride on one of his delivery runs. “He said I could call on him if I had any questions. Maybe he can help me.”

The bearded stranger offered a hint of a smile. Believing that Johnny was a potential convert, he decided to introduce himself. “My name is Ian. Wait here while I go get James. If he agrees, then we’ll allow you to come inside.”

Johnny dipped his head in appreciation. “Thank you. I really appreciate that.”

As he waited for James to return, Johnny sat on the front bumper of his vehicle. It was obvious that he was going to have to take a different approach to get to Lily. He recalled his conversation with James weeks earlier. The young man had offered to enlighten Johnny, to teach him how to reach self-actualization under the teachings of Father Hiram. James had explained that the Unity Family was a place where everyone was treated as equals, accepted for who they really were.

Soon the small vespa-looking vehicle topped over the crest, but this time a different young man was in control of the tiny vehicle. He immediately recognized him as James. Johnny stood up, smiling as he closed the distance between himself and the locked gate.

“James, it’s me, Johnny Gage. You may not remember me, but you—“

“John,” James said, stepping off the silent vehicle and walking towards the gate. “Of course, I remember you. How is your friend, Mike?”

“Completely healed and back at work,” Johnny said, quickly adding, “just like Father Hiram predicted.”

James smiled widely, running his fingers along his scruffy beard. “So what brings you back to Holistic Unity Gardens?” He questioned, holding the key to the lock securely in the palm of his hand.

“A couple o’ things actually, um… Do you mind if we talk somewhere else? I have this thing about looking through metal bars, if ya know what I mean.”

“You are welcome to come inside, but your vehicle must stay outside the compound,” he said, waiting for Johnny to voice his understanding before he unlocked the gate.

“Kinda dangerous, isn’t it? I mean, somebody might break in and steal my stuff.”

James smiled knowingly. He had almost forgotten what it was like to own things and be very possessive of one’s own wealth. At Holistic Unity Gardens, the family owned everything, collectively. No one owned anything of their own except their clothing and personal hygiene items. Remembering what others had done in similar circumstances, he made an offer to Johnny.

“Well, many people don’t understand us, John. They think we hold people here against their will, which we do not. We’ve lost a few members of the family because their relatives hire deprogrammers to kidnap them.” He picked up the lock that was attached to a chain binding the two sides of the gate together. “That’s why we’ve had to add this, but I’ll unlock it for you, if you’ll give me your keys and let me move your vehicle inside. That’s the rules.”
Johnny pondered his options, and realized he really had none if he wanted to get inside the compound.

“A’right, as long as it’ll be behind this big ol’ locked gate.”

“That it will,” James said, holding out his hand. When Johnny dropped the Rover keys into the open palm, he slipped them inside his pants pocket, then unlocked the large padlock on the gate. James pointed at the small electric cart. “John, if you’ll move my car out of the way, then I’ll park yours over beside that fence,” he said, pointing at the corner where the tall wooden privacy fence butted against the iron gate.

“Will do,” Johnny said, walking through the opening created when James removed the lock and chain. He took a seat on the cart and pressed the accelerator. He made a quick circle, parking the slow-moving vehicle on the grass beside the narrow lane. He waited while James cranked up the Rover, slowly driving it through the gate and positioning the vehicle in the corner near the privacy fence.

James exited the Rover, then hurriedly made his way back to the gate to secure it with the padlock. Johnny relinquished his position at the steering wheel of the tiny electric cart, taking the larger seat over the rear axle of the vehicle. James noticed how slowly Johnny moved, and decided to question the paramedic.

“Are you alright, John?”

“Jus’ a little sore. I fell out of a tree yesterday during a rescue. I’ll be a’right.”

“Very well… We have a couple of options of where we can talk. If you’d like to eat dinner, then we can share a meal in the feeding area. Or, if you’d rather have a more private conversation, then we can go to the meditation garden near the creek.” He waited for Johnny to make the call, unsure if the conversation needed to be a private one. Ian had already informed James that Johnny had asked about Lily Campbell before asking for him. Now James was curious about how much Johnny really knew about the Unity Family.

“Well, I ate a burger on the way up here, so… How ‘bout the meditation garden. That sounds nice and private.”

“Then so shall it be,” James replied, maneuvering the cart back over the crest of the hill, then taking a side trail to the left.

Johnny was amazed at the immaculate grounds and walking trails that wound around the low-lying area. There was even a small koi pool with a rippling fountain. When the cart stopped, Johnny stepped out propping his hands on his hips as he surveyed the area. There was no sign of others anywhere near this small sanctuary, and Johnny couldn’t help wondering where the ‘family’ might be.

“Find a comfortable spot and have a seat, John.”

Johnny looked back at the place where James stood. Seeing no benches or logs around, Johnny found a boulder and leaned his hips on it, mimicking the stance he often saw Dixie take behind the nurse’s station.

James walked over closer to him, purposefully taking a seat on the ground so that Johnny would have to look down at him. He had been taught that by allowing a guest to feel powerful, they were more likely to feel empowered.
“So, John, what brings you to our family compound?”

Johnny thought for a moment, propping the heel of one boot on a lower section of the boulder, leaning his forearms across his uplifted knee. He could feel the twilight breeze blowing tufts of hair up all over his head as he continued to ponder his situation. He needed to appeal to James’ sense of altruism if he was going to be allowed to speak to Lily.

James, sensing Johnny’s hesitation, skillfully used the silence to reassure his guest.

“Take your time, John.”

“Ahem,” Johnny looked at the other man, appreciating the calm manner of his host. “Two things, actually.” His eyes scanned the horizon, confirming that they were totally alone with only the sounds of nature to interrupt them.

“Go on.”

“I’m… I’m facing a big decision, and I don’t know what to do,” Johnny said, unsure of how much to divulge about his own past.

“Then I will join you in your quest to find the inner peace needed to make the choice that is best for you.” James crossed his legs, assuming the lotus position and inhaled deeply. “The tranquility of nature is whispering to you, John, telling you that the answer you seek is already inside of you. You merely need to free yourself to follow where your soul is leading.”

Johnny arched an eyebrow in his direction, amazed that such calming and serene words were being spoken to him by a man he barely knew. How could an army medic who had seen the worst side of humanity during the Vietnam War be sitting calmly before him speaking of peace and tranquility? Johnny was keenly aware of their similarities and their differences. Both men were medics and both had seen the horrors that humans are capable of inflicting on other humans. Both had basically run away from those who cared about them and ended up in the Tehachapi Mountains. But the differences between them were astounding. While Johnny was anxious, stressed, and fearful; James was calm, relaxed, and seemed content with his life.

“And what of your second reason for coming here?”

James’ words brought Johnny out of his musings. His chocolate eyes looked down at the bearded man. He swallowed hard then licked his dry lips. This was it. This was his chance to reconnect with Lily.

“When my friends and I were at the accident scene, the one where Mike was trapped in his vehicle… There was a group of, uh, family members who stopped by to pray, or something.”

James nodded, remembering the prayer circle that had been used to surround Father Hiram during the impromptu healing service. “Yes… And you are wondering how Father Hiram was able to heal your friend?”

“Ah, well no, not exactly. See there was this woman I saw, and I think I know who she is.” He straightened his back, pushing off the boulder and standing up tall. “I believe she is a friend of mine that I lost contact with when we were just kids.”

“What is her name?”

“Lily, and I really believe that if I could talk to her for just a few minutes, then she might be able to help me make my decision.” He stepped forward, kneeling down in front of the place where James
was sitting. He picked up a small stone, rubbing it between his thumb and index finger. “She knows what happened to me a long time ago, and… And I really could use her help now.”

James, being very perceptive, focused on the minute details that Johnny had provided. “So, something horrible happened to you when you were just a kid?”

Johnny pressed his lips together, not really wanting to relive the sordid details of the month-long adventure during that long ago spring, but for reasons he didn’t fully understand, he spent the next half hour talking to James about everything he had experienced. When he was finished, he hung his head feeling completely emotionally exhausted.

James saw the fatigue in the slumping shoulders of his companion, heard the pain in his raspy voice as he fought to hide his emotions. He placed a comforting hand on Johnny’s shoulder. No words were spoken between them, but he knew that John was feeling overwhelmed with shame and emotional pain for all that had happened.

“We’re brothers in our pain, John. I, too, have witnessed similar horrors and was powerless to stop them. That’s why I’m here, and I believe it’s why you’re here, too.”

“I… I dunno,” Johnny commented.

“You don’t have to decide now. Why don’t you come with me, spend a little time with us and see what you think? If nothing else, perhaps we can give you a reprieve from your current stress, and help you decide whether or not to testify.”

“I brought my camping gear… Got a week off from work, so I thought I’d spend some time in solitude…” He looked up at the caring eyes of James, feeling an acceptance he was not used to feeling from people he barely knew, especially not from someone who now knew his darkest secret. “I guess I could stay a few days.”

James patted Johnny’s back, noting the hissing sound the action elicited.

“I’m sorry, John. I didn’t mean to cause you pain,” James said worriedly.

Johnny stretched his limbs as he slowly straightened his aching back. “Ahh, not your fault,” he replied, turning to look at the other man.

“Is your injury serious?”

“Nah, I jus’ keep gettin’ these spasms,” the paramedic groused. “Um, will you take me back to my vehicle?”

“Of course, but you’ll have to leave it parked there while you’re with us,” James replied with a knowing grin, anticipating Johnny’s question. “Only our delivery trucks are allowed here.”

Johnny carefully sat in the second seat of the electric cart while James assumed the position of driver. As they were meandering back along the pathway, lighted by only the full moon, James glanced back at his passenger.

“Father Hiram will be happy to heal your back if you will allow it.”

Johnny fought the urge to smile at the comment. The last thing he wanted to do was to offend the man who might be able to help him reconnect with Lily.

“I’ll, ah…,” Johnny began, hesitating to commit to something he didn’t believe in. “I’ll think about it,
“Of course,” James agreed, trying to find the smoothest route back to the campus entrance, not wanting to hurt his passenger. He felt like he was on the verge of securing a new addition to the Unity Family, and he didn’t want to do anything to impede the conversion.

E!

Back in Los Angeles, Hank had tried to contact his younger paramedic twice. He wanted to calm his own concerns about the statements Johnny had made during their telephone conversation earlier in the afternoon. The subsequent conversation with Roy had concerned him even more. None of his men were prone to violence, certainly not Johnny and Roy. While his anxiety had risen with each unanswered ring, his wife had managed to calm him down with her soft words and tender touch.

“Hank,” Rebecca said, running a hand along his back as she walked behind him. “Why don’t you just quit trying to reach him. You know how Johnny likes solitude; maybe he’s gone camping or something.”

Hank returned the receiver to the cradle with a sigh. “I know, but I can’t shake the feeling that something is really wrong.”

She pulled him into an embrace, planting a kiss on his lips. Hank responded likewise, enjoying the intimate moment. When their lips parted, he stared into her pretty face. “Thank you, Becca. Thank you for not leaving me when you had every reason to take the girls and file for a divorce. Thank you for allowing me to continue pursuing a career that I love, in spite of the dangers.” He pulled her close again, pressing his lips lightly against her head as she snuggled into his chest. “And thank you for keeping me grounded. John IS a grown man, and I need to treat him like one.”

“You’re a great husband, father, and captain, Hank. It’s normal to worry about all of us, including your men at the station. Beneath all that macho mumbo jumbo, you love them, too.” She snuggled a little tighter. “And that’s something that you can’t just turn off when you’re away from those you care about.”

E!

Alone in her house in a Los Angeles suburb, Iris Campbell sat staring at the photo album she had created to chronicle the journey she and her daughter had made a decade ago. She felt her face grow damp as her tears flowed freely. The aftermath of that trip had changed the course of three lives forever. She had lost her daughter a few years afterwards when Lily chose life with a cult over the life she had always known. A bright young man had exchanged his family life on a reservation for the life of a firefighter and paramedic on the west coast. And Iris had spent the last few years more alone than she had ever felt in her life, even more alone than she had felt the day her parents had disowned her.

Iris had always wanted to be a wife and mother, as well as a florist. She had been a wife only for a few short years. She had lost her husband in an industrial accident when Lily was very young, too young to remember her father. That time had been the darkest of the young widow’s life because no one from her family attended the small funeral. Then Iris had lost her only child to the cult. Finally, while that fateful journey had given her a chance to be a part of history and fight for something she believed in, it ultimately left her sitting alone in her living room with only some photographs and memories to comfort her. While she continued to be successful as a florist, her flowers offered her very little happiness compared to all that she had lost since moving to California, twenty-seven years ago.
She stared at the telephone on the end table, silently cursing the instrument that had proven to be useless all afternoon. She had been trying for hours to check on Johnny, but there was no answer to her persistent calls. He had told her of his plan to go to Tehachapi in search of Lily, but she had hoped he would wait until he had recovered from his injuries before he made the long drive. She couldn’t stop the worry that was clawing at her heart. She stared at the carpet in her living room, hoping to think of a way to help him make the right choice about testifying at William Waite’s trial. She knew Johnny needed his friends now, especially his partner, Roy. But she had promised Johnny that she would never divulge his past to anyone, not even his best friend. Now, she was beginning to wonder if perhaps she should break that promise in order to save Johnny from himself. John Gage had become like a son to her over the years, and she couldn’t begin to think about losing him, too.

E!

At the DeSoto home, Roy ran his hand through his thinning red hair as he walked back in the front door. Having been unable to reach his partner on the phone, he had decided to drive over to Johnny’s apartment. The first thing he noticed was that the Rover was not in the parking lot, confirming that the younger man was not at home.

“Roy? How’d it go?”

Roy looked across the living room to the place where his wife sat reading a magazine.

“He isn’t home,” he answered, dejectedly.

“Let it go, sweetheart.”

“Knowing that partner of mine, he’s probably-“

“Probably recuperating somewhere where he has someone to help him,” Joanne interrupted. She knew what her husband was thinking and she was trying to convince herself that it wasn’t true. Yet, Roy had been convincing with the evidence he had provided her. Was it possible that Johnny and Iris were involved in a romantic relationship after just a few weeks of knowing each other?

“Exactly!” Roy responded, pointing his finger in her direction. “And I’m pretty sure I know who it is.”

Even though Joanne had to admit that she wasn’t happy about the possibility, she had to try to settle Roy down, or else neither of them would be able to sleep tonight. “Honey… What if it’s true?”

“So you believe me?”

Joanne closed the magazine, wanting to give her husband her full attention. “Of course I believe that you saw what you say you saw; I’m just not 100% convinced that your interpretation of what you saw is accurate, but what if it is?”

Roy slumped back in his chair. “What do you mean?”

“I mean… They’re both adults, so there’s nothing wrong with it, is there?” Joanne asked, having pondered the thought for most of the afternoon.

“She’s twice his age. I mean, I know he’s good for her ego, but… What’s he getting out of it, huh?”

Joanne lifted her eyebrows, giving Roy a knowing smirk.

He dismissed her with a wave of his hand. “Not that! I mean…”
Roy’s hesitation only served to raise Joanne’s frustration level. She really had no idea why Roy was so upset about the as yet unconfirmed romantic relationship between Iris and Johnny. “What, Roy? What DO you mean?”

Roy felt a twinge of embarrassment color his face as he looked over at the woman he had loved since fourth grade. “I’m just afraid that… That he’s settling.”

“Settling?”

“Settling for less than he deserves,” Roy tried to explain. “I’ve got nothing against Iris, I really don’t. But you know that Johnny can’t seem to succeed in a long term relationship. He either gets dumped, or,” he snorted slightly, “or engaged to a nut like Valerie.”

Joanne watched as Roy’s shoulders slumped. “And you think he sees Iris as someone he could be with long-term, who’s stable and… sane?”

Roy didn’t like the way it sounded when Joanne repeated his words to him. They sounded derogatory to his own ears, making him think long and hard about his stance. “Yea… I guess.”

“And if that’s what Johnny wants and Iris makes him happy then I have to ask you again, Roy. What’s wrong with it?”

Roy softened his voice, realizing that Joanne was helping him process things. “That’s just it, Jo. Johnny isn’t happy. He hasn’t been for a while, and I think it’s getting worse.”

“Well, that certainly doesn’t sound like our Johnny. And it really doesn’t sound like someone in a new romantic relationship, does it?”

Roy pressed his lips together tightly. Joanne had identified the very issue that had been plaguing him. If Johnny and Iris weren’t romantically involved, then what was the real nature of their relationship? Roy closed his eyes, leaning his head against the back of the chair. He wanted answers to his questions about his partner’s recent somber mood. And, if Johnny wouldn’t talk to him, then he had no choice but to confront the only person who might have the answer.

E!

Lieutenant Ronald Crockett swirled the amber liquid in the bottom of the glass he held in his ebony hand. He couldn’t stop the maniacal grin that spread across his dark features as he listened to Dr. Brackett on the telephone.

“Thanks, Doc. I’ll be there to pick him up first thing in the morning.”

He lowered the receiver to the cradle, running his gold ring-clad hand across his chin. Leonard Hunley had been hospitalized since the day of Mike Stoker’s personnel hearing. The assistant chief’s nose had been broken by Mike, then deliberately straightened by Johnny, resulting in a surgery that was fraught with complications. After several rounds of IV antibiotics, the man who had caused harm to an unknown number of people, primarily women, was ready to be discharged. Crockett considered his options for which jail cell Hunley might occupy. He snickered to himself, knowing exactly who Leonard Hunley’s new roommate would be.

“Yes sir, karma’s a bitch, Hunley.”

His smile faded as he returned the glass to his lips, sipping the burning liquid just as the telephone rang, again. He threw the remains of his drink into the back of his throat before answering the call.
“Yea.”

“Hey, Crockett? Summerlin here.”

The lieutenant relaxed, grateful that it wasn’t a call from his precinct that was interrupting his relaxing Sunday night.

“Slim, how are you?”

“Oh, fine, fine. I’m sorry to bother you at home, but—"

“No problem, man. That’s why I gave you my personal number.”

On the other end of the line, Summerlin chuckled in appreciation. “I appreciate that. I was just wonderin’… Have ya talked to Mr. Gage, yet? I’m really tryin’ to help out the DA, and you know we can’t do it without that young man’s assistance.”

Crockett exhaled hard into the phone. “I talked to him, Slim, and he’s thinking about it. I just hope he’ll do the right thing.”

“Well, I have another bit of information for you to pass along to him, if ya don’t mind. It might jus’ make him feel a little more comfortable ‘bout comin’ back here.”

Crockett leaned forward in his recliner, lowering his feet to the floor. “Oh yea? What’s that?”

Ron Crockett listened intently to what his cross country colleague had to tell him. After all, Summerlin was the man who had taken the death bed confession of the former crooked police chief. Now Summerlin was the police chief of that same small town, and he was determined to do all he could to find justice for the wrong-doings of his predecessor.

Crockett couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He felt a certain connection to the victim in this case, and he couldn’t stop the smile that lit up his face. Karma might be slow sometimes, but it had a way of getting back at people, eventually, even men like William Waite.

“Slim… Are you jivin’ me?”

“O’ course not,” came the disembodied voice on the other end of the line. “If you’ll let Mr. Gage know, and tell him that all his expenses will be paid for, then I’d be much obliged.”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” the relieved Lieutenant responded. “My pleasure, indeed.”
Chapter 9

As dawn broke in the Tehachapi Mountains, Johnny awoke from a deep sleep filled with vivid dreams. He sat up, still feeling stiff but not nearly as sore as the day before. Looking around the large room, he realized that he was alone. Pulling his bare legs over the edge of the bed, he looked around for his clothing. He didn’t remember disrobing, yet he now found himself clothed in only his underwear. He looked down at the floor and caught a glimpse of his duffel bag, his clothing from the day before folded neatly on top. Feeling a sense of relief, his mind began to wander back through the events of the previous night.

He and James had talked in the meditation garden until the sun had completely set. They had driven back to the housing area of the compound using only the light of the waxing moon to guide them. Johnny recalled James pointing out the men’s and women’s dorms with the larger primary housing and worship unit in the middle. He had indicated that this larger structure was where Father Hiram resided. James had introduced Johnny to the older religious guru and the three of them had shared a few cups of hot herbal tea sweetened with honey. Father Hiram had insisted that it was his own special blend of herbs prized for their curative properties. Afterwards, he had asked Johnny to remove his shirt. The young paramedic had felt strange about doing so, but for reasons he couldn’t explain, he had complied with the unusual request. He had felt awkward having his bare back touched by the bearded stranger, and felt as if he were a victim being touched during the course of an assessment. He closed his eyes, as per Father Hiram’s request, and felt the coolness of the older man’s hands stroking his back.

The intriguing man’s touch had been light and wispy, not painful, and as the ministrations continued, his flowing graying beard brushed along Johnny’s tender flesh in a way that had made the younger man shiver. Father Hiram had begun chanting in a language unknown to Johnny and soon was joined by James.

Johnny looked down at his bare feet on the smooth wooden floor, then around the empty dorm in which he found himself. The large wooden structure reminded him of the sleeping quarters at 51’s. There were rows of twin size bunks flanking two walls that ran the length of the structure. In the center were a couple of rows of showers, two on each side, with half-walls that rose up about four feet from the floor. On one end of the building there were four sinks with very small mirrors over them. On the other end of the long room, there were a couple of stalls with toilets between a large metal urinal. The scene reminded him of the boys’ bathroom at the reservation school which he had attended as a child. In fact, the events of the previous evening had reminded him of a ceremony from his reservation days. He surveyed his surroundings once more. ‘Humph, so much for privacy,’ he thought.

After relieving himself and splashing his face with water, he fumbled around inside his duffel bag in search of his toothbrush and toothpaste. His mouth was sticky and his teeth felt furry. He stood at one of the sinks for a few moments trying to remember if he had brushed his teeth before going to bed. The nightly routine had been a ritual for as long as he could remember, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember completing the task before falling asleep. In fact, he really couldn’t remember much that had happened after his meeting with Father Hiram.

No matter how hard he tried, Johnny’s memory was a blank slate, from the time the chanting of James and Father Hiram began, until he woke up a few minutes ago. He finished brushing his teeth, tapping his toothbrush on the edge of the sink before returning it to his toiletries bag. He looked at his
face in the small mirror, noting how gaunt his features looked. He rubbed his scruffy face with his right hand, unsure if shaving was permitted here. He had only met a few of the men so far, and all of them had beards.

He spun around at the creaking sound of a door opening.

“Good morning, John. I trust you slumbered well?”

Johnny turned around, seeing James standing in the doorway. “Ahh, yea… yea, I did. I, um, I barely remember a thing.”

Johnny felt the coolness of the breeze from the open door as it blew across his naked chest. He never felt uncomfortable in a semi-nude condition around the station, where he was among his closest friends, but around strangers, he felt exposed. He instinctively tried to cover himself, even more confused by the events of the previous night. He rarely slept shirtless. Generally, he slept in his boxers and undershirt. Now, he stood in front of James wearing only his boxers. “Um, I,” he stammered, feeling vulnerable. “I need to, um, to get dressed,” he mumbled, scrambling over to the bed in which he had spent the night.

“No worries, John. You were quite exhausted after the healing ceremony. You probably don’t remember, but I helped you get undressed and into bed. We take care of each other, here. We’re all family, even our guests.” James closed the wooden door behind him, aware of how self-conscious his guest appeared to be in his state of undress. “I presume that your back is much improved, yes?”

Johnny pulled on his undershirt with relative ease, still aware of the bruising, but amazed that his muscles were loose and his movements relatively pain-free. “Yea… That tea must’ve been some good stuff.”

James walked closer to the younger man, watching how easily he moved as he tugged on his jeans. “The tea only prepares your body for the healing process. Father Hiram is the great healer.”

Johnny buttoned his jeans, feeling an uneasiness settle in the pit of his stomach. Had something happened to him without his knowledge, or his consent? He swallowed back the bile that rose into his throat. He didn’t recall being asked for permission to be treated, even if the treatment was in the form of herbal tea and chants. Something was amiss, but he was feeling too rushed by his host to ponder the mysteries of the previous night. He tucked the thought away, knowing he would be bothered by his memory loss until he was able to figure it out. He had a more pressing need at the moment; he needed to see Lily, needed to talk to her about the upcoming trial.

“It is time for the morning meal. I am sure you are hungry.”

Johnny finished tying his boots, then pulled on a flannel shirt over his tee shirt. “Yea… I am kinda hungry.”

E!

Chet felt the warm body lying next to him, and snuggled her in a little closer. “Mornin’, baby.”

Caroline adjusted her head to move her mussed up hair out of her face, then ran her fingers through Chet’s hairy chest. “Mmm, wha’ time is it?” It was a rare morning when the young mother wasn’t awakened by an energetic three year-old.

Chet kissed the top of her head, cherishing her and remembering the beauty of their union from the previous night’s activities. He twisted his wrist, prying one eye open to peek at his watch. “Humph, it’s almost 9:30…,” he mused. “I love you, baby. I can’t wait to wake up like this every morning.”
Caroline, feeling particularly frisky, giggled as she ran her fingers down his body, feeling him shiver as she neared her destination. “Uh-huh… Happy to see me this morning, aren’t you?”

Chet emitted a sound that was a mixture of a groan and a growl as he rolled over on top of her, holding himself up on his elbows. “Always… But actually, I have to pee.”

“Oh,” Caroline commented with an exaggerated pout.

He snickered, kissing her lightly on her nose, not wanting to offend her with his morning breath. He nuzzled her neck and whispered into her ear. “But hold that thou - oooohhh!” He groaned as she snickered once more.

“Oh, sorry, you want me to hold that THOUGHT. I thought you wanted me to hold something else,” she laughed playfully, releasing her grip on his anatomy.

“Two minutes, baby. Jus’ gimme two minutes, and you can hold anything I’ve got,” he moaned, pushing the covers off of his naked form, walking hurriedly into the adjoining bathroom.

He relieved himself of his most pressing need, then set about washing his face and brushing his teeth. Between the flushing toilet and the running water, he never heard Caroline’s telephone ring.

He stepped out of the bathroom, still in the nude, and was disappointed to find Caroline’s bed empty. He drew his eyebrows together in confusion as he heard her voice carrying down the hallway. He pulled a towel off the rack in her bathroom.

“Um, yes, yes, he’s here,” Caroline stated, turning to see Chet walking pensively down her hallway, wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. “Hold on.”

Chet gave her a curious expression as he accepted the telephone, grateful that she had been talking on the telephone and not to a visitor. “Hello?”

“Chet, it’s Roy. I hate to bother you so early. I hope I, um, I didn’t interrupt anything,” Roy commented, remembering what it was like to be happily in love with no children scurrying around.

Chet felt Caroline’s fingers whisking along his terrycloth-covered buttocks and along his hips, sending a shiver across his body. “I, uh-oh, um, well, I did kinda have one foot in the saddle, buddy, if ya know what I mean.” He continued to squirm as Caroline continued her ministrations, enjoying watching him dance around, nearly naked in her living room.

“So wha’-uh, what’s u-up?”

Roy felt the tips of his ears turning pink as he realized what was happening on the other end of the phone. “I… Well, I need to talk to you… When you have time.”

“I-is sommething wr-wrong?” Chet stammered, feeling the goosebumps covering his flesh, unprepared for the cool breeze that brushed across his manhood when Caroline stripped him of his towel.

“Well, I don’t know. It’s about Johnny. Just give me a call later on, okay?”

“Sure thing, DeSoto. I’ll call ya inalittlewhile,” the lineman spat out, rushing his friend off the telephone before he said something that might further embarrass himself. Caroline’s fingers were doing incredible things to him and he no longer trusted his higher brain functioning to be in complete control of his verbal abilities.
Chet hung up the phone turning around to face his fiancée when she suddenly surprised him. His eyes jerked wide open and his chin dropped in a nearly silent groan that was anything but a protest to the woman he loved who was lowering herself in front of him.

“OhmyGOODDD!” He groaned, doubling over and nearly losing his breath in the shock and pleasure of the moment.

E!

“Is something wrong, honey?” Joanne asked, seeing the blush that was crossing her husband’s face.

“I, uh, I don’t think so.” He set the receiver back into the cradle of the telephone, then looked over at his wife who had been washing dishes at the kitchen sink. Her emerald eyes radiated concern as she dried her hands on a dish cloth. “I think I might’ve, um, interrupted something between Chet and Caroline.”

Joanne’s lips slowly parted into a pearly smile. “I guess they’re enjoying Corrie’s trip to Disneyland with Greg and Mim.”

Roy quirked his eyebrows upwards giving her a sly grin. “Sure sounded like it. I’ve never heard Chet stuttering like that before.”

Joanne snickered, feeling her own blush as she reached for a piece of fruit. She hadn’t been hungry when the kids and Roy had eaten earlier, now she was not only hungry, but wanted to send Roy a message as well. Slowly, she peeled the banana, wrapping her lips around the tip as she nibbled on the sweet treat. “Guess I answered her questions, Friday morning,” she said, licking her lips as she swallowed the fruit.

A knowing look crossed Roy’s face and his lower body responded to the visual cues his wife was giving him. “You didn’t, did you?”

Joanne lifted her shoulders quickly, jerking her head to one side. “What was I supposed to do, Roy? She’s inexperienced and needed a little… advice.”

“Damn,” he groaned. “If I interrupted that, Chet’s gonna kill me,” he said, pulling her into his embrace.

“I bet he’ll be quick to forgive you. Besides, he’s probably going to be one very happy man when he calls you back,” she snickered, allowing her own fingers to do a little familiar probing.

“Why Mrs. DeSoto… You’re trying to seduce me.”

“Kids are at school, I’m not babysitting, and we’re alone on your day off,” she said, setting the partially eaten banana on the counter beside the sink and wrapping her arms around her husband’s strong shoulders. “You bet I am.”

E!

Lieutenant Ronald Crockett walked into Rampart’s emergency department with a bit of a swagger. As he sauntered up to the nurse’s station, he propped one hand on his hip, leaving his weapon exposed beneath his tan sports coat.

“Good morning, Ms. McCall.”

Blue eyes shifted up from the chart on the counter, followed by a flirtatious smile. “Well, good
morning to you, too. Here to pick up our provocateur patient?"

“Haha, I take it he isn’t the most popular guy on the fourth floor, huh?”

The head nurse gave a slow shake of her head. “I hear the nurses up there are drawing straws to see who has to take care of him, especially when it’s bath time,” she chuckled softly.

“Well, he’s got a special roommate waiting for him over at my place,” the lieutenant said with a wicked grin. “He’ll get what’s coming to him.”

Dixie reached for the telephone to dial the fourth floor nurse’s station. “I’ll let them know you’re here. I’m sure they’ll have him down here in record time.”

Lieutenant Crockett waited patiently for Dixie to complete the call before he continued with their conversation. “Say, is John Gage on duty today?”

“No, I believe it’s C-shift that came on this morning, but Johnny wouldn’t be at work anyway.”

“Oh?”

Dixie smiled softly as she relayed the details of Johnny’s latest mishap to the waiting lieutenant.

“Mmm, sounds painful. You folks must’ve given him some potent painkillers. I’ve been trying to reach him on the phone and he isn’t answering.” Crockett hoped his fishing tactic was working on the pretty head nurse.

“He’s probably still with the woman who picked him up from here. Do you know Iris Campbell?”

Crockett let his eyes wander across the counter as he pondered the familiar name. Where had he heard it before? The quick search through his mental Rolodex turned up nothing. “Hmm, can’t say that I do.”

“She’s the florist over at Bloomers, on Alameda Avenue. She’s the gal who picked him up. Maybe he stayed with her.”

“Mmm,” he said with a smile, just as the elevator dinged. “A little female attention may be just what that young man needs.”

Both Dixie and Ron looked up just in time to see a sour-faced patient being wheeled down the corridor by an equally bitter-looking young nurse.

“He’s all yours, detective,” the young woman stated curtly, then shoved the yellow discharge papers into the waiting lieutenant’s hands.

Crockett made a couple of soft tsking noises. “Hunley, still treating the ladies poorly, aren’t you?”

Hunley, with his bandaged nose creating a thick nasal whine, grunted. “Dus’ a buntz o’ bit’ez,” he mumbled.

“Stand up and put your hands behind your back,” Ron ordered, his tone as professional as ever. He looked over at the calm head nurse, giving her a quick wink. “I think he can walk out of here under his own power.” The detective leaned in a little closer to Hunley’s left ear. “You’ll soon have a different definition for a ‘bunch of bitches’ once I get you to the slammer,” he whispered for Dixie’s sake as he clicked the cuffs in place.

“Iz dis weally necessawee?” The patient-turned-prisoner questioned.
“Yes, it IS really necessary. It’s standard operating procedure,” Lieutenant Crockett blurted out as he walked Hunley towards the exit. “It’s the SOP for an SOB.”

E!

At Bloomers, Iris was silently cursing the lack of business on this Monday morning. She had given Caroline the morning off, allowing the young mother a rare break, since she had a morning without her daughter present. She remembered how exhausting it was to be a single mother of a toddler, and was happy to do what she could to assist her new employee.

Now though, she sat thumbing through her invoices, her eyes not really seeing the print on the forms. Occasionally, she would look over at the telephone, willing it to ring. She wanted to hear Johnny’s voice telling her that he had talked to Lily and they were on their way back home. She had finally given up on reaching him, realizing that he had gone to Tehachapi in spite of her warnings about the dangers of him driving with his injuries. After all, he was a paramedic, a man educated in the field of emergency medicine. Yet, he was still her Thorn, her surrogate son, and nothing could ever remove the love and sense of responsibility she felt for him.

A few moments later, she heard the bell jingle on the front door, and looked up to see her first customer of the day.

“Hello, welcome to Bloomers. May I help you?” She asked, using her most pleasant voice as she greeted the elderly man who walked in using the aid of a wooden cane.

Outside a gold-colored sedan was stopped at the traffic light. Lieutenant Ron Crockett waited patiently for the red light to change to green. He hated hauling the disgusting piece of humanity that was handcuffed in his backseat. Then again, rarely did he ever have anyone decent riding along with him in the rear of the department-issued unmarked car.

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as he glanced at the flower shop on the corner. Noticing that the front sign said OPEN, he decided to deliver his prisoner to the jail, then return to talk to the owner of Bloomers. If what Dixie had told him was true, then perhaps Iris could help him locate Johnny. He had to deliver the latest news regarding William Waite to the troubled paramedic.

As soon as the light changed, Crockett accelerated through the intersection on his way to the gray cement building that housed some of the city’s criminals as they awaited their day in court. One man in particular would be very interested in the newest arrival.

He pulled into a parking spot near the rear entrance and shifted the sedan into park. “Alright, Hunley. Home sweet home.” His remark was acknowledged by a mere grunt from the rear seat.

Hunley was led down a long corridor and through two sets of locking doors, his hands still cuffed behind his back.

“Dis iz bu’sit,” the former assistant fire chief mumbled as they approached a corner cell. He noticed that one bunk was vacant inside the small room, but the other was occupied by a thin man in a blue jumpsuit.

“Whatever you say,” Crockett uttered sarcastically. He looked inside, noting that the other occupant of the jail cell was curled up on his bunk facing the wall. He rattled the keys in the lock of the cell. “Wake up… Got a new roomie,” the detective called out.

The only acknowledgement he received was a slightly lifted middle finger. Crockett felt the grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He didn’t know which man was going to be the most surprised,
Hunley or his new roommate.

“Alright, step inside then place your hands back through the bars so I can uncuff you.” He waited for Hunley to comply then clicked open the handcuffs, pulling them back through the iron bars. “Welcome to the Los Angeles City Ritz Carleton, Leonard Hunley.” He stepped back, watching the two prisoners.

The sound of the name Leonard Hunley caused the other man to jerk his head up, turning it slightly to the right. “Hunley? THE Leonard Hunley?” The young man grunted as he sat up clutching his hands into tight fists.

“Yea, das m’name. Don’ wear it ou’,” Hunley said, not sounding at all threatening with his nasal whine.

The other man stood up to his full height, keeping his face angled towards the floor, away from the new arrival, but his voice was menacing in a thick Hispanic accent. “I been rotting in this hell hole waiting for you to bail me out, jus’ like you promise. We had agreement, but you lie to me. Now you come to pay your debts to me, no?” He asked, lifting his chin slowly to eye the new arrival.

The sight of the young dark-haired man standing before him sent chills down the older man’s spine. The voice had sounded familiar; he recognized the accent, but the identity wasn’t confirmed until the Latino man leveled Hunley with his dark evil glare. Fear gripped Hunley’s knees, cementing his feet to the place where he stood. His heart rate quickened and a fine sheen of perspiration suddenly began to ooze from his pores. In his panic, he wondered how long he would survive in the small room with the man he had used as a scapegoat, back in the early part of the summer. “Uh… Oh, g-gah… I-I ca’ ezz-‘pain,” the cowering man muttered in a shaky voice that barely registered above a whisper, his words barely understandable due to his injury and his terror.

“Leonard Hunley, I believe you know Ricardo Gomez… You fellas play nice now, you hear?” Ron Crockett snickered as he walked back down the hallway. ‘Yes sir, karma’s a real bitch,’ he mused.

E!

Chet kissed Caroline goodbye, then picked up his keys. He had a few errands to run and decided to stop by Roy’s house while he was out.

“Have a good day at work, sweetheart,” he said, his heart warm and his body completely satiated. He still couldn’t believe what she had done for him earlier and he hoped she would allow him to reciprocate tonight.

“Thanks. It’ll be a short day, since it’s only a few hours. I’ll cook us a nice dinner when I get home,” Caroline remarked, loving the rosy tint in Chet’s cheeks.

Even though she had been embarrassed to talk to Joanne, the older woman had been more than willing to explain things to her, and for that she was grateful. The next time she saw Joanne she was going to ask her a very important question. She felt closer to her babysitter than to any other woman, and it was time to start making wedding plans. She hoped Joanne would agree to be her matron of honor on her special day.

E!

Ron Crockett expertly parallel parked the sedan in front of Bloomers. He checked his mirrors before stepping out of the car, a habit common among law enforcement officers who were trained to be vigilant and aware of their surroundings. As he walked inside the florist shop, he saw an older red-
haired woman smiling as she handed a small vase of roses to an elderly gentleman. He waited patiently for the older man to exit before he stepped up to the counter.

“Good afternoon. May I help you?”

“Yes, ma’am, my name is Lieutenant Ronald Crockett with the Los Angeles Police Department. I’m looking for Iris Campbell.”

Iris felt her legs grow weak and reached for the stool behind the counter to steady herself. She propped her hip on the wooden furniture, silently praying that the officer wasn’t here to deliver news of her worst fears coming true.

“I-I’m Iris… Is something wrong?”

“No ma’am, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I understand that you picked up John Gage from the hospital after he was injured. I need to speak to him and I haven’t been able to reach him by phone. I was hoping that you could tell me where I could find him.”

Iris both felt and heard the rushing sound in her ears. This man wasn’t here to tell her that Johnny had been in an accident, or even worse, that Lily was dead. She coughed a little, her mouth suddenly dry. “Ahua, um, excuse me for just a moment. I need to get some water.”

As Iris stepped over to the sink behind her work counter and turned on the water, filling a glass for herself, she didn’t hear the back door of the shop opening.

“Lieutenant, would you like some water?”

“No, ma’am. I’m fine. Again, I apologize for upsetting you. I really need to work on my tactics,” he joked.

In the back room, Caroline was about to announce her arrival when she heard a comment that silenced her, sending chills down her spine.

“Mrs. Campbell, I really need to talk to Johnny about an old murder case. It’s about to go to trial now and his testimony is desperately needed.”

Iris wondered how a detective from Los Angeles was involved in a murder case that happened on the other side of the country. She finished gulping her water, reaching for the counter top to steady herself.

“I see. May I ask how you know about it?”

Lieutenant Crockett, well-versed in body language, picked up on both the verbal and non-verbal cues from Iris. “I take it you know about this case?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, yes I do. The victim was… Was my husband’s younger brother.”

Lieutenant Crockett looked at the paling woman standing before him. Had he heard her correctly? “Oh, um… I see… Is your husband available?”

Iris shook her head, lowering her chin to her chest. She sniffled, collecting her thoughts before she spoke, knowing why the Lieutenant had seemed confused. “He died in an accident twenty-two years ago.”

Crockett rested his hand on the counter, lowering his voice. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Campbell. I didn’t mean
to dredge up bad memories for you.”

“It was a long time ago, Lieutenant, but sometimes it feels like it was just yesterday.”

Feeling the need to redirect the conversation, Crockett cleared his throat before asking his next question. “How long have you known John Gage?”

Iris looked down at her hands, knowing that Johnny wouldn’t want her to divulge this much information, yet she felt compelled to do so. Her heart told her that Johnny was walking along a slippery slope and she had to do whatever she could to help him.

“I’ve known him for a-a long time. We met when he was just 16 years old. I was… He was with my daughter and me when Phillip was murdered. Lily, she’s my daughter, and I… We didn’t see the murder happen, but… Johnny did… It changed his life forever.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss, Mrs. Campbell. I’m sure that losing your brother-in-law was difficult.”

Iris felt her chest tighten as the memory of that day flooded her thoughts. “Yes… Yes, it was. It was almost as difficult as losing my husband.”

Crockett lowered his face. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Campbell. This must be hard for you to talk about.”

She nodded, struggling to find her voice. She swallowed back the lump that was threatening to block her throat. “You asked me if I knew where you could find Johnny. I think he might have gone to the Tehachapi Mountains. You see… My daughter, Lily, is a member of a,” she hesitated, embarrassment coloring her features. “She’s involved with a cult, Holistic Unity Gardens. I believe Johnny went there to find her, talk to her about testifying at the trial.”

“So you already knew about all this?” Crockett asked.

Iris nodded in affirmation. “Yes…, but Lieutenant… Johnny doesn’t want his friends to know. He’s… He’s having a difficult time accepting the fact that he didn’t intervene when Phillip was being… t-tortured and killed.”

Crockett looked up at the woman on the other side of the counter. His heart bled for her now that he had a better understanding of her situation. “He couldn’t have stopped them. Men like that… They’re filled with hate. They would’ve killed Johnny, too. He has nothing to be ashamed of, Mrs. Campbell.”

“You and I know that… But he feels differently. I hope you’ll respect his wishes. May I ask you how you got involved?”

Crockett realized that she had shared a lot of information about herself and Johnny. He felt like he owed her an explanation. “One of the two men involved in the murder confessed it on his death bed. When the DA told Phillip’s mother, your mother-in-law, about the break in the case, she gave him information about Johnny having been a witness. She said he was living in LA and the DA’s office contacted my office in an effort to locate him. I met with him a couple of weeks ago, and he was considering testifying, but… Well, I knew he was afraid, and I don’t blame him. I can’t imagine how I’d feel going back there under these circumstances.”

“Then why are you pushing him. For God’s sake, Lieutenant, you’re a black man, so surely you understand.” She said, her face reddening.

“I do, Mrs. Campbell, but something else has happened that Johnny needs to know about. The perpetrator in this case, William Waite, has had a stroke. He can barely walk, and speaks with a slur.
He isn’t the threat he was ten years ago.”

Iris’ green eyes darted back and forth between the lieutenant’s brown ones. “A stroke? Really?”

“Yes ma’am, and his buddies really aren’t as strong a group as they were back in ’65. Times have changed.”

Iris looked down at the counter, her mind spinning with the news. “When I see him, I’ll tell him. That’s the best I can do, Lieutenant.”

Crockett nodded his understanding. “I appreciate that, ma’am. Let me know if I can help in any way. And… I hope that your daughter returns to you soon.”

“Thank you, so do I.”

In the back room, Caroline trembled with the information she had overheard. She sensed that the conversation was coming to an end and decided to make her presence known. She quietly opened the back door and then closed it quickly, calling out to Iris. “Iris, I’m here.”

Iris quickly stiffened her spine. “That’s my employee,” she said, hoping the lieutenant would understand.

“No problem,” he whispered. “Here’s my card, just call me if you have any contact with him,” he said, turning to leave. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Iris watched the detective exit through the front door just as Caroline walked in from the work room.

Caroline saw Iris staring after the departing man. She was reeling with the bits of information she had overheard, but didn’t want Iris to know she had been inadvertently eavesdropping. She cleared her throat, forcing a smile onto her face.

“Thank you for the morning off, Iris. I really appreciate it.”

Iris heard the comment, but made no effort to turn around. She was still watching the detective as he got into his car, his features so reminiscent of her late husband. As Lieutenant Crockett pulled into traffic, Iris allowed her chin to dip slightly, lost in her own thoughts.

“I remember what it was like to be young and in love,” she said softly. “You and Chet need to spend some time together, without Corrie around.” She turned around, meeting the eyes of her young apprentice and saw the concern etched in the younger woman’s face. “I know you love… you both love that daughter of yours, but it’s good to spend some quality time with just the two of you.”

Caroline felt the heat rising from her chest, coloring her face. She quickly diverted her eyes from Iris, feeling as if the older woman could see into her soul and knew exactly what she and Chet had been up to during her morning off. She heard Iris’ footsteps walking closer to her, then felt the older woman’s hands firmly gripping her upper arms. When Caroline looked up, she could see that Iris’ eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

“Caroline,” Iris whispered, her voice raspy and weak. “Don’t ever let Chet walk out of the house without you telling him how much you love him. I know he’s a firefighter and he’s a strong man both physically and mentally, but most men… All men have a soft spot for the woman they love. No one will ever see him as vulnerable and as weak as you will. You’ll see a side of him that no one else will be allowed to see, not even the other men he works with.”

Caroline stood still, feeling the light pressure on her upper arms as Iris began to stroke them gently.
She didn’t know what to say, and so she said nothing. She simply allowed Iris the chance to say whatever was on her mind.

“He needs to know you’ll be there for him, that you’ll always be by his side no matter what the future brings. Do you understand?”

Caroline pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, a nervous habit she had had since childhood. She felt her own eyes stinging as they, too, began to swell with tears. “I-I think so. We’ve talked about his career being dangerous, but… I love him too much to ask him to quit for me.”

Iris gave a weary smile. “Good girl… The fact that he’s in a dangerous profession gives you a bit of an advantage. At least you’ve had to think about what might happen. I never did.” The older woman looked down at the counter, allowing her hands to drift back down to her sides as she walked around the work station. “The last time I saw my Jonathan alive, we were… We were having a disagreement.” She released a soft chuckle. “It was stupid, really. Just a misunderstanding about what he wanted me to cook for dinner that night. He wanted me to cook a chicken pot pie and I wanted a roast with carrots.” Iris reached up, brushing her fingertips beneath her eyes to remove the moisture. “Jonathan never got that chicken pot pie he wanted. He was killed on the job that same day.”

Caroline turned her shoulders slightly, her eyes following the forlorn woman as she settled behind the work counter. “And… And you didn’t tell him you loved him before he left for work that day, did you?”

Iris merely nodded her head, acknowledging that what Caroline was assuming was in fact true. “People can be taken from you in an instant Caroline. Don’t ever forget that. Always tell them how you feel because you never know when it might be your last chance.” Iris sank onto the stool behind the counter. “Recently, I let my… Someone very close to me leave and didn’t say all the things I wanted to say to him. Now, I don’t know if I’ll see him again.”

Caroline swallowed hard, wondering if the person Iris was referring to was John Gage. Quickly she ran through the details of the conversation she had overheard, trying to put together the pieces, but knowing she couldn’t ask Iris for the details. After all, if Iris wanted her to know, then she would have told her.

“I hope you do, Iris. I hope you do have the chance to tell him how you feel.”

Iris looked from the counter top, up to the place where Caroline stood. She offered a weak smile, sniffing as she fought through her tears. “Me, too. Now, why don’t you and I look through some of these catalogs?” She asked, pushing a couple of floral magazines in Caroline’s direction.

“Why?” The younger woman asked, puzzled.

“Because my wedding gift to you and Chet will be your flowers.”

“Gift?” Caroline asked, unsure if she had heard correctly.

“That’s right. It doesn’t look like I’ll be able to create a bridal bouquet for my own daughter. I don’t know if she’ll ever get married, or… Or even invite me to the wedding if she does. But if you’ll accept it, I’d love to create a special arrangement for you to carry on your wedding day. In fact, I’d like to be your florist. I’d love it if you and Chet would allow me to decorate your venue. My treat, my gift to you both.”

“But, that’ll cost so much. I mean, I really appreciate it, but it’s a lot of money and-“
“And I want to do it, Caroline. Please allow me, won’t you?”

“You’d really do that for me?” The younger woman asked, feeling her own tears beginning to flow.

Iris reached across the counter flipping open the first catalog. “Yes… I’ve grown to care a lot about you, Caroline. You’re a wonderful young woman. Now, what do you say?”

Caroline nodded her agreement, but instead of looking down at the pictures, she rushed around the corner of the counter, enveloping Iris in an embrace. “Thank you, Iris. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

E!

Chet wheeled his van into the DeSoto driveway, shifting into park and stepping out into the mid-day sunshine. He had had several errands to run and had decided to make the short trip over to Roy’s house to speak to him in person.

He had a bounce in his step as he walked onto the small porch and knocked on the wooden front door. “In the garage!”

Roy heard a vehicle pull to a stop in his driveway while he was changing the oil in Joanne’s car. He called out from behind the raised hood. “Hey DeSoto. So, what’s up?”

Chet bounded around the shrubbery, tapping the trunk of the car lightly with his fingers as he walked closer to the front of the vehicle. He couldn’t erase the grin that had been plastered on his face all morning. “Well… It’s about Johnny,” Roy said, knowing he couldn’t hide beneath the hood forever. He reached for a rag to wipe the oil from his hands then slammed the hood down.

When he peeked over at the side of the car where Chet stood, he got the exact reaction he assumed he would get.

“Whoa! Damn, man. What the hell Joanne do to ya?”

“It wasn’t Joanne,” Roy said flatly, glaring at the annoying Irishman.

“Okay, then, uh,” Chet stammered, rubbing his chin with his hand. “Um, what does the other guy look like?” He asked with a snicker.

“About six foot one, dark shaggy hair, skinny, and has a crooked smile,” he deadpanned.

Bushy eyebrows knitted together in confusion as Chet pondered the unusual response he had gotten from his friend. Then his eyes widened as he began to stammer almost as badly as he had during his earlier phone call with Roy.

“Wa-wa-wait a minute, buddy. Are you talkin’ ‘bout Gage?”

“Yep, my partner decked me,” Roy confirmed. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Chet ran a hand through his curly hair. He gave a slight chuckle, trying to lighten Roy’s obviously depressed mood. “Sure, need some help with your moves from ol’ Chester B.?” Chet asked, raising his fisted hands, assuming a boxer’s stance.
When Roy didn’t respond, Chet knew the situation was serious. “Aww, man. I’m sorry, Roy. I shouldn’t have said that. So… What’s going on with him?”

Roy leaned his hips against the side of the sedan he had been working on. He looked at his friend, trying to decide the best way to broach the subject. Deciding there was no good way, he chose to forge on ahead. “Chet, how much do you know about Iris Campbell?”
Chapter 10

Chet looked at Roy as if he had taken leave of his senses. “Iris? What’s your shiner got to do with Caroline’s boss lady?”

Roy, cut his eyes away from his friend, crossing his arms over his chest. “I think she and Johnny are seeing each other…. Or something.”

“Seein’… What do ya mean by seein’?” The Irishman asked, curious if his mind was wandering in the same direction as Roy’s.

“Romantically, Chet. Geez, do I need to have the birds and bees talk with you?” Roy asked, feeling defensive.

Chet’s goofy grin spread across his face, feeling as though Roy had pulled a fast one on him. “Ah-ha, yea… I dig it, DeSoto. Gage struck out with so many women in LA that now he’s hittin’ on the overweight senior citizens.”

Roy crossed his legs at his ankles, still leaning against Joanne’s car. “I know she’s not exactly his type, but… There’s got to be something going on, Chet. Why else would he jump me when I mentioned it?” Roy’s blue eyes bore holes into Chet making the lineman feel uncomfortable.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Dead serious. I saw them together when Mike and I took his Rover home on Saturday morning. He was getting out of her car, and both of them looked like kids caught with their hands in the cookie jar.”

Chet propped his hand on his hip, staring at the cement flooring of the DeSoto garage. He tried to think of another reason for what Roy had seen. The two friends were silent for a few moments, and then Chet snapped his fingers and widened his eyes.

“Hey, maybe she’s teaching him how to cook?”

“Really? Is that the best idea you can come up with?” Roy asked. “Look, I know it sounds crazy, but… Damn it, I know what I saw. And Dixie called Joanne to get Iris’ phone number around lunch on Friday. That was about the time that Johnny would’ve been discharged. And,” Roy continued, his voice rising in volume as he pointed a finger towards the startled lineman. “Dixie told me that a woman had picked Johnny up from the hospital. It all makes sense, Chet.”

“No it doesn’t,” the Irishman chimed in. “I mean, what you’re saying is adding up, but it doesn’t make sense. Johnny and Iris? She’s too old for him,” the lineman said, counting on his fingers. “Two, she’s too heavy for his tastes. Three, she’s a red-head, and-“

“You’re skating on thin ice with that one, Kelly,” Roy deadpanned, running a hand through his own thinning auburn hair.

“I’m just sayin’ that she’s not his type, that’s all. Besides, every time Gage has a new chick, he’s all hyper and happy. Lately, he’s just been plain miserable.” Chet looked up at Roy, knitting his
eyebrows together. “Plus... How do they even know each other?”

“Joanne introduced them a few weeks ago, back when she was still working there. Johnny went into the flower shop for something, and Joanne explained that he was my partner.”

“Why was Johnny in a flower shop? Let’s face it, he ain’t the most romantic guy... on... earth,” Chet said, his smile fading fast.

Roy pushed himself off the car when he heard Chet’s voice slowing down. He knew that the other man had an idea of what might be happening. “What?”

“Do you remember the conversation we were havin’ in the locker room the mornin’ that the investigators came to talk to Mike?”

“No.”

“It was right after Caroline started at Bloomers, I was talking about the language of flowers? Caroline had been teaching me about it, and I mentioned it to you guys.”

“Okay, I vaguely remember it. Why?”

Chet’s face took on a serious expression. “Johnny knew the meaning of the Star of Bethlehem. How many guys know the meaning of that flower, huh?”

“Two. You and Johnny,” Roy commented, his mind beginning to retrieve more details of that particular conversation. “I seem to recall him asking you if you knew the meaning of Jimson Weed.”

Chet’s facial features became even more animated. “And I didn’t, but Johnny did. He said it meant... Um, um...,” he mumbled, snapping his fingers as he dug into his memory bank for the meaning of Jimson Weed. “Oh yea, disguise.”

“And he said that it was perfect for you because of your alter ego,” Roy chimed in.

“Alter ego?” Chet placed a flattened palm on his chest. “Are you insinuating that I’m the Phantom?”

“Absolutely!” Roy said with a quirk of his lips. “But how did Johnny know the meaning of Jimson Weed?”

“Maybe it’s something they teach Indian kids on the reservation.”

“You really ought to learn more about reservation life, Chet,” Roy stated. “They might be taught the medicinal and ceremonial uses of different plants, but the language of flowers? That’s ridiculous.”

“Do you have a better explanation?” Chet shot back.

“Not really... Wanna beer or something? I could really use a drink right now,” Roy commented, trying to sort through the confusing aspects of John Gage.

The two men walked through the garage door into the kitchen. Roy pulled a couple of bottles of brew from the refrigerator, removing the tops with a bottle opener. He had just tilted his head back when Joanne walked into the room.

“Hello, Chet.”

“Hey, Jo,” the Irishman commented, following Joanne as she walked through the kitchen towards the laundry room.
“You boys enjoy your beer,” she tossed over her shoulder, offering Roy a wink as she headed to the laundry room with her armload of towels.

Chet looked over at his friend, returning them to their conversation. “So do you think Iris taught him the language of flowers?”

“I don’t know,” Roy said, his voice tinged with exasperation. “I agree that it’s ironic, but Iris can’t be the only person who knows the meaning of flowers.” Roy crossed his arms over his chest. “Okay, now you’re making me doubt my own theory.” He allowed his mind to return to that morning in the locker room, remember one thing that hadn’t struck him as unusual at the time. Now, it seemed as though his partner had been giving him a bit of a clue. “You know, after you left the locker room that morning, I remember asking Johnny how he knew so much about flowers.”

“And what did he say?”

Roy stared into the air between him and his friend as he drew another long drink from the cold brown bottle. When he swallowed his beer, he looked directly at Chet. “He didn’t answer my question… Just said that he was a man of mystery.”

“Hmm… Well, what did he say about his relationship with Iris? I’m sure you’ve asked him, right?”

Roy pressed his lips into a thin line, pointing at his bruised and swollen eye.

“Aaahhh, okay, so I take it Johnny was upset by your question,” Chet stated, pulling over a bar stool and taking a seat.

“That’s an understatement. I had to choke him just to get him off me.”

Chet released a long slow whistle. “He must’ve been really pissed. He’s never done that to me, even with all the shit I … Ahem,” he cleared his throat, looking around to see if Joanne had overheard his swear. “I mean, with all the Phantom’s pranks around the station, Johnny’s never gotten violent about ‘em.”

“Well, obviously I can’t talk to him about it again, but if they aren’t seeing each other, then why did he get so mad about me asking? Why not laugh in my face? I don’t get it, Chet. I just don’t get it. What’s their connection?”

“Maybe you should talk to Iris.”

“What would I say?” Roy questioned, not wanting to admit that he had already thought about just such a conversation.

“Ask her if she’s doin’ Johnny,” the lineman said, curtly.

“Smooth, Chet. Real smooth. I can’t use that kind of language around a lady, and you know it. Besides, I’m not sure I believe it anymore, not after the list of reasons you just gave me.”

“I was only kiddin’, Roy, but you could ask her if she’s been teaching Johnny the language of flowers.” When Roy smirked at him, Chet lowered his gaze. He sat still, slowly spinning the bottle around on the kitchen bar as he tried to think of a nice way to broach the subject. Looking up, he snapped his fingers together. “I got it,” he nearly shouted, looking up at Roy who was still standing at the counter. “Tell her that Johnny has a tendency to hide his injuries, and since she picked him up at the hospital, you were hoping she might be able to tell you more about how he’s doin’. You’ve got to make it sound like you’re really worried about him.”
Roy thought for a moment, then slowly began shaking his head. “They both said she saw him walking home yesterday morning and picked him up. They don’t know that I suspect she picked him up at Rampart. Besides, I AM really worried about him,” he said, leaning his back into the corner of the counter between the sink and the bar where Chet sat. He lifted the cold beer to his lips, quenching his dry throat. He used his closed fist to hide the slight belch that followed.

“Then just be honest with her.”

“About what? Wondering how she and Johnny are connected, or ask her if she’s teaching Johnny the floral language?”

“The language of flowers, Roy. And… You could ask her what kind of, um, affiliation they have with each other.” Chet paused for just a moment. “You DO believe that they have some sort of connection, right?” Chet asked. When Roy nodded his affirmation, the lineman continued. “If you really wanna know what their relationship is, and Johnny’s gonna punch your lights out for askin’, then you have to ask Iris.”

“And what if she punches my lights out, too?” Roy asked with a nervous snicker, knowing that talking to Iris was the only way to get to the truth, and yet, not looking forward to the conversation.

Chet laughed, lifting his bottle to his mouth. “Well, then Roy ol’ pal, you’ve got a big problem if you let an old lady kick your ass,” he grinned, gulping the remainder of his beer.

“Thanks for the support,” Roy retorted, dropping his empty bottle in the trash can.

“Roy, can I ask you something?”

The paramedic looked at Chet with concern. “Yes.”

“Will you and Johnny be able to keep working together?”

Roy thought long and hard before he answered the question. He knew that Chet was being serious, and was only asking out of concern for their team. All six men of Station 51’s A-shift had always worked like a well-oiled machine. Now, it seemed that the ‘machine’ might be falling apart. Roy thought back over Johnny’s comment to him after their fight.

“I don’t know if he’ll give us the chance,” Roy said, his voice shaky.

“He’s a forgiving person, Roy. He’s forgiven me dozens of times.”

Roy felt the backs of his eyes begin to sting as Johnny’s words echoed in his memory. “Chet… One of the last things he said to me was… Was that he wasn’t coming back on shift.”

Chet wasn’t sure he understood Roy’s statement. “So… Is he resigning?” He asked, seeking clarification.

Roy shook his head slowly. “I don’t know, Chet. I honestly don’t know.”

“Well hand me the phone. I’ll just call and ask ‘im,” Chet said, reaching towards the telephone.

“Can’t… He isn’t answering the phone, or else he’s gone camping. I’ve been trying to call him since last night.”

“Alright, that’s it,” Chet said, slapping his hand down on the counter. “Either you go talk to Iris, or I will. If Johnny’s going to leave us, and Iris has ANYTHING to do with it… I’ll… I’ll…”
“You’ll what?” Roy asked.

“I dunno, but I’ll do… Something!”

“I think it’s my place to go talk to her. I kind of started this whole thing. Guess it’s only right that I try to fix it,” Roy commented.

Chet knew that what Roy was saying was true, but he still felt inclined to help out. “Well… Will you let me know if there’s anything I can do?”

Roy looked at Chet, seeing just how much the man cared about Johnny. Everyone at the station knew that the two of them only pretended to be easily aggravated by each other. When Johnny had nearly died from the snake venom, Chet’s true feelings were seen by everyone. Roy understood it well. They really were a cohesive unit, a family, and he wasn’t going to stand by and lose a brother and best friend without a fight.

E!

It was nearly closing time, when Roy walked into Bloomers. He had hoped to catch Iris alone, but noticed that Caroline was still in the store.

“Hello, Roy. May I help you with something?” Caroline asked.

“Um, yea, is Iris still here?”

“I’m here,” the older woman responded, walking out from the back room.

Roy gulped, feeling very unsure of himself. “May I talk to you, please?” He asked, his blue eyes looking cloudy.

Iris felt her heart leap into her throat. “Um, sure. I was just about to close up, anyway.”

“Thank you. I hope it won’t take long,” he responded, hoping Caroline would understand.

Caroline looked back and forth between the two people, feeling awkward. “Um, I think I’ll go now, if that’s okay,” she said, feeling a desperate need to talk to Chet about the events of the day at Bloomers.

Iris looked at the younger woman. “That’s fine. Just um… Lock the back door when you leave, please. I’ll get the front,” Iris stated, walking past Roy. She clicked the locking mechanism, turning the sign around and turning off the lights to darken the store front.

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Caroline looked worriedly at Roy. “Bye, Roy.”

Roy dipped his head at her as she retrieved her purse from beneath the work counter and walked out the back door. He waited until he heard the lock clicking before he turned around to face Iris. “I need to talk to you about Johnny.”

Iris began to wring her hands nervously. “I figured as much.” She knew Roy was going to ask about her taking Johnny home on Saturday morning.

The two stood on opposite sides of the counter, feeling the tension growing between them.

“Well… We’re alone now. What about Johnny?”

Roy licked his dry lips, unsure of how to ask the question. “Um… I know that Joanne introduced
you and Johnny a few months ago.”

“Yes, she did,” Iris commented, not willing to tell him that the introduction hadn’t been necessary.

“And, um… Have you two been seeing each other since that time?”

“Yes,” she responded, hesitating as his words sank in. “Roy, what’s going on?”

“Well, that’s what I came to ask you. What’s going on between you and Johnny? Are you two dating, or something?”

Iris, having noticed the bruising on Roy’s face, crossed her arms in defiance. Under different circumstances, she would probably have laughed at the idea of her dating a man who was half her age. However, Johnny wasn’t just any man; he was like her own child, and she resented Roy’s accusations. “I presume that you questioned your partner before coming here.”

“Yes, I did,” Roy stated, in an equally defiant tone.

“And you didn’t like the answer he gave you, is that it? Is that why you came to me?” Iris asked, feeling protective of her young friend.

“This is the answer he gave me,” Roy said, pointing to his left eye. “And I want to know why?”

Iris, having spent years explaining her actions to others who were judgmental of her, piped up. “Well then it sounds like the reason you got that,” she said, pointing her finger at Roy’s face, “is because you stuck your nose into a place where it didn’t belong.”

“I’m not trying to offend you, Iris—“

“Then don’t, Roy. Just leave Johnny alone. He’s going through a rather difficult time right now, and he doesn’t need you putting any pressure on him.”

“But he needs you there to comfort and console him? What’s REALLY going on, Iris? I know that you know more than you’re telling me.”

Iris dropped her face towards the counter, grateful to have the barrier between them. When she composed herself, she looked back up into his worried cobalt stare. “Yes… Yes, I do, and all I can tell you is that there are some things that Johnny doesn’t want other people to know. Please respect that.”

“But he told you? I’m his best friend, his partner, and you’re his…,” Roy paused, grateful that he hadn’t blurted out what he had been thinking. “And he’s confided in YOU instead of me?”

“Yes, and if you care about him like you say you do, then please respect his wishes.”

Roy leaned forward across the counter, his jaw muscles working as he clenched his teeth. “What the hell have you done to him, Iris? He’s not the same man he used to be, and it all started when he met you,” Roy spat out.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Roy. I… I think you better leave.”

“NO,” Roy slammed his hand down on the counter, causing Iris to flinch, a move he immediately regretted. “Not until I get some answers.”

Iris, suddenly feeling a bit afraid of the angry man, jumped back away from the counter. “Get. Out.”
Roy blanched, realizing his mistake. “I’m… I’m sorry, Iris. I didn’t mean to—“

“I said get out, Roy. Whatever information you want from me, you aren’t going to get it. I care very much for Johnny, and I’m simply doing what he’s asked me to do.”

“What?” Roy asked.

“He’s asked me to keep some things private. Please understand. Now, I think it’s best that you leave before this conversation gets out of hand.”

“All I’m trying to do is help my friend, Iris. I’m not trying to…,” Roy waved his hand in her direction, “stick my nose in your business. I just want the old Johnny back. Please understand that,” Roy said, his voice calming once again.

“Then be there for him if he comes to you. That’s all I can say, Roy. Just be there for him. He’s going to need you soon; he’s going to need all his friends very soon.”

Roy opened his mouth to speak, but was immediately cut off by Iris. “That’s all I’m going to say, Roy. Now I’m going to ask you once more. Please go.”

Roy, realizing that the conversation was truly over, backed away from the counter. “The last thing he told me, after our fight, was that he wasn’t coming back on shift. Did he tell you he was quitting the fire department?”

Iris shook her head, stunned by Roy’s comment.

Roy swallowed before continuing his apology. “That’s the other reason why I’m so worried. Being a firefighter and paramedic is Johnny’s whole life. He’s good at it; no, he’s great at it… One of the best I’ve ever known. He loves his job… And I’m just trying to find out why he’d throw all of that away.”

Iris looked down, lowering her chin to her chest. Was Johnny really giving it all up? Was it possible that he wasn’t planning on bringing Lily home? Was he planning on joining her and the cult, instead?

Roy saw Iris’ hands trembling and knew he had truly frightened her. He felt terrible, but didn’t know how to make her feel any better. “I’m sorry, Iris. I didn’t mean to come here and upset you, or anger you.”

Iris released a sigh, walking around the counter to escort him to the front door. She turned the metal latch, pulling open the door to allow him to exit, never making eye contact with him. She didn’t want him to see her tears.

Roy, his remorse overwhelming him, looked at the worried woman. “I AM sorry, Iris. Please forgive me for my rudeness.”

“Goodbye, Roy,” she said curtly. From her peripheral vision, she could see him hang his head as he walked out the door.

His attempt to gain information about his best friend had not gone as planned. Now he had no idea how he was going to help Johnny… If Johnny would even accept his help.

E!

By the time the men from Holistic Unity Gardens completed their tasks for the day, the afternoon sun
was beginning to set. Inside the men’s dorm, Johnny stood naked inside the narrow shower stall, beside James. While he had never been particularly modest around other men, he felt vulnerable showering with three male members of the group. He quickly scrubbed away the dirt and sweat from the day’s activities, hoping to get out of the shower, and into his clothes, as quickly as possible.

The other members of the family had seemed to welcome him into their group, including him in their meal time and their work schedule. While the genders spent most of their time working on different tasks, their meals were a joint affair. Yet, Lily had remained a bit elusive. He had caught a glimpse of her entering the feeding room as most of the family, including him, were finishing their lunch. He knew she had seen him, but he had not been allowed to talk to her.

As he towel-dried himself, he thought about the activities of the day. He was exhausted, but felt a renewed sense of purpose. Before breakfast, he had taken a walk around the compound to better understand the layout. It had been dark when he had arrived, so this was his first chance to get a good look at the place. Behind the living quarters, he had found acres of greenhouses, most of which were open, but a few were closed off with locks on the doors; various wooden buildings with metal roofs and metal doors, all of which were locked; and a large unpainted barn. It was the barn that intrigued him most. He had wandered around the perimeter of the large building, hearing the sounds of barn animals, as well as their noxious odors. Others might not appreciate the earthy smells of tilled dirt, hay, and manure, but Johnny certainly did. He stopped near the hen house, watching as the chickens scratched and pecked their way around the small enclosed yard. In the fields behind the barn, he saw goats and sheep grazing, and in a pen on the far right side of the area, he heard the smacking grunts of a large herd of pigs. At least this gave him an idea of where the group got its food.

Johnny had spent most of the day with James and a few of the other men who were working on a new greenhouse. Even though he had not been allowed to do the heavy manual labor because of his recent back injury, he had been called upon to secure the heavy duty plastic to the 2 x 4’s erected by the other men. It had been a long day, but afterwards, when Johnny looked upon all that they had accomplished, he felt good about it, and himself.

He wrapped the towel around his waist, then trotted over to his bunk. As he was digging through his duffel bag in search of a pair of sweat pants, he heard James speaking to him.

“So, John, how was your first day with us?”

Johnny spun around, quickly pulling his boxers up before removing the towel. “Aww, man, it was great. I really love it here. The fresh air, the bright sunshine, and no smog,” he continued, pulling on his sweat pants. He stood back up, threading his arms through his t-shirt, pulling it down across his taut abdomen. “And the cold shower is really refreshing,” he said with his trademark grin.

“Yes, that will take a little getting used to, I’m afraid.”

“So,” Johnny said, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull on his socks. “When do you think I’ll be able to talk to Lily?”

James looked seriously at his new friend, knowing that the news he was about to deliver might be distressing. “John, earlier today, while you and the other men were working on the greenhouse, I had a chance to discuss your request with Father Hiram and with Lily.”

“And?” Johnny asked, his bright smile fading quickly.

“And it seems that Lily has some concerns about talking to you.”
Johnny’s chin dropped, leaving his mouth gaping open. “Wha… What are you talkin’ about, James? She and I go way back, we’re friends, we’re-“

“Were,” James said, taking a seat beside the dejected paramedic. “The two of you WERE friends… A long time ago. Things have changed, John.”

“Like what? Sure, we’re a few years older, but what’s changed?” He asked, positioning himself at the head of his bed, pulling his pillow into his lap. He felt a need to protect himself from the news James was giving him.

James rubbed his beard, grateful that the other men had left them alone for a few moments. “John, our ways are different from the ways of the world. Outsiders don’t understand us, and… Well, you should understand when I say that other people are afraid of those who are different.”

Johnny drew his legs up, crossing them while he leaned his back against the wall, much like he had done countless times sitting on his bunk at the station. He exhaled loudly, cutting his eyes at James. “All my life, I’ve been different. Too Indian to be white, and too white to be Indian. Part of me is a fireman, and the other part is a medic.” He lowered his face, staring at his lap. “Part of me is a hero to the people I save, and the other part is the biggest failure on earth to all those I didn’t.”

“You are referring to the young man whose death you witnessed,” James stated. It wasn’t a question. “John, you’re-“

“James, I’ve lived my entire life with my feet in two different worlds. I was either hiding my white heritage while I was on the reservation, or hiding my Indian heritage when I was off of it.” He looked up at the man who was sitting patiently while he went off on one of his rants. “And Lily, well, she’s got her feet in two different worlds, too. We’re a lot alike, James. So why can’t I just talk to her?”

“Because she’s afraid of you.”

“WHAT?” Johnny gasped, not believing what he was hearing. “I wouldn’t hurt her!”

“Maybe not physically, but she doesn’t trust you, yet. Like I told you last night, we’ve lost a lot of members because their families have hired deprogrammers to kidnap them, take them away from us.”

Johnny ran his hand through his hair, leaving damp dark tufts sticking up over his head. “Is that what you think? You think I’m here to kidnap her?”

James skillfully dodged the question. “It doesn’t matter what I think, John. It only matters what she thinks, and right now, she thinks you’re here to persuade her to return to the outside world, or worse, you’re here to take her by force.”

Johnny scrubbed his face with his open palms. “Take her by… You make it sound like I’m gonna rape her, or somethin’.”

“Try to see it from her perspective, John. She’s seen several brothers and sisters snatched away from us. She doesn’t want to be one of them.”

“I’m NOT here to snatch her away. Don’t you get it?” He pulled his knees closer to his chest. “James, I’m lookin’ for peace… Peace I haven’t had since I was just a kid,” Johnny said, pointing his middle finger at his own chest. “Hell, maybe I’m lookin’ for the kind o’ peace I’ve NEVER had, but… I’m damn sure not here to hurt Lily, or anybody else for that matter. I jus’…,” he felt his throat tighten, nearly choking off his words. “I jus’ need to… to talk to my friend, James. Can’t you understand that?”
“Your life has been filled with turmoil, hasn’t it?” The bearded man asked, turning Johnny’s thoughts back on his own internal struggles.

“This is crazy,” Johnny stated, extending his legs to avoid the cramping he could feel beginning in his lower back. “Just drop the whole flower child, rainbows and unicorns, psycho-babble bullshit, will ya?”

James smiled inwardly; his tactic was working perfectly. “John, each one of us here has been through difficulties. It is what has brought us here to this place, this utopia. Here, we are judged merely on our own merits, not on that over which we have no control, such as our heritage, or our poverty. When I was just eighteen years old, my country sent me to do a job in a foreign land. When I returned, my blood family turned their backs on me. Do you know what it’s like to have one of your own brothers turn against you? To basically spit in your face and ridicule you for something which you had no choice in?”

Johnny stared at the olive green blanket on which he sat. He did know what it was like. He remembered how Chet had made fun of his Native American heritage, calling him a semi-red brother; and how the other guys, even his best friend and partner, thought it was funny. The peace pipe, the hatchet, the talk about the anthropologists, all of it came tumbling back on top of him like it had happened just yesterday. He was always the butt of the Phantom’s pranks. There were water bombs, and incidents involving short-sheeting his bed, and he would never forget the laughter that ensued when the guys set up the stokes like a cradle when he was having a bout of insomnia. Plus all the wise cracks about his failures with the ladies, and his deficiencies with his culinary skills. Even at work, among those who professed to be his friends, he was never good enough. His best friend had once called him a nut.

“Yea… I do know.” Johnny looked up, his chocolate eyes pleading for salvation as if he were a drowning man begging for a life preserver. “But what can I do to let her know I’m not here to hurt her?”

This was it. This was the break-through James had been hoping would occur, and it was happening much faster than he had ever believed possible. John Gage was truly a broken man, and brokenness always expedited the conversion process.

“Join us, John. Leave behind the world that has made you an outcast, the world that has told you all your life that you don’t matter, that you aren’t good enough. Here, you ARE good enough. Here, we’ll love you and accept you just the way you are… No judgement, no ridicule, no shame, or heart ache. The peace you spoke of is found right here,” James said, reaching out a hand to squeeze the shoulder of the emotional young man. “It’s right here among the family, your family, forever.”

Johnny felt as if his heart was being squeezed in a vice. What James was offering was very tempting, but could he do it? Could he leave behind all that he had worked so hard for? Wouldn’t that be running away from his commitments? He used the heels of his hands to rub his watery eyes.

“I, uh… I need to think about it.”

“It’s a big decision, John. It’s the same one we’ve all made before, so we understand that it isn’t something to be taken lightly. If you can’t sell out and join us completely – mind, body, and soul – then perhaps Holistic Unity Gardens isn’t the place for you. Every member of the family has been at the same crossroads where you are right now, and we’ve each chosen the pathway that leads to inner peace and fulfillment. May I ask you one thing?”

Johnny gulped, running his sleeve across his face. “Yea.”
“May I share your contemplation with Lily? Perhaps she’ll agree to speak to you, in my presence, if she knows you are seriously considering becoming one of us.”

“You’d… You’d do that for me?” Johnny asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“Of course, my brother,” James remarked, standing up. “As I told you before, we take care of each other here. She trusts me, John. She knows that I won’t let anything happen to her. And if I show her that I trust you not to steal her from us, then perhaps she will be less fearful of you.”

“Bu-“

James held up his hand to silence the protest he knew was coming. “I believe you when you say you are not here to harm her, Brother John, but Lily has not seen you in a very long time. She must learn to trust you again, and time, as well as your actions in the coming days, will prove to her that she is safe with you… That she is not only your friend, but your sister. The meeting shall not occur tonight, but it will happen soon, very soon.”

E!

Mike Stoker poured water into the percolator while listening to the exiting engineer’s updates about the previous shift. He measured out the appropriate amount of ground coffee just as Brian finished his explanation for the the scratch along the officer’s door of the engine. This was only Mike’s second shift back since his exoneration, and with Johnny’s injury during the previous shift, and now Big Red’s new battle scar, he wanted everyone to be alert and ready for whatever this shift was to bring.

“Morning, Roy. I heard about Johnny’s fall. How’s he doing?” Asked Brian, concerned about the accident-prone A-shift paramedic.

“Doing well.” Roy replied, reaching for a cup in the dish drain, purposefully keeping his back to the departing engineer. “The man’s like a cat, always ends up on his feet, somehow.”

“Yea, well he better start saving a few of those spare lives. He’s bound to be getting close to his ninth,” the tired engineer chuckled. “You fellas have a safe shift.”

“See ya, Brian.” Mike waited for the other engineer to depart before turning his attention to Roy. “How’s he doing, really?”

Roy finished pouring his cup of coffee, then turned around to face his friend, leaning against the counter. He blew a cooling breath across his coffee. “He’s healthy enough to do this,” Roy responded, pointing to his purple eye.

“Johnny did that to you?”

“Yea… He wasn’t exactly thrilled when I asked him about his relationship with Iris.”

Mike released a low slow whistle. “That’s not like him. Wonder what’s going on?”

“What’s going on with whom?” Marco asked, heading for the coffee pot. He did a double take when he saw Roy’s face. “DeSoto, what happened?”

“Johnny and I had a little disagreement,” the paramedic explained, turning and walking out the door.

Mike and Marco waited for Roy to leave the kitchen before they continued their conversation. Marco looked at Mike who was sitting at the table with his forearms leaning on the white tabletop.
“Roy got into a fight with our injured crewmate? What did they fight about?” The lineman asked, adding a spoonful of sugar to his cup of coffee, worried about the integrity of the partnership between their paramedics.

“I’m not sure,” was Mike’s response. “He just mentioned something about asking Johnny about his relationship with Iris Campbell.”

Marco lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “Who?”

“Iris Campbell, Caroline’s boss.”

“Oh,” the senior lineman stated, knitting his dark eyebrows together. “What kind of relationship?”

“I don’t know, but I certainly want to find out. We’ve been having too many misunderstandings around this station. We can’t afford to have Roy and Johnny at each other’s throats.”

“I agree with you there,” Marco said, pulling out a chair at the table. “Can I ask you something?”

“As long as it’s not about a relationship,” Mike snickered. “I don’t want us to get into a fight,” he said dryly.

Marco used the comment as a segue. “Actually, it kind of is… If you’re free on Wednesday night, would you be interested in going to a movie?”

Mike grinned, his blue eyes sparkling as he rapidly batted his eyelashes at his lineman. “Why Marco, I’m flattered, but you really aren’t my type.”

Marco chuckled, realizing how his question had sounded. He quickly recovered and pressed on. “Well, is my sister your type?”

Mike’s face suddenly became serious. “You want me to take your sister out?”

“A double date with Beverly and me. No pressure, Mike, and I’ll pay for the entire night… I just want to show Lexi what a normal life is like. She’s missed out on so much, and she’s really doing well. Beverly thinks she’s ready to move to the next level, going out in public and learning not to be watching over her shoulder every minute.”

“In other words, she’s got to learn to trust people again?”

Marco lifted his cup to his mouth. “Something like that.” He looked down at his rough hands. “I just thought… Well, you already know about her past… I just thought that maybe you would be the perfect man to reintroduce her to the world, you know? But, I understand if you’d rather not.”

“I’d love to, but not if you’re paying,” the engineer said, finally allowing a smile to return to his handsome face.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want another fella paying for my date.” Mike sipped his coffee, watching Marco’s face intently. “This IS a date, isn’t it?”

“Um, do you want it to be?”

Mike thought about the question, returning his cup to the table. “I think you’d better ask Lexi that question. How does she feel about it?”
“Scared, I think. I told her I would find a nice man to go out with us. She’s hoping it’s you, Mike.” Marco’s dark eyes looked down at the table. “She’s really quite fond of you.”

“Well… That feeling’s mutual,” Mike began, interrupted by Hank’s announcement.

“Roll call in two.”

“Okay, Cap,” Mike answered for the two of them. When Hank retreated back into the apparatus bay, Mike continued. “Are you sure she wants to go out with me?”

“Positive… Are you sure about her? I know her past has got to be an issue for you.”

Mike looked intently at his friend, his voice holding no condemnation. “Is Beverly’s past an issue for you?”

Marco pressed his lips together as he stared into his coffee cup, shaking his head. “No.”

“And Lexi’s past isn’t an issue for me, either.” Mike stood up, stretching his back for a moment before pushing the chair beneath the table. “You and I both know that most women who get caught up in the business really aren’t there by choice. Lexi and Beverly are two of the strongest women I’ve ever met. They not only survived the experience, but they’re both defeating their demons.”

“That’s true,” Marco added. “I look at all that Beverly has accomplished, and I’m in awe of her. Now, she’s helping Lexi follow in her footsteps. It’s really incredible.” He paused, waiting for Mike to shift his blue eyes in Mike’s direction.

“I’m looking forward to an evening out, Marco.”

In the apparatus bay, Roy and Chet stood in line waiting for the remainder of their crew to arrive for roll call. Chet shifted his weight from one foot to the other while shoving his hands into his pants pockets. He really wanted to have a private conversation with Roy, soon.

“Hey, I um… I need to talk to ya when we get a chance.”

“Caroline told ya that I went to Bloomers didn’t she?” Roy asked.

“Yea… And you weren’t the only one that stopped by to ask Iris about Johnny,” Chet responded just as a young blonde-haired man that neither of them recognized, emerged from the locker room and took his place in the line-up.

“Um, I’m Kyle Greene. I’m here to replace John Gage,” he said, extending his hand to both Roy and Chet.

“DeSoto, Roy DeSoto and I’ll be your partner,” Roy said, hoping that the new arrival wouldn’t ask for details about his black eye.

“Chet Kelly, lineman,” the Irishman stated gripping Kyle’s hand a little harder than was necessary. “How long have you been with the department?”

“About six weeks now. I don’t have a permanent station, yet. I just fill in where I’m needed,” Kyle responded, already feeling welcome. He looked up as two more men joined them.

“Greene,” Roy began, “this is our engineer Mike Stoker and our senior lineman, Marco Lopez.” He then waved his hand back in Kyle’s direction. “Fellas, this is Kyle Greene, Johnny’s replacement.”

“Well, I see you men are getting acquainted. Greene, I’m Hank Stanley, captain of this motley
crew,” he said with a smile that appeared forced. “Welcome to 51’s. You fellas make sure he gets a warm welcome. He’ll be here until Johnny comes back, week after next.”

“Thanks, Cap. It’s good to be here,” the young man stated, unaware of the stunned faces in the line-up beside him.

Chet and Roy stood with their mouths gaping open.

“Week after next?” Roy asked, feeling the panic rising in his chest. Was he about to lose his best friend? Was Johnny really quitting the department, or at least 51’s?

“Yes,” the captain replied. “Johnny’s on injury leave until Thursday, then he’s using some vacation time.”

Hank didn’t say anything further. He always respected the privacy of his men. He had already had a telephone conversation with Roy about the fight between his paramedics. He knew that Roy had questioned Johnny about his relationship with Iris Campbell, and he had been shocked by Roy’s details of the events of their encounter. It was out of character for the junior medic to react in such a violent manner, especially with Roy. However, he had chosen not to tell Roy about Johnny’s leave request. Johnny had mentioned taking care of something personal. Since Roy hadn’t mentioned Johnny’s paid time off, he thought that perhaps his younger medic hadn’t told Roy about it. Now that he had gotten a good look at Roy’s face, as the men were lining up for roll call, he realized just how serious the whole situation was, and he was worried. He had been afraid when he walked into his office this morning, he would find a transfer request on his desk from John. When that didn’t happen, he had tried to calm himself down. Johnny hadn’t explained what kind of personal issues he needed to attend to while on paid leave, but Hank sincerely hoped that it didn’t involve looking for another job.

Hank quickly ran through the memos before handing out chore assignments. “Roy, how about show Kyle around the station.”

Marco was staring straight at his captain when the older man’s color began to fade with his last statement. Quickly, the senior lineman stepped up beside his superior.

“Cap, you okay?” The lineman asked in a hushed voice as the other men set about fulfilling their captain’s orders.

“Oh, yea… Fine, I’m fine, Lopez.” Hank shuffled the papers he was holding and turned to walk back to his office.

“I caught the name, too, Cap.”

Hank jerked his head toward his office, relieved when his lineman followed him. Marco closed the door behind him then took a seat beside the desk.

“It’s the new guy’s name, isn’t it?”

Hank leaned back in his chair, lifting his eyebrows at the reality. “He’s the first man named Kyle that I’ve had under my command…,” he hesitated, fighting back the horrific memories.

“Since Kyle Carrigan died,” Marco finished for him. “He isn’t Kyle Carrigan, and you didn’t cause Carrigan’s death, Cap. We fight the fires we can, we save those we can, and sometimes… Sometimes, the fire fights back.” He watched as his words sank into the psyche of his superior. “It’s a risk we all know about, and one that we all willingly accept, knowing it could happen to us… But we do this job anyway.”
Hank closed his eyes, his voice sounding weary. “But the memories…”

“It’s Carrigan’s memory that we honor each time we climb on board Big Red, Cap. He wasn’t the first man lost, and he won’t be the last.”

“But the memories, Lopez… They won’t go away,” the captain said, his voice fading.

“If they did, then you wouldn’t be human. We’re all human. We all have memories that we wish would go away, but won’t… The key is to stand up to them. Face them head on, and refuse to run away.”

Hank nodded his understanding without saying a word.

“Usually, we find out that it was our fear of facing them that was paralyzing us… Not the memories themselves.”

“You’re a wise man, Lopez.”

E!

Johnny pushed the cart of plants to the back of the delivery truck, watching as James lifted them to the awaiting containers. He remained silent, frustrated that he had spent two nights with the group, and had not been able to speak to Lily. He had seen her from a distance, but they had only made eye contact. The look on her face left him feeling sick and empty. Her face lacked the joy and radiance it had held when they had first met as kids. She looked frail, weak, and had shifted her eyes quickly as if the sight of him had been painful.

“Brother John?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry,” Johnny stated, returning from his reverie. He handed the next tray to James.

James finished loading the vehicle, then hopped down from the truck bed to the ground. “Alright, ready to roll?”

“Sure, where’re we goin’?”

“Bakersfield,” James responded. “I need to deliver these, and make a pick up for Father Hiram,” the other man said, his voice rising slightly. When he didn’t get much of a response, he decided to push forward, sensing he was about to lose John if he didn’t give the paramedic something to keep him interested. “We’ll be back in plenty of time to have that talk with Lily.”

Johnny’s dark eyes looked up, brimming with hope. “Tonight? We can talk tonight?” He asked, closing and securing the back of the delivery truck.

Both men climbed into the cab of the white vehicle before James answered. “Yes, tonight will be the night that you two may talk, in my presence, of course.”

“Oh, yea, o’ course.” Johnny allowed a faint smile to tug at the left corner of his mouth. “Thanks, man.”

Johnny leaned back in his seat as the big truck lumbered down the narrow lane. Finally he was going to have a chance to talk to Lily, and he knew that she would help him decide what to do.
“Hey, Greene?” Roy asked as soon as roll call was over.

“Yea?”

“Why don’t you grab us a couple of cups of coffee and meet me in the locker room. We’ll start the tour there,” the senior medic stated, moving towards the janitor’s closet where Chet was retrieving the mop bucket to begin the task of cleaning the latrine.

“Sure thing.” Kyle commented as he hurried toward the kitchen door, eager to begin his shift and please his temporary partner. He had heard about the legendary paramedic duo of DeSoto and Gage, and he was nervous about being partnered with the senior half of that team.

Chet banged the mop bucket against the closet door as he pulled the bulky item out of the narrow opening. As soon as he saw the lineman enter the locker room, Roy looked back over his shoulder, making sure that no one was following him, then quickly darted in behind Chet.

“Okay, what do you mean I’m not the only one who’s been asking questions about Johnny?”

Chet propped the mop beside the sink and began filling the bucket with water and bleach. He turned his blue eyes upwards, staring intently at the taller man. “Caroline overheard a conversation when she first got to work yesterday.”

“Between…?”

Chet darted his eyes around the room. “Look, Roy, you can’t say a word to anybody, alright?”

Roy fought to keep the look of exasperation from coloring his features. “Just say it, Kelly. What’s going on?”

“Well, Caroline went to work after lunch yesterday, and Iris didn’t hear her when she went in through the back door.”

“Go on,” Roy encouraged.

Just as Chet opened his mouth, the door to the locker room opened. Kyle Greene entered with two steaming mugs in his hands.

“DeSoto? It’s black, is that how you like it?” The replacement medic asked with a concerned look on his face, worried that he hadn’t asked Roy how he liked his coffee.

“Sure, it’s fine,” Roy stated, accepting the coffee from Kyle without looking at him. Instead, his eyes were glued on the frustrated lineman.

It was obvious that Chet wanted to give his friend more details, but he wasn’t about to reveal anything in the presence of the new guy.

E!
As the heavy delivery truck lumbered out of the Tehachapi Mountains, the conversation between James and Johnny was becoming more and more serious. James was continuing his efforts at recruiting the young paramedic, and Johnny was determined to talk to Lily before he committed to anything.

“So, is there really enough money to be made selling flowers to sustain you folks?” Johnny asked, curious about the financial situation of the group.

“We don’t require a lot of money, Brother John. We are simple people, desiring to leave the world in a better place than we found it.”

“Yea, okay, but how do you pay your bills? I mean, that’s a lot o’ land back there,” Johnny said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, “and I know land ain’t cheap. Plus the building materials, the animals, food for people and livestock, and-“

James raised his hand to silence the rant that was beginning. He had heard it all before from previous recruits and had practiced his response. “You see, when a person sells out and joins us completely, they want to rid themselves of the material and financial chains that keep them from being free… truly free. All of our members discard these worldly nooses that are choking the life out of them,” James continued, fully aware that the reference he was making would remind Johnny of the death he had witnessed as a teenager. “They turn over the proceeds to the group, to better the family and sustain us. It’s very uplifting, Brother John. You should try it.”

Johnny wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the comments, but a part of what James was saying sounded sweet to the paramedic’s ears. His father’s people placed far more value on humans and Mother Earth than on money and possessions. Perhaps the Unity Family wasn’t so different from him after all. Yet, the thought of giving up his most prized possessions, especially his Rover, sent a chill down his spine.

“Yea, okay, but doesn’t that mean that you have to keep gaining new members?”

James realized that Johnny was going to need more answers than the others he had converted. While he didn’t particularly need Johnny’s conversion to add to his numbers, now that Ian had joined them, but he still wanted to assure Father Hiram of his allegiance. If Johnny would agree to join their family, that would help him gain even more trust with their leader, thereby securing him a place in the inner sanctuary – his ultimate goal.

James continued answering Johnny’s questions. “New members do benefit the family, but to obtain their financial resources isn’t the reason we seek them.”

Johnny continued looking forward as he processed the bits of information James was giving him. Somehow, he felt as if he was only being fed crumbs, being given just enough information to keep him hungry for more.

“A’right, if it isn’t our money you want, why DO you need us?” Johnny questioned, squinting into the morning sun as he peered over at James, much like he would do when he was riding along with Roy.

Roy. The thought of his partner and best friend made him wince. He thought about his last encounter with Roy, could still hear him pounding on the outside of Johnny’s apartment door, calling out his apologies and pleading for Johnny to allow him back inside. His heart ached at the thought that he might never see Roy or the rest of the DeSoto family again, especially if he stayed in the Tehachapi Mountains. However, as the image of Phillip Campbell’s lifeless body hanging limply from the large tree near the river forced its way into his brain, he remembered why he had left without saying
How could he have allowed his weakness for family to endanger those he loved most? Since that cool foggy morning in 1965, John Gage had vowed to keep everyone at arm’s length. He had promised himself that he would not permit innocent people to be in harm’s way because of his connection to William Waite. Iris and Lily Campbell were already involved. He didn’t feel guilty about remaining close to them, but the others, like his family and friends? No way could he allow Waite to do to them what he had done to Phillip Campbell. How many times had his captain referred to 51’s as a family? Too many times to count, so why hadn’t Johnny broken the circle before now? Deep inside his soul, he knew the answer. Biology didn’t always determine who was and who was not a member of one family, and John Gage wanted to belong to a family unit – whether by blood, proximity, or career choice. Loving people, whether they shared his DNA or not, was something Johnny found easy to do. And it was that feeling of love and devotion that made his life such a lonely and painful existence now. As he had done with his parents, he would do for the men of 51’s. He would love them enough to break away… or could he?

“Does that make sense?” James asked, veering right and continuing along highway 178.

“How?” Johnny questioned, realizing that he had been lost in his own thoughts and had completely missed what James had said. “I’m sorry, man. I didn’t get that. If it isn’t for the money, then why exactly do you need us?” Then, as if answering his own question, he responded. “Oh wait, it’s the manpower, right?”

James chuckled at Johnny’s response. “Well, I have to admit that a few extra strong backs are appreciated, but no, that is not the reason. It is just what I said, Brother John. We want people to join us so that they can find true happiness and realize their ultimate potential. The world we live in is very judgmental; we offer a different way. We offer peace, love, unity, and a sense of purpose that you can not find in the outside world.”

“But what IS the purpose? Selling flowers?”

James swallowed hard, trying to find a way to answer Johnny without causing him further alarm. He was very perceptive, and maybe not quite as desperate to escape his demons as James had hoped. Yet, James knew he couldn’t reveal the true purpose of the family compound. He was too close to succeeding with his ulterior motive to ruin his plan now.

“Um, the purpose is happiness. True happiness and self-actualization,” James answered.

Johnny grinned his crooked smile. “Yea, well, I consider true happiness to be sharing my life with a beautiful woman who loves me just the way I am, maybe a couple o’ kids…” Johnny narrowed his eyes, his chin dropping slightly. That’s what was missing. Kids. There were no kids in the compound. “Um, James…,” he hesitated, shifting in his seat and running a nervous finger beneath his nose. “How come there’s no kids?”

“Soon,” James grinned. “We have been waiting for Father Hiram to decide that it is time for him to sire offspring. He and his chosen partners will unite tomorrow night and then they will produce the first offspring at Holistic Unity Gardens. The first children of our people, the progeny of our leader.”

Johnny’s head was reeling from the news. Produce offspring? James made it sound more like a business proposition than a loving relationship. “Sooo, you guys have no sex around here? I don’t think I’d find much happiness in celibacy,” he smirked.

James smiled for the first time. At least this was an answer he could give his new friend. “Ahhh, intercourse is only one way to find carnal pleasure,” he winked, watching as understanding dawned.
on the paramedic’s face.

“Wa-wait… You mean, you don’t have sex, per se, but you, ah, you are allowed to perform other sexual acts?”

“Yes, we are allowed intercourse one night each month. The dates are of Father Hiram’s choosing, but primarily center around the full moon. Yet, we are not denied the fulfillment of basic human needs and desires during the remainder of the lunar cycle. Father Hiram is in total control of the fertility of our women,” James explained. “So far, he has not thought it wise to reproduce. However, once Father Hiram has sired heirs, then the rest of us will be allowed to pair up and start reproducing, as well.”

“Children, James. They’re called children,” Johnny said with a straight face. “You make it sound so clinical. Loosen up, man.” Johnny shook his head as he stared out his window. With all the talk of love and peace that James had been giving him, there was no mention of love when it came to sexual relationships, or starting families, and that did not go unnoticed by the keen paramedic.

“I suppose you’re right, Brother John. I apologize for sounding so… distant, I guess you could say.”

“Yea,” Johnny responded, returning his dark eyes to the mysterious man in the driver’s seat. “You don’t sound like you’re buying into the part about marriage and kids.”

Thinking quickly to cover for his lack of enthusiasm, James piped up. “We do not marry as in the traditional sense, the way the world recognizes marriage. Here, no one is permanently paired with another. We are allowed freedom and choices when it comes to sexual fulfillment. Unless we are chosen to, um, bring a child into the world. Then we are to pair up until the entire process has been completed so as to ensure the paternity of the infant. Father Hiram’s chosen ones are the exception. They will be united with him for life, as in the traditional sense of marriage.”

“Humph, so are you saying that you can have sex with as many of the chicks as you want, uh, with their consent, of course, and there’s no strings attached?”

“Of course, or with some of the men, if that is your preference.”

“Ohhh no, nu-uh, no way.”

Johnny grinned, thinking of what it would be like to live in such a world. After all, rarely did he ever make it past second base before getting dumped. “So what about… you know… VD? Or what if your favorite lady gets picked to be,” he snickered, “in Father Hiram’s harem.” Saying the words sent a sinking feeling into the pit of Johnny’s stomach. What if Lily was to be one of the chosen ones?

James smiled, cutting his eyes over at his new friend. “Venereal disease is not a concern among our family. Father Hiram provides a healing service for all our new converts. This cleanses them of all outside negativity and makes them pure again. If they have not kept themselves sexually pure prior to joining us, then their purity is restored. It’s called a second virginity. After their conversion is complete, they are welcomed into the family, and are free to participate in ALL aspects of our lives.”

“So, no hanky-panky until you’re a full-fledged member, huh?”

James was careful how he responded. “It is against Father Hiram’s rules, and it is what is best for the family. More than once, Father Hiram has revoked the membership of a family member. He refers to it as bastardizing them, and they are sent away to spend the remainder of their lives in exile. Committing a sin against the family is a very serious offense, Brother John. But it is to ensure that
our family remains united and pure. Surely you understand.”

Johnny was soaking it all in, and thoughts of he and Lily enjoying such sexual freedom kept his mind wandering away from the discussion about the purpose of the family. “No condoms?” Johnny questioned.

“No,” James continued. “None are necessary, neither for birth control, nor disease prevention. We have no barriers between our members, Brother John. There are no worries here.”

Johnny rubbed his chin, shifting in his seat as his body reacted to the information he was hearing.

“Father Hiram has been preparing two of our women who are in the prime of their childbearing years. He has them on a restrictive diet and herbal routine to detoxify their bodies in preparation for a possible pregnancy. They have been off limits to all of us for the last three months in anticipation of the coming lunar cycle. And do not concern yourself about who these women are; Lily is not one of them,” he reassured the worried paramedic. When he looked back to the road ahead, a flash of blue light reflected in his side view mirror.

“Ugh.”

The sound of James groaning when he peered into the side view mirror made Johnny jerk his head to the right.

“What?” Johnny asked, sitting up straighter in the seat and glancing at his side view mirror as well. “Why are we being pulled over?”

“Pigs don’t like us,” James huffed, pulling the truck onto the shoulder of the road. “Wait here,” he said, turning off the vehicle and reaching into the glove compartment for his registration. With an aggravated look on his face, he stepped down from the truck and walked back toward the two officers who were exiting their patrol car.

Johnny watched in his mirror at the activity taking place behind the delivery truck, thinking it odd that one of the officers was wearing street clothes. He tried to see what was happening, but the three men stepped out of his line of sight. He heard the rolling door open and felt the vibration of a man walking around in the back of the vehicle. The impromptu inspection seemed to end quickly, and James returned to the cab of the truck.

Johnny looked worriedly at his new friend. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, I’m getting used to this,” James mumbled, glancing a couple of times in his side view mirror before returning to the highway. “Now, what other questions do you have about joining the family?”

E!

Marco stood over the trashcan, scraping the remnants of his dinner into the nearly full garbage receptacle, then headed to the sink to begin his dish-washing duty. When a handful of forks were dropped into the sudsy water, splashing bubbles onto his forearm, he looked over at the offending man.

He had been watching how his partner had been fidgety and anxious during most of the shift, yet multiple attempts to elicit the reason from the worried Irishman had been unsuccessful. Marco pressed his lips together in exasperation as he glared at the junior lineman.

“Hey, watch it, will you?”
“Hmm?” Chet asked, looking over his shoulder as he used a damp cloth to wipe the tabletop. Seeing the white suds standing in stark contrast with the tanned skin of Marco’s arm, he released a sorrowful frown. “Oh, sorry.”

“Want to talk about it now?” The senior man asked, seeing that they were alone in the kitchen. “It’s Caroline, isn’t it?”

“No.” Chet released a sigh, knowing that he had been acting uncharacteristically worried all day. He knew he owed his friend an explanation. “Caroline and I are great… I’m, ah… I’m worried about Johnny and Roy, ya know?” While not telling the entire story, he had still managed to let Marco know what was on his mind.

“Me too, amigo. I just hope that they can work together again, when Johnny comes back.”

“Where are DeSoto and Greene, anyway?”

Marco rinsed the plate he had been washing, placing it in the dish drain before responding. “Back-to-back runs all day. I think the last one was for a possible heart attack, but I’m not sure. You must’ve been in the shower when dispatch toned them out.”

Several moments of silence passed before Chet decided to head for the latrine to brush his teeth, hoping that Roy might return soon and the klaxons would remain silent long enough for him to share his information with the senior medic.

Just as the lineman was finishing up his oral hygiene routine, he heard the doors of the squad slamming shut. He was using his fingers to comb his mustache into place when he saw Roy’s reflection in the mirror.

“Where is everybody?”

Chet turned around, facing the paramedic. “I dunno, man. It’s been a crazy shift.”

“Don’t I know it,” Roy agreed, his face revealing his exhaustion. “Wanna go out behind the station and finish that conversation?”

Chet didn’t need an explanation. He had been waiting all day to tell Roy what Caroline had shared with him. “Yea,” he commented, following Roy through the latrine door and across the back parking lot.

The two men stood in front of Chet’s van, leaving them both with a clear view of the station, ensuring that none of the other men would be able to walk up on them and overhear them talking.

Roy leaned his forearms on the hood of the VW van, shifting his blue eyes towards his friend. “Now, who else has been asking questions about Johnny?”

Chet ran a nervous hand through his curly hair. While Caroline hadn’t sworn him to secrecy, he did love and respect her very much. What he knew left him feeling torn between competing loyalties.

“Look, you can’t tell anybody, alright?” Chet asked, knowing Roy wasn’t going to be able to make such a promise.

“Chet, I—”
“I know, I know, but this is serious, Roy. I mean, really serious.”

“Chet… Who?”

The younger man gulped, knowing there was no turning back. “Caroline thinks the guy’s a cop, and even though she didn’t get a look at ‘im, she said she thought she recognized his voice.”

Roy’s face began to turn red with frustration. “Who, Chet? Vince?”

“No… Crockett.”

“Why would Ron Crockett be in Bloomers asking about Johnny?” The paramedic’s voice was gravelly as he asked his question.

Chet looked at the station and around the back lot. No one was around them, yet he still felt awkward about what he needed to tell his friend. He cleared his throat, knowing that Roy was going to explode.

“Because he was talking to Iris about Johnny. Caroline said the man was a black guy and that he’s a Lieutenant. She met Crockett at Mike’s hearing, during the meylee, and she really thinks it was him. Anyway, the guy said Johnny was a witness to an old murder case and was needed to testify at the trial.” Chet felt his thighs grow weak with anxiety, and began to shift his weight, nervously. “DeSoto, you can’t breathe a word of this to anyone because Iris doesn’t know that Caroline overheard the conversation. And-.”

Roy stood up, staggering backwards until his feet bumped against the cement retaining wall. He stared at Chet in disbelief. “I-I’m shocked. Johnny never mentioned being a witness to a murder.”

“I know, man. And if he didn’t tell you, then you know he sure as hell didn’t tell any of the rest of us…,” Chet hesitated, knowing what he was about to say was going to surprise the dumbfounded paramedic even more. “But Iris knew about it.”

“WHAT?”

“SSshhh,” Chet warned, stepping closer to Roy and lowering his voice. “Caroline heard Iris tell the man that she had known Johnny for a long time, since he was a kid, Roy. What the fuck’s up with that, huh?”

Roy felt his mouth suddenly go dry and his heart leap into his throat. He was flabbergasted. Iris had known Johnny for years?

Roy’s wide eyes narrowed as anger overwhelmed him, coursing hot and bitter through his veins. “I’ll tell you what it means. She lied to me,” Roy grunted through clenched teeth. “The bi… Argh! She lied to me,” he repeated; his words and tone were opposite of the calm demeanor he normally possessed.

“Yea, well… Seems Iris isn’t the only one around here who’s lying. Johnny hasn’t exactly been truthful either, now has he? I don’t think Iris picked him up when he was walking home from his girlfriend’s house, do you?”

Roy felt the throbbing begin on the left side of his head and wondered if it was the onset of a headache, or if his blood pressure had just risen drastically. Deciding it was probably both, he rubbed his temple with his fingertips, searching his mind for another possible explanation for what Caroline had heard.
“No… It’s like… Chet, it’s like I don’t even know my own partner anymore.”

“Maybe we should all go over to his place and talk to him. You know, kind o’ gang up on ’im. See if he’ll come clean with us.”

“That would jeopardize Caroline’s job,” Roy commented softly, having exhaled a few times in an effort to calm himself. “Besides, you don’t want to cause a problem between you and your future wife, do you?”

Chet leaned his hip against the passenger’s side fender of his vehicle while he tried to think of a way to solve their dilemma. “True… I’ve got to respect her wishes to keep it quiet.”

Roy chuckled slightly. “Yea, well… You’ve already broken that promise.” He stepped away from the retaining wall, stretching his achy back. “I hope you can keep your marriage vows better than you kept this promise to her.”

Chet felt the weight of guilt bearing down on his shoulders. “Well, she didn’t tell me I couldn’t tell ya, just that she didn’t want Iris to ever find out what she had overheard.”

“I’m so damn mad, I feel like punching Iris in her lying mouth right now… but I could never hit a woman – not even her.” Roy clenched and released his fists. Deep down, he was feeling betrayed, but not by Iris. Johnny had been Roy’s best friend since they became partners. Johnny had been there for Roy when his marriage was falling apart. He had helped keep Roy grounded, helped him realize that he was jumping to conclusions about Joanne’s alleged affair. Johnny had even kept the kids so that Roy and Joanne could talk things through. So why hadn’t Johnny confided in him? Instead, he had turned to an older woman, a woman he seemed to have known much longer than anyone realized. That in itself was a lie of omission, wasn’t it? Yes, Roy was seething mad, but not necessarily at Iris, like he was telling Chet. No, he was more angry with Johnny.

“Yea, well… You ain’t so good at punchin’,” Chet snickered, waving his hand towards Roy’s bruised left eye, hoping Roy might appreciate the slight quip as a way of releasing tension.

Roy offered the lineman a hint of a smile. “Maybe not, but I’d sure like the chance to choke the shit out of… Somebody.”

“Whoa… down boy,” Chet said in a stage whisper. “Remember, you can’t tell anyone, especially not Iris.”

Roy thought for a moment, listening to the steady sounds of the cars on the freeway behind the station. “Well… Since Iris is obviously a liar, and Caroline CAN’T talk about it, and Johnny WON’T talk about it, then… Hell, I don’t know what to do.”

“Me either,” Chet replied.

“But I promise I won’t do anything to compromise Caroline’s job.”

“Or our marriage?” Chet added.

“Yea,” Roy said with a smile, still trying to get used to the idea of a married Chet. “But, I guess the big question now is… What am I gonna say to Iris and Johnny the next time I see them?” No longer thinking that Iris and Johnny were involved in a romantic relationship, he still wondered how they knew each other. Yet, the more pressing concern was whether or not he would have the opportunity to talk to Johnny again. With the last words his best friend had spoken to him reverberating in his memory, he hoped he would have the chance to make things right between them.
Just after nightfall, Johnny watched as the embers continued to glow around one of the fire pits he had chosen to sit at during the nightly ritual of the tea ceremony. He hadn’t seen Lily all day, and now his worries about her being one of Father Hiram’s options was causing him anxiety, in spite of James’ assurances to the contrary. James had promised that he would allow Lily and Johnny to talk after the tea ceremony, but where was she? Johnny lifted his eyes, looking around at the relaxed and contented faces of the members of the family. Males and females were intermingling, a few were holding hands and whispering to each other while they all stared at the hypnotic withering dance of the few flames that remained amid the growing pile of ashes. His eyelids were growing heavier and heavier, but just as the last tongue of fire slithered inside the mound of embers, he heard a familiar masculine voice speaking softly to him.

“Brother John?”

Slowly the relaxed paramedic lifted his chocolate eyes to meet those of James. “Hmm?”

“It is time.”

His gaze drifted from James to the young woman who stepped up beside him. Immediately, he recognized her. The soft glow of her hazel eyes in the dim light of the fire, her dark wavy hair accenting her perfect complexion and framing her plump lips that curled into a slight smile.

“Lily?”

“Hello, Thorn. It’s been a long time. Brother James tells me that you are considering joining us.”

Johnny stumbled as he pushed himself off the ground. When he rose to his feet, he felt James provide a steadying hand. “Yea… Lily, it’s be-been years. I’ve missed ya,” he remarked, his trademark grin appearing on his expressive face.

“I’ve missed you, too. I just can’t believe that you’re here and… And you may be joining us,” Lily said, stepping closer to him, but not near enough for him to touch her.

“Yea… I… I really need to talk to ya… ’bout somethin’ else, though,” Johnny commented, walking in the direction that James was guiding him.

“Why don’t we drive out to the meditation garden?” James asked, ushering the couple towards the nearest electric cart.

“Right on, James,” Johnny said with feelings of elation from the tea he had consumed, still mesmerized by the young woman he had adored since she was a child.

Johnny waved his hand in the direction of the back seat of the cart, allowing Lily to be seated before he sat down. James quickly assumed his position as the driver, and silently the small cart drove into the night.

The ride was short and silent. Johnny didn’t want to begin the conversation until they arrived at their destination, simply enjoying the peaceful ride with the woman he cared for deeply so near to him. When James drove past the meditation garden, Johnny became a little concerned.

“Uh, James?”

“Someone was already there,” James tossed over his shoulder, “and it looked like they were needing some privacy. We’ll go to the boulder near the front gate. It should be unoccupied.”
Just as James had predicted, the area near the compound entrance was empty. He eased the tiny cart to a stop beside the gate, stepping out and offering his hand to Lily.

“T need to make sure the lock is secure. It’s a nightly ritual. You two can sit on the boulder over there,” he directed, pointing to his right, “and I’ll do the lock check and then wait for you here. Just make sure to stay on this side of the boulder.”

Johnny felt a bit like a teenager being watched by the father of his date, yet James’ words sounded like neither a threat nor a warning. Instead they gave him a sense of peace, a feeling of security.

“Thorn, James assures me that you are being truthful, that you really are thinking of joining us and that you aren’t here to take me away,” Lily said as she took a seat on the large gray stone.

“You know I’d never do anything to hurt you. I really care about you, Lily.” He paused, seeing her dip her head and smile. He wanted to reach out, lift her chin up so that she was looking into his eyes, but he didn’t dare touch her. He wanted to be respectful of the group and their rules. To them, he was still an outsider, not yet a part of the fold, and the last thing he wanted to do was frighten her.

“You know your mom misses you, too?”

“She refused to join us; she chose the outside world over her only child,” Lily stated, her countenance falling. “She cast me aside, Thorn. She doesn’t understand me, not like you do. So, I have forbidden myself from speaking of her.”

“You won’t allow yourself… Or is it that Father Hiram won’t allow you to?” He asked, hoping he wasn’t pushing her too hard. The last thing he wanted to do was to offend her. He didn’t give her time to answer his question before he asked her another. “Can I ask you something?”

She nodded, refusing to look over at him. “As long as it isn’t about her.”

The mention of her mother brought an ache to her heart for which she felt a deep sense of remorse. Father Hiram had assured her that leaving her mother had been the right thing to do. She had cut all ties to the outside world, but that one had been the most difficult.

“Lily… Are you happy?”

Her smile immediately lit up her face. “Oh yes, very happy. I’m an artist now.”

“Artist?”

“Yes,” she replied, her enthusiasm contagious. “I’ve been promoted from the greenhouses to the pottery house.”

“There’s a pottery house?”

“I’m sorry, Thorn. I forgot that you haven’t gotten to see the entire compound, yet. That only comes after your conversion is complete. This place is much larger than what you’ve been allowed to see, so far. We have a pottery house where we create one of a kind pots for our plants and vases for the flowers. Some we sell locally, filled with the plants we’ve grown. Others, we ship all over the country and the world. It’s so rewarding to know that something I formed with my own hands,” she said, looking down at her open palms, “is bringing happiness to sick and lonely people on the other side of the world,” she exclaimed. “Father Hiram blesses each piece in his sanctuary before it gets shipped out. I’m a part of something that is bringing healing and love to a desperate and dying world.”
Her eyes were brighter than Johnny had ever remembered seeing them. He could tell that she truly was happy, but he worried about the activity she was describing.

“So you send these out to people around the world, people you don’t even know?” He asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Yes, it’s our way of passing along our own inner peace. It’s how we reach the pinnacle of our existence.”

Johnny drew his eyebrows together. Even though the woman sitting beside him looked like Lily Campbell, the words and phrases she was using were completely different. What had happened to the shy young girl he had met along the highway when they were just teenagers?

“Thorn, please say you’ll join us? You’ll love it here… And we can be together forever… No one here will judge us. And soon, we will even be able to… to unite completely, in every way. We might even be permitted to… to have a baby, if you’d like.”

“Whoa, slow down, Lil’,” he said, raising his hand. “I’m not quite ready to be a dad. I’ve…,” he shook his shaggy head, as if clearing his thoughts. “Ahhh, see… I’ve been asked to testify against William Waite,” he blurted out, knowing that there would be no easy way to bring up the subject of her Uncle’s murder.

Lily’s face darkened, growing paler in the soft glow of the moon. “No… Thorn, you can’t go back there. You just can’t. They’ll…,” she gulped, feeling her eyes begin to sting. “They’ll get you, too,” she softly cried.

“Hold on… Now I didn’t say I was gonna do it. I just said that they want me to.”

“Who?” She questioned. “Who’s THEY? It’s a trap, Thorn. It’s got to be a trap. It’s just a way to get you back there so they can leave you han-.”

“Stop it!” He said, using his voice to ground her. He wanted to hold her tightly, pull her into the safety of his arms, but he dared not cross that line. “Things have changed since we left. The old police chief is dead, and just before he died, he ratted out Waite… Confessed everything… But,” Johnny ran his hands through his hair. “But they know I’m an eye witness… And… Kizzy told ‘em ‘bout the pictures.”

“Who did WHAT?” Lily’s eyes grew wide, realizing what her grandmother had done. “But, you destroyed them, didn’t you? You threw the film in the river, right?”

Johnny shook his head slowly from side to side. “I didn’t. I just couldn’t make myself do it.” He glanced over her shoulder, seeing that their chaperon was patiently waiting beside the gate. “Lily, I still have the film. I never developed it. It may not even be any good anymore; I mean, it’s been ten years, but… Help me, Lily. Tell me…,” he hesitated, licking his dry lips, his mind still feeling as foggy as that long ago morning. “Should I testify? Should I just turn over the film? Please tell me what I should do?”

Lily, no longer the starry-eyed teenager, closed her eyes and calmed herself with a few breathing exercises she had been taught by the family. If the police chief was dead, would it be safe to return? Had times changed at all? When she opened them again, she looked at the man beside her, seeing into his soul with her intense gaze. “Follow your heart, Thorn. The peace you seek can not be found in the past. Your soul already knows the answer to your question. It is not my choice to make.”

“Lily, please…”
“Maybe… Perhaps if the police chief is dead, then… Then maybe things have changed…” She used her thin fingers to adjust her headband, curling her hair behind her ear. “You have to do what your spirit is telling you to do. If that is to join us, and I hope that it is, then you will make the right decision. We can be together forever, right here. You could mail the film to the authorities, and unite with us… Or, if you choose to testify at the trial, then…”

When she didn’t finish her thought, Johnny jumped in using every ounce of internal strength he had to restrain himself from grabbing her upper arms and shake her. “Then… What?”

Lily stood up, pacing a few steps towards the place where James waited. When she turned to the side to look back at Johnny, her eyes glistened in the moon light. “If you choose that path, going back to a place filled with hate, then I may not be available when you return.”

“But why? I can still join when the trial’s over.”

“I may be long gone then. And you… You will be tainted, Thorn. That place changed you; it changed both of us. Now I seek peace and I’ve found it among my family, my true family here. You seek to right a wrong that can never be undone in that world. It is futile, Thorn. And mark my words, if you do this, if you go back there, then you won’t return here as the same man you are now.”

“I’ve felt tainted my whole life, Lil. My whole goddamn life,” he cursed, wishing he could take back the words as soon as he had uttered them. “Am I Indian, or white? Am I a coward, or a hero? Am I-“

“A man?” She jumped in, knowing she was slicing through his heart with her words, but she had been taught that a person had to be broken before he could be mended, emptied of the world before being filled with the peace Father Hiram offered. “Or a child?”

“Don’t,” he grunted, the hurt bubbling deep inside his soul. His manhood had been wounded when he had failed to prevent Phillip’s death. Now the one person whose opinion of him mattered more than anyone else, was taking a shot at his masculinity.

“A child does what others tell him to do. A man makes his own decisions,” she said, turning and quickly heading for the cart. She had effectively given him an ultimatum, challenged his manhood, and she sincerely hoped that he would choose to join the group, to join her family.

James stood up, whispering his accolades to her as she took her seat in the back of the cart. “Nice job, Sister Lily. I think he’s very close, and you just might have pushed him over to our side.”

“I did my best,” she whispered back, watching as Johnny pushed himself off the boulder, slouching as he walked slowly back to the cart. He was considering her words; she could tell by his expressive face. She smiled inwardly, pleased with herself for completing the task that Father Hiram had commanded of her, and if Johnny was still with them tomorrow night, she would be able to make him an offer she hoped he couldn’t refuse.
The ride back to the sleeping quarters was an uncomfortably quiet one. The visit had not met Johnny’s expectations, and now he was not only exhausted, but depressed. He tried to step out of the cart when James stopped it near the entrance of the women’s dorm. He wanted to escort Lily to the door, but his feet felt as if they were made of lead.

“Good night, Thorn,” Lily said softly, cutting a quick glance at James before returning her eyes to Johnny. “Please think about what I said.”

“I-I will,” Johnny commented, sitting up straighter in the seat as he watched her turn to walk away. “Lily?”

“Yes?”

“I- I’ve really missed ya,” he drawled out, a little softer than he had intended. There was so much he wanted to say, but couldn’t find the right words.

“I’ve missed you, too, but we can be together now. If you want to be,” Lily replied, quickly turning away and rushing into the building.

“Damn,” the paramedic cursed, rubbing his face with the palms of his hands. “I feel like I’ve worked a double shift… With Brice!”

James smiled to himself as he turned the cart in the direction of the men’s dorm. “That’s what hard work and fresh air will do for you, Brother John.” James followed the trail along the edge of the wooded lot. “That’s one of the many reasons we all like it here. We sleep well, and wake up refreshed. No stress, no worries… No hassles.”

“No bills to pay… No water bombs to dodge… No chicks to dump me…”

James pulled to a stop as close to the front door as he could get. He knew Johnny was going to need a little assistance to get into bed. “That’s right… No problems,” he commented, wrapping his arm around the waist of his loopy friend. Everything was happening exactly as he had anticipated. He was amazed at how precise the reactions to the tea were becoming. As soon as John’s conversion was completed, James would be allowed into the inner sanctuary. Then he would be trusted with the secrets of Father Hiram’s power.

E!

Wake-up tones sounded, eliciting a series of grunts and a couple of muffled expletives from the men of Station 51’s A-shift. The night had been a busy one, leaving them all groggy and fatigued. Mike was the first one to pull on his bunker, popping the red suspender straps over his white t-shirt as he stumbled through the dorm door in search of the caffeine he could smell brewing.

The yawning engineer pushed through the kitchen door, his mouth stretched wide. Rubbing his eyes clear of the smoke and sleep from the previous night, he was surprised to find Roy sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a steaming cup of coffee.

“When did you get up?” He asked, realizing that it wasn’t the on-coming captain that had started the pot of coffee.
Roy took a quick slurp of his coffee before answering. “A little over 24 hours ago,” he grimaced. Had the senior paramedic not been so worried about his best friend, he would have made a joke about the tuft of hair sticking up from the back of Mike’s head. Instead, he simply returned his attention to his coffee.

“Damn, did I go back to sleep, or did you two make the fastest pot of coffee in the history of the fire department?”

“Morning, Chet,” Mike mumbled, removing a couple of mugs from the dish drain.

“Mornin’ to you, too… Alfalfa,” the Irishman snickered, seeing the tuft of hair standing up at the back of Mike’s head, reminding him of his favorite ‘Little Rascals’ character.

Mike caught the joke, in spite of his sleepiness, and quickly patted down the offending locks of hair. “Yea, tough night for the He-man Woman Haters Club,” he snickered, continuing with the Little Rascals theme of the conversation.

Hank was the last of the crew to shuffle into the kitchen.

“Couldn’t sleep, Roy?” Captain Stanley asked, noting his senior medic had not exited the dorm room with the rest of the crew.

“Guess it was too much adrenaline from that last run,” Roy groused, hoping his captain would buy the lie.

Hank looked at his second in command, noting the slight shrug of Mike’s shoulders, indicating that he didn’t know what was going on either.

“Well,” the seasoned captain began, pulling out a chair beside Roy. “Maybe Joanne won’t have a long ‘honey-do’ list for you on your off days, Pal.”

“Coffee, Cap?”

Hank looked up at his temporary crew member. “Ah, yea, that’d be great, Greene. So, how was your first shift at 51’s?”

“It was fantastic.” The young man poured two cups of black coffee, then took a seat beside Hank, pushing one mug in the captain’s direction. “I’ve really learned a lot from DeSoto, here,” Kyle commented, lifting his coffee cup with a subtle nod in Roy’s direction.

“Well, you should see DeSoto and Gage working together,” Chet piped up, knowing why Roy was looking so glum. “They’re like an old married couple; they don’t even have to use words anymore,” Chet explained.

Kyle Greene chuckled, then quickly grimaced. “Ugh, my teeth still taste like smoke,” he groaned, setting down his mug and heading to the locker room for a quick brush up.

As soon as the replacement paramedic left, Marco turned to his fellow linesmen. “Speaking of married couples… When’s the big day?”

A huge grin crossed Chet’s face as he leaned his hips against the counter. “March 27, 1976.”

“So that means a bachelor party on the 26th, right amigo?”

Chet turned to his side, his blue eyes looking intently at his partner and best friend. This wasn’t how
he had planned on making the request, but it seemed as good a time as any. “Well… That’s what the best man does, right?”

Marco felt his heart leap into his throat. His dark eyes sparkled and a big smile spread beneath his thick mustache. “That’s right,” he nodded.

“So… You’ll do it?” Chet asked hopefully.

“Throw you a bachelor party, or be your best man?”

“Both.”

Marco clapped his younger partner on the shoulder. “Yes… I’d be honored, Chet. Honored to do both.”

Chet felt a sense of relief as he turned to his surrogate brothers in the room, even though one was obviously missing. “I’d, uh… I’d really appreciate it if the rest of you fellas would stand up with me on that day… You know,” he shrugged, “be my groomsmen.”

A chorus of cheers and varying forms of affirmation were given; even Roy was able to crack a smile and offer his support to his friend.

“I… I hope to ask Johnny to stand with me, too… As soon as he returns to us.”

That comment sent Roy’s mood plunging once again. ‘I just hope he DOES return,’ he thought to himself.

One by one, the men on A-shift were replaced by the on-coming B-shift. Mike informed the engineer about the faint grinding sound he had noticed when he had shifted Big Red into reverse to back into the apparatus bay after their last run. Afterwards, he gathered up his duffel and made his way across the parking lot just as Marco was getting into his car.

“Pick you up at 6:00?” Marco asked as he stood beside the open door of his sedan, hoping Mike hadn’t changed his mind about the double date.

“Why don’t I just go over to your Mom’s house around quarter ‘til? At least I won’t feel like a teenager who can’t drive yet,” Mike joked, tossing his bag across the seat of his new pick-up truck. It had taken nearly a month to get the check from his insurance company after his accident, and another couple of weeks to find the right vehicle, but he was pleased with his selection.

“See you then,” Marco waved as he backed out of his usual parking spot, relieved by Mike’s response and happy that in a few hours he would be spending more time with Beverly.

Mike tossed his duffel bag onto the passenger’s side of the seat of his truck. He couldn’t remember being this nervous about going on a date since he was in high school. He whistled as he cranked up the vehicle and drove toward his apartment, secretly hoping that tonight would go well enough that Lexi might want to go out with him again, alone.

E!

The cool temperature in the Tehachapi Mountains sent a shiver down Johnny’s back as he stepped
out into the morning sun. Once again, he had enjoyed a deep sleep with vivid dreams. He felt refreshed and renewed. Yet, when he thought about his conversation with Lily the previous night, he felt his spirits sink. What did she mean when she said she might not be here when he returned? Where might she be going?

“I trust you slept well,” James spoke up as Johnny stepped out of the dorm. He walked in sync with Johnny’s long strides, anxious to begin his chores, and yet knowing he could not leave a potential recruit alone for even a minute.

“Oh, yea… Yea, I did,” Johnny agreed, following James and a couple of the other men as they walked towards the dining hall.

“I am sure you are ready for breakfast,” James commented.

“Yea, I am kinda hungry,” Johnny responded, buttoning up his flannel shirt.

Once inside, the group of men sat down at the long table, eyeing the plates of eggs, bacon, and toast that were being placed before them. Johnny looked around the room, realizing that Lily was not present.

James saw Johnny’s searching eyes. “Brother John, she’s already eaten and gone to the pottery building. They are finishing up an order that we received a few weeks ago, so they had to get an early start.”

“Oh,” Johnny replied, unable to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Here you go, Brother John,” Ian said, passing a white pitcher to their guest.

Johnny accepted the container of milk from the man to his left, and poured himself a glass. When the silent morning prayer was completed by Father Hiram, the group began eating their food. Johnny took a drink from his glass. It had been a long time since he had tasted unpasteurized milk, and he had forgotten just how good it tasted. He gulped down half his glass before joining in the conversation going on around him.

“So, James… What are we gonna do today?”

James used his cloth napkin to wipe the crumbs of toast from his beard. “How are you with working with animals?”

Johnny’s eyes lit up with anticipation. “I love it. I lived on a ranch when I was a kid. I’m right at home around a barn,” he commented, finishing up his breakfast.

“Good,” James said, slapping the younger man on the shoulder. “Because Ian and a couple of the other fellows could really use a hand with the livestock.”

“Well, a’right!” Johnny exclaimed, finishing his milk as he stood up to follow the other men out the door. He couldn’t wait to get his hands dirty in something other than human body fluids and soot.

E!

Roy was still brooding when he walked into his house. Joanne met him at the door, immediately noticing the dark circles beneath his eyes.
“Tough shift?”

“Kind of,” he commented, dropping his bag near the couch. “I, ah…,” he began, then hesitated. He wanted to tell her about Iris and Johnny, but first, he needed to process it himself. “I’m gonna get a shower, and….” Roy looked around the kitchen. “Are we alone?”

Joanne smiled, completely misunderstanding his question. “Uh-huh,” she said with a flirtatious grin as she sauntered up to her husband. “Kids are at school and Corrie doesn’t come back until tomorrow.”

She stood in front of him, lightly placing her hands along his shoulders. “Got something you want to do?” She asked, running her fingers along his trapezius muscles before sliding them gently into his hair at the back of his neck.

“I… I really need to talk to you about something,” he said, stepping away from her. He knew what she wanted, but his exhaustion and frustration were preventing him from carrying out her not-so-subtle request.

Joanne stepped back, her green eyes narrowing in concern. “Roy… You’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

Roy, realizing his mistake, returned to her and planted a chaste kiss on her ruby lips. “Nothing involving us, baby,” he remarked, settling his hands on her hips. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her. “It’s just this whole thing with Johnny.”

Joanne nodded her understanding. She knew how close Roy and Johnny were, and she knew that when things weren’t right between them, it affected Roy on a very deep level - more than anyone realized, including Roy. They were more than partners and best friends; they were brothers, and when one of them hurt, so did the other.

“Why don’t I fix you something to eat while you shower? You’ll feel better when you’re clean and have a full stomach,” she stated, turning towards the refrigerator.

Roy stood in the kitchen a moment longer, watching his beautiful wife begin preparing his breakfast. She never ceased to amaze him. Even after all they had been through, she still loved him, and she always made sure that he knew it. Some days, he simply didn’t feel deserving of her love and devotion.

Joanne could feel Roy watching her, even though her back was to him. When she turned around, she saw his blue eyes had become cloudy with remorse. “Roy?”

“Hmm?”

Setting the carton of eggs on the counter, she took a couple of steps in his direction. “It’ll be okay, sweetie. Go on and get your shower. I’ll have breakfast and coffee ready when you get out, and then we can talk as long as you’d like.”

Roy looked at her, his eyes growing misty. “God Jo, I… I don’t de-deserve you,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

“Roy… I love you and you love me. Nothing else matters,” she stated, continuing with her breakfast preparations.

“I love you… With all my heart and soul,” he commented, then slowly turned to trudge up the stairs.
Joanne poured the scrambled eggs into the hot skillet. The sizzling sound filled the small kitchen, but not enough to drown out the sound of her own heartbeat rushing in her ears. Was the situation between Roy and Johnny so bad that it threatened their partnership, or even worse, their friendship?

Twenty minutes later, Roy returned to the kitchen smelling like Irish Spring soap. His thinning damp hair was combed neatly in place, and even though he hadn’t slept, he felt refreshed.

“I hope you’re hungrier than your son was this morning,” Joanne stated, placing two slices of toast on the plate full of eggs.

“I’m starving,” Roy commented, taking his usual seat at the head of the table. “What’s wrong with Chris?” He looked up as Joanne placed his plate on the placemat in front of him, followed quickly by a glass of apple juice and a cup of strong black coffee.

She lightly kissed the top of his head before sitting down beside him with her own cup of coffee. “I don’t know. He just said he wasn’t hungry. He drank a little apple juice, but didn’t eat anything before he got on the bus this morning.”

“Well,” Roy said, lifting his juice glass to his mouth. “Maybe he’s just worried about a test, or something.”

“He’s only in the third grade, Roy. If he had a test coming up, I would’ve known about it.” Joanne sipped her coffee, wondering if she should have kept the child home from school today.

Roy noticed her furrowed brow and knew that she was second guessing herself. “If he gets sick at school, they’ll call us to come and get him.”

“I suppose.” Joanne offered him a weak smile, then plunged into the conversation Roy had begun earlier. “Now, what’s going on with Johnny? He hasn’t accepted your apology?”

“I haven’t even spoken to him, yet,” he stated, lifting his fork full of eggs to his mouth. “But… Jo, you introduced Iris and Johnny, right?”

“Yes… Still think they’re seeing each other?” She asked, eyeing her husband as if she were admonishing one of her children.

“I wish it was that simple.” He inhaled deeply, knowing that what he was about to tell her was going to come as quite a surprise. “Listen, you can’t breathe a word of this to anybody, or else Caroline might lose her job.”


“Caroline overheard Iris talking to a detective about an old murder case… But that’s not all.”

“Roy…”

He pressed his lips into a thin line, dreading her reaction to the news. “It seems your introduction of Johnny and Iris wasn’t necessary. They’ve known each other for a very long time.”

Joanne’s eyes widened in shock. “WHAT? But… How?”

Roy returned his attention to his plate of food. “I don’t know.”

Joanne shook her head, confused by the information she was receiving. “Okay, wait… You said a detective was talking to Iris about an old murder case?”
“Yes, and…” he cleared his throat, “Ahem, Caroline thinks the guy was Lieutenant Crockett, and he said that Johnny was a witness.”

“Oh, dear God!” Joanne gasped, worry making her voice sound strained. “Poor Johnny! When did this happen, and… How is Iris involved?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “It’s got to be why he’s been acting so depressed lately, but… I just can’t figure it out.”

Joanne looked down at her nails for a moment, then back up at her husband. “Well… Your conversation didn’t go so well with Iris, so… Maybe you could…”

Roy knew what she was thinking, and truthfully, he had considered the same thing. “I don’t know, yet. I thought I’d keep trying to get Johnny on the phone, but if I can’t…”

“Then you’ll go talk to Lieutenant Crockett about it?”

Roy held his fork suspended over his plate as he stared into the air between them. “Yea… It might really make Johnny mad, but… But he’s my best friend, Jo. I can’t just let this go, you know?”

Joanne placed a hand on Roy’s firm shoulder, leaning in to kiss him lightly on his ruddy cheek. “Johnny wouldn’t let it go, if it were you struggling.”

Roy stared into her emerald green eyes, feeling a stab of guilt in his heart.

He lowered his gaze, nodding his head. He still didn’t understand why his best friend didn’t trust him with this news. “I know. But when it WAS me, I wasn’t keeping secrets from my best friend.”

E!

Marco and Beverly sat in the chairs on the front porch of Marco’s childhood home. They rocked in companionable silence, lulled by the common sounds of the lively neighborhood.

Beverly turned her head slightly, seeing Marco watching her intently. She smiled at him, her face coloring a hint of pink. “What?”

“I’m just admiring the view,” the mustached man said.

Beverly gave a slight chuckle, one that confirmed to Marco that she really didn’t know how beautiful she was, both inside and out. “That’s awfully sweet of you.”

“It’s true. You’re a gorgeous woman, Bev.”

Eager to change the subject, Beverly quickly diverted the conversation to Marco’s sister. “Is Lexi nervous?”

Marco returned his head facing the street, exhaling a cleansing breath. “Yes, I think so. I just don’t understand why.” He returned his gaze to the woman beside him, seeking her counseling skills. “It isn’t like Mike is going to proposition her, or mistreat her in any way.”

“Of course he won’t, but you’ve got to understand that in a way, this is like Lexi’s first date. It’s like she’s picking up where she left off when she was only fourteen. And she’s afraid of doing or saying something that will embarrass her… Or you, or me, or Mi-”

“Like what?” Marco interrupted. “Well…,” she hesitated, still not completely comfortable with self-disclosure, even around the man with whom she was quickly falling in love. “For one thing, she’s
afraid that someone might recognize her.”

“Like a former john?”

“Or a cop, another pimp, one of the other girls in the stable.”

“Stable?” He asked, perplexed. He thought he had learned all the terminology, but this was a new one to him.

“It’s what pimps call their group of girls – their stable.”

Marco pressed his lips together, wanting to curse the despicable men who profited from the sufferings of the women they prostituted. Instead, he merely gave a one word reply. “Oh.”

“It’s just another way of dehumanizing them… Us.” Beverly said in a lowered voice, grateful that she was no longer a part of that life, yet not willing to completely separate herself from the sisterhood of those who had survived the streets. “She’ll be okay. Mike is the best possible choice for this.”

“I know, Bev. Some things are just difficult when it’s the first time in a long while,” he said, offering her a chance to elaborate on her own struggles.

“Yea, but when it’s with someone as nice as Mike… Or you… It makes it much easier,” she said, knowing that she was no longer talking about Lexi.

Both of them turned their attention to the driveway as a pick-up parked beside Marco’s sedan.

“Well, speak of the devil and he shall appear,” Marco quoted with a genuine smile.

“I’ll go get her,” Beverly commented, standing up with a slight wave in Mike’s direction, then turning to walk into the house.

When she stepped into the kitchen, Beverly saw Lexi and Maria embracing. Maria was stroking her daughter’s long dark hair, reassuring her that tonight would go well.

“Ready to go?”

Lexi broke the hug, turning to face her mentor. “He’s here?”

“Yes… And looking quite handsome, I must say,” she said, reaching out to Lexi. “C’mon, it’s time to do this.”

Lexi gave a soft whimper, giving her mother a slight nod as she followed Beverly out the door.

“You girls have a good time,” Maria called after them. “Antonio and I are going to read stories while you’re gone.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Lexi said, glancing over her shoulder as she walked towards the front door.

Mike and Marco were enjoying a casual conversation about football when the door opened. Mike’s first sight of Lexi nearly took his breath away. She looked so pretty; her physical wounds were completely healed and she had gained a little more weight. He noticed how quickly she glanced away from him, and knew she was feeling nervous. Marco had already explained her fears to him.

“Hello, Lexi. You’re looking very pretty tonight.”
“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Well, I’m hungry; how about the rest of you?” Marco asked, ushering Beverly towards his car.

“I’m famished. Are you hungry, Lexi?” Mike asked, allowing his date to walk ahead of him to the car where he quickly opened the door for her.

“A little,” she said, taking a seat in the back of her brother’s sedan while Mike closed the door and walked around to the other side, sitting behind Marco. “Well, this feels funny,” he chided.

“What does?” Marco asked, peering in his rearview mirror.

“Usually, I’m driving and you’re the one sitting behind me.”

“Sometimes change is good,” Marco joked, sending a round of tension-releasing laughter amid the small group. So, how does Peking Palace sound? I haven’t had General Tso’s chicken in a long time.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mike spoke up. “Lexi?”

“Sure.”

“Me, too,” Beverly added.

“Great,” Marco said, turning on his left blinker.

“Let’s do it,” Mike agreed, watching as Lexi relaxed in the seat. Maybe this night would go well after all.

E!

Night fell quickly in the Tehachapi Mountains, and an unusual coolness fell across the compound. Johnny was relaxing near one of the fire pits, watching the stars peek through the dark sky above him, grateful to be away from the bright lights and fast-paced life of the city. He heard various group members whispering among themselves, and saw some overt flirting going on between both genders. Looking up at the full moon, he remembered what James had told him about what happened between members of the family when the moon was full. The flirtation he was observing was nothing more than foreplay, he presumed.

Suddenly the deep rumble of something that sounded like a distant shofar horn caught everyone’s attention. He looked around, seeing that most of the family were on their feet and quickly heading towards Father Hiram’s quarters.

“What’s goin’ on?” Johnny asked Ian as the young man he had spent most of the day with walked past him.

“Father Hiram is calling us to assemble at the sanctuary.”

“Oh, yea,” Johnny commented, brushing off his jeans as he followed the rest of the group towards the tall circular structure between the male and female dorms.

The small crowd formed just outside the entrance of the raised structure. Father Hiram often addressed the members of the family from this site. As soon as the group of approximately fifty people reached the entrance, Father Hiram stepped out of his residence, followed closely by two young women, their heads bowed and hands clasped together beneath their chins.
The first woman to walk out was very petite, with dark hair. When she stepped to the left of Father Hiram, Johnny could see that she was of Asian descent. He didn’t recognize her, had not seen her around the compound. The second woman who walked out was taller than the first, very slim, with long blonde hair held in place by a beaded headband. Her skin was pale, and the paramedic in Johnny wondered if perhaps the young woman was anemic. She stepped into place to the right of Father Hiram, lifting her chin slightly.

Johnny gasped, recognizing the young woman as a former waitress from the Pourhouse. “Gretchen?” He whispered to himself.

“My children,” Father Hiram began, waving his hands to settle the crowd. “The time has come for us to celebrate new life among our family.” He reached out his arms, pulling the two silent women closer to his sides. “Sister Kim and Sister Gretchen are each with child.”

Smiles spread among the assembled group and hands were raised to praise their leader.

“Yes, my progeny shall be the first born in our family, and then all of you may follow as we replenish our numbers, and share our love with the next generation. Tonight is the beginning of the full moon. Those of you who belong to our family are permitted to fully enjoy yourselves this evening,” he stated with a knowing smile, then turned around and walked back into his sanctuary, followed closely by the two young women.

Johnny stood statue-still, unable to believe what he was hearing. Neither woman looked particularly happy about the announcement making him wonder if they had agreed to the arrangement. And what did Father Hiram mean by ‘replenish?’ Johnny had the feeling that something other than deprogrammers had diminished the numbers of the family.

Johnny looked around, noting the joyous smiles as men and women began pairing up and moving into the shadows of the compound. He watched as James walked away quietly, unaccompanied. Johnny was about to follow him when a distinctly feminine hand touched his lower back.

“Take a walk with me?” A soft familiar voice asked.

Johnny turned around, a smile tugging at the left corner of his face. “Lily?”

“Let’s walk back to the boulder where we talked last night. Maybe we can finish our conversation… Or something,” she suggested.

Johnny looked around, realizing that they were alone, and became somewhat worried. “But, don’t we need a chaperone?”

“They’re all busy. Besides… I trust you, Thorn,” she said, reaching for his hand as they began to meander down the pathway. “You may not have joined us officially, but I know you well enough to know that this is where you belong. Inside, I think you know it, too.”

“I- um, I’m thinkin’ ‘bout it,” he turned back to look at the sanctuary one last time. “Wha- what happened back there?”

Lily continued her leisurely pace down the long pathway that led to the front gate of the compound. She never shifted her gaze from the lane that sprawled out in front of them. “You’re a grown man, Thorn, and a paramedic. I would think you know all about human reproduction.” She smiled, glancing at him over her shoulder as she walked slightly ahead of him. “Father Hiram believes that it is time for us to share our love with the next generation.”

“Yea, yea, I heard all that, but… How does he know it’s the right time? I mean, why now?” He
asked, still perplexed about Father Hiram’s alleged powers.

“How does he know anything, Thorn? He’s a true modern-day prophet. He knows what is best for us, his followers.” Lily kept her voice calm, hoping that soon Johnny would be convinced of Father Hiram’s powers as well.

“Do you trust ‘im?”

“Completely,” she replied, grateful that they were beyond the glow of the dying fires. What she needed to do had to be done in the darkness, away from the prying eyes of the rest of the family. She reached out her hand, grasping Johnny’s and feeling him flinch, jerking his hand away from hers.

“We c-can’t.”

She smiled inwardly, grasping his hand more forcefully and lacing their fingers together as they continued on their way. “No one will see us. Only you and I will know. I…” She hesitated for a moment, never slowing her pace. “I need you, Thorn. I need to spend time with you just like when we were kids.”

“That was a long time ago, Lil’,” he countered, still unsure about what she was suggesting. He had been warned about the rules regarding physical contact between members and non-members of the family. He knew she could face serious consequences if they were found out, although no one had explained to him exactly what might happen to a disobedient member of the family.

“Yes it was, and now we aren’t kids,” she said, leaning into his shoulder as they walked side by side. “Everyone else is busy right now. And trust me, they will NOT be concerned about what you and I are doing tonight.”

“Not even James?” He asked, worriedly.

“Especially not James. He isn’t interested in tonight’s activities… At least, not with a woman.”

Johnny’s eyebrows shot up into his bangs. “Really? I, uh, I had no idea.”

“He prefers Ian, not that I care,” she added. “The heart loves who it loves, no matter what society says, right?”

“I guess,” Johnny responded, still trying to wrap his head around the information he was being given.

Eventually the couple made their way to the boulder near the front gate. This time, Lily deliberately took Johnny to the back side of the stone where the grass was soft and full. She knelt down, curling her legs beneath her.

“Relax, Thorn. We’ve got all night,” she said, tugging on his arm, encouraging him to sit down beside her.

“It’s kinda hard to relax when you’re scared of gettin’ caught.”

“I’m not scared,” she said, leaning in close enough to hear him breathing hard.

Johnny gulped, feeling his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. He didn’t know what to say, or do. His mind and body were warring with each other. His body definitely wanted to be near her, but his
mind was yelling at him that they were in danger of being caught. His defenses were being worn down by her persistence, and the effects of the evening tea.

“So, are you going to send the film back to the authorities? That way they’ll have what they need and you can stay here with us… With me,” she said, pleadingly.

“I dunno,” he managed to say, feeling her breath hot against his face.

The kiss was feather-light, and he inhaled her sent as she pulled back, breaking their contact.

“You were my first, Thorn. Make love to me again, tonight,” she whispered seductively.

“We were so young,” he whispered, remembering their first awkward union. Iris had been at work, leaving them at home alone. Even though it had been uncomfortable for Lily, he had never felt such sensations as he had felt on that day. He closed his eyes, remembering the soft warmth of her skin against his. They had not used protection, having never intended to have sex that afternoon, and both of them had been relieved when there had been no pregnancy as a result. Over the next year, they had fallen in love, sharing their bodies on many subsequent occasions. Then he left for the academy, and she fell for the teachings of a cult, or so Iris had explained.

“You were my first, too,” he whispered again, their lips meeting once more.

She reached for his hands, placing them at the hem of her garment, encouraging him to disrobe her, much as he had done on that first afternoon.

“No… Not that I don’t want to, Lily. I do, I really do, but… I don’t want you to regret this,” he said, pushing her away from him. Even though his mind seemed muddled, he still was able to recall the fear resulting from their first love-making session, the worries about regrets and the concern for a possible pregnancy. If she were to conceive tonight, then they would be found out, their deeds exposed for the entire family to see. No, no matter how badly he wanted her, he wasn’t willing to take the risk.

“I only regret leaving you, all those years ago.” She smiled at him, her eyes welling with unshed tears. “But we’re together again. Father Hiram brought you back here, don’t you see?”

“Coincidence brought me here,” he corrected.

“There is no such thing as coincidence, Thorn. We were meant to be together, forever. This is the beginning of forever.”

E!

Marco pulled his sedan into the driveway of his mother’s residence. Before he turned off the ignition, Mike tapped him on the shoulder.

“I’ll walk her to the door, make sure she gets in safely,” he said to his friend. “That way, you can take Beverly on home.”

“Thanks, amigo,” Marco commented, trusting his sister into the very capable hands of his friend. “Goodnight, Lexi.”

“Goodnight, Marco. Thanks for taking me out tonight,” she said, watching as Mike walked around the front of the car to open her door. “Goodnight, Beverly.”

“We had a good time tonight, Lexi. I’m glad everything went well,” Beverly offered, looking over
her shoulder.

Mike opened the door, offering his hand to his date. “See you next shift, Marco. Goodnight, Beverly.”

Mike placed his hand on the small of her back, barely touching her. As they walked nearer the porch, he leaned in slightly. “How much you wanna bet he doesn’t back out of the driveway until we’re on the porch?”

Lexi laughed, something she had been doing a lot all evening. “Probably… He’s a great big brother, protective, you know?”

As they walked up the steps, Marco’s headlights shifted as he backed out of the driveway.

“See? I know him,” Mike laughed, stepping up to the front door. “Lexi, I really enjoyed this evening.”

She smiled, feeling as if she were floating. “I did, too.”

“Well, would you and Antonio like to go to a Dodgers game this weekend? I can get tickets for the three of us,” he asked hopefully.

Lexi felt her breath catch in her throat. Not only was Mike asking her out again, but he was including her son. “Um, you… You really want to do that?”

“Yes, I do… Do you want to go?” He asked, beginning to think she might not have enjoyed the evening as much as he had thought.

“Y-Yes… Yes, I’d love to go. And Antonio will be beside himself,” she said, her smile beaming in the glow of the porch light.

“Great,” Mike said with relief. “I’ll see what I can arrange, and then I’ll give you a call. Is that okay?”

“I’d really like that, Mike. Thank you for a wonderful night, and… And for thinking about my son, too.”

Had this been any other woman, this would have been where Mike leaned in for a quick kiss. But this wasn’t just another date. This was Lexi Lopez, and he knew he needed to take things slowly with her.

They had just enjoyed a wonderful evening, and she had agreed to go out with him again. He waited for her to go inside, and listened for the sound of the locking mechanism being engaged, then turned to walk to his truck. This time, he was the one who felt like he was floating.

E!

“Mom? Dad?”

Roy and Joanne quickly pulled themselves upright, squinting their eyes at the child standing in the doorway to their bedroom.

“Son?” Roy called out. “Chris, what’s wrong?”
Roy had assumed that Chris was coming down with stomach flu when he had vomited shortly after eating his dinner. Now his gut told him it was something much worse.

“I… I don’t feel good,” he sniffled. “My belly h-hurts.”

Roy bolted out of bed, followed quickly by Joanne who was pulling on her robe as Roy kneeled down in front of the crying child.

“Where does it hurt?” He asked, the paramedic in him taking over.

“H-here,” the child cried, placing his warm hand along the right side of his abdomen.

Joanne touched his forehead just as Roy began to palpate the child’s lower right quadrant.

“Roy, he’s burning up,” she said worriedly just as Christ howled in pain.

“Aarrgh! That HU-HURTS!”

Roy quickly looked up at his wife. “We’ve got to get him to Rampart. I think it’s his appendix.”

Joanne covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, no.”

“Call Mrs. Kennedy, and see if she can come over and sit with Jennifer. I’ll get him ready.”

“Nooo,” Chris cried, knowing that there would be needles involved if he was taken to the emergency room.

“Chris, listen to me,” Roy said, looking directly into Chris’ watery eyes. “This isn’t something that I can fix. We’re gonna have to take you to see a doctor.” He ran his thumb beneath his son’s eyes, removing the tears that were spilling out. “Your Mom and I will be right there with you the whole time, okay?”

“Umm, owweee,” he cried, realizing that he had no choice.

Roy quickly pulled on a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt, grabbing his wallet before rushing into Chris’ room to get the child’s robe. When he returned, he saw that Joanne was quickly getting dressed.

“She’s on her way over,” she said to her husband. “I’ll go meet her at the front door while you carry Chris out to the car.

Roy scooped his crying son into his arms, quickly following Joanne down the stairs. He knew that he needed to get Chris to Rampart before the appendix ruptured. As he was securing Chis into the back seat, Mrs. Kennedy walked through the hedges and into their yard, wearing her robe and a scarf wrapped around her curlers. She waved to Roy and Chris, nodding her head as Joanne gave her a quick rundown of what was happening.

“She’ll be fine with me. You just take care of your little boy, Joanne,” the older woman stated as she closed and locked the garage door. In less than a minute, the DeSoto trio were on their way down the street, heading for Rampart Emergency.

A couple of hours later, dawn began to break while Roy and Joanne stood near the window in the surgical waiting room. Roy’s initial diagnosis had been confirmed by Dr. Brackett who had just gotten to the ER when Chris was brought in. Now the head of the Emergency Department was
operating on a very sick little boy. He finished closing the wound, then stepped out of the OR, removing his sweat-soaked surgical mask. He pushed open the doors, heading quickly to the waiting room to deliver the news.

“Roy? Joanne?"

The DeSotos turned around at the sound of the deep voice of their physician and friend.

“How’s he doing, Doc?” Roy asked, pulling his trembling wife closer to his side.

Dr. Brackett’s lips twitched slightly before parting into a smile. “He’s doing just fine. We got it out in time.”

“Oh, thank God,” Joanne gasped, leaning her head against Roy’s chest.

“He’s going to be on antibiotics for a few days just to be safe, but I think he’ll be up and moving again real soon.” He patted both of his friends on their shoulders. “He’ll be in recovery for an hour or so, and then you can see him before he gets moved to a room on pediatrics.”

Roy fought with his emotions, but somehow managed to croak out his gratitude to his medical director. “Th-ahem, thanks, Doc. We’re really glad it was you on duty when we brought him in,” he said, his voice fading to a whisper.

“I’m glad I could be here when you needed me. Now, why don’t you two go get something to eat? He’s got a nurse sitting right beside him, and she won’t leave him alone for even a second until you’re able to go back to see him.”

“I don’t think I can eat anything, Roy. I… I just want to see my baby,” Joanne said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

“At least drink some juice or something. When he wakes up, he’s going to want us to stay with him. You don’t want to have to leave him to go eat later, do you?”

Joanne shook her head, allowing herself to be ushered toward the hallway.

“Roy?”

Roy turned, looking over his shoulder at Dr. Brackett.

“Johnny’s supposed to come in sometime today so I can check his injury, make sure he’s able to return to work. Is it okay if I tell him about Chris? I’m sure he’ll want to visit with him for a few minutes. That’ll give you and Joanne a brea-“

“Dr. Kelly Brackett to the ER, STAT. Dr. Brackett to the ER, STAT,” came the female voice over the paging system.

Dr. Brackett didn’t wait for an answer from the DeSotos before he turned and jogged toward the stairs. He knew how close his star paramedics were, and he had no reason to doubt that Christopher DeSoto would welcome his Uncle Johnny’s visit later in the day.

E!
A/N: Thank you all for the support you have given me for this series. I hope to pick up the speed of this story, now that most of the back story has been told. Thank you for sticking with it. I appreciate each and every one of you.

Chapter 13

The following morning, Johnny awoke with a start. Once more, William Waite had entered his dream world, but this time his victim was Lily, not Phillip. Her fading screams had brought him to wakefulness with lightning speed. He sat up, scrubbing his stubbly face with his hands, forcing the images and sounds back into their hiding spot.

“You okay, Brother John?”

Johnny looked over at James who was making up his bunk. “Yea… Yea, jus’ had a bad dream,” Johnny responded. He looked around the room, noting that the others were beginning their morning routines. “Gettin’ an early start?”

“Today we have a chapel service before we start our chores. It’s our mid-week service,” James explained, turning away from Johnny.

Johnny looked at James, knitting his eyebrows together in confusion since it was Thursday. He knew that most religious mid-week services were held on Wednesdays. Then again, this group seemed to be more involved in worshiping a man, not a known deity.

“Afterwards, I’ll be heading down to Los Angeles. Would you like to come along with me?” James tossed over his shoulder.

“Oh, umm… Yea, I’ll go,” he stated, quickly walking to the urinal. He didn’t want to be late for a service, or another chance to talk to Lily.

The men walked down the center aisle of the sanctuary in a single-file line sitting in the rows of chairs on the right. The women followed, taking seats on the left. Johnny thought that separating the genders was strange considering the events of the previous night. He took a seat, looking around for Lily. When he saw her, his heart broke. Her eyes were red and swollen; she had been crying. He knew she felt rejected from the night before. He wanted to hold her, tell her he still loved her, but he didn’t dare break the rules of the family. He also wanted to assure her that he did want to make love to her again, but not here, and not now. This wasn’t the right place or time.

“Brethren,” Father Hiram began, eyeing Kim and Gretchen who were seated on the front row with everyone else behind them. “Someone has transgressed against the family.” His eyes searched the crowd, and Johnny noticed that Lily quickly diverted her gaze. “That sin has impacted all of us, and it must be atoned for. Last night, Sister Gretchen suffered a miscarriage,” he said, holding out his hand to the pale young woman. She rose, joining him at the front of the group, looking as if she were unsteady on her feet.

Johnny’s heart sank. Gretchen looked like she needed to be in a hospital. Her skin was pale, even paler than the previous night. Her features were gaunt, and she seemed to struggle to remain upright. He wanted to run to her, check her pulse, and call for an ambulance, but Father Hiram’s next words pinned him to his seat.

“Who among you committed the sin?”
Johnny watched as Lily wiped her eyes, knowing that she was feeling guilty about their contact, even though they had not had sex.

“WHO?” Father Hiram shouted after helping Gretchen back to her seat. “Children are innocent, and my child has paid the ultimate price for the sin committed among you,” he said, angrily. “Now, identify yourself, confess your transgressions before us, before my other child is lost as well.”

“It was I,” Lily stated, standing shakily. “It was I. I am sorry, Father Hiram. Please… Please forgive me.”

“Come forward, Sister Lily,” the leader ordered, pointing his finger in her direction.

Johnny watched in horror as Lily walked down to the front of the assembled group and knelt in front of Father Hiram.

“I have sinned against you and our family. I spent time alone with… With a non-member last night.”

“And did this non-member defile you, Lily?” He asked, no longer using the familiar ‘sister’ in front of her name.

“He did nothing wrong, Father. It was I,” she stated, not wanting to implicate Johnny in the incident.

He used his outstretched arms to motion for the rest of the group to stand. When they complied, Father Hiram laid his hand on Lily’s head.

“Rise Lily… Rise and face those against whom you transgressed,” he ordered.

Lily stood up, crying as she turned toward the hurt faces of those she loved.

“Look as they turn away from you. Watch as they reject your transgressions.”

Johnny felt a gentle nudge on his right arm. He turned his head, seeing James nod his head towards the exit, silently urging him to follow the others as they left the sanctuary.

Father Hiram waited until the assembled group walked out of the chapel, standing outside the doorway waiting as he made his decision.

Johnny felt as if someone had sucked the breath out of his lungs. He had followed the group as they had walked out the door, but his heart remained inside the building with Lily.

“What’s gonna happen to her?” Johnny whispered to James, worrying for Lily’s safety and well-being, his own guilt weighing heavily on his heart.

James saw the concern on the paramedic’s face. “She was with you, wasn’t she?”

“Yea, but… We didn’t do anything, James. We didn’t do anything wrong,” he said, his voice strained.

“Being with you alone was wrong, Brother John. You have not joined us, yet. She must face the consequences of her actions. The fault is not yours, it is hers.” James reached out, pulling Johnny away from the open doorway. “She will be restored to the family, as soon as she meets his demands.”

“Demands?”
“He will sentence her, she will complete the requirements, and then she will be restored to the family.”

“Is… Is he gonna hurt her? ‘Cause if he does, I’ll-“

“Brother John… It is our way. Allow her to be cleansed, and then restored to us. It is what’s best.”

Johnny looked at James, wanting to scream at the man, but holding his tongue in check. “Well… What about Gretchen. She needs medical care if she’s had a miscarriage.”

“Father Hiram is the great healer.”

A loud scream of anguish was heard from inside the chapel, and strong arms pulled Johnny away from the door. If he entered the sanctuary, he would ruin the plan.

“Wha-, lemme go!” He argued, pulling at the arms that were restraining him. “What’s happenin’ to ‘er?”

“She is receiving her cleansing. She must endure it for restoration to occur,” James explained.

“But-“

“There are no exceptions, Brother John. This is our way, the right way, the only way to wholeness, and-“

“But… What if… What if I join? Will she be restored then? Can she avoid the punishment if I join?” Johnny asked, still struggling to free himself.

“We do not accept forced conversions,” James announced. “It must be a choice made of your own free will.”

Johnny gulped back the bile that was rising in his throat. “It IS my choice!” he responded, wondering what Lily was going through inside the sanctuary. “I-I want in.”

“Then her shunning will be greatly reduced, Brother John,” James smiled, turning to walk into the sanctuary, closing the doors behind him.

A couple of hours later, Johnny was driving his Rover back to Los Angeles with James sitting by his side. Ahead of them, Ian was driving the delivery truck. During the silent trip, Johnny had been vacillating between two options. Should he join the group and spend the rest of his life with Lily? Although the uncertainty of such a move was frightening, it wasn’t as scary as testifying against a cold-blooded killer – a murderer who was capable of taking lives Johnny valued far more than his own.

With his decision made, Johnny knew he would have to make preparations before he could join the family, thereby saving Lily from a fate he truly did not understand, nor did he really want to. His first task was to ask for Iris’ help with getting the film to the proper authorities and delivering his resignation letter. Then, if time – and James – allowed, he wanted to talk to Roy. He needed to tell his best friend the truth about what happened back in 1965. Then maybe Roy would understand why he had to get away from those he loved the most, and why he didn’t deserve to be a part of the Station 51 family any longer. Johnny also knew that the truth would ultimately break the friendship he had enjoyed for years, thereby forming a protective barrier between William Waite and Johnny’s friends in Los Angeles. Yes, once Roy and the rest of 51’s A-shift knew what Johnny had done, or
failed to do, they would openly dismiss the junior paramedic to everyone, including Waite and his henchmen, if they were to come looking for him at the station.

“You really don’t need to go with me, James. I’m not gonna run away, or anything.”

“I know that, Brother John, but those of us in the family fully support each other. I want to be there for you, help you in any way that I can, and support you during this transition,” James commented, sounding as if his words were well-rehearsed.

They drove on in silence for several miles. Johnny’s body was driving the Rover on auto-pilot, because his soul had never left Holistic Unity Gardens, and the fate that Lily was enduring. Finally, he could remain silent no longer.

“Please, James, please tell me what’s happenin’ to her,” he pleaded, glancing at his passenger with reddened eyes.

James chose his words carefully, wanting to keep Johnny intent on joining the group. “Well, right now she is going through a purging of her system.”

“Purging?”

“Yes, Father Hiram will use an herbal concoction to induce vomiting and purge her bowels. She will not be allowed to eat or drink anything for 24 hours, until her system is clean. Then she will be subjected to solitary confinement for 48 hours within Father Hiram’s sanctuary, to reflect on her transgressions. She will be allowed to consume cleansing liquids and nourishing juices during that time which will be brought to her only by Father Hiram. Afterwards, she will not be allowed to speak, or be spoken to, by the rest of the family for 96 hours. She will eat her meals alone, at a separate table, and only after the rest of the family has eaten.”

“WHAT?” Johnny was incensed. He knew Lily’s heart, and he knew how sensitive she was to rejection. He knew how much she wanted to belong, and to have this surrogate family turn away from her when she was so upset was absolutely breaking his heart. “But… But I’m joining. I thought that would make things better for her.”

James reached out, patting his friend on the shoulder. “By choosing to join us, you have greatly reduced her punishment, Brother John. Normally, the restoration process takes a month. Father Hiram has shortened it to one week because of your decision. You have found favor in his eyes, and he is greatly pleased by your decision.”

E!

Roy and Joanne sat near the bedside of their son, Joanne stroking his bangs out of his face.

“He needs a haircut,” Roy said, snickering at the absurdity of the comment.

“Roy…,”

“Well, he does. He’s looking more and more like his Uncle Johnny,” Roy commented, relieved that the crisis was over for Chris, but knowing that there was still one storming for his partner.

“D-Dad?” Chris croaked out, his throat dry and hoarse.
“Hey, Sport,” Roy whispered, taking a seat beside his groggy son, careful not to disturb the IV line running into his wrist. “How’re you feeling?”

“Um… S’eeepy,” he mumbled, his blue eyes opening briefly, then closing again. “Ugh, ‘s Unca Jo-Johnny ‘ere?”

“It’s okay, Chris. Uncle Johnny will come see you later,” Joanne consoled, knowing how much Johnny loved Chris. She knew that as soon as Johnny found out about the surgery, he would be knocking on the door of Christopher’s room. “Your Dad and I are here with you, so you just sleep for a while, okay?”

A knock on the door sent both adults looking in the direction of the sound. Dixie stuck her head through the opening.

“Hey there. How’s our superstar feeling?” She asked in her soft smoky voice.

“He’s sleepy,” Joanne announced, still running his fingers along Chris’ brow. “He woke up just for a minute, but then he went right back out again.”

“Well,” the nurse said, walking in with her hands in her pockets. “That’s to be expected. Besides, if he’s asleep then he isn’t feeling any pain.” She looked from the tiny body in the bed to the two adults poised on either side. “And how’s mom and dad holding up?”

“We’re good,” Roy exhaled. “We ate some breakfast while he was in recovery.”

Dixie looked at her watch. “And that was five hours ago, or so, right?” When she saw both of the DeSotos nod, she continued. “Why don’t I stay with him while you two run down to the cafeteria?”

“But you’re on shift.”

Dixie gave Roy a look that he recognized well, one he knew not to question. “And I’m taking care of a patient which is what this hospital pays me to do. Now scoot.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Roy laughed, rubbing his bloodshot eyes with his fingers. He placed his guiding hand on Joanne’s shoulder. “You heard the lady, Jo. And trust me, you do not want to argue with the boss lady.”

Joanne giggled slightly, looping her arm into the crook of Roy’s elbow. “Well, I’m also your boss lady, and I know you haven’t slept more than a few hours in the last two days. So let’s eat and then you go home, okay?”

“I’ll go one better than that,” Dixie added. “When the two of you get back, I’ll drive you home. That way Joanne will have a car here and neither of us will have to worry about you arriving home safely. I can have Carol cover for me long enough to get you home.”

“Ugh,” Roy groaned, actually appreciating the care and concern of the two women. “I know when I’m defeated.” A yawn only served to confirm his position.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Joanne said, pulling on her husband’s arm. “I’ll call Mrs. Kennedy to pick up Jenny from the bus stop after school. That way, once you fall asleep, you won’t have to be worried about her.” She turned to look at the older woman in the room, tossing her a grateful wink.

“Thanks, Dixie.”
Dixie waved as the young parents walked out of the room. She turned her attention to the sleeping patient, instinctively checking his pulse and adjusting his blankets. She loved her job as a nurse, and she especially loved taking care of her friends when they needed her help.

E!

Johnny pulled into the parking lot of his apartment complex, finding his favorite spot unoccupied. “This is it,” he said, turning to look at his passenger. “Feel free to go help Ian,” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the delivery truck that had stopped behind him.

“No, he doesn’t need my help, Brother John. I would rather be here to support you. We’ll meet up with Ian later on. Now that he knows where you live, he will return here to pick us up after his deliveries are completed.”

Johnny shifted his gaze to his left. He was feeling too much pressure from James, but as he opened his door, his thoughts returned to Lily, and he wondered how she was fairing during her ‘cleansing.’ He waved at Ian, then headed for his apartment, noticing that James was walking toward the delivery truck, instead of the stairway.

“Apartment B-6,” Johnny called over his shoulder.

“I will be there shortly,” James responded, stepping up to the rolled down driver’s window of the delivery truck. “He’s wavering, Ian. I can feel it.”

“I’ll get back here as quickly as I can,” the blonde-haired man said, shifting into gear and pulling away from the complex.

Johnny bounded up the stairs, jingling his keys until he found the correct one. With practiced ease, he slipped it into the lock and entered his darkened apartment. He flipped on the light in his living room, dropping his keys into the bowl in the foyer.

Johnny stood in the middle of the room, looking around at his meager possessions. He had never been a wealthy man, so material things weren’t important to him. He had been pouring all his extra money into his savings account, dreaming of the day when he would use it as a down payment on a house and a few acres of land. Since receiving his very first paycheck with the department, he had been stashing at least twenty dollars a month in an envelope that he kept in a plastic bag in his freezer. As a fireman, he knew that it was one of the safest locations in his apartment.

He had grown up in poverty on the reservation before moving to California with his aunt. Because of his upbringing, he always wanted to have some ‘quick cash’ available to him. He decided to give this money to the Unity Family. If asked, he was prepared to deny having bank accounts. After all, many people from his tribe had preferred to use cash instead of entrusting their money to a government insured financial entity. This would allow him to divide his bank accounts between Iris, and the DeSotos. It would be a way to pay Iris back for all she had done for him through the years. The remaining amount would be a nice start on college funds for the two DeSoto youngsters. He hoped that the eight hundred dollars stashed in his freezer would be enough to serve as a sort of ransom for Lily and an investment in the health and safety of his friends.

As he continued to look around, his eyes fell upon a simple frame on a shelf over his small kitchen table. It was a picture of Roy and Johnny, Chris on Roy’s shoulders and Jenny on Johnny’s, smiling at Joanne who had been the photographer. He walked over to the shelf, retrieving the photograph and hugging it closely to his heart. The pain was palpable as he considered what he was giving up, but one more look into the faces behind the glass, and he knew he had to do this – he had to protect them at all costs.
He inhaled deeply, returning the frame to its previous resting spot. As much as he wanted to take the photograph with him, he knew it was best if he made a clean break from all those he loved so dearly, save one red-haired woman with gray streaks tinging her hair. Only Iris would completely understand why he had to leave.

With a heavy heart, Johnny turned to walk down the hallway. He had to get busy, had to complete the requirements of him, so that he could return to Lily. He felt a deep sense of guilt and responsibility for what she was enduring, all because she had spent some time alone with him the previous night.

He felt the tug of his left cheek as a sarcastic smirk spread across his face. The Unity Family would only accept willing conversions. Well, for a man who was running away in search of freedom, he was feeling backed into a corner like a trapped animal. Somehow, leaving those he loved most in order to protect them and saving Lily from a month of misery was beginning to feel less and less like it was his own choice. How was this any different from a forced conversion? He was joining the group because he felt like he had no other option; the choice really wasn’t his own, but it wasn’t forced, either. He could remain in Los Angeles working at Station 51, but always looking over his shoulder for Waite, or one of his cronies. He could return to the scene of the decade-old crime to testify against the lone surviving perpetrator, but who would believe him? If the pictures he had taken failed to develop after all these years, it would be his word against the word of a very powerful man. Would there be justice after all these years? His thoughts returned to the conflicts ten years earlier, making him question if he would even survive the trip to the courthouse for the trial, had he chosen to testify. And what about Lily? If he didn’t return to the family, join them completely, then Lily would be facing her punishment, her ‘cleansing,’ all alone and for a much longer period of time. The length of her shunning depended completely on whether or not he joined the family. No, he really had no other choice, but he wasn’t being forced to join, either.

He scrubbed his face with the palm of his hand, pushing back the tears that threatened to fall. History was repeating itself in his life. He had left his home in Montana to protect his parents from William Waite. Ten years later, he was once again being forced to sacrifice his known life for an unknown exile. Needing to get busy, he stepped toward his closet and removed the old camera case, the camera case that possibly held the only proof of a senseless act that had taken the life of an innocent man. A man who was the same age then as Johnny was now. Phillip’s life had been snuffed out too soon, and something inside Johnny’s breaking heart was making him feel as though his own life was being slowly smothered out of existence.

The sound of his front door opening pulled him out of his reverie.

“Brother John?”

Johnny sniffled, wiping his sleeve across his cheeks. “Yea, I’m, ah… I’m in my bedroom,” he called out. He heard the shuffling sound of footsteps walking down the hallway.

“I’m here to help you. What should I do?” James asked, still concerned that his opportunity to enter the inner circle of Father Hiram might be slipping away. This was always the most critical time during a conversion, the point where they moved from a mere verbal commitment to a tangible one.

“Uh…” Johnny stalled, turning to look at the other man over his shoulder. “Jus’, um… Ahem, jus’ gimme a few minutes to get some things in order back ‘ere, a’right?”

“But I want to-“

“I know!” Johnny said curtly, turning to face James. “I know, I get it. Ya can’t leave me alone long enough to take a piss, can ya? ‘Cause I might change my mind, right?” He spat out, regretting his
raised voice. “Well, I’m not changin’ my mind, James. I’m gonna do this, jus’... Jus’ gimme a few minutes to collect my thoughts, a’right?” Johnny asked, his voice softening as he stood with his hands on his hips beside his bed, his face angled towards the floor.

“Are you sure?”

“Yea...,” he said, walking over to his desk, pulling open the top drawer. “Yea, look... I gotta write my resignation letter, and leave some instr-” he sniffled before continuing. “Instructions about what to do with some o’ my stuff. I can’t take it with me, and I don’t have time to sell it, ya know?”

James hung his head, stepping away from Johnny. He had gotten the answer he had hoped to receive. John was going to go through with his plan, and James was going to make sure nothing stopped him.

“Alright, Brother John. I shall leave you alone to complete your tasks. I will be in the living room, awaiting your instructions for anything that I might help you with. Okay?”

Johnny nodded his head, waving the older man off with his right hand. He swallowed hard, finding his voice as he removed a tablet and pen from the open drawer. “Yea, sure, thanks.” He waited for James to leave before he sat down to pen what felt like his Last Will & Testament.

E!

By the time Dixie returned to her post in Rampart’s Emergency Department, Dr. Brackett was becoming worried. She saw the intent look on his face, the downcast gaze, and the twitch of his lips. He had one arm across his chest, while the opposite elbow was propped on top of it with his fingers rubbing the worry lines along his forehead.

“Kel?”

“Hmm?” He responded, pocketing his hands into his lab coat.

“What’s wrong?” She asked in her usual sultry voice.

Dr. Brackett pulled his right hand out of his pocket, leaning against the counter of the nurses’ station. “Dix, have you seen Johnny?”

“No,” she replied with a soft smile, “But I’ll bet you dollars to donuts that he’ll be by here soon to see Christopher DeSoto. You know how close he is to the DeSoto family, especially the kids.”

“Yea, well I hope you’re right. I asked him to come back by here today, so I could examine him before releasing him back to work tomorrow.” Dr. Brackett stood up straight. “Although... I have a feeling he’s not going to make the weight limit,” he commented, lifting an eyebrow.

Dixie propped her chin on her hand, strumming her manicured nails against her cheek. “I know, he was looking thinner than usual when he was brought in the other day. Maybe that’s why he hasn’t shown up, yet.”

The red light above the base station began to blink, interrupting their discussion. “Uh-oh, better stick around, Kel.”

E!

At Johnny’s apartment, James was growing impatient as he kept a close check on his recruit, frequently sneaking down the hallway to make sure the younger man was continuing to make his
preparations for his departure. He stared at the dark television set, wishing he could turn it on, but knowing it was best if he didn’t. It was one of the many things he had missed since joining the family. He couldn’t allow his focus to be removed from the young man who, he hoped, was writing his resignation letter to the fire department.

Johnny completed the list of things he hoped Iris would do for him. He then looked at the telephone on his nightstand. He had to call Iris first. Then he hoped he would have time to call Roy and tell him the truth. It would be easier for Roy to hate him for his failure, than to feel rejected by his sudden disappearance. He hadn’t talked to his parents in a long time. Not wanting to call them in front of James, he decided to write them a letter, too. He would ask Iris to mail it for him, along with all the other things he was planning to ask her to do.

Exhaling a sigh, he sat down on the edge of his bed, reaching for his telephone. He dialed the familiar number, hoping it would be Iris who answered the call.

“Bloomers, may I help you?” Came the cheerful young voice, not the one he was hoping for.

“Um, may I speak to Iris, please?”

Caroline knitted her eyebrows together in confusion. She thought she recognized the voice as John Gage, but he didn’t identify himself. “Yes, hold please.”

Johnny rubbed his temples, his anxiety level rising.

“Iris Campbell speaking, may I help you?”

“Hey… It’s me,” Johnny said, using his softest voice.

“Thorn? Where are you? I’ve been looking for you.” Iris turned her back to Caroline hoping the young woman wouldn’t overhear their conversation. “Is Lily with you?”

“Sorry ‘bout that. Um, I found her, and she’s okay,” he hoped he wasn’t lying. He still didn’t know for sure what was happening to his friend.

“Oh, thank God. Listen, a detective, Lieutenant Ron Crockett, came by here looking for you the other day. Thorn… He told me to let you know that William Waite is sick; he’s had a stroke and can barely walk.”

Johnny was shocked by the news. The man he remembered as being tall, strong, and intimidating was now… An invalid?

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yes, there’s no need for you to hide from him,” she said, looking over her shoulder to see that Caroline was busy helping a customer. “You… You can come home.”

Johnny felt the backs of his eyes begin to sting. Had things changed? Could his running be over? Iris hadn’t mentioned Waite’s group of friends, and Johnny wondered if they might still be a threat. Then he thought about Lily and what she was suffering because of him, and he knew he had to carry out the mission he had begun. “Not yet.”

“Why? You can go back and testify without being afraid of him. Why can’t you come home and bring Lily with you?” She asked, feeling the familiar ache in her heart, the pain that had been her constant companion since her daughter left her years earlier.
“It’s not that simple. See-“

“Brother John? Is everything alright?” James inquired, standing in the doorway to the bedroom. He had heard Johnny talking to someone, and he feared the outside influence might have a negative impact on Johnny’s impending conversion.

“Fine, James. Jus’ gimme a minute, a’right?” Johnny asked, trying to keep the agitation out of his voice.

Johnny waited for the other man to return to the living room before he continued his conversation.

“You can’t talk, can you?” Iris asked, feeling a sense of dread, knowing someone else was in the apartment with Johnny.

“No, not really. But, ah, I know what I’m doin’. At least, I hope I do.”

“Thorn…”

“Look, I really need your help. I leave a key to my apartment underneath the rug at the door. Use it to come inside and get my camera bag. It’ll be on my bed. Inside you’ll find a roll of film – THE roll of film. Please get it to the authorities, a’right?”

“Why? You can go back and testify, Thorn. You don’t have to just send the film. Do this for Phillip, please?” She pleaded. She had waited a long time to see justice for her murdered brother-in-law.

“I-I can’t.” He could see James’ shadow in the hallway, and knew that the man was listening to his conversation. Part of him wanted to rush the man, tackle him to the ground, and punch him in the face. But the other part, the part that wanted to save Lily, knew that he had to do whatever it took to get back to her.

Caroline was growing more and more worried. “Why? You aren’t making any sense!” Iris commented in a harsh whisper, grateful that Caroline was on the opposite side of the store.

Johnny felt torn. He wanted to explain it all to her, but if James overheard him, then the gig was up. “Um,” he stuttered, thinking about the nickname she always called him. “I really like the nickname you gave me; it fits me perfectly, don’t ya think? I’m glad you taught me the language of flowers. It made a lot o’ sense… then and now.” He hoped she was getting the cryptic message.

On the other end of the line, Iris was growing emotional. It seemed she was on the verge of losing another person in her life, another person who was as close as family. Looking at Caroline, and remembering what the young woman had told her when she arrived late for work, she had an idea.

“Have you talked to Roy?”

“No,” Johnny commented softly. “Please say you’ll do it, that you’ll come by here.”

“Chris is in the hospital,” she said quickly, ignoring his request. “He had an attack of appendicitis last night, and had to have surgery. He’s at Rampart, if you care enough to go see him,” she spat out, hoping to hit Johnny in his Achilles’ heel.

“What? Ohmygod, is… is he a’right?”
“Yes, Caroline was a little late coming in this morning because she had to get in touch with her in-laws and ask them to drop Corrie off here, instead of at the DeSotos’ house. Chet came by and got her a little while ago. I’m sure that Chris wants to see his Uncle Johnny,” she said, knowing she was breaking Johnny’s heart.

“Ugh!” Johnny groaned, leaning his head back to look at the ceiling. He ran his hand through his unruly hair, huffing loudly into the phone. He wanted to go by Rampart to visit with Chris. He also needed to talk to Roy… Or did he? Maybe his friends weren’t in danger from Waite after all! He could almost hear Iris’ voice speaking to him from his past. Teaching him the meaning of the various flowers they saw during their cross-country journey a decade earlier. The truth behind his nickname slapped him squarely on his face. He stood up, holding the receiver in the crook of his neck as he often did with the biophone, and picked up the telephone. He pulled the long cord behind him as he stepped in front of his mirror, spending several long moments staring at his weary reflection.

Thorn was a fitting name for him. He had been living his life behind a mask, disguising himself as a hero. For the first time in a decade he was facing his deepest fear – admitting his own failure and weakness. No longer could he hide behind the evils of William Waite. The monster of a man from Johnny’s past was now unable to inflict physical harm on anyone else. That left Johnny able to see his true self in the reflection, and he hated the dark eyes of shame staring back at him. He wasn’t running in order to protect his friends and family. He was running so that he would never have to face them, knowing that they knew Phillip Campbell had died that early foggy morning because Johnny had failed to intervene. Now he could see the truth - he couldn’t return to testify against Waite even though the perpetrator was incapacitated. He couldn’t relive that scene, couldn’t handle crossing that bridge again, knowing all the horrors that had taken place there.

He ran his fingers beneath his eyes, drying his tears. He knew that returning would mean admitting his failure to save Phillip, and staying in Los Angeles would mean acknowledging his deceit. Firefighters were supposed to be heroes, weren’t they? He knew that the lie he had been living was about to be exposed, even if he didn’t testify. Roy would demand to know the truth. After all, he was about to learn that their friendship had been based on nothing more than a fallacy. How could he face his coworkers when they found out what he had done? He couldn’t, and he knew it. He wondered if he had ever truly belonged to that brotherhood. Their disappointment and rejection would be just as difficult for him as what Lily was enduring from the Unity Family. Her anguished cries pierced his memory. He knew exactly how she felt when her spiritual brothers and sisters had turned their backs on her.

“Brother John, Ian will be back soon. Are you ready to leave?” James called out from halfway down the hall. “The banks will be closing soon… And.”

“I don’t use ‘em,” he commented. “Don’t trust ‘em… I’m not quite finished, James. Please jus’… Jus’ gimme a little more time,” he called out. “Ahhh, damn it!” He cursed into the phone, amazed that Iris was still on the line.

“Don’t do this, Thorn. Chris needs you. I need you. The fire department needs you,” she pleaded. She felt that she had already lost Lily, and if Johnny joined the cult, then she would lose him, too.

Johnny felt like he was being drawn and quartered. He had nowhere to turn except the Unity Family, yet, he knew that by joining them he would be once again hurting someone he loved. He needed more time to think, but time was a luxury he no longer had. He could still see James’ shadow in the hallway. It was strange how he usually made the right split-second decisions at work, yet here he was, needing to make quick decision, and he didn’t know what to do. Realizing that he couldn’t audibly tell Iris what he needed her to know, he decided to write it down for her to read later.
“Please come by my apartment,” he said into the phone. “I’m leaving instructions on my bed for you about what needs to be done. It’s critical. Please?” He pleaded again. “And, I need one more favor, too. It’s for Chris.”

Iris sniffled, struggling to find her voice. “W-what?”

“Please send Chris some balloons from me and tell him I love him… Tell all the DeSotos I love ‘em. Chris and Jenny are great kids. I’ll leave the money on my bed beside the camera bag. Jus’ please come over here… I-I love you,” he said, hanging up the telephone, closing his eyes in silent prayer that Iris would do as he had requested.

If Iris told Roy the truth, that Johnny’s life in Los Angeles had been merely a disguise, covering up his cowardice by pretending to be a hero, then he would understand why Johnny had to leave. Roy would be disgusted by his behavior, and would be grateful to have John Gage out of his life and the lives of Joanne and the kids. Then he would tell the rest of the guys at 51’s. And Hank would quickly accept the resignation letter. He had lost people who were close to him, his entire family, Drew being the most recent, but the pain he was feeling now was worse than he had ever imagined. His heart was completely broken.

E!

Iris hung up the phone, replaying her strange conversation with Johnny over and over again in her mind. Why had he mentioned his nickname and the language of flowers? He had been trying to send her a message, unable to say what he truly meant because of the presence of the other person in his apartment.

She had given him the nickname of Thorn not long after picking him up along the highway when he was a teenager. It had been difficult for her to call him John as that had been what she had called her deceased husband, although it was with a different spelling. His name had been Jonathan Campbell, and she had called him Jon. It seemed fitting for Johnny to be given a ‘floral’ name to match hers and Lily’s. During the trip, Johnny had mentioned how much he missed his long hair. He had cut off several inches of it prior to heading out on his personal quest, intentionally hiding his Native American Heritage. Because of this, she had called him Thornapple, explaining that it was a plant that was also known as Jimson Weed. In the language of flowers, it was often used to mean ‘disguise.’

Suddenly, she gasped out loud, her hand flying to her open mouth. Why hadn’t she thought of it earlier? It was as obvious as the sunrise.

She believed that Johnny was only pretending to be joining the cult as a way of helping Lily escape. Once again, his actions were merely a disguise. She hurriedly set about creating a large bouquet of balloons that would be the envy of every hospitalized child in Rampart’s Pediatric Department. She would do what Johnny had asked; she would deliver the balloons to Chris, hoping the child’s father would be there when she stopped by. Perhaps Roy would have an idea of how to help Johnny rescue Lily from the grips of the cult. With joy in her heart, and a fresh spring in her step, Iris filled the balloons with helium, then headed for the back door to make her special delivery, fully believing that she would soon have her daughter - and Johnny - back in her life.

“Caroline, please lock up for me. I won’t be back today,” she called out over her shoulder, knowing that the conversation with Roy might take a while. She also needed to go by Johnny’s apartment first, to pick up the instructions he had left her.
“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow,” Caroline commented, strumming her fingers on the counter. She was sure that the man who had called Iris was John Gage, and she couldn’t wait to get home to tell Chet about the angry exchange between Iris and Johnny. Caroline hadn’t overheard the actual conversation, but she could read Iris’ body language, and the older woman was VERY upset during the phone call, but her mood had lightened quickly afterwards. Johnny and Iris were still a mystery, one that Caroline wanted to figure out – and she knew that Chet would be intrigued by this new development, too.

E!

By the time Roy woke up, the shadows had grown long across the bedroom floor. Realizing that he had slept longer than he had intended, he quickly made a call to Rampart to check on Chris’ condition. Upon hearing that his son was improving, and that he had even been able to eat a little jello, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s fantastic Jo. I’m gonna get a quick shower and then I’ll come down and relieve you so you can come home. Do you think I should bring Jenny by to visit her brother?”

“No, she’s fine with Mrs. Kennedy, but…

“But what? Do you need me to bring you anything?” He asked.

Joanne looked at Chris, thinking about what the child had asked her while he was eating his jello.

“Well… Could you call Johnny? Chris really wants to see him,” she said, biting her lower lip. If Roy would agree to talk to Johnny, then maybe the two friends could repair their broken relationship.

“Yea… Yea, I’ll give him a call. See you soon, Jo. Tell Chris I’ll be there as soon as I can get dressed and eat something.”

Roy hung up the phone, quickly dialing Johnny’s number. When he got no answer, he decided to drop by the younger man’s apartment on his way to Rampart. He needed to set things right between himself and Johnny, and he knew that right now, a visit from his surrogate uncle would be just what Chris needed to make him feel better, too.

E!

Iris stood inside Johnny’s bedroom, her shaky hands holding the letter he had left for her on his bed. She had completely misunderstood his intentions. He wasn’t pretending to be joining the cult in order to help Lily escape. Johnny was actually joining the Unity Family, and he had no intention of ever returning to Los Angeles, or the life he had worked so hard to build for himself.

She stared at the list of things he wanted her to do. Pay the penalty for breaking his lease, sell his furniture, give away his clothes to a homeless shelter, and… Her tears fell even harder as she read his final requests. He wanted her to take the money in his checking account for herself. He had even left her a couple of signed checks. Then he wanted his savings divided equally between Christopher and Jenny DeSoto. Finally, he wanted her to give Roy the keys to his Rover. No, John Gage was definitely not coming back.

She quickly dried her eyes, gathered up the items he had left for her on his bed, and headed for the front door. She slipped the spare key back underneath the doormat, glancing from side to side to make sure none of his neighbors were watching. She had to get to Rampart, not only to deliver the balloons to Chris DeSoto, but to talk to Roy. Johnny was in trouble, and it was going to take
everyone Iris could think of to help him and Lily escape the grip of the cult.

Tossing the camera bag and letters onto the seat of her vehicle, she backed out of the parking spot, and pulled into the evening traffic. Her heart was pounding inside her chest, and her level of anxiety was rising with each beat. Could she ask Roy for help when his son was recovering from surgery? She was so caught up in her thoughts about Lily and Johnny, that she didn’t see the gold Porsche turning into the opposite entrance of the parking lot.

When Roy arrived at Johnny’s apartment complex, he saw the familiar white Rover parked in its usual spot. Breathing a sigh of relief, he pulled his sports car in beside it, and quickly headed for apartment B-6.

Roy knocked and waited for his partner to open the door. When there was no response, he knocked louder. “Johnny?”

After several long moments of futile knocking, Roy became worried for Johnny. He looked again at the parking lot, just to confirm that the Rover was still there. Seeing it still sitting in its parking space, he began to have a niggling feeling in his gut that something was very wrong with his partner. He decided to use the spare key Johnny had told him about not long after they had been assigned to Station 51.

Roy slipped the key into the lock, turning it until he heard the lock disengage. Slowly, he pushed on the front door, sticking his head inside and calling out to Johnny one more time.

“Hey, Junior? You alright?”

He was met by total silence. Gulping back the bile that was rising in his throat, he flipped on the light and looked around the apartment. Nothing seemed out of place.

“Johnny? Are you here?” He called, walking down the hallway toward the bedroom. The bedroom was empty, but one of the drawers was askew. Roy pulled it open, stunned to see that most of Johnny’s socks and boxers were gone. He rushed to the closet, finding only Johnny’s better clothing items remaining. Most of his tee shirts and jeans had been removed, evidenced by the empty hangers hanging on the metal rod. With a lump forming in his throat, he headed for the coat closet in the living room. This was where Johnny stored his camping equipment. If it was missing, then maybe Johnny had gone camping with someone, although Roy had never known him to go camping without taking his own vehicle.

He pulled back on the door, and nearly yelped when a large book fell off the shelf above his head. He caught it, grateful that it hadn’t slammed into his face. He was still sporting some bruising around his eye from his last visit to this apartment. He would never live it down if he got a broken nose, especially since Johnny wasn’t even present.

He saw the camping equipment, stored haphazardly, as was Johnny’s habit. With the thought of Johnny camping extinguished, he turned the book over in his hand, preparing to put it back on the shelf from which it had fallen, but a picture on the cover caught his attention. This was an old photo album, one that Roy had never seen.

With his curiosity piqued, Roy took a few moments to look through the pictures, noting that they were from Johnny’s past. As he turned the pages, the images became more and more disturbing. Beads of sweat popped out on Roy’s forehead as he saw scenes that were both familiar and haunting. He read the hand-written captions beneath a few of the pictures, but one caught his eyes,
startling him beyond belief.

“Ohmygod, Johnny! I-I never knew you were there… Why didn’t you tell me?” He whispered into the silence of the apartment. His heart was pounding and his blood was rushing in his ears. He finally understood who Iris was, and how she was connected to Johnny. His only question was why were they keeping it a secret from his friends?

He stared at the picture of three people, two of whom he recognized. A much younger Johnny, with very short hair, was standing between two ladies. One of them was obviously Iris, but the other one, a teenager, was someone Roy had never seen. Beneath the photograph was the caption that held the answer to the question that had been bugging him for several days.

Roy closed the photo album, returning it carefully to the shelf in the closet. He rushed out the door, making sure to lock it behind him, fishing his car keys out of his pocket as he took the stairs two at a time. He had to get to the hospital to see his son, and to tell Joanne what he now knew to be the truth about Iris Campbell’s identity.

E!
Roy made his way down the hallway of the pediatric department, nodding his head in greeting to the nurses who were busy charting at the nurses’ station. He rounded the corner, knocking lightly as he entered Chris’ room.

“Wow! Who sent those?” He asked upon seeing the colorful balloons tied to the bedrail. He dreaded telling his son that his favorite uncle wouldn’t be by to visit him.

“Uncle Johnny sent them,” Chris said, his face beaming. “He’s out of town, but he sent me these. And… Mrs. Campbell brought me these,” he said, pushing a coloring book and crayons across the small bedside table in the direction of his father.

“How thoughtful,” he commented, eyeing Joanne who sat staring at him.

Joanne could tell that something was very wrong with her husband. After all, she had known him since the fourth grade, and no one was better able to read Roy DeSoto than Joanne.

“Everything okay, Roy?” She asked, standing and stretching her back.

“Yes, I wasn’t able to get up with Johnny, but I guess you figured that out,” he said, nodding at the balloons. He couldn’t help but wonder who had told Johnny about Chris’ hospitalization.

The couple watched as Chris occupied himself with his crayons for a moment. “Hey, Sport? I need to talk to your mom for just a minute. We’ll be right outside the door, okay?”

“’kay,” the child responded without even looking up.

“He’s feeling much better,” Joanne said, walking through the door that Roy was holding open for her. As soon as the door closed behind them, she turned to face her husband. “Spill it, Roy.”

“I couldn’t find Johnny, but I… I went by his apartment. I was checking to see if he’d gone camping, and I found something I’ve never seen before.” He stared at the floor, wondering if Joanne would even believe him. “Joanne, I know who Iris is.”

E!

Iris sat at her kitchen table, nursing a cup of coffee. She stared at the film canister sitting in the middle of her kitchen table. She sipped her coffee, flipping the business card over and over with her free hand. What should she tell Lieutenant Crockett?

Finally, deciding she had no other options, she walked over to her telephone, dialing the home phone number he had written on the back of the card.

“Hello?”

“Um, Lieutenant Crockett?”
“Speaking,” came the gruff voice on the other end of the line.

“This is, ah, this is Iris Campbell,” she said, feeling awkward calling the detective at home, even though he had given her permission to do so.

“Mrs. Campbell, good to hear from you. Did you get in touch with John?” Ron asked, suddenly sounding much more interested in the phone call.

“Well… That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m… I’m really worried about him.”

Crockett creased his forehead. This was not what he had expected to hear. “What’s going on?” He asked, his voice deepening.

Iris spent the next half hour telling the detective everything that had happened that day, including the fact that she was now in possession of the roll of film. She had to fight with her emotions to keep her voice audible. Anxiety and anguish were constricting her throat, her eyes were burning, and her heart was pounding inside her chest. She felt torn between her loyalty to Johnny and her need to find someone to help him, eventually giving into the worry for his safety. She was at a loss for what to do, or where to turn. Talking to the detective was her last resort.

In his home, Ronald Crockett felt his stomach begin to burn. He was very familiar with Holistic Unity Gardens. He had been working with the California Bureau of Investigation, as well as the FBI, regarding the cult. Hiram Ultman Gardner had been using his initials to create various fake businesses over the years; the latest of which was Holistic Unity Gardens. There had been rumors for years that the man was a drug lord, but because he was so well hidden and protected behind the religious fortress he had created, no charges had ever been filed against him because no evidence had ever been secured.

Ron had pulled over a couple of delivery trucks in recent months, trying to find cause to search the vehicles. So far, he hadn’t been able to find any evidence of wrongdoing. Why would John want to join such a group? Crockett squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. He wasn’t at liberty to disclose what he knew about Hiram Gardner. The investigation was an active one.

“Mrs. Campbell, are you sure he isn’t coming back? I’ve known John for a while now, and this just doesn’t seem like the John Gage I know.”

“I agree, Lieutenant, but I’ve got his hand-written note right here… And please call me Iris.”

“Very well, and I’m Ron,” he said, his voice sounding lighter. “Have you mentioned this to Roy DeSoto, or Captain Stanley?”

Iris sighed audibly into the phone. “No… Roy’s son is in the hospital; he had surgery for appendicitis. And I just don’t know the other men well enough… Well, actually, I kind of know Chet Kelly. His fiancé works for me. Do you think I should call him?”

Crockett clicked his tongue. “That’s your decision, Iris, but I think the guys would want to know. They’re a close bunch – brothers, just like police officers.” He knew that no one was closer to Johnny than those men who worked beside him, laying their lives on the line to protect the life and property of the citizens – and each other. These same men had saved Johnny’s life before, in the line of duty. Perhaps they would know of a way to get Johnny out of this predicament, too.

“He did leave a letter addressed to Captain Stanley… It… It’s his resignation letter. I just… I just don’t know if I can give it to Captain Stanley. He loves his job, Ron.”
“I know,” the detective sighed, “and he’s good at it.” Thinking quickly, Ron piped up. “Have you read the letter?”

“No, it has a note saying he wanted me to give it to his captain. I really don’t want to, Ron, but what else can I do?”

“Hmm, I don’t know. Maybe you should give Chet a call. I’ve got some contacts that might know something. I’ll check in with them. Maybe we can discuss this more in a day, or so?”

“Okay, thank you, Le- err, I mean, Ron. Johnny’s going to be angry, but I think his friends need to know. Maybe they can talk some sense into him.”

“Let me know what Chet says, and in the meantime, I’ll see what I can dig up,” Crockett replied. “If you find out anything else, please call me – day or night. I’ll do the same.”

“Thank you,” Iris replied, feeling a little better just knowing that another person was sharing her burden.

She sat staring at the phone for several minutes, unable to bring herself to make the call to Chet. She needed to think about it a little longer, needed to formulate a plan for how to share Johnny’s darkest secret with his closest friends.

E!

Johnny lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling, fighting the extreme sleepiness the nightly tea seemed to cause. As his brain became more and more muddled, he thought he heard hushed voices whispering outside the dorm. His hearing had always been extremely keen, making him one of the best search and rescue men in the state. He wanted to walk to the door to see what was happening, especially since the dorm had no windows, only a couple of doors on the ends of the building which allowed for ventilation when the weather was warm. However, his body seemed to be made of lead, and the whispering voices faded away as he drifted into a deep slumber.

When morning came, he awoke with the rest of the men, to the sound of the horn blowing – their summons to the sanctuary.

“What’s happenin’?”

“Today’s service is for you, Brother John. You will become one of us, officially,” James stated with a smile. “The process is a largely ceremonial one, and will only be attended by the men.”

“Lily won’t be there? How will she know I’ve joined?” Johnny asked worriedly.

“Father Hiram will tell her. He is very excited to have someone like you joining our family. He is quite proud of you.” James walked over to Johnny’s bed, taking a seat beside the younger man as the rest of the men filed out of the dorm room. He could tell the new convert was nervous, but compliant, and he wanted to do whatever he could to alleviate Johnny’s stress. “We’re all very proud of you, and very happy to consider you a true brother.”

Johnny felt his face darken with a blush. He had told James everything about his past, and yet, this man still wanted to call him a brother. He had to admit that the idea gave him a warm feeling inside. He ran his hand through his mussed up hair.

“So, Brother James, what kind of ceremony are we about to have?”

“The same one we have all gone through. It is symbolic of your old self dying and the new you
being reborn into our family.” James was careful not to give too many details, afraid that the humiliation he knew John was about to endure might make him change his mind. “Afterwards, Father Hiram will tell Lily that you are now a full member of the family, and that her shunning will be greatly diminished. She will be overjoyed by your decision, Brother John,” he said, clamping his hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “You are about to make her a very happy woman. She loves you; I am sure you know that, right?”

“Yea, and I lo-“

A second horn sounded, cutting Johnny’s admission short. James stood up with Johnny following him. “It is time.”

The duo walked in silence to the sanctuary. Lining the entrance were most of the women of the group; only Lily and Gretchen were missing. Each one held a small bouquet of flowers, smiling at Johnny and James as they walked into the sanctuary.

“You see, we are ALL delighted that you have chosen to join us,” James announced, pushing through the wooden door.

The aisle of the sanctuary was lined by the men, each one patting Johnny on the back as he walked past them, following James to the altar.

The front of the sanctuary held several items Johnny recognized. There was a clear cup with what looked like milk in it, a small loaf of bread, a few small pieces of fruit, clothing similar to that worn by the other men, folded and set on one side, and a pair of sandals positioned beside them.

Father Hiram emerged from his quarters and began the ceremony. There were several accolades bestowed on Johnny, as well as a list of requirements for him to promise to follow. His vows included foregoing haircuts and shaving. He had no problem agreeing to those conditions, even though he could almost hear Captain Stanley’s voice chiding him for his hair length. The thought of his captain brought a fresh wave of remorse washing over his soul.

He was going to really miss the men from 51’s.

“Look around at your new family gathered in support of you, Brother John,” Hiram instructed, aware of the emotional pain he was about to inflict on the younger man. It was a necessary psychological process. When Johnny complied, he continued. “Our brother, you stand before us now in the process of being reborn. There is no shame or embarrassment in this moment. Share with us your deepest sorrows so that we may share your pain, and help shoulder your burdens with you.”

Johnny gulped. Could he confess the events of 1965 with these men? James already knew the details, and for a moment, Johnny regretted having shared that with the other man. He slowly turned his face to the right, seeing James giving him an almost imperceptible nod of encouragement, and Johnny knew he had no choice but to tell the tale again. Would he still be accepted? James hadn’t rejected him, would Father Hiram and the others? He felt like an orphaned child; with no fire department family left, he wanted, needed the acceptance of the Unity Family, a true place to belong. Ultimately, he wanted to remove the mask he had been living behind for ten years, to stop hiding in shame because of his past failures.

In a ragged voice, Johnny told the group about that foggy spring morning, and the events that led up to the death of Phillip Campbell. He couldn’t stop the tears that flowed as he relived the nightmare. He trembled, unsure of the reaction he might receive from the assembled group. When he finished his confession, he was rewarded with several strong hands patting his shoulders.

“Now, John, it is time for your rebirth. Remove your worldly garments. You must stand before your
brothers in your nakedness, just as you came into this world naked,” Father Hiram announced as the rest of the men stepped closer.

“Uh,” Johnny gulped, unsure if he had heard correctly.

“Naked you were born into the world, and naked you shall be born into our family,” the bearded leader instructed. Hesitation was commonplace during this part of the initiation process. He knew that by the other men forming a semi-circle around the recruit, he would feel a little more pressure to comply.

Johnny was accustomed to seeing naked men, but usually it was during a medical emergency where clothing had to be removed in order to render life-saving treatment. His mind took him back to several incidences where his own clothing had been cut off due to his injuries, but this was different. Could he do this? Could he strip naked in front of these men? He felt the heat of humiliation radiating from his chest, coloring his face.

James leaned near him, whispering supportive words to the embarrassed paramedic. “We’ve all done it, Brother John. The human body is a vessel for the soul. Do not be ashamed of your body. Lily has gone through this as well, in front of the other women. If she can do it, then so can you,” he encouraged, challenging the masculinity of the fireman.

Slowly, Johnny began removing his clothing, starting with his hiking boots. He thought of how easy it was to change from his street clothes into his uniform in front of the other guys at the station. The difference, here, was that he was going to be stark naked in front of men who were barely acquaintances, not standing in his boxers, or with a towel around his waist in front of men who were his best friends. This was totally different, and he hated the degradation he felt as he lowered his boxers, exposing his manhood as the cotton garment fell to the floor. He used his hands to cover himself as he stepped out of the material pooled at his feet. He had never felt so vulnerable and exposed in his life, as he felt at this moment. He closed his eyes, unable to look at anyone in his current state of undress. He heard James picking up the discarded articles, and he wondered what would happen to his clothes.

Johnny knew the men behind him could see his nude backside. James, who was standing beside him and Father Hiram had the full frontal view, and his breathing rate increased from the emotional stress. He had reached the lowest point of his life. He had given up his career, his family, his friends, his possessions, and now even his dignity. He truly had nothing left; he wasn’t even sure that Lily would still want him after what she was suffering because of their time together.

“Well done, Brother John. Just as you have rid yourself of your worldly garments, so too have you rid your soul of your deepest worries. It is time to be fully embraced by your new family,” Father Hiram announced. “But first, we must bury your past life.”

The leader accepted the discarded clothing and shoes from James and walked over to a wooden box. He placed Johnny’s clothes inside, closing the lid and pounding a large nail into the wooden structure to seal it shut. He returned to the group, waving his hands across the altar.

“Brethren, if you are willing to accept this brother as a full member of the Unity Family, then please begin the next part of the ceremony.”

Johnny rapidly blinked his watery eyes. He wanted to dry his cheeks of the tears he had shed, but he didn’t want to remove his hands from covering his nakedness. He felt a hand on his elbow, and shifted his head to his right. He saw James holding a pair of white boxer shorts.

“When we are first born, we are totally helpless. We must rely on others to meet our most basic
needs. We will now dress you, our brother, to show our love and acceptance of you,” James explained.

Johnny was shivering as he stepped into the boxers James held in his hands, embarrassed even more when his new friend pulled the elastic waistband over his hips. He removed his hands, reaching for the boxers to finish the job, but Ian stopped him.

“No… Let us do this for you, brother,” Ian stated.

After James pulled on the boxers, Ian added Johnny’s new pants, and two other men assisted with his undershirt and shirt. Two more added his sandals. He was then instructed to kneel in front of the altar and fed a cup of milk and bites of bread and fruit from the remaining men. When all of the men present had participated in the ceremony, Father Hiram stepped forward carrying a bowl of warm water and a white cloth.

“Brother John Gage, lift your face towards me,” the leader ordered. When Johnny complied, Hiram wet the cloth in the water, and used it to wash Johnny’s face, removing the tears that had stained his chiseled features. “Now, you have been reborn, clothed, nourished, and quenched. Your tears have been washed away along with all your past failures. You are a new being. Rise and join the members of your new family, my child,” Father Hiram announced, lifting his arms in front of Johnny.

Johnny felt two strong arms assist him into a standing position. He inhaled deeply as he stood up to his full height, and found himself surrounded by the men of the group. Each voiced his support and gratitude for what Johnny had just completed. Suddenly, the doors of the sanctuary opened and the women were brought in. There were more hugs and congratulatory comments from them, but the one face he longed to see was noticeably absent. Lily wasn’t there, but he knew she wouldn’t be allowed to join them, yet. However, Gretchen wasn’t present, either. He was about to ask for her when Father Hiram ordered the assembled group to the feeding hall for the celebration meal. Johnny, realizing that he was the guest of honor, and feeling relieved to have gotten through the initiation ceremony with the support of the group, decided not to ask for her now. Although he had resigned from the fire service, he was still a paramedic. He just hoped that she had chosen to rest following her miscarriage.

E!

Roy sat on the bench in front of his locker, pulling on his socks and shoes as he waited for Kyle Greene to join him. Although he had wanted to stay at the hospital with Chris, he knew that there was nothing he could do for his son. Joanne had encouraged him to work his shift, checking on Chris whenever he made a run by Rampart. Christopher was scheduled to be discharged the following morning, and Roy had agreed to pick him up, giving him a ride home in the Porsche.

“Hey, Roy,” Chet said, pushing through the locker room door in his usual rush. “How’s Chris?”

Roy looked up at the Irishman, offering as much of a smile as he could muster. “Much better. He should be discharged home tomorrow.”

“Aw, that’s great, man,” the lineman stated, peeling out of his street clothes and into his department blues.

“Sorry about the babysitter blunder,” Roy offered.
“No problem. I kept the little princess yesterday, and Caroline is taking her to Mama Lopez today. Iris said it wouldn’t be a problem if she took her to the shop, but Corrie and Antonio are best buddies now.”

Just as the door opened to reveal Kyle rushing in already in uniform, the klaxons sounded.

“Station 51 – woman down – 1742 Laurel Terrace – 1-7-4-2 Laurel Terrace – Cross Street, Hill. Time out: 0753.”

“Are you ready, Greene?” Roy asked, closing his locker door.

“You bet,” the younger medic responded, excitedly, tossing his bag into his locker and rushing out the door.

“We’re all here, Cap,” Mike called out to Hank as the on-coming fire captain headed for the radio to acknowledge the call.

“We’ve got it,” Hank told the departing captain as he reached for the microphone. “Station 51, KMG-365.”

Roy passed the address slip over to Kyle while Hank hit the button to lift the bay door. “No need to consult the maps,” the senior medic said to Kyle as the younger man began thumbing through the pages of the map book. “I know the address.”

“Alright,” Kyle announced, his chin strap waving in the wind as the squad pulled into traffic, followed closely by her bigger sister.

E!

Johnny felt unusually giddy as his reception into the Unity Family continued. He had never been the recipient of such a warm and welcoming celebration. The event lasted longer than he had anticipated, and even Father Hiram joined in the festivities.

“Brother John, I am so pleased that you have joined us. We are much stronger because of you. I am honored by your commitment,” Hiram spoke, patting Johnny on his shoulder.

“Um, I was jus’ wonderin’, Is… Is Gretchen a’right?” He asked, unable to turn off the paramedic in him.

“Ahem,” Father Hiram began, looking sorrowfully into Johnny’s dark eyes. “I’m afraid that our sister has chosen to leave us. She has returned to her home in Los Angeles.”

“Oh,” Johnny responded in shock. “I hope she went to see her doctor. She looked pale when I saw her last.”

“She had suffered a miscarriage, Brother John. I assure you that when she left us, she was in good health. Brother Augustus drove her to LA last night. I wanted to ensure her safe travels. It is not my desire for harm to befall my children, even those who wish to depart from us. It is always free choice,” the elder man replied, pressing his lips into a thin line. “The loss of our baby was difficult for both of us. But,” he said, clamping his hand on the back of Johnny’s neck. “The transgressions that resulted in the loss have been forgiven. I do not hold you responsible for what happened, and Sister Lily is being completely restored to us, sooner now that you have joined us. This is a time to celebrate what we have gained, not to be remorseful for that which is no more.”

Johnny hung his head, his own guilt still weighing heavily on his heart. Lily was alone, being
shunned by the group because of him. Gretchen had suffered a miscarriage. Unlike Lily, Johnny knew that the two events were not connected, both of them represented a tremendous sorrow for each woman. His grief for their losses was palpable.

Father Hiram saw the regret on Johnny’s long face. “Brother John?”

“Yea?”

“Come with me. I believe you should see your beloved. I want you to tell her that you have joined us completely.”

“Really? I can see Lily today?” Johnny asked, hope returning to his voice.

“Yes… I believe it is best,” Father Hiram announced. He stood up, motioning to Johnny, then turned to James. “Brother James, I’d like to have a private conversation with you, as well.”

“Yes, Father,” James responded, following Johnny and Hiram towards the sanctuary. He hoped that he was about to be admitted into the inner circle of the most powerful man he had ever known.

E!

Inside a small room, Lily sat rocking back and forth on the small bed. She was being punished for her failure to follow the rules of the family. Her actions had taken the life of an innocent baby, and she didn’t know if she would ever be able to forgive herself. When she had lured Johnny away from the rest of the group that night, her intention was to become intimate with him again, to convince him that this was the place where he could find everything he had ever wanted – her, and a place to truly belong.

Instead, he had rejected her seduction and Gretchen had suffered a miscarriage. Now she sat cross-legged on the hard cold mattress, tears forming a steady waterfall from her reddened face to her lap. Had she lost Johnny forever? Had the events of yesterday’s chapel service sent him running back to Los Angeles? As she wallowed in her recriminations, a gentle knock sounded at the door.

“Sister Lily?”

Lily wiped her face with the backs of her hands. Her leader had come to see her again, and she had no idea why he had returned. She sniffled, sliding off the bed into a kneeling position.

“Y-Yes, Father?”

The door creaked open and Hiram stood before her, and he was smiling. “Sister Lily, we have news for you,” the leader stated, stepping aside so she could see Johnny standing in the doorway, fully clothed in the garments that only initiated members of the family were allowed to wear.

A new wave of tears pooled along her lower lids. Her suffering had not been wasted. He was here, and he was a full member. A smile warmed her face, and she clasped her hands together beneath her chin. She wished that she could throw herself into his arms, that he could kiss her and take away her pain. But, she knew that her cleansing was not yet complete. However, when she was allowed to emerge from her seclusion and her shunning ended, he would be there. He would be with her forever.

E!
Roy made the turn onto Laurel Terrace, the small narrow strip of asphalt that ran behind The Pourhouse. He saw a familiar waitress waving her arms at the approaching emergency vehicles.

“Ohmygod, Roy!” Amy cried, rushing to the place where the squad came to a stop.

“What’s going on?” He asked, trying to calm the hysterical waitress while his partner ran over to the pile of boxes near the garbage cans.

“It…,” Amy heaved, tears flowing down her cheeks. “It’s… Gret-Gretchen,” she cried, turning to Hank as soon as he reached her side. “I found h-her… when I… brought out… the garbage a… a few minutes ago,” she wept, her voice ragged and hoarse.

“Got a weak pulse, DeSoto,” Kyle called out, kneeling down beside the unconscious victim, setting up the biophone.

“What’s need?” Chet called out, hesitating near the squad, preparing to deliver whatever equipment might be needed.

Roy pulled out the trauma and drug boxes. “Better get the O2,” he called over his shoulder.

“Rampart, this is Squad 51, how do you read?” Kyle spoke into the biophone, his voice much calmer than he was actually feeling.

Roy began his assessment, counting pulse and respirations before wrapping Gretchen’s upper arm with the BP cuff. He listened intently as the thumping faded in his ears, then called out the vitals to his partner. “80/50, pulse about 60 and weak, respiration 10,” he called out flatly.

As Kyle relayed the information to Rampart, Roy used his pen light to assess for pupillary response. “Pin points,” he said with a grimace, quickly replacing his pen light and closely inspecting Gretchen’s arms for needle marks. He checked her nailbeds and her lips, seeing a blue tinge. “Get that oxygen on her now,” he ordered Chet.

Vince directed the crew of the Mayfield ambulance to the back of The Pourhouse, as Roy began working to insert the ordered IV.

“Damn it, Gretchen. Work with me here,” Roy cursed, as the vein he had punctured blew out.

“What’s going on, Greene?” Hank inquired, kneeling down beside his replacement paramedic.

“Looks like an overdose, Cap,” he responded, passing another IV kit to Roy. “Jugular?” He asked the older man.

“No… I got it,” Roy said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Let’s go,” he called out, taping down the tubing.

The men quickly loaded Gretchen onto the awaiting gurney, the oxygen tank positioned between her knees, with Roy holding the IV bag above his head.

“I’ll ride in with her,” Roy told Kyle.

“Greene, go with him. Kelly, bring in the squad, Pal.” Hank watched as his orders were carried out. He then turned to Amy, wrapping his arm around his favorite waitress. “I’m sorry, Amy. I didn’t
know she was back.”

Amy used her apron to dry her eyes. “She wasn’t. This is the first… first time I’ve seen her since… since she left. I just can’t believe it. Drugs?” She cried, leaning into Hank’s supportive arm as she felt her legs begin to tremble.

“Easy, Amy. Take a seat. Your adrenaline is wearing off.” Hank directed her to the tailboard of the engine. “Maybe you should go home. Can someone else cover your shift?”

“I’m off. That’s why I was taking out the boxes,” she said, accepting his assistance as she sat down.

“Want us to call someone to come and get you?”

Amy shook her head slowly. “No… I wanna go to Rampart. She… She ain’t got nobody, Hank. Humph,” she chuckled sarcastically. “Where’s her damn hippie friends now?”

Inside the Mayfair ambulance, the paramedics were intent on saving the life of the former waitress. Roy had just been ordered to insert an esophageal airway and begin artificial respirations. She had gone into full respiratory arrest.

“Keep the air going,” Roy ordered, listening for breath sounds in both lungs as his partner forced air into them.

“Heart rate’s dropping,” Kyle announced, watching the datascope.

Roy picked up the receiver of the biophone. “Rampart, esophageal airway is in place and artificial respirations have been initiated. Patient’s heart rate has dropped to 48. ETA,” he looked out the back of the ambulance, feeling a sense of relief that they were turning into the long drive at the back of the hospital. “ETA, one minute,” he reported, reaching for the medication he knew would be ordered.

“10-4, 51,” Dr. Early responded. “Administer .5 mg atropine.”

“One-half milligram atropine,” Roy repeated. He had barely finished the delivery of the medication when Kyle alerted Roy.

“Damn! She’s crashing, DeSoto!”

Roy immediately began chest compressions as the ambulance backed into the bay at the entrance of the hospital.

The doors of Rampart’s Emergency Department opened and the orderlies rushed the gurney down the hallway with Roy riding the rails, continuing CPR while Kyle followed at Gretchen’s head, pushing life-saving air into her lungs.

“Two,” Dixie announced, her voice firm.

Roy felt the sweat running down his back, forming a dark stain of perspiration in a vee pattern on his uniform. It trickled down from his forehead, stinging his eyes as he continued to pump on the frail chest of the once lively waitress. “Come on… damn it,” he huffed between compressions. It was always more difficult to work on someone he knew. He saw the defibrillator being pushed up to the side of the exam table, and he knew what to expect.

“One – Two – Three – Four – Clear!”
Roy stepped down from the rails, lifting his arms to break contact with Gretchen as did Kyle. Both watched as the jolt surged through the young woman’s body, arching it upwards then dropping it back down onto the gurney, but she remained lifeless.

“Hit her again,” Early ordered Dr. Morton as he began to draw up the epinephrine.

“One – Two – Three – Four – Clear!”

The small group pulled away from Gretchen as another jolt jarred her body. Again, the line on the datascope remained flat.

“Stand back,” Early ordered as Morton injected the medication into the line Roy had established on scene, while the senior medic continued his compressions.

“One – Two – Three – Four – Clear!”

Zchunk!

E!

Lieutenant Ronald Crockett closed his office door, ensuring that the conversation he was about to have was a private one. There was too much at stake, and he knew it. He sat down behind his heavy oak desk, picking up the telephone receiver and punching the buttons with his index finger.

When a deep voice answered on the third ring, he shifted the receiver closer to his mouth and lowered his voice.

“Hey, Davenport… Crockett. Any new developments with HUG?” He asked his friend, using the acronym for Holistic Unity Gardens.

“We’re working on it. Progress is slow, but our guys are advancing. Hopefully, we’ll be able to nail that sonofabitch soon,” the special investigator commented.

Ron wasn’t sure he wanted to tell his friend about the Unity Family’s newest recruit, but he knew that it could be critical. He swallowed hard, hesitating a little too long.

“Crockett? Why’re you asking? What’s really going on, man? You got something for us?”

“Uh, yea… maybe… I don’t want to discuss it on the phone, but this city cop could really use some help from you federal boys… It’s got to be completely under the table, man. Completely under the table.”

“Alright… Why don’t we meet for lunch? I’ll pick up some tacos, you get us a couple of sodas, and we’ll meet at the rest area on the 405, same place we usually meet.”

“I’ll be there at noon. Thanks, man. I really appreciate this,” Crockett said, hanging up the phone. This was going to be a difficult conversation, but if Iris was right, it was also going to be a very necessary one. If his suspicions were correct, and they normally were, then Johnny was in a very dangerous situation.

E!
Iris began her daily routine of opening up the flower shop. She had given Caroline permission to bring Corrie to work with her today since Joanne wasn’t available. Iris really wanted to talk to Caroline, to tell the young woman the truth about her relationship with Johnny and about her estranged daughter, but she knew she couldn’t do it with Corrie around, nor did she want to have the conversation at Bloomers. It was times like these that made her realize just how alone she truly was. She had no friends, having become a recluse after her daughter left her.

She looked around the shop, realizing that the place comprised her entire life, which really wasn’t much. She had grown close to Joanne DeSoto while she had worked at Bloomers, but if Joanne found out the truth, would she still consider Iris to be a friend? After all, both Iris and Johnny had pretended not to know each other when Joanne introduced them. No, friends don’t lie to each other, and Iris knew it. On the other hand, she had grown very fond of Caroline, even offering to provide all of the flowers for her upcoming wedding - free of charge. Yet, if Caroline and Chet found out the truth, would their growing friendship be in jeopardy, too? Again, the answer seemed like a resounding affirmative.

Jon was dead, Lily was lost, and now Johnny had run away. Perhaps it was time to return to her roots. Maybe it was time to head back home to Kizzy. Her mother-in-law had always accepted her, in spite of their obvious differences. Yet, she knew she couldn’t leave without trying to rescue Lily and Johnny, but what could one middle-aged widow do to fight a powerful cult?

The back door of the shop opened, and Iris quickly painted on her happy façade.

“Good morning, Iris,” Caroline called out as she walked over to the work counter and stowed her purse on the lower shelf.

“Good morning… Um, did you forget someone?” Iris asked, seeing that Caroline was alone.

“Oh, no, Mrs. Lopez offered to keep Corrie for me today. Antonio and Corrie have become best friends, so they were both happy to have a play date,” she said with a slight giggle. Her chipper mood quickly faded as she noticed the dark circles beneath Iris’ reddened eyes. “Iris? What’s wrong?”

Iris fought hard to dam up the tears, but as soon as Caroline placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, the dam began to leak. She patted her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry, I’m just feeling a little… I don’t know… blue, I guess.”

“No one’s here, why don’t we get some coffee and talk about it?” Caroline said, urging the older woman in the direction of the percolating coffee pot in the corner of the counter.

Iris allowed herself to be directed to the back of the work area. The physical contact, although it was brief, felt comforting. “Caroline, I… I need to tell you something, but… But, I don’t want you to h-hate m-me,” she cried, unable to finish her statement.

“Oh… Um,” Caroline remarked, pouring two mugs of coffee. “Is it the wedding flowers? I understand if you can’t do them. I mean, it’s a huge expense, and I promise that Chet and I will pay for them.”

Iris shook her head, cupping the younger woman’s face with her hand. Caroline was such a sweet girl; she deserved all the happiness in the world. “No sweetie, it isn’t about the flowers. In fact, it isn’t even about the shop.”
“Whew,” Caroline said, blowing out a breath. “Then I’m not fired?” She asked, trying to lighten the mood a little.

“Of course not. I just hope you’ll still want to work here when you find out the truth,” Iris whimpered, turning her back to Caroline.

“Absolutely, I love it here, Iris. Why are you so upset? What’s going on?” Caroline asked worriedly.

Iris’ breathing became rapid. Telling the truth was proving to be more difficult than she had thought. She realized that if she told Caroline, then she’d have to tell her story again to Roy and maybe Captain Stanley. She began shaking her head, realizing that she couldn’t relive the series of events multiple times, she cleared her throat, turning back around to face Caroline.

“I… I need your help, Caroline… Please?”

“Anything, Iris. I’ll do anything I can to help you, but you’ve got to tell me what to do?”

“It’s… It’s Johnny. He needs… Oh, Caroline,” she cried. “Do you think you could… I mean, could you and Chet get the rest of the crew together and… come to my house tomorrow night? I don’t think I can do this… but once,” she choked out, her voice sounding raspy.

“I’m sure I can. They’ll work off shift in the morning. I’ll… I’ll call Chet at the station and ask him to let the others know. You’ll have to give me your address, but… Iris, what’s going on with Johnny?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t been honest with you about John.” Before Iris could continue, the first customer of the day walked in.

“We’ll be right with you,” Caroline called out, then turned back to Iris. “Are you sure you can work today?” She asked, seeing Iris rubbing her temples.

Iris shook her head. “I – I don’t know. Maybe I should… Should go home.”

“I can handle the shop today. You just write down directions to your house and what time you want us to be there. I’ll take care of the rest, okay?” Caroline suggested, pulling Iris into a sideways hug. “You go get some rest, and we’ll see you tomorrow night.” She assumed that Iris wanted to tell everyone about the old murder case Johnny had witnessed. Maybe Lieutenant Crockett had gotten more information. She didn’t want to alert Iris that she had overheard the conversation. She would go along with the plan, acting surprised when Iris broke the news to the group tomorrow night.

“You’re a precious young woman, Caroline. Chet is a lucky man.”

E!

Chet backed the squad into a parking place at Rampart, just as he heard Mike Stoker’s voice over the radio.

“LA, Engine 51 is 10–8 to Rampart to retrieve manpower.”

Chet opened the door, stepping out into the morning sunshine. He hurriedly walked into the emergency entrance at Rampart, looking for the paramedics. Seeing neither of them around, he waited in the hallway for his captain.

Hank parked Amy’s car in the parking lot behind the hospital. He had insisted on driving her to the
hospital, seeing how upset she was about Gretchen’s condition. He helped her out of the car, then followed her into the emergency entrance.

“Hey, Cap. I haven’t seen DeSoto or Greene, yet.”

“Mike’s on his way with the engine; keep an eye out for him, will you, Pal?” He asked, then walked with Amy towards the waiting area.

Just as Amy sat down, Hank saw his two paramedics walking out of exam room two, both hanging their heads dejectedly.

“Uh-oh,” the seasoned fire captain groaned. He had seen those looks before.

Roy scrubbed his face with his open palm, walking towards the waiting area. He used his forearm to wipe the perspiration off of his forehead. Amy saw the two paramedics walking towards her, and her heart leaped into her throat.

“Ohmygod, no…”

Roy walked over to Amy, kneeling down in front of her in much the same way as he had seen Johnny kneel down to tell Pam that Drew had died.

“Amy… She’s alive, but the prognosis isn’t good. Dr. Early will be out in a few minutes to talk to you. Do you know who her next of kin may be?”

Amy sniffled, covering her face with her hands as she curled her torso towards her lap, propping her elbows on her knees. She shook her head slowly, running her fingers beneath her eyes before she spoke. “Ah, no… No, she doesn’t have anybody…. Nobody but me, I guess.”

Roy exchanged a sad look with his captain. “Okay, just hang in there, Amy. Gretchen needs you now.”

“Was it dr-drugs?” the waitress asked.

Again, Roy exchanged a worried look with Hank and Kyle, before returning his attention to Amy. “We don’t know for sure,” he said softly. “It looks like a heroin overdose.”

“Heroin? No! Gretchen wouldn’t do that!”

“That’s just what it looks like; we don’t know for sure,” Roy added. “Dr. Early is running some tests.”

Amy exhaled loudly. “Those damn religious nuts!” She grunted. “What did they do to her? And where are they now, huh? If they’re such good friends to her, then why is she alone in there,” she said, pointing an angry finger down the corridor, her voice rising, “fighting for her life and they’re nowhere to be found! Those are some friends, huh? Friends are supposed to be there for each other. Friends offer their blood, sweat, and tears, for… each… other,” she said, propping her arm on the chair and resting her forehead against her fingers. “Friends don’t hurt… hurt each… other… They don’t… abandon each… other,” she said, continuing to weep.

Roy felt her words stab him in his heart, wounding his soul. Had he abandoned Johnny? Was his best friend suffering alone with some unknown crisis? In some unknown location?
“Cap, I... I need to check on-“

“Go see him,” Hank responded before the request had even been made. When a run went bad, they all wanted to contact their family, especially when one of their family was sick or injured. Something inside him felt a strong desire to contact the missing member of his work family. ‘What’s wrong with you, John?’ He thought to himself as he sat beside Amy, while she wept. When he saw Dr. Early walking down the corridor, he patted the woman on her shoulder. “Doc’s here, Amy.”

Amy sniffled, drying her eyes as she sat up. “Thanks, Hank. I’m glad your crew answered the call. I needed you fellas... I know Gretchen appreciates it, too.”

Hank gave her a wistful smile, nodding a greeting to Dr. Early as the two men exchanged places. He looked around for his men, seeing Kyle pushing his way through the men’s room door and Chet talking on the pay phone.

Chet waited for an answer to his call, pleased when it was Caroline who answered. “Hey, Babe. It’s me.”

“Chet, are you okay?”

“Yea, I just had to bring the squad in to pick up Roy and Kyle at Rampart. We had a tough run.” He didn’t want to go into details with her on the phone, preferring to listen to her voice as it soothed his soul. He leaned against the wall, listening intently to what Caroline was telling him. “So, tomorrow night? Yea, I’ll talk to the guys when we get back to the station. If it involves Gage, I’m sure they’ll all be there.”
Chapter 15

Amy felt a warm hand on her shoulder, beckoning her from the fitful sleep she had endured, sitting in an uncomfortable chair with her head leaning against the ICU waiting room wall. She looked up into the face of Roy DeSoto, seeing the concern on his ruddy features.

“Amy, why don’t you go on home? You need some rest. The ICU nurses told me you’ve been here all night.”

She blinked her eyes, trying to focus on the clock on the wall. It was morning – again. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since she had found Gretchen unconscious behind The Pourhouse.

“I can’t leave her, Roy. What if she wakes up and she’s all alone?” The exhausted waitress asked, running her fingers beneath her eyes, a futile effort to remove the smudges of mascara deposited by her tears.

Roy frowned, sitting down beside the weary waitress. “There’s been no change. She isn’t going to wake up in the next few hours. Just go on home, sleep for a while, and then come back this afternoon.”

“But-“

“She isn’t alone, Amy. The ICU nurses are here with her, and they’ll take good care of her while you’re gone.”

Amy sighed, pushing the bangs off of her forehead. “I know you’re right. I don’t want to go, but if I stay, then I’m just gonna make myself sick.”

“Atta girl,” Roy said with a forced smile. “I’ll walk you to your car. Are you sure you can drive home?”

“Yea,” she said with a yawn. “It isn’t that far.”

As soon as he had ensured that Amy had arrived at her car safely, he returned to the hospital to check on Christopher. He was grateful that his shift had been a light one through the night, leaving him feeling rested and ready for the meeting at Iris’ home tonight.

He pushed through the door of Chris’ room, thankful for the bright smile he saw on his young son’s face. “So are they letting you go?”

“We’re just waiting on a wheelchair,” Joanne piped up.

As if on cue, the door opened and a young brunette beauty walked in pushing the aforementioned medical equipment. “Christopher DeSoto, are you ready to leave us?”

The youngster, who seemed mesmerized by the pretty nurse, merely nodded his head in affirmation.

“Very well, let’s get you out of that bed and into this wheelchair,” she said with a bright smile.

“Okay, easy does it, Chris,” Roy warned he scooped his son into a cradle carry, depositing him into
the wheelchair.

As the nurse pushed a blushing Christopher out of the hospital, Roy and Joanne walked on either side. The perceptive father saw his son’s features turning pink, and knew that even at the age of eight years old, the child was already recognizing a pretty face. He looked over at Joanne who seemed oblivious to the situation. He knew she was just happy to be going home with the knowledge that their son was well on his way to a full recovery.

“Chris, we better let your mom carry the balloons home. I don’t think they’ll handle the wind very well,” Roy offered with a wink.

“Wow, we’re gonna ride home with the top down?” The youngster asked, his face beaming for a different reason, the pretty nurse all but forgotten for a ride in his father’s Porsche.

Joanne smiled as she accepted the balloons. “I’ll see you boys at home.”

“Bye, Mom.”

“See you in a few minutes, honey,” Roy added.

Twenty minutes later Roy and Chris pulled into the driveway of the DeSoto residence, both of them with a happy windblown look.

“Alright, sport… Let me get the door for you,” Roy said, rushing around the front of the car. He didn’t want to risk Christopher pulling his stitches loose trying to open the car door. “Think you can walk, or should I carry you?”

“Daa-ad,” Chris drawled, rolling his eyes. “I’m not a baby, ya know.”

“Yea, well… I know that, and you know that, but your mom hasn’t figured it out yet, so let’s not break her heart, okay?” He gave his son a knowing wink, tousling Chris’ blonde hair.

Roy walked slowly behind the boy, ready to carry him if the walk proved to be too much. However, the child made it to the front door with only a slight grimace from a twinge of pain when he lifted his right leg to step onto the porch. Joanne had arrived home ahead of them and was opening the front door just as Chris stepped onto their welcome mat.

“There’s my two favorite men,” she announced. “C’mon Chris, let’s get you settled on the couch.”

Chris walked a little slower than usual as he made his way through the formal living room and into the family room. “I thought Dad and Uncle Johnny were your two favorite men.”

“Okay, so you and your father are two of my three favorite men,” Joanne corrected, tying the balloons to the back of a chair at the kitchen table while Jennifer took the opportunity to play nurse to her brother, tucking him beneath the afghan on the couch and placing her small hand on his forehead to check for a fever.

Roy used Joanne’s comment to segue into a conversation about Johnny.

“Jo,” he spoke softly, pulling out two of the chairs at the kitchen table. “Have a seat.”

Joanne wrinkled her forehead, accepting the proffered chair. “Okay, something wrong?”

“Uh, not really. It’s just that… Well, Iris wants all the guys from the station to meet at her house tonight. She has something to tell us about Johnny, and I was hoping you’d come along. Caroline
and Rebecca will both be there.”


Roy butted in to stop her protest. He didn’t want to be at Iris’ house without Joanne there. The last encounter he had had with the older woman had not gone well. “Mrs. Lopez has offered to keep all the kids here. She’ll bring Antonio over, and Chet and Caroline can drop Corrie off here, so…” He reached for her hand, knowing she didn’t want to leave Chris so soon after coming home from the hospital. “Jo, please… Chris is doing great, and… I really need you there with me. I think this is something very serious, and if Iris is who I think she is, then…” He hesitated, exhaling deeply. How could he explain to his wife how he was feeling when he wasn’t even sure of it himself?

Joanne bit the inside of her cheek, not liking the idea. However, she knew that the crisis with their son really was over, and she trusted Maria Lopez as much as anyone. “You’ve already made the arrangements, haven’t you?”

She saw Roy lowering his gaze, giving her a barely perceptible affirmative nod. “Well…,” she hesitated, releasing an audible sigh. “I’ve got some fruit and popcorn for snacks…”

E!

Hank Stanley picked up the lunch plates, scraping the remnants of the meal into the trash can before stacking them in the sink. He began running the warm sudsy water just as Rebecca walked up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“So you know how sexy it is when a man washes dishes?” She flirted, slipping a couple of fingers between the buttons on his flannel shirt, whisking them across his belly.

“No. I’ve watched my men wash a lot of dishes at the station, and I’ve never once considered it to be sexy.” He jumped, startled by her touch. “Ohh, ah-ha,” he laughed, using his wet hands to stop the tickling sensation. He pulled her hand away from his abdomen so he could spin around and envelop her in his embrace, the running water completely forgotten. “I love you, my Becca,” he said, nuzzling his face into the top of her head, inhaling the scent of her shampoo.

“And I love you, my Hank,” she cooed back, enjoying the warmth of his embrace.

He leaned against the sink counter, pulling her tighter against his chest. “Would you do me a big favor tonight?” He asked.

She pulled back, looking at him with a knowing smirk.

“Yea, that’d be nice, too, but that’s not what I’m talking about, sweetheart,” Hank said with a wicked grin.

“Oh, really… Hank, you know I will. What is it?” She inquired, returning her head to his chest to resume the embrace. She loved to hear his breathing and his heartbeat. As a fireman’s wife, she never took those things for granted. Too many times she had attended the funerals of fallen firemen, watching the grieving widows, and wondering if she might be in their shoes one day.

“Well… AAHH!” Hank arched his back away from the counter, spinning around and turning off the hot water. There was a wet spot along the small of his back, leaving his shirt clinging to his skin. It seemed to have grown a white beard as the suds stuck to it from the rising water.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell in your ear,” he apologized, seeing his wife laughing at him. “You got me, uh, rather distracted.”
Rebecca pulled a paper towel off the roll beside the sink, and wiped the suds off his back before they fell to the floor. “Anyway, you were saying?”

“You know how I’ve been worried about John, lately?” The captain reminded her.

“Yes, and…”

“Well,” Hank continued, “Iris Campbell, you know, the lady that runs Bloomer’s Florist?” He waited for her to nod in affirmation, then continued. “Anyway, she knows something about John that she wants the rest of us to know. I can’t imagine what it is, but… I know I’d appreciate the support if you’d come along with me. Joanne and Caroline will be there. Do you mind going with me?”

Rebecca smiled, kissing him lightly on his cheek. “Of course not, honey. There’s no place I’d rather be than by your side. If it involves John, then we’ll both be there. He was certainly there for us when we needed him,” she said, remembering how Johnny had taken care of her injuries during Hank’s depression after Kyle Carrigan’s death. The junior medic had been the perfect combination of friend and professional. He never questioned, or judged. He simply bandaged her wounds, changing her dressings when needed. Hank had been worried about John lately, and if John was in some kind of trouble, then he deserved the respect and help of those who loved him most.

E!

By mid-afternoon, Antonio was on cloud nine. He walked between his mother and Mike, holding tightly to both their hands as they meandered down the corridor of the baseball stadium in search of hotdogs and sodas. Mike quickly made the purchases and the trio found their seats, waiting for the first pitch.

“This is the bestest day ever!”

“So, you like baseball, kiddo?” Mike asked, laughing at the mustard mustache the youngster was sporting.

“Here, let me get that off,” Lexi laughed, using her napkin-covered finger to remove the offending condiment. “There, there’s my handsome little boy,” she giggled.

Mike watched the mother and son interact, and it warmed his heart. Lexi had missed so much after leaving her newborn son with her mother. She loved him enough to leave him in a place where she knew he would be safe, even though it wasn’t with her. He couldn’t imagine how difficult that must have been for her. Now, here she was, making up for lost time and becoming the mother Antonio needed her to be. She had known so much sorrow in recent years, and all he wanted to do was help her create some new memories, fun times with her son. He found himself lost in their conversation, feeling as if he might have found something in his own life that he didn’t even know was missing.

The engineer adjusted his cap, looking around at the other young families. This was what he had been missing for years – wholesome activities with those he loved. Love. It was the reason why most of his relationships ended before the third date. He didn’t want to string a woman along when he wasn’t feeling anything for her - no chemistry, no spark, nothing.

Mike, being a handsome fireman, had gotten his fair share of sultry offers over the years, but he rarely accepted them. Casual sex seemed like an oxymoron to him. How could something so intimate be casual? It was the ultimate form of giving and receiving, of allowing oneself to become vulnerable, and protecting the vulnerability of the one you loved.

Love. It was definitely the element that had been missing in most of his previous relationships. Mike
was a serious man; a man who didn’t believe in wasting time. If a relationship wasn’t progressing, then he ended it. He remembered all the locker room talk between Chet and Johnny, each one discussing his latest bedroom conquests. Mike was a private man, not prone to exaggerating his sexual prowess during testosterone-laden macho conversations in the locker room, like Chet and Johnny tended to do. Those conversations ended when Chet met Caroline, which is when Mike knew the junior lineman had found the right woman.

He looked once more at Lexi and Antonio, both of them grinning and laughing happily. He couldn’t imagine being anywhere else than right here, right now. He leaned back in his seat, taking a big bite of his own hotdog. Was it possible that he would find the right woman one day? Could it be Lexi?

“Well, Mike,” Lexi laughed. “It looks like you need me to take care of you, too,” she said, wiping the corner of his mouth with her napkin.

“Oh really? And what’s this… right… here,” he said leaning in closer to her, close enough to give her a quick peck on the corner of her mouth. He licked his lips, smacking them loudly. “Hmm, yep, mustard,” he said giving Antonio a wink as he leaned back in his seat. There had been no mustard on the corner of her mouth, but only he and Antonio knew that.

Antonio covered his mouth with his hands, lifting his shoulders as he giggled. “I kiss my mama too,” he announced, kneeling in his seat so that he could reach Lexi’s other cheek. He smacked her loudly, then sat back down on his bottom, swinging his feet excitedly awaiting the first pitch.

Lexi sat stunned. Mike had kissed her, hadn’t he? Was that really what had just happened? His whispered apology caught her by surprise.

“I’m sorry… I shouldn’t have done that,” he commented, silently kicking himself for rushing the relationship.

“It’s okay, really,” she said with a blush. “I… I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Embarrass me?” Mike knitted his eyebrows together in confusion. “How could you embarrass me? I’m the one who kissed you, and… And I didn’t ask for permission first. Forgive me?” He asked, all of Marco’s warnings yelling at him in his head.

“Nothing to forgive,” she responded, curling her dark hair behind her ear. “And… If you’d asked… I would’ve said yes,” she said, hoping she hadn’t been too forward. She still wasn’t sure how to behave around a nice man like Mike.

“Really?”

She nodded, batting her eyelashes at him just as the announcer keyed up the microphone.

Several hours later, Mike parked his pick-up in the driveway of the Lopez residence. He reached over, picking up the sleeping child from the seat, accidentally dislodging Antonio’s newly purchased baseball cap in the process.

“Oh, I’ll get it,” Lexi said, picking it up from the floorboard before stepping out of the vehicle and following Mike up the steps of her childhood home.

Antonio didn’t rouse when Mike walked onto the porch, or when the tall man carried him up the stairs. Mike gently laid the sleeping child down on his bed, sitting beside him while removing his sneakers.

“I think we wore him out,” he whispered to Lexi.
“Yes, he said it was the most fun he’s ever had,” Lexi mused, depositing Antonio’s baseball cap on his nightstand.

“Actually,” Mike began, standing up and stepping closer to her. “I think he said something like funnest day ever,” he said mimicking the child’s voice.

Lexi laughed out loud, quickly covering her mouth to keep from waking her napping son. “Well,” she whispered, “his mom had the best day ever, too.”

“Me too,” Mike agreed, licking his lips. He desperately wanted to kiss her again, but was more nervous than he ever imagined. “Um,” he uttered, hesitating briefly. “If I asked you that question we talked about earlier, would the answer still be yes?”

In a flirtatious voice, Lexi spoke up. “You won’t know unless you ask?”

Taking a chance, Mike leaned in closer. “May I kiss you, Lexi?”

Gulping, she responded with a hushed whisper as Mike leaned in even closer. “Yesss.”

Their lips met. Although it was brief, and very chaste, it had happened. Both felt their hearts flutter, their breath hitch, and their chests filled with a nervous heat. Mike backed away slightly.

“You’re lips are as soft as I imagined they’d be.”

She looked into his crystal blue eyes. “And you’re definitely the gentleman I always thought you were. Thank you,” she whispered.

“For the kiss, or for the afternoon with the Dodgers?” He asked with a slight smirk.

“Yes,” she repeated, leaving him wondering.

It took a moment, but Mike finally realized that she had enjoyed the entire day just as much as he had. He felt as if he were walking on air. “So, are you sure you don’t mind going with me to Iris’ house? I have no idea what this might be about, but if Johnny is in some kind of trouble, then we all want to help.” He hung his head, not wanting to bring up bad memories for Lexi.

Lexi knew what Mike was thinking and spoke up before he had a chance. “He was there for us – both you and me. I’ll never forget that, Mike. I’ll do anything I can to help him now. And I know you will, too. You have a heart of pure gold,” she smiled.

Mike ushered them out of Antonio’s bedroom, closing the door behind him. Together they walked down the hallway.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, bashfully.

“I do. Mike, you have no idea what a wonderful man you truly are, do you?”

“Nah, I’m just a hose jockey,” he joked, walking behind her as they went back down the stairs.

When Lexi reached the bottom step, she spun around looking deeply into his eyes, losing herself in the depths of the azure pools. “No, Mike. You’re a knight in shining armor. Not just to me, but to a lot of people.” When he smiled warmly at her, she continued. “I had a wonderful afternoon, and I know Antonio did, too. I can’t thank you enough. This must’ve cost you a fortune.”

“No thanks needed, Miss Lopez, and it was worth every penny. Just, ah, maybe go out with me again?”

“I’d like that,” she answered, appreciatively. “Are you still coming by to get me later, or should I ride
with Marco and Beverly?”

“I’ll pick you up,” he said, “but not until I wash some of this baseball sweat off of me,” he laughed. “I don’t want offend anyone.”

“I understand. I could stand a little freshening up myself. C’mon,” she said, turning towards the front door. “I’ll walk you out.”

Inside the kitchen, Maria Lopez was eavesdropping on the conversation. Hearing the footsteps walking across the wooden floor, she scurried back to the kitchen counter when she heard a loose board creak in the foyer. She felt the backs of her eyes stinging. Her family was whole again. Maybe, just maybe, everything would work out for all her children. That thought led her to think about Marco’s friend, Johnny. She considered all of Marco’s shiftmates to be her sons. From what Marco had told her, Johnny was in a dark place. She remembered how Chet had been in just such a place before Caroline came into his life. Maybe Johnny needed the love of a good woman. Perhaps that would make him happy, just like Mike was making Lexi happy, and Beverly was making Marco happy.

Returning to chopping her vegetables for their dinner, she began to pray for Johnny. She had always been comforted by her religious beliefs during difficult times, and her faith had always held the answer, even when she wasn’t able to see it, at first. Silently her lips moved as she chopped the lettuce. If Johnny was in trouble, then she would storm the Pearly Gates of Heaven with her prayers on his behalf.

E!

Lieutenant Crockett removed his tiny notebook from his shirt pocket, flipping through the worn pages in search of the phone number he needed. Finding the string of digits for which he was searching, he sat down in his recliner, reaching for the telephone.

Iris Campbell paced the floor of her living room, wringing her hands with anxiety. She had been busy cleaning up the already tidy house, moving every available chair she owned into the largest room in her modest home. While she had been grateful to Chet, who had informed her that the men from 51’s were going to bring their female companions to make her feel more comfortable, this also added to the pressure. She was dreading telling the group everything about Johnny’s past, knowing that she was betraying his confidence. Having both Joanne and Caroline there, the only two women in Los Angeles that she felt somewhat close to, was going to be difficult. She had lied to them. Even though it had not been an intentional act of deception, it was an act of omission, but that still made it a lie, as far as she was concerned. She hoped that they would look past her and all of her faults, and agree to help Johnny out, and perhaps Lily, too.

When her telephone rang, penetrating the quiet of her sanctuary, she was startled. She uttered a shy curse, as the shrill noise pierced her ears a second time. “Oh, please don’t cancel on me,” she muttered to herself, fearing that one of the men, or perhaps all of them, were going to nix the gathering.

Interrupting the third ring, she answered the call. “Hello?”

“Iris? This is Ron. Can you talk?” The feisty detective had never been one to mince words, getting straight to the point.

“Uh, yes, is something wrong?”
Realizing he had probably alarmed her, Crockett decided to change his tactic. “No, no; I apologize. I guess I’m a little too brash. Comes with the job, you know?”

Relaxing a bit, Iris took a seat in her favorite chair, relieved that the caller wasn’t one of Johnny’s crewmates. “I suppose it does.”

“Uh, Iris, remember I told you I had some friends that might know something about that cult?”

Iris closed her eyes, dreading whatever news she was about to hear. Good news was not something she associated with the group that had lured her daughter and Johnny away from her. “Y-yes, I remember.”

“Well, I spoke with one of the fellas this afternoon, and I think you’ll like what he told me.”

Iris eyebrows lifted in anticipation and her breath caught in her throat. “O-okay, what is it?”

On the other end of the line, Ronald Crockett seemed to waffle. He wasn’t comfortable telling her everything over the phone. “Uh, listen, I was wondering… May I meet you at your house? I’d rather discuss this face to face, and besides, I need to get that roll of film from you.”

“Oh yes, the film,” she muttered, thinking about the evidence the small film canister might hold.

“Iris, I did call Summerlin. I told him about the roll of film, specifically that you are now in possession of it. Summerlin HAS to have those pictures developed, especially if Johnny isn’t going to testify. You did tell me that Johnny wanted you to turn the roll over as evidence, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, because of the age of the film, Summerlin thinks they should be sent to Quantico for processing. If you give the film to me, then I’ll make sure to send it.”

“Who’s Quantico?” Iris asked, having no idea what the detective meant.

Ron couldn’t stop the chuckle that erupted from his chest. “Oh, Iris… You have a way of making me smile. Quantico isn’t a WHO; it’s a WHERE. It’s the training facility for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The federal boys have some specialized equipment. If anyone can develop that film, it’ll be them. Besides, that way the defense can’t argue that the film was tampered with, you know?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Iris said, blushing because of her faux pas. “You must think I’m stupid,” she snickered, feeling much more comfortable conversing with the lieutenant.

“Not at all. If you asked me a question about flowers, I wouldn’t know the answer,” he said with a warm smile, even though Iris wasn’t able to see it over the phone.

Iris pressed her lips into a thin line, unsure of what to do. Ron already knew most of the details that she was about to share with Johnny’s friends. Would it be wrong for her to invite the detective over, too? Deciding that having at least one person who understood her, she made her decision.

“Well, could you come over in about two hours? I’ve, um… I’ve invited Johnny’s shiftmates over this evening. I wanted to tell them the truth… The truth that you already know. Is… Is the news you have for me something that they can hear, too?”

Ron smiled on the other end of the line. She had followed his advice. He knew that what she was going to tell the men of Station 51 was going to shock them, and if he could support her in any way, then that’s what he needed to do.
“I trust those men completely, Iris. So should you. I think they’ll be particularly interested in what I’ve got to say.” He hesitated, sensing her anxiety. “And I’ll be there to offer you my support, too. It’s the right thing to do; I really believe that.”

“Then why does it feel so wrong, Ron? Why do I feel like I’m hurting Johnny when all I’m trying to do is help him?”

Ron leaned back in his chair, searching for the right words to use to comfort the woman who was fast becoming a friend. “It’s kind of like… Well, when Lily was a baby, did you take her to the doctor to get her baby shots?”

“Of course, I did. What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t take care of her?”

“You knew it was going to be painful for her, yet you did it anyway. It wasn’t easy, especially when she cried, but you knew you were doing what was best for her. You were protecting her from something worse down the road, right?”

Iris felt her eyes beginning to sting. “I see your point,” she said, sniffing slightly. “I guess I never thought of it in that way.”

“It’s the same thing. You may cause Johnny some pain when he finds out that you told his friends about his secret, but in the long run, it’ll be for the best. You ARE protecting him, Iris. And I hope that, perhaps with the help of the rest of 51’s A-shift, we’ll get Johnny AND Lily back.”

Iris felt stunned by the detective’s comment. He had said WE; was he going to help, too? “Okay, um, do you have something to write with?”

“Yes.” Ron took down Iris’ address, jotting down the directions in the margin next to her telephone number. When he finished, he clicked the pen and dropped it back on the end table beside his notebook. “I’ll see you soon, Iris. May I bring something? Sodas, donuts?” He asked with a belly laugh.

Iris understood the joke and laughed along with the officer. “Now, Ron, I can’t let my police officer friend show up with donuts. Those firemen I have coming over would never let you live that one down.”

“Hahaha, touche’, Iris. Touche’.”

“I’ve got some cookies made, and I thought I’d make a pot of coffee. Johnny always told me that firemen like coffee.”

“So do cops… What you’re doing is the right thing. It might not feel like it at the moment, but it’ll all be okay in the end.”

“Thank you. Goodbye, Ron.” Iris hung up the phone, feeling a little better about the impending meeting. If Ron thought it was a good idea, then it must be. She stood up, heading for her bedroom. She had a lot of pictures she wanted to show the men when they arrived. She felt more confident with the thought of the handsome, self-assured lieutenant who was going to be joining them.

E!
Marco arrived at Beverly’s apartment at the appointed time. He walked up to the door, knocking loudly.

“Hey,” the green-eyed beauty remarked, welcoming him into her home. “Come on in.”

“Thank you so much for going with me tonight, Bev. I know that having ladies around will make Iris feel more comfortable, but…,” he hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to proceed.

“But?” Beverly asked, collecting her sweater and purse.

“But, I also want to pick your brain a little.” He blushed at the way Beverly arched one eyebrow at him, silently questioning his comment. “Well, Chet says that this has something to do with Iris and Johnny. Since you have a remarkable insight into relationships and the psyche of people, I was hoping that you might be able to help us understand what’s going on.”

Now it was Beverly’s turn to have heated cheeks. “I’m afraid that you give me too much credit, Marco. I’m not a psychologist.”

“You should be. Why don’t you go back to school?” He asked, opening the front door for her.

“Money… Time… Not enough brain cells for that kind of thing.”

Marco gently placed a hand on her shoulder, slowly turning her around to face him. He looked deeply into her eyes, seeing the self-doubt that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in her soul. “Beverly, we’ve talked about religion a little, and I know that you and I share a belief in God. He’s using you to help so many young women, including Lexi and Bri. But, I really don’t think you’ve reached your full potential. I believe in you, Beverly Marsh. I believe. Lexi believes. Bri believes. Most importantly, Mama believes.” He smiled warmly at her, seeing the shimmer of tears pooling along her lower lids. “Mama and God are like this,” he said, indicating a close relationship by crossing his fingers. “You need to believe, too. Are you truly happy with what you’re doing now, or do you want more?”

Beverly adjusted her purse strap along her shoulder, feeling her heart thudding inside her chest. She did want more for her life, but it had nothing to do with her career. “I wish I could do more to help the ladies. There just aren’t many female psychologists, and it’s hard for them to trust a man,” she said, dropping her eyes to the ground. “After all they’ve gone through,” she added.

“Then don’t sell yourself short.” Marco reached over, using the crook of his index finger to lift her chin so that she was looking at him. “God wouldn’t give you the desire to be more without giving you the tools you need to do the job. All the tools, including the education… But you didn’t answer my question. Are you happy?”

Beverly felt her bottom lip quiver, feeling vulnerable with Marco, and yet, not feeling anxious about it. “Am I happy?”

He nodded.

“I’m happy when I’m helping others, but… I’m happiest… when I’m… with you,” she finished in a quiet whisper, sucking in a ragged breath.

Marco suddenly felt taller and more self-assured than he had ever felt in his life. He had somehow managed to break through the wall she had built up over the years of her abuse. She seemed to be open to talking to him, telling him how she really felt. Without saying it in so many words, she had just told him that she trusted him, and he silently vowed to never betray that trust. He didn’t want to break the contact he had with her, so he kept her chin resting on his finger. He licked his lips, both he
and Beverly knew that the time was right, and slowly they each leaned in a little closer.

When their lips met for the first time, the warmth spread throughout their bodies. The kiss was soft, but confident, and even though it only lasted a moment, it ignited a raging inferno inside both of them. Marco was surprised when she didn’t pull away from him, and in response to her readiness, he parted his lips slightly, timidly seeking an entrance with his tongue. Beverly responded likewise, their tongues meeting passionately as the kiss deepened. Both of them trembled, each enveloping the other in an embrace, communicating through soft guttural murmurs of pleasure. The future seemed to have been given to them in those few moments. Both of them felt it, and neither wanted the kiss to end.

Marco slowly pulled away, his eyes closed in ecstasy. When he opened them, he looked at the response on Beverly’s face, grateful that she seemed to have enjoyed it as much as he had. He cleared his throat, lightly running his thumb across her chin. “Ahem… that was nice.”

He squeezed his eyes shut in embarrassment. When he opened them again, he looked away from her. “Argh, Marco, you idiot,” he groaned, rolling his eyes, his face heating. The kiss had been much more than nice. It had been the most wonderful kiss he had ever known.

Beverly chuckled, thankful that she hadn’t been the one to speak first. “Hahaha, you are NOT an idiot, Marco,” she said, lightly punching him on his shoulder. “You’re absolutely right. That was nice.”

“Nice enough to do it again sometime?” He asked, feeling a little bolder.

“Yes,” she said with a wide grin, offering him a quick kiss on the cheek that held the promise of more to come, then flipped her hair away from her neck as she turned to walk to his car. Her face was red, but not from embarrassment; it was from something else that she was feeling. As he opened the door for her, she looked up at him, appreciating how he was making her feel special. “Thank you.”

“Hey, my Mama raised me right. She taught me how to treat a lady,” Marco grinned bashfully, closing the door.

Beverly waited for him to take his seat behind the wheel. When he closed his door, she reached out, grasping his hand. “I’m grateful to you for treating me like a lady, but… I was thanking you for the kiss.”

Marco cranked up the car, backing out of the parking space. “Let’s get out of here before I say something embarrassing again,” he laughed, but inside he was thinking about how warm her lips had felt. And he couldn’t wait to kiss her again.

E!

Maria Lopez felt right at home in a kitchen, even if that kitchen wasn’t hers. “Do not worry about Christopher,” she relayed to the DeSotos in her thick accent. “He will be just fine with Mama Lopez,” she said confidently.

“I trust you completely,” Joanne spoke up. “Thank you for doing this for us.”

When they heard a knock on the front door, Roy walked across the living room to answer it.

“CORRIE!” Antonio shouted, seeing his best friend walking into the living room ahead of her mother and Chet.
Both youngsters were happy to see each other again. They had enjoyed playing the previous day while Caroline was at work.

Warm greetings were shared among the adults present as the children congregated in the living room. Joanne and Roy said goodbye to Jenny and Chris, reminding Chris that he was only allowed to get up from the couch to eat a snack, or use the bathroom.

“Mrs. Lopez will help you if you need it, so don’t be afraid to ask, okay, sweetheart?”

Chris groaned, not wanting the extra attention from his mother in front of their guests. “I know,” he groused.

“You folks head on out for your meeting,” Maria said, shooing them with a waving motion using the backs of her hands.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Caroline asked, knowing that Corrie could sometimes be difficult to contain with her endless energy.

“I raised five children, including a set of twin boys,” Maria reminded the young mother. “I can handle this.”

Caroline’s cheeks turned rosy. “I guess you are a little over-qualified for the job, huh?”

The group snickered as they walked out of the house, leaving Maria in charge of the four youngsters. They knew that their children would be well cared for. What they didn’t know was what they were going to be facing when they arrived at Iris’ house.

E!

Iris was just setting the tray of cooking on the table, when she heard the doorbell ring. A quick glance at the clock told her that her first guests were arriving twenty minutes early. She felt her heart dance around inside her chest as her anxiety level spiked. She quickly placed the tray on her dining room table and hurried to the front door.

Relief swept over her when she saw that the visitor was Ronald Crockett. With a smile on her face, she opened the door to the detective. “Ron, welcome. Won’t you come in?”

The detective entered Iris’ home, carrying a pink box. He waited for her to close the door before he spoke up. “Thank you for the invitation, Iris. Where should I put these?”

Iris tilted her head slightly, a smile parting her lips. “You didn’t!” She laughed nervously.

“No,” he said cockily. “I didn’t get donuts. I brought some petits fours.”

A graceful hand fell across Iris’ chest. “Oh, Ron. How thoughtful of you. You can put them there,” she waved her arm towards the table.

“Well, I didn’t want to come over empty handed. Besides, I thought you might want some extra sugar to give you a boost.” He followed her to the table, placing the box beside the tray of cookies just as she had instructed.

Iris pulled a glass serving tray from a cabinet, and together the two of them placed the confectionary delights in rows on the dish. When that task was completed, they poured a couple of cups of coffee,
and sat down in the living room.

Ron was the first to break the silence. “I know this won’t be easy for you, Iris, but these cats from 51’s are real good guys. It’ll be fine,” he said, sipping the hot coffee.

“I wish I had your confidence, Ron. I’m just afraid that they’ll be angry, you know? I should’ve told them about me and Johnny, but… He didn’t want them to know.”

Ron studied the nervous woman as if he were searching for nonverbal cues from a suspect. “Are you really afraid that Johnny’s friends will be angry… Or is it Johnny’s anger that worries you?”

Iris cast her gaze to the side, away from the perceptive detective. She knew he was good at his job, just by the way he had questioned her. He went straight for the jugular. “Both, I suppose.” She lifted her cup to her lips, looking at the detective over the rim of her brown mug. She swallowed the hot coffee, feeling the burn as it flowed down her throat and into her empty stomach. “I’m betraying his trust, Ron. We both know it.”

“And we BOTH know why,” he said reassuringly.

“Oh, my, I almost forgot the film,” she said, setting her mug down on the coaster on her coffee table. “I’ll go get it.”

Ron stood up, waiting until she left the room before removing an evidence bag from his coat pocket. When she returned, he accepted the canister from her, sealing it inside the clear bag. “Thank you. I’ll take extra special care of it.”

The doorbell rang again, and Iris made her way to her foyer. Her legs were shaking as she pulled open the large wooden door. She was greeted by an older man who introduced himself as Hank Stanley and his wife, Rebecca. Just as they were ushered inside, a maroon sedan pulled to a stop along the curb. Marco got out, walking around to open the door for Beverly. They made their way up the sidewalk, and again introductions were made.

“Thank you for coming. I’ve got coffee and sweets over-“

Her instructions were interrupted by a pick-up truck parking behind Marco’s car.

Mike helped Lexi out of his vehicle, recognizing both Marco and Hank’s cars. He walked up the sidewalk, introducing himself and Lexi.

“I’m Iris, and… I appreciate this. Please help yourself to some coffee and snacks,” she offered, waving her hand towards the table. She noted that her guests were talking among themselves, with Ron joining in comfortably.

Another car parked along the curb across the street, and she felt her legs grow weak once again. These were the guests that she had dreaded seeing the most. Joanne and Caroline walked ahead of Roy and Chet as they made their way up the sidewalk. Both women smiled at her, offering her their warm greetings as they each gave her a quick hug.

Chet gave Iris a respectful nod, then felt his eyes widen in surprise. “Uh-oh, Johnny must be in big trouble if the fuzz is here?”

Iris smiled lightly. “Oh, it’s not what you’re thinking,” she commented, waving off the young lineman.
As Iris was closing the door, Roy caught her attention.

“Iris,” he began, looking around to make sure no one else was listening. “I want to apologize for my behavior over the last few days.”

Iris looked up into Roy’s blue eyes, noting the sincerity she saw in those shimmering pools. She tried to swallow, but found her mouth had gone dry. “Um, okay… It’s alright.” His heartfelt apology had caught her off guard. “There’re things you… You don’t know, Roy.”

“I know more than you think I do.” He stared at her intently, ensuring he had her full attention. “I went by Johnny’s apartment today. I saw a photo album there that I’d never seen before. I have to admit, I don’t know why Johnny never told me about what he did, nor do I understand why he never told me the truth about you, but…” He blinked rapidly, not wanting to lose control of his emotions. “But Johnny’s like a brother to me, to all of us,” he croaked out, jerking his head toward the group assembled in her living room. His crystal eyes looked at her, connecting with her soul as he watched her tears welling up. When she pressed her lips together tightly, he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “And that makes you family, too.” He saw her nodding slightly, unable to speak. “Please forgive me for how I’ve behaved towards you. I’m both ashamed and… And really sorry.”

“For-gi-given,” she whispered, struggling to force the words past the lump in her throat.

“Thank you,” he said, giving her shoulder a light squeeze. “I want to help, we all do. Just please tell us the truth, all of it, so we can figure out how best to help Johnny, okay?”

Iris nodded. She had not been prepared for Roy’s apology, and his honesty and boldness encouraged her to forge on ahead. On trembling legs, she followed Roy into the living room, quickly taking a seat.

Ron, sensing Iris’ discomfort, decided to help her get started. “Everyone, I’m glad you all are here. I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here, but that’ll be obvious later on. Um,” he stuttered, locking eyes with Iris. When she nodded affirmatively to his unspoken question, he continued. “If you all will take a seat, we’ll get started.”

When the commotion settled down, Iris scanned the room, seeing that all eyes were on her. She felt waves of heat and nausea washing over her, and a trickle of perspiration made its way down the nape of her neck. This was it. This was the moment she had been dreading for days now. She saw the worry in each person’s eyes, and her own eyes began to grow misty. Johnny had no idea that so many people cared about him so much. She wished that he could see the group gathered here, anxious for an update on their friend. John Gage, the young man who felt so unworthy of the respect and admiration of his coworkers, had a close work family, and he didn’t even realize it. These men and women gathered here on his behalf, were his brothers and sisters. They truly cared for him. Loved him.

“Iris?”

Jerked from her musings by Roy’s voice, Iris blinked her eyes rapidly, clearing her throat. “Ahem, I’m sorry, this is just so… So difficult.”

“It’s okay,” the red-haired paramedic said softly. He had an entirely new opinion of her since his discovery in Johnny’s apartment.

“Um, thank you for coming, especially on such short notice. Uh… I’m sorry. H-how much do you
The men from 51’s exchanged concerned glances with each other. Hank, feeling like the leader of the group, even when they weren’t on shift, was the first to speak up.

“Well, we know he grew up on a ranch in Montana. Moved to California where he finished high school and—“

“And he was on the track team where he was known as Gage the Galloping Greyhound,” Chet added, a smile peeking out from beneath his mustache, though the action failed to light up his face. Even the Phantom was worried about his pigeon.

Iris only smiled wistfully.

“He loves photography and rodeos,” Mike added, staring into his coffee cup. For some reason, this felt as if they were remembering a fallen brother, and it made his stomach burn.

“But hates anthropologists,” Marco added. “Because he’s Native American.”

“Semi,” Chet corrected, remembering how he had called Johnny their semi-red brother during a particularly heated discussion about Johnny’s heritage, shortly after 51’s opened.

“And he’s one of the best rescue men and paramedics in the whole state,” Hank added.

Roy, who had remained silent while the others were reminiscing about his partner, lifted his face from his plate, locking eyes with Iris once again. It was time to speak up about what he knew.

“His parents are still alive, but he moved here to LA where he lived with his aunt to finish high school. My kids call him Uncle Johnny, not because he’s my blood brother, but because we’re as close as brothers… Maybe even closer.” His voice faded. “At least we were,” he muttered, incoherently.

“Yes, sometimes our friends are even closer to us than our blood family,” Iris added, her comments having a dual meaning for her. Her own family had disowned her over twenty-five years ago, and she had found a new family member in a young man named John Gage. “John and I are close like that. I mean, we’re not related, of course, but…”

When Iris’ breath hitched, Roy filled in the gap, adding the words that Iris’ seemed to be having difficulty saying. “But he lived with you when he moved out here. Iris… You’re the woman Johnny calls his aunt, aren’t you?”
Chapter 16

A/N: This chapter is a little longer than usual, but I didn’t want to divide it into two chapters. I hope you don’t mind. Thank you for reading and especially to those of you who share your comments with me. I appreciate you more than you could ever know.

Chapter 16

“Iris… You’re the woman Johnny calls his aunt, aren’t you?”

The red-haired florist felt the heat of the stares. Roy’s question sounded more like a knowing confirmation than a question. Now he, along with all the other guests except Lieutenant Crockett, were waiting for the answer. Iris closed her eyes in a futile attempt to dam her tears. She lowered her face to her lap, allowing the pent up emotions of the last decade, specifically the last few years, to overwhelm her. Her tears ran down from the inside corners of her eyes, leaving a salty taste behind as they traveled past the corners of her mouth. She feared that her relationship with Johnny was about to be damaged beyond repair. Her silence answered the question louder than her whispered reply.

“Y-yes.”

Chet’s eyes widened like blue-centered saucers. “Huh? But I thought you said you weren’t related?”

Before Iris could respond to Chet, Joanne jumped into the conversation.

“Why didn’t you tell me when I was working for you, Iris?” Joanne asked with more than a hint of displeasure in her voice. “For God’s sake, I introduced the two of you, and you acted like you’d never even seen each other. Why?” Joanne spat out. She was exhausted from spending her nights on a lumpy cot at the hospital. Her fatigue seemed to have removed her internal filter, allowing her thoughts to escape from her mouth without concern for who might be offended.

“Take it easy, Jo,” Roy cautioned, trying to settle her down even though he completely understood her anger. “There’s got to be a good reason for the deception,” he said in a low voice, then looked over at Iris with a soft gaze. “I think we’d all like to hear it.”

“Joanne,” Iris began with a shaky voice. “I owe you an apology, but… John didn’t want any of you knowing the truth about our relationship, and that day—”

“There’s no reason to lie about such a thing, Iris. None!” Joanne said, waving her hand towards Iris to emphasize her point.

“Yes… Yes, there is a good reason,” Iris remarked, pinning the angry woman and the rest of her guests with her red-rimmed eyes. “I hope you’ll understand after I explain—”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear this one,” Joanne muttered, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest. She shrank back into the sofa beside Roy, immediately regretting her sarcasm.

“Please… Please let me start from the beginning. It’s… It’s a long story,” Iris began, accepting the package of tissues Beverly removed from her purse and handed to the weeping woman. “Thank
Iris looked around the room, trying to discern what Johnny’s friends were thinking, wondering how they would react. “What I have to tell you may be difficult for you to understand, but try to put yourself in Johnny’s shoes. Just… Please listen to the whole story before you pass any judgments, okay?” She asked the group in a weak voice.

“It isn’t our place to judge you or Johnny, Iris,” Beverly spoke up. “We’ll be quiet and allow you to tell us everything you want us to know. It’s obvious that Johnny means a lot to you, and he means a lot to all of us, too. We have that in common, so we’re not adversaries,” the counselor said with an understanding smile; she felt grateful when the others agreed to do the same.

Marco felt his heart swell with admiration at the way Beverly had quickly doused the emotional flames with her remark. Her words and calming tone had settled everyone down, and she had managed to find something that they all could agree on. It was a strategic move, finding their common ground on which to build trust, in a situation that seemed to have been on the verge of spiraling out of control.

Iris inhaled deeply, exhaling a cleansing breath before she began. “In order to explain this, I’ve got to start at the beginning, long before I ever met John Gage. It all started when I was a teenager back in Alabama during my senior year in high school. I met a sweet young man, a handsome soldier, strong and polite, who had bravely served our country in the war… But my family disapproved of the relationship. My parents threatened to send me away, all the way to my cousin’s home in Connecticut, if I didn’t break up with him.”

She looked around the room, ensuring that she had everyone’s attention before she continued. “We didn’t break up; we kept our courtship a secret from our families until I had graduated. I figured that once I was eighteen years old, I could do whatever I wanted, including marry Jon,” she said, her eyes losing focus as her mind took her back to the early summer of 1948. “But I was wrong. We eloped, but we were refused a marriage license.”

Iris saw the perplexed faces of those gathered around her. She knew they didn’t understand.

“There were laws that prohibited our marriage in most states, especially in the deep South,” she explained.

“Why?” Rebecca questioned, blushing when she realized she had agreed to remain quiet. “I’m sorry,” she offered, sinking back into the sofa beside her husband.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Stanley. That’s a good question,” Iris began, her breath hitching. “It’s because… Jon was black.”

“And it was illegal for a white person and a black person to marry back then, right?” Roy asked, thinking that he now knew the identity of the young mystery woman in the pictures in Johnny’s photo album.

Iris swallowed hard, nodding her head. “One of Jon’s Army buddies told him that we might be able to get married in Kansas, or in California. So we headed west. As we drove through Kansas, we decided to see if we could get a marriage license. We did, and in just a few minutes we were officially husband and wife. A few days later, we arrived in Los Angeles. We found an apartment, and Jon found a construction job.

We were happy, but we missed our families. One day, while Jon was at work, I walked down to the supermarket to use the pay phone. I made a collect call to my parents’ number…,” she hung her head
before she continued. “My father answered the phone and accepted the charges. But… When I told him that Jon and I were in California and that we’d gotten married, he hung up on me.”

Joanne intertwined her fingers with Roy’s. Even though her mother had never really approved of her marriage to Roy, at least she hadn’t turned her back on Joanne.

Iris sniffled, still staring at the coffee table in front of her, but not seeing it. Her eyes were still seeing her past, both good and bad.

“Anyway, I spent the rest of the day crying, but before Jon came home from work, I decided that if my parents were going to make me choose between them and my husband, then my husband was going to win. I loved him… so… much,” she cried.

Drying her tears with the tissue Beverly had given her, she sniffled, then continued with her story. “Jon’s family didn’t have a phone, so he wrote them a letter. A couple of weeks later, we received a letter from them. They let him know that they disapproved of our union; asking him why the local colored girls weren’t good enough for him. But they didn’t turn their backs on him. They just didn’t seem to understand… We were in love, and neither of us saw our skin color as a barrier, or a reason not to allow our love to grow.”

Marco offered his elbow to Beverly, grateful when she curved her hand into the crook of his arm. He gently patted her soft hand with his own. He was of Mexican heritage and Beverly was of Irish ancestry. Would their relationship have been frowned upon twenty years ago?

Iris’ face began to light up, her eyes glistening as she moved along with her story. “And our love did grow. Within a few months, I discovered that I was pregnant. We were so happy, but I was young, scared, and really wanted my mother to be with me. So I wrote my parents a letter, telling them that they were going to be grandparents, and that… That I wanted them to get to know their first grandchild.”

Iris closed her eyes, her cheeks turning red as she cried even harder. Silence cloaked the room; no one uttered a word as they waited for her to continue. “A short time later I received a letter in the mail. It was short and to the point. They refused to acknowledge Jon as my husband, and they… They refused to accept an innocent baby as a member of the family, because her father had darker skin than mine,” she wept.

Lexi slipped her hand into the larger, warmer hand of Mike Stoker. Her own son was of mixed parentage. What if her family had rejected Antonio because his father was white? Her only option then would have been to place her newborn son for adoption. There was no way that she could have cared for him when she was in an abusive situation, selling her body on the streets. Instead of rejecting Antonio, Lexi’s family had accepted him, raising him during her absence. What kind of parent turns their back on their own child and grandchild?

“Over the months, Jon’s family grew to accept our marriage and they were more accepting of our unborn baby. His mother wanted to come out and help me after the birth, but they simply didn’t have the money to make the trip. So when our daughter was born, it was just Jon and me – we were all she had, but she was loved,” Iris whispered, struggling to breathe. After a few moments to collect herself, she continued.

“We named her Lily, keeping with the flower theme of my name. Lily was a beautiful happy baby. It was like she had gotten the best of both of us. She had dark hair, but it was straighter than Jon’s. She had pretty light hazel eyes that were darker than mine, but lighter than Jon’s brown ones. Her skin
was the perfect mixture of my pale complexion and Jon’s darker one. She even had a light sprinkling of freckles across her nose as she grew older,” Iris chuckled. “Somehow, we managed to raise her without help from our families.”

Hank wrapped his arm around Rebecca’s shoulders, pulling her close. He remembered how difficult the birth of their daughters had been on his wife, and how much help her mother had been during those first few weeks after the delivery. He felt Rebecca’s shoulders tremble and saw her swipe at her tears, knowing that she was thinking the same thing.

Iris took a deep breath and resumed her story. “I sent my parents a letter with a picture of Lily, and told them about her birth. I just knew that if they saw her, they’d fall in love with her. I never heard back from them.” She used the tissues to dry her tears as her face morphed into a cold, stone-like appearance. It was obvious she had had to build a strong wall around her heart where her parents were concerned.

“Three years later, Jon was killed in an industrial accident.” She heard a couple of gasps and knew that the wives of firemen lived with the fear of the same thing happening to them – being widowed at a young age, left to raise children alone.

“He’s buried here, in California, because I didn’t have the money to send his body back home to Alabama. His family couldn’t afford to come here for the funeral. Kizzy, my mother-in-law, wrote me, telling me that my parents were aware of Jon’s death… They could’ve afforded the airfare, but they didn’t come to the funeral, didn’t even contact me. At that moment, as far as I was concerned, they were dead, too,” she said, her jaw firmly set.

“I never dated again, never wanted to,” Iris said dryly. “Jon was the love of my life, and I was afraid that no one else could match up. I also didn’t know if another man would accept Lily, be a father to her. So it was just Lily and me against the world,” she chuckled, nervously.

Chet pulled Caroline close, knowing that she knew what it was like to be widowed at a young age, to raise a young daughter alone. Caroline leaned her head against Chet’s shoulder briefly, a silent thank you to the man she loved, the man who loved her daughter as if Corrie was his own child, a man who would be there to help her raise her daughter because the little girl’s own father was deceased.

Iris shifted in her seat, staring into the space in the middle of the room as she continued to relay her story. “I took odd jobs, things I could do with Lily tagging along with me, housekeeping and things like that. I didn’t work full time until she went to school. That’s when I found a job as a florist’s assistant. The older lady, Liliana, taught me everything I know about flowers. She was a sweet Italian lady; what some people might call an old maid,” she smiled wistfully.

“She never married?” Ron asked, hearing this story for the first time.

“No, she never did. She sort of accepted me and Lily as her daughter and granddaughter.” Her eyes seemed to sparkle as she reminisced about her mentor. “She really connected with Lily. I guess it was because of their names. Liliana is Italian for Lily,” she explained. “Since she didn’t have family, and because she thought so much of us, she… Ahem…”

“Do you need some water?” Ron asked, standing before Iris could even respond.

“Yes… Ahem, please.”

Beverly, her counseling skills taking over, leaned forward. “Iris, you’re doing great. I know this must be difficult for you, but remember… You won’t find any rejection here, not among us.”
Marco held Beverly’s hand, adding his own support to Iris. “I know it isn’t the same as being accepted by your biological family, but… You ARE Johnny’s aunt. That makes you a part of the 51 family.”

“That’s right, Iris. And I’m sorry for how I behaved earlier,” Joanne stated, her voice filled with remorse.

Iris waved a forgiving hand in Joanne’s direction as she gratefully accepted the proffered glass of water handed to her by the attentive detective. “It’s okay, Joanne. I… I understand; no apology necessary. Thank you… all,” she said, lifting the glass to her mouth, gulping the cooling liquid.

“Take your time, Iris. There’s no rush,” Beverly assured her, pleased when she saw the older woman visibly relax.

Iris set the empty glass on the coaster on the end table nearest her. “Lily began having problems in school. A few of the kids made fun of her because she didn’t look like them. She also had problems learning. Later on, we discovered that it was called dyslexia, but by then, I had already pulled her out of school. I figured I could teach her what she needed to know in a place where she was happy, not miserable. Liliana allowed me to keep Lily with me at the shop, and teach her the basics of math, reading, and…” Iris lowered her gaze slowly. “Her history lesson would come a few years later.”

“Where’s Lily now?” Roy asked, seeing Iris’ struggle to continue.

Iris looked over at Ron, seeing the slight nod of encouragement he gave her. “The ‘60’s were turbulent times, Roy. When Lily was thirteen, in 1963, four little black girls were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. Lily saw the story on the news, saw their pictures in the newspaper, and she began asking questions. She wanted to know about my family,” Iris said, placing her open hand on her chest. “She knew of her paternal family, but knew nothing of my family. Obviously, she knew they were white, but she’d never once asked me about meeting them. I… I made a huge mistake then, one I will always regret. I lied to my own daughter; I told her that her maternal grandparents were deceased. As far as I was concerned, they were. And I didn’t want her to know that her own grandparents had rejected her… But she found out later.”

Chet cringed, remembering what it felt like to think he had been lied to by his parents. The incident had left him depressed, lonely, and making mistakes at work. He ran his hand through his curly hair, knowing exactly how Lily must have felt when she learned the truth.*

“In 1964, Liliana became ill. She died of breast cancer just a few months after being diagnosed. I was devastated by the loss, and so was Lily. After her funeral Mass, an attorney came to visit me. He told me that….” Her voice quivered, becoming airy as she struggled to tell of her surrogate mother’s final wishes.

“Liliana had left everything to me and Lily. The lawyer had a copy of her will and… She left EVERYTHING to the two of us,” she wept, remembering the generosity of the woman she loved dearly. “Bloomers… It was actually her shop.”

“I’m sure that was a difficult time for you and Lily,” Roy said softly.

“Yes, but… It was hardest on Lily.”

“Iris… Where is Lily now?” Roy asked again.

Iris held up her finger, a gesture to the senior medic to let him know that she would get to that part of
“We had been hearing news about freedom riders, and how things in the south were going to be changing. By this time, my father-in-law had passed away, but Kizzy had been able to pay for telephone service. I called her, and she told me about plans to peacefully stand up for the civil rights of black people. When I shared this with Lily – she was fifteen by then – she asked to go back to the place where Jon and I had been born and raised. So… We packed up our car, and we headed to Alabama.”

Beverly listened intently, finding the story both fascinating and astonishing.

“That took a lot of courage, Iris. You’re to be commended,” Beverly remarked.

Iris gave her a half-hearted smile, not feeling very courageous at the moment. “Along the way, I decided to show Lily the place where Jon and I had been married. Being there, outside that old courthouse, brought back some really good memories of my husband. When we left, we were traveling through a rural part of Kansas, when we passed by a skinny young man walking along the road. He had a small backpack and what looked like a camera case on his shoulder. He was hitch-hiking. Picking up a hitch-hiker was something I NEVER did, but he seemed different, more like a child than a young man. I was concerned about him so I picked him up.”

“It was Johnny, wasn’t it?” Marco interjected.

Iris nodded affirmatively. “Yes, he was energetic, eager, and… And he and Lily really seemed to connect with each other. He, too, had heard about the things happening down south, about how people of color were standing up to the racism that had oppressed them for so long, and people of all races were uniting to overcome the evils of prejudice.”

Marco smiled knowingly.

“When John told us his name, I just knew that I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t call him by the same given name as my deceased husband. So I just never addressed him by his first name.”

“I can understand that,” Beverly said, encouragingly.

“John shared with us about growing up on an impoverished reservation, and that he had talked to his parents, telling them that he needed to take his camera, which was his most treasured possession, and go south to document the events. He was only sixteen years old, but he knew without a doubt that he wanted to be a photo journalist. The way he explained it, this journey he was making was a sort of rite of passage into manhood for him. He needed to prove that he could find a way to survive on his own in a strange land far from home. It was something that his male ancestors did, and John wanted to follow the old ways of his people with a modern day twist. He wasn’t going into the wilderness; he was going to another part of the country.”

“That’s a long way from home for a kid,” Hank stated.

“True, but they allowed him to leave the reservation, very reluctantly. Before he left, he had done something that had been extremely difficult for him. He had cut his long dark braid that had hung down between his shoulder blades, leaving it with his mother. It was symbolic of him separating himself from his parents, leaving boyhood behind. He explained to us that because he was half white and half Indian, he thought he could pass himself off as being white, to better fit in while he took his photographs of the protests. He was hoping to sell his pictures to magazines and newspapers, to jumpstart his journalism career. That’s when I decided to give him a nickname.”
“Nickname?” Chet grunted when Caroline’s elbow connected with his side. “No, I wasn’t gonna do anything. I just like nicknames. You know, like Gage the Galloping Greyhound,” he said to his fiancée. Then turning back to Iris, he asked his question. “What was his nickname, Iris?”

The florist smiled, remembering the conversation she had had with her young passenger. “Well, I explained that Thornapple, which is also known as Jimson Weed, means ‘disguise’ in the language of flowers.”

Chet jumped, his bushy eyebrows lifting upwards as he remembered the conversation he and Johnny had shared in the locker room shortly after Caroline had started working at Bloomers. “So that’s how he knew what Jimson Weed meant,” the Irishman exclaimed. “When I asked him how he knew, he just said that he was a man of mystery.”

“He is a man of mystery, Chet,” Iris retorted with a chuckle. “Anyway, I told him that I wanted to give him a nickname to go along with flowers, like Iris and Lily. He agreed to be called Thorn, short for Thornapple.”

“And he’s sometimes a thorn in the side of those around him,” Hank added with a grin. “But he’s our brother, our friend… Go on, Iris. I apologize for interrupting.”

“No worries, Captain Stanley,” Iris commented, feeling more relaxed around Johnny’s friends, but growing more anxious about the rest of the story.

“Lily had never had many friends, so seeing her happy with someone her age was… It was wonderful. For a month, Lily, John, and I stayed with my mother-in-law. Fortunately, Kizzy lived outside of town, east of the river. It made life easier for us; John and I looked out of place with our lighter skin color. I really stood out with my bright red hair,” she giggled.

“We all ate together, worshipped together at Brown’s Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. I…,” she hung her head. “I would go into the white part of town to buy groceries, because the produce was fresher there than in the black stores. John enjoyed squirrel hunting and fishing with a few of Kizzy’s neighbor’s. It was a wonderful time, seeing the two cultures bonding together, teaching each other,” she said, thinking about the teenaged boys sharing with each other without regard for skin color. “There was a genuine hunger to learn the Indian culture from John, and for him to learn about the African heritage and southern culture of Kizzy and her nieces and nephews.”

Iris tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, staring once more into space as her mind returned to the month the three of them had spent at the Campbell home. “Kizzy only had one small spare room which Lily and I used. Johnny shared my brother-in-law’s room. He really admired Phillip; being ten years younger, he sort of looked up to him. Phillip often took John down to the river to fish and…,” she chuckled softly, “And he showed John where to find alligators. John got a pretty good picture of a big one that was sunning on the river bank. Sometimes at night, I’d hear them talking. Of course, with Phillip being twenty-six, and gainfully employed, he often worked odd hours. He also had a girlfriend, so some nights he didn’t even come home at all.”

“Lily got to spend a lot of time with her paternal relatives.” She chuckled softly. “And Kizzy taught her granddaughter how to make cornbread, lard biscuits, and cook grits.”

“I bet Johnny enjoyed all the good cooking,” Hank spoke up, seeing the smiles that crossed the faces of the others. Johnny’s reputation of being a bottomless pit was well known.

“Some good soul food is just what that skinny boy needs,” Ron grinned.

“I’m surprised Kizzy could afford to feed him,” Joanne laughed, imagining the appetite of a teenaged
John Gage.

“Well, he did bring in a lot of meat for us with his hunting and fishing, but no matter how much he ate, he didn’t gain weight. He just got taller.” She covered her mouth with her fingers, unable to hide her smile. “But you should’ve seen the look on his face when Kizzy told him it was ‘hog killin’ time.”

“Hog killing time?” Lexi asked, not sure she had heard correctly.

“One of the sows was becoming rather temperamental, so Kizzy decided it was time to, um, give her an attitude adjustment. That meant fresh ham, bacon and souse.”

“Is that pork?” Caroline asked, innocently.

“Well… Let’s just say that another word for it is… Hog’s head cheese.”

“Holy sh… um… shucks!” Chet grunted, glad he had managed to halt the curse. “You eat the HEAD?”

“There’s more to it than that, but yes, Chet. The meat from the head is used to make a kind of meat loaf that has the consistency of cheese. It’s really tasty fried. But I wish you could’ve seen the look on John’s face when he found out that he was going to have to pick the meat out of the boiled head of a pig.”

“Ah, man…” Chet ran his hand through his curly hair. “Did he do it?”

“Oh, yea… and he really enjoyed the souse, too.” Iris was enjoying her trip down memory lane, but a quick glance at the clock told her she needed to move forward with her story.

“Things were getting more and more serious all over the south. My brother-in-law, Phillip, had gotten involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had also been involved for several years in opposition to the Jim Crow laws, and even Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made plans to come to town to help black people register to vote, or at least to put pressure on the officials to stop preventing them from exercising their rights. Of course, the Klan was active, even though they performed most of their evil deeds under the cover of darkness… And ghostly white sheets.”

“Wait a minute,” Mike said, suddenly understanding. “You mean, the three of you were in Selma, Alabama, during the Civil Rights Movement?”

“They were there on Bloody Sunday,” Roy said softly, remembering the pictures he had seen in the photo album back at Johnny’s apartment. Some of them looked so familiar that he wondered if, perhaps, the pictures he and others had seen might actually have been taken by Johnny.

“Because John had cut his hair in a crew cut, he—” Iris’ explanation was quickly interrupted by Hank.

“Wait a minute,” the captain interrupted with a huge grin. “John Gage had a… Our Johnny had a buzz cut?”

“Ahh-haha!” Chet howled, shirking back when he realized that his outburst was inappropriate. “I’m sorry, but, ahh-ha, I just can’t imagine Gage with a flat top.”

“Can you imagine latrine duty next shift?” Hank asked, glaring at his junior linemen.
“Sorry, Cap.”

Iris continued with her story, as much to save the young Irishmen as to finish her tale. “Yes, and it was early Spring so he hadn’t been in the sun enough to produce a rich tan, so he was easily seen as white, able to get into places that Lily couldn’t.” Iris snickered a little. “Didn’t you ever wonder where Johnny picked up that accent he has sometimes?”

“Accent?” Marco asked, being more self-conscious of the heavy Spanish influence on his own pronunciation.

“Yes,” Iris giggled harder. “Haven’t you ever heard him drop his G’s? Like when he says the word something, it sounds more like somethin’. At times, he even uses the N sound in the place of a TH. You know, like instead of saying ‘in there,’ it sounds more like ‘in nair.’ It’s because he spent over a month in South Alabama when he was a teenager,” she explained, seeing several smiles appearing on the faces of the men present.

“You said you grew up there; why don’t you drop your G’s?” Mike asked, feeling a bit skeptical.

Iris gave him a knowing look. “Because I spent years trying to rid myself of everything that reminded me of that part of the country. It just seemed natural for John,” she explained.

“I assumed that he had family from Oklahoma,” Hank said with a grin.

“He does, but he definitely picked up on the Alabama dialect during his time there. Anyway,” Iris’ face suddenly turned dark. “On the morning of March 7, 1965, Johnny left Kizzy’s house just before dawn. It was a foggy morning and he wanted to take pictures of the Edmund Pettis Bridge with the fog drifting upwards from the surface of the river.”

Ron felt his skin crawl, knowing what he was about to hear.

“He didn’t know it at the time, but down along the river bank, a man named William Waite and a police chief from a nearby town were…” Iris used the tissues to dab at the corners of her eyes. “They had beaten a young black man. Voices carry farther on the water, and John was able to hear what they were saying. He was just a kid, but he became a witness to a horrible act. The fog was thinning out, and he… He saw these two men… Ha-hang the black man, leaving his lifeless body dangling from a tree on the southern bank of the Alabama River,” she cried, grateful that the room remained silent, and that Ron was there.

Ron waited for Iris to finish telling her story, but realized quickly that the task was impossible. He knew the rest of the details, so he stepped in.

“Ahem, folks, Johnny was too far away to identify the three individuals, but he had the forethought to use his zoom lens to take pictures. We don’t know for sure that the pictures are any good. He never developed them,” he said, reaching into his jacket pocket and withdrawing the bag of film to show the group. “But I’m sending this to the FBI to see if the Feds can develop it. He kept the film safe all these years.”

“The victim,” Iris spoke up having recovered her voice, and needing to let them know who the young victim was. “Was my brother-in-law, Phillip, and he was only twenty-six years old when he was murdered,” she croaked out, struggling to speak past the protest of her emotions.

“Ohmygod,” Joanne exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hands. What Roy had told her had been true, including witnessing a murder. She had been hoping that Johnny had just somehow managed to obtain pictures of the marchers as they tried to cross the bridge that Sunday morning.
Now she realized that the photos had been taken by Johnny himself, and that the young man who had always seemed like a little brother to her, had witnessed man’s inhumanity to his fellow man at a very young age.

Beverly was stunned, knowing that what she had been told would leave deep emotional scars on anyone, but especially a young person. She wondered how Johnny had managed to remain as strong and seemingly normal as he had through the years. Somehow, the remarkable young man had been able to compartmentalize the trauma, minimizing the effect on his personal and professional life. Or had he?

“Iris, I’m so sorry about your brother-in-law. It’s a senseless act and I hope those two men who did that got what they deserved,” Roy stated, wanting to comfort Iris, but not being sure what to say.

“That’s the irony, Roy. The Klan was made up of members of law enforcement, fire department, and even the legislature,” Iris explained.

“Whoa,” the senior medic commented. “Are you saying that those men who killed Phillip were public servants?”

“Yes, one man was the chief of police and the other was a man with a lot of political power. They saw Johnny walking along the road afterwards. He was rushing to try to get back to Kizzy’s house before they saw him. He was harassed and even threatened by them. They thought they were keeping him from going down to the river bank and finding Phillip’s body; they didn’t know that he had been a witness to their crime.”

“Jeezus,” Mike mumbled.

“He was deathly pale when he walked into Kizzy’s house that morning. He couldn’t even eat breakfast. He… He stayed on the front porch retching. He didn’t tell anyone what he had seen, not at that point. I think… I think maybe he was in shock, not really believing it himself.

Joanne silently swiped her tears, crying for what her friend had endured as a teenager. “Poor Johnny,” she whispered, feeling Roy’s comforting arm pulling her closer.

“He quietly dressed for church. None of us felt like talking, wondering how the march would go. This was what John’s journey had been about – documenting the protests with photographs. Kizzy fully expected to see Phillip at the worship service, so she wasn’t worried when he didn’t arrive before we all left. I don’t need to tell you what happened later that day. It was all over the news, and in the papers, and… And Kizzy and I kept looking for Phillip. We searched the crowds at Brown’s Chapel, but there were over six hundred people there. There was some confusion about when the march would begin. Dr. King was late arriving from Atlanta. Not wanting to hold up the march, he asked that the group go ahead without him. Together, Kizzy, Lily, and I walked with the others south on Sylvan Street, then west on Alabama Avenue until we got to Broad Street.” Her eyes were glazed over as the sounds of voices singing while they walked towards the looming steel structure rose louder and louder in her memory. “We turned south on Broad Street and headed straight for the Edmund Pettis Bridge. Johnny stood among the white people, looking paler than ever, snapping a few pictures as we walked along. He stopped at the bottom of the bridge like there was some sort of wall there, or something. He didn’t set a foot on that bridge; he just began taking pictures as the group walked past him. Later on, we found out why.”

Iris felt her arms tremble with fear, her brow dampen from the anxiety. In her memory, she heard the shouts, the whinny of the horses of the mounted posse, the smell of smoke and noxious gas… And
the screams. She shivered as she remembered clutching the arms of Lily and Kizzy as they retreated north on Broad Street, away from the melee.

“I couldn’t find Johnny at first, and I hoped that he had not gotten in the way of the dogs and the billy clubs. Somehow, we managed to get back to the church and into my car. I remember shoving Lily and Kizzy into the back of the car, yelling at them to get in the floorboard so they wouldn’t be seen. I drove around, searching for John for a while, finally finding him standing wide-eyed beside the Saint James Hotel. When he saw me, he ran to the car and jumped in. The only words he spoke were ‘Lily? Kizzy?’ I told him that they were in the back, hiding. Kizzy called out from the floorboard, asking John if he had seen Phillip. He merely shook his head, as he picked up his camera and continued taking pictures. Later on, he told me that seeing it from behind the lens of a camera made him think he was watching a movie. It kept it from seeming so real to him. I… I guess I never thought of it that way.”

“It seemed like it was hours later before we could get back to Kizzy’s house. We were hoping that Phillip would be there, but he wasn’t. It was after dark when a sheriff’s car turned onto Kizzy’s driveway. The Sheriff… He told us… about Phillip.” Iris bit her bottom lip, trying to stop the trembling. She had to get the rest of the story out. Johnny’s friends had to know the truth.

“All I remember was the anguished cries of Kizzy as she collapsed on the floor. Her worst fears had been realized. She was wailing and crying long into the night; she was inconsolable, but who could blame her? It was the following day when John finally pulled me and Lily aside. He looked so young, but his eyes had grown old in just a few short hours, we all had. The dark circles beneath them made his features look even gaunter than before. He told us what he had seen. Of course, he had no way of knowing that it was Phillip at the time, but now he knew, and he felt responsible. I remember how he seemed crushed by the guilt of not intervening. We sat Kizzy down and told her about what John had seen, and photographed. She was the one who talked him into not reporting it.”

“Why?” Mike asked. “They needed to pay for what they did.”

“Because Phillip was dead; he wasn’t coming back. Kizzy said that man’s judgment might not convict them, but that it was God’s judgment that really mattered. Even if charges had been filed against Waite, they wouldn’t have stuck. He would’ve gotten away with it, so why even try?” Iris shook her head, lowering her gaze. “John was scared, terrified. I still don’t understand why they let him go that day.”

“God’s protection was on him,” Marco stated, feeling his faith growing stronger by listening to the story.

“Yes… I suppose it was. Anyway,” Iris went on. “John knew he couldn’t go back to Montana. He was too afraid of Waite, afraid that the man would make good on his threats… He had threatened to not only harm John, but to hurt his family. So I offered for him to come back to Los Angeles with Lily and me. He wrote his parents, and they agreed, thinking that it was so he could go to college out here. So, I pretended to be his aunt when I registered him for high school the following autumn, and that’s all it took. He never told his parents the truth; that he was running to protect them. And he never admitted that he was running because he was ashamed of not doing something to prevent Phillip’s death.”

“He was just a kid,” Roy said in a faint whisper, not directed at anyone in particular. “Just a scared kid.”

Hank closed his eyes briefly, knowing what it was like for a man to blame himself for the death of
another person. He opened his eyes inhaling deeply before jumping back into the conversation with a question that everyone else was thinking.**

“Is that why he never goes home to visit them?” Roy questioned.

“Yes,” Iris said, her eyes looking sad. “I think he usually tells them he has to work, but… But I know that isn’t the real reason.”

“But why did he go to the Fire Academy instead of getting a degree in journalism?” Hank asked, knowing that the young medic was well suited for the fire service, but curious about his change in career path.

“He witnessed something back in Alabama that made him respect firemen,” Iris said, but was interrupted before she could finish.

“Humph, yea… We all saw what they did. They hosed down those innocent people,” Roy muttered sarcastically.

“Yes, Roy. They followed orders, but they didn’t like it. The next time that order was given, they stood up and flatly refused to carry out the order of their chief. Knowing that such actions would cost them their jobs, they said that they ‘put out fires, not people,’ and they laid down the hoses and basically walked off the job. That left an impression on John. After all he had witnessed, and being unable to do anything other than take pictures, he decided to do something with his life to actually help people who need assistance, not just photograph them,” Iris said, looking at Roy intensely. “He respected those firemen.”

“But Iris,” Roy began, pulling them back from 1965 to the present. “That was a decade ago. I mean, I’m not making light of the situation. It’s horrible, and I’m really sorry that it happened, but… Why is this all coming up now? And where’s Johnny and Lily?”

Iris and Ron glanced at each other before she spoke up. “When Lily was nineteen years old, she found out that I had lied to her about her grandparents being dead. A relative of mine had decided to come to LA to attend college at USC. She had been told about me and Lily by her mother, my cousin, and decided to find us.” Iris looked down at her lap, twisting the tissues in her hands. “She didn’t know that I had lied to Lily, so I don’t blame her for what happened. I mean, at least she cared enough to try to contact us, you know? But Lily was furious. She felt betrayed, and… And… Not long afterwards, she joined this… This cult, called Holistic Unity Gardens—“

A strangled sound came from Mike Stoker. “Ugh… Wait… Those are the folks who found me after my accident.”

“Yes, Lily joined them a few years ago. I had been searching for the group for a long time, but they tend to be elusive. When my former supplier went out of business, she sold her accounts to HUG. One day, they delivered some green plants to me, and… I nearly fainted when I saw the invoice. I knew I had found them.”

Joanne sat stunned, staring at Iris.

Iris did a double take when she saw Joanne staring at her so intently. She felt the need to address her former employee and answer her unspoken question. “Joanne, the day you came into the shop, and John was there, it was because I had called him to let him know that I had found the group that Lily had run away with.”

Joanne felt the corners of her mouth lift slightly. “Now I get it. You told me that he had been in there
to order flowers for his aunt,” she said with a slight chuckle. “I didn’t know he was talking about you.”

“I know, and I’ve always hated lying to people,” she grimaced realizing how that must sound. She had just confessed to lying to her own daughter, so why would they think she was anything other than a liar?

“I still don’t get it, Iris,” Marco spoke up. “Why did Johnny keep this a secret from all of us?”

“In his own way, he thought he was protecting you from William Waite, and…” Iris dabbed the tissue to her nose. “And he’s ashamed of himself.”

“For what?” Roy asked, forcing his voice to remain calm. “What’s he done to be embarrassed about?”

“Roy,” Iris began, knowing she had already betrayed Johnny’s trust, so she might as well tell these men everything. “John loves you, all of you, like brothers. He’s very proud of what he does for a living, but… He isn’t proud that he failed to stop Phillip’s murder. He was also afraid that he was endangering you and your families. He’s always known that if Waite found him… Then he’d find you all, too.”

Roy felt himself gulp as that though sank in, yet he knew that it was highly unlikely that William Waite would cross the country looking for Johnny, let alone cause harm to any of Johnny’s friends and their families.

“Iris, I’m really sorry about your daughter and the cult. I do hope she comes back home soon. I don’t mean to be insensitive, but where is Johnny now? Do you have any idea?” Roy asked, fearing the answer he might hear.

Stoically, Iris looked directly at Johnny’s partner and best friend. “I know exactly where he is. See, a few weeks ago, Kizzy wrote to me. She told me that the chief of police, who was partly responsible for Phillip’s murder, made a death bed confession about what happened that day, and he implicated Waite as the one who actually killed Phillip. William Waite was arrested. When Kizzy was contacted by the District Attorney about the break in the case, she told him about Johnny being a witness and about the pictures. When I told Johnny, he got really upset. He was trying to decide whether or not to testify. He knew that if he testified, then… Then he’d have to explain all of this to all of you, and possibly put you and your families in danger,” she said waving her arm at the group. “Then we got the news that Waite had a serious stroke and is basically incapacitated. His old Klan cronies don’t have the power, or the numbers they used to, but Johnny’s still afraid. He isn’t afraid for himself, though; he’s afraid for all of you. He’s terrified of William Waite harming you. So he decided to go to Tehachapi and spend some time with the cult to sort through all of this.”

She looked over at Mike, then began to talk again. “Mike, he told me about your accident. When Roy and Chet went with him up to the mountains to look for you, he caught a glimpse of Lily at the scene of the accident. He’s gone back up there to spend time with her and talk to her about the possibility of him testifying.”

“Is he still up there?” Hank asked, realizing now why his junior medic had requested time off.

“Yes, but… there’s more. He’s decided to… To join the cult,” she cried.

“No way!” Mike spoke up.
“He wouldn’t do that,” Marco added.

“They got to him. They brainwashed him and he…,” Iris hesitated, looking at Hank. “Captain Stanley, he’s written a resignation letter for you, and Roy… He wants you to have his Rover.”

Hank felt his heart sinking and his stomach churning. “No, I won’t accept a resignation letter from a third party. If John wants to resign, then he needs to come see me.”

Lexi had been quietly listening to the story, and watching Beverly’s reactions. She trusted the older woman’s knowledge of human behavior, and she could tell that Beverly wasn’t believing what she was hearing.

“No… No that’s not how it works,” Beverly spoke up.

“What do you mean?” Ron asked, passing his handkerchief to Iris to replace the dissolving mass of tissue in her hand.

“Brainwashing takes longer than, what, a week or two?” She looked around the room, seeing the affirmative nods.

“He told me… himself!” Iris said in a raised voice.

“Oh, I believe you, Iris. I’m just saying that there’s something else going on here. I can see why he would be especially susceptible to their tactics, after hearing all this, but… It just doesn’t make sense that he’s JOINED them. He wouldn’t be brainwashed this quickly. It takes time to do that.”

“We worked a medical call yesterday morning. The victim was Gretchen, a waitress from The Pourhouse,” Roy began, relaying the information. “She… She was unconscious from an apparent overdose… And she joined that group a couple of months ago. If they’re a religious group, then why would they be involved with drugs?”

“Because it’s a CULT, Roy,” Iris emphasized.

“Hey, you don’t think that Johnny’s been drugged, do you?” Chet asked.

“Anything’s possible,” Iris said. “My Lily never touched drugs, but… I… I don’t know now. She… She’s probably one of them after this long,” she cried, covering her face with her hands.

“Ohmygod!”

“Okay, I think it’s my turn to tell you all what I’ve learned about all this,” Ron said. “Iris doesn’t even know what I’m about to tell you.”

“You mean you aren’t just here to collect that film?” Roy questioned, pointing at the pocket where Ron had placed the evidence bag earlier.

“This, too,” the detective said, patting his chest. “But I’m also here because an old buddy of mine, Slim Summerlin, is the chief of police in Selma now. Times have changed back there. Oh, there’s still problems just like everywhere, and the Klan is still around, but it’s nowhere near as strong as it was back in ’65. Slim told me about Waite’s stroke, and how he needed to take a deposition from Johnny, preferably have him testify at the trial. But, if Johnny won’t testify, Slim wants to at least get this film. Here’s the thing, Johnny doesn’t even know about the stroke, so maybe-”

“Yes, he does,” Iris interrupted. “I told him about it yesterday when I told him about Chris’ surgery. And he still went back to that damn cult. They’ve got some kind of hold on him.”
Ron cleared his throat, knowing he had more news to tell them. “Ahem, well, I have a few friends who are with the FBI. They’ve been investigating HUG for a long time now, trying to get something on the leader, Hiram Gardner.”

“And?” Hank questioned, knowing there was more to the story.

“And they’ve gotten closer in the past few days than they’ve ever been. I have to tell you this, and I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but… This group is up to no good. It’s bad… And Johnny and Lily are in danger.”

“Aack!” Iris wailed, fearing the worst as she cried into her palms.

“Wait… They’ve agreed to try to help us get Johnny and Lily out, alright? We ARE gonna get them back, Iris. That’s the good news… But it’s gonna be rather, um, unorthodox.”

Roy looked around the room, seeing a mixture of curiosity, eagerness, and dogged determination on the faces of his crewmates. “We’re listening.”

E!
*Chet’s Cataclysm
** Hank’s Haunting

A/N: This story is in honor of the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery. Please remember that the setting was only ten years from these events and do not reflect the current attitudes of the majority of people who live there now. The events depicted, while historically accurate as far as the march is concerned, are entirely fictional regarding the death of Phillip Campbell. Any similarity to real people or events is completely coincidental.
Chapter 17

Roy looked around the room, seeing a mixture of curiosity, eagerness, and dogged determination on the faces of his crewmates. “We’re listening.”

Lieutenant Crockett coughed into his closed fist, unsure of how to tell the assembled group the details of the plan. “Ahua… Ahem… I, uh… Well, first… I need to find out from each of you… This has to be kept top secret. No one… and I do mean no one can find out. Agreed?”

Rebecca Stanley was the first to speak up. “Do the ladies need to leave the room?”

“No,” both Ron and Iris said, simultaneously. The two exchanged quick glances.

“I think Iris needs your support, Mrs. Stanley, and… This is going to take everyone here, working together, to pull it off.” Ron looked at Iris, encouraged by her grateful, albeit faint, smile.

Iris crossed her arms, hugging her abdomen as she waited for the plan to be revealed. “But… I don’t understand. You said that the FBI was involved, so can’t they just go in and get them out?”

“No, they can’t,” Ron said, his face growing solemn. “Lily and Johnny have done nothing wrong, which means they can’t be arrested… And to swoop in and remove them against their will is… well… kidnapping.”

“Oh,” Iris said, pondering the situation. “I guess I never thought about it that way. I suppose it would be bad for law enforcement officers to be involved in a kidnapping, huh?”

“Yes, it’s frowned upon when those charged with enforcing the law actually break it,” Ron said.

“Okay, you said you needed our agreement to keep this, uh, mission a secret. I’ll start,” Hank Stanley began. “I agree.”

“Me, too,” Rebecca added.

Crockett’s dark eyes followed the round of voices as everyone took a turn agreeing with his request. The final person to comment was the woman who had brought them all together.

“Agreed,” Iris said, her voice sounding a bit stronger. “Thank you all for this… I’ve… I’ve never felt so much…, um…”

“Support?” Joanne spoke up, crossing the room and sitting lightly on the edge of the chair Iris was occupying. She wrapped her arms around her former employer. “We’re a family, Iris. And now that we know about the relationship between you, Lily, and Johnny… Like Marco said – you’re a part of the 51 family, too.”

“And family members are there for each other,” Mike added, giving Lexi a brief nod.

“No matter what,” Marco chimed in, grasping Beverly’s hand.

“In good times and bad,” Chet spoke up, pulling Caroline in a little tighter.

“Forever,” Roy said, his blue eyes staring lovingly at his wife.
Looking around the room at his men, Hank had never felt closer to them than at this moment. “No matter how bad the run may be, we do our best to save life, property, and see that we all get home safely,” he said, feeling a lump forming in his throat. Somehow, he managed to push past it, his breath hitching with his final statement. “And we’re willing to risk our own lives to save that of a victim, or a brother.”

The room fell silent for a moment, until Ron spoke up once again. “Very well… Here’s what you’re going to have to do…”

“Wait, wait, wait… Aren’t you gonna help us?” Chet asked the detective, perplexed when Ron didn’t include himself in the plan.

“Yes… but the biggest part of this mission, you, fellas, are gonna have to handle without me. I can make all the arrangements, but at the end of the day… It’s gonna be in your hands. That’s why it has to be top secret, okay? Legally, I can’t even know about it.”

“Legally? You said that LEGALLY you can’t know about it… Is this something illegal?” Chet asked, lifting his eyebrows.

All eyes were on the lieutenant causing his concern for Johnny and Lily to increase; would the men from 51’s still agree to participate when they found out the plan?

“Well… Possibly, but… It may be the only chance they have. Now… are you in, or aren’t you?”

Crockett looked at the stunned faces, seeing each one pondering his question. “If any one of you decide not to do this, then I beg of you… Don’t participate, but please do NOT stand in the way, or tell anyone about what’s going down, okay?”

Beverly, seeking clarification, spoke up first. “So… We’re talking about deprogramming, not exit counseling, right?”

“What’s the difference?” The detective asked, unaware that the two approaches were very different.

“There’s a big difference. Exit counseling is when the cult member chooses to listen to the counselor who is trying to help them see through the false teachings. They can walk away at any time. Deprogramming is when… When the member has no choice in the matter.” Beverly saw Crockett grimace, his lips thinning as he pressed them together anxiously.

“Then yes, it’s deprogramming,” the detective commented.

“It’s kidnapping,” Roy said, saying the word they were all thinking of.

“Jeezus,” Mike said, rubbing his forehead. “No wonder you said the FBI couldn’t do it.”

“You can’t be seriously considering kidnapping them, can you?” Joanne asked, stunned by what she was hearing. It was bad enough to have her husband risk his life fighting fires, but… Kidnapping was something completely different, even if the proposed victims included a fellow firefighter and family friend.

“Figures… Send in the firemen to do the work that cops are too scared to do,” Chet remarked, sarcastically.

“We aren’t doing this as firemen; we’re doing it as Johnny’s friends,” Hank responded, hoping to
prevent his younger linemen from saying anything else that Lieutenant Crockett might find offensive.

“Exactly, but you will do it, right?” Crockett asked.

“I can’t answer for the rest of my men, Ron. We’ve got families, and… Someone could get hurt… Or worse,” the captain responded.

“Or lose our freedom, if we get caught,” Marco added, well aware that kidnapping would mean a certain prison sentence.

“That’s the part that my federal friends and I will be playing. You won’t get caught, but…”

His hesitation made all the other men look at him questioningly.

“But?” Roy asked.

“But if Johnny or Lily chooses, then they could file charges against you.”

“Ugh,” Chet groaned.

“Why can’t we just sit down with them and talk this out?” Beverly questioned, well aware of the dangers involved when a person was forcibly removed from their environment.

“They won’t listen,” Iris grumbled. “I couldn’t even reason with Johnny. He was more determined to go back to that God-forsaken place than to see Chris in the hospital!” She said in a raised voice.

“That’s the kind of hold they’ve got on the members. It’s… It’s unbelievable!”

“Yes… It is…,” Beverly huffed, trying to find a way to reach the group, to offer another solution besides forcing Johnny and Lily to leave the group. They needed to be convinced to leave, not be forced into the back of a van in the middle of the night. “It’s also horribly cruel,” the counselor said, looking around the room. “Look at it through their eyes. We’ve all just heard about what happened to Johnny and Lily when they were teenagers. They were a part of history, but they paid a heavy price, emotionally. Now you all want to subject them to another horror. Maybe Johnny will be angry, but probably not afraid once he recognizes you. However, what about Lily? We’re all strangers to her. Her uncle was abducted by strangers and murdered. She saw horrible atrocities committed against black people by white people in Selma. Most of us in this room are white. She’ll be completely terrified, and traumatized all over again! And… Think about Johnny’s heritage for a moment. Forcibly removing him from a place he wants to be sounds a little too familiar for American Indians, doesn’t it? Do you really want to do this to them? Is it fair to them? No,” she said, feeling the tears threatening to spill onto her cheeks as she continued her emotional argument. “I know you love them; I can see it in your eyes, hear it in your voices, but… This is wrong. Please don’t do it.”

Crockett looked at the down-turned faces in the room. No one was looking at him, and no one was talking. Now that he had heard Beverly’s comments, he didn’t want to be involved in this plan, either. “You, uh… You make some good points, Ms. Marsh. I’m not trying to put you on the spot, but how do you recommend handling it?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, pondering the situation. When she rescued women from a life of prostitution, she helped them escape from their bondage, but she never resorted to kidnapping one of them. She offered them a way out, and sometimes they went back to the life they knew. Sometimes they stayed out of the business for the rest of their life, but it was always their choice. She merely removed them from their toxic environment, allowing them to think for themselves without the duress of their pimps’ complete control.

Iris sniffled, feeling as if her one chance to rescue Lily and Johnny were slipping through her hands.
“Please… We can’t just leave them there. Help me get them back, please?” she begged, her voice fading into a whisper.

“Okay, I haven’t figured out all the details yet, but I’ve got an idea,” Beverly piped up.

“And if it doesn’t work?” Iris asked, dabbing a tissue beneath her eyes again.

“It will,” the counselor stated, confidently. “It has to.”

E!

At the Holistic Unity Gardens compound, Johnny had showered and was walking across the cold wooden floor to his bed. The day had been a busy one, his muscles aching as if he had been fighting a high-rise inferno. His back was beginning to bother him again, and he feared he might have strained the same muscles he had injured when he fell from the tree. His shoulders slumped as he thought about Lily. He had not been allowed to see her since the day of his initiation. If Father Hiram had been truthful with him then her isolation period would soon be over. He longed to see her again, to make sure that she was okay after her punishment.

James saw how his newest convert carried himself, as if the weight of the world was resting on his shoulders. “Are you okay, Brother John?”

“Yea… Jus’ a little achy ‘s all,” Johnny said, not looking at James as he slowly lowered himself to his bunk.

“Did you drink your tea? It will help with the pain,” James stated.

“Nah, I jus’ need a couple o’ aspirin, an’ I’ll be a’right,” Johnny drawled.

“We only use our faith in Father Hiram and natural remedies here, no aspirin,” the older man commented, passing a cup to his hurting friend. “Here, drink this. It will help you relax, so you can rest.”

“Is it willow bark?” Johnny asked, grimacing in pain as he looked up at James. The other man was silhouetted by the glow of the gas lantern behind him.

James raised an eyebrow. “You know your herbs.”

“Yea… I do.”

Johnny had spent the day watering the plants inside a couple of the greenhouses in addition to mending a fence for the livestock. He recognized a few of the herbs growing there, and his suspicions were growing, especially about Gretchen and her sudden change of heart. For the time being, he needed to remain silent on the subject, but he was planning on keeping his eyes open.

The paramedic continued his explanation. “My maternal family has been using them for centuries,” he said, sipping on the lukewarm beverage. He forced himself to swallow most of the liquid, looking back at James. “And this ain’t no willow bark tea.”

“No, it is not, but it will help you rest and relieve your pain,” James said accepting the nearly empty
cup back from Johnny, and setting it on the table near his bunk. “Lily is one of our best massage therapists, but until her shunning is over, perhaps one of the others can help you. They’ve been trained in therapeutic massage by Father Hiram, the great healer.”

Johnny felt the bile rising in the back of his throat at the thought of the leader of the family being a healer. He was growing concerned that the man was more of a witch doctor than a healer, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He needed to stay here, at least for a while.

“Nope… I’ll be a’right,” Johnny said, gingerly laying back on his bunk and draping his arm over his face. “I’ll wait for Lily.”

“As you wish,” James acknowledged with a nod of his head. “As always, the choice is completely yours. Sleep well, Brother John.”

A weak snort was the only response he received from Johnny.

Moments later, Johnny’s pain had faded away and he drifted into a sound sleep. James, who had been watching the younger man with concern, waited for the others to fall asleep as well. Their newest convert seemed to be growing bolder since his commitment ceremony. James began to worry that Johnny’s dedication to the family might not be as strong as he had originally thought. He knew that he had pressured Johnny harder than he had Ian. His own need to move up in the family had been so critical that he began to wonder if he had placed too much pressure on Johnny. Was it too much too soon? If so, Johnny may decide to leave, and if he did, would he take Lily with him? Would that damage James’ position in the family? He couldn’t let that happen, not yet. Not until he knew more of Father Hiram’s secrets.

Pushing those thoughts aside, James waited until most everyone in the dorm was asleep before he rose from his bunk. Only Ian remained awake, and the two exchanged knowing glances before James quietly exited the men’s dorm to return to the sanctuary. At midnight, his ascension within the ranks of the family would be complete; he would be allowed into the inner circle of Father Hiram, and he couldn’t wait to find out what secrets were lurking there.

E!

Mike graciously offered to pick up Mrs. Lopez and Antonio from the DeSoto residence and take them home, since he would be driving Lexi back, anyway. His new truck had a large bench seat which would easily accommodate the three adults and one small child. Mike had given Marco a knowing wink as they departed from Iris’ home. He was deliberately giving the two lovebirds some time alone. Truthfully, Mike was hoping to steal a few moments with Lexi, too.

It was nearly 9:00 pm when Marco and Beverly left Iris’ house, heading back to Beverly’s apartment.

The drive was a long one; traffic was heavy on the 405 making the trip twice as long as normal. It did give the two of them a chance to talk about the upcoming rescue.

“Bev,” Marco began, wanting to know what she was thinking. “Do you really think that Johnny has joined them WITHOUT being brainwashed? I just can’t believe he would do something like this without some kind of pressure.”

“Oh, I believe there’s pressure, but I don’t think the pressure is coming from the members of the cult, at least not from all of them.”
Marco glanced over at the woman sitting beside him, seeing the soft curves of her face in the dimly lit car. She had grown quiet as the night had progressed. Something was on her mind, and he wanted to know what had silenced her. He reached over, grasping her hand in his own, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of her soft hand.

“Penny for your thoughts?” He questioned, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

Beverly curled her hair behind her ear, staring down in her lap. She struggled to tell him what she thought, unsure if she was right or wrong.

“Well… Brainwashing happens over time. It occurs when a person is completely dependent on another person for everything – even living or dying. All of their needs have to be met by the person doing the brainwashing. Remember a couple of years ago, in Stockholm? Those hostages began to actually DEFEND the men who were robbing the bank and holding them against their will. Nobody understood it, but it made sense to me. See, I’ve… I’ve been brainwashed before, Marco. For years, my pimp had total control over me, including my mind. He threatened me, and he carried out those threats, and yet, he kept me safe. It’s a weird thing that happens, but… Hell, I don’t know how to explain it,” she said, sounding defeated.

Marco was taken aback by her cursing, a sure sign that she was frustrated. “It’s like that old saying, the monster you know is better than the monster you don’t know?”

“Kind of, but not exactly. It creates this really creepy internal paradox. Your head tells you the relationship is detrimental, but your heart tells you that you have to stay in it to survive.”

Marco was trying to follow the conversation, but he was struggling to do so. If a relationship was detrimental, then what could make a person remain in it? “I guess that’s why battered women stay with their abuser.”

“Yes, it is,” Beverly continued. “Being in a difficult situation, stressed out, and frightened, makes a person vulnerable. Then slowly someone comes in and offers you comfort, shelter, food, friendship, and you start to give back to them… Something… It may be your time, your money, or… Or your body. You basically invest in this new person or cause, and you become devoted to it. So much so that you may even give your life for the person or group.”

“Are you saying that Johnny would lay down his life for this cult he met just a few weeks ago? From what Iris said, he’s only been spending time with them for a little more than a week!”

Beverly looked over at Marco’s profile, watching as his jaw clenched while he drove.

“No, Marco. No, it just doesn’t happen that quickly.”

The lineman checked his rearview mirror before switching lanes to take the next exit. When he had come to a stop at the traffic light, he turned to Beverly. “Then why? Why has he gone off and joined this cult? Is he so afraid of this Waite character that he’s running away from everything he knows and loves?”

“I don’t think he’s running AWAY from something as much as he’s running TO something… Or someone. I think there’s someone in the cult that Johnny cares for very deeply…” She hesitated, squeezing his hand once more. “Someone who means more to him than his own life. Marco, I really think he went there because of Lily.”

“You think he’d give up his career and his friends, and join this cult, all for love?” He asked,
accelerating when the light turned green. “Why not just talk her into leaving it? If she loves him, then wouldn’t she join him and make a life here?”

Beverly rubbed her fingers across her forehead. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong, but… Nothing else makes sense to me. Besides, if she’s been in the cult for several years, then she’s been completely brainwashed.”

“So Johnny had no choice but to join, too. It was either the cult WITH Lily, or us WITHOUT her, right?”

“Maybe so. I’ve heard that love is the most powerful emotion in the world,” she said, just as Marco parked his car at her apartment. “Perhaps it’s strong enough to motivate him to give up everything in order to be with her.”

“Well, I just hope your plan works, because I don’t like the alternative.” He opened his car door. “I’ll walk you to your door,” he said, getting out and walking to her side to open her door. He had heard what she said about love… And he heard how she did not include herself when speaking of the emotion. Had she never experienced love so strong that she would give her life for it? Maybe it was time he told her how he felt, even if she didn’t feel the same way.

He walked with her up to the front door, his hand resting lightly on her lower back. When Beverly removed her keys from her purse, she inadvertently dropped them on her door mat.

“Oh, darn it... I’m a klutz,” she groaned, bending down to retrieve them. Marco snickered, reaching down to pick up the keys for her when a sharp thud slammed into his forehead. “Ugh!”

“Umph!” She grunted.

Both of them stumbled backwards, Marco pressing his palm to his forehead while Beverly covered her chin with her hand.

“Oh no! Are you okay?” Marco asked, having reached for the keys just as Beverly’s face collided with his head.

“Rattled my teeth a little, but I’m a tough gal.”

“I’m so sorry,” he apologized, slipping the key into the lock then ushering her into her own apartment. “C’mon and have a seat. Let me take a look at it,” the fireman said, assisting her toward the sofa.

“I’m fine, really,” she said, brushing him off. “I’m not that fragile.”

“I know,” he said, closing the door, grateful that Beverly had left a lamp on beside her sofa. “Please sit down and let me take a look, okay?”

Beverly smiled as she walked over to her sofa. She wasn’t accustomed to the attention she was receiving. “Trust me, Marco. I’ve been hit a lot harder than that… And that was on a good day,” she said, offering him a nervous smile.

Marco gulped at the thought of Beverly being assaulted regularly when she was working the streets. He was still amazed that she had escaped that life and was now leading a normal healthy life, as far
as he could tell.

“You never have to worry about that again, sweetheart,” he said softly, using his fingertips to tilt her head into the light, wanting to get a better look at her injury. “I’ll never ever hurt you like that, not intentionally,” he whispered, running his thumb across her soft lips.

Beverly felt her heart slamming around inside her chest. His nearness and gentle touch left her both wanting more, and yet, anxious. This type of intimate contact was still foreign to her, but as their relationship was deepening, she knew it was inevitable. Was she ready for more?

“Is my chin alright?” She whispered, feeling the warmth of his breath brushing across her lips.

“Oh yes… fine… but I… I need to check out your lips,” he said, leaning in for a quick kiss. “Mmm.”

“Mmm, is right,” Beverly said, feeling her pulse quicken. She felt her stomach flutter, knowing that it was time to take a chance. This time she took the lead, reaching up to caress his face as she leaned in for another kiss.

The kiss deepened, mouths parted and tongues began to dance. Marco was exhilarated that she seemed to want this as much as he did. When the kiss finally broke, he continued trailing kisses along her jaw towards her earlobe where he slowed down, breathing into her ear. “Baby, I… I love you.”

Beverly recoiled from him, needing to look into his face to confirm what she thought she had heard. “What?”

Marco wet his lips, needing to tell her exactly how he felt, even if she rejected him. “I said… I love you. I don’t expect you to say it back, but… I just needed you to know. Um,” he hesitated, suddenly feeling more nervous than before. “Do… Do you think that you might be able to love me, one day?”

Beverly’s green eyes began to well up with tears. “I think… I already do.”

They kissed again, this time with even more vigor. Marco began trailing kisses along her neck, gently pulling her collar away to allow him better access. Beverly leaned her head back, elongating her neck, unable to stop the guttural moan that developed deep in her throat. His ministrations were awakening desires she had never known, and she didn’t want him to stop. “Oh, Marco,” she whispered, her voice sounding strained as she ran her fingers through his hair. Her respiration rate increased as his kisses continued trailing lower. Feeling bolder, she ran her hand down his chest, untucking his shirt and whisking her fingers along his back. Her own sexual desires were stronger than her fear of intimacy. “Marco, I…” Her words were cut off by his tongue probing her mouth. “Mmm,” she groaned, as his left hand squeezed her shoulder.

Marco found himself as breathless as Beverly. “Are you… Okay?” He asked, knowing that if she wanted him to stop then he would, but he desperately wanted more.

“Yesss,” she hissed, closing her eyes as he planted light kisses on her face, his hands continuing to touch her in increasingly intimate ways. “But, I… Tell me what you… You want me to… to do for you.”

Marco pulled back, cupping her face with both of his hands and staring into her face. “Please look at me, baby.” When she complied, he continued. “I want US to make love, when you’re ready. I want to bring YOU pleasure, not just you giving it to me. I want US to give ourselves to each other. Do you understand?”
Beverly merely nodded, having never received this kind of attention. “Yes, but I don’t... I’m not sure... how to... make love,” she whispered, her tears spilling onto his hands. “But I want... to learn... I want to know what it’s like to truly make love.”

They kissed again, this time with more passion, as Marco used his left hand to slowly unbutton her blouse. Following his lead, she began returning the favor, enjoying the feel of his hairy muscular chest as she opened up his shirt, running her fingers through his chest hair.

Marco felt his body responding rapidly to what was happening. Carefully, and very slowly, he opened her blouse, gently pushing the material off of her shoulders, exposing her bare skin. He ran his fingers up and down her arms as he lightly kissed the exposed skin, feeling her shiver beneath his touch. His fingers curled beneath her chin, lifting her face up to his again. “Still okay?”

“Yes, are you?”

“Never better,” he said, kissing her lightly again.

“Should we... take this to... my bedroom?”

Marco gulped. “Only if you’re sure,” he said, hoping she wasn’t going to back out now. He needed to make love to her, needed to find his own release from the pressure building inside him.

“I’m sure, I promise... I got, um, some c-condoms. I have to make sure... sure the ladies at the shelter have protection, if they choose to go back out on the streets again.”

Marco exhaled loudly, feeling uncomfortable still sitting on the sofa. “I want you so badly, Bev, but don’t do anything you aren’t ready for. I can wait. You’re worth it.”

“I don’t want to wait. I... I love you, Marco. I’m sure of it. And I... I want to learn how-“

“Sshhh,” he said, pressing his index finger to her lips. “We’ll learn together. We’ll have to be honest with each other, okay? You tell me what feels good and what doesn’t, and I’ll do the same. I want to please you, Beverly, and I know you want to please me, too. Communication is the key, so please promise me that you’ll be honest with me.”

“I will,” she agreed, feeling nervous for what she was about to do. Years ago, she had decided that she would likely never have sex again. It had been over five years since she had gotten out of the business, and she hadn’t had sexual relations with anyone during that time. Now she was about to have sex with a man she loved, truly loved, a gentle man who was putting her needs before his own. Never had she encountered the feelings she was feeling now. And she knew she wanted more.

“Bedroom?”

“Yes,” he said, standing up and offering her his hand. When he had helped her to her feet, he swooped her into a cradle carry before walking into her bedroom. Carefully, he lowered her to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He continued to hover over her, reaching behind her to remove her bra. He pulled the straps off her shoulders, allowing his fingers to lightly graze the heaving mounds as he removed the garment.

With trembling hands, Beverly reached for his belt buckle, her eyes staring intently at his handsome face. She needed to be reminded that this was Marco, her Marco, and not a stranger who was paying her for her services. When the belt was removed, she unsnapped his jeans, then lowered his zipper. She saw him slowly close his eyes as she lowered his pants and boxers down to his knees. Using her fingernails, she lightly scrapped them along his hips, feeling him shiver in anticipation. He was enjoying what she was doing, and that thought warmed her heart. She felt his knees begin to buckle,
and he took a seat beside her on the bed.

Marco was enjoying the feelings of ecstasy. He quickly removed the clothing that was pooling around his knees, then slipped out of the shirt that hung open on his muscular frame. Carefully, he helped Beverly shift her position so that her head was on the pillows of her bed. She lay before him, semi-nude, wearing only her jeans. He didn’t want to go any further, at the moment, preferring to give her plenty of time to stop him if she changed her mind.

Again their lips met for a passionate kiss. When they parted, he looked down at her, noting her red swollen lips and hooded eyes. She wasn’t stopping him, and he could tell that she wanted this as much as he did. He lavished her with kisses along her jaw, her neck, and then her collarbone. His calloused hands roamed across her ample chest, caressing her breasts. He was pleased when he felt the skin pebble around the rosy erect nubs. Encouraged by the way she ran her fingers through his hair, he lowered his mouth, suckling at her right breast. He felt her arch her back, groaning with pleasure as he toyed with the sensitive nipple. He planted light kisses between the heaving mounds then gave the other breast the same attention while his hands moved southward.

Beverly couldn’t believe the sensations coursing through her body. No one had ever given her this kind of attention, and she truly did not know that such feelings were real. But they were real, and now she knew that, because she was feeling them while Marco continued the foreplay. Her fear of intimacy began to wane, pushed aside by the arousal his ministrations were creating. Her breaths were coming in short gasps as he made his way past her breasts, feathering kisses along her abdomen. His hands roamed between her thighs, causing her womanhood to tingle with desire. She couldn’t stop the involuntary bucking of her hips as he rubbed her with increasing pressure.

Sensing that she was ready, and realizing that she wasn’t going to change her mind, he slipped his fingers into the waistband of her jeans, unbuttoning them and lowering the zipper. He slipped his fingers between the materials, feeling the dampness of her panties and knowing that she was enjoying what they were doing. He continued to pepper her midsection with kisses, relishing the writhing and moaning he was creating in the woman he loved with his entire being. His heart was pounding out a rhythm as he dipped his fingers into her lacy panties, running them past the wiry curls and slipping them into the slick heat of her sex.

Beverly had never felt so sexually charged in her life. Her nerves were on edge all over her body, each touch sending a jolt of pleasure through her system. When he touched her, gently entering her with his finger, she arched her back, crying out with feelings of pleasure. “Ohhh, ohmygod,” she panted, bucking her hips as she rode his hand, the pleasure increasing.

Marco continued pumping into her moistness, trailing kisses back up her body to her swollen lips. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, feeling his own desire growing to a heated frenzy. Breaking off the kiss, he pulled back and stared at her, seeing her face contorted in ecstasy.

“Baby,” he panted. “I… I want… I need to be inside of you.”

“I need you,” Beverly said, sucking in her ragged breath. “I need to feel you.” She began to wiggle out of her pants, allowing Marco to assist her in disrobing.

“Condoms?”

She licked her lips, needing to moisten them from her heavy mouth breathing. “Top drawer, chest of drawers,” she stated.
When Marco extricated himself from her arms, he walked over to the place she had indicated, opening it up and finding a couple of boxes of prophylactics. He opened one of the boxes, removing a foil wrapper, then turned around to see her watching him with hooded eyes.

When Marco had left her on the bed, she had felt the coolness of his absence and immediately wanted him back, needed to feel the warmth of his touch. She watched him, seeing his erection springing from his center as he found what he was searching for and returned to her side.

Marco sat on the edge of the bed, rolling the condom on his engorged length, shocked when he felt her arm snake along his ribs and stroke him lightly with her fingers. “You’re driving me crazy, baby,” he groaned. When he turned around, he saw the raw desire etched on her face. This was it. They were going to unite their bodies in the dance of the ages.

Beverly watched him, saw the muscles flexing in his back as he turned around to her once more. His gaze ran the length of her naked body, drinking in her beauty. She saw the hesitant look on his face. He was waiting for her to consent to this again, wanting to make sure she still wanted him as much as he wanted her.

“Marco?” She whispered, her voice rising in question. “Will you make love to me, please?” She had just done the most difficult thing she had ever done. She had made her need known to the man she loved. She had allowed herself to become vulnerable, both physically and emotionally, risking rejection. She had lowered the wall she had built up over the years. For so long, she had needed things from others – food, shelter, love – and had felt the sting of denial of even the basic necessities of life. She had learned, long ago, that the pain of doing without something was far better than making her needs known and still not getting that which she so desperately needed. Now, here she was, lying naked before him, hiding nothing from him, and asking him to give her what she most desired: his love – mind, body, and soul.

Immediately, Marco responded to her request by returning his attention to her. Kisses and caresses soon led him to gently part her knees as he positioned himself at her entrance. Propping himself on his elbow so as not to hurt her with his weight, he cupped her face with one hand, using his other to guide his length into its destination. In one slow smooth move, he entered her womanhood as his lips locked with hers. Once he was buried to the hilt, he remained still, probing her mouth with his tongue as he allowed her body to adjust to his invasion.

Beverly felt him filling her, stretching her in a way she had not felt in a long time. She appreciated his stillness for a few moments as their kiss deepened. She ran her fingers across his backside, squeezing his cheeks as she shifted her hips upwards. Immediately, he responded by slowly withdrawing then pushing forward to enter her again and again. His tongue darting in and out of her mouth as his hips lunged forward, thrusting and withdrawing, sending her closer and closer to the edge. She felt her orgasm beginning, and she wrapped her legs around him, pulling him back into her each time he withdrew. The tingling that had begun in her pelvic area continued to grow stronger and stronger. She was losing herself in the frenzy of his thrusts, his grunts growing more desperate as the slick sound of skin slapping against skin filled her bedroom.

Marco felt his impending orgasm and fought hard to prevent it. This was for her; her pleasure was far more important to him than his own. “Ungh… oh god, Bev. You… feel… so good,” he panted in tempo with his thrusts. He nuzzled her neck, breathing into her ear as he whispered his love to her. That’s when it happened; his breathy whisper was the catalyst that sent her over the edge.

“Arrgh! Ohhh,” she moaned, her brain incapable of forming words as she exploded.
Marco felt the first small quakes of her body, then felt the spasms of her womanhood clamping and releasing him periodically. Her breath hitched as she rode out wave after wave of pleasure. Marco quickened his pace, needing to find his release while she was continuing to shudder from her climax.

“Ba-baby, please… ho-hold m-me, please…” He begged with each thrust, needing to be enveloped in her loving arms when he reached his goal.

Beverly wrapped her arms around his torso, stretching her legs yet keeping them entwined with his. She needed to cover as much of his body with her own as she could. He needed her, had let her know what he wanted, and she wanted nothing more than to comply with his request and meet his need. Using her hands to rub his back, she leaned upwards enough to nuzzle his neck, licking and sucking along the whiskered skin along his jawline. As she neared his ear, she felt his pace quicken, the head of his shaft swell inside of her, and she begged him in a desperate whisper.

“Come… for me, Marco. I’ve got you… give me… all your… love,” she gasped, gripping him tightly, holding him as he stiffened, groaning loudly as his body responded to the strongest orgasm of his life. “Ohh, Gah… Ungh…” Then with one final thrust of his hips, he emptied himself into her.

“YESSS!!!”

At the DeSoto residence, Joanne pulled back the covers on the queen size bed she shared with Roy. Slipping her legs beneath the sheets, she turned off the lamp, then rolled onto her side, curling into her husband’s body.

“Is he asleep?” Roy asked, shifting his left arm to pull her closer to him.

“Yes, he seems to be doing well. No fever,” she said, glad that Christopher was doing well.

Roy resisted the urge to say ‘I told you so’ to his wife. She was a loving mother, even though she worried a little too much. He kissed her lightly on top of her head. “Mrs. Lopez knows how to take care of little boys… So tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I think he’s going to be fine, just like Dr. Brackett said.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Roy chided. “I’m talking about Johnny and Lily.”

Joanne laid her hand softly on Roy’s chest, feeling the wiry curls beneath his thin cotton undershirt. “I think it’s a risky plan, but… I dislike Crockett’s plan even more.”

“He’d do it for any one of us,” Roy piped up.

Joanne patted him lightly, smiling in the darkness. “That’s exactly what I was going to say, Roy. I just don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“That’s what’s bothering me, Jo. I mean, I know the fellas and I can handle Johnny and Lily, but, we don’t know how many others may be there. I just don’t know,” he said, worrying his thinning hair with his hand. “And all those things Beverly said about causing them more mental harm… I don’t think I can do it.”

“Beverly’s done this kind of thing before. Maybe we just have to trust her. Besides, if the FBI and Ron are involved, then it’s got to work, right?”
“I don’t know, Jo. I want it to work, but—”

Feeling as though her husband was about to jump into a rant worthy of his partner, Joanne decided to give him a verbal jolt. “Then just tell everyone that you don’t want to do it,” she said, rolling away from him.

“What? Jo, how can you say that? Johnny’s part of our family. He’s my partner, my best friend. I can’t just turn my back on him,” he groused in a loud whisper.

Joanne rolled onto her back, propping herself on her elbows. “Then you need to trust Beverly and Crockett. You trust the fellas at work every shift. Don’t you trust counselors and cops, too?”

“I guess,” he grunted, still concerned about the mission.

“Roy DeSoto! Didn’t you learn from the things Iris told us tonight? Discrimination is wrong – and you don’t think that counselors and cops are as good as firemen, do you? That’s… That’s… Professional discrimination,” she countered, frustrated by his attitude.

The two lay in bed, back to back, each one trying to hide the snickering that was developing as they thought about her comment. Finally, with his shoulders shaking, Roy snorted into his pillow.

“Are you laughing at me?” Joanne asked, elbowing him lightly.

“Nu-uh,” he lied, still trying to hide his giggling.

“You are too; guess it was kind of a stupid sta-statement,” she said, losing her attempt to control her own laughter.

“Sounded like some of Johnny’s logic,” he added, settling beneath the sheets. “But you made a good point, sweetheart. I do need to trust others to do their jobs, and just… Just focus on doing what we all agreed to do tonight.”

She reached over swatting his backside, playfully. “That’s right. And Beverly and Lexi will do theirs. Crockett and the FBI will do what they’re supposed to do. That leaves Rebecca, Iris, Caroline, and me to do the rest.”

Roy scooted his body over, touching Joanne’s back with his own. “It’s got to work, Jo. It’s just got to work. I… I can’t lose him over this. I just can’t. Our last conversation was… It was horrible. I’ve got to have the chance to talk to him… Heart to heart.”

Joanne rolled over, wrapping her arms around his larger frame. “You will, baby. I know you will. And with all of us fighting for him… He’s going to come back to us… And Lily will return to Iris, too.”

E!

Hank Stanley awoke the next morning to the smell of coffee and bacon. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the aroma wafting through the bedroom, grateful for his wife and family. He lay still, snuggled beneath the blankets as he thought about the meeting the previous night. He scrubbed his stubbly face as he considered the life his junior paramedic had lived. He had had no idea about the horrors and the sorrows Johnny had experienced during his time in Selma. Hank thought about how Johnny had always put his heart and soul into each rescue. Was that a reflection of his past, his inability to save Phillip Campbell, or stop the attacks he witnessed on Bloody Sunday?
He threw the covers off his legs, stretching as he stood up. He pulled on his robe and padded down the stairs towards the kitchen. He stood for a moment, watching his wife finish preparing his breakfast. He walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist, nuzzling her neck.

“Morning, sweetheart,” he crooned into her ear.

“Good morning to you, too,” Rebecca remarked, closing the refrigerator door and setting the orange juice on the counter. She spun around into his arms. “How’d you sleep?”

“Not so good,” he groaned, kissing the top of her head before stepping back away from her, allowing her to finish her task.

“Worried about John?”

Hank sighed, pouring two cups of coffee. “Yea… And about this so-called rescue.”

Rebecca prepared two plates with eggs and bacon, then poured two glasses of juice, pushing them across the counter. The two of them took seats on the barstools.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, Becca. If we don’t do this, then we lose John. If we do it, then we may still lose John, but our jobs, too. Do we risk the entire crew to save one?”

“If one of your men was trapped inside a burning building, and your first attempt to rescue failed, would you send in another rescue team to try a different approach?”

Hank grinned, his face a mixture of pride and admiration. “I doubt I’d have the chance to; they’d probably go in without my order,” he commented, knowing that they wouldn’t actually do it, just that they would be ready when he gave the order. “But this is different. This isn’t a call we’ve been dispatched on.”

“Sure it is,” she said, biting a piece of bacon. “Maybe LA didn’t dispatch you, but you’ve been dispatched. Now, the question is… Will you respond to the call?”

Hank didn’t answer for several long moments. “I need to talk to him, Becca. I need to tell John that I know what it’s like to watch a man die, and wonder what you could’ve done to stop it.”

“Hank,” she warned, worried for her husband’s mental health. “Don’t go back there; you know you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know. I’ve come to terms with Kerrigan’s death, but it sounds like John may not have come to terms with what he witnessed.”

“Well, you haven’t asked me for it, but I’m going to give you my opinion anyway. I think John needs to be encouraged to go back to Selma and testify against William Waite. It’s the only way to find resolution.”

Hank stared at the woman he loved. “I agree, but he can’t do that unless he leaves the cult.”

Rebecca raised one eyebrow in his direction. “And he probably won’t leave the cult without a little help from his friends.”

Hank wrapped his left arm around Rebecca, pulling her into a sideways hug. “You are one smart
Chet tilted his wrist to check the time before he knocked on Caroline’s door. It was half past nine, and a squeal emanating from inside the apartment told him that his arrival wasn’t too early. He heard the locking mechanisms disengage, then braced himself for the bundle of energy that usually launched herself into his arms when the door was opened.

“Mizzer Phet!” Corrie called out, running up to his knees and jumping into his outstretched arms.

“Hey there, ladybug. Did you sleep well?” He asked, leaning sideways to give Caroline a peck on the cheek as he walked in carrying his favorite toddler.

“Uh-huh,” the child responded, nodding her head in an exaggerated manner.

Chet looked over at Caroline, seeing the hint of dark circles underneath her eyes. “I take it you didn’t?”

“Not really,” she said in a hushed tone, closing the exterior door. “You don’t look like you slept much either.”

Without responding to her comment, he began to get Corrie settled in front of the television set again. “I see you’re watchin’ Captain Kangaroo,” the lineman said to Corrie, easing the little girl down onto the blanket on the living room floor. Seeing that she was settled and engrossed in the tale of Mr. Greenjeans, he looked over at his beloved. “I didn’t. Couldn’t stop thinkin’ about this whole Johnny and Lily thing.”

Jerking her head towards the kitchen, Caroline turned away from Chet. “Let’s get some coffee.”

Chet, having become quite perceptive, understood that Caroline didn’t want her daughter to overhear their conversation. He followed her into the small kitchen where she began to pour two cups of coffee.

“Are you having second thoughts?” She asked, passing a mug to Chet.

“About the rescue? No… About myself… Yea,” he stared down at the floor for a moment, blowing a cooling breath across the steaming liquid.

“What do you mean?”

Chet took a tentative sip. “I’m wonderin’ if… Maybe I’m… prejudiced.”

“Oh, Chet, come on. You don’t judge people based on their skin color,” Caroline responded, siding up to him, circling her hand into the crook of his arm.

“But I say things, Caroline,” he began, his voice unwavering. “Stupid things that… That I think are just jokes, but other people… Well, if I was on the receiving end, I might not think they were quite so funny.”

Caroline took a sip of her coffee, staring into the blue eyes she loved so much. “Is this about the peace pipe, and burying the hatchet… All that stuff that happened on that shift a couple of years ago?”
Chet ran his hand through his curly hair. “Yea… but it’s more than that. I mean, why did I refer to that doctor who helped me in Niccoli’s as a black doctor?”

“Um, because his has ebony skin?” Caroline responded, her voice rising into a question.

“But it shouldn’t have mattered, baby. I should’ve just referred to him as a doctor. I thought I was trying to set the scene, but… I’m a racist, aren’t I?”

“No… We all see the world through our own eyes. Whether those eyes are blue or green, black or white, blind or seeing, wheelchair-bound or walking, we all see our world through the eyes we’ve been given. Some people like… Well, like Johnny and Lily… They get the chance to see the world through two sets of eyes. Maybe it just helps them see things more clearly. It doesn’t mean that you’re a racist. It does mean that you have to recognize that you have limitations.”

“And a big mouth,” he responded, setting down the coffee and pulling her into a hug. “From now own, I’m going to try to see things through the eyes of others… Especially before I make a joke about something.”

Caroline set her mug down beside his, resting her head against his chest while her arms wrapped around his torso. “Does this mean that you’re going to apologize to Johnny for what happened back then?”

“Yes… I need to ask him to forgive me and… and see if he’s willing to be one of my groomsmen… All without kidnapping him,” he snickered, kissing her forehead.

E!

Mike had been jogging for half an hour, his mind returning to the weeks he had spent trying to rescue Lexi. Would saving Johnny and Lily be similar? He pondered the difference; the way he had slowly gained Lexi’s trust versus the suddenness with which Lily was about to be removed from her surroundings. He began to have an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Would their plan work?

He stood jogging in place as he waited for the traffic light to change, giving him the right of way to cross the busy intersection. How long would it take Johnny to return to his old personality? Would he be willing to go back to Selma to set the record straight? He hoped so. And he vowed that if Johnny wanted him to, then Mike was willing to go back there with him.

The light changed and Mike looked both ways before jogging through the cross-walk. In the distance, he heard the sound of a wailing siren. That sound sent his mind reeling back to the night of Lexi’s rescue. She had been very close to death by the time he had barged into her burning apartment and retrieved her limp body. Had he not been on the scene at the time of the fire, then she surely would have died within minutes. Her death would have appeared to be an accident, and no one would have paid for the crime they had committed against her. Antonio wouldn’t have his mother; Maria wouldn’t have her daughter; Marco wouldn’t have his sister, Bri wouldn’t have her friend, and Mike wouldn’t have… Have what? His girlfriend? Could he call her that?

He jogged up the stairs leading to his apartment, huffing with the added effort. Maybe it wasn’t quite time to call her his girlfriend, yet, but because she had been saved, he just might have the opportunity in the not so distant future. Ricardo and Hunley would have to pay for what they had done, and that fact brought at least a tiny bit of consolation to the Lopez family. It was time… Past time, for the Campbell family to have some justice, and past time for Johnny to forgive himself for a crime he did NOT commit.
Mike retrieved his keys, unlocking his door and going inside. As he stood stretching in his living room, cooling down from his run, he vowed to do whatever he could to help Johnny restore his relationship to his family, help Lily reunite with her mother, and help the family of a victim who died a decade earlier find the justice they had long been denied. He would do whatever he could to get Johnny and Lily out of the cult, so they could get on with their lives the way Lexi and Bri had done. Whatever challenges lay ahead of him, Mike Stoker was ready to face and defeat them – for the sake of Johnny and Lily.

E!

In his apartment, Lieutenant Crockett tapped his fingers on his desk, waiting for his phone to ring. He normally spent his Sunday mornings relaxing in his easy chair while he waited for a game to start, or sleeping off a hangover, but not today. His friends from the FBI were to call him later on this morning, to give him an update on the cult, and find out if the rest of the A-shift from 51’s would be willing to resort to breaking the law to save Johnny and Lily.

He sighed, closing his eyes as he rubbed his temples. He hadn’t shared everything with the men from 51’s and Iris. He couldn’t. He was sworn to secrecy, even with them. If his federal friends were right, then Hiram Gardner was more than a cult leader, more than a doped-up hippie. If they were right, and they usually were, then Hiram was indirectly responsible for many deaths, possibly even directly responsible for a few others. And he silently prayed that this rescue, no matter how unconventional, would happen in time to save the rest of the cult members, especially John and Lily.

The shrill ringing of the telephone startled him, causing his heart rate to quicken. “Argh, shit,” he mumbled to himself, snatching the telephone receiver out of the cradle.

“Crockett,” he groused, waiting for the other party to identify themselves.

“Adams here… Did they agree to do it?” The caller questioned, not mincing words. Both men felt the need to act fast, worried that time was running out.

“They want to take a bit of a detour, but,” Ron said, sucking in a deep breath. “But, yea… It’s on.”

“So I need to talk to my, uh, informant then,” Adams replied.

Crockett rubbed his forehead. “Well, let me tell you what they want to try first…”
“Are you kidding me?”

Crockett rolled his eyes as he listened to Special Agent Adams rant about the ridiculousness of the plan. “Nope, not kidding. They’re afraid of traumatizing Lily; said they wanted to try this first. If it doesn’t work then they’ll go with our plan.”

Crockett heard the sigh on the other end of the line, and knew what his friend was thinking. “Don’t say it, man. I agree with you. This is nuts, but what can we do? You and I can’t go in there and haul them out like a couple of criminals.”

“Yea, well… There’s at least one criminal in there that I’d sure like to get my hands on.”

At that statement, Crockett stiffened his spine. “Talk to me.”

“We’re close enough now to get the evidence we need. I want to get ALL those people out of there, but right now we don’t know who’re the good guys and who’re the bad, you know?” Adams said, frustrated by this latest development. “I was sure hoping to get those two out of there, maybe even get some additional insider information from them.”

“Yea, I know what you mean. I do know that Johnny and Lily are a couple of the good ones. Maybe if 51’s plan works, you’ll get your information soon.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

Crockett hesitated before he responded. “Then you’ll have to depend on your man to get it for you, ‘cause I doubt that Johnny and Lily will want to talk after they’ve been kidnapped.”

“Yea… I know. Listen, I’m supposed to talk to my man at some point tomorrow. I’ll let him know what’s up. I’ll find out when the best time may be for 51’s to implement their operation.”

“10-4, buddy. And if you’re a praying man, would you mind sending up a few requests to the man upstairs?” He heard a chuckle on the other end of the line, and a smile spread across his ebony face.

“I don’t advertise it, but, yea… I’ll send a few prayers up… Mind if I ask you something, Crockett?”

“I’m an open book, man. Ask away,” the detective responded, curious about his friend’s sudden change in the conversation.

“You seem to have a personal interest in this case. Are you that close to these firemen from 51’s, or could it be you’re really close to someone else who’s involved?” Adams didn’t really expect an answer, but his curiosity got the better of him and he had to ask.

Crockett made a clicking sound with his tongue. “Now what the hell kind of question is that?” He asked, doing a little quick soul searching himself. He was investing more of himself into this case than was his normal routine.
“An honest one.”

Crockett snickered into the telephone. “Then let me give you an honest answer. Maybe.”

“Maybe? That’s not-“

“Call me when you talk to your guy, Adams. I’ll be waiting to hear from you. Goodbye,” Ron spat out, interrupting the FBI agent. He quickly hung up the phone, scrubbing his face with his palms.

Why was he so determined to get Johnny and Lily out of the compound? He knew that the FBI had suspicions about illegal activity going on inside the Unity Family, and that there was the possibility that those involved could be in danger. But was that why he spent his free time working on this case, and his nights thinking about it? He knew the answer as surely as he knew his own name. He knew that his determination to help get Johnny and Lily away from the Unity Family was primarily due to his desire for William Waite, a Klansman guilty of murder during the Civil Rights Movement, to spend the rest of his life behind bars… But he also felt his interest in a certain red-haired florist growing, too.

E!

On Monday morning, Hank was making a fresh pot of coffee in the station kitchen, knowing that his men would appreciate the caffeine boost for the upcoming shift. While the coffee pot percolated, he pondered his predicament. While at Iris’ home on Saturday night, he had refused to accept John’s resignation letter. Even though he hadn’t wanted to accept the letter from a third party, he knew that he could only delay the inevitable. If John really wanted to resign from the department, then there was no way that Hank could stop him. He leaned his thin, lanky frame against the cabinets, holding the empty coffee cup in his hand. More than anything else, he wanted to talk to John, man-to-man.

Hank’s younger medic had a habit of falling into and out of love on a frequent basis. Was this just another case of misguided affection? If so, he wanted to talk to John, to stop him from repeating the mistake he had made with Valerie… And Betty, his accidental fiancee… And with a half a dozen other pretty faces in recent years. He huffed, hearing the gasping sound of the end of the percolating cycle. The worried captain turned around and poured a cup of the steaming java just as his engineer walked in.

“How do you think the meeting went?”

Hank sighed, taking a sip of his coffee before responding. “Oh, just swell, Mike. I have a paramedic who wants to quit his job because he doesn’t want to testify in a murder trial. This same young man was not only a witness to, but a photojournalist during one of the most turbulent periods in American history, and now he’s joined a goddamn cult. As if that isn’t enough,” Hank said, his frustration growing along with the volume of his voice. “The rest of my shift is going to try to get him back, by whatever means necessary, including kidnapping, which means we may all end up with our assess in the fucking slammer!”

Mike raised his eyebrows in surprise at his superior’s shocking outburst. “Well don’t hold back, Cap. Tell me how do you REALLY feel,” Mike commented wryly, lifting his cup to his mouth.

Hank felt his shoulders relax a bit. Mike had a dry sense of humor, but he always knew just what to say to keep Hank grounded, or at least bring him back down a notch when it was needed. The
experienced captain depended on his engineer far more than Mike realized. He needed the quiet man as a sounding board, especially when Chet and Johnny were misbehaving. Mike had a calmness about him that Hank envied. He knew Mike Stoker was going to make a wonderful captain one day; he just hoped that day wouldn’t come any time soon.

“Sorry, guess I was getting a little too riled up.” Hank stood up straighter, turning to face his second in command. “I’m worried about the plan, Mike. I won’t lie about it. But honestly, I don’t have a better one. And I sure like our plan better than going in and kidnapping them.”

“I know what you mean,” Mike responded. “I don’t mind grabbing Johnny to get him out of there, but I just can’t do that to the young lady.”

“Then we better hope you and Roy can talk some sense into them, Mike.” Hank sighed, running his palm down his face. During the meeting at Iris’ house, the men of 51’s A-shift had decided to let Mike and Roy attempt to get into the compound and talk to Johnny. If that didn’t work, then a more urgent response would be required, one they hoped they wouldn’t have to deploy.

Before the engineer could respond, Marco entered the kitchen, whistling and wearing a huge grin beneath his mustache.

“Good morning, Lopez. You’re mighty chipper this morning,” Hank offered, patting Marco on the shoulder as he walked past him. “I’ll be in my office getting ready for roll call,” he tossed over his shoulder as he exited. He needed some time to think about what to do with Johnny’s impending resignation.

Mike cut his eyes at his senior lineman, offering the older man a knowing wink. “I take it your Sunday went well.”

“Yes, indeed, amigo,” Marco said, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“I, uh, didn’t see you around your Mom’s house yesterday. You must have had something come up that was more important than your Sunday visit, huh?” Mike asked, struggling to hide his grin.

“Yes… Something did, um, come up, as you say,” Marco remarked, waggling his eyebrows.

“I knew it. That’s the only thing that can make a man as happy and relaxed as you are this morning. Congratulations, Marco. I’m happy for you both,” Mike said, slapping Marco on the back.

“What’s that?” Chet asked, pushing his way through the kitchen door.

Mike cleared his throat, taking another sip of his coffee. He knew the story was Marco’s to tell, if the older man so chose.

Chet looked at his two co-workers, knowing that they were deliberately hiding something from him. “Aww, c’mon, fellas. What’s goin’ on?” He asked, staring at the other men while he reached for a coffee cup from the dish drain.

Marco draped his arm around his partner’s shoulders. “I don’t kiss and tell, Chet.”

Chet poured his coffee, then looked up at his friend, noting the glow that colored Marco’s face. “Aww, shit. I know that look,” he said, blowing a cooling breath across the steaming coffee. “I’m happy for you, Marco. Just don’t forget who sleeps in the bed beside you in the dorm, alright? I don’t want you waking up in the middle of the night and thinkin’ I’m Beverly,” he snickered.
“Don’t flatter yourself,” Marco commented, glad that his friends understood his mood and seemed to be willing to allow him privacy.

“You’re not my type either, Pal,” Chet chuckled. “Caroline is all the woman I need.”

“Guess I’m the only one around here not getting any action, huh?” Mike groaned.

“Watch it, Stoker. You’re going out with my sister,” Marco said, feigning anger. His efforts were in vain, and in just a few seconds, all three men were laughing.

The kitchen door swung open and the senior medic walked through. He stopped in front of the refrigerator. “You fellas sure are happy this morning.”

“Mornin’, Roy,” Chet said, pouring another cup of coffee and offering it to the paramedic. “Uh-oh,” the lineman muttered, seeing the downcast look on Roy’s face. “You’re second guessing our plan for Johnny and Lily, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” Roy responded with a shrug. “But I honestly can’t think of another way.”

Kyle Greene pushed through the door, nodding his greeting to the other men in the room. Just as he poured a cup of coffee, a light knock was heard at the side door.

Mike was closest to the door, so he opened it and greeted their guest. “Good morning, Amy. C’mon in. May I get you a cup of coffee?”

“I think I’m supposed to be the one askin’ that question,” she replied with a wide grin.

“Not when you’re in OUR house,” the engineer replied.

“Amy, how’s Gretchen? Any change?” Roy asked, correctly assuming that an update was the reason for the waitress’ visit.

Amy accepted the proffered coffee, smiling her gratefulness to Mike. “That’s why I’m here. I had to come by and tell you all how thankful I am for you saving her life. She’s awake now… Well, not fully, but she’s beginning to come around. Doctor Early said it might take a while, but… He thinks she’s gonna be okay.”

Roy gave her a warm embrace. “That’s wonderful, Amy. Has she said… anything?”

“About what happened? No, we haven’t asked. The labs came back positive for heroin, though.” The waitress shook her head, accepting the chair Roy pulled out for her.

“Then why haven’t you asked her why she did it?” Chet asked.

“Well, the doctors… And the, um, the police said not to. They said that if we asked her questions while her mind is… fuzzy… That it might actually create memories that aren’t real. They all said that we need to wait and see what she remembers on her own,” Amy responded, sipping the black coffee. “I know what this looks like, fellas, but I know her. She wouldn’t do it. I just know she wouldn’t.”

“Then we’ll just wait for her to remember what happened,” Marco said, offering his support to their favorite waitress. “When you care a lot about someone, then you don’t mind waiting for them to recover from whatever demons they may be wrestling with.”
Amy smiled up at the senior linemen, looking a little forlornly. “I know, Marco. It just ain’t easy, that’s all.”

The waitress and the firemen visited for a few more minutes, until Hank stuck his head in the doorway to announce roll call.

“Roll call in… Amy?” He paused, surprised to see his friend. “How’s Gretchen?” He asked, stepping the rest of the way into the kitchen, propping his elbow against the wall.

“Improving… She’s gonna be okay, Hank. I just stopped by to let you fellas know, and to thank you for saving her.” Amy repeated, rising from her seated position. “I guess I better get going and let you men get back to work saving more lives,” she said with a nervous chuckle. She placed her coffee cup in the sink, then offered the men a small wave as she walked out the door. “See ya ‘round.”

“I’ll check in on Gretchen when Greene and I make our first run to Rampart,” Roy said, a smile crossing his ruddy features. Not only was the young woman going to survive a brush with death, but she just might hold the key to getting his old partner back.

E!

Johnny and James bounced around inside the delivery truck as they made their way down the Tehachapi Mountain side. They had deliveries to make in Bakersfield, and James seemed particularly nervous.

“What’s up, James,” the dark-haired paramedic asked, his crooked smile lighting his face. Today was the day Lily would complete her shunning. At sundown she would be allowed to return to the Unity Family, including their newest member. Johnny couldn’t wait to see her again, to hold her in his arms, and apologize to her for being the cause of her week-long exile.

“Nothing… Why do you ask, Brother John?”

“You just seem like you’re a million miles away, man,” Johnny said, his long hair blowing in the wind while his arm rested on the ledge of the rolled down window.

James continued looking forward, both nervous and glad that he had been chosen to pick up a package for Father James. He had been given the address of the new florist’s shop in Bakersfield, and a description of the man who would have the package he was to retrieve. It would be the second time he had been entrusted with such an assignment.

He pulled out onto the highway, retrieving a piece of paper from over the sun visor. “Here,” he said, handing the paper to Johnny. “Please read these directions to me. We have a new stop to make.”

Johnny accepted the proffered paper. His heart ached from the similarity he felt, the action reminding him of all the times he sat in the passenger’s seat of the squad, accepting the address slip passed to him by Roy as Johnny directed them to the scene of a rescue. He cleared his throat, pushing the hurtful images aside. That relationship was gone, destroyed by Johnny’s past. He had to force it out of his mind, count it as just another failure in his life.

“Brother John?”

Johnny was startled by James’ voice, and he cleared his throat again, as he looked back down at the paper. “Oh, yea… Ahem, sorry.” He read the directions one more time. “Looks like we need to make a left turn on, uh,” he snickered for a moment. “Weedpatch Highway.”

“Weedpatch?” James questioned.
“That’s what it looks like to me. What does it look like to you?” Johnny asked, holding the paper out for James to see.

James toggled his eyes back and forth between the paper and highway 58 as he took several fleeting glances at the paper. “Yes… Yes, it does appear to be Weedpatch Highway. I suppose we can easily figure out how it acquired its name,” he said with a grin, running the passenger’s side wheels off the side of the road.

“Whoa!”

“Sorry, Brother John. I didn’t mean to frighten you with my poor driving skills.”

“Nah, it’s a’right. You wouldn’t believe how many near misses Roy and I have when… I mean HAD when we were running code R,” he said, turning his face away from James so the other man wouldn’t see his dejected expression.

“Code R?”

“Oh, yea… It’s when-“

The sound of a siren approaching them from the rear caused Johnny to look in his side-view mirror. “It’s that,” he said with an eye roll, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

“What? I’m being pulled over again?” James asked, pressing his lips into a frustrated grimace as he slowed down and moved onto the shoulder of the highway.

“So code R means you’re getting pulled over for doing nothing wrong?” James asked, the sarcasm in his voice sounding unusual.

“No… I mean, yes, you’re getting pulled over so the fuzz can harass us again, but no, that isn’t what code R means. It means running hot. You know, lights and sirens.”

“Oh,” James grunted, reaching across the seat to open the glove box. Once again, he withdrew the envelope which Johnny assumed held the registration, and then exited the vehicle.

Johnny reached for the door handle, intending to exit the vehicle along with James.

“Just, ah… Just wait here, Brother John.”

Johnny knitted his eyebrows together. “What? Why? This is bullshit!”

“Look, I know these cats. Just… Just let me handle it,” James said, diverting his eyes from Johnny’s face, making the paramedic question the other man’s sincerity.

Johnny watched out of his side-view mirror as James opened up the back of the truck for the one uniformed and one plain-clothed officers. He felt the vibration of the men walking around in the back of the truck, and he knew that they were being searched again. James was right, they were definitely being harassed, and the idea made Johnny’s stomach churn. He remembered seeing what the police had done to the black citizens in Selma, and he couldn’t help but see the similarities here. The only difference was instead of harassing them because of their race, they were being harassed for their beliefs.

Johnny leaned his head against the headrest, exasperated by the turn of events. He could hear the mumbled voices of the three men talking, but couldn’t make out the words. However, James’ words to him prior to exiting the vehicle were echoing loudly in his mind.
'I know these cats.' Johnny wondered why James had made such a statement. Was it because these same law enforcement officers had stopped him before? Did James somehow know these men in a different capacity than as law enforcement officers? Johnny ran a nervous finger beneath his nose; he was beginning to believe that there was more going on than had been shared with him.

By the time James returned to the cab of the truck, twenty minutes had passed. He quickly replaced the envelope, slammed the glove compartment shut, and pulled the old truck back onto the highway.

“What the hell took you so long?” Johnny asked, suspiciously

James looked over at his passenger, his eyes seeming far more worried than before the stop. “They were just doing what they do best.”

“What’s that? Wasting our time?” Johnny asked, feeling a rant rising from the pit of his stomach.

“Just settle down, Brother John. It took some quick thinking on my part, but I satisfied their inquiries and they let me go. Now how much farther until we get to… What was that street again?”

“Weedpatch Highway,” Johnny said, forcing back the bile in his throat. “Looks like it’s just… Oh, maybe five miles or so. It’s on the western edge of the city.”

The duo continued on in silence, each man lost in his own thoughts. James had been given a difficult task to accomplish by the law enforcement officers, and Johnny was trying to figure out the truth behind the traffic stop. Johnny decided that the next time they got pulled over by the cops, he wasn’t going to sit by idly. Never again would he sit by while injustice was being doled out on innocent people.

James maneuvered the delivery truck, following the directions Johnny gave him. Eventually the duo pulled to a stop behind a dilapidated structure.

Johnny looked down at the address at the bottom of the piece of paper he held in his hands. “This can’t be right.”

“The owner hasn’t completed the remodeling,” James said softly, looking around at the back lot, feeling anxious about meeting the person who held the package for Father Hiram.

“Then why the hell is the guy ordering plants and flowers from us now? Nobody in their right mind would come here to make a purchase with the place looking like a haunted house.” Johnny cocked an eyebrow in James’ direction. “I got a bad feeling about this.”

“We just do as we are instructed, Brother John. Father Hiram believes in us. We must not disappoint him.”

Johnny huffed, shifting in his seat.

Before Johnny allowed the expletives to escape from his mouth, James held up his hand to silence the younger man. “I’ll go make contact with the owner. You get the boxes ready to be delivered. They are the ones marked with red letters.”

“The pottery?”

“Yes,” James replied, opening his door.
James’ beard and long hair blew in the gust of wind that whipped around the corner of the building. He walked past the empty crates tossed haphazardly around the back entranceway. When he knocked on the door, a heavily tattooed man opened it.

“Are you James?”

“Yes. You must be Gordon,” James replied, his steady voice hiding his rapidly beating heart.

“That I am,” the balding man responded. “Bring the boxes inside while I get Hiram’s package ready.”

Johnny and James unloaded four heavy boxes, each carrying pieces of pottery made by the women of the Family, including Lily. When Johnny walked into the darkened interior of the building, the hair on the back of his neck stood up. The room was dark and dingy with empty boxes stacked high in several places. The pathway was narrow and winding, leading to the dusty room that had once been a store. The dust drifted around Johnny’s face causing him to sneeze.

“Achoo!”

“Bless you, Brother John,” James spoke softly.

“Thanks.”

While the two men unloaded the boxes into the front room, Gordon retrieved two large manila envelopes taped up with packaging tape. “Here,” he said, thrusting the package into James’ waiting hands. “Tell Hiram I’ll be waiting for more on the first of next month.”

“Think you’ll have this place ready to open in a month?” Johnny inquired, beginning to doubt that this was a legitimate business.

“It’ll do,” Gordon said flatly.

“Thank you, Gordon. I will see that this reaches Father Hiram,” James remarked, tucking the package underneath his arm.

“See ya,” Johnny called to the owner with a slight wave of his hand, happy to be returning to the truck. When he slammed the door shut, he looked over at James and released a slow whistle.

“I understand. Not our usual customer,” James replied, cranking up the truck and sliding the package beneath his seat. “Let’s make the next delivery.”

“Yea… Let’s do that,” Johnny muttered nervously. He kept an eye on the back door of the building as James pulled the delivery truck into traffic. “So… What’s in the package? That pottery can’t be worth that much money,” the paramedic stated.

“It is for Father Hiram.”

“Yea, yea, I know that, but… But, uh, what is it?” Johnny questioned, his curiosity piqued.

“It is not for our eyes, Brother John.”

“Oh, c’mon. Aren’t you curious about it? I mean, we could be hauling somethin’ illegal, and with the way this truck is a cop magnet, we need to be extra careful, you know?” Johnny had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach about the contents of the package.
“We are protected,” James replied, his eyes still staring at the road ahead.

“By what? Father Hiram’s magic? Man, that’s bullsh—” Johnny nearly shouted his remark, his frustration growing, but James interrupted his outburst.

“Do you question Father Hiram’s deity?”

Johnny sighed, fearing he was about to be kicked out of the truck. He couldn’t allow himself to be abandoned in Bakersfield on the day that Lily was being released from her isolation. If he did, who would he call? He couldn’t call his coworkers back in Los Angeles, and no one at the compound had a phone except Father Hiram. Feeling trapped in a noose of his own creating, he apologized to James.

“I’m sorry, man. I’m jus’… Uptight, I guess. I… I’m so ready to see Lily.”

“Understandable,” James responded, relieved that the topic of the conversation had turned to a calmer subject. “You shall see her tonight, Brother John, and all will be well.”

“I sure hope so, James. I sure hope so.”

E!

By late afternoon, the men of Station 51 were exhausted. They had been a part of a three-alarm fire at a high-rise apartment complex. Thankfully, there had been no lives lost, but several victims suffered from smoke inhalation and minor burns, keeping both Roy and Kyle busy. As soon as the paramedics had been released from their last run to Rampart, they had been dispatched on a woman in labor call.

It was Mike’s turn to cook dinner so while he and Chet were chopping vegetables for the pot roast he was preparing, Marco took a quick shower and was talking to Beverly on the phone in the dorm.

“I’ve never seen Marco this happy,” Mike said, making quick work of peeling potatoes.

“Hey, I’m happy for him. A good woman is hard to find and the two of them seem as happy as… Well, as happy as me and Caroline,” the junior lineman remarked. He received a grunt in response from the quiet engineer. “Say… How’re you and Lexi doing?”

“Things are moving along,” Mike said, cutting up the last of the potatoes. He reached for the celery and began chopping. “I mean, we’re taking it slowly because of… Well, you know… But…,” he hesitated, looking over at the shorter man. “But I think our relationship is progressing nicely.”

“Are you happy with her?” Chet asked, looking over his shoulder to ensure they were still alone. After all, they were talking about the sister of his best friend.

Mike picked up the chopping board, raking the thin slices of celery into the roasting pan. “Yes… Yes, I am happy when I’m with her. The Dodgers game that I took Lexi and Antonio to was one of the best days of my life,” he said with a broad smile.

“Kids are great, aren’t they?”

“Yes… Even when they’re not your own flesh and blood. I know you understand that. You seem to be great with Corrie.”
Chet blushed just as Marco walked into the kitchen, his own face glowing. “That’s because Chet’s just a big kid himself,” the senior lineman chuckled.

“Oh, ha-ha, Marco,” Chet said sarcastically, cutting his eyes at his friend. “Say… You look like you’ve been talking to Beverly.”

“That I was, and the lady says to tell you all hello,” he said with a smile.

“It’s amazing how happy all of us are now, isn’t it?” Mike asked, pulling an onion out of the grocery bag.

“Yea, all of us except Johnny,” Chet muttered, hearing the front bay door rising.

Roy was just backing the squad into the station when he saw the sedan belonging to Ronald Crockett turning into the back parking lot of the station. Even though Kyle was not included in the plan for rescuing Johnny and Lily from the cult, he was aware that something was going on. He also saw the detective, and knew that the men would need some privacy to talk to the officer.

“I’ll, ah… I think I’ll take a shower and maybe take a nap before dinner,” Kyle offered, before exiting the squad.

“Thanks, Greene. We all really appreciate how supportive you’ve been with us and Johnny. You’re a great asset to the department,” Roy said softly, exiting the vehicle, then stepping out of the squad and into the captain’s office. “Crockett just drove up, Cap.”

Hank looked up with his hazel eyes, leaning back in his chair. He inhaled deeply, pushing down on the table as he rose to his full height. “Well… Let’s head to the dayroom and see what he has to tell us.”

“Uh, Greene said he would make himself scarce so we could talk. He’s really a good kid, Cap. I’m impressed with him – personally and professionally,” Roy said as his superior walked towards the door.

“Good to hear, especially if John doesn’t come back,” Hank said in a worried voice, stepping past his senior medic and heading for the dayroom.

Roy watched with a solemn look on his face. “He’s coming back, Cap,” he mumbled to himself. “He has to.”

Ron Crockett walked through the open rear bay door, nodding his greeting to the two approaching firemen. “Hank… Roy.”

“Hello, Ron,” Hank said extending his hand to the detective. “I assume you’re bringing us some news.”

“Yea, um, I’d like to explain all of this to everyone at once. Do you mind getting the rest of your crew together?”

“Right this way,” the captain said pushing open the kitchen door and gesturing with a sweep of his right hand.

Inside the station kitchen, Mike gave his stew one final stir before placing the lid on top so it could simmer. Both he and the two linemen looked up when they heard the deep voice of their leader.
“Good afternoon, fellas,” the detective said heading over to the kitchen table.

Before his men could speak, Hank took over the conversation. “Marco, get us a fresh pot of coffee going, will you, Pal? Detective Crockett has something he’d like to share with us.”

“Just plugged it in, Cap,” the senior linemen replied, scooping up several coffee cups and setting them around on the table.

Hank offered the detective a slight grin. “Don’t know why we even use words around here. My crew has a way of reading each other’s minds, including mine,” he said, pointing a finger in the center of his chest as he pulled out a chair.

“Well, that’s a skill that could come in real handy in the next day, or so,” Crockett stated, taking a seat opposite Hank.

“So you’ve been in touch with your colleagues at the FBI?” Roy asked, eager to find out if their plan to rescue Johnny and Lily from the clutches of the cult had been deemed acceptable.

“Yes, I have, Roy,” the detective stated, spinning the empty blue and white coffee cup around in front of him. “While they don’t think it’ll work, they won’t stand in the way of it.”

“Then why the rush?” Mike questioned, noting the stress on the detective’s face. “Are things that bad?”

“Sort of,” Ron interjected.

“Sorta?” Chet repeated, blue eyes widening with concern. “They’re in danger, aren’t they?”

Crockett chose his words carefully, refusing to answer Chet’s question, directly. “I’m afraid that things have changed a little. The FBI’s timeline has been moved up. It seems that their inside guy is getting rather antsy about what’s going on inside the cult.” He leaned back in his chair, turning towards Roy. With his elbow resting on the back of the chair, he looked straight at Roy and Mike. “You fellas are gonna have to do it soon, and I mean REAL soon.”

“How soon?” Roy asked, hearing the sound of blood rushing in his ears as his blood pressure and heart rate rose.

“No later than Wednesday.”

“So then… You want us implementing this plan as soon as our shift is over?” Hank asked, the reality of the situation hitting him hard. When he saw the detective nod his head, he continued on. “Then we’ve got to get ready, don’t we?”

“Yes, you do. And you’ve got to give it everything you’ve got, Hank. ‘Cause if you can’t convince them to leave on their own, even for just a short time, then you’ve either got to grab ‘em and go, or… Or they may be there when the feds raid the compound.”

“Shit,” Chet cursed, slamming his hand on the table. He knew better than to look at his captain after such an outburst.

“Exactly, man,” Ron remarked, picking up his cup and walking over to the counter to pour himself a fresh cup of coffee. He unplugged the percolator and began pouring a round of coffee for the group of weary firemen. “So… Are you ready to nail down the details of O-51?”

“O-51?” Hank questioned, knitting his eyebrows together.
“That’s right. The Feds have dubbed this plan as… Operation 51,” he said with a chuckle.

The tension release was audible as the group guffawed at the comment. But it was just what they needed; giving a name to their most critical rescue to date had a unifying sound.

“All right, let’s form a plan of attack,” Hank began, accepting a cup of coffee from the detective. “And let’s bring them home.”

E!

The sun drifting behind the clouds in the western sky was beautiful in the Tehachapi Mountains. Johnny stood beside the men’s dorm, staring across the fields at the orange and magenta hues growing bolder as the sun slowly disappeared. He appreciated all things in nature, but this particular spot was especially beautiful. He felt like a Shakespearean actor. The flat strips of land along the edge of the mountain reminded him of a stage, and the surrounding mountain peaks appeared as large curtains on either side of the narrow field. How he wished he could simply close those curtains, thus ending the drama he found himself a part of. But this compound wasn’t a stage of actors, and his life wasn’t a play. The hills were dotted with greenhouses, surrounded by various grazing animals used to supply protein for the family members. The whole place seemed majestic, but was it too good to be true?

He thought of all he had left behind, his career as a paramedic, his friends, his best friend, Roy and the entire DeSoto family who had adopted him as one of their own; Iris, the woman who had housed him after the darkest period of his life, and even his beloved Land Rover had all been left behind in Los Angeles. The worst thing he was giving up was any chance of returning to his home in Montana to visit his parents. Was the sacrifice worth the reward? He loved Lily, had since the day they met, but could he really give up everything he had worked so hard for in order to be with her for the rest of his life? Could he turn his back on Kizzy Campbell, the woman who had treated him like a son a decade ago? He had made his decisions, pushed by events that had happened too quickly. Now, he no longer knew the answers to those questions, not since he had seen the herbs that were growing inside a couple of the greenhouses.

Suddenly, a soft voice brought him out of his reverie.

“Thorn?”

Johnny spun around on his heels, rushing to the woman he had been aching to hold in his arms for the past week.

“Lily!” He said, embracing her and stroking her dark hair as he whispered into her ear. “Oh, god, how I’ve missed you. I’m…” Johnny hesitated, forcing his words past the lump in his throat. “I’m so sorry for getting you in trouble with Father Hiram.”

“I’ve missed you, too, but my shunning was only for a week,” she said in a hushed tone, pulling out of his embrace so she could look at his face. Tenderly, she caressed his stubbly face with her small hand, pleased to see him growing a beard like the other men in the family. She saw his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “And you didn’t get me in trouble, Thorn. I was the one who took the risk. It was my sin, not yours. You were not a part of us then. Besides, if you hadn’t joined us, it would’ve been much longer. You saved me from weeks of anguish.”

“I shouldn’t have been alone with you,” Johnny stated, emphatically. “I knew the consequences, but I still—“
“Sshhh,” she hushed him, stepping closer to embrace him. “I’m elated that you made the right decision.”

Johnny’s countenance fell. “Did I?” he asked, stepping back. “Did I do the right thing, Lily?”

The young woman knitted her eyebrows together in confusion. “Of course, Thorn. Of course you did. You’ll learn to be happy here. You left behind all those things that were weighing you down. You left behind the people who ridiculed you, treated you unfairly because of your heritage… Didn’t you?” She questioned, hearing the doubt in his voice.

“I don’t know, Lil’. I thought I left those people behind the day we left Selma. I mean, I know that I’ve been the butt of some jokes in recent years, but… But I don’t know if I can LEARN to like it here,” he emphasized her own words. “Those people I left behind are… er, were my friends, my family.”

“NO! No, you’re wrong!” Lily said, raising her voice. “Your family is here! Right here, right now,” she argued.

“What about your mother? Aunt Iris loves you, Lily. She loves us both.”

“No, she doesn’t. She lied to me, Thorn. She lied about my maternal grandparents. She said they were dead, but they weren’t. They were… They ARE racists… and I hate them.”

“You don’t even know them!” Johnny’s frustration was growing. “People change, Lily. Maybe you should give them a chance,” he said, his voice softening. He reached for her, but she turned her back to him, not wanting him to see the tears flowing freely down her face. “And if you can’t give them a chance, at least give Aunt Iris a chance. She was trying to protect you. Can’t you see that?”

Lily used the backs of her hands to wipe away her tears. “Is that why you came here? To talk me into seeing my mom again?”

Johnny’s shoulders slumped. “No… No, not really.”

“Then why?” She sniffled, not sure if she really wanted to know the truth.

“Because… I’ve missed you, Lily. I wanted to see you… to be with you, again. And… I need your help. I… I don’t know what to do.”

Suddenly Lily remembered the conversation they had had when Johnny had first visited with the family. “The trial?” She asked, turning around slowly to face the man she loved with all her heart.

“I have to make a decision… And… And I can’t just hide away and pretend like it didn’t happen. My unwillingness to intervene cost Phillip his life and I’ve been running away from it for the last ten years,” Johnny choked out, believing that he had played a role in Phillip’s death. “I walked away from everything and everyone in Los Angeles that means anything to me at all. So now, I’ve got no reason to stand by idly and watch that sick bastard get away… with it all… over again,” he said, his voice raspy and ragged with emotion. “I have a chance to tell the world what I witnessed in Selma, a chance to help your entire paternal family get justice for your Uncle Phillip’s murder.”

Lily began shaking her head from side to side. “No… No, you can’t do it, Thorn. You just can’t!”

“Why not?”
“Because they’ll… They’ll hurt you… And I can’t… I can’t lose you, too.” Lily’s heart-felt pleas were killing Johnny, but somehow he pressed on.

“And I can’t stand back and let history repeat itself, Lily. I can’t…,” he paused, forcing the lump in his throat to retreat long enough for him to push his words out. “I WON’T let my cowardice define me for the next decade.”

“Oh, Thorn… No… Please…” She cried, rushing into his arms, clinging to him like a woman drowning.

“I really need for you to go with me. I… I don’t know if I can… face that place alone, but… But if you won’t do it, then… Then I’ll have to go without you.”

Her anguished cries ripped his heart right out of his chest. He ran his calloused hand down the back of her head, pulling her tighter against his chest. The last thing he had wanted to do was break her heart, but he had to go back to testify, even if it meant losing her forever.

“But you… can’t leave… us,” she sniffled, drawing in a hitching breath.

“Why not?” Johnny asked, pulling away from her so he could look into her tear-stained face. “Am I imprisoned, here?”

“Of course not, but…” She didn’t want to do it. She didn’t want to tell him the truth.

“But what? WHAT?” He said through gritted teeth, shaking her by her upper arms.

“I’ll… I’ll be… pun-punished, and James will, too. He-he’ll hurt us… both!”

“Who? Hiram?” Johnny asked, his dark eyes angering as they scanned her face for answers.

“Y-yes… You’re here ‘cause of us… If you le-leave, then… then…”

“Then what?”

She collapsed into his embrace one last time. “Please don’t do it, Thorn. Don’t make us endure it, please?”

“Then come with me, please?”

She didn’t answer him, not wanting to leave the family, and yet, not wanting to lose Johnny again, either.

Johnny felt his legs begin to buckle. If he stayed, then Phillip’s murderer might not be found guilty. He did not believe that Lily or James would willingly leave the Unity Family. And if he left the Unity Family, then Lily and James would endure a severe punishment. He was trapped, just as surely as he had been when that hole had caved in on him while he was trying to rescue an abused boy who had fallen in it. The only difference was that during that rescue, he had his friends holding onto his legs while his upper body had become buried in the collapse. They had pulled him out quickly. All he had to do was hold on to the victim. He had done his part, and his shiftmates had done theirs. And both the boy and Johnny had survived. He had thought about the cave collapses during rescues, where his coworkers had spent hours digging him out to safety. He even remembered following his captain’s orders to leap from a window ledge and into the waiting life net, held by his department brothers. Their actions had saved both Roy and Johnny from certain death.

This time, things were different. He had pushed his friends away, cut them off from his life. This
time, there would be no last minute intervention from his coworkers. This time, his captain’s voice would not be there to guide him to safety, no department life net to break his fall. This time, neither he, nor the victim he had hoped to rescue, would get out of the hole they had fallen into.
Chapter 19

A/N: My apologies for the length of time between updates. Real life has been getting in the way of my writing, but hopefully things will slow down soon. Thank you for continuing to read and share your thoughts with me. I appreciate you all so much.

Chapter 19

Johnny was still awake when James returned to the men’s dorm. The paramedic had grown accustomed to the other man returning from the sanctuary after midnight. It had been happening ever since Johnny had joined the Unity Family, and he couldn’t help but wonder if there was a connection between his initiation and James’ new nocturnal behavior. After all, it hadn’t happened during the time that Johnny was only visiting the compound, at least, he didn’t think so. He recalled how deeply he would sleep after drinking his nightly tea, before his initiation, so he couldn’t be sure.

Once Johnny realized that he was being drugged, he had been discreetly disposing of some of his tea, hoping to stay more alert at night. He needed to keep up the façade as long as he could, and that meant that he would have to consume at least some of the drug which he now assumed was a muscle relaxer, a tranquilizer, or perhaps both.

The dorm was cloaked in darkness, the only light being the glow of the oil lamp near James’ empty bed. Johnny lay motionless, pretending to be asleep as James walked past his bunk, heading for his own bed. Johnny was lying on his side, his eyes opened in narrow slits to allow him to see what the other man was doing. He watched as James sat on the edge of his bed, removing his sandals. The resting paramedic was surprised to see James hang his head instead of lying down. The older man’s shoulders seemed to be carrying the weight of the world, bowing over as he scrubbed his bearded face. Something was wrong, and Johnny’s sixth sense, the one that had always served him well on rescues, was kicking into high gear. His anxiety began to tie his stomach in knots, but he didn’t think he could approach James, couldn’t ask what was worrying him.

By the time dawn broke, Johnny had managed to get a few hours of sleep. He pushed himself into a sitting position, looking around the room at the other men. Ian and James were washing their faces at the far end of the dorm, whispering quietly to each other. Johnny wondered if Ian knew more than he was letting on. Did he know what James was doing after midnight? He decided that if he got the chance to speak to Ian alone, then he would ask him.

E!

Wake-up tones roused the men of station 51 out of a peaceful slumber. There had been no tone outs during the night, not even a run for the squad. Hank picked up the microphone, acknowledging that his crew was awake, alert, and ready to turn the safety of their response area over to the on-coming shift in a couple of hours.

“Station 51, KMG-365,” he said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Shuffling sounds were heard around the dorm, but when Hank looked over at his second in command, he saw worried blue eyes looking back at him. He pressed his lips together firmly, nodding his head in understanding. The next twenty-four hours would be critical to the unity of 51’s
“Stoker… DeSoto,” he called out, raising his voice when he called out Roy’s name, “my office. Lopez, how about getting us some breakfast started? Greene, please make us some coffee, ‘cause, Kelly, yours sucks, pal,” he said with a snicker.

“Thanks a lot, Cap,” Chet commented, stepping into his bunkers and snapping his red suspenders onto his white t-shirt. He knew that his captain was right. He could never seem to get the coffee right, either too weak or too strong.

Roy followed Mike across the apparatus bay, running his hand across the hood of the squad as they headed for the captain’s office. He wanted to see his partner sitting beside him on that beige bench seat. He liked Kyle Greene well enough; the young man would make a great partner, but he wasn’t the partner Roy wanted. Station 51 had only had one paramedic partnership for A-shift since it had opened, and more than anything else, Roy wanted that partnership to resume. Even more than the partnership, the senior medic wanted his best friend back in his life. He was still haunted by their last encounter, and he was dying to make things right.

“Have a seat, fellas,” Hank said, pulling out his rolling chair from the desk. The two firemen sat down beside the desk, mimicking their captain’s posture. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence that we didn’t get a single run last night,” he mused, running his fingers through his mussed up hair.

“You two sound like Mrs. Lopez, but…,” he rubbed his chin, staring at the empty desk as he thought about what he needed to say. “Yes, something like that.” Hank stretched his neck, looking back at his two men. “Tonight may be difficult. If he says no, then…”

“Then we’ll do what we have to do to save them,” Roy commented.

“I wish there was another way, Cap,” Mike spoke up, “but if there is, I sure don’t see it.”

“We’ve all batted this around in our heads for days now,” Hank responded, leaning back in his chair. “I don’t think there is another way. Rescuing people is what we do for a living. If there was another way, we’d have figured it out by now.”

Roy stared at the floor, resting his elbows on his knees. “When I leave here, I’m going by Rampart to see if I can talk to Gretchen. Hopefully, she can give us some inside information, some clues, or something to help us out. I feel like we’re going into a burning warehouse without knowing what chemicals may be on the inside.”

“But we’ll have our lifelines with us, right Cap?” Mike asked, his eyes locked on those of his captain.

“You bet you will, fellas.”

E!

As soon as Roy changed into his street clothes, he headed for the hospital. For a moment, he thought about picking up a small vase of flowers, but the memory of his marriage falling apart made him change his mind. Resting his wrist on top of the steering wheel, he shifted his gold Porsche into a
higher gear as he made his way down the street. There had been a time when he had been tempted to stray with Gretchen. Both of them had felt the attraction. But that was all behind him now. He and Joanne had reconciled and Gretchen had left the area, presumably to join the same religious sect that Johnny and Lily had joined. Now she was back… And had overdosed on heroin.

The wind whipped through his thinning red hair as he drove past the place where he had picked her up, innocently offering a ride to a young woman who had tripped over a broken place in the sidewalk. A simple act of chivalry had turned into a near disaster for the entire DeSoto family. He and Joanne had been on the brink of divorce when… When Johnny had come to his rescue.

Roy turned into the hospital driveway, his mind returning to the day he had fought with Johnny in his front yard, angry because the younger man seemed to be sticking his nose into Roy’s business, and Roy had hated it – hated the feeling of having his partner standing in judgment of him. Yet, that wasn’t really what had happened. Johnny had been worried about his surrogate family, worried that Roy was about to make the biggest mistake of his life. And he didn’t stand by and let Roy fall. He cared enough to confront him. Now it was Roy’s turn to return the favor.

Roy pulled into a vacant parking space, slammed his car door shut then walked through the glass doors of the front entrance. He walked up to the information desk, smiling politely at the women’s auxiliary volunteer sitting behind the desk. “Can you tell me which room Gretchen McDowell is in?”

The woman looked through the glasses that were perched on the end of her nose. She flipped through the pages of the patient census. “Ummm, here she is. She’s in room #424.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Roy walked to the elevators, pushing the up arrow. When the silver doors opened, he stepped inside, pressing the button that would take him to the fourth floor. He watched as the numbers increased, wondering what condition the former waitress would be in when he visited her. Would she be able to shed any light on the situation with the cult, or had she become just another junkie?

He exited the elevator, walking down the hallway towards the appropriate room. He stood outside the door, momentarily, not wanting to disturb the young woman if she had other visitors. Hearing no sounds coming from inside the hospital room, Roy gently knocked on the wooden door.

“Come in.”

Roy heard the muffled sounding voice and slowly pushed through the door. “Gretchen?” he said, sticking his head into the doorway.

The weak woman tried to push herself up in the bed. “Roy? Oh, hi,” she smiled, fumbling until she found the button to raise the head of the bed. “How kind of you to stop by.”

The paramedic walked across the room, standing beside the hospital bed. She was still pale, but he noticed a hint of color returning to her cheeks. “You’re looking better. How do you feel?”

“Well, um,” she mumbled, her voice sounding soft. “I’m alive… Amy tells me I have you fellas from 51’s to thank for that,” she said, her voice growing ragged with emotions.

“I’m glad we could help.”

Gretchen picked at the blanket covering her legs. “Um… Roy, I… I didn’t do it.”

“Didn’t do what?” Roy questioned, unsure of what she meant.
“I didn’t try to… to kill myself,” she said, curling her blonde hair behind her ear. “I’m… I’m not a…” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

“Suicidal?” he finished for her.

“No… I mean, I’m not that, either, but… I’m not a… a junkie.”

In spite of their previous close friendship, Roy didn’t reach out to her. He wanted to, but he was afraid of what the memories might do to her… and to him. His heart ached when he saw her nodding her affirmation. Her shoulders began to tremble.

“I know you aren’t. But, Gretchen… What happened? There was heroin in your system, a lethal dose from what Amy tells me.”

Gretchen began to fidget in her bed, coughing nervously. “Ahua, I… ahua, um…”

“Here,” Roy said, pouring her a cup of ice water. “Drink some of this,” he said, handing it to her. “Your throat is probably still sore from the vent tube.”

After swallowing a couple of refreshing sips, she handed it back to him, refusing to make eye contact. The room was silent for a few long moments, neither of them knowing what to say.

“Um… Roy?” she began, wanting to change the subject. She wasn’t sure she could tell him the truth about what had really happened.

“Yea?”

“Johnny’s there… Did you know?”

Roy nodded his head; he knew where she meant, and he was glad she had opened the door to the topic he really wanted to discuss with her.

“Yes… And I’m really worried about him.”

“I didn’t tell Amy ‘cause I wanted to talk to you first. You’ve got to help him. He…,” she began to shake uncontrollably. “You’ve got to get him away from there.”

Roy felt his mouth go dry. She did know something about the group, and whatever it was, it wasn’t good. “Is he in… in some kind of trouble?”

“No… Not yet, but the longer he stays…” She didn’t finish her sentence, fear silencing her.

Roy felt his heart pounding in his chest. He wanted to grab the young woman, shake her into telling him what she knew, but he knew he couldn’t. It was obvious that she was terrified of something… or someone.

“Gretchen? Talk to me… What will happen to Johnny if he stays there?”

Gretchen pulled her legs up to her chest, rocking in the hospital bed. “No… No, I can’t… I… Just… Just get him out, okay?”

Finally, Roy could take the pressure no more. Sitting down on the edge of the hospital bed, he reached out to the trembling young woman, pulling her into a warm embrace. “Sshhh,” he crooned, stroking her long blonde hair. “It’s okay, Gretchen. You’re going to be okay.”

“Ca-can’t leave… No one can ever REALLY le-leave.”
Roy pulled her back away from his shoulder, looking at her red splotched face with narrowed eyes. His pulse rate quickened. “What do you mean?” he asked, worriedly. His blue eyes darted back and forth, searching her face for an answer to his question. Suddenly, he understood exactly what she was too afraid to verbalize, and the bile rose in the back of his throat.

“Ohmygod… Did… Did someone force you to take the drugs?”

The frightened young woman began crying again, her body shaking violently. “I di-didn’t do it, Roy… I just… wanted to… come back to… to L.A,” she hiccuped.

“Gretchen,” he said, cupping her tear-stained face in his hands. He turned her face upwards, forcing her to look at him. “Who? Who made you take the heroin?”

She tried to remove her face from his hands, protesting his inquisition.

“Gretchen, come on… Talk to me.”

Unconsciously, she rubbed her bruised wrist, remembering how hard she fought against the strong arms that had restrained her while the poison was being injected into her vein. She closed her eyes, unable to look at the worry-filled face of her friend.

“No one can get to you, here,” Roy reassured her. “If someone from the… uh, group,” he began, avoiding the word cult, “shot you up with heroin, then… Gretchen, whatever you know that will help me get Johnny home… I need for you to tell me… Please?”

She continued crying, refusing to answer his pleas for help.

“Is…,” Roy pressed his lips into a thin line in frustration. “Is Johnny being drugged, too?”

Gretchen gave Roy a barely perceptible nod. She knew that she owed her life to this man, and she couldn’t just sit back and let others fall victim to the evils of Hiram Gardner. Even if she was too afraid to go to the authorities herself, she had to do something to help. “Yes… we all are,” she whispered hoarsely, unaware that she was still including herself with the group.

“With opiates?”

The young woman shook her head. “No… Well… I’m not sure what kind of drugs, but…”

“But?” Roy inquired, growing frustrated with her hesitation to fully disclose what she knew.

Knowing that she had already said too much, she closed her eyes and forced herself to explain what she had done. “It’s… It’s all my fault, Roy… I’m s-sorry.”

“Hey, don’t say that,” he soothed, encouraging her to continue. “You just got through saying that you didn’t overdose. This isn’t your fault.”

Gretchen felt her heart rate increase, as if the organ were trying to escape from her chest, just like she was trying to escape from the cult. With a ragged inhalation, she continued. “No, Roy… Johnny joined… because of me.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, with a hint of anger in his voice. Was it possible that his partner was in danger because of Gretchen?

“It’s a long story, but…” Gretchen looked to her right, reaching for the box of tissue on her bedside
She placed the box in her lap, removing a couple of the tissues to dry her face. “I’m sorry, Roy. I felt so badly about the lie… that afterwards… I tried to leave the family, and… And that’s how I ended up… here.”

Roy was stunned by what he was hearing. He stood up, pacing between her bed and the nearby window. “Okay… Wait a minute… Now… I’m not here to blame you, or cause you any more guilt, but you’ve got to tell me the truth…” He spun around, glaring at her. “About everything… Okay?”

“Umm… Johnny thinks I was pregnant… And that I had a miscarriage. We used the lie to… to guilt him into joining.”

Roy ran his hand through his hair, trying his best to sort through the information he had just received. How could a fake pregnancy cause Johnny to… Roy’s eyes widened in shock. “Are… Did you and Johnny… Um… Did he think that… he was the… father?”

“No, no… Nothing like that. Johnny and I haven’t… you know, but… He thinks that the miscarriage was his fault, because he and Lily broke the rules, and…” She shook her head, hearing how ridiculous the tale sounded to her own ears.

Roy sat in the chair beside the bed, looking bewildered as he thought about what she had just said. So Johnny hadn’t really wanted to join the cult? Did that mean he would be willing to leave? But what about Lily?

“So… Let me get this straight. You told Johnny you were pregnant. Then he and Lily broke some kind of rule, or something… And then you told him that you lost the baby because of it?”

She looked down at her lap. “That’s not exactly how it happened, but that’s about the gist of it.”

“So then… he doesn’t know? That you didn’tmiscarry?”

Gretchen shook her head, swiping the tissues beneath her nose and tossing them into the wastebasket beside her bed. “No… He doesn’t know that I was never pregnant. I guess he thinks I left… because I was upset about… about losing the baby. I don’t know what Lily told him.”

“Why? Why would she tell him anything? Did you lie to her, too?” Roy continued his questions, knowing he was being harsh with her, but he was beginning to have a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Gretchen shook her head, staring down at her lap. “No… She was in on it.”

Roy felt as if he had been kicked in the groin. Lily was in on the lie? If what Beverly had suspected was true, that Johnny was in love with Lily, then finding out that she was a part of a scheme to trap him, was going to be devastating to Johnny.

“What?” He nearly shouted, his anger boiling to the surface.

Gretchen sniffled, pushing her words past the lump in her throat. “God, I feel so stupid… See, Roy… Lily knew Johnny when they were kids, and… And seeing him again made her happy… Happier than I’ve ever seen her. She told me that,” Gretchen looked down at her lap, unable to look at Roy’s face. “She said that she didn’t think that Johnny would join. She thought he was there to convince her to leave, and… And she wanted me to help…”

“By lying to Johnny about being pregnant?” Roy asked.
Gretchen curled her long blonde hair behind her ear. “Two of us had been chosen to…” She stopped, not wanting to tell Roy the truth.

“To…,” Roy was growing frustrated by her hesitation. “Come on, Gretchen. This is serious.”

She snifflled again, her eyes remaining locked on the blanket covering her. “To have Father Hiram’s babies.”

Roy felt his stomach roll as he thought of Gretchen being used in such a dreadful way. “But you said you weren’t pregnant, right?”

“I wasn’t… He had us on a special diet. Said we had to be cleansed and purified before we could carry his heirs.”

“So you and Lily just decided to lie about the whole thing? And Hiram agreed to it?”

“Lily and Father Hiram devised the plan… And James was in on it, too… I’m sorry… I wish I could change what I’ve done. I…”

“James? The guy who found Mike?” Roy asked, feeling his own blood pressure rising as he thought about his friend being manipulated. He had always been somewhat protective of his partner, thinking of him as if he were a younger brother. Hearing that his best friend had been deceived, by people he trusted, was infuriating him. Johnny had always been a trusting person, even with people others didn’t believe in at all. Now, his naivety had been exploited, and Roy was incensed.

“Yes… James was going to get promoted… with one more convert. Johnny just happened to be the next man to show up, and… God, I wish they HAD killed me,” she wept, sinking back into the bed, her head beginning to throb.

Roy felt torn between feeling sorry for Gretchen for being the victim of a murder attempt, and feeling bitterness and hatred for her part in Johnny’s predicament. He knew he should make a disagreeing comment about what she had just said, but he couldn’t make himself do it. He was mad, and growing madder by the second.

“If anything happens to him… I’ll never forgive myself. And I know that you fellas won’t forgive me, either. I don’t blame you,” she said, sniffling again. “Please… I… I need to be alone.”

Roy stood up, unsure of what to say, or do next. He stood beside her bed for a moment, staring at the downcast face of the weeping young woman, then turned to exit the room. As he reached for the door, he heard her call out his name.

“Roy?”

“Yea?” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

“No one else knows.”

Roy stood stunned, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion. “About the… fabricated pregnancy?” he asked.

“About the overdose,” she clarified. “Everyone thinks it was an accident… Even Amy.”
Roy looked over his shoulder at her. “You mean you didn’t report it to the police?” His blue eyes narrowed with concern.

Gretchen shook her head, knowing that Roy would not agree with her decision.

“If someone tried to kill you, then they need to be punished,” Roy said, turning back around to face her again, beginning to doubt her story. “If they aren’t stopped, then they may try it again… to someone else.”

“I wasn’t the first,” Gretchen said, weakly. She felt the heat of his stare, slowly lifting her face to look at him through swollen eyes. She recalled the mumbled voices of the men in the back of the car who had tried to kill her. She knew she was the tenth person they had done this to, and she shivered. “I was just the first to survive.”

“Who?”

Gretchen shot him a quick glance. “Me.”

“No, I mean who did this to you? James? Hiram?”

She rapidly shook her head, sinking further into the bed. “Not… Them.”

Roy saw her trembling in fear and knew wasn’t going to give him the names of those involved. “Then you need to do the right thing… Gretchen, you’ve got to stop them. You don’t deserve… No one deserves that,” he said, waving his hand at the bruises along the back of her wrist. “Murder is a very serious crime. And if they’ve done it before, then you HAVE to make sure they don’t have the chance to try it again… ‘Cause the next person probably WON’T survive,” he responded with a stern expression, hiding the way his heart was beating frantically against his rib cage.

“I-I can’t… What if…” The rest of her statement remained unspoken, cut off by Roy’s hasty remark.

“What if the next victim is Johnny?”

Roy waited for an answer, knowing he wasn’t going to get one. He watched as Gretchen closed her eyes, curling onto her side with her back to him. She was shutting him out, ignoring his comments. Their conversation was obviously over.

Roy exited her room without saying goodbye. He was too angry to even speak to her. He sighed, walking briskly down the corridor toward the elevators. He didn’t know what to do, but he knew he had to update his shiftmates because the situation was even worse than they thought.

E!

Ronald Crockett sat down behind his desk, seeing the yellow slip of paper beside his phone. Picking it up, he read the message.

‘Call Special Agent Adams – ASAP! Urgent!’

He recognized the handwriting as that of the secretary for his division. Sighing, he picked up the telephone, dialing the familiar number.

“Adams, speaking,” the disembodied voice on the other end stated.

“Hey, man. This is Crockett. What’s up?”

“Thanks for calling me back so quickly. We uh… We’ve talked to our undercover man again and…”
We have a situation.”

The detective pinched the bridge of his nose as he listened to the special agent explain the details of the latest development. He felt his stomach tighten up in knots. How was he going to explain this to the men of 51’s… And to Iris.

“Shit!” he cursed into the phone. “I guess we’ve got to change our tactic.”

“We need your help with this, Crockett, but you can’t let those firemen know what’s going on…”

“Well, that won’t be an easy thing to do, Adams. They’ve got their mind set on this rescue, and…”

“I know, I know, but… You need to be a sort of… Double agent. Go along with what they’ve got planned, but we’ve got to add a slight twist to it… And you’re the key to making this whole thing work.”

Ron pressed his lips into a thin line, realizing that he had no other option. He picked up the yellow pencil that was laying on his desk and began tapping it on the edge of the phone. He didn’t like the tone in his friend’s voice, but he had known Special Agent Adams for many years. He was a man of integrity, and Ron had always trusted his judgment, but tonight was going to test the bonds of friendship, both with Adams and with the men of 51’s. Sighing into the phone, he acquiesced.

“Alright… I’ll do whatever it takes, man. Whatever it takes.”

As soon as Roy got home, he went straight to the telephone in the kitchen. He picked up the receiver, dialing the familiar number just as Joanne walked in from the laundry room.

“Roy?” She asked, propping the laundry basket on her hip. “What’s wrong?” She knew her husband well enough to know that something was bothering him.

“Things are worse than we thought with Johnny. Do we have enough food around for the guys to come over for lunch?” he asked, dialing the rotary phone.

“Um, yea… I went to the market yesterday. I’ve got soup in the freezer and we have lunchmeat and bread. Roy… Is Johnny in danger?”

“Yes… And Lily’s a part of the problem….” He heard the phone answered on the other end of the line. “Hey, Cap? It’s Roy. We’ve got to get the guys together again before we head up there. There’s been a development that changes everything.”

“What kind of development?”

“I’ll explain it later. Can you call Mike and Chet? I’ll call Marco and Crockett. We can meet here for lunch, alright?”

“Well, sure, Pal... What about Iris and the rest of the ladies?” Hank asked, assuming that Roy had just forgotten to include them in the list of attendees.

“The ladies will be fine, except for Iris; we can’t include her in this meeting. I’ll explain when you get here. Thanks, Cap.”

Roy hung up the phone, seeing the frightened look on Joanne’s face. “It’s bad, Jo.”

“Sounds like it,” she responded, embracing him. She rested her head on his chest, appreciating the
feel of his arms around her. “So you are you going to call Iris,” she stated, wondering why her former employer was being left out of the group that she had originally gotten together.

“Can’t,” he responded, pulling back to look into her green eyes. “Lily lied to Johnny to get him to join the cult. I don’t know how Iris would feel about that, so I don’t want her here.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story, but I went to Rampart when I got off shift. I wanted to talk to Gretchen, see what she could tell me about the cult.”

“Gretchen?” Joanne’s voice held a hint of disdain at the sound of the waitress’ name. It had not been very long ago that she thought Roy had cheated on her with the younger woman.

“She told me that she...” He waved his hand at her as he turned towards the refrigerator. He hadn’t eaten breakfast and was searching for a snack. “I’ll explain it all when the fellas get here, but Lily, Gretchen, and James all told a big lie to get Johnny to join that stupid group. Then Gretchen felt guilty about it and tried to leave, but somebody in the group tried to kill her,” he said, pulling out the bottle of orange juice, pouring a glassful. “Injected her with heroin.”

Joanne watched her husband drinking his juice, feeling as if he were overlooking the obvious. “Sounds like she’s just trying to blame her drug habit on someone else.”

“No,” Roy shot back. “You weren’t there, Jo. You didn’t see how upset she got when she was telling me about it. I… I believe her.”

“Really?” she questioned, crossing her arms.

“Yes, I do. I’m mad as hell at her for her part in this whole charade, but I DO believe her.”

Roy’s comment gave Joanne a sense of relief. If he was mad at Gretchen, then he probably wasn’t being tempted by her again. She walked to the place where he was standing. “I’m sorry, honey. Let me get the soup started heating up. Go ahead and make those phone calls,” she said with a slight smile, fighting to hide the fear that was developing in the pit of her stomach. Was Johnny at risk of a non-consensual heroin injection, too?

“Thanks,” he said, kissing her forehead. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you, too.”

E!

The men from 51’s arrived within a few minutes of each other; Crockett was the last to drive up, parking on the street in front of the DeSoto residence. Roy watched as the detective slammed his sedan’s door shut. Roy could tell that Crockett was stressed, and he could only assume it was because Iris was being left out of this particular meeting. He and Joanne had both noticed the way Ron and Iris had interacted at Iris’ house during their first meeting. There was definitely an attraction between them. Roy just hoped that it wouldn’t present a problem for Ron when he heard about Lily’s part in tricking Johnny.

“Hello,” Roy said, opening the door to welcome the detective into his home. “The others are in the kitchen making sandwiches and Joanne has a large pot of soup ready for us. Help yourself,” he said, waving his arm in the direction of the kitchen.

“Thanks, man. I could use a little food, but… I’ve got to ask you… Why is Iris barred from this
gathering?” His frustration had been simmering ever since Roy’s phone call inviting him over for lunch.

Roy swallowed back the bile creeping into his throat as he heard the iciness in Ron’s voice. “It’s not that she’s barred, Ron. It’s just that… You’ll understand when I explain what I found out this morning. Get something to eat, and then I’ll share what I learned.”

One by one, the men made their sandwiches, picked up their soup bowls, and headed out the door to the table on the DeSotos’ back deck. Joanne filled glasses with ice, and placed them and a pitcher of tea on a serving tray. When Roy returned inside for the drink tray, he leaned in, giving Joanne a kiss.

“Thanks, Honey. Please fix you a plate and join us. You need to hear this.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, her emerald eyes shining. “Are you sure you want me out there?” she asked, handing him the tray.

“Yes… Please.”

“Okay, but the next time we have the guys over, I want Johnny here,” she said, reaching for a bowl for her soup.

Roy gave her a pensive look, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Me, too.”

Twenty minutes later, the group had full stomachs and worried countenances. Everyone was lost in their own thoughts as Roy relayed the story he had learned from Gretchen. The men were looking at Roy, waiting for him to tell them what to do next, but that didn’t happen. Instead, it was Crockett who spoke up.

“This really doesn’t change anything, does it?” the detective asked.

“Sure it does,” Chet interjected. “If she’s a part of the problem, then-“

“She isn’t,” Marco spoke up, surprising the others.

“Whose side are you on, Marco?” the curly-haired lineman asked in frustration.

“Johnny’s… And Lily’s,” Mike said, looking across the table at Marco. Both men had been thinking the same thing.

“Lily is just as much a victim of Hiram as Johnny. So are Gretchen, James, and all the others who are up there.” Marco looked over at the detective. “Do you have any idea how many people are involved in this cult?”

Joanne stood up, removed the empty tea pitcher from the middle of the table, and headed back into the kitchen. “I’ll go make some more tea,” she announced, growing uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

“Thanks, Jo.”

“Listen fellas, I’ve got to call this in to the feds when we finish up here. They need to go talk to Gretchen, maybe even post a guard outside her hospital door.” The detective reached for his glass of tea, needing a refreshing drink as he considered all that he had heard. Tonight was going to be more difficult than he had initially thought. “To answer your question, Hank… From the intel the feds have gotten, there’s at least fifty… maybe more.”
Hank let out a long slow whistle. “That’s a lot of people in danger, and we don’t even know which ones are victims and which ones are… Well, the bad guys,” the fire captain stated, wondering how many of the members of the Unity Family were guilty of murder.

“I know,” Roy spoke up. “But I don’t see how you can put Johnny and Lily in the same category. Johnny was TRICKED into joining by Lily and-“

“Gretchen,” Chet shot back. He had aimed his verbal barb at Roy now that Joanne had left the group. He knew that it would be painful for the paramedic.

“They tried to KILL her, Chet!” Roy said in rebuttal. “And I was going to say James, not Gretchen.”

“But you aren’t pissed off at her for duping Gage into joining. Why does she get a free pass, huh?”

“Because she’s a victim, too!” Roy’s ruddy face was growing red in anger.

“Figured you’d say that,” Chet grumbled, feeling Marco’s elbow connect with his rib cage.

“They’re ALL victims, you twits!” Hank said, using his authoritative captain’s voice to stop the downward spiral of the conversation.

Ronald Crockett decided that now was the time to jump into the conversation before the men got into an even bigger argument. “Hank’s right. Part of the strategy groups like this use is to separate friends and families from their victims. It’s the old divide-and-conquer routine… And you fellas are falling right into their trap.”

“What do you mean by that?” Roy asked, cutting his eyes at Chet, daring the younger man to say another word.

“Just listen to yourselves,” Ron changed his tactic, using an analogy the firemen had used on him on more than one occasion. “How many times have you all told me that you aren’t the judge or jury? You help the bad guys along with their victims, giving everyone the same treatment, right? Hell, I’ve even seen you triage a robber and a cop, and you treated the robber FIRST! But it was because you gave both men the dignity and respect they deserved,” he rolled his eyes before he continued. “Even if I didn’t agree with you on that one, but if I can’t turn off being a cop, then I know you fellas can’t turn off being firemen. So stop…,” he hesitated, knowing his words were going to sound harsh, but that was what the men of 51’s needed. “Stop discriminating against these folks because they happened to be victimized by Hiram BEFORE Johnny was!” He was surprised at how protective he felt of Lily; a young woman he had never actually met.

“I think we all agree that Mike might not be with us today if James hadn’t found him,” Hank stated.

“You guys are right,” Marco spoke up. “Beverly and I have talked about this a lot lately. She’s told me about how, um… How pimps look for vulnerable women… play mind games with them. Provide what the women need, financially and emotionally, until they have them in their snare. This is the same thing, I think.”

“People are all the same; we all have the same needs and wants,” Mike said. “All it takes is one negative event to disrupt our lives, and make us susceptible to the weapons these… these monsters use.” The engineer looked around at the gathered group. “It could’ve been any one of us, but it was Johnny. Maybe hearing about the upcoming trial just brought all that… all that shit from Selma back up in his head,” Mike cursed, uncharacteristically. “Maybe that was the trigger, and Lily’s presence at the cult was his… His weakness,” he said, remembering how he felt about rescuing Lexi from her traffickers. “Cap’s right… James saved my life, and so did Chet, Roy, and Johnny. I won’t ever turn
my back on anyone of you, and that includes Johnny… And James.”

“Over this last year, or so, we’ve all been through a lot of shit, Mike,” Chet mumbled in agreement.
“I guess it was just Johnny’s turn, huh?” he questioned, his own mind reflecting on his life before
Caroline and Corrie entered it.

“He was there for me and Becca,” Hank added, thinking about the times Johnny had changed
Becca’s bandages after their kitchen fire.

“Me and Joanne, too,” Roy added.

“He stood up for me with you, Cap, even when he probably shouldn’t’ve,” Chet stated. “Even after
all those times I played jokes on him, planted water bombs, made negative comments about his…,”
the junior linemen felt the lump forming in his throat, cutting off his words. He had been relentless
about Johnny’s heritage early in their careers, something he deeply regretted.

Mike snickered as he recalled Johnny’s antics with Leonard Hunley. “He straightened ole’ Lennie’s
nose after I broke it.”

“He always treated Lexi with kindness. He treated her like a person, not like the object that so many
others did,” Marco mused. He lifted his eyes, looking at the men who were sitting around the table.
“You all did, and… And my family and I will never forget it.”

Mike clapped his hand on the back of Marco’s neck. “Strange how things work out, sometimes. Chet
has Caroline and Corrie, now… You have Beverly because of everything you went through with
Lexi… And Lexi, Antonio, and I are, uh, enjoying spending time together, all because I was helping
out a friend, a brother,” he said, squeezing Marco’s neck.

“Sounds like two marriages were saved,” Ron added with a soft smile, “and there will be wedding
bells ringing real soon,” he said with a grin aimed at Chet. “And maybe others, too.”

Chet smiled back, his blush coloring the tips of his ears. “Yea… Johnny’s made a real difference in
all our lives, hasn’t he?”

“And we’ll make a difference in his,” Hank said. “That’s what brothers, er, families do,” he
corrected, remembering all the women and children involved.

Joanne opened the door, returning with a fresh pitcher of iced tea. “Anyone need refills?”

Several men picked up their glasses, offering Joanne wide smiles for her hospitality.

“Sometimes it takes problems to set us on a better path,” Ron said.

Roy and Joanne exchanged knowing glances. They’re relationship had grown after they had endured
their own problem. “Speaking of that,” Roy began, nodding in Ron’s direction. “Seems you might
be on a new pathway, yourself.”

Ron drew his eyebrows together. “How so?”

“A certain red-haired florist seems to brighten up whenever you’re around,” Roy snickered.

Ron cleared his throat, knowing he couldn’t deny the truth. He did enjoy spending time with Iris, and
he had wondered if she felt the same way. Now it seemed that Roy thought she did.

“Ahem, anyway, so are we still on for tonight?” the detective asked the group. He smiled when he
heard the chorus of affirmations. Perhaps the lunch gathering had been a good idea after all. He relinquished the negative thoughts he had been having since receiving Roy’s phone call. It seemed that the group was willing to give Lily another chance, seeing them as victims instead of perpetrators. Maybe, just maybe, their plan would work… At least, part of it would.

“Alright, men, let’s get ourselves geared up for the trip,” Hank said, extricating his long legs from the picnic table where he had been sitting. “It’s going to be a long night.”

E!

Darkness was falling, as well as the temperatures, in the Tehachapi Mountain compound of the Holistic Unity Family. Johnny and Lily sat around one of the many fire pits, enjoying the sounds of Ian playing his wooden flute near the pit nearest them. Johnny closed his eyes, his mind drifting back to the days of his youth when his uncle would play the same type of melodic music while his family sat around a crackling outdoor fire. It was both soothing and haunting to the young man. Slowly, he ran his thumb across the back of Lily’s hand, relishing the feel of her petite hand in his larger one. He had missed her more than he had realized.

“More tea?” James asked, walking up to the young couple, his voice sounding as mellow as the soft notes from Ian’s instrument.

“Nah, I’ve had enough. Thanks, man,” Johnny spoke up, wanting to remain alert again tonight.

“Oh, come on, Thorn. Just a little more won’t hurt you. You’re tense, and you said you were still sore,” Lily said, shifting her position so that she was kneeling behind him, kneading his shoulders. She gave James a knowing look as she continued to encourage Johnny to consume a little more. “I’ll drink a little more with you.”

James nodded at her in appreciation. He knew what was going to happen later in the evening, and having Johnny a little groggy might make the plan easier.

“I’ll be right back,” the young woman offered, standing up and carding her fingers through Johnny’s dark hair. She knew he couldn’t resist her touch.

James sat down in the spot that she had vacated. “So tell me, Brother John, how are you acclimating to life with us?”

“Fairly well, I think.” Johnny stretched out his legs, leaning back on one elbow. He jerked his head in the direction of the fire pit to their left. “Ian’s pretty good. Reminds me of the sounds of my childhood,” he said with his lopsided grin.

“Music is comforting to the soul. Ian was my first convert. He’s thriving here… You will, too,” James spoke in a soft, lilting voice.

“Here you go,” Lily said, kneeling down beside Johnny so that the paramedic was between her and James. She sipped her own tea, watching to make sure that Johnny drank his, as well.

As Johnny lifted the cup to his mouth, he missed the satisfied look that passed between Lily and James.

Suddenly, a distant clanging of a bell made Johnny sit up straighter. “Uh-oh,” he mumbled, knowing that the bell ringing was the same as a doorbell sounding at his apartment back in Los Angeles. It meant that someone was requesting admittance to the compound, or else, someone was lost.

The flute playing abruptly stopped, and Johnny watched as Ian trotted off to the vespa-like vehicle. It
was his turn to answer the call. Johnny continued sipping the honey-sweetened tea, enjoying the nights’ conversation with his two friends. Momentarily, the cart approached the fire pit where the three had been visiting with each other.

“There’s three folks at the gate, James. They said they need to talk to you.”

James stood up, brushing the dust off the seat of his pants. “Male or female?”

“Two male, one female,” Ian replied.

James sighed, tugging on his long beard. “I see... Do you mind going up there with me? It is probably my brothers and sister, and I do not want to be alone with them.”

“I don’t think so,” Ian answered, remembering the dark eyes and hair of the young woman, contrasted by the light skin and blue eyes of the men. It was doubtful that all three were related to each other, or to James.

“Well, if it is not my family, and if one of them is a female, I would really like to have witnesses with me, especially you, Sister Lily,” he said, his eyes pleading for Lily to join them.

“Sure, we’ll go,” Johnny said standing, swaying slightly. “Whoa.”

“Are you okay, Thorn?” Lily asked, grasping his arm.

“Yea... Jus’ stood up too fast,” Johnny said, offering her his sideways smile.

James looked over at Ian. “Please go tell them that I am on my way. There is not enough room in the cart for all of us to ride so we will walk.” He turned to Johnny. “Are you able to walk, now?”

“Oh, yea,” the paramedic responded, offering his elbow to Lily. “I’m good.”

The three of them began the quarter mile walk to the entrance of the compound, while Ian rode ahead in the small cart. James inhaled deeply, dreading the task that lay ahead of him, but it was something that he had agreed to do, and James was a man of his word.
Chapter 20

Chet Kelly’s Volkswagen van was parked at a slight angle to the wrought-iron gate, beneath the overhanging “Holistic Unity Gardens” sign. The passenger’s side was hidden from the view of those inside the compound, concealing two of the members of the rescue mission who were crouching down beside the side door. The night sky was littered with sparkling stars, stars that always seemed hidden in the bright lights of Los Angeles. It took a while for the eyes of those gathered to adjust to the darkness; the compound was in an area so remote that no street lights had ever been installed.

Eventually the light of the full moon seemed to cast a blue tone on the surroundings, creating shadows along the fence and edge of the road where Crockett’s gold-colored sedan was hidden from view. The second car was brought along in the hopes that the group of seven would be leaving with two additional people in just a little while.

The junior lineman leaned his hips against the grill of his vehicle, his heart thudding at the base of his throat. He wasn’t sure that he was the best choice to be front and center for this meeting, but if their plan was going to work, then he had to do his part. Chet looked over at his two cohorts, Beverly and Mike. Both of them seemed to be just as nervous as he was. The Irishman had thought that Roy would be taking the lead, but reluctantly, Roy had conceded that he was not the best person for Johnny to see at this point. Their last encounter had not gone well, and the group did not want a repeat of that event. They had agreed to allow Beverly to join them, hoping that having another female close by might ease Lily’s mind. The counselor was street wise, and knew how to defuse the situation should it begin to spiral out of control. But if their attempt for a peaceful resolution failed, then the rest of the crew hiding nearby would provide the muscle for the not-so-peaceful alternate plan.

Mike stood near the front quarter panel of the van, leaning against the vehicle with his forearms while Roy and Marco crouched along the van, just to his left. He watched as Beverly found a comfortable position on Mike’s right. Clearly she was positioning herself so that Marco could see her from his hiding place on the far side of the vehicle, away from the gate. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike caught a glimpse of Marco dropping down to a kneeling position. He wanted to reassure his friend that Beverly was safe with him, that he would look out for her just like he looked out for his shiftmates at every fire, but Marco’s eyes were closed and his head was bowed. Mike saw Roy leaning in closely at Marco’s side, placing a comforting hand on the lineman’s shoulder.

Hiding along the privacy fence were Hank and Crockett. The two men were standing with their shoulders against the wooden planks, poised and ready to intervene.

Crockett leaned his head against the hard wood of the fence, closing his eyes in dread. He suspected he knew the outcome of this endeavor, and he hated the role he was going to have to play in it. He respected the men of 51’s, even considered them to be brothers. He listened to the sounds of the quiet night around him. The cricket’s chirping and the gentle rustling of the fall leaves created a natural harmony of peacefulness. That peacefulness was about to be broken, and he inhaled a deep, anxious breath.

Hank stared at the ground, noticing the slight shadow the light of the full moon created. He thought of how different this area was from the bright lights of Los Angeles, considered the contrast of the flashing lights and sirens he used on most rescues, and compared it to the night noises and eerie shadows of the Tehachapi Mountains. Silently, he prayed that this night would end with the
reunification of 51’s family, and Iris’ reunion with Lily.

Chet could have sworn that Mike and Beverly could hear his blood rushing through his veins, pulsing to an adrenaline-induced rhythm. This was it. This was what they had been planning for, and he hoped that they would be successful. Johnny had been a major part of Chet’s own rescue during the lowest part of his life. Now the Irishman wanted to return the favor, to save his friend and brother from what might be the biggest mistake of his life.

Mike and Chet stood up straighter when they heard the faint hum of the cart returning. Silently, Marco made the sign of the cross, then readied himself for whatever they were about to do. He and Beverly exchanged quick nods, their actions acknowledging their readiness for what lay ahead. Roy inhaled deeply, exhaling a cleansing breath. He pressed his fingertips against the cold metal van behind him, using it to steady his nerves.

Mike coughed into his closed hand, mentally rehearsing the conversation he was about to have with James… and, he hoped, Johnny.

Chet and Mike looked at each other with worry-filled eyes. Only one man was in the cart. Had their plan already failed? Both men stepped closer to the gate, anxious for what the bearded man might tell them.

“I have spoken with Brother James,” Ian began, leaning back in the seat of the cart, “and he wanted me to let you know that he will be here, momentarily.”

Mike took the lead, wrapping his hands around the iron bars, feeling as if a large stone had dropped into his belly. “Thank you for taking him the message.”

“Are you relatives of Brother James?” Ian asked, feeling a need to fill the awkward silence that soon settled between them.

“Um, no,” Mike began, “but he… he saved my life a few months ago. I was in an accident near here,” he said, jerking his head to his left. “I would’ve… I would’ve died if he hadn’t found me. I wanted to, ah… to thank him for what he did for me.”

“Kind of late for you to be out in the wilderness tonight, isn’t it?” Ian continued.

“Well, we were meeting up with some friends near here,” Beverly said, thinking of the rest of the men from 51’s who were hiding so close by. She stepped forward, stepping between Mike and Chet. “And since we were so close to the accident scene, we just couldn’t leave without properly thanking James for saving Michael.”

Mike nodded his head in agreement, giving her a shy smile.

Ian, looking over at the woman standing between the two firemen, continued his questioning. “And you are…?”

“Beverly Marsh… And this is Chet Kelly,” she introduced.

“I’m Ian,” the man stated, tugging at his beard before returning his gaze to Mike. “I do remember the accident. I’m glad that my family was able to save you,” he said, dipping his head in Mike’s direction. “Brother James and a couple of friends are walking here from the compound. These carts aren’t very powerful,” he said, looking down at the tiny vehicle in which he was riding, “and it would have been crowded for four people, anyway, so he and Brother John and Sister Lily decided
to walk up here. They should be here in just a few minutes.”

“Thank you, Ian,” Mike responded. “May we come in?”

“Brother James has the key. It is his decision to make.”

Ian accelerated the small cart, moving it out of the way of the gate and parking it along the side of the privacy fence. He stepped out of it, but remained only a few short steps away.

“We understand,” Beverly commented, wanting to keep the bearded man as calm as possible. She wasn’t sure if he was the FBI agent, or if James might be, but she didn’t want to do anything to alarm anyone… At least not until she knew which man was their ally.

E!

Walking down the pathway, beyond the knoll, Johnny and Lily held hands as they walked behind James. The air was cool, making the warmth of their handholding seem even more enjoyable. Johnny inhaled deeply, nearly stumbling along the path in his current condition. As they walked over the rise of the hill, Johnny suddenly stopped. He narrowed his eyes, staring at the entrance to the compound, and the familiar faces standing outside the gate.

“Damn it,” he whispered, his sudden halt causing Lily to turn back to look at him.

“What? What’s wrong, Thorn?” she asked, looking up at Johnny.

“Uh, James, I… I know them,” Johnny warned, his words causing James to look back at him.

“Do you fear them?” James questioned, hoping to appeal to the ego of the paramedic. He had agreed to get Johnny to the gate tonight, and he didn’t want anything going wrong when they were this close.

Johnny continued to stare beyond the gate, his pulse rate quickening when he saw his three friends talking to Ian. Slowly, he shook his head. “No, I… I’m not afraid of them, but… I think they might be here to talk to me, instead of you.” Roy’s absence was obvious, and Johnny’s heart sank. Had Roy been injured… or worse? Had Christopher had post-op complications? Why was Beverly here without Marco? Was Marco injured? The young paramedic closed his eyes, feeling a gentle squeeze on his hand by Lily.

“They asked for me, John,” James stated in a calming tone, gently pulling Johnny out of his worry-filled musings. “It was I who asked you to come with me to the entrance, remember?”

Johnny thought for a moment, then slowly continued his walk towards the entrance of the compound, his body struggling to follow the commands of his drug-induced mind. Why had they asked for James? Something was definitely wrong. The nervous paramedic felt a lump forming in his throat. This had to be bad news.

When the awaiting trio from Operation 51 realized that Johnny was approaching, Beverly clenched her teeth tightly. She had been a part of the rescues of many women from the streets, but those women wanted to leave their environments. She was afraid that Johnny and Lily might feel differently.

James approached the small group at the gate, sensing that the couple were staying several feet behind him. He reached into his pocket, withdrawing the key to the lock.

“Hello, Michael Stoker,” James acknowledged, “You are looking much better than the last time I
“And I have you to thank for that, James. That’s why we’re here,” the engineer stated, waving Chet and Beverly forward. “This is Chet and Beverly… They’re friends of mine… and Johnny’s,” he said, looking beyond James to the place where Johnny and Lily stood.

“You are very welcome, Michael,” James said, unlocking the padlock on the gate. “Please come inside, but you must leave your vehicle out there,” he instructed, opening up the gate.

“Thank you,” Mike relayed, being the first to enter the compound.

“I’d like to introduce you to Brother Ian whom you have no doubt already met, Sister Lily, and… you already know our newest member, Brother John,” James said.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Beverly said, politely. She looked around at the surroundings inside the fenced in area. “It’s so peaceful here.”

“We like it,” Lily said, her voice sounding meek.

“James,” Chet said, extending his hand to the bearded man. “I wanted to thank you for what you did for Mike, too. I came here with Gage,” he said, dipping his head in Johnny’s direction, “and another friend of ours, Roy DeSoto.” He watched Johnny’s face blanch when he mentioned Roy’s name.

“My family and I are here to serve those in need. I’m glad that I was in the right place at the right time, and that Father Hiram was able to heal your wounds,” he said, turning his attention to the taller of the two men.

Mike blushed, feeling a hint of anger at the sound of the religious guru’s name. “Well, I don’t know if it was your, uh, leader, Dr. Buchanan at the Tehachapi Hospital, or the fact that I’m just too stubborn to die in an accident, but I will always be grateful that you found me.”

There was a brief pause in the conversation. Beverly was about to speak up when Mike made the next move.

“Say, uh, James… Do you mind if we talk to Johnny and Lily alone?” Mike asked, hoping for some time alone with the young couple.

“Can’t do that,” James shot back. “Too many of our people have been kidnapped… We can’t allow that to happen again. Say what you want to them, but you must say it in front of Ian and myself.”

“We aren’t here to take anyone against their will,” Chet corrected. “We just want to talk to ‘em.”

“It’s okay,” Beverly spoke up, negotiating for the group. “We’re not hiding anything, but… you will let us say what we want, right?” she asked, needing James’ agreement.

As if reconsidering the situation, James spoke up. “On second thought, you may speak privately, as long as Brother Ian and I are standing at the gate to block any attempt to take them by force,” James said, nodding for Ian to go to the gate. “Brother John, Sister Lily… it is your choice. Do you wish to hear what they have to say?” James asked, looking at the young couple for a response. He discreetly gave Lily a slight nod.

“It’s okay, Thorn. Our brothers will be here with us. Let these guests say what they want and then they will be on their way. We are safe,” she said, taking a step forward, encouraging Johnny to agree to the conversation.
Johnny’s muddled brain continued to struggle to process what was happening. His legs felt weak, his body was trembling, and a fine sheen of sweat had broken out along his brow. He felt heart palpitations in his upper chest and swallowed back the bile that was burning his throat. He saw the concerned look on Mike’s face as he walked nearer, and he suddenly felt like a cornered animal. Something was wrong. His stomach muscles tightened; the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. It was the same warning his body gave him when he and Roy were entering a dangerous situation, and he had learned to listen to his gut.

“Why are you here… really?” Johnny questioned, narrowing his eyes at the tall engineer.

“We want to make sure that you’re happy here,” Mike responded.

Johnny didn’t believe the engineer. He slowly shook his head from side to side. “No… No, there’s somethin’ else. Why? Did something hap-happen to one o’ the guys? Is… ‘s Roy o-okay?” the paramedic asked, feeling light-headed and slurring his words. “Mar-co?” he questioned, his dark eyes shifting to Beverly.

Hidden from view, Roy felt his eyes beginning to burn. Johnny’s first question was about him. Was there hope for their friendship to be restored? He hoped so. He silently sniffled, finding it difficult to remain in hiding.

“No one’s hurt, John.” Beverly jumped right into the conversation. She was accustomed to taking control of emotional rescues, and in her mind, this was no different. She began slowly moving forward. “They’re all fine,” she said, encouraged when Johnny remained still. “Well… not exactly fine. They miss you, we all miss you, John… Especially Roy.”

Johnny turned his head to the side slightly, arching an eyebrow at Beverly while squeezing Lily’s hand. “Then… Why… Why isn’t he… h-here?”

“Would you be willing to talk to him if he were here?” Mike asked. He knew how close the paramedics were and he hoped to tug on Johnny’s heartstrings.

“M-maybe… Depends…,” Johnny commented, noncommittally.

James and Lily exchanged a look that did not go unnoticed by Beverly. She filed it away, needing to focus on Johnny at the moment.

“Johnny, are you happy?” Beverly repeated, getting right to the point.

“It’s peaceful h-here,” the junior medic responded, carefully avoiding the question. “I love bein’ ou-outdoors.”

“You love being a fireman and paramedic, too…” Beverly continued, pushing him for answers.

“Um,” Johnny struggled to respond to Beverly’s questions. This wasn’t right. They had come here to speak to James, hadn’t they? Why was he the center of their conversation? “I need to be… here,” he said, pulling Lily closer to his side.

“With Lily?” the counselor asked, her eyes giving him a warm approval.

“Yea,” Johnny replied, beginning to feel more unsteady on his feet.

“Johnny, please…” Mike took a step forward, but was stunned when Johnny inched backwards,
tugging on Lily’s hand to follow him. He stopped his forward progress, not wanting to cause Johnny
to run. “Listen, just… Please, just talk to us for a few minutes, okay?”

Beverly picked up the conversation. “If this is such a good place, then why must you give up what
you love doing? Why should you leave those you love behind?”

“I don’t wanna… leave those I love… b’hind,” Johnny stammered, leaning into Lily, slightly. After
all, she was the reason he was here. He had given up everything in order to save her. He needed to
convince her to leave with him, to go back to Selma and support him during the murder trial… to
return to her mother… And perhaps one day to make a life with him. But she wasn’t going to leave
willingly at this point, and he knew it. He had to stay until he could convince her to leave with him,
which would take more time. His respiration rate increased as the realization hit him that he might not
have more time with her.

Beverly watched the body language of those present. It was obvious to her that Johnny was
struggling with his words. Had he been drugged tonight? James was behaving oddly, seeming to
back out of the conversation, even though it had originally been about him. He had to be the FBI
agent, she surmised, but what about Ian?

Mike sensed Beverly’s discomfort and decided to press on with the conversation. “Johnny… Let’s
talk about a friend of ours that the two of you know… Gretchen McDowell.”

“How?” Johnny asked, knitting his eyebrows together.

“Gretchen… The waitress,” Chet clarified.

“She isn’t here,” Lily said, without being asked. “She went h-home,” she said, her voice cracking,
fearing that she knew the fate of the young woman.

“No, she didn’t,” Chet spat out. “She lied about being pregnant, faked a miscarriage, then tried to
leave, but someone here didn’t want her to go.”

“That’s not true,” Lily retorted, fearful of what she was about to hear.

“Yes, it is,” Beverly spoke up. “She was never pregnant… But you know that, Lily,” Beverly said
softly. “And when she tried to leave, someone here shot her up with heroin… tried to kill her.”

Johnny’s eyes were as wide as saucers as his addled brain tried to sort out the details of what he had
just heard. “Wha- What?”

“That’s right, Gage,” Chet took a step closer to his friend. “You were lied to by these… friends of
yours,” the lineman spat out.

“There was no pregnancy. She lied about that AND about the miscarriage. She was desperate to get
out of here, but when she asked to leave, she was escorted away. Someone here injected her with
heroin, then dumped her near the garbage bins behind The Pourhouse, Johnny,” Mike relayed. “Left
her for dead, but Amy found her… and called us.”

Lily was stunned by what she was hearing. “Then… Gretchen’s… alive?”

“No thanks to you,” Chet shot back, realizing that the young woman had basically admitted that she
thought the young waitress was dead.
Mike intervened to prevent Chet from saying anything more. “We got to her in time... Roy and... and his temporary partner managed to save her. She’s at Rampart now, recovering. Why don’t you two go talk to her, let her tell you the truth.”

Lily and Johnny looked at each other, then back at the trio in front of them. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lily argued, her throat beginning to constrict. “No one here would hurt her.”

“We speak only the truth,” Beverly commented, reassuring Lily with her nonjudgmental eyes. “Someone here DID hurt her, but they failed to kill her.”

James shifted his weight, nervously. He had not counted on Beverly’s convincing ways, and he wondered if his own covert mission was about to be compromised. Lily knew the details of the inner workings of the Holistic Unity Gardens family, and James had convinced her to work with him to remove Hiram Gardner from power. Now, that plan seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

For Johnny, the pieces were just beginning to come together in his drug-affected mind, and he didn’t like the picture that was forming. His chocolate eyes scanned the faces of those present. He saw compassion and caring in the blue eyes of Mike and Chet. He looked at Beverly’s dark green eyes, seeing only sincerity there. He shifted his gaze to the fearful eyes of Lily, noting her rapid respirations, and perspiration-soaked forehead glistening in the moonlight. Then slowly his eyes drifted to the bearded face of James. What he saw there made his stomach turn. James seemed to be growing angry, and emotion Johnny had never seen James display.

“Lily, Johnny… Why don’t the two of you come with us? We’ll take you to Rampart to see Gretchen. Talk to her yourselves, find out the truth straight from her,” Mike suggested.

Johnny continued staring at the two men of the cult. Had he just learned the truth about James’ late night activities? Was this why James spent time whispering to Ian when they thought no one else was listening? Had James been the one who tried to kill Gretchen?

“You know that we would never lie to you, John,” Beverly added, seeing Johnny’s doubts written on his face. “We’re your friends, your family, and we don’t hurt those we love.” She waited for her words to hit their mark.

“You... knew this?” Johnny asked, not realizing how soft his voice was projecting due to the unknown drugs he had consumed. His voice was not quite loud enough to carry across the distance to where James and Ian were standing although his eyes were obviously addressing the bearded duo.

James noticed that Johnny was speaking to him, but wasn’t sure what had been said. “Brother John? Did you say something?” he asked, walking closer to his recruit.

Johnny remained stoic, unmoving as his brain continued to put the pieces together. Beverly noticed his hesitancy and knew that he was beginning to believe them. She knew she needed to continue with her plan.

“Lily… You’re mother loves you, and she’s very sorry she didn’t tell you the truth about your grandparents,” Beverly said.

Lily’s round eyes widened. “You… You know my mother?”

Johnny stared at the counselor, his attention suddenly jerked back to Beverly and Lily. “What’d... you say?”
“That’s right, John. We know Iris Campbell… and we know who she is to Lily… and to you,” Beverly said.

“NO!” Lily gasped, releasing her grip on Johnny’s hand and covering her mouth. “You… How… how do you know that!” She gasped, shaking her head.

“It’s true,” Chet commented. “We’ve talked to her and she… she told us everything, Johnny. And… We…we want to help you, man… be there for you when ya-“

“NO!” Johnny yelled, his carefully constructed world falling to pieces around him, the secrets he had spent years hiding seemingly exposed. “She… told… you?”

“Please, Johnny,” Mike spoke up, reaching out for Johnny’s shoulder. He felt the younger man shrinking out of his grasp. “I know it’s a shock, but… Johnny, Iris loves you and Lily, both. She wants you both to come home.”

Johnny’s head was pounding, his blood rushing in his ears. Everything was happening too quickly. He was dizzy, his world was spinning… “Nu-um, We… Lily?”

Lily’s face became deathly pale. She had been trapped in the cult for several years, believing that to attempt to leave the group would mean certain death. Over time, she had grown to trust a couple of other members of the group. Gretchen, who was in the same situation as herself, and James – the man who had only recently disclosed his true identity to Lily. Together, they had devised the plan that was about to be implemented in just a few hours. She had reluctantly agreed to assist in getting Johnny out of harm’s way by walking with him to the front gate. What she had not counted on was having her own mother brought up during the process. Now as she stood at the gate, hearing how much her mother loved her and wanted her home, her already tortured heart seemed to shatter.

“NO! Nooooo! Go away!” Lily yelled at the group, turning to run back towards the compound.

The scene seemed to unfold slowly to Johnny’s drug-induced mind, but in reality, it happened in only a few seconds. Lily turned to run as fast as she could back towards the compound. Chet lunged for Johnny as Mike gave chase to the departing young woman. James grabbed onto Mike’s shirt as the engineer turned to run after Lily, creating just enough of a delay to allow Ian to pull away in the cart, desperate to help the young woman escape. The men hiding behind the privacy fence and Chet’s van rushed through the open gate. Hank grabbed Johnny, helping Chet contain the thrashing man. Marco, worried about the woman he loved, ushered Beverly away from the scene and into Crockett’s sedan at the edge of the road. Roy, secure in the knowledge that his partner was being taken care of, shot past James, heading to offer his assistance to his engineer, running as fast as he could to help Mike intercept Lily. Ian drove past Mike, wedging the cart between Mike and Lily, allowing her to slip over the knoll before Mike and Roy reached her. Ian stepped out of the cart, tackling Mike to prevent his catching the young woman.

“Umph!”

A few steps behind them, James saw Roy slowing down because of the skirmish developing in front of them, and he managed to waylay the paramedic.

“Ugh!”

The two pairs of fighting men rolled around on the ground, exchanging blows, while Lily slipped from their view. Crockett, the only man involved in Operation 51 who actually knew what was happening, ran over to the place where the four men were fighting with each other.
“Hold it! Break it up!” He said, pulling Mike off of Ian.

By the time Crockett had the first pair separated, Marco had returned and was breaking up the fight between Roy and James.

“Cut it out!” Marco yelled.

“She’s getting away, Marco,” Roy yelled, twisting to escape from the grips of his lineman.

“She’s already… GOTTEN away…, Desoto,” Crockett said, breathlessly, trying to restrain Mike.

“What the hell are you doing?” Roy argued, swearing uncharacteristically as he stared at the detective.

“Keeping you out o’ jail for assault, I hope!” Crockett shouted. “We’re on private property, man! You can’t say you were acting in self-defense!”

“But-“ Mike began, quickly cut off by Ian.

“I want to press charges, officer!” Ian shouted, watching as James used his shirt sleeve to remove the blood from the corner of his mouth.

“Go check on her,” James said to Ian, nodding in the direction Lily had taken as she fled.

Crockett looked back at Mike and Roy. “Lemme talk to ‘im,” he suggested. “Go check on Johnny.”

“Come on, fellas,” Marco encouraged, unhappy with what had just occurred.

Mike and Roy slowly acquiesced. Roy gave one last glaring look at James, feeling the swelling beginning along his left cheekbone.

As soon as Crockett was sure that the three firemen were out of hearing range, he turned his back to them and addressed James, directly.

“That was close,” the detective whispered, discreetly removing the zippered pouch from his jacket. He handed it to James, making sure that no one saw what he was doing.

James winced, stretching his arm out to accept the zippered pouch. “I see your… friends can do more than… fight fires,” he heaved, grimacing as he rotated his shoulder.

Ronald Crockett looked over his shoulder, grateful to see that Johnny had been removed from the premises. He could hear the skinny paramedic yelling out his slurry speech as Hank and Chet dragged him into the back of Chet’s van with the remaining members of their crew hurrying over to assist.

“Are you gonna be okay?” the detective asked.

“Yea… I’ve had my ass kicked before,” James snorted, “but never by a hose jockey.”

Ron gave the undercover agent a silent grin, looking back over his shoulder to ensure that no one was watching. He didn’t want to risk the others seeing him being jovial with the man they had perceived to be the enemy. “Ahhh, yea…, the fellas at the office will never let you live this one down,” Crockett stated, turning to leave.
“Tell the firemen that you convinced us not to press charges,” James suggested, holding onto his shoulder.

“I will,” Crockett stated, “as soon as I figure out a way to explain how Ian knew I was a cop,” he said with a grimace, reminding James that Ian had accidentally revealed more than he had intended.

James squeezed his eyes shut. “Mmm, yea… Sorry about that.”

“So what’s Johnny on?” the detective asked, knowing that the paramedic was under the influence of something.

“Not sure, man. Probably muscle relaxers and opioids mixed into the tea, but we don’t know for sure. He got an extra dose tonight. See if you can talk them into taking him to Tehachapi Hospital for a toxicology test. We’re going to need to know what we’re dealing with when this place gets raided. It could save lives,” James suggested.

“I’ll talk to ‘em about it,” Crockett agreed.

“Was what they said true?” James asked. “About Gretchen?”

Crockett propped one hand on his hip as he studied the battered man. “Yep, but she’s gonna be okay.”

Relief washed over the face of the bearded man. He had feared that she had been the latest victim of Hiram Gardner. It was her disappearance that had prompted the urgency of the upcoming raid.

“Yea, those hose jockeys, as you called them, got to her in time, and she’s expected to fully recover,” Crockett explained.

“But she WAS overdosed on heroin?” James asked, needing to confirm what he had heard.

“Yea… Hiram’s a real piece of work,” Ron said, turning around to exit the grounds.

“More like a real piece of shit,” James mumbled, climbing into the cart.

Crockett waved his hand, watching as the other man drove down the pathway, returning to the compound. When he had disappeared over the knoll, Ron turned around and jogged back over to the gate which had been deliberately left unlocked.

E!

Johnny gasped, growling at his captors as they dragged him farther and farther away from Lily. He struggled against their strong arms, trying to fight and kick his way free. He craned his neck, trying to find Lily. Had they gotten her, too?

“Cut i’ out,” Johnny groaned, his voice creating an echo in his own ears. “Lemme… go… NO!”

“Easy, Johnny… Everything’s going to be alright,” Hank crooned, grateful to have Johnny back in their grasps, but worried about their other paramedic who was jogging back to the entrance of the compound. Hank had never seen Roy’s face so red.

“Nooo,” Johnny mumbled, his eyes growing wide when he saw the door of Chet’s VW van open. Even his addled brain understood what that meant. “Nu… NOOO! Li-LILY!” he called out, feeling Hank and Chet hoisting him into the back of the van.
Hank continued to keep Johnny’s arms pinned to his sides. He hated the agony they were creating in Johnny, but the situation had escalated too quickly, so there had been no other choice but to leave Lily behind.

Hank was sitting in the empty void in the back of the van, leaning against the side wall. Johnny was pulled against his chest with Chet attempting to straddle Johnny’s thighs.

“Cut it out, Gage,” the lineman grumbled, finding it difficult to stop the constant movement of Johnny’s legs. Suddenly, Johnny’s knee connected with Chet’s groin, sending the lineman tumbling out of the back of the van.

“Arruugh!”

Marco saw Chet grabbing his crotch and knew that could mean only one thing. The senior lineman winced in sympathetic pain, rushing to the fallen fireman’s side.

Roy felt torn between his two friends. One he knew was injured, and the other he suspected was under the influence of some unknown substance. His blue eyes locked with Marco’s, then each man rushed to the aid of their respective partners.

Marco kneeled down beside his friend who was curled up in agony. “You, okay?”

“What the… hell kinda… question is that?” Chet spat out.

Marco merely patted his friend on the shoulder. “Well, I do seem to remember Johnny saying that he would get you back.”

“Huh?” Chet grunted.

“Remember back at your apartment… You charged the door with your crutch, and… you rammed it right into Johnny’s…”

“Ahh, shit!” Chet cursed, forcing back the nausea. “Guess I… had this one… comin’.”

Roy stepped up to the door of the van, casting a quick glance at the linemen. When he received a reassuring nod from Marco, he jumped into the van ready to focus his energy on Johnny.

Crockett jogged over to the van just as Mike stepped inside to help Hank and Roy. “How’s John?” the detective asked.

“Strong as ever!” the captain yelled. “I could really use… a little help in here,” he commented as he and Roy wrestled with Johnny.

Mike slipped into the back of the van, straddling Johnny’s legs. Hank was struggling with the thrashing man’s arms while Roy tried to check his pupils.

“Get… off… m-me!” Johnny groaned. “Get Li-LILY!”

Crockett spoke to both Roy and Mike. “Listen, fellas, I think he’s been drugged, so… better take him into Tehachapi Hospital, don’t you think?”

“Roy?” Hank asked, deferring the decision to his senior medic.

Roy heaved in a calming breath of the cool night air. “Yes… But we better get out of here before
“they come back with reinforcements,” he said, nodding his head in the direction of the compound.

“Agreed,” Crockett added. He knew there would be no reinforcements coming. Everything had gone according to plan… The FBI’s plan, that is.

Roy crawled towards the van seats, retrieving his pen light from inside the first aid kit he had brought along. The sight of his best friend being restrained hit him much harder than he had thought it would, but it was more than the sight of Johnny being held forcefully that shook Roy to his core. He couldn’t believe that the disheveled, scruffy man on the floor of the van was his normally happy-go-lucky partner. Johnny often pushed the limits of the department’s dress code with his somewhat shaggy hair, but he was never unkempt. Now, in the dim glow of the interior lights of the van, Roy thought he looked more like one of the many homeless patients they had treated over the years, than like a Los Angeles County Fire Department Paramedic.

“Johnny?” Roy said softly, slowly positioning himself between Hank and Mike so he could look at Johnny’s face. “Take it easy, Johnny. It’s just me… Just Roy… You’re safe now.”

“Wha-Aarrgh!” Johnny growled, moving his head around. “Lily!” he cried out, his glassy eyes beginning to water. He hadn’t heard her voice, which could only mean one thing. She was gone. His mind was sent reeling back to the moment when she had relinquished her hold on his hand, the moment when she had been stunned by the mention of her mother’s name. Why had he let her go? Why hadn’t he held onto her hand, securing her to him like a life line? He had failed her, allowed her to slip out of his grasp. He had lost her - again. “LILY!!! AArrggguuh!” he cried out in anguish.

“Lay him down, Cap,” Roy instructed. “I’ll sit on him and you hold his head.” Roy turned his head slightly to address Mike. “And watch out for those legs.”

The three men maneuvered Johnny onto the floor of the van. While Hank held Johnny’s head still, Roy straddled his body, preventing him from getting up. Roy’s knees pinned Johnny’s arms at his sides and Mike held onto the junior medic’s hands while he sat on Johnny’s knees. Sufficiently restrained, Roy peeled Johnny’s eyelids open, using his pen light to check the younger man’s pupils.

“Pin points… damn it,” he cursed, sweeping the tiny beam of light across his partner’s brown eyes. He looked out the open van door, seeing Crockett and Marco assisting Chet into a standing position. “You’re right… Need to get him to Tehachapi Hospital.”

“Marco, ugh…you better drive,” Chet said, gingerly pulling his keys out of his pants pocket.

“Beverly and I will follow in my car,” Crockett said, relieved that this part of the mission was over.

“Thanks,” Marco said, tossing the departing detective a nod as he held out his hand for Chet’s keys.

“Watch yourself,” Crockett commented as he closed the van door while Marco and Chet climbed into the front seats. The detective jogged over to the gold sedan, seeing the worried face of Beverly anxiously waiting in the passenger’s seat.

“We’re going to the Tehachapi Hospital. Marco’s driving Chet’s van.”

Beverly nodded her head in understanding. “Good… They need to be together,” she said, grateful that it had worked out for all the men of A-shift to be with Johnny during this crisis. Then she turned her thoughts towards the young woman who had gotten away.

Crockett cranked up the car, following closely behind the departing van. He was glad to have gotten
away from the compound without any more injuries than had been acquired. James’ injuries were minor as were Chet’s; he hoped Johnny’s were, as well. He had no idea what was in the young man’s system, but all he had to do was convince the emergency room physician to run a toxicology test on Johnny to see what kind of substance was being used in the compound. With the young man’s symptoms, that should be easy enough. The results would determine what would happen next.

The silence between Ron and Beverly was continued as they headed down the winding, deserted road. Both of them were worried about what was going on inside Chet’s van… and thinking about the young woman who got away. Finally, Beverly turned to Detective Crockett.

“What was going on between you and James? I saw you talking to him.”

“Ahem,” Crockett began, having already rehearsed this conversation in his mind. “I’m a cop, Beverly. I felt like I needed to make sure those two were okay. That’s all.”

“You checked on them, but you stopped Roy from catching Lily?” She questioned flatly, having watched the scene unfold from her vantage point inside the car. “Sounds like you better come clean, Crockett.”

Ron shifted in his seat, the accusation making him uncomfortable. “Look, I had to stop him before he crossed over that little hill. We HAD to stay behind it; we don’t know exactly what may have been waiting on the other side. If they tried to kill Gretchen… And I have no doubt that they did… Then they might’ve been armed and waiting for him. Not exactly the way we wanted this night to end.”

“No, it isn’t the way we wanted it to end,” Beverly stated, staring at the back of Chet’s van, wondering what was happening in the vehicle. “We wanted BOTH of them… And we almost had them.”

Ron rolled his eyes, propping his elbow on the window ledge. “Listen, I WILL get Lily out. I promise you that.”

“Well, I think it’s Iris you need to be making that promise to,” Beverly shot back.

“I did,” the detective grumbled.

“What was that?” Beverly questioned as the car eased to a stop at an intersection.

“I DID promise Iris I would bring her daughter home… I just didn’t promise it would be tonight.”

Beverly made a scoffing sound. “Mmmhmm… When will you do it then?”

“Soon,” Ron said. “Very, very soon.”

E!

Inside Chet’s van, Johnny moaned, his head lolling from side to side.

“Li-Lily?”

The fading paramedic’s resolve to fight was waning, his strength to resist the men who were holding him down was dissolving. His eyes burned, his throat seemed to constrict, and his chest tightened. He knew that Lily would never leave the Unity Family on her own. He had hoped to be able to convince her to leave, maybe even help him face the trial in Selma. Now, with his vision fading and the voices of his former coworkers seeming to drift down a long tunnel, farther and farther away from him, he knew that he had lost everything.
Johnny had left instructions for Iris to break his lease and give away most of his possessions; he had resigned from the department, and he had instigated an argument with Roy that he knew would end their friendship. He had failed to keep his secrets hidden from his coworkers and now even the faint glimmer of hope that he might one day return to the job he loved had been ripped away from him. The many friendships he had enjoyed through the years among his brotherhood of firefighters would be washed away as soon as word spread about the dishonor he had brought upon the department and their profession. He had tried to protect his parents in Montana by staying away, limiting his contact with them in order to save them from the threats of a Klansman. But after such a long time away from his family, their relationship had faded, or so he feared. At one time, Iris and Lily were all he had, but now he knew that he had lost them, too. He had literally allowed Lily to slip out of his hands, and he knew that Iris would never recover from the pain his failure was going to cause her. He oftentimes made risky decisions on the job, and usually, he won. Tonight, his luck had run out. He had risked it all for the woman he loved, and now he had surely lost it all – everything that had ever been important to him was gone.

As the van bounced along the dirt road, heading down the mountain, Johnny’s body began to relax as he slowly descended into the drug-induced pit of despair, his mind not yet comprehending that the men with him were actually helping him.

“Johnny?” Roy questioned, feeling his best friend’s body going lax. “Come on, partner,” he continued, trying to coax Johnny back from the abyss. “Stay with me… alright?”

Roy kept one hand on Johnny’s abdomen, counting his respirations while the other one sought out Johnny’s carotid pulse. It was much slower than usual, in spite of the adrenaline rush he knew Johnny had gotten from the confrontation. His respiration rate was slower than anticipated, as well.

“Cap, his pulse is about 60, respiration rate of 12,” Roy reported, needing to share the information with someone. He was accustomed to having a doctor on the other end of the biophone whenever he checked a patient’s vitals. Now, he was untethered to a medical facility, and the nearest hospital was small, rural, and twenty minutes away.

Hank grimaced at the numbers he knew were too low for what had just occurred.

Mike, who had been staring at the floor of the van, looked up at his semi-conscious friend and coworker. He allowed his gaze to shift from Johnny to the others in the van. “Hey fellas… When did they do it?”

“Do what?” Chet asked, puzzled.

“When did they drug him? Chet, did you see it happen?”

Chet looked over his shoulder at the men in the back, then turned around to face forward again. He leaned his head back against the head rest, listening to the hum of the engine as they continued their trek. He relived every minute of the operation, from the time Johnny’s image appeared at the top of the knoll through this very moment.

“No… I didn’t see anything. Lily was close enough to have injected him with something, but I never saw him flinch, or anything. He… He had to have been drugged BEFORE he got to us, but…”

“But why wasn’t Lily drugged? I mean, if the feds have a guy on the inside, and they knew we wanted them both out, then… Why was Johnny the only one drugged?” Mike asked the group.
“Sonofabitch!” Chet cursed, slamming his hand against the side of the door as they continued down
the mountain. “We were double crossed!”

“What, amigo?” Marco asked, confused.

“Think about it. One of them had to be the federal agent. It had to be James, because that quiet
fellow in the little cart…..”

“He never fought back… SHIT!” Roy cursed again, putting the pieces together. “He never fought
back when I was punching him.”

“Fellas, do you think you can explain it to the rest of us without all the colorful verbiage?” Hank
asked, feeling frustrated by the situation.

“James… He’s got to be the agent, and… The other guy,” Roy said, pausing as he relived what Ian
had said. “He yelled out that he wanted to press charges against us, but… How’d he know?”

“How’d he know what?” Mike asked.

“How’d he know that Crockett was a cop?” Roy asked, feeling stunned by the turn of events. He ran
a worried hand through his thinning hair. “I think I assaulted an FBI agent!”

“We’ll bail you out of jail,” Marco said, hoping to lighten the mood. “That guy had it coming.”

“But how’d he know Crockett was a cop?” Chet repeated, shifting in his seat with a grimace of pain.

“Do you fellas think maybe… I mean, could he be an agent, too?”

“Guess I might be your cell mate, DeSoto,” Mike stated flatly. He looked over at his comrades
beside him, his blue eyes scanning Johnny’s limp form, the young man’s eyes barely open. Mike had
never seen the medic so still; it was unnerving to him.

“How’s he doing?”

“He seems to be fairly stable. Pulse and respiration are holding steady… but too slow, even for him.
Not sure he’s really with us, though.”

“We’re halfway there, buddy. Just stay with us, Gage,” Chet said in a raised voice, hoping Johnny
might understand him. “Please, jus’ stay with us,” the Irishman whispered.

E!

James drove back towards the compound, picking up Ian along the way; each man was worried
about Lily. As they passed by the meditation gardens, they saw her limp form lying on the small park
bench. James eased the cart to a stop, both men jumping out to check on their friend.

“Lily?” James called out, walking up to her. He could hear her soft sobs and see that her shoulders
were shaking.

Ian reached her first, gently laying a hand on her shoulder. “Ssshhh,” he crooned. “It’s okay.”

“No… No it isn’t okay,” she whimpered, pushing herself up off the bench. She used her sleeve to
dry her face then wrapped her arms around her midsection. “It’ll never be… al-alright,” she said in a
ragged breath.

“It had to be done; you know that, right?” James questioned the crying woman, taking a seat beside
her.
“No… No, it didn’t.” She looked into his face, lighted by the full moon overhead. “I never should’ve gotten him involved. I never should’ve… tricked him into… joining.”

“We needed him,” Ian added. “We needed just one more, and he came along and…”

“He’ll never for-forgive me,” she cried, pulling her knees to her chest.

“You really do love him, don’t you?” Ian asked, already knowing the answer.

“I do,” she said, nodding her head in affirmation. “I’ve never loved anyone else.”

“And you will be with him soon, Lily.” James reached into his pocket, withdrawing the zippered pouch Crockett had given him. “Let’s get you wired up, and soon we’ll have the evidence we need to nail Hiram’s ass to the wall.”

Lily stood up, reluctantly lifting her blouse enough for James to attach the microphone to her undergarment. The darkness eased her nervousness at him seeing her partially naked body. She sniffled then spoke up. “Do you think what they said about Gretchen is true?”

Ian, who had been standing by silently, spoke up. “It has to be. Otherwise, they would’ve said she was found dead. She had to have survived,” he added, feeling a sense of relief. “She’s… She’s really alive,” he said, feeling jubilant. “Maybe… Maybe I’ll see her again soon, too.”

James finished clipping the wire to Lily’s clothes, pleased with how well it was hidden by the loose fitting garment. He glanced at Lily and Ian, hoping that both of them would soon be reunited with the people they loved. And if the next few hours went the way he had planned, he would soon be able to go back home, too.
A/N: Sorry for the delays in posting. Real life has been getting in the way recently. I hope to update again soon. Thank you for all those who are reading this story, contacting me, supporting, and correcting me. I truly appreciate you all.

Chapter 21

Marco drove Chet’s van as fast as he safely could, leaving the darkness of the mountain behind. As he neared Tehachapi, he increased his speed and turned on the emergency flashers to warn other motorists of the urgency of his task.

Behind the van, Lieutenant Crockett saw Marco accelerating and assumed that Johnny’s condition had worsened.

“Hang on, Beverly,” the officer commented, reaching for the blue light he often placed on his dashboard when he was heading to a crime scene.

Beverly winced when he flipped the light on, casting an eerie swirling blue flash around them. She watched as Marco drove the van closer to the edge of the highway, allowing Crockett to pass him. She gripped the door handle just a little harder as the sedan flew past the van then tucked back in neatly as the lead vehicle.

“Crockett’s gonna clear the way for us,” Chet announced when he saw the flashing blue lights behind his vehicle. “Only time I ever wanted to see those lights coming up behind me,” he joked, trying to convince himself and the others that everything would be alright.

Marco knew that citizen drivers responded quicker to police lights than to emergency flashers on personal vehicles and he gladly allowed the officer to pass the van.

“I know what you mean,” the senior lineman commented. He listened to the sounds of Roy urging Johnny to remain as alert as possible.

“Hey, Junior… Cap’s going to write you up if you don’t get a haircut soon.” More than anything, Roy wanted to hear his partner’s long-suffering rant about the departmental regulations being too strict. Instead, he was met with total silence.

“Stay with us, John… That’s an order,” Hank said, lightly patting the scruffy face of his downed paramedic. He wanted to laugh at the thought of John trying to grow a thick beard like the other two members of the cult that he had seen. To Hank, Johnny had always looked younger than his actual years. Perhaps that was why he was struggling to see John, the only one of his men with a nearly hairless chest, suddenly becoming bearded. He had always felt a sense of protectiveness with all his men, but especially with his junior medic.

“Gonna have to shave soon, John,” he snickered. “Don’t make me give you latrine duty for a month, okay?”
There was no response from Johnny. He remained flat on his back, his head turned to one side, and his unseeing eyes merely slits.

“John Roderick Gage, front and center!” Hank said, his voice booming inside the close confines of the van.

Somewhere deep in the darkness, Johnny heard the voice of his captain and knew that he was in trouble. He had heard Hank use that tone of voice very few times, and only when one of the men was in big trouble. He tried to perk up, tried to apologize for whatever he had done, but his body refused to fully cooperate. Slowly he slipped back into the nothingness.

“Looks like that got his attention, Cap,” Mike said, encouraged to see Johnny trying to regain consciousness. “That’s a good sign, right, Roy?”

“Yes, it is. He’s recognizing us… Well, at least he’s recognizing you,” Roy said, shifting his forlorn blue eyes over at Hank and then back down at his partner. Johnny had not responded to Roy’s voice and that made the senior medic’s heart sink.

“Almost there, fellas,” Chet called out from the front seat, just as Marco followed their police escort onto East E Street in Tehachapi. “Just a little longer, Gage.”

E!

Ian eased the cart to a stop in front of the Holistic Unity Gardens sanctuary. The trio exited the vehicle and rushed to the front doors, pounding on them as hard as they could. Even though there were no locks on the sanctuary doors, they dared not enter Father Hiram’s residence unannounced.

Within a couple of moments, two broad-shouldered men opened the door, silently allowing the frantic group to enter.

“Where is Father?” James asked the guards.

“Meditating,” one of them said. Curious eyes took in the disheveled sight before them, scanning the grass-stained clothing and various bruises on James and Ian.

“We need to speak… to him now,” Lily spoke up, the words nearly choking her amid her tears. “Our brother… has been taken from us.”

“Who disturbs my meditation at this hour?”

The group turned to see their red-faced leader tightening the ties of his robe as he entered the large room.

“Our brother… Thorn, has been… taken from us,” Lily said again, her tears burning her swollen eyes.

Hiram tucked his long, graying hair behind his ear, arching one eyebrow at the disheveled group. “John?” the leader questioned, as Lily was the only person who used that name for Johnny. When he saw the three heads nodding in affirmation, he continued. “Taken… Or left?”

“Taken… by force,” James clarified, realizing that Hiram was questioning John’s allegiance.

“By whom?” Hiram asked, slowly walking to the assembled group. He peered into the battered face
of James. “The same person who assaulted you?”

James lowered his head in mock shame. He needed the cult leader to believe he had done his best to avoid the kidnapping. “Yes, a large group of his friends… firemen, I believe.”

“I see. And did he resist them?”

“Yes, Father,” Lily said, bowing her head in reverence. “He… He had drank an extra cup of tea, so he was thoroughly relaxed and prepared for sleep, but he fought them as hard as he could.”

Hiram turned his head in Lily’s direction, narrowing his eyes at her. He noticed that she quickly looked away from his stare, but chose not to address this behavior. “And just how did he obtain a second cup?”

Lily looked up at James and Ian, not understanding the significance of Hiram’s question. “Um, I-I gave him mine,” she said, looking back and forth between James and Hiram, her mind spinning. “He seemed to need it more than me… Remember, he has back pain sometimes?”

Hiram stared at the young woman, knowing she had no idea what she had done. “Have you forgotten who among you is the great healer?”

Lily bowed her head, trembling in fear. Was their scheme about to be exposed?

“I just… wanted to… help him. He’s been… working very hard lately…”

Hiram glared at her, knowing that she could feel the heat of his stare. “You have no special skills or knowledge, Sister Lily. You are not authorized to administer healing to your brothers and sisters.”

The tall leader walked around her in a close circle, making her even more uncomfortable. “Only I – Hiram – have the power of life and death in my hands.”

“Yes sir,” she mumbled, her eyes remaining downcast.

Hiram took a step away from the chastised young woman, eyeing the other members of the group. “Did they threaten to return, or will they leave us in peace?” the leader questioned the trio.

Ian spoke up, having been completely silent thus far. “I believe they will leave us in peace,” he said, using Hiram’s own words. “It sounded as if they had gotten what they wanted.”

Lily couldn’t stop her sniffling as she recalled the mention of her mother, knowing that the group had not gotten everyone that they wanted. She understood that they had come to retrieve her, too. Lily knew that for her mother, learning that her daughter had not been rescued was going to hurt her badly. She hated that she had been unable to leave with them, but the mission was much too important to give up on now.

While her heart had nearly burst for joy when she had heard that her friend, Gretchen, had survived leaving the group, her heart was broken with the realization that her mother would only be partially relieved when she heard the news about Thorn. Lily just hoped that she would be able to make it up to her, and Thorn, when this mission was finally accomplished. She had already seen men go unpunished for the murder of an innocent man, her uncle; she was not about to allow it to happen again, not if she could stop it.

“Lily?” Hiram said softly, lifting her chin with his fingertips until she was looking up at him. “I am sorry for your loss. I know that you were very fond of Brother John.”

She swallowed back the bile in her throat as she closed her eyes, forcing out the remaining tears.
“Maybe... I will... see him... again one day,” she whispered, knowing that if all went well, she WOULD see him, but it would be outside of this compound.

“You have done well, my children. You tried your best to save your brother. You are dismissed. Go and find your rest, clean your wounds.”

The three turned to walk away, but Lily stopped when she felt a hand on her shoulder. “Not you, Lily.”

All three of them turned around, seeing the stern look on Hiram’s face.

“How’s he doin’?” Roy mentioned, resting his palm on his partner’s midsection. “Respiration is still shallow.”

Chet looked up at the sound of Marco’s voice coming from the opening glass doors. “He’s in the back of the van,” the senior lineman said to the orderlies as they pushed a gurney to the opposite side of the vehicle.

“We’ll load him,” Mike said, sliding out of the van backwards, holding onto Johnny’s legs. Hank scooped his arms underneath the thin medic’s shoulders, firmly gripping his forearms in preparation of transferring his medic onto the gurney. The firemen made quick work of shifting their fallen comrade, then followed behind as the orderlies rushed his still form into the hospital. Roy held
onto the rail of the stretcher as they hurried down the corridor, knowing he had vital information to give the attending physician.

Marco paused at the doorway, seeing Crockett and Beverly walking quickly across the dimly lit parking lot. “How is he?” Beverly asked, rushing into the arms of Marco.

“Still alive, but… he’s unconscious,” Marco said, caressing her brown hair as he pulled her into his warm embrace.

“Marco? Gimme the keys and I’ll move the van,” Crockett stated, tapping his friend on his shoulder. He knew that Marco needed to be with Beverly for a moment.

Inside the hospital, Chet leaned his back against the wall outside the treatment room. On the opposite end of the corridor, he saw a couple of pay phones, reminding him that he needed to call Caroline. He was finally beginning to understand why Roy and Hank called their wives after particularly bad runs. They found their strength in hearing the voices of their loved ones. At that moment, Chet knew that he would be joining them from now on. He finally had someone to call to make him feel better. He knew that the sweet sound of Caroline’s voice would be just what he need to settle him down after a failed rescue.

He swallowed back the lump forming in his throat as he watched Beverly and Marco lingering in each other’s arms as they passed by him on their way to the waiting area. He offered them a slight nod as he pushed himself off the cold tile wall and headed for the pay phones. He knew it was late, but Caroline had made him promise to call with news as soon as he could. Now he knew he needed to hear her voice just as much as she needed to hear his. He fished inside his pocket for a few coins, enough for a quick phone call to let her know where he was and the outcome of their rescue.

E!

Johnny felt himself moving, floating, and then turning a corner. He had no idea where he was, or what was happening to him. He tried to open his eyes, but all he saw were blurry images of white-clad figures. When he felt his movement stop, and strong arms lifting him up onto another surface, he began to panic. His mind, already traumatized since his kidnapping, reeled back to 1965 and all that he had seen in Selma. In his drug-induced haze, his brain combined the past with the present, and slowly terror began to develop inside his soul. They had finally caught up with him after all these years. He was now in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan.

“Nuh… No,” he grunted, feeling hands touching him and deep voices mumbling something his muddled brain couldn’t comprehend. He felt something placed over his mouth and nose, and he knew they were trying to kill him. “Argh!” He grunted, trying to remove the offending object, but his arms were quickly held down at his sides. ‘Oh God,’ he thought to himself, ‘oh God, help me.’

“Secure that oxygen mask on him,” Dr. Buchanan ordered, recognizing both Roy and Mike when the group had arrived. It hadn’t been that long ago that Mike had been brought into this same hospital after having been involved in an accident. When his eyes scanned the young man he was now working on, he recognized him, too. “Get me a set of vitals, and start an IV, D5W,” he commanded with the same sense of urgency that Dr. Brackett often used.

“Respiration rate is 10, pulse 60, and pupils are pinpoints. We think he’s been drugged,” Roy commented, adjusting the mask over his friend’s face as he had done several times before, when Johnny suffered from smoke inhalation. This time, Johnny protested the action, seeming to panic when he felt the elastic bands snap into place. “Easy, Junior… You need to just take a few deep breaths for me. You know how this goes. You’re safe now,” Roy continued to croon, upset by the
way Johnny was fighting against his ministrations.

“Based on how he’s dressed, I’m assuming that he’s been spending some time in the mountains?” Dr. Buck asked, recognizing the clothing as that worn by the members of the Holistic Unity Gardens Family.

“Yea,” was all Roy managed to say. 

“Any idea what he’s on?” the physician asked, a little too matter-of-factly.

Roy felt his feathers ruffle at the thinly veiled accusation from the physician. “He isn’t ON anything. He’s been drugged.”

Dr. Buchanan looked up into the eyes of Roy DeSoto, his stethoscope still poised over Johnny’s bare chest. “He needs your help, not your protection.”

“No, Dr. Buck. He needs YOUR help, not YOUR judgment,” Roy corrected. “My partner is not some junkie. He did not willingly get himself into this mess.”

Both men looked at the doorway as Crockett entered the room.

“You need to wait outside,” Dr. Buchanan ordered. 

Crockett flashed his badge, knowing that it afforded him no special privileges in Tehachapi. “I’m working on this case, and I may have some information you need to treat John. He may be on muscle relaxers and opioids mixed into his drink. From what I’ve been able to gather, he got an extra dose tonight. Can you run a tox screen on him?”

Dr. Buchanan listened to Johnny’s heart and lungs without commenting, as he pondered what to do next. He slipped his stethoscope from his ears, laying it across his shoulders. “Nurse, I need you to run a full tox screen and get me a dose of naloxone.” He looked up into the faces of Roy and Ron. “I’m going to treat this like a heroin overdose until we know differently.”

“But-“

Dr. Buck raised his hand to halt Roy’s protesting. “I’ve seen my fair share of this from those hippies on the mountain. Some survive, some don’t. I’m not taking any chances here. We can’t wait on the drug screen. He needs treatment now.”

Roy’s blue eyes widened with the realization that Johnny could be dying from a heroin overdose, just like Gretchen. He pressed his lips into a thin line, his rage building. It was one thing to be sitting at Johnny’s bedside after the younger man had been injured during a rescue, but to know that his best friend might lose his life due to a deliberate act was more than he could handle. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears until he heard Johnny’s raspy voice.

“L-Lily?”

“Take it easy, Johnny. Everything’s gonna be alright,” Roy soothed, seeing the nurse preparing to start the IV.

Johnny heard garbled voices floating around him, and he had only one thing in mind – he was about
to be tortured and killed by the group he so loathed. He needed to know that Lily had gotten away.

“Lil-y… Lil-y…” he whispered breathily, his voice barely audible.

“She isn’t here, Johnny. Listen to me,” Roy repeated. “She isn’t here, but we’re going to get her, I promise.”

Roy had no way of knowing that his words sent fear straight to Johnny’s core. They were going to get her? That could only mean one thing to John. The KKK was going to find Lily and kill her, too. He had to warn her, had to stop them from harming her. He no longer cared what they were about to do to him; he had to protect Lily.

“Nuh-uh… Nooo,” Johnny moaned, shifting slowly on the exam table. He needed to get away from these people, had to save Lily from such a horrible fate.

“I can’t get the IV in,” the young nurse said, exasperatedly. “He keeps moving his arm.”

“Restraints,” Dr. Buchanan ordered of the two men in white who were positioned on either side of Johnny, holding down his squirming limbs.

When Johnny felt his extremities being tied down, his mind tried to protest, but his body refused to cooperate. “Lemme go,” he tried to shout, in spite of the chemicals coursing through his blood.

Roy held Johnny’s head between his hands, hating what his friend was going through. “Johnny look at me. Look at me! It’s me, Roy. I’m here with you. You’re okay.”

“We can handle him now,” Dr. Buck stated, dismissing the orderlies.

Johnny’s glassy eyes caught a blurry glimpse of Roy and another wave of panic shot through his system. The man who had once been his best friend, was working with the KKK.

“Ugh, ohmygod,” Johnny mumbled, pulling against the restraints. “No… P’ease… I… I sor-ry, ‘oy… S’op, p’ease,” he begged, his words slurry. “No… don’ hur’ Li-ly… I’m… sorry…” Johnny tried to convey his feelings from behind the oxygen mask. His eyes tried to focus on the face in front of him, but he could only see a blurry image of the man he had spent years working side by side with as they saved lives in Los Angeles County. He knew that Roy was disappointed in him. He knew that Iris had divulged his deepest secret to his friends. Now they seemed to want to remove him from the department in a way that was much more permanent than just a resignation. They wanted him dead.

“Johnny, don’t worry about Lily. We’re going to get her, I promise,” Roy repeated, his own eyes brimming with tears.

“No, no, p’ease don’,” Johnny begged, never feeling the pinch of the tourniquet as it was tightened around his arm.

Roy, assuming that his friend was begging not to have the IV inserted, continued speaking in a soothing tone to Johnny, unaware that his words were being wrongly interpreted by the drugged man. “We have to, Johnny. It’s what’s best. It has to be done.”

“Noooo,” Johnny cried out, continuing his efforts to escape.

Dr. Buchanan grimaced at the scene in front of him as he continued to monitor his patient. He knew
that he shouldn’t treat a patient who was refusing his care.

“Mr. Gage… Do you understand what may happen if you don’t get treatment?”

Johnny’s muddled brain didn’t process the question, being unaccustomed to being called by his surname.

“Have you lost your mind?” Ron asked the physician, speaking up before Roy could get the words out.

The nurse, having finally raised a vein, stood poised with the needle positioned at a plump vein on the back of Johnny’s hand.

Dr. Buchanan looked up at the detective, remembering the badge he had flashed upon entering the treatment room. “Is he in your custody?”

“Of course not; he hasn’t broken any law. He’s a VICTIM, damn it!” Ron blurted out, unprofessionally. He didn’t care; it wasn’t as if he were on duty.

“I’m his medical proxy,” Roy piped up. “It’s on record at Rampart General Hospital. Call them for confirmation if you want,” the senior medic said, knowing that time was of the essence. He knew that they couldn’t afford to make an enemy of the physician. “The number is (901) 555-3113. Ask for Dr. Kelly Brackett or Head Nurse Dixie McCall… Please,” he begged.

“He’s been drugged, doc,” Ron added. “He can’t make his own decisions now, right?”

Dr. Buchanan looked at his nurse. “Go ahead and start the IV,” he commented, walking over to the telephone to make the call.

Johnny’s slurry speech faded, and he never felt the pain as the needle was skillfully inserted. Although the care he was receiving was pulling him closer to full awareness, the effects of the toxic tea he had consumed seemed to offset the effect of the increased oxygen. His eyelids continued to feel like lead, and the voices of those around him sounded as if they were echoing down a long corridor. He had no concept of time, nor did he feel any pain. In fact, he felt nothing at all as the silent darkness enveloped him like a cloak, cradling him into oblivion.

Outside the treatment room, Hank and Mike stood talking quietly, while Marco and Beverly consoled each other silently in the waiting area. Chet, who had been talking on the payphone, had just returned the receiver to the cradle when Roy’s panicked shout permeated the quiet scene, and the rest of the group rushed into the small treatment room.

“Johnny!” Roy yelled, his voice rising an octave as he watched his best friend’s breathing cease. “Respiratory arrest!”

Dr. Buchanan slammed down the phone without retrieving the information he had requested. He no longer cared who his patient’s medical proxy was, or even if he had one. Right now, he had to start treatment for the overdose he suspected from the young man’s presenting symptoms.

“Bag ‘im,” the physician ordered, tilting Johnny’s head to open up his airway as he waited for his nurse to retrieve the ambu-bag.

As soon as Johnny’s lungs began to inflate again, Dr. Buchanan scurried to the drug cabinet, pushing vials aside in search of the one he knew his patient needed.

Roy felt himself being dragged backwards by his captain’s strong arms.
“Let them work, Roy,” Hank said, his voice sounding weak. He had seen his men injured before, but never like this. He felt numb all over, and knew that his senior medic had to be in shock, too.

Roy’s face was a mixture of confusion and disbelief. “Cap, I…” He stopped short, realizing that there was nothing he could do for Johnny now. Slowly, he backed away from the exam table, wishing that they were at Rampart, and that the medical staff in front of him was Dr. Brackett and Dixie. He stopped when he felt the cold tile wall against his back, the reality of the situation hitting him just as hard. They were not at Rampart. They were in Tehachapi. This wasn’t Dr. Brackett and Dixie McCall. This was Dr. Buchanan and his nurse. Roy felt his chest begin to burn as a lump formed in his throat. Was he about to watch his best friend die right in front of him?

Across the tiny treatment room, a battle waged for Johnny’s life. Dr. Buchanan injected the first dose of naloxone, then waited for it to take effect. He counted each weak thump of Johnny’s pulse against his fingers, willing the rate to increase as time slowly ticked by.

After two minutes, Dr. Buchanan gave Johnny another dose, then reached for the blood pressure cuff. As he pumped it up, he saw a slight movement of Johnny’s fingers.

“That’s it… c’mon,” he mumbled to himself, releasing the bulb as he listened for the thumping sound through his stethoscope.

“He’s breathing on his own, Dr. Buck,” the nurse stated, replacing the ambu-bag with the oxygen mask once more.

“BP’s 68/40, pulse 56,” the physician stated, more confident in his original diagnosis. “Roy?” the physician asked, looking over his shoulder. “Come get these restraints off, will you? Don’t want him to aspirate.”

Roy rushed into action, feeling better knowing that he was helping take care of Johnny. He quickly removed the wrist restraints, shifting further down Johnny’s body to free his legs. Just as he released Johnny’s lower limbs, the young man began to wretch.

Quickly the nurse stripped off the oxygen mask, assisting Roy in turning Johnny onto his side. They had barely gotten him turned when brown liquid spewed from his mouth. Fortunately, Hank had recognized the signs and had managed to shove an emesis basin beside Johnny’s face, preventing the remnants of the nightly tea from soiling the uniforms of the surrounding medical personnel. The naloxone was working.

Ron found a stack of 4 x 4 gauze squares and dampened them before handing them to Roy’s awaiting hand. He watched as the older medic tenderly cleaned the offending liquid from the edges of Johnny’s mouth. He was amazed at how rapidly Johnny seemed to regain his color, breathing, and his movement. The lanky limbs were beginning to fidget, and the young man began emitting sounds that were a combination of incoherent grunts and groans.

“That’s it, Junior, come on and open those eyes.” Roy continued talking to his partner, hoping to help bring him out of his unconscious state. He was pleased when Johnny tried to push the gauze away from his face, his breathing beginning to come in rapid pants. “Hey, if you don’t like it, then just tell me to stop,” Roy continued.

“Uh, ‘top,” Johnny groaned.

“84/66, pulse 62, respiration rate 12,” Dr. Buchanan announced, removing his stethoscope from his ears and folding it as he placed it into the large pocket of his lab coat.
“What happened?” Ron asked, confused about the rapid transition from respiratory arrest to semi-consciousness and nearly normal vital signs. He saw Johnny’s legs begin to shake and wondered what was happening inside the young man’s body.

“The drug reverses the effects of opioids like heroin,” the physician stated, clicking his pen to begin charting his diagnosis and treatment.

“He’s gonna be okay, then?” the detective asked.

Without looking up, Dr. Buchanan gave his prognosis. “He’ll likely make a full recovery. I just hope he’s our only customer from the compound tonight.” The tired physician looked up over the glasses perched at the end of his nose. “We’re running low on naloxone.”

E!

Chet hung up the telephone, feeling a sense of relief after talking to Caroline. She had a way of saying the words he needed to hear. He inhaled a cleansing breath as he headed to the waiting room. He was about to sit down beside Mike when a receptionist rounded the corner.

“Excuse me, but is there a Lieutenant Ronald Crockett here?”

“He’s in treatment room one,” Mike stated.

“Is he the patient?” the gray-haired woman inquired.

“Ah, no… Is something wrong?” Chet asked.

“He has a phone call at my desk. They say it’s urgent,” she stated worriedly.

Marco and Mike exchanged glances, but it was Chet who spoke up. “I’ll get ‘im.”

The Irishman walked quickly down the short corridor, pushing through the treatment room door. He gulped when he saw Johnny unconscious and in restraints. “Uh… Crockett?”

“Yea?” the detective responded.

“Phone call for you…,” Chet said, his face growing pale. “Receptionist’s desk.”

Ron hurriedly exited the room, anxious for the news that awaited him. He had been anticipating a call from the authorities related to the raid. He had deliberately delayed calling Iris until he had better news to deliver. Silently he prayed that the raid had been a successful one.

E!

Outside the sanctuary, Ian and James paced worriedly. Both men were concerned about the welfare of Lily. Even though they knew that the FBI was not far away, listening to every word, they still knew that she could be in danger. She had been alone with Father Hiram for too long and neither man wanted to think about what was happening behind closed doors.

Lily sat on the floor with her head bowed in reverence to Father Hiram as he rested among the many pillows strewn about his room. His legs were crossed, his arms relaxed, but his face was growing crimson. Although Hiram’s actions had initially been seductive, they had quickly turned to rage. Lily was unsure which was worse.
“Do NOT lie to me, child!”

Lily sucked in a ragged breath, her sobbing limiting her ability to breathe. “I-I’m not, Fa-father.”

Hiram rose angrily to his feet, standing over Lily to intimidate her, rehashing the minute details of Johnny’s kidnapping. “How dare you,” the leader grunted through gritted teeth. “It is certainly convenient that you encouraged Brother John to indulge in a second cup of tea on the same night that his friends came for him.”

Lily held her breath, unsure of what might happen as Hiram towered over her cowering form.

Hiram waited for a response, but when he didn’t get one, he continued with his accusations. “You knew they were coming, did you not?”

Lily vehemently shook her head.

“Then why the extra dose of tea?”

Lily merely shrugged her shoulders. She hoped he couldn’t see through her lies.

“Why did they not come after you as well, Lily?”

Again she shrugged her shoulders, unable to look at him. She could almost feel the heat radiating off of him as he dropped to one knee in front of her, spitting out his next words.

“You have no idea what you’ve done, girl. Your boyfriend may not live through the night, thanks to you.”

Lily gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. Her tears burned her cheeks. “Wha- why? Are you… go-gonna k-kill him, too?”

He stood up again with a slow, maniacal grin spreading across his face. “No… No, I won’t have to order his death. It seems that this time YOU took care of that for me.”

Lily felt waves of heat washing over her body, her vision blurred, and she felt as if she were falling into a deep hole. “ACK! NO! How?” she cried, hugging her own midsection.

Hiram continued to give her the details in a painfully slow manner. “Why do you think we separate the men from the women during the evening meal?”

Trembling, Lily shook her head. She had lost her ability to speak.

“Because males and females have different needs. Our bodies require different enhancements to reach our full potential,” he explained, further confusing Lily.

“I-I don’t un-understand,” she cried, rubbing her eyes to remove the tears and clear her vision. “The tea just… helps us to relax… and sleep more soundly.”

Hiram gave her a snort, his wicked grin covering his face. “You… foolish… girl!” His teeth were gritted together as he spat out the words. “There are different… er, enhancements to the tea for males and females. They should NEVER be mixed,” he emphasized, narrowing his eyes at her.
“But-“

“The tea issued to YOU was for the females only. Brother John had already consumed that which was prepared for the men,” Hiram stated, burning holes into her soul with his dark eyes.

Lily finally realized what he meant. She had inadvertently combined the teas, unaware of the dangers of mixing the two concoctions. “W-will Thorn… die?” she asked, not wanting to know the answer.

A maniacal smile was the only response she received.

“Oh… my… God… ACK!” She cried out, her body melting onto the floor as darkness claimed her.

Lily’s blood curdling scream sent chills down the spines of Ian and James. Both men rushed the sanctuary door, but they were unable to open it. Several swift kicks and bruising shoulder rams did not dislodge the obstruction.

“Lily!” James yelled, pounding his fist against the heavy wooden structure.

“Open up!” Ian belted out as he continued his efforts to get into the sanctuary.

Outside the compound, several dark-colored vehicles were parked along the desolate trail that ran down the length of the property beside the compound. Inside the command vehicle, federal agents were listening to the conversation taking place inside the sanctuary. As soon as they heard Lily’s scream, the order to proceed was given, and an army of men and vehicles breached the unlocked gate, slinging dirt and debris as they rushed the premises. They might not have gotten the confession they wanted, but Hiram had said enough to damn himself in a court of law. And more importantly, they had to get their undercover agent and informants out of harm’s way.

E!

Lieutenant Crockett hung up the telephone, loping down the corridor and passing by the stunned group from 51’s.

“Uh-oh,” Marco mumbled, giving Mike a quick glance and pulling Beverly closer to his side. He didn’t know what was happening, but from the look on Crockett’s face, it wasn’t good news.

Lieutenant Crockett stuck his head in the doorway of treatment room one.

“Hey, Doc?”

Dr. Buchanan looked up, seeing the panicked look on the detective’s face. “Yes?”

“Can I see you a minute?”

The physician, confident that his patient was in good hands for the moment, followed Crockett to an empty room.

“It’s bad, Dr. Buck,” Crockett announced then proceeded to share with the physician all that had occurred at the Holistic Unity Gardens compound.

Inside the treatment room, Johnny couldn’t stop fidgeting in his hospital bed. His heart was pounding, his head was hurting, and his stomach continued to churn. Even though there was nothing left in his belly, his body seemed intent on expelling something. He felt himself being rolled onto his side again as the dry heaves continued.
“That’s it, Junior. Just let the medicine do its job,” Roy said, holding the emesis basin near his partner’s chin.

“P-poison,” Johnny rasped, trying to shove Roy’s hands away from him. “Nuh-no.”

“Mr. Gage,” the nurse began as she finished charting his latest vitals, “you’ve been given naloxone. It’s an antidote for opioid overdose. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Johnny tried to make sense of what was happening. He still thought Roy was siding with the Ku Klux Klan. Now he was hearing another white-clad person say that he had been given an ANTIDOTE for opioid overdose. Confusion swirled inside his head. Were they trying to kill him, or not? Then his exhausted brain remembered Lily.

“L-Lily? L-leave… her… ‘lone,” he said, reaching for the basin and giving it a shove as he rolled onto his back. His legs continued moving, and his entire body ached. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to pull his arm over his eyes, but found that it was being held down by a strong hand. He lifted his head slightly, squinting at the bright lights as he tried to focus on the man who was restraining him.

“C-Cap?”

“Yea, John. It’s me. I can’t let you move this arm. You don’t want to dislodge the IV cannula. You know what’ll happen if you do that.”

Johnny’s breathing continued to come in gasps as he looked around the room. He was in a hospital, but it wasn’t Rampart. His eyes followed his arm down to his wrist where he saw an IV taped to the back of his hand. Hank Stanley’s strong hands were keeping him from moving his arm around.

“Wha- Ugh,” he groaned as he let his head fall back against the pillow. “Lily… Where’s… Lily?”

Roy hung his head, dreading the news he had to deliver to his best friend. “Johnny… I’m sorry, she… She got away.”

Johnny closed his eyes, fighting the nausea, and feeling a sense of relief that Lily had escaped. “Mmm,” he grunted, smacking his dry lips. “Good… ‘at’s good,” he said, panting slightly.

Roy’s worried eyes locked with Hank’s. Both men silently communicated their concern. Had Johnny really become indoctrinated so quickly? Why else would he have wanted Lily to get away when they were trying to rescue her?

Johnny suddenly became aware of the nasal cannula in his nose and used his free hand to swipe at it. Roy saw what he was doing, and quickly intercepted his hand.

“No, Johnny… Leave it. You need the oxygen right now. Your respiration rate is still too low.”

Seeing that his younger medic was becoming more alert, Hank took the opportunity to ask the question they had all been wondering.

“John,” the captain began, “who gave you the drugs?”

“Nuh, no… d’ugs,” Johnny slurred, his eyes remaining closed. “Jus’… tea.”

“It wasn’t just tea,” Roy commented, his anger at the cult growing. “It was opioids.”
Johnny tried to disagree, but his stomach chose that moment to protest the opioid antagonist again. Roy helped him roll over, quickly shoving the emesis basin into the appropriate position with practiced ease.

Dr. Buchanan rushed back into the room, checking his patient and documenting his vitals in the chart. Roy noticed the worry lines on the physician’s face.

“Doc? What’s wrong with him?” the red-haired paramedic asked.

Dr. Buck looked over at the perceptive man, unaware that his stress had been so obvious. He shook his head negatively. “He’s recovering, Roy.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

Dr. Buck blew out his breath. “Do you think you can manage him by yourself for a while?”

Roy replaced the emesis basin on the counter while Hank rolled Johnny onto his back. The senior medic dampened a wash cloth and used it to remove the sweat from his friend’s face, another side effect of the naloxone and the dry heaves Johnny was now enduring.

“Of course, but why?”

“Got several patients coming in from that damn hippy commune,” Dr. Buchanan swore. “It finally got raided, and… And a few are in bad shape, according to the police reports coming in.”

Roy could see the near panic on Dr. Buchanan’s face. “You’re the only doctor here, right?”

Dr. Buchanan nodded his head, pressing his lips into a thin line. “Yes, me and a small staff of nurses.”

Chet stepped over from the corner where he had been sitting. “We can take care of Johnny, Roy. I mean, as long as we turn him over to puke, and Cap keeps his arm still, then…,” he waved his arm in the direction of his pale friend. “I mean, we got this. Right, Cap?”

“In a crisis like this, can you use a paramedic who’s certified in LA only?” Hank asked.

Dr. Buchanan cut his eyes over to Roy. “You bet I can. We’ll worry about the legalities later,” the somewhat relieved physician announced. “Do you mind, Roy?”

“Not at all,” Roy agreed, looking back over his shoulder at Johnny who seemed to be resting at the moment.

“Get me a set of vitals on him every five minutes,” the physician instructed. “I mean, you men are trained to do that, right?”

“Yes, we are;” Hank agreed, releasing Johnny’s arm as he seemed to be relaxing a bit.

“Good, log it on the chart there,” he said, pointing at the open chart displayed on the counter. “His numbers should keep improving… If not, then come find me. I think we’re gonna be busy for a while.”

Dr. Buchanan stepped out into the hallway with Roy following close behind. Roy saw the nurses rushing from room to room, sensing the urgency in their actions.
“How many?” Roy asked, following the physician.

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“Some five who are showing symptoms of opioid overdose, and…”

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“And three are DOA.”

Roy’s heart sank into his belly. Was one of the three Lily? James?

“Change quickly, Roy. They should be here in about 10 minutes, maybe by then Lt. Crockett will be back with the naloxone.”

Roy began removing his dirty flannel shirt, but stopped suddenly and gave the physician a questioning look. “What?”

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“He’s headed to meet a Sheriff’s deputy from Kern County. Bakersfield is loaning us some naloxone,” the physician stated. “Meet me in treatment room one,” he ordered as he departed.

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Roy was left semi-clothed in the supply closet. His mind was reeling with possibilities, but he didn’t like any of them. As he dressed, he prayed that Lily would not be among the injured… or the dead.
Roy stood in the hallway, feeling awkward in the green scrubs he was wearing as he waited for the first patients to arrive. Triage would be Dr. Buchanan’s job, but Roy had been told that he would be assigned the lesser acuity patients, and that plan left him feeling as if he had fallen into an alternate universe, waiting for the patients to be brought to him from the field instead of riding in with them. He didn’t like it, but he knew he had the skills needed to assist the limited medical staff of the small hospital, and he wanted to help out in any way he could. He watched Chet assisting an orderly who had taken charge of transporting Johnny’s gurney, pulling it down the hallway through a set of double doors. Hank walked beside them with the IV bag elevated to maintain the gravity-fed fluids flowing into his junior medic. Roy stared as the doors swished closed, wishing he could be with his partner as he continued to recover from the near-fatal drug overdose.

“Roy?”

The paramedic turned towards the sound of his engineer’s voice, seeing Mike standing beside Marco.

“He’ll be okay,” Mike continued, knowing where Roy really wanted to be at the moment.

“Dr. Buchanan told us that he’s recovering well,” Marco added. “Cap and Chet will take good care of him. We’ve decided to stay here and help out, if we can.”

Roy shifted his eyes, looking in between his two coworkers, seeing three nurses frantically rushing around setting up the treatment rooms. He then returned his gaze to his friends who stood ready to help in spite of their own fatigue.

Roy glanced at his watch, realizing that they had been at the hospital much longer than he had realized. “Where’s Beverly?” he asked, concerned about the counselor.

“She’s gone to get us something to eat from the vending machines. When she gets back, she’ll be in Johnny’s room with Cap and Chet,” Marco stated, grateful to have such a caring woman in his life.

“I’m glad she’ll be there when Johnny comes around,” Roy commented, still uncertain if all of Johnny’s comments were related to the drug overdose. “I think he’ll really need somebody to talk to about all of this.” His heart sank once again. There had been a time, not so long ago, when Roy would have been that person. Perhaps this time Johnny needed someone with more experience. He certainly didn’t need Roy after the fight they had had at Johnny’s apartment just before Johnny joined the cult.

Roy was brought back from his musings by the distant wails of a duo of sirens. Turning to look out the automatic glass doors, his anxious voice stated the obvious to his comrades.

“Looks like they’re here.”

E!
Johnny felt as if he were teetering on the edge of an abyss. His body was a bundle of contradictions. His legs felt too heavy to move, and yet, they wouldn’t remain still, constantly twitching beneath the sheet. His eyes were nearly closed, yet he could see the blurry movement of people around him. His ears were hearing voices, both muddled whispers and distinct vocalizations, yet he couldn’t understand what was being said, only that the conversations were about him. He felt as if he were floating, and yet, knew that he was confined to a gurney. He shivered from the coolness of the air around him, yet his body was perspiring from the internal inferno burning inside his being. His entire body ached, and yet he felt nothing. He was lost – physically, mentally, and emotionally. And the one person he wanted to be with, the one person who made him complete, was no longer by his side. The other half of his soul was missing, left behind at the compound by the men who had taken him against his will. His anchor was gone, and now he was adrift in the sea of nothingness.

The events from earlier in the evening began to flood his mind. He drifted back to the place where he and Lily had been sitting beside each other, staring into the flickering flames of the fire in the pit nearest them. He heard the melodic notes of Ian’s flute and tasted the honey-sweetened hot beverage that Lily had insisted he drink. The tranquility of the night had been interrupted by the arrival of his shiftmates.

As Johnny lay quietly on the gurney, his thoughts drifted back over his stumbling walk from the fire pit to the gate of the compound. Had he not consumed the second cup of tea, he probably could have outrun his coworkers. He was the lightest and fastest man on his shift. He pondered the poor timing of Lily’s offering, remembering how she had insisted that he needed an additional cup to relax his aching muscles. He swallowed back the bile that was rising in his parched throat. If only she had known that his coworkers were coming for him… Or did she? He was beginning to have a niggling feeling that the second cup of tea had been more than a coincidence.

He felt the gurney moving and knew that he was being transferred to a different room. It wasn’t as if he was a stranger to hospitals. Even though he was still in a semi-conscious state, his faculties were aware enough of his surroundings to know what the movement meant. But where were they taking him? He tried to open his eyes fully, but found the task to be beyond his capabilities at the moment. He heard Hank and Chet conversing, unable to discern their words. Where were the others? They had been in the back of the van with him earlier… How long ago had that been? Tiny snippets of his abduction were floating around inside his brain, falling like snowflakes into a river – present for a moment, then disappearing as they floated away from him. The details were sketchy, but he was sure that Mike had been there, and Roy…

Roy. The thought of the man who had been his best friend for years made his throat itch and his eyes burn. With greater awareness came the realization that Roy had not joined the Ku Klux Klan. The man he had served alongside for several years, his departmental partner, had been present in the hospital with him – caring for him, not there to harm him. Moisture slipped from beneath his eyelids, coursing down from the corners of his eyes, winding across his tanned face until they disappeared along the oxygen tubing at the edge of his scraggly whiskers. At least they didn’t seep into his ears as they had done in his younger years.

Johnny had spent his first year in California being homesick for his parents. He loved them more than life itself, and having to distance himself from them, even though it was to save them from the Ku Klux Klan, had nearly killed him. He thought of all the nights when he had lain in bed at Iris’ house, crying for his parents. He knew that Iris could hear him, Lily too, but neither one said anything about his nocturnal whimpers. They understood how hard he was trying to be strong, to hide his weakness in front of them, to be the warrior he needed to prove himself to be.

He was jolted back to the present when the gurney came to a stop and the voices around him became more pronounced. He felt his leaded body being transferred to a hospital bed, felt the covers being
tenderly tucked in neatly around him. His oxygen tubing was adjusted and his IV bag was hung on the pole near Johnny’s head. Why did the hands that had snatched him away from Lily, hands that had forcefully held him down against the flooring of the van, why were they now ministering to him? Nothing made sense. Everything was wrong. His throat burned and his eyes began to water even more. He tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. He felt his nostrils flare and his respiration rate increase, resulting in a muffled cough.

“John?” Beverly said softly, removing the damp cloth from his heated forehead. She dipped it into the basin of cool water, wringing it out and then replacing it on his fevered brow. “John, can you hear me?”

Johnny pressed his lips together tighter. He didn’t want to respond, couldn’t even if he had wanted to, but the coughing fit began again.

“Take it easy, Pal. I know it must be rough. We’re here for you,” Hank said, checking his medic’s pulse once more, then tightened the straps on the brace on Johnny’s left hand. He wanted to ensure that the integrity of the IV had been maintained during the transfer.

“John, if you can hear me, open your mouth a little. I’ve got a cup of water with a straw for you. It’ll help soothe your throat and ease your cough,” Beverly stated, bending the straw and slipping it between his barely opened parched lips.

Johnny felt the plastic tube brush across his lips, and instinctively closed his mouth around it, pulling a small amount onto his burning tongue. The cool dampness offered him some relief from his misery. He swallowed, releasing a raspy breath. When the straw remained in place, he anxiously clamped down again, withdrawing another sip, this one a little larger than the first. He released the grip his lips had on the straw, gulping as he swallowed the water. The relief to his burning throat was immediate. The energy he had expended drinking the water had depleted him, and once again, sorrow and depression slipped their arms around him, easing his transition from near consciousness back into the deep darkness.

Beverly saw the tears seeping from beneath Johnny’s long fluttering eyelashes. Seeing that he had ceased his sipping, she set the cup of water back on the bedside table and reached for the cloth laying on his forehead. Gently she wiped his face, removing the tears that had stained it. Again, she soaked the cloth in the cool water and replaced it on his forehead while Hank checked his vitals again.

The seasoned fire captain released the bulb on the blood pressure cuff and removed the stethoscope from his ears. “BP is up some more,” he said, placing the medical equipment on the table. He picked up the pen and began writing down the latest numbers. “Pulse and respirations are improving, too.”

“That’s good,” Chet commented, placing the last bite of his stale vending machine sandwich in his mouth.

“Yes, and….” Beverly hesitated, looking back and forth between the two men. “And he can hear us, I think. We need to talk to him, encourage him to wake up.”

“Whatever Gage needs to come back to us is what we’ll do,” Chet said, looking over at his pale friend who was tucked neatly beneath the blanket. He shivered, involuntarily, at the thought of losing one of his friends. He was determined that neither death nor resignation would separate the members of his shift, and he had decided to do whatever he could to save Johnny from the emotional demons that seemed to be slowly dragging him away. “We’re brothers and we never leave a brother behind.”

E!
Iris sat in the darkness of her living room, listening as the pendulum on her wall clock methodically ticked from side to side. She lifted her eyes, looking at the face of the clock from the glow of the street light outside of her window. She sighed with the realization that it was nearly two o’clock in the morning and she hadn’t heard anything from Ron, or the men from Station 51.

She shivered against the chill that ran across her shoulders and pulled her robe tighter around her plump bosom. She knew that things had not gone as planned or she would have been contacted by now. Against her will, her mind drifted back to the church services she had reluctantly attended with Kizzy during her time in Selma, during the Civil Rights marches.

Iris had been reared in a Protestant congregation as a child, but had become disillusioned with religion after being rejected by her family because of whom she chose to date. How could a religion that was founded on the love and grace of its deity allow people to reject their own child because the love of her life had different colored skin?

She also knew that even though Kizzy’s congregation worshiped the same God, they were only slightly more accepting of Jon Campbell’s choice for a wife. It seemed to Iris that too many people chose to believe only parts of their religious doctrine, and not the entire scripture. Yet, she had found a bit of comfort when she had attended the service at Brown’s AME Church before the melee, on that fateful Sunday. Again she wondered how the people had maintained their faith when things had gotten so bad just a short time later.

As the ghostly sounds of the Negro spirituals faded back into her memory, she could almost hear Kizzy’s sweet voice reminding her of where the older woman found her strength.

“God is with me, Iris. It don’t matter what no man does to me down here, ‘cause I know where I’m goin’ when I leave this world. I know the Lord’s gonna take care o’ me. The Lord hears our prayers, girl. He don’t always answer ‘em like we might want, or as quick as we want, but he hears ‘em. Maybe you oughtta try it again sometime… He’ll give ya the piece this world can’t give ya. Them folks that do us wrong, they gotta answer to the Lord one day. You see, child, the Lord can do what we can’t do. So we gotta believe and jus’ keep the faith. Keep on believin’ even when ya can’t see no way outta the mess you in. ‘Cause He’s done seen it all for ya and He’ll jus’ carry ya right on through it all. The good book says that vengeance is His…”

Iris’ eyes began to refocus on the present, leaving the image and fading voice of her mother-in-law in the past, but the message remained inside of Iris’ heart. With tears burning her reddened cheeks, she slipped out of her chair and onto her knees. And there, in the quiet darkness of her living room, she poured her heart out to the God she hadn’t directly addressed since she was a child.

E!

Ronald Crockett looked down at his watch, sighing at the late hour. The chaos in the emergency room was beginning to slow down. The detective looked over at the payphone on the wall, and knew he needed to call Iris. He had to tell her exactly what had happened, and let her know the final outcome of the mission.

He wiped his forehead with his hand, blowing out his cheeks with a loud exhalation, and made the short walk to the phone.

Picking up the receiver, he rolled the dime around in his fingers before dropping it into the slot and dialing the operator. He propped one hand on his hip while he gave the friendly operator the information needed to connect to Iris Campbell’s residence, then deposited the required coinage to pay for the charges.
As the phone began ringing, his dark eyes scanned the corridor in the emergency room. A few of the FBI officials were congregated outside treatment room three, while a couple of nurses passed between the treatment rooms carrying supplies. He would have to be careful of what he said so as not to compromise the investigation.

“Hello?” a desperate sounding female voice answered on the second ring.

Ron heard the anxiety in Iris’ voice, even though she only spoke one word. Wanting to relieve her stress as much as possible, he quickly blurted out the news Iris had been waiting for. “We got ’em.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone, but the detective could hear the ragged breathing and knew that Iris’ emotions were getting the best of her. He didn’t rush her, allowing her the time she needed to compose herself.

“B-both… of them?”

“Yes… they’re both out… and Gardner won’t be hurting anyone else – not ever.”

Iris sniffled, using her free hand to push herself off of the floor where she had been kneeling. The fact that she had been praying when she received the call was not lost on her, and her heart began to pound in the upper part of her throat. Had the God of her childhood answered her prayer so quickly, even after all the years of silence from her?

“W-when will… will they be… home?”

Ron again exhaled loudly. This was the part of the phone call that he had been dreading.

“Iris… I need to tell you what happened, and I wish I wasn’t doing it on the phone. Please hear me out before you say anything… Okay?”

“Oh no… Are they… al-alright?” she asked, worried about the answer she would receive.

“They will be. Look… When we first got to the compound, we managed to get Johnny out. The guys from 51’s think that Lily got away, but-”

“No! No, Ron, you said you got them both-“

“Iris!” He said in a raised voice, needing to halt her rising panic. “We did, but I’m trying to tell you how it happened.”

“Okay, alright… I’m s-sorry… Go on.”

Ron leaned against the wall, his own fatigue catching up with him. “I knew more than I could tell you until now; even the fellas from 51’s didn’t know this part… In fact, they still don’t, but I’m gonna tell them as soon as I get off the phone with you.”

“Okay,” she responded softly, not fully understanding his confusing comments.

“The FBI has been after Gardner for a few years now, but couldn’t pin anything on him. Iris… You need to know that Lily wanted to leave, but she couldn’t. Others who tried to leave were… Well… most who tried to leave didn’t survive.”

“ACK!”
“Sshhh,” he crooned into the receiver. “You need to know that Lily has never stopped loving you, and she wanted to come home to you, but couldn’t. The FBI infiltrated the cult, got a guy on the inside. He befriended Lily, and she began working with the feds to help bring Gardner down. I had to help her get away from the fellas from 51’s when we first snagged Johnny; she had to finish the job with the feds. Anyway, she put on a wire, and helped us get audio evidence of his activities, including murder.”

“W-where’s my baby girl, now?” she asked in a voice husky with emotion.

“She’s here with me,” Ron stated, not yet disclosing that he was at a hospital in Tehachapi. “It was tough, but she got the evidence she needed, and-“

“I want to talk to her. Please put her on the phone, Ron… Please,” she whimpered. “I need to hear my sweet girl’s voice.”

Ron winced, realizing that he wasn’t explaining things very well to her. “She can’t come to the phone right now. But soon, Iris. Very soon, I promise. Anyway, Gardner has been involved in... well, let’s just say illegal drug activity,” he said, careful not to mention that the religious leader had been manufacturing and selling drugs, including opioids like heroin, and he was even in the process of creating new synthetic drugs. That was a conversation he would have to have with the others after the investigation was over.

“Ohmygod, Ron…”

“We think he was using his cult members to experiment on. Some of them are in the hospital now with symptoms of an overdose. If we hadn’t raided the place, some of them might have died. Johnny is one of them.” He deliberately withheld the fact that Lily had caused Johnny’s overdose by giving him a second cup of tea from a different, more concentrated, container that resulted in his near-fatal overdose.

“Argh,” she gasped, closing her eyes as hot tears spilled onto her cheeks. “Will he… be okay?”

“Yes, we got him to the hospital in time to be given an antidote. He’ll be here for a few more hours, but he’ll recover fully.”

“And… You said Lily was there with you… She’s hospitalized, too?”

“Yes… Iris, she’s being treated for anxiety, not a drug overdose. It’s been a very long night and she’s been through a very traumatic experience. She’s… She’s resting comfortably now. If she were awake, I would’ve put her on the phone, but-“

“But she’s okay… gonna be okay, right?” the frightened mother asked. She needed to hear the words again.

“Yes… Both of them are going to be fine. You have my word.”

“I… I need to come there. I’ve got to see them.”

Ron knew he couldn’t stop her, wouldn’t even if he could. “I would ask you to wait until morning, but it wouldn’t do any good, would it?”

Iris released a soft snort. “No… It’s been too long since I saw my daughter. She… She needs her Momma.”
A huge smile spread across Ron’s dark features. Iris was right and he knew it. He also knew that Momma needed her baby girl, too. “We’re at Tehachapi Hospital. It’s about a two-hour drive from LA.”

“Ron… What happened to Gardner? Did that bastard get arrested?”

The detective stood up straighter, looking back down the corridor at the place where the federal agents were gathered. He hadn’t planned on discussing details other than Lily and Johnny’s condition with Iris.

“No… He… He, uh… He and his two body guards seemed to have acquired a fatal dose of lead poisoning during the raid. He’ll never hurt anyone else – not ever.” Again his dark eyes scanned the corridor, hoping that anyone who had overheard his comments, didn’t understand the cryptic message. The investigation was still an active one, so he couldn’t release too much information. He just hoped she understood.

“Fatal dose of… lead-“ Iris stopped mid-sentence, gasping as the realization dawned on her. “You mean… Ron, are you telling me that this nut and his bodyguards were killed during the raid?”

“Um… Gardner is no longer a threat to anyone… Except maybe the devil when he busts hell wide open,” the detective said with a sneer.

“Good riddance… Ron, thank you,” she whispered, the lump in her throat constricting her ability to speak. “Thank you for giving me my… my family back.”

Crockett’s heart nearly melted at the sincerity in her voice. Her words touched his soul. “You’re welcome, Iris. Please be careful, and I’ll be waiting for you when you get here.”

“I will.”

Just as Ron hung up the receiver, he heard clapping and jubilant voices coming from the entrance to the treatment room where James had been taken. When he turned around, he saw a gurney being pushed out of the treatment room, and the man lying on it was James.

With confident strides, the lieutenant walked over to the crowded area. He noticed that James was battered, but seemed to be alert.

“Well, well… Is this what happens when you get your ass kicked by a hose jockey?” the detective chided, referencing their earlier conversation in the meditation gardens.

“No…,” the injured man said, squinting from the pain of the lights in the hallway. “This is what happens when you get your ass kicked by a couple of professional goons,” the relieved agent replied, wincing when his split lip was tugged by a slight smile. “It’s just a mild concussion. That fireman did NOT get the best of me.”

“Yea, yea… but I DID pull DeSoto off o’ you, remember?” Crockett asked with a grin. Patting the wounded agent lightly on the shoulder, he continued his conversation. “You did good, James… Real good. Try to get some rest.”

James looked around his swollen left eye, seeing the blurry image of the police detective. “I’m glad to be on your side, Crockett, but I’m even gladder to be out of that hell hole.” He grunted when he raised his hand up to his sore chin. “I can’t handle this damn beard any longer. I’ve got to get a shave and a haircut.”

“Two pence,” a couple of guys said in unison, then the entire group burst into laughter.
“I’m gonna go check on Ian and Lily,” Crockett said with a smile.

“Let me know how they’re doing.” James tossed back just as the orderlies began to push the gurney down the corridor towards the doubled doors.

“Will do,” Ron responded.

“Say, is Johnny still pissed off?”

Crockett stood stunned. He hadn’t thought to tell James about the overdose. “Um, not exactly. He’s, uh, he’s recovering from an overdose, James. The second cup of tea that Lily gave him was spiked with a stronger dose than the first one.” He watched as the FBI detective gulped.

“W-what do you mean?”

“He had already consumed a small dose of what we think was heroin in the tea. Lily gave him a second cup, to help lower his resistance to being, um... removed from the premises, but she didn’t know that it was a much stronger batch. Johnny went into respiratory arrest when we first got him here. Doc thinks he’s going to be fine though.”

James was glad that he was already lying down, otherwise, he might have collapsed. “Sonofabitch,” he mumbled as the gurney was pushed away from the assembled group. “I was the one who asked her to do it.”

The detective saw the worried look on James’ face as he was wheeled away, through the double doors. When Crockett turned back around he was greeted by the exhausted face of Roy DeSoto who was exiting the room where Ian was being treated. The two men exchanged weary glances and slight nods. The paramedic gave the detective the information he was wanting before he ever had the chance to ask for it.

“He’s going to be fine. The nurse is preparing to transfer him to the floor.” Roy nodded towards the waiting room where a middle aged man was waiting, his knee bouncing rapidly. “Ian’s older brother from Pearsonville.”

“His family is here already?” Ron asked.

“Yea... Ian gave me the number as soon as he arrived. I gave his brother a call when I had a chance, and... I think I nearly gave him a heart attack, but he agreed to come right away.”

Crockett released a low whistle.

“Ian didn’t know if anyone in his family would come for him. Their reunion was...,” Roy hesitated, knowing that he had been a witness to one of the most tender moments between two adult men that he had ever seen. “It was... Emotional. He, ah... He needed to be alone for a few minutes to compose himself. Doc’s probably going to let Ian go home in a day, or so, and Alex,” he said, again quirking his head in the direction of Ian’s older brother. “Alex is going to take him home to live with him and his wife until he gets back on his feet. It’s the best possible outcome.”

“Definitely,” Crockett mused. “The Red Cross has been called in to set up a temporary shelter for the members who didn’t need to be brought in here. The compound is a crime scene now so they can’t stay there. Suddenly realizing that he hadn’t told anyone else about Iris, he chose to speak up. “Iris is on her way,” he said, his dark eyes returning to Roy. “She’ll be here in a couple of hours.”

Roy’s blood-shot eyes perked up. “Here? Tonight?”
“Yea, I called her to let her know that Lily and Johnny were out. She wouldn’t wait until morning to come and see them,” he said with a wistful smile. He admired her dedication to her family. It was just one of many qualities he liked about the florist.

“Have you told them?”

“No… I was about to go check on Lily. Wanna come with me to tell her?” Crockett asked, hoping for a little moral support from another man. He had never handled crying women well, and he knew that there would definitely be some weeping over the news. Even joyful tears made him uncomfortable.

“I’m not sure if she’s been moved yet, or not. Dr. Buck was going to send her to the floor earlier. He wants to keep her a few hours for observation.”

Ron propped his forearm against the tile wall, leaning his weight against it. “Be honest with me, DeSoto. Is she gonna be okay?”

Roy crossed his arms, leaning his shoulder against the same wall. Both men were tired, even though they were accustomed to working long hours with only a little sleep. It was different when it involved close friends. “I think so. She’s going to need a lot of support from Iris… and Johnny, too, but I think she’ll recover – physically, at least.”

“Did she have some kind of nervous breakdown?”

Roy shook his head, hearing the worry in the detective's voice. “Not exactly. The stress of the situation affected her. Then when she thought she had killed Johnny… It just sent her over the edge. She went into emotional shock. Dr. Buck has her on an anxiolytic, which has her calmed down.”

Ron allowed a soft smile to spread across his face. “So maybe a little TLC from Iris and Johnny will heal her?”

“For the most part,” Roy said, pushing himself off the wall and leading the detective down the hall to the treatment room where he had last seen Lily. “As for the mental aspects… I think she’ll need professional help, therapy, you know?”

Ron saw the shadow cross Roy’s ruddy face. He knew the other man was worried about his own partner. When Roy’s hand hesitated at the door of the treatment room, Ron placed a supportive hand at the back of Roy’s neck.

“Let’s go see Johnny when we get through in here.”

Roy gave a slight nod of agreement, then pushed the door open. Inside he saw the pale face of Lily, snuggled beneath the blankets on the gurney. A nurse looked up from the chart when she heard the door opening.

“I thought you were George coming to move her,” she said in a quiet voice.

“Is she being moved to a room?” Ron asked, his voice barely a whisper. The last thing he wanted to do was awaken the sleeping patient.

“Yes… 110. It’s a private room, so she’ll be able to get plenty of rest. Has anyone located her family?” the red-haired nurse asked.
“Yea… Her mother is on her way. She’ll be here before dawn,” the detective said, inching closer to the sleeping form.

For the first time, Crockett was able to get a good look at Lily. He saw the light sprinkling of freckles that adorned her nose, the soft mocha complexion that he thought was so beautiful. But it was the dark circles beneath her eyes that haunted him. What had this young woman endured at the hands of a madman? She and Iris had lost so much time, but they were about to be reunited, and part of him wanted to be present when the joyful reunion occurred. Yet, he knew that it was a private family moment, and he wasn’t a part of the family.

He leaned down close to her ear, not knowing if she could hear him, or not. He saw the shape of her eyes and the slight upturn of her nose, features he had seen on Iris. He smiled wistfully, then whispered softly.

“Your mother will be here soon, Lily. She loves you very much.”

Roy felt the tickle beginning in the back of his throat and the familiar stinging in his eyes. His thoughts turned to the distant future and wondered what it would be like to switch places with Iris. How would he feel if it were Jenny who had been lost for so long? What would their reunion be like? He lightly coughed into his closed fist, forcing the intrusive thoughts out of his mind. He wouldn’t allow the painful ponderings to linger. He couldn’t imagine the pain such an event would cause… And he hoped he never would.

Ron straightened up, then turned to the nurse. “You said room 110?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll wait for her mother and then escort her to the right room. That will be okay, won’t it?” Crockett asked.

“Yes,” the nurse said in a muffled voice, smiling as she closed the chart. “Dr. Buck has relaxed all of the visiting hour rules for this event. Family and friends can come and go as they please. He says it’s better for the patients.”

“He’s right,” Roy piped up, thinking about Johnny. “And I really need to go check on my partner, if you’ll excuse me,” he said, turning to leave.

“Hold up, Roy,” Ron commented. “I’ll go with you. I’d like to see Gage, too; I just need to see for myself that he’s okay.”

E!

Inside his hospital room, Johnny lay still with his eyes closed. The head of his bed was raised slightly to make it easier for him to use the emesis basin. Thankfully though, the nausea had dissipated, but left behind a throbbing headache. He pretended to be asleep, not wanting to face the people who were in the room with him. He listened to their soft whispers, appreciating their efforts to communicate quietly, yet wishing they would leave. They had ruined his plan, jerked him away from the woman he loved. He gripped the sheet a little tighter, wanting to be anywhere but here, with anyone but these people… No, he really wanted to be with Lily, but she was gone. His last memory of her was the fading scream of her exit as she ran from the melee while he was being forcefully dragged to Chet’s van. That could only mean one thing. Lily considered the Family and Unity Gardens to be a safe place, a place to run to when she was afraid. Because of how deeply indoctrinated she had become, he feared he may never see her again.
“Do you think he’s gonna be… addicted to this shi, er, stuff?” Chet asked, managing to prevent the obscenity from escaping his lips as he cut his eyes apologetically at Beverly.

“Not after being drugged once. It takes a lot longer to become addicted to heroin, I think,” Hank replied.

Johnny’s muddled brain heard Hank’s comment and a sense of panic began to rise in his chest. Heroin. Had he really been drugged with heroin? That was impossible… wasn’t it? It was only herbal tea…

“Depends,” Beverly mentioned, staring at the pale form lying in the hospital bed. “Heroin can be addictive after just one episode.” She was about to say more when a soft knocking wrapped on the door.

Being seated closest to the door, Mike opened it, mouthing the word ‘sleeping’ to the two guests. Roy was the first to walk in, nearly gasping at the sight of his strong partner looking so weak and frail beneath the white sheets. He entered the room, followed by Ron.

“How are his vitals?” Roy asked quietly, aiming the question towards his captain.

“Much better. He’s been asleep for about half an hour now,” the fire captain explained.

“Went out pretty much as soon as the nausea stopped,” Marco added.

“So what’s going on with the others?” Mike questioned, remembering how James, Ian, and Lily looked when they had first arrived at the emergency room.

Roy and Ron quickly updated the rest of the crew on the condition of the trio. Ron also chose that moment to explain what really happened back at the compound. The men of 51’s and Beverly were surprised to learn that Lily and Ian had been participants, too.

Johnny’s heart rate increased and his breathing hitched. The pounding in his head grew stronger and he felt nauseous again. He forced his body not to gag; he didn’t want to alert the others that he was awake. His mind was reeling with what he had just heard. It had all been a set up.

Everything had been orchestrated by the FBI. James, Ian, and even Lily had been involved… and they hadn’t told him. Instead of seeking his assistance, they had drugged him. That had to be it. That’s why Lily had insisted that he drink a second cup of tea. They wanted to get rid of him, remove him from the situation. The three of them knew that he was a fireman and a paramedic, yet they hadn’t thought he was capable of assisting them. Why? Did they really think he was that untrustworthy? That inept? Did they consider him a liability instead of an asset? The truth slammed into him full force. He had shared with them most of the details of what had happened in Selma a decade earlier. They knew of his weakness.

The sense of cowardice took him back to the morning of Phillip’s murder. His entire body trembled through the sweat-soaked sheets, and the noxious scent of stale water seemed to fill his nostrils, even though he knew that was impossible. He was in a hospital, not near a river. He pressed his lips together again, stressfully, trying to remove the putrid smell from beneath his nose. This was why he had always hated water rescues; they reminded him of the one rescue near water that he hadn’t even attempted. They reminded him of the place where he had stood by and watched an innocent man die. He never admitted his fears to anyone, not even Roy, but he loathed calls that involved water rescues because they always resulted in the same outcome. He would be left shaking uncontrollably, feeling light-headed, and usually vomiting. Roy called it seasickness, but Johnny called it what it really was...
– he was nothing more than a white-feathered gutless coward.

“So DeSoto really did assault an FBI agent?” Chet asked, his blue eyes holding a hint of a mischievous sparkle.

Roy rolled his eyes at the junior lineman’s comment. He stopped paying attention to the conversation going on around him since he had already been briefed by the agents who came in with their battered comrade. While Ron continued with his story, Roy walked over to the bedside table and scanned the vitals that Hank had documented on Johnny. After running his index finger down the page that chronicled Johnny’s return from the brink of death, his eyes shifted over to Johnny’s silent form.

Johnny was lying partially on his right side, away from the group, gripping the blankets near his chin. Beneath his closed eyelids, his eyes were twitching. A light sheen of sweat had formed across his face which seemed to have grown paler since Roy arrived. He wondered if Johnny was truly asleep, or if he was simply listening to the conversations of the others. Instinctively, Roy reached beneath the edge of the blanket, grasping his friend’s wrist, and began counting his pulse. Noting how rapid it was, he stood by, watching the younger man’s respiration rate. It was also faster than normal for someone who was sleeping. The fact that Johnny had flinched when Roy touched him did not go unnoticed.

“Johnny?” Roy whispered softly, ignoring the conversation the others were having around him. “Johnny, can you hear me?”

Johnny heard the melodic voice of the man who had been his best friend for years. He had thought Roy had left the hospital because he hadn’t seen him or heard his voice since he had been moved to a private room. Now he was here and Johnny’s heart ached. Once again, his eyes began to sting and the back of his throat felt scratchy. The air felt thicker and he struggled to breathe normally. Silently he chastised himself, gritting his teeth together tightly in an effort to dam his tears. But Roy’s voice, the touch of the older man’s hand, breached the dam and his tears began to flow. He was torn between wanting to grab hold of Roy, like a drowning man, and wanting to push him away.

Roy saw the moisture leaking from Johnny’s closed eyes, and his heart broke. He didn’t know what his partner might be thinking, but whatever it was, it was creating a very emotional response from Johnny. He knew he needed to apologize for his actions at Johnny’s apartment, but he really didn’t want the others to hear him. Yet, his own emotions began tugging at his heartstrings, and he knew what he needed to do.

“Johnny, if you can hear me… I want you to know… how sorry I am for what happened at your apartment that day.”

Johnny sniffled, shutting his eyes tighter. He didn’t want to hear Roy’s apology. He didn’t want to go back to that time. And he certainly didn’t want to face the man who had been his best friend, knowing that Roy knew what he had done so long ago. But he needed Roy, or Lily… Or somebody… He needed help, but he didn’t know where to turn, or what to do. He was dying a slow and agonizing emotional death.

Roy watched as Johnny seemed to withdraw even further into himself, shrinking lower beneath the covers as if he were afraid of Roy. He placed a comforting hand on Johnny’s shoulder, feeling the thin shoulder jerk away from his touch as if it had burned him.

“Jo-Johnny…,” Roy choked out his whisper. “Please…”
Beverly watched the tender moment play out in front of her. Feeling the need to intervene, she stepped to the other side of Johnny’s bed, facing the young man who was shutting out his best friend. She tenderly caressed his scruffy face, seeing the twitching of his lips and the quivering of his chin. He was listening, but he obviously didn’t want to interact with them.

“John, we’re all here with you. There’s nothing to be afraid of. You’ve been given naloxone to combat the effects of the drugs.” She saw him shrink down more in the bed. “This isn’t your fault.”

While Beverly spoke to Johnny, Roy composed himself, finding his voice. “Johnny, listen to me. James, Ian, and Lily are here at the hospital, and they’re all going to be just fine. They’re resting, same as you, but they’ll come see you… Or I’ll take you to see them, as soon as everyone is feeling a little better, okay?”

Beverly added to what Roy was saying, hoping that the two of them would finally get through to their friend. “John… Iris is on her way here. Ron said she should be here in about an hour, or so. She’s so excited that both you and Lily are safe now. She can’t wait to see you. Lily needs you, too.”

Johnny heard the comments, but wasn’t sure how to process them. Iris had lied to him. She had broken her promise to him after all these years. Had she merely used him to get her daughter back? If Lily was really at the hospital, if she was really out of the cult, then Iris would finally have what she wanted most. She would have her daughter back. Maybe Iris didn’t care for him as much as he had thought. So many times she had said that she loved him like a son. Would a mother go back on her word to her child? He knew the answer. She didn’t really love him. She had been kind to him, but ultimately, he wasn’t family. Strengthening his resolve, he summoned up the courage to say the words that were on his heart. He needed to be alone.

“All of you… Just go… away….. pl-please.”

Roy and Beverly exchanged worried looks. It was Roy who spoke first, leaning down nearer to Johnny’s ear.

“Johnny, please don’t kick us out. We want to help you.”

“NO… get… out,” Johnny reiterated, his breath heaving anxiously. He couldn’t handle the reminders of his former life. He had enjoyed a wonderful few years in the department, developed deep friendships, and had led a fulfilling life. Now he felt as if fate was mocking him. He had lost everything, including Iris… Even Lily didn’t trust him. He couldn’t face his best friend or anyone else in the entire DeSoto family. And he had long ago lost his parents. They were still alive, but their relationship had been damaged by the distance he had put between them. When his thoughts turned to Lily, he became even more confused. Had she really deliberately poisoned him? That was the most disturbing thought of all.

He had sworn that he would never allow himself to become this close to other people because of the pain he experienced when the relationships ended… And they always ended, one way or another. This fact was even more proof of his spinelessness. He preferred to run away rather than face a painful truth. He had run from Waite, run from the KKK, run from the impending trial, run away from the department and from his best friend – he preferred to run away rather than face the pain of his past. He loathed himself and everything that his life seemed to represent.

Hank and the rest of the men became aware of what was happening and their conversations ceased. He stepped over to the place where his junior medic lay, noting the silent tears streaming down his face.
“John? John, we’re all here. Just take it easy, pal. Everything will be alright soon.”

“N-no,” Johnny grunted, his eyes remaining tightly shut. “Get… out,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Can’t do that. I promised the doctor that we’d stay with you until he comes back by,” Hank explained.

“Ahem,” Johnny said, trying to clear his throat. “Please… Please jus’ leave me… ‘lone.”

Beverly stepped over with a cup of water, bending the straw towards Johnny’s mouth. “Listen… John, will you let Marco and me stay with you so that you aren’t alone?” She cast her eyes around at the stressed faces of the men. “Maybe you fellows could use some coffee while you wait for Johnny to be released, huh?” she asked, expectantly. She could see that the situation was going downhill and she wanted to stop the downward spiral. While she waited for the men to consider their options, she pushed the straw gently into Johnny’s mouth, feeling a sense of relief when he began to drink.

Hank ran his hand along the back of his head, squeezing the nape of his neck to release the tension. He looked over at Beverly and then at his senior lineman. Maybe Beverley was right. Perhaps they all needed a little space.

“It’s your call, John,” Hank stated, stepping nearer to the bed. He watched as Johnny seemed to contemplate his options, then gave a silent nod of affirmation.

Roy exhaled an exasperated sigh. “Yea… okay,” he commented, casting one last look at his partner. When he turned to head for the door, he tossed over his shoulder. “I’ll catch you later, Johnny. We really need to talk, but it can wait until you’re feeling better,” he said, reaching for the door handle. “I’m, ah… I’m really glad you’re going to be alright.” He quickly pulled open the door and exited the room, feeling completely exhausted and totally inadequate as a friend.

Hank raised his eyebrows in an exaggerated manner before patting Johnny on his shoulder and following Roy out the door. Mike stood up, following behind Chet and Ron. He turned back for a moment, offering a hint of a sad smile to Beverly and Marco. “We’ll be in the waiting area. Let us know if you need anything.”

Marco nodded his agreement to his engineer, reaching out for Beverly’s hand as the door closed. He didn’t know what to say to Johnny, but he knew that Beverly did, and for the umpteenth time since they had been dating, he was grateful to have her by his side.

E!

Iris Campbell blinked her eyes exaggeratedly as she turned her station wagon into the parking lot of the Tehachapi Hospital. The drive had been a long one, but she had made good time. She pulled into a vacant parking spot beneath the glowing blue and white sign, shifted into park, and sat behind the wheel.

It had been three years since she had last seen her daughter, and even though she had just spent the last two hours trying to decide what to say to her first, she still had no idea what she might blurt out. Lieutenant Crockett had only told her that Lily was resting after being treated for anxiety. He had mentioned that Lily had been trapped in the cult. He had even told her that her daughter had never stopped loving her… But Ron never said that Lily was ready to see her again.

Using a folded napkin to dry her misty eyes, she tossed the previously discarded item back onto the long bench seat, pulled her purse onto her shoulder, and headed for the emergency room entrance.
She had already lost three years of time with her daughter, and she refused to waste another minute. It was time to see Lily, and to make sure that Johnny knew exactly how much he meant to her for helping reunite them.
Entering the small waiting room, Iris saw Roy laying across three chairs, snoring. Beside him, Mike was napping with his head tilted to one side, a position she knew had to be uncomfortable for him. Chet was dozing in a corner, his head leaning against the wall, while the captain of the crew leaned his head against the back of the chair he was sitting in, with his long legs propped in a chair in front of him. Iris’ eyes scanned the scene, wondering where the others might be at the moment. Ron had agreed to meet her here. His absence sent her panic rising. Had something happened to Lily?

“May I help you, ma’am?” a polite receptionist inquired of the nervous florist.

“Um, y-yes… I’m-“

“Iris?” Roy’s head jerked up at the sound of Iris’ voice. He struggled to stand up, using the heels of his hands to rub the sleep from his eyes.

Iris, ignoring the woman who had first spoken to her, rushed to the place where Roy was stretching his back. Without thinking, she lunged into his arms seeking comfort from the paramedic.

“Roy… Where…,” she sniffled, pulling back slightly. “Where are they?”

Roy held her upper arms, as much to steady himself as to ground her and calm her fears. “Marco and Beverly are with Johnny in his room. And,” he peered over his shoulder, seeing the other men stretching groggily as they gathered around them. “And Crockett is with Lily. He didn’t want her to wake up alone.”

Iris’ lower lip began to tremble, unable to hold back her emotions. When she had composed herself, somewhat, she looked around the waiting area. “And they’re… okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hank spoke up. “Johnny… He asked to be alone for a while. He’s…” Hank wasn’t sure how much to say, and so he chose to say as little as possible. “He’s recovering well. The doctor will probably release him in a few more hours.”

“And Lily?” Iris asked, her voice quivering.

Roy pulled her into a sideways hug, knowing that she was petrified. “Iris, I treated her myself. She had a very harrowing experience, but she’s going to be fine. It’s been very stressful for her,” he began, ensuring his voice remained calm. “I’ll take you to her now, but just try to understand that… Lily thought that she had killed Johnny. We tried to convince her that that wasn’t the case, but I’m not sure how much she really understood. She was so upset that… that Dr. Buchanan had to give her an anxiolytic.”

“A tranquilizer?” Iris gasped, her hand covering her mouth.

“Yes, but don’t worry. She needs rest and… And some of your tender loving care,” he said, steering her towards the double doors that led down the hallway to Lily’s room. “And later on, a visit from Johnny,” he said, knowing that his partner needed the visit, as well.

The walk to room 110 was made in silence. When the duo arrived, Iris slowly pushed on the door.
As the opening widened, she saw a sight that took her breath away. Lily was asleep, snuggled beneath the pale blue blanket, curled partially on her side. Her right hand had slipped from under the blanket, and sitting beside her, holding tightly to her exposed hand, was Ronald Crockett. His head was bowed, his dark thumb caressing the back of Lily’s lighter colored hand. Iris gulped. The image was exactly what she would have imagined Lily’s father doing, if he were still alive.

Roy pressed his hand lightly on Iris’ shoulder. “I’ll go back to the waiting room. Dr. Buchanan is allowing unlimited visiting hours, so you can stay with her until she wakes up. When you’re ready to see Johnny, just come and get me. I’ll go with you.”

Iris turned to him, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “Thank you,” she said in an airy whisper.

Slowly she pushed the door open wide enough to walk through. The sound caused Ron to look up at her with relief in his eyes. He slowly maneuvered Lily’s limp hand out of his own, then stood up to greet Iris.

“I was just sitting with her until you arrived,” the detective whispered. “I didn’t want her to wake up to an empty room.”

Iris listened to what Crockett was saying, but her eyes were glued to the sleeping form of her daughter. She nodded her understanding to him as her eyes filled up with tears.

“I’ll be out in the waiting area,” he announced, turning to leave.

“Th-thank... you,” she said with a whimper, struggling to speak past the lump in her throat.

Crockett quietly opened the door, turning back for a glimpse before he left the room. When he saw Iris slip off her shoes, gently pull back the covers, and slide into the bed, he lost the battle with his own emotions. His eyes filled with unshed tears when Iris pulled Lily close to her side, kissing the top of her head and cupping the side of her face. He allowed the door to close on the heartwarming scene, grateful to have been a part in the reunification miracle.

“M-momma,” Lily whimpered in her sleep.

“Yes, baby girl... Momma’s here... Everything’s gonna be a’right,” she sniffled, caressing the side of Lily’s face. “Go back to... sleep,” she crooned, holding tightly to the daughter she hadn’t seen in years.

In the hallway, Crockett scrubbed his face with his open palm as he turned to walk back towards the waiting area. The tired detective felt the prickly sensation of his stubby day’s growth. As he passed by the bank of windows in the hallway that connected the patient rooms with the emergency department, he saw the magenta hues of the early morning sun, pushing the darkness out of the sky. He paused for a moment, reflecting on the changes the new day would bring. For Iris, the woman he was quickly growing fond of, the darkness had finally been lifted. The most precious person in the world to her had returned, and he had been a small part of making that miracle happen. Lily had finally escaped the chains that had kept her bound for years, and her captor would never see this new day dawning. Ron inhaled deeply, giving a wistful smile heavenwards as he turned to walk back to the waiting area. There was still one more shadow that needed to be lifted, and it would take everyone working together to bring the light back into Johnny’s life.

He walked into the waiting area, seeing most of the men from 51’s sleeping. He wished he could take a nap, knowing that the drive home would be a long one without sleep. He sighed as he took a seat in the hard plastic chairs, wondering how John Gage was doing. He was concerned about the young man’s mental state, especially with the upcoming trial. Although Johnny hadn’t agreed to
testify, he knew that he was going to be subpoenaed, anyway. John was the only witness still living who could positively identify William Waite as the perpetrator. He hadn’t heard anything back from Quantico on the film he had sent in. He wondered what evidence the pictures might reveal, and if the FBI lab was able to develop the decade old film.

E!

Johnny shifted in his hospital bed, annoyed by the oxygen tubing rubbing his whiskers. He removed it, looping it over the bedrail. His full bladder made its presence known. He was glad to have avoided conversing with Marco and Beverly, but he could no longer rest in his current condition. “Ahem,” he began, clearing his throat to alert the others that he was awake.

“Hey, how do you feel?” Beverly asked, hoping to finally have a chance to talk to him about his earlier outburst.

Before Johnny could answer, there was a soft knock on the door and Dr. Buchanan walked inside.

“Mr. Gage?”

Johnny rubbed his face with his free hand, then repositioned himself in the bed, intentionally avoiding eye contact with Marco and Beverly.

“Ahem… Yea.”

Beverly reached for Marco’s hand, knowing that they needed to give Johnny a moment of privacy with the physician. Her planned conversation with John would have to wait.

“We’ll wait outside,” she said, stepping towards the door.

“Can we get you anything, Johnny?” Marco asked, looking back at his friend.

Johnny merely gave a quick wave of dismissal, turning his head away from the sound of Marco’s voice. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

When the visitors had exited, Dr. Buchanan stepped over to the bedside table and reviewed the log of Johnny’s vitals. He noticed Johnny fidgeting in the bed and figured he knew why. “You’ve had three bags of fluid, Mr. Gage, to compensate for the vomiting and sweating. How’s your urine output.”

“Bladder’s gonna explode if I don’t get to the bathroom quick,” Johnny muttered, pushing the button to raise the head of the bed as he kicked his legs out from beneath the covers.

“Let me disconnect your IV and give you a hand,” the physician said, lowering the bed railing and clamping off the flow of the fluid. He then offered Johnny his steadying arm.

“Whoa… Damn,” Johnny cursed, feeling the room spin when he stood up.

“Just take it easy,” Dr. Buck said, allowing Johnny to lean most of his weight on him.

“You’ll let me go by myself, though, right Doc?” Johnny snorted, nervously.

“Yes… You don’t need my help with that, do you?”

“No… ‘s long as the walls don’t move,” Johnny grunted, holding onto the door facing and then the sink as he made his way to the toilet. He knew that Dr. Buck could see his naked backside, but the urgency of his situation left him uncaring. He pulled aside the thin hospital gown, using his IV’d
hand to maneuver the material, while his free hand pressed his weight against the wall. The room seemed to tilt and he closed his eyes against the resulting nausea as he emptied his bladder, praying that the urine stream was hitting its intended target. He had suffered enough embarrassment in the last few hours. He didn’t need to add a bathroom mishap to the growing list.

After flushing the toilet and washing his hands as best he could, Johnny maintained contact with the wall as he turned around and reached out for the proffered arm of his physician. Slowly, they made their way back to the bed. When he laid back against the pillows, he closed his eyes, still battling with his stomach, while the doctor adjusted his coverings.

“How’s your nausea?” Dr. Buchanan asked, removing his stethoscope, preparing to check his patient’s blood pressure after the exertion.

“It had gone… ‘way… ‘til I got up,” Johnny heaved, blowing out his breath.

“You’ve had enough fluid, but I’m going to leave that cannula in your vein a little longer in case we need to give you something for the nausea.”

Johnny closed his eyes, nodding his agreement.

Dr. Buchanan watched the slow fall of the mercury, then fully released the air in the bulb. “Pressure’s still a little low, but that’s normal. Any pain with urination, or blood in your urine?” He asked, positioning the stethoscope to listen to Johnny’s heart.

“No. Why?”

“I was told you were, uh, manhandled. I was concerned about bruising of your kidneys during the experience,” the physician said, matter-of-factly.

“But...” Johnny paused, allowing the physician to finish listening to his heartbeat. He knew how difficult it was to hear minute changes in rhythm when someone was talking. When Dr. Buchanan removed the stethoscope from his ears, Johnny spoke up. “I was dragged, not punched.”

Ignoring his patient’s foul temperament, Dr. Buchanan continued with his line of questioning. “Abdominal pain? Headache?” he inquired, writing down the blood pressure and respiration rate in Johnny’s chart.

“No... Well, headache...”

“I’ll order some aspirin for you. How about chills?” Dr. Buck asked, shaking the thermometer.

“Not anymo-umph,” Johnny responded, cutting his eyes at the physician when he stuck the glass tube inside Johnny’s open mouth.

Unbeknownst to Johnny, Dr. Buchanan had already had a lengthy conversation with Roy. He was aware of Johnny throwing his friends out of his room, and for the life of him, the physician couldn’t understand why. Johnny’s friends had saved his life, of that there was no doubt. With Johnny’s mouth occupied with the thermometer, he decided to take the opportunity to speak.

“Mr. Gage, I know that this must be a difficult time for you, but you—“

Johnny jerked the thermometer from between his lips. “You have no idea, Doc. You have no idea what the hell you’re talkin’ about. I am NOT some junkie. I did NOT overdose on that stuff.”
Johnny’s free arm began to flail about, animatedly. “I don’t do that, so don’t look at me like I’m just some kinda street trash.”

Dr. Buchanan guided Johnny’s hand back to his mouth, grateful that Johnny had not used his IV-laden hand to emphasize his point. He was also glad to see Johnny take the hint and return the thermometer beneath his tongue. “Are you done with the monologue?”

A snort was his only response.

“Good, because you aren’t telling me anything I don’t already know. From what I’ve been told, you’re a damn fine fireman and paramedic... With no history of drug use. You went to the hippie commune on the mountain in search of your friend, and that’s where you were when you were drugged.” He held up his hand when he saw Johnny take a deep inhalation. He knew Johnny wanted to speak, but Dr. Buchanan needed to say a few things first. “You don’t have to worry about this going against your record, Mr. Gage. It was an accidental poisoning, and that’s how it’ll be recorded in your chart. I’ll be more than happy to send a copy of the records to your department heads, if you’d like. This will not prevent you from enjoying the rest of your career. I will personally see to that.”

Johnny rolled his eyes and grunted. As soon as the physician removed the thermometer from his mouth, he spoke up. “I don’t have a career, Doc. I resigned.”

Dr. Buchanan knitted his eyebrows together. “Oh? That’s not what your partner just told me.”

Johnny’s head jerked to the side, his eyes glaring at the physician. “You mean you talked to Roy about me? About my condition? That’s confidential information, Doc.”

“You were brought in here in a semi-conscious state. You were unable to make your own decisions, and I received information that Roy DeSoto was your medical proxy. He consented for your treatment which allows me to discuss your health information with him – to the extent needed to make decisions related to your care. You’re in the medical field, Mr. Gage, so you know the routine.”

“Yea,” Johnny groused.

Dr. Buchanan stared at his seething patient, wondering if the behavior he was seeing was common for the young man, or if perhaps it was the result of the chemicals in his body. For that information, he would need to consult with those who knew his patient best. He decided to continue the conversation to see if he could garner any additional information from his uncooperative patient.

“Mr. Gage, how much do you remember about the last few hours, specifically, from the time you left the compound until now?”

“You mean from the time I was forcibly removed, don’t you? Seems to be a common theme with my people,” he muttered, surprising himself with his own hostility. Why was he being so hateful?

“Okay, from the time you were forcibly removed until now, what do you remember?”

Johnny stared at the pale blue blanket covering his legs. He thought back over the snippets of information he could pull from his memory, unsure if they were in the right order, or not.

“Being pulled away from Lily… Hearin’ her screams as she ran away… Bein’ held down in the back of a van… Chet’s van, I think… Feelin’ miserable here while I was pukin’…”

“Do you remember your captain and the others tending to you, while Roy and I took care of the
Johnny continued staring at the same spot on the blanket. He seemed to remember pieces of conversations occurring around him. Perhaps he did hear someone say that Roy was helping the doctor with the others. How many others had there been?

“How are they? The others, I mean. Will they be okay?” Johnny asked, his anger simmering down. He didn’t understand why he was vacillating between anger and depression. He felt as if some unknown entity was inhabiting his body and brain.

“Yes, the only casualties were the religious leader and a couple of his bodyguards.”

“By casualties, you mean they… died?”

“Yes… But the other group members are okay, or will be. Several are feeling the same as you right now. They were given naloxone for their overdoses, too.”

Johnny laid his head back, exhaling loudly. “And Lily?”

“She’s recovering, as well. You can see her whenever you’re ready, but not until you’ve calmed down. I can’t allow you to upset her any more than she already has been.” He watched as Johnny closed his eyes, giving his head a gentle nod of understanding.

“So she’s here? In the hospital?” Johnny inquired, his voice relaxing a little.

“Yes... She, um... She collapsed at the compound. She thought... Well, from what I understand, she was told that she had given you a fatal dose of the opioid concoction.

“Aww, man,” Johnny whispered.

Dr. Buchanan saw his patient’s Adam’s apple bobbing and surmised that he was growing emotional at the thought of his friend. “Mr. Gage, do you know how close you came to dying last night?”

“Not really,” he said, his hostility waning. “I remember fading in and out at times. Did I really consume that much... um, h-heroin?” he asked, struggling to say the word.

Dr. Buchanan stepped closer to the bed, taking a seat on the edge of it. He was beyond exhausted and planned to go home for some much needed rest after finishing his rounds.

“It was an opioid overdose... I’m not sure that it was heroin. It’s more likely that it was something more routine, morphine, perhaps.” He shifted his gaze, looking intently at the young man lying in the hospital bed. “You went into respiratory arrest, Mr. Gage. You were refusing treatment in the ER. I was on the telephone with Rampart General Hospital to confirm that Mr. DeSoto was truly your medical proxy. He wanted you treated with naloxone and... and you didn’t. While I was on hold, you stopped breathing.”

“Damn it,” Johnny groaned, feeling remorseful over his earlier behavior towards the physician.

“If your friends hadn’t gotten you here when they did... We wouldn’t be having this conversation right now.” Dr. Buchanan heard a soft sniffle from his patient. “They saved your life, Mr. Gage. And Mr. DeSoto helped me treat and save the lives of several others who received the same drugs you did. He helped me take care of your friend, Lily, too. And a couple more who were assaulted.”
“Assaulted? Who?” Johnny asked, concerned again for Lily. Dr. Buchanan had only said that she was recovering well; he never said what she was recovering from.

“Their names are James and Ian. I don’t recall their last names,” the physician stated, unable to stifle a yawn.

Johnny used both palms to scrub his face. When he lowered his hands down to his thighs, he looked over at the exhausted physician. “Lily wasn’t... assaulted, was she?”

“No, I believe it was a combination of emotional shock and fatigue.

Johnny considered the information he had been given. “Thanks, Dr. Buck. Thanks for, ah... for not listening to me when I first got here... And for treating all of us.”

Dr. Buchanan reached out, shaking the hand of his patient. “You’re welcome, but I think it’s your shiftmates who really deserve your gratitude,” he said, rising from the edge of Johnny’s hospital bed.

Johnny hummed his response.

“Try to eat breakfast. The food here isn’t that bad. If it stays down, then you’ll be discharged. I’d like for you to follow up with your family physician in a few days, just to make sure there are no lingering effects.” He pulled open the door of the room, looking back over his shoulder. “There shouldn’t be, but let’s not take any chances. He can sign your release to go back to work when you feel like it.”

“Um, Doc?”

“Yes?” Dr. Buck looked back at Johnny with blood-shot eyes.

“Where are my clothes?”

The physician gave a weary smile. “They’re in a bag over in the corner, but they’re dirty. Why don’t I find you a set of scrubs to wear home?”

“Sounds good; I appreciate it.”

After the door closed behind the physician, Johnny lowered the head of his bed. As he lay there in the stillness of the room with his arm draped over his eyes, he thought back over all the hateful, hurtful things he had said to his friends. They had saved his life, even after finding out what he had done back in Selma. He did owe them an apology for his behavior – all of it. They also deserved his thanks. For the first time, he was beginning to regret that he had resigned from his position at the department. Yet, he could never put on the uniform again. He could never pretend to be one of the brave firefighters of the Los Angeles County Fire Department. He wasn’t brave at all. He was a coward. At least his resignation kept him from facing the embarrassment of termination. But why had Roy told Dr. Buchanan that he hadn’t resigned? Why hadn’t Cap told the others? Or had Iris chosen not to give Hank his resignation letter?

He wanted to talk to Lily, but he had no idea what he would say. What would he say to Roy and the others? They knew the truth about him and they had saved his life from a drug overdose. Just another shame to add to the growing list of things they knew about him. The past he had fought so hard to hide had been completely exposed. His stomach churned with the thought of facing the men from 51’s after the events of last night. Worse than that, what would he say to Lily... And Iris?
Iris jerked into wakefulness when Lily shifted in her hospital bed.

“Momma? You... You ARE here,” Lily wept, gripping tightly to her mother’s waist.

“Yes, I’m here,” Iris said, hugging her daughter to her bosom, stroking her long dark hair. “Oh, my baby girl... I’ve missed you so much,” she cried, feeling Lily’s shoulders trembling beneath her touch. She kissed her daughter’s forehead, then pulled her even tighter.

“I... I love you... Momma. I’m... so sorry, I-“


Lily melted into the warm embrace she had missed for so long. Time seemed to turn backwards, and once again, she was a child seeking comfort and safety in the trusting arms of her mother.

Lily rested her head on her mother’s chest, wrapping her arms around the familiar plump waist, as Iris soothed her tears. They remained still for several long moments before Lily relaxed, her breath hitching with each inhalation. She shifted her face upwards, her swollen eyes glued to her mother’s beautiful face.

“Momma... Have you seen Thorn? They keep telling me that... that he’s here, but... I haven’t seen him. I... I think I... Ack!” she cried, covering her face with her free hand. She could still hear Father Hiram telling her that she had killed her beloved Thorn with a fatal dose of the herbal tea. Having yet to see him, her heart was still broken, the fear of his dying at her hand stealing her breath from her lungs.

“Sshhh, sweetheart. Ron and all the men from 51’s are telling me that he’s here and he’s going to be fine. I haven’t seen him, yet, either. I wanted to see you first, but Roy said that he would take me to Johnny’s room when I was ready to see him.”

Lily’s eyes widened slightly. “Johnny? You call him Johnny now?”

“It’s his real name, Lily. He’s a grown man and his friends all call him Johnny, or John. I’ve been trying to do the same thing. Kind of a new beginning, you know?”

A shadow crossed Lily’s face. She turned her head away from her mother. “I want to see him, but... I doubt he’ll want to see me.”

“Don’t say that, sweetheart. You told me that you didn’t know what was in the tea you gave him. It was an accident. You didn’t try to kill him, Lily. In fact... I know that you love him,” Iris suggested, waiting with bated breath to see the reaction she might get. When she saw her daughter’s lower lip tremble and her chin wrinkle, she knew she had gotten her answer.

“If you feel up to it, I’ll see if the nurse will let me take you with me to see him. Would you like that?”

Drying her tears with the corner of the sheet, Lily nodded her head in agreement. She had to see him for herself, had to know that he was alive and well, even if he rejected her for what she had done.

Iris crawled out of the bed. “Very well. Let me wet a cloth for you to wash your face with, and then I’ll go see about getting you a wheelchair.” She pulled a washcloth from the shelf beneath the sink and wet it with cold water. As she turned to walk back to the bed, she saw Lily struggling to get
untangled from the sheets.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Iris pulled the blanket and sheet away from Lily’s pale legs. She noticed how thin her daughter had become since the last time she saw her. “I brought you a dress and sweater to change into. I didn’t know if you’d have anything to wear home.”

Lily swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She hesitated when she heard the word her mother spoke last. “Home? I can go… home? With you?”

Iris sat down on the edge of the bed beside Lily, using the cloth to wash her face just as she had done when Lily was a child. She offered her daughter a wistful smile as she held her chin tight. “Absolutely… It’s your home, too. It always has been and always will be.”

Lily’s shoulders shook. “I… I didn’t know how you’d feel about taking… me back,” she hiccuped.

Iris turned her daughter’s shoulders to face her. “Lily Campbell, there is nothing you could ever do… Not ever, that would make me disown you, or push you away.” She pulled her into a deep hug, wishing her own family had spoken those words to her all those years ago. “Nothing… Never.”

E!

Roy hung up the payphone and headed for the complimentary coffee pot at the far end of the waiting area. He had waited until he knew that Joanne was awake before calling home. He felt a sense of relief having talked to his wife, just as he did after every difficult rescue. She was his rock, his fortress. Her words were a balm to his battered soul and he couldn’t imagine life without her. She had given him strict instructions to bring Johnny back to their house for a few days to recover. Roy hoped that when he extended the invitation, his partner would accept it, but he had his doubts. Their relationship seemed to have been irreparably damaged.

Roy stirred the cream and sugar into his cup of coffee, then turned to walk back to his seat, but stopped suddenly. He looked around at the haggard group of first responders. Everyone was napping except for Crockett. Quickly, he prepared a second cup of coffee and carried it back to the place where the detective was staring intently at his fingernails.

“Coffee?”

The dark eyes of Ronald Crockett turned upwards in surprise. When he saw the proffered Styrofoam cup, he accepted it graciously.

“Thanks, man. It’s been one helluva night.”

Roy sighed as he took the seat beside his friend. “That it has, but… Everyone seems to be doing well… Everyone that matters, anyway,” he said, taking a sip from his cup.

“Yea… I hope Iris and Lily are doing okay,” the detective said in a husky voice, looking down the hall in the direction of the private hospital rooms.

Roy saw the concern on the other man’s face and recognized it for what it really was. “I’m sure they’ll be fine. They love each other, and that’s all it takes - mutual love and respect.” When he got no response, he cleared his throat and forged ahead.

“Ahem… Ron, she’s really getting to you, isn’t she?”

The blood-shot eyes of the ebony detective glared at Roy. “Who… Iris?”
“Mmhmm,” Roy said, swallowing another hot sip of his morning coffee.

“She’s a very nice lady who’s been through a lot of shit in her life.” Ron looked back down at his hands, running his tongue across his teeth, wishing he had a toothbrush. “I just wanna do what I can to help her out, you know?”

“Ahh, I think it’s more than that…,” Roy hesitated, swirling his coffee around in the cup before looking back up at the detective. “I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“Naw… we’re both tired, DeSoto. I don’t think that’s what you’re seeing.” The detective had also seen and felt what Roy was mentioning, but now that Lily was back in Iris’ life, would that leave room for him? Crockett rubbed one eye with the heel of his hand. He needed sleep, but he also needed to finish the job they had all started. At least, that’s what he was trying to tell himself. Truthfully, he wanted to know how the reunion was going between Iris and Lily. His stomach chose that moment to growl, giving him a valid excuse for changing the subject. “When’s that damn cafeteria gonna open up?”

Roy twisted his wrist to glance at his watch. “Sign said they’d open up at 0600 so they should’ve opened about thirty minutes ago. Want to go get some breakfast?”

“Yea, but… I really want to wait on Iris. I don’t think I can eat until I know everything’s okay,” the detective said softly, lifting his cup to his mouth.

“Mmhmm,” Roy hummed again, allowing a slight smile to brighten up his face. He was right about what was happening between Iris and Ron, and he knew it.

The swishing sound of the double doors opening drew Roy’s attention beyond the detective. He tapped Ron on his shoulder, slightly. “Speaking of Iris…” When Crockett looked over at Roy, the paramedic nodded in the opposite direction.

Ron turned his head and saw Iris, her eyes swollen from crying, pushing Lily in a wheelchair. The younger woman’s face was splotchy and her eyes were swollen, as well. She was dressed in a floral dress with a yellow sweater draped over her shoulders and a blanket covering her legs. They were headed towards the waiting area, and everyone noticed the contented look on both women’s faces.

“Well if this isn’t a sight for sore eyes,” Ron said, standing up and stretching as the two arrived, his booming voice awakening the sleeping firemen.

The men of station 51 quickly surrounded the Campbell ladies and Beverly joined them, reaching out her hand to grasp Marco’s larger one.

“How do you feel, Lily?” Hank asked, noting how Iris was gently stroking Lily’s long dark hair. He knew that she needed to maintain physical contact with her just to reassure herself that her daughter was really there.

A slight smile made its way across Lily’s face. “Much better… Thank you,” she said, sheepishly. “I want to thank you for… For all you’ve done for me… for us,” she said, reaching up to grip her mother’s hand as it rested on her shoulder. “And for Th-er, Johnny, too.”

“Are you ready to see him?” Roy asked.

Lily sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, biting down on it as the tears began to flow again. She nodded her head in response to Roy’s question as Beverly thrust a tissue into her hands.

“Thanks,” she managed to whisper, smiling nervously.
“You’re welcome. And I think Johnny needs to see you, too. In fact,” Beverly began, looking around at everyone gathered. “I think Johnny needs to see us all. I’ve been thinking about some of the things he’s said… and hasn’t said. I think I might know what’s going on with him. And if I’m right, then he’s going to need all of us to support him… and get him through it.”

“Um... Would you all mind if I spoke to him privately for a moment? You know, before we all go in there,” Iris asked, suspecting that he would be angry with her for telling the others about Selma. She had long ago promised to never tell anyone, but she had broken that promise by sharing the details with the men from 51’s. She wanted a chance to explain her actions to Johnny. She needed him to understand why she had gone back on her word.

“Of course,” Beverly acquiesced. “That’ll give the rest of us a few minutes to figure out how we’re going to handle our visit.”

E!

Inside his room, Johnny sipped on the ice water that the morning shift nurse had left for him. He picked at the scrambled eggs and toast on his plate, forcing himself to swallow a few bites. He knew that eating would get him an earlier release from the hospital. He lowered his fork back onto the plate, arranging his napkin to cover up the uneaten portion.

He looked around at the stark white walls of his room, wondering why Marco and Beverly hadn’t returned. Had they left him? He couldn’t blame them if they did, but he knew it wasn’t their way. Besides, he needed a ride home since he no longer had a car, or money for a bus.

Home… The thought slammed into him like a freight train. He no longer had a home, either. He had left Iris instructions to break his lease, and give away his possessions, including his money. He sighed, leaning his head back against the pillow.

“Argh, Gage… You’ve really messed up this time,” he mumbled to himself.

A soft knocking sound on the door startled him. “Come in,” he called out.

“How’d breakfast go?” his nurse asked entering the room with a bright smile, a stark contrast to his own dark mood.

“I ate as much as I could. No nausea or vomiting,” he commented, holding up his wrapped left hand. “So can I get this out now? Of course, I DO know how to do it myself.”

“Well, that would be a first,” the young nurse stated, picking up the breakfast tray from the bedside table.

“Hey, I once had to START my own IV, so removing one won’t be a problem,” he said, pulling back on a piece of tape.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” she said, walking towards the door. “Let me take this back and get the supplies. I’ll be back in just a minute to take care of that for you.” When she reached to door, she stopped and looked back over her shoulder. “Dr. Buchanan left orders for a set of scrubs for you to wear home, too. Now THAT’S truly a first,” she chuckled, opening the door and nearly colliding with Iris.

“Oh, excuse me,” the nurse said, stepping past the older woman as Iris placed her flattened palm on the door to hold it open.
“May I come in?” the familiar female voice called out.

Johnny sat up quickly in his bed, his mouth suddenly going dry. “Uh, um, yea… Iris?” He was stunned. Part of him had assumed that she would be with Lily, not checking on him. The other half was still angry at her for breaking her promise. Was that the reason for his uncharacteristic mood swings?

He shifted in his bed, pushing the bedside table away from him as she walked into the room. She was alone, and that fact sent a chill down his spine. “H-how’s Lily?”

“She’s doing well,” Iris said, crossing the distance between them. She could see that his breathing was fast and that he had lost even more weight since she had last seen him. “She, ah… She’s outside,” Iris explained, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. “She…,” she hesitated, reaching out to caress his scruffy face. His eyes held that same lost look that she remembered seeing when he first moved to California. He pulled back slightly before her hand had actually touched him. “Ahem,” she said, clearing her throat as she returned her hand to her side. “Lily wasn’t sure if you’d want to see her.”

“Why?” he asked, his voice raspy and weak.

Iris was stunned by his comment. “Because she hurt you.” Iris sat down on the edge of Johnny’s bed reaching out to grasp his hand. She was grateful when he allowed her to touch him this time. “She didn’t know, John. She didn’t know what was in that tea. If she had known, she never would’ve given it to you. Gardner,” she hesitated, her voice cracking. “When she returned to the compound, he told her that it was a fatal dose. He told her that… that she had killed you, and… and she collapsed inside the sanctuary.”

Johnny had been wanting to be with her since he had been taken away, but now that he knew she was asking to see him, he wasn’t sure if he could face her. She had intentionally gotten him out of the way, rather than ask for his assistance with the plan to get Father Hiram. Even if she hadn’t intended to kill him, she still didn’t believe in him enough to allow him to help. That thought hurt him deeply.

“She okay?”

Iris lifted her green eyes to look into the face of the man she loved like a son, seeing the same lost look she had seen ten years earlier. “Yes… but she’d be a whole lot better if you’d… if you’d talk to her… forgive her.”

The silence between them confirmed her fears. He was more upset than she had thought he might be. “Will you at least let her see you for herself?”

“Why?” he asked, shrugging his shoulders as he picked at the blanket covering his legs. Was it just to relieve her own guilt?

“So that she’ll know that you’re alive… So that she’ll know that we aren’t lying to her about—”

“Like you lied to me?” he blurted out.

Iris narrowed her eyes at him. “What?”

Johnny huffed, unable to look at the woman who had taken him in when he had nowhere to go, the woman who had been a surrogate mother to him since he was sixteen years old. “You told them.”
Icy fingers wrapped themselves around her throat, constricting her ability to speak for a moment.

“Ah… Ahem… Your friends, you mean?”

“The guys from the station, yes…,” he began, summoning up his courage. He could no longer call them his friends. He knew there was no way they would consider him their friend, their brother, now that they knew the truth. He shifted his dark eyes to look at her, pinning her with the hurt in his chocolate gaze. “You told them about Selma… You promised me that you’d never tell anyone what happened… But you told them.”

“I had to-“

“No!” Johnny said angrily, his chest heaving as he gasped for air. “You chose to tell them. They did NOT have a need to know. Why?” he asked, his voice cracking with emotions. “I trusted… you… And you let me… down,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Iris watched as the young man ran a nervous finger beneath his nose and sniffled. He turned away from her, unable to look at her after her betrayal.

“John…” She hesitated, waiting for him to look at her. When he didn’t, she reached out, using the tip of her fingers to gently guide his chin back in her direction. “John, look at me, please.”

Johnny felt the burning wetness leaking from his eyes, but found himself unable to resist her tender, motherly touch. He allowed his face to be turned in her direction, but all he saw was her blurry image sitting near him.

“John, I had to make a gut-wrenching decision. I didn’t want to divulge that information to them, but I had to. I had to…,” she had to swallow hard in order to continue talking to him. “I had to do something to stop you from… from throwing away everything… that you had worked so hard for.”

Johnny pressed his lips together tightly as he listened to her choking voice, until he could no longer remain silent. “Throw it all away? No! YOU, Iris… You destroyed it for me!”

“I had to do it… because I… I love you. I love you so much… I had already lost Lily to those religious zealots, and… and I knew that I was going to… either lose you to the cult… or lose you by my… betrayal.”

Johnny squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hold the tears back behind his closed lids, but failing in his attempt.

“I decided that it was better… that I… betray your trust… than for you… to lose your dream.” She breathed in a ragged breath. “I was losing you… either way,” she said in a fading whisper, her cheeks dampening. She stood up, drying her cheeks with the backs of her hands as she turned towards the door. “I’m glad you’re… you’re out of there… and I hope that… one day, you’ll understand… that I did it… to save you.”

Iris allowed her trembling hand to rest on the door handle, dreading facing her daughter’s disappointed face. “I’m sorry that I… hurt you, John. But I know that… what I did was... the right thing… for you. So…,” she pulled open the door, looking back over her right shoulder for a brief final glimpse. “I can live… with it. But don’t punish Lily because of what I did, please?”

Johnny sighed, running his hand through his disheveled hair.

“At least think about it. The doctor hasn’t released her, yet, so we’ll be here for a little longer,” she
Johnny’s chest was heaving as he fought an internal battle. Could he face Lily? No matter how hard he tried, Johnny couldn’t get his mouth to cooperate with his brain. He didn’t want Iris to leave, didn’t want her to walk away from him, but he was powerless to stop her. He exhaled his breath, wanting to say so many things, but no audible words escaped his lips.

The devastation Iris had caused had left him heartbroken. He loved her, loved her like a mother, but he couldn’t get the words out. He knew in his heart that she wouldn’t have betrayed his trust if she had thought there was any other way. And he knew that she was right. She had been about to lose him to the cult. He would have stayed with the Unity Family and Lily for as long as it took to get past the trial, to escape the subpoenas, to hide from his cowardly past that had followed him like a dark shadow for over a decade. Once again, he smelled the stench of stale water, felt the coolness of the foggy morning, and heard the repeated thudding sound of blow after blow as Phillip Campbell lost consciousness before the noose was tightened around his neck. Again, the heart palpitations pumped in his throat, and the nausea began to bubble up from his belly. His entire body shook uncontrollably.

Johnny began to blow out his breath in short rapid pants. The familiar sweat beads popped out across his forehead and upper lip, and wave after wave of heat washed over him. He lay back in the bed, gripping the sheet with his right hand and slinging his left arm over his eyes. His face contorted in emotional pain. His body was responding exactly as it had done back in 1965, and for the second time in his life, he was losing everyone who had ever meant anything to him... and he had no one to blame for his losses but himself. With tears coursing down his face, dripping off his nose and into his lap, he lost all control of his emotions. Iris’ words had been swift and accurate, piercing his heart and soul. What she had done had been difficult, but something that would clear her conscience. What he was doing was just as difficult, but the emotional chains were tightening around him. The path he was choosing was wrong. Running away from what he feared was wrong. How could a grown man, a fireman and paramedic who was able to run into burning buildings and repel down the side of skyscrapers, be afraid to face a wrinkled crippled old man from his past at a trial and how could Johnny horribly mistreat those in his life whom he cared about the most?

“Ohmygod,” he whispered his airy cries into the emptiness of his hospital room. “Some...body... help... me...”

Outside the room, Iris frowned at her daughter. Lily remained seated in her wheelchair, still feeling weak from her earlier experience. When she saw the look on her mother’s face, she knew that Johnny didn’t want to see her. She had sacrificed the love of her life in order to take down the leader of the cult. She looked around at the assembled group of Johnny’s friends, saw the dejected looks on their faces. Unable to contain her disappointment, she bowed her shoulders, covering her face with her hands.

“Nooo,” she cried, feeling her mother’s arms reaching around her.

“Shhhh, baby... It’s okay,” Iris crooned. “He just needs a little more time.”

“I’m... so... sorry,” Lily continued, weeping onto her mother’s shoulder as the older woman bent down to hold her. “I... didn’t know...what else to do,” she wailed.

The shift nurse walked slowly towards the upset group. “Um, is something wrong?”

Beverly spoke up for the group. “John’s being a little, ah... Difficult.”
“Again?” the nurse asked with an understanding nod, remembering his sarcasm. “Maybe I can talk to him. I’m going to take out his IV and give him these,” she said, holding out the folded clothing. “Perhaps that’ll improve his mood.”

Beverly huffed in frustration. Johnny was making a terrible series of mistakes, and she couldn’t stand by and watch it happen any longer. She understood, on a personal level, what he was doing and why. Now she needed to intervene and force him to face his demons, to stop running AND stop pushing away those he needed most.

“Um... Would you mind if we talked to him first?” Beverly asked.

“I can take out his IV,” Roy volunteered, wanting to feel like he was doing something for his partner.

“Well...,” the nurse hesitated, contemplating her decision. She knew that Roy had helped out in the emergency room so she saw no problem with him continuing his medical assistance. “I don’t see why not,” the nurse agreed, handing the medical supplies to Roy while Hank accepted the folded scrubs.

“Will one of you be taking him home?” the nurse asked the group.

“He normally stays with me when he’s sick or injured,” Roy commented. “But I’m not sure if he’ll be willing to do that this time,” the paramedic said, staring down at his feet.

“Well, Dr. Buck won’t release him unless he’s going to be with someone, so I’m sure he’ll agree to whatever arrangements you decide,” the nurse stated. “I’ll be at the nurses’ station. Call me if you need anything. When he’s dressed AND agrees to go home with you,” she said, looking at Roy. “Then let me know. I’ll bring his discharge instructions.”

Beverly waited until the nurse walked away before she spoke to Lily. “He isn’t refusing to see you. He’s refusing to face his own past. I’m not entirely sure why,” she said, looking over at Iris. “But I have a feeling that you do.”

Iris’ eyes widened in surprise. “Me? No... I’ve told you all everything I know, honestly.”

Beverly eyed her suspiciously. If Iris didn’t know what he was hiding, then perhaps no one did. “We can all help him come to terms with his past, if you’re willing to help,” she said, looking back and forth at Iris and Lily. “I’ve got to warn you; this won’t be easy. Are you up for it?”

“Yes... We are,” Lily said, sniffling as she curled her dark hair behind her ear. She squeezed her mother’s hand. “I’ll do whatever... it takes.”

Iris nodded her head in agreement, thinking back over their conversations in an effort to recall any clues about what he might be avoiding, but nothing readily came to mind.

“Very well... Marco, may I speak with you for a moment?” she asked, hoping he would agree with what she had planned.

Marco agreed, and the two of them walked to the far end of the hallway to be alone.

“Wonder what that’s all about?” Chet asked, his curiosity overwhelming him.

“None of our business, I suppose,” Mike remarked, trying not to stare down the hallway.
After several long moments, Marco and Beverly returned. He seemed a little uneasy, but he was holding Beverly’s hand. Whatever they had discussed seemed to have affected him deeply.

“So, how do we do this?” Chet asked, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Just follow my lead, and... speak up when you feel you should,” the determined counselor said. “Ready?”

Just as they were about to walk into Johnny’s room, and FBI agent walked hurriedly down the hallway. “Hey... Crockett?”

“Yea?”

“Got a message for you from my commander,” the agent stated.

“Oh?” the detective said, raising his eyebrows in confusion.

“Yea... Wants you to call an Edward Morgan at Quantico. Here’s the number,” he said, thrusting a folded piece of paper into the hand of the detective. “Says it’s urgent.”

Ronald Crockett looked at his watch to check the time, wondering why the FBI was contacting him so early. “Oh, yea... They’re on Eastern time,” he commented. He held up the piece of paper. “Thanks, man.” He turned to the group. “I’ll take care of this while you all talk to Johnny. This may be news about Johnny’s film they were trying to develop,” he said, reaching into his pocket for the appropriate change for the pay phone.

“I hope they got it developed,” Beverly stated. “If John won’t testify about what he witnessed, maybe his film can.”
Johnny lay in his bed with the head slightly raised, his knees bent. His heart continued to pound out a rhythm that had become familiar to him. He had figured out over the years that he needed to learn to self-soothe when these symptoms of his cowardice presented. He closed his eyes, propped his arm over his eyes, and began to work to deliberately slow down his breathing. He thought of himself as an eagle, soaring high above the landscape, conquering the world with the wind beneath its wings. Perhaps that was why he never feared high-rise rescues. It was where he felt strangely comfortable, at peace.

Beverly was the first person to enter his room, but when she saw him, his chest rising and falling rapidly, she understood what was going on. Quickly, she held up her hand, stopping the others from following her into the room.

“Give me a minute,” she whispered to the others, shutting the door behind her.

Johnny heard the door open and removed his arm from over his eyes. “W-wha’?” the anxious man gasped. “I... thought you... were the nurse.”

Beverly set the folded scrubs down in the empty chair, then walked over to the hospital bed.

“Are you okay?” she asked, seeing his rapid inhalations. “John, slow down your breathing.”

Johnny cocked one eyebrow at her, then lay his head back against the pillow, sighing. “Fine... Jus’ ready to leave... this place,” he responded. He knew that she had already spent hours caring for him. The last thing he wanted was to feel even more indebted to her.

“Well, the nurse gave me those clothes for you to wear home,” she said, pointing at the clothing in the chair, even though she knew he wasn’t watching. “Roy’s gonna take out the IV when he comes in, but I wanted to talk to you for a minute, first. You, ah... seem to be upset.”

He shifted his position and gave her an exaggerated glare.

“Okay... Johnny, you’re sweating and hyperventilating...”

“I’ll be a’right... as soon as I can... get out o’ here;” he panted, still trying to lessen his symptoms.

“No... I don’t think you will. John... I think I know how you’re feeling. Did Iris say something that... that made you feel like this... suddenly?” Beverly asked. She often had similar experiences when she heard eighteen wheelers blaring their horns. The sound would send her mind back to the many truck stops she had worked as a young teenager, even though it had been years since she had sold her body to a cross-country truck driver in search of a little carnal pleasure.

“Please, Beverly... Jus’ leave me... alone, ‘kay?’

“You feel panicky, don’t you? Anxious? Sweaty with heart palpitations; am I right?”

Johnny was unnerved by what he was hearing. How could she know that?

“The same thing happens to me sometimes.” She bit her bottom lip for a moment, hesitating before
she explained what she meant. “See, I used to be forced to, ah... work at truck stops. So whenever I
hear one of those big trucks blowing their horn, it seems like I’m that scared fifteen year old girl. It...
It terrifies me, John. I get shaky and weak, my stomach hurts, and I feel like I can’t breathe.” When
she saw him staring at her intently, she continued. “My therapist called them flashbacks. I swear I
thought I was going crazy for years... until somebody explained it to me.”

“How did you make it stop?” he asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“They still haven’t gone away completely, but with professional help, they don’t happen nearly as
much.” Beverly hoped she was getting through to him.

“So you think I’m crazy too, huh?”

“I could ask you the same question, John,” Beverly said, her face a mixture of compassion and
frustration. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

Johnny merely shook his head. He had dealt with enough veterans who came back from Vietnam
with what was referred to as shell shock, but he had never served in the military, so how could he
have a war-related illness? Yet, he knew that trauma had a way of causing pain long after the
physical wounds had healed. He rubbed his temple, feeling the throbbing of his growing headache
increasing.

“I don’t know what you and Iris discussed, and I don’t want to know. It’s none of my business. You
deserve your privacy and I respect that. But... there’s a group of people in the hallway who really
want to talk to you. They brought you in here, stayed with you during the worst of all of this. They
deserve the chance to see that you’re better... and to tell you how they feel about you.”

“Ugh! I can’t... I,” Johnny’s voice cracked. “I can’t... face ‘em,” he said, swallowing hard. He hated
the taste of bile that seemed to rise in his throat when he got upset.

Beverly stood up, walking towards the door. He was basically trapped inside his room, and she
knew it. Now that his respiration rate was lower, she felt that he was ready for the others to join her.
“It won’t take long,” she said, opening up the door. She waved the others inside, leading them back
to the place where Johnny lay.

Johnny glanced at the group behind her as they entered his room and surrounded his bed. His dark
eyes never connected with anyone until they landed on the forlorn face of Lily. The fact that she was
sitting in a wheelchair, looking weak and frail, made his heart leap into his throat. He longed to hold
her in his arms, to take her out of this hospital and start a new life with her, but how could he?

His feelings for Lily were now conflicted. How could he expect her to want to have a relationship
with him when she didn’t even trust him to help bring down Father Hiram? Would she even want to?
He knew that she had loved him at one time, but did she now? Had she been lying to him for the last
few weeks, using the ruse of love to draw him further into the group? He had no way of knowing...
Actually, he was afraid of the answer. He had grown accustomed to being rejected by beautiful
women after a very short relationship, sometimes after only one date. Yet, Lily was the woman who
had stolen his heart when he was just a teenager. In fact, she was his first love, his first intimate
experience. And he was her first, as well. Were those feelings still there, buried beneath the layers of
false teachings that Father Hiram had covered her with over the last few years? And how could he
dismiss the fact that she had lied to him about Gretchen’s miscarriage in order to guilt him into
joining The Family, and then given him an opioid overdose, even if it had been unintentional?

Johnny waited for Lily to look up at him, but when she didn’t, he closed his eyes. “I’d like... to be
alone,” he said, forcing back the bile in his throat.
“Well, you aren’t going to be,” Beverly stated, taking a seat on the edge of Johnny’s bed.

“Please, Beverly...,” he said, his breathing ragged. “Jus’...”

“Just nothing,” she snapped back, interrupting him. “I’ve got...” She looked around at the others, “We’ve got something to say to you, John Gage, and you’re going to listen... Whether you want to, or not.” She was being forceful, but she needed to push him. She knew he wasn’t going to agree to talk to them, and he needed to hear what they had to say. It was the only way he was going to get better.

“Ugh,” he groaned, scrubbing his face with the palm of his right hand. His legs began to fidget again as his agitation grew.

Beverly knew that the group was waiting on her, and the enormity of the responsibility weighed heavily on her shoulders. She wished she had more psychological training, but at the moment, she was the most qualified person available to take on this challenge. Maybe one day, she thought, she would be a real therapist. She knew she needed more training, and right now, she felt inadequate for the job at hand. So she put herself in John’s place, deciding to say to him what she wished someone had said to her when she had reached her lowest point.

“I know exactly how you feel, John, because I’ve been through some pretty rough stuff in my life, too.” When she saw him pressing his lips into a thin line, she knew he was listening. “Look at me, please.” When he didn’t comply, she repeated the directive with more force. This time, she watched him shift his face slightly towards her.

With trembling hands, she reached up to her neck and slowly removed the scarf she had been wearing, folding it neatly across her lap, then unbuttoned the top two buttons of her blouse.

“W-what are... ya doin’,” Johnny asked, worriedly.

Without a word, she opened up the collar of the blouse to reveal a couple of large, angry scars.

“I wanted to show you these,” she said. When she pointed to the long scar across her neck, she looked directly into Johnny’s brown eyes. “This is where one... um, particularly sadistic buyer tried to kill me. He cut my throat and left me in an alley to bleed to death. That was my first experience with a fireman; he was off duty when he found me and saved my life.”

Johnny gulped. He had been told the story, but he had never actually seen her scar. She normally wore a high collar or a scarf. He assumed it was to hide the mark.

“But this,” she began, running her right index finger over the raised blister-like scar below her collarbone at the top of her left breast. “This is where my second pimp branded me, marking me as his property.”

Johnny felt his mouth go dry. “Ohmygod... I’m... so sorry.”

Quickly, Beverly buttoned up her blouse and replaced her scarf. “I don’t want your pity, John. I just wanted to show you my scars... A couple of them, anyway.”

“Why?” he asked in a husky whisper.

“Because I wanted to show you that I know what it’s like to be scarred. My scars are physical... Yours aren’t... But they’re every bit as real as mine.” Beverly could see Lily out of the corner of her eye and it appeared that the young woman was weeping. Beverly knew that John wasn’t the only...
person in the room who had emotional scars.

“No... They aren’t,” Johnny replied, staring at the ceiling to avoid looking at Beverly and the others in the room.

“John,” she said, reaching for the bed controller and raising the head of his bed higher, so that he would be looking at her. “Yes... You do have emotional scars, very... real... scars. I can’t ever get rid of my disfigurements. Every time I look in a mirror, I’m reminded of what I once was... a hooker, a prostitute, a streetwalker. I’m reminded of what was done to me when I was younger... the rapes, the beatings, the... tortures. But I’m also reminded that these,” she said, pointing in the general direction of her neck, “don’t define who I am now... Nor do they define who I can be. I’ve come to terms with my past. I no longer think of myself as a tramp, or a whore.” She felt Marco rest his hands on her shoulders in a show of support, and his touch brought tears to her eyes. She knew he didn’t like hearing her use those words.

“Why are you... tell’ me... this?” Johnny asked softly, not making eye contact with her.

“You see... I’ve used the bad things that happened to me to help me help other women like me. It’s how I was able to help Lexi and Bri... and many others. What other people meant as harm to me, I was able to turn into something good for others. It’s like the ultimate defeat of those men who hurt me. John... You’ve done the same thing with your life. There was a time when you weren’t able to help someone... and that person died. But you decided to get the training you needed... and save so many mo—“

“Yea... right,” he spat out, sarcastically, interrupting her.

The counselor narrowed her eyes at him. “How many lives have you saved?”

Johnny felt the familiar lump rising in his throat. He had saved lives, many lives, but the one he didn’t even try to save was the one still haunting him day and night.

“How many, John?”

“Dunno,” he mumbled, picking at the blanket.

“Think about it.”

“I don’t WANT to think about it,” he shot back.

“One? Two? Twelve? Forty-five?” she asked, pushing him to consider the results of his career as a fireman and paramedic.

“It doesn’t matter,” he muttered.

“It matters to them... to their families. YOU matter to them, to their families, and to YOUR families. You have multiple families you’re a part of, John.... Most of them are represented in this room right now. You have a station family and these are your brothers. You’re an uncle to the DeSoto kids. You have a surrogate family,” she said, looking over at Lily and Iris, “and your birth family, too.”

Beverly knew she was getting to him. She saw his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed hard, watched him pressing his lips together, saw him batting his long eyelashes to stave off the flow of tears.

Johnny struggled to accept what the counselor was telling him. Maybe he had once mattered to his ‘families,’ but not anymore. How could they continue to think of him as a brother, uncle, friend, or
even son after what he had done?

“I’m one of those lives,” Chet said, remembering how Johnny and his other station brothers had stayed with him after his own unintentional overdose.

Johnny, uncomfortable with the praises of Chet and Beverly, changed the subject.

“...should’ve... stopped ‘em,” Johnny said in a voice full of emotion. “I should’ve... done somethin’ to help Phillip.”

“And I should’ve run away from my pimp,” Beverly added, realizing that he was taking the conversation exactly where she wanted it to go. “But I stayed... and accepted what he and the others did to me. I never even fought back.”

“You were jus’... a young girl and... he would’ve... killed ya.”

“And you were just a kid, too. And you know they would’ve killed you if you had tried to intervene, John.”

“I was almost... grown,” Johnny stammered, realizing that she had trapped him with his own words. “A young man.”

“Is that what you would say to Chris,” Roy asked, “if this were to happen to him in a few years?”

Johnny jerked his head up at the name of his surrogate nephew. “This isn’t about Chris... It’s about... me.”

“It’s about a scared young boy... Caught in the middle of... a horrific situation,” Roy added, watching as Johnny’s respiration rate increased. “You were just a kid, Johnny; just a scared kid watching something happen that most grown men couldn’t handle if they had witnessed it!”

“Damn you,” Johnny cursed, angry that his partner was raising his voice at him.

“Damn me? Johnny, all I’m doing is pointing out the obvious! Why do you expect so much more of yourself than you do of everyone else?”

“I DON’T!” Johnny yelled at Roy.

“I get it, man,” Marco spoke up. “Feel like you’ve got to be twice as good as everyone else just to be considered equal. To the ladies in the room, I apologize, but, Johnny, that’s bullshit.”

“Lay off, Lopez,” Johnny retorted, leaving Marco taken aback, but not completely surprised by the outburst. Beverly had warned them that she was going to try to pull some type of an emotional response out of Johnny. He had withdrawn too deeply inside of himself, and Beverly had needed to do something to get him to come out – even if he came out fighting.

Beverly saw Johnny make eye contact with Marco. It was the start she was hoping for. He was connecting with his shiftmates again, even if the connection was an angry one.

“You weren’t there,” Johnny ranted. “None of you were there, so don’t judge me!”

“Don’t judge you?” Roy questioned. “You’re judging yourself! You’ve decided that you have no value, no worth because you Couldn’T stop a murder.”

“I didn’t even try! Don’t you get it? I’m just a fuckin’ coward!”
“JOHN!” Iris chastised loudly, disliking his language.

Johnny cowered down in the bed. “Sorry,” the upset man muttered, apologetically.

Chet’s eyes widened. “Oh man, Gage, you are the last one of us that I would consider a coward. You’re the FIRST one to run towards danger. You ain’t normal, but I mean that in a good way. I... I admire you, Johnny... Always have,” the junior lineman mumbled, shrugging his shoulders as he looked down at the floor.

“He’s right, John,” Hank added. “Never thought I’d be agreeing with Kelly,” he snickered. “None of you men are cowards, in fact, I know you’re just the opposite. The five of you are five of LA’s finest, and it’s truly an honor to be your captain. I have to admit, you twits keep me frustrated a lot, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. I... I love you fellas. You men were there for me...” he hesitated, looking over at his junior lineman, “even when my behavior was unbecoming of a captain.” He looked over at his second in command. “I put you all, especially you, Mike, in a terrible situation. You had every right... EVERY right... to file a grievance against me. And I should’ve been fired...but...” Hank’s eyes grew misty as his thoughts returned to that fateful shift. “But you men gave me another chance... I’ll... I’ll never forget that. And because of you... ALL of you, John... I still have... my family.” His voice choked on the lump in his throat, but he pushed past it. “And I can’t wait to get everyone back on shift. I know it’s selfish of me, but... I want all my station brothers back together, again.”

“I resigned, Cap,” Johnny said, cutting his eyes at Iris, accusatorily. “I guess you didn’t get the letter.”

“Ahem... Actually,” Hank began, “Iris offered me the letter, but I never read it. In fact, I didn’t even accept it.”

Johnny looked to Iris for confirmation, which he got in the form of a faint head nod. When he returned his eyes to his captain, Hank continued.

“You can’t resign by proxy. If you want to leave the department, then I won’t try to stop you. You’re the only one who knows what you want... But do you REALLY want that?” He saw Johnny’s jaw muscles flexing and knew he was thinking about it. “Some of the best advice I was ever given was that I shouldn’t make a decision about resigning under extreme stress. That extreme stress involved watching a man die on my watch... following orders that I had given him. THIS,” Hank said, waving his arms around the hospital room and the impending trial... It’s all extreme stress, John. I won’t accept your resignation right now. Take some time to think about it... Really think about it... Then we’ll talk in a couple of weeks.”

Johnny felt the familiar stinging in his eyes. He gave a slow nod to his captain; he often felt a sense of awe and respect for his superior officer.

“But, I’m... an embarrassment... to the department,” he whispered. “Everyone... includin’ the brass... is gonna know what... happened.”

“An embarrassment to the department? Never,” Chet chuckled, nervously. “I’m the screw up in this crew, Gage. I’m the one who lied about an on-the-job injury and nearly killed myself because I mixed pain pills with alcohol,” he held up his hand to silence the comments he knew Johnny was about to make. “Even though I knew better.” He looked at Johnny with sincerity in his blue eyes. “If anyone is an embarrassment, it’s me... It sure as hell ain’t you.”

“Everyone is going to understand why you became a rescue man and paramedic,” Mike said, thinking about his own recent involvement with the top officials of the department. “Our
administration is made up of good men, Johnny. They were fair to me, even when it looked like I was guilty of arson. What you’re talking about isn’t something that you did wrong, and it happened long before you joined the department. This has NO impact on your career... unless you allow it to make you quit.”

“Stoker doesn’t talk much, but when he does, he says a lot,” Chet stated, while his worried blue eyes shifted from Mike back to Johnny. “I have an idea of what it’s like to feel like your whole life is just a mistake,” he said, knowing Johnny would understand what he meant.

“C’mon, Chet... You’re not a mistake. You just... didn’t realize how much your parents loved each other,” Johnny responded, remembering the internal struggle the junior lineman had endured when he thought that the man who had raised him wasn’t his biological father.

“I know that now, Gage, but I didn’t at the time.” Chet shoved his hands into his pockets, looking more like a shy schoolboy than a fireman. “I’m just sayin’ that... I know how it feels to... to make mistakes and... knowin’ that you can’t ever take those things back... can’t change the past,” Chet said, remembering lying to his captain about his injury and getting caught. “Maybe that’s how you’re feelin’ now, huh?”

Hank jumped in before Johnny could answer Chet’s question. “I know I felt that way. I felt so responsible for Carrigan’s death that it made me do things... I’d never have done, otherwise. I felt responsible, guilty for... for what felt like... the biggest mistake of my career, but you men... You, ah... brought me back from the brink.”

Johnny clenched his teeth together.

“And I know what it feels like to be ashamed,” Marco chimed in. “I was embarrassed by what Lexi had done.” His hand still rested on Beverly’s shoulder, and he felt himself relax when she reached up and grasped his hand. “Beverly taught me that... that what I had assumed all these years... wasn’t true. Lexi had been trapped... enslaved... It wasn’t her choice to sell her body on the streets. I wish I had known all of that when she first left home. Maybe... Maybe I would’ve felt like I could talk to you fellas about it. Instead, I just... I kept it to myself and... and suffered in silence. Johnny, you don’t have to do what I did. You can trust us, you know that. We all trust each other with our lives on every shift. None of us will betray your trust.”

“And I understand how it feels to be... betrayed,” Roy commented, his voice cracking. “I was so sure that Joanne was having an affair... in front of our children, that... it turned me into... a man that I wasn’t... A man who... who almost made the biggest mistake of his life,” he commented, thinking about how close he came to cheating on Joanne with Gretchen. “I know what it’s like to... to feel every part of your life is spiraling out of control... Like you’ve lost everything.” The senior medic pinched the bridge of his nose, then ran his hand down his face. “And then to blame yourself for it.” He exhaled a cleansing breath. “Johnny, you didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t shut out the people who care about you the most because you’re carrying around guilt that...,” his voice was choked off by emotions as he thought back over his own dark circumstances. “Guilt that isn’t yours. Johnny, you... you’re always there for the rest of us. Why not let us be there for you this time?”

Beverly watched as the men took turns encouraging Johnny by recalling how they made it through their own darkest hour. As each one spoke, he moved a little closer to Johnny until the paramedic’s bed was surrounded by his brothers. Beverly reached out to Iris and Lily, holding their hands as they watched Johnny’s emotional wall begin to crumble, but the emotions that came tumbling out included both resignation and rage.

“Okay, okay... OKAY!” the fuming paramedic shouted, not liking the comparisons the other men were making between their lives and his. To Johnny, nothing they had been through compared to
what he had been enduring for the last decade. “You jus’ don’t get it, do you? Okay, so all o’ you
dealt with some tough shit and all of you made it through. That’s jus’ great... wonderful. I’m happy
for ya, but you are NOT ME! You don’t know how it feels to BE ME!” he lamented.

“John,” Hank said sternly, knowing he needed to stop the Johnny rant that was forming.

“Nu-uh, Cap, this time I’m right. I’m jus’ so... screwed... up,” he gasped, his breathing becoming
ragged, his words airy and barely audible. “None of ya know how it feels... to... to feel...,” he ran his
hands through his hair, leaving long tufts sticking out all over his head. “I feel like I’m jus’ some...
moth... flyin’ along... mindin’ my own business... and then it happened,” he said, his eyes growing
glassy as he stared at the blanket covering his legs. “I... I flew right into a big ol’ spider web...” The
left side of his mouth tugged upwards with a snort, and his eyes held a sadness like his friends had
never seen. “And I’ve been... stuck... strugglin’ to get out o’ this mess, but... the more I struggle... the
more trapped I get... I’m jus’... jus’ waitin’ on that spider to...”

Chet’s heart leaped into his throat when he heard his friend mention dying. “Johnny, don’t say-“

“How not? ’s true,” Johnny said, his voice raspy and broken. “It’s been goin’ on so long... I jus’...
kinda wanna get it over with... I’m tired... Tired of hidin’, worrin’, and... jus’ plain tired... Jus’ like
that moth... he struggles to get free... and gets more entangled...”

Hank felt a stab of pain in his heart. Johnny’s analogy seemed desperate. He knitted his eyebrows
together, trying to decide how to address the comments made by his junior medic. He dared a glance
in Roy’s direction. He could tell by the look on the senior medic’s face that he was worried about the
same thing.

Johnny’s lower lip began to tremble. Beverly heard him sniffle, and watched as he rubbed his eyes
with the heel of his hand. His voice was a breathy whisper, but the counselor was able to discern
what he was saying. “I... can’t... testify,” he rasped out. “It’s...too...late.” Johnny looked at Iris and
Lily, guilt causing his shoulders to slump in defeat. He knew that the others didn’t know the real
reason why he couldn’t testify in Selma.

“As long as you’re still breathing, it’s never too late,” Roy spoke up, placing a comforting hand on
his partner’s shoulder. “You were there for me when Jo and I went through a really rough patch,
remember?”

Johnny nodded, closing his eyes as he remembered the physical altercation he and Roy had had in
the DeSotos’ living room. It seemed to have been the lowest point in Roy’s life, and Johnny wasn’t
going to stand by and let his friend lose everything without a fight, even if that fight was literally an
assault on each other.

“I also remember... my best friend,” Roy sniffled, shuffling his feet, nervously. “My best friend was
so concerned about me, that he... he intervened on my behalf. I,” Roy continued, reaching for
Johnny’s left wrist. He slowly and carefully began removing the tape from around the IV insertion
site.

Johnny didn’t pull his hand away from Roy’s touch. He felt the gentle ministrations of his partner,
and he appreciated the efforts the other man was putting forth. He had seen the supplies in Roy’s
hand when he walked in, so he knew what was happening.

Roy continued talking as he folded up the gauze, preparing to create a bandage for the removal of the
IV. “I didn’t appreciate it then, but later on... when I had my family back together, I sure did. And I
promised myself... that I’d be there for you... anytime, day or night, that you might need me,” he
said, feeling Johnny’s trembling hand. Roy pressed the gauze tightly against Johnny’s skin.
Carefully, he withdrew the IV cannula, holding pressure against Johnny’s bleeding wound. “None of us wanted to kidnap you, Johnny... But we didn’t know any other way. Crockett had gotten word about the raid and... Gretchen told us about the... the members who tried to leave... We didn’t want to risk losing you.”

“Yea,” Chet said, his own voice a throaty whisper. “We never leave a brother behind.”

As if on cue, Crockett quietly slipped through the doorway. Iris felt a warmth spread throughout her being at the sight of the man who had helped her get her daughter back. She took a step closer to him, noticing the startled look that covered his face.

“Everything okay?” Iris whispered.

He nodded slightly, clearing his throat to announce his presence. “Ahem... John?”

Johnny’s red swollen eyes shifted to the doorway.

“I just heard back from Quantico, and-“

“Quantico? The FBI headquarters?” Johnny asked worriedly.

Crockett, kicking himself for forgetting that Johnny didn’t know where his roll of film had been sent, explained why the film had been sent to the FBI headquarters for processing.

“Oh,” Johnny responded, pulling the sheet higher with his newly bandaged hand.

“They couldn’t process all of the pictures you took, but... John, there were a few pictures that... Well, I’m not sure how to say this...,” he looked around at the curious faces of the others in the room. “Why didn’t you tell me... or at least say something to Iris?”

Iris knitted her eyebrows together in confusion.

“Tell you w-what?” Johnny asked, squirming nervously.

“That Phillip wasn’t the only victim that morning. And William Waite was one of THREE perpetrators.”

“WHAT?” Iris gasped, her voice the loudest among the mumbling voices of disbelief.

Johnny seemed to be as stunned as the others by what he was hearing. “H-how? W-ho? I was... there! I was THERE! I.... but...” Johnny ran his hands through his mussed up shaggy hair, staring at the blanket. His legs began to tremble and he was squirming about in his bed. How could there have been another victim without him knowing it? He thought about the Sheriff driving into Kizzy’s yard that night, and he heard Kizzy’s agonizing screams of anguish at the news that her son had been murdered... But there had never been any mention of another victim. At least, not that he recalled... but there was a lot that Johnny couldn’t recall...

“Take it easy, Johnny. Just settle down. We believe you, but you have the proof! You CAN’T let them get away with it,” the detective pleaded. “You’ve got to go back to Selma and testify.” Ron knew he was becoming too emotionally involved in this case, but he couldn’t help it. He was as much a social worker as he was a law enforcement officer. Injustice – whether social or criminal – incensed him. Using his fingers, Crockett wiped the sweat beads from his upper lip and exhaled in an effort to calm himself down. He hated it when he became so emotionally involved in a case that he became easily riled up.
“I... c-can’t,” Johnny said, his voice shaky.

“Why not? Johnny, BOTH victims deserve justice!”

“I... Just... CAN’T!” Johnny shouted, his chest heaving. Unbidden images of that fateful morning assaulted Johnny’s memory. He could see the fog floating beneath the bridge, hear the voices in the distance, and smell the musty scent of the water of the Alabama River as it meandered lazily towards the Gulf of Mexico. The echoes of the physical assault taking place along the distant shore made his own body ache. For Johnny, it was as if it were happening all over again.

“You pictures recorded it all, John. Now Waite is an invalid and his cohort is dead!” Crockett stated, growing frustrated with Johnny. “We just need to know the identity of the Sheriff’s Deputy who was involved, and your pictures will help us do that. You’ll be protected, man! They... CAN’T... hurt you!”

“I KNOW that!” Johnny shouted. “Don’t you think I KNOW that? I’m... I’m not AFRAID of them!”

“Then why won’t you testify?” Crockett asked again.

“Because... ‘cause I....I CAN’T REMEMBER! Argh!” Johnny’s shouts were followed by a strangled groan. His eyes were a mixture of fear, anger, and embarrassment. “I... I can’t remember what... what I saw.”

“But you took pictures and--“

“I KNOW that, Crockett! Damn it, I KNOW THAT! But my brain is... It’s just... It’s BLANK! I can’t testify because I can’t remember what I saw. I can... I can HEAR it... I still hear... in here,” he said, pointing to his head. He began to suck in his breath in a gasping manner. “But I... I can’t SEE anything that happened... while it was goin’ on. I... I can’t even... remember other voices, or... it’s all... blank.”

A light sheen of sweat broke out over his face and chest, and his eyes became glassy. His lips began to tingle and he knew he was hyperventilating, but he couldn’t stop it. “I can’t... remember seein’... a damn thing!”

“Easy, Johnny,” Roy said, rubbing Johnny’s shoulder in an attempt to calm him. “Slow down your breathing, pally.”

“I... I can hear... everything... but I... know they’re gonna... want me to... testify to... what I saw. But... I don’t know... what I saw. I... I just can’t... remember!” Johnny cried, his body fidgeting beneath the covers.

Beverly knew exactly what was happening to Johnny and she stepped forward to offer her assistance. “John... It’s called disassociation. You’ve blocked out the memories that are too painful, or too traumatic to remember. It’s your own brain’s way of protecting itself.”

“So... I really am fu-, uh, screwed up, huh?” Johnny replied, his body gradually responding to Beverly’s soothing melodic voice and Roy’s touch. His breathing slowed, but the perspiration continued.

“No,” she answered, understanding how he felt. “You’re having a NORMAL reaction to an ABNORMAL situation.”

“There’s nothin’ normal ‘bout me,” he said with a hint of sarcasm. “You’re wrong, Beverly. You’ve
got it all wrong. It’s what happens when you’re scared! SCARED! Yes, I admit it. I was SCARED! Jus’ a... a coward!”

“Johnny,” Roy spoke up. “Remember how I felt paralyzed on that ledge at Rampart after that patient dove through the window? You had to help me get back inside because I was... afraid of... falling off. Fear can be a healthy thing. It keeps us alive. It does NOT make us a coward.”

“Bullshit!”

“Oh, so now I’M a coward, huh?” Roy questioned, knowing he was trapping his partner. “Well, thanks a lot, Pally. I’ll remember that next time we have a victim eighty feet in the air. I’ll just tell Cap that he’s got to call in another squad because ours is out of service due to cowardice!”

“Go to hell,” Johnny mumbled, knowing what Roy was doing.

“Been there already, Junior,” he said, thinking about his difficulties in his marriage. “Been where you are now, and I survived, and with my family still intact. And so will you.”

“Humph!” Johnny pulled a few tissues from the box on his bedside table, using them to dry his face. Beverly and Roy had made their point. He wasn’t going to win this battle so he decided to let the matter drop. They hadn’t made him change his mind entirely, but... perhaps there was a little truth in what they were trying to tell him. His thoughts returned to the second victim. “Ah, who... was it?” he asked of the detective.

“Johnny, I’m sorry that I upset you. I didn’t mean to do that,” Crockett apologized. “I’ve talked to Slim, my buddy back in Selma. I called him when I got off the phone with Quantico. I told him about the pictures and he told me who he thought was involved... and the most likely identity of the second victim. The second man in the pictures had blonde hair and was wearing a clerical collar.”

“A... A white man... A priest?” the confused paramedic asked.

“Yes... Slim thinks the man is Father Mitchell, the Catholic priest who allegedly committed suicide by jumping off the Edmund Pettus Bridge the night of Bloody Sunday. The deputy who reported seeing a priest leap from the bridge was a man named Dennis Clark. If the deputy’s squad car that’s partially visible in your photographs is proven to be Clark’s, then... Then we’ll know that Father Mitchell most likely didn’t jump off that bridge like Deputy Clark reported. If anything, he was probably thrown off of it.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Marco mumbled. He glanced around the group, seeing nothing but stunned faces.

“What?” Johnny questioned, loudly. “I was standing beneath that bridge. Nobody got thrown off of it. Hell, I was right there, remember?”

“Easy, Pal,” Crockett said, raising his hands. “I didn’t mean that the man got thrown off the bridge that morning. I’m sure it was under the cover of darkness. They wouldn’t have wanted anyone to see a dead priest floating down the Alabama River during the march, you know? Too many news cameras around recording the whole scene that afternoon. No, men like Waite and Clark, they do things covertly... Just like they hide behind those damn white hoods.” Crockett ran his hands over his head and down his neck, kneading away some of the tension. “Anyway, based on one of the pictures, it looks like his body might have been placed in the trunk of the patrol care... then disposed of later, but... Slim said they couldn’t be sure.”

“Ron, the rest of us are lost here. If this priest was killed in the pictures on the MORNING of Bloody Sunday, then wouldn’t he have been reported missing by someone?”
“Not necessarily, Iris,” Crockett explained. “No one remembered seeing Father Mitchell during the events of that march. No one remembers seeing him during the melee, or at the hospital helping treat the victims. Things were so chaotic, that everyone just assumed that he was there... somewhere.”

“But... What’s in the pictures that the FBI developed?” Iris asked, vaguely remembering the reports that a priest, and leader of the Edmundite Mission Charity Organization in Selma, had allegedly committed suicide after being threatened by the Ku Klux Klan for allowing the victims of Bloody Sunday to be treated at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma. His body had been recovered a couple of weeks later by fishermen near Old Cahaba, several miles down-river from Selma. By that time, his body was so badly decomposed that the cause of death couldn’t be determined. Everyone had assumed it was suicide, based on Deputy Clark’s report. Now it sounded like that might not have been the case. It also explained why an immediate search of the area hadn’t turned up any sign of the young priest.

Crockett explained what he knew about the case. When he was finished, he looked over at the upset paramedic. He felt badly for having caused Johnny to react so strongly to the news, but his knowledge of legal matters allowed him to offer Johnny a bit of a reprieve.

“John... Really, the only testimony they’ll need from you is to verify that the pictures were taken by you,” he stated, watching as Johnny looked up with hopeful eyes. “The pictures tell the story.”

“How will that help? If they... know what happened... by looking at the pictures... why do they need me to be there?” Johnny asked, his voice still ragged.

“If you can verify the date and time you took the pictures and the fact that the film remained in your custody until Iris took it out of the camera bag a few days ago, then that’s as good as an eyewitness testimony. In fact, it’s even better than an eye witness account,” Crockett said as a short-lived smile crossed his lips. “Just prove that the pictures weren’t tampered with and confirm the date you took them... The case should be a slam dunk.”

Iris saw Johnny look down into his lap and she knew he was contemplating his options. She stepped closer to his bed, running her hand through his hair in a motherly manner. “I’ll testify, Johnny. I’ll tell them that I took the film out of your camera bag and gave it to Ron.”

Silence filled the room as everyone waited for Johnny’s response.

“I’d... I’d like to talk to... to Iris and Lily privately, for a minute... please?”

Roy gave his partner’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “When you’re finished, I’ll come back and help you get dressed.” The red-haired man briefly locked eyes with Lily, giving her a barely-detectable approving nod.

“We’ll be right outside, John,” Beverly assured him.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.
A shadow fell across Johnny’s face as he watched his friends file out of his room. His face was still cloudy when he turned his attention to Iris and Lily. He struggled to find his voice, coughing into his closed fist to clear his throat. “Ahua, um... I... I really don’t remember... seein’... any of that,” he said, shaking his head and picking at the tape Roy had pressed a little too tightly along the back of his hand. Even though he trusted Lieutenant Crockett, he was having a hard time believing that Father Mitchell had also been a victim of murder on that damp and foggy morning.

“I know,” Iris crooned, sitting down on the bed beside him. “I know what Beverly said, and... I’ve heard that our brains have a way of protecting us from painful things, sometimes.” She reached out, using the tips of her fingers to brush his shaggy bangs away from his drooping eyes. “What happened in Selma... It was painful for all of us,” she said, looking over at her daughter who was still sitting in her wheelchair, silently staring at her hands that were folded in her lap.

“So you... think I should... do it, huh?” Johnny asked, already knowing the answer.

Iris picked her words carefully, not wanting to alienate him further. “I can’t answer that, John.”

“Iris... I’m sorry... I should’ve... told you that... that I couldn’t really remember what I saw that day,” Johnny sniffled.

“No... You don’t owe me any apologies. It was a long time ago, and it was a very... tough time in our lives... difficult for the whole nation to see,” she added, remembering the black and white news footage of the Alabama State Troopers confronting the marchers at the south end of the bridge.

Johnny reached out, grasping her hand. When she looked up at him, she saw his eyes welling up with tears. Iris lost control of her emotions. She reached out for him, pulling him into a motherly embrace. “Oh, Johnny... Thank you for... bringing Lily home,” she said, rubbing soothing circles along his upper back. His ragged breathing nearly ripped her heart out of her chest. She had assumed he would be emotional, but she hadn’t expected this reaction. “Please follow Hank’s advice,” she pleaded. “Take some time off to get your life back in order before you make a decision about your job.”

“I can’t afford to take time off,” he responded, pulling back away from her. “I’ve got to... start over; just like I did ten years ago. I’ve got nothin’, and I... I need my job back, now. I guess I can do it a little longer until I... Well, until I figure out what to do,” he said, dropping his gaze to the floor. He felt just as lost today as he had felt after Phillip’s death. He didn’t know how the rest of the men in the department would treat him when they found out about his past. But he knew he would simply have to deal with it until he could find another job... Maybe even in another city. “I just hope I can... pass the physical.”

Iris knitted her eyebrows together in confusion. “Start over?” Then understanding dawned on her face. She reached out, placing both hands on his thin shoulders. “No, sweetheart. The only thing you asked me to do that I actually DID was give Ron the film.”

“Huh? Wait... You mean...”

“Yes... You still have your apartment, your Rover, AND all your money. And since Hank didn’t
accept your resignation, you’re still a paramedic at Station 51, too.”

Johnny stared at her in disbelief, his chin dropping slightly. He looked at Iris with more respect and love than he had ever felt before, his face twitching from the news he had just heard.

“John... You still have it all,” Iris said, a smile spreading across her face.

Johnny’s shimmering eyes shifted past Iris’ face, staring at Lily who seemed to be slumping in her wheelchair. His countenance fell as he looked at the frail young woman. “No... Not everything.”

Iris knew what he was thinking, but she didn’t speak. She just hoped that Johnny and Lily would talk things out very soon. She could see the love they had for each other, even if they couldn’t see it through the fog of stress they had recently endured.

Johnny shifted his chocolate eyes back to Iris. “Would you mind if... If I talked to her... alone?” He asked, nodding in Lily’s direction.

Iris slowly smiled. “Of course not. Take your time,” she said, standing. She walked past Lily, patting her lightly on her shoulder. “I’ll wait outside with the others.”

When the door closed behind Iris, Johnny stared at Lily waiting for her to look at him. When she didn’t, he decided to speak up, anyway. “Lily?”

Lily sniffled, but didn’t move. “Yes?”

“We need to talk.”

She swept her fingers across the dark circles beneath her eyes. “I didn’t know, Johnny. I swear, I didn’t know what was in that urn. All I... was trying to do... was relax you a little more so...,” she jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “So your friends could... take you easier. I was... I was afraid of what... might happen if you knew...”

“I hear it was a close call. I, uh... I stopped breathin’,” he stated softly. He watched as her shoulders began to shake. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“No...,” she hiccuped. “You’re right... I messed up.”

“Lily, I won’t lie to you. I’m upset about some things that’ve happened. I mean, you lied to me to get me to join The Family. Then you didn’t trust me to... to help you take down Gardner...”

“I’m so sor-sorry...” She looked up at him, questioningly. “Wait... It had nothing to do... with me not trusting you. Johnny... It... James and Ian... and me, we all had to... keep it a secret. If anybody overheard you and me talking... then... Oh God, Johnny, they KILLED other people for just trying to leave. They... they would’ve killed the three of us... and you... if they found out what we were trying to do. Please... Please try to understand why I couldn’t tell you. I wanted to... And I came close a couple of times, but... we just couldn’t risk it.”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud, Lily. I run into burnin’ buildings for a livin’. I can handle myself, a’right?”

“You’re trained to do that... You’re a fireman, but... but you’re not a cop.” She stared at him for a long moment, seeing him contort his face to stop his tears. “I do trust you, Johnny, but... It’s just that...”

“It was a dangerous thing you did, Lily.”
“I know... but it... had to be done, you know? I mean... I...,” she sighed, unable to say what was really on her mind.

“I know,” he said, feeling as if a huge weight was pressing on his chest. He knew what she was trying to say. It was the same thing he wanted to say, but couldn’t. “I... I, um...”

“I hope that... one day you can... forgive me. I... I lo-love you, J-Johnny.”

Now it was Johnny’s turn to sniffle, swallowing past the constriction in his throat. “I... I love you... too,” he finally managed to say, his own tears spilling hot onto his cheeks.

Lily placed her palms on the arms of the wheelchair, pushing herself up. Slowly she stepped closer to his bed, still feeling unsure of herself. Carefully, she sat down next to him. “I’d... really like to... start over... maybe?”

He inhaled deeply. If he was being truthful with himself, it was what he wanted, too. He slowly reached his hand out, covering her smaller, softer one. When she turned her hand over, gripping his hand tightly, he felt a sense of relief. “Yea... I’d like that too, but... I need to, ah, I need to ask you one more thing.”

“Okay,” she said, biting her lower lip. She had no idea what he was about to ask, or how her answer might affect their future.

“Why’d you leave us? Your mom loves you so much, Lily. You broke her heart... Mine, too.”

She cut her eyes down to her lap. The regret for her actions when she was younger feeling like a millstone around her neck. He deserved an answer and if they had any chance of starting over, then she had to be truthful with him. “She lied to me. She told me that my grandparents... her parents... were dead.” Lily looked up into Johnny’s deep brown eyes. Had he known the truth?

“Oh.”

Lily dropped her eyes to her lap. “My cousin came out here to go to college. She came over to visit us... I’d never even met her, you know?” She curled a lock of dark hair behind her ear. “But... she told me the reason my parents left Alabama was because... they couldn’t get married there back then... and... my maternal grandparents wouldn’t accept my dad... which meant... they wouldn’t accept me. Mom lied about that all those years, John.”

“She was protecting you.”

“I understand that now, but... well, you were at the Fire Academy, and I really didn’t have any friends to talk to... So when I saw the people of The Unity Family selling flowers on a corner one day... I talked to them. They offered me something that... that my own family... my own flesh and blood had refused to offer me.”

“Love and acceptance, right?”

“Yes... even though I was different, they didn’t care.” She wiped a tear from her face.

“You could’ve written me a letter, or called me.”

She curled her hair behind her ear. “John... They wouldn’t let me. I mean, they didn’t want me to have any contact with anyone from my previous life... you know that, right?”

“Yea...,” he muttered, remembering how closely he had been watched when he had first agreed to
join.

Her lips began to tremble. “My maternal family hated me before I was ever born. How... how can people hate their own family without ever even meeting them?” she cried out.

“Because of prejudice. THEY have the problem, not you, Lily,” he said, feeling compassion for her. He knew how it felt to be half of two things, but not feel whole. “Your mother... she did the same thing for you that... that you were trying to do for me, right?”

“What?”

“She hid the truth from you to protect you... That was out of love, Lily.”

She looked up into his handsome face. This time, he offered her a slight smile. “I get that, now.”

“Me, too,” she said weakly, thinking about the renewal of her relationship with her mother. However, there was another relationship she wanted to renew, too. “So can we? Start over, I mean? I’ll never lie to you, or keep anything from you ever again. I promise, Johnny.”

“Yea... but, let’s take it slow... ‘kay?” Recent events were going to take time to process and work through. He knew he loved her, and that she loved him, but there were issues they both needed to work on before they would truly be free to pursue a relationship.

Silence filled the room for a long moment. Johnny could hear his heartbeat rushing in his ears. He gulped, then licked his lips, nervously. He had made up his mind; he knew what he had to do.

“Will you.... go to Selma... with me?” Unable to speak, Lily merely nodded her agreement, then lunged forward, embracing him. It was exactly what Johnny needed. He wrapped his arms around her, clutching handfuls of her hair in his fists as he pulled her tighter. He inhaled her scent, the faint scent of lavender that had always permeated Iris’ home. He thought it odd until he realized that she was wearing a dress that Iris must have brought with her. As she melted against his chest, he memorized the feel of her in his arms. It would take time and work to re-establish their relationship, but he knew without a doubt that he had already forgiven her... and he never wanted to let her go.

Johnny wasn’t sure how long they had been holding each other, but when she pulled away, he felt the emptiness in his arms. For the first time in a long while, he saw the hint of a smile cross her pale features.

“Let’s go home, Johnny.”

“So... no more Thorn?” he asked, using his thumb to wipe away a tear as it coursed down her face.

She puckered her lips, lightly touching them to his hand. She shook her head. “No... Let’s leave Thorn back at the compound.”

Johnny gave her a gentle smile, nodding his agreement.

“I’ll get Roy to help you get dressed,” she said, standing up slowly. She stepped behind the wheelchair, using it like a walker as she pushed it towards the door.

In the hallway, Roy saw the door to Johnny’s room open.
“He’s ready to get dressed now,” Lily reported, leaving the wheelchair beside the door inside the room.

Everyone noticed that she was walking and that she had more color in her cheeks than she had before her private conversation with Johnny, a sure sign that the talk had gone well.

Roy smiled in spite of his fatigue. He walked into the room, seeing his partner sitting up in his bed, scratching his chin.

“Itches doesn’t it?” the red-haired paramedic said with a soft chuckle. “I’ll get you a razor as soon as we get home. Joanne’s got the spare room ready for you, and you know what Jo does when you’re sick or injured, don’t you?”

“Yea... Maybe by the time we get back to L.A, I’ll have my appetite back.”

“Exactly... She’ll give you back those pounds you look like you’ve lost. By the time you go for medical clearance at Rampart, you’ll be able to step on the scales and pass with no problem.”

“True.”

Roy smiled; they both knew Joanne’s tendencies, and they both loved her for them. “Dr. Buchanan said you can leave as long as you not alone the rest of the day... Okay?”

Johnny gave a soft snort, nodding his agreement. “Figured as much.”

“So, no argument? No Johnny rant?” Roy questioned, reaching for the folded clothing in the chair.

“Not this time... pally. Not this time.” Johnny was drained, physically and emotionally, so he had neither the energy, nor the desire to argue.

“Ready to get dressed?” Roy asked, unfolding the scrub set, then reaching for the bag containing Johnny’s sandals. When he got no answer, he turned around to see Johnny staring into the air between them. “Johnny?”

Johnny gulped, whispering his words past the lump in his throat. “Roy... I jus’...”

Roy walked over to the bed where Johnny was perched on the edge with his bare feet on the cold tile floor. He placed a comforting hand on his partner’s shoulder. “Yea?”

Johnny blinked his eyes rapidly, unwilling to shed any more tears, even with his best friend. He already felt like the weakest man on his shift; he didn’t want to do anything to make him seem even weaker. “I wanna... do the right thing, ya know?”

“I know. And I know you... You will, Johnny. We’re all here for you... supporting you. And Chet was right,” Roy said with a wistful smile. “We never leave a brother behind,” he said squeezing Johnny’s shoulder.

“If... If you fellas are right, and I’m not sayin’ that you are, but if you’re right...,” he inhaled deeply, unsure of how to say what he was thinking.

Roy waited, allowing his friend the time he needed to give words to his thoughts. It took a few moments, but while Roy was quietly assisting him with getting dressed, Johnny finally spoke.

“Why does it feel like... like no matter what I do, it’s... never enough?”

Roy knelt down in front of his partner, slipping his sandals on his feet, knowing that if Johnny leaned
over, he would likely feel dizzy again. He thought about what Johnny had asked him. When Roy got up off of his knees, he sat down in the chair across from Johnny.

“I know this may sound... patronizing, but... Back in Selma, you weren’t physically injured, and I agree with Beverly that you have emotional scars; anybody in your situation would. But... I think it’s more than that. Johnny, you have such strong beliefs. I’ve seen you risking your life, on multiple occasions, putting other people’s lives before your own. And it’s even more than that. You... You put the needs of others before your own...” Roy held up his hand to stop Johnny’s rebuttal. “I know, we all do that because it’s a part of the job, but... Sometimes, you even put the WANTS of others ahead of your own NEEDS. You’re one of the most giving and selfless people I’ve ever met.”

Johnny hung his head, feeling uncomfortable with Roy’s accolades.

Roy saw that he was reaching some dark corner of Johnny’s heart, so he continued. “That’s not a weakness at all. In fact, it’s just the opposite. It’s a strength, a tremendous strength, and it led you to dedicate your life to others by being a rescue man. And I’m... I’m glad that you came into the paramedic recruiting office that day. You helped make paramedicine a real profession. If it weren’t for you... I don’t know if Brackett would’ve ever accepted us. We’re here because of you.”

“Naw... Roy, that was all you. You know that. I jus’...” Johnny paused, shaking his head, unable to find his voice.

“Okay, maybe it was both of us... We’re a team, Junior.”

Johnny snorted, allowing a hint of his trademark grin to sprawl across his face. “I owe you... an apology for...”

Roy held up his hand. “If you’re talking about the fight at your apartment, don’t. We’ll talk about that later, okay?”

Johnny tiredly nodded in agreement.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to tell you is... I believe it was your morals that were injured that morning. You believe, truly believe with your heart and soul, that you were born to help others when they’re in trouble. That morning, you couldn’t. COULDN’T, Johnny, not that you chose not to. You had no choice, but because of your beliefs... Because of who you are... Your spirit was injured. And you’ve been trying to overcome that... overcompensating by being the first to jump into dangerous situations, like you’re trying to pay some penance.” Roy shook his head.

Johnny pressed his lips together, clenching his teeth and forcing back the tears. It made perfect sense to him. Roy was exactly right.

“And... Johnny, you’re good... damn good... at your job. I think your... cockiness... is just an act... And you’re... intelligent, and yet, you sometimes... act like you aren’t. I mean, it’s like you... you don’t want the rest of us to know what we already know. I don’t know, maybe I’m not making any sense.”

Johnny didn’t respond audibly, but his left cheek lifted a little when Roy accused him of being cocky. His partner had hit the proverbial nail on the head – most of Johnny’s adult life had been one long act.

The silence in the room was permeated by a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” Roy said, realizing that Johnny was busy rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.
“Got your walking papers,” Hank said, holding up the yellow discharge instruction sheet.

Following Hank, the rest of the crew walked into the room. Ron and the ladies remained in the hallway to give the shiftmates a few minutes alone with Johnny.

“Thanks, Cap,” Johnny said, rubbing the collar of the scrub shirt up to wipe his upper lip. He could still feel beads of perspiration popping out on his head and raked his arm across his forehead.

“We’ll use Lily’s wheelchair; she seems to be doing fine without it,” Chet commented.

The Irishman pushed the wheelchair over to the bed, locking the brakes. Roy reached for one arm while Mike held the other, and together they helped Johnny transfer from the bed to the chair.

Johnny sat back, propping his elbows on the arm rests of the wheelchair, gazing at the floor. When the wheelchair didn’t move, he looked up. Staring at him were the tired eyes of his five coworkers. His own eyes darted from one haggard face to the other, searching for an answer as to why no one seemed to be heading for the door.

“Somethin’ wrong?”

Hank lifted his eyebrows into his hairline, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand while he propped the other on his hip. “I’ve been thinking about something you said, John.”

“What?” the confused paramedic asked. He was exhausted from his experience and from the emotional releases he had been enduring. Now he just wanted to go home and rest.

“About feeling like a moth caught in a spider’s web.”

“Ugh,” Johnny groaned. “It was jus’ an analogy, Cap. I’m not... I know what you’re gonna ask me... and the answer is no... No, I didn’t really want to join that cult. I just wanted to get Lily out. No, I’m not suicidal... No, I’m not homicidal... and... No, I don’t need to see a... Okay, maybe I DO need to see a shrink,” he mumbled.

“Well, that’s all good to know, John, but that wasn’t what I was going to say.”

“Huh?”

“I do think you should see someone, and I highly recommend Dr. Robertson. He helped me... a lot... Saved my marriage. I’ll get you his number,” Hank said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed that Johnny had just vacated so that he was on the same level as his junior medic. His height could sometimes be intimidating, and he often had to use it to exert his authority, particularly with his junior men, but this was not one of those times.

“John... This spider’s web you feel caught in... I want you to know that... it isn’t a spider’s web. In fact, it’s neither a web, nor a trap of any kind.”

“Then... what is it?” Johnny asked, his voice cracking. Captain Stanley’s sincerity and nearness made him feel both uncomfortable, and yet, somehow safe.

“It’s so much stronger than a spider’s web. John, we,” he began, waving his arm around the room, “didn’t come here to trap you. We came here to link our arms together in unity. We came with a bond that the jaws of life can’t break. What you’re feeling isn’t a spider’s web to ensnare you... It’s a human safety net... OUR safety net... and we’re here to catch you.”

Johnny pinched the bridge of his nose, nodding his understanding and appreciation, knowing that
what Hank said was absolutely the truth. The men from A-shift at Station 51 were a close-knit brotherhood and always would be, no matter what changes the future might bring.

The entourage made their way out the door of the hospital room. Johnny sat in the wheelchair, feeling helpless as Roy pushed him through the hospital corridor towards the emergency entrance. The group dispersed into the four awaiting vehicles. Marco and Beverly climbed into Chet’s van. Hank and Mike agreed to drive Crockett’s car back to Los Angeles so the detective could drive Iris’ car for her, so she could pay more attention to reconnecting with her daughter. That left Johnny and Roy trying to decide which vehicle would be best for them.

“Roy... I can’t ride back with Iris... Not right now,” Johnny groaned as they reached the automatic glass doors that opened into the parking lot. “She needs time with Lily... They have a lot of catchin’ up to do.”

“No problem... We’ll ride with Mike and Cap,” Roy said, pushing his partner towards the gold colored sedan. He locked the brakes on the wheelchair while Hank stood by, just in case Johnny was still a little woozy.

“Watch your head, John,” Hank said.

“Got it,” Johnny responded, folding up his lanky body as he got into the back seat.

The caravan waited for Roy to return the wheelchair, then take his seat behind Mike.

“Humph, I’m not used to sitting in the jump seats, anymore,” Roy kidded, trying to lighten the somber mood.

“Obviously,” Mike joked, “because you’re sitting in them backwards.”

The four men chuckled as Mike pulled into traffic for the long ride home.

“Johnny, let me know when you need to make a pit stop,” Mike snickered. “You’ve had a lot more fluid than the rest of us.” Mike looked into the rearview mirror, concerned by the lack of expression on his friend’s face.

“A’right,” was the only remark Johnny made.

Johnny was completely exhausted, both mentally and physically. He felt as if he had been stripped of all his dignity; his darkest secret had been exposed, and yet, his coworkers seemed to still care about him. As the miles ticked off on the odometer, he stared out the window. The methodical rhythm of the tires on the asphalt coupled with the droning of the voices of the other three men, lulled him into an almost hypnotic state. His eyelids became heavy and he leaned his head against the back of the seat, his mind carrying him over 2,000 miles into the past. Why couldn’t he remember seeing Father Mitchell on the banks of the river that day? Was Beverly right? Was his own brain protecting him, somehow? If so, how could he make it stop? How could he regain the memory that had been taken from him? Did he really want to?

Johnny kept his eyelids at half-mast, staring at the ceiling of the car as the others carried on a conversation around him. He could hear their voices, but he paid no attention to what they there saying. He didn’t want to be a part of the conversation. Over and over again, he imagined what William Waite’s trial would be like. Each time the defense attorney asked him a question, his mind went blank and he was left stuttering like a liar on the witness stand. He thought about the smug expression he would see on Waite’s face when the jury returned with a ‘not guilty’ verdict. He could envision the despair on the faces of Iris and Lily, knowing that he had failed to bring justice to the
Campbell family. And then there was Kizzy. Her anguished cries would haunt his dreams. He needed to be able to provide her with some type of closure. He needed to help the prosecution win the case. He couldn’t bear to hear her wails of grief, if the man who was primarily responsible for her son’s death was able to walk away a free man.

Roy exchanged a look with Mike in the rearview mirror. They had reached the halfway point in their journey home, but when Mike had asked Johnny if he needed to stop, he got no response. Roy reached out, barely touching Johnny to bring him out of his musings.

“Hey, Joh-”

“WHA-huh?” Johnny cried out, his entire body jumping when he felt the back of Roy’s hand tap his upper arm.

Roy chose not to make a big deal out of Johnny’s hyperarousal. “We’re stopping at a gas station in about a mile. We all need a break,” Roy added.

“Oh... ‘kay,” Johnny responded, his face devoid of emotion.

Mike led the small caravan into the dusty parking lot of the rural gas station. He waited for Iris’ car to pull into the spot beside the place where he had parked, then stepped out of the car. In the backseat, Iris was slowly moving her hand back and forth in her lap. A closer inspection revealed that Lily was lying with her head on her mother’s thigh, fast asleep, while Iris continually stroked her daughter’s hair. He smiled at Iris when she looked over at him. He saw her quickly jerk her head towards the backseat of Crockett’s car and knew that she was silently asking how Johnny was doing. Mike gave her a slow nod of his head along with a sad look.

From what he had observed of the trip so far, Johnny was not doing well, at all.

Inside the gas station, Roy’s nostrils were assaulted by the mixture of gasoline vapors and the scent of grease. He accepted the bathroom key from the dirty hand of the gas station attendant, then headed for the small bathroom on the side of the building with Johnny walking rather slowly beside him. He didn’t want his partner to feel like a child who needed adult supervision, but he really had no choice. He had told Dr. Buchanan that he wouldn’t leave Johnny alone for the next 24 hours, just in case Johnny needed him. The last thing he wanted was for Johnny to fall in the restroom, blocking the door.

“You know I’m house-broken, right, Roy?”

Roy didn’t really like the way Johnny was joking around at the moment, but he assumed that it was his way of letting Roy know that he didn’t need his help.

“I know... I have to go, too,” Roy replied, passing the key over to his partner. “You first.”

“I’m good... You’ve had coffee, I’ve just had some D5W,” Johnny stated, holding up his hands with his palms out.

Roy was already feeling a sense of urgency. “Thanks,” he said, unlocking the door.

A few moments later, Roy emerged, holding open the door for Johnny. “I’ll wait for you.”

“You can return the key and wait in the car... I’m feeling fine now... steady on my feet,” he said, shutting and locking the door.

After relieving himself, Johnny washed his hands, then stared into the cracked mirror above the sink. He almost didn’t recognize the face looking back at him. It wasn’t just the longer hair and beard. It
was the fragmented reflection from the broken glass. He stared at himself for several long moments, wondering how easy it would be to remove one of the shards. He thought about Beverly’s scars, wondering how painful the cut on her neck had been. Her assailant had missed the jugular by millimeters. Had he nicked it, she would have bled out in minutes, no matter how hard the off-duty firefighter had tried to save her. Johnny thought about the four firemen waiting on him in the parking lot. Just a few millimeters deeper... Just a quick slice... The discomfort of the cut would be far less than the pain he had been enduring for the last decade. He ran his finger along the rough edges of the glass. He could endure physical pain; it was a frequent part of the job, at least for him. It was the emotional pain that was so difficult...

“C’mon, Gage... Hurry up...,” Chet said, banging loudly on the door. He wasn’t in a hurry, but he did want to know that his friend was alright.

Startled, Johnny exhaled deeply, trying to force his excited heart to calm down. He splashed a little cool water on his face, patted it dry with a paper towel then opened the door.

“Key’s on the sink,” Johnny said, walking past Chet who was bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Johnny walked slowly over to the place where the car was parked, pushing his dark thoughts back into their hiding place. He painted on a face that looked more pleasant than he felt. He didn’t want the others to know just how dark his thoughts were becoming. If he had any hope of going back to work, even at another station, he knew he couldn’t tell anyone, not even Dr. Robertson. Shake it off, Gage, he chided himself. Man up!

E!

Joanne was cleaning up the breakfast dishes, allowing Corrie to stand in a chair in front of the sink to ‘help’ her, when the telephone rang.

“DeSoto residence.”

“Hey, baby.”

“Roy, are you on your way home?”

“Yea, we’ll be there in about an hour or so,” he said.

“How are they doing?” she asked, holding the phone in the crook of her neck as she helped Corrie down from the chair. “Go watch television for a few minutes while Jo-Jo talks to Uncle Roy, okay?” she instructed, placing her hand on the little girl’s back, directing her towards the living room.

Roy waited a moment before answering, knowing that his wife had her hands full with her babysitting job. “Ah, I really don’t know how to answer that... Lily seems to be improving, but... Johnny’s... lost.”

“Lost?”

“I can’t explain it, Jo. He’s...”

“Depressed?”

“Maybe... I’m not..., uh, here he comes,” he said, rushing her off the phone.

“Tell him I’ll have homemade potato soup and grilled ham sandwiches ready when he gets here.”

“Okay... I love you, sweetheart.”
“I love you, too.”

Joanne hung up the phone, peeking into the living room to make sure that Corrie was alright, then set about peeling the potatoes and carrots for the soup. Realizing she had more than enough vegetables, she decided to make enough for Iris and Lily, too. As she prepared the soup, she considered how she might feel if she were in Iris’ shoes. How would she manage going about her daily activities the way Iris had, if it were Jennifer who had joined a cult. She lifted her apron, wiping an errant tear from her cheek. She hoped she would never know how it felt to lose contact with her children.

She also knew that Iris wasn’t the only parent missing a child in this situation. Although she had never met Johnny’s parents, she felt nothing but heartache for them. Did they have any idea why Johnny had put so much distance between them? Would they be able to renew their relationship, now that the threat of the Ku Klux Klan had passed? She knew that Johnny had a very forgiving spirit, but did his parents?

Joanne pushed the worrisome thoughts from her mind and continued with the task at hand. She scraped the peeling off the carrots, enjoying the fresh scent the action created. Plans for Johnny reuniting with his parents would have to wait. Because from what Roy had told her, and what she had learned about the entire ordeal, Johnny needed to work on himself first. “Oh, Johnny...,” she mused, washing the vegetables and dicing them as she dropped them into a stock pot to simmer. “Maybe we don’t know you as well as we think.”

E!

By the time Mike pulled into the DeSoto driveway, the long drive was beginning to lull Johnny to sleep.

“We’re home,” Roy said, tapping the drowsy man on his leg.

“Hmm? Oh, yea,” Johnny mumbled, reaching for the door.

“Let me give you a hand, John,” Hank said, stepping out of the vehicle.

“I got it, Cap,” Johnny said, opening the door and enjoying the feel of the warm autumn sun shining on his face as he stood up under his own power.

Joanne stood in the doorway, noting that Mike was driving Crockett’s car. A plan suddenly formulated in her mind. She looked over her shoulder, ensuring that Corrie was playing with her dolls on the living room floor, then walked out to greet the men.

Joanne nearly gasped at the sight of the man she loved like a brother as he emerged from the backseat of the car, looking like a homeless man. “Johnny,” she said, hugging him. “Soup’s on... And your room is ready.”

“Thanks, Jo,” he replied, forlornly.

She locked eyes with Roy, briefly, noting that he seemed worried and tired. She offered him a faint smile then turned her attention to Hank and Mike.

“Are you hungry? I’ve got plenty,” she explained, pointing towards the house.

“If I eat now, I’ll fall asleep on the drive home,” Mike kidded.

“Not that we don’t enjoy your cooking, Joanne,” Hank added, not wanting to offend her.

“Oh, I understand. Um, this is Ron’s car, right?” she asked, thinking she understood why Mike was
“Yes, he drove Iris and Lily home in Iris’ car,” Roy explained.

“We’re heading over there now to pick him up. Then he’ll take us home,” Hank explained.

“Well, will you take them some soup? I made enough to feed an army, and this way Iris won’t have to cook. She can spend her time with Lily, instead.”

“Of course,” Mike said, appreciating Joanne’s generosity. He loved his 51 family and the way they pulled together to help each other out. He knew that the support would be good for Johnny, too.

The group made their way into the house, inhaling the delicious aroma of the simmering potato soup where Joanne set about pouring into plastic containers. She had grated cheese which she placed into a plastic sandwich bag to be added to the soup when it was served.

“Mmmm,” Roy said, inhaling deeply, his mouth watering.

When Corrie heard the men talking, she rushed into the kitchen. “Unca Roy!”

“Hello, Corrie.”

Corrie gave Roy a hug, then moved to each of the other men, giving them the same greeting. One man was conspicuously absent and the little girl scrunched her eyebrows together in confusion. “Where’s Mizzer Phet?”

Roy took a seat at the kitchen table, lifting the little girl onto his lap. “Mr. Chet is taking Antonio’s Uncle Marco home.”

“Oh,” she said, her round face forming a pout. Roy ran his hand down her light brown hair. “I’m sure you’ll see him after your mommy picks you up this afternoon.” He smiled at the little girl, thinking about how different Chet’s life would be if the child hadn’t survived the car accident two years ago.

Johnny took a seat, in his usual spot, at the DeSoto table. As soon as Joanne had packed up the containers of soup and escorted Mike and Hank out the door, she returned to the kitchen.

“So, are you boys ready to eat lunch?”

“It smells delicious,” Johnny said, his voice lacking its usual enthusiasm for Joanne’s cooking, “But I think I’d like to take a shower first... and shave,” he said, scratching his chin.

“You are looking a little wooly,” Joanne kidded, reaching out to touch his whiskers.

Johnny looked slightly embarrassed. “Yea.”

Roy set Corrie down, standing up as the little girl skipped back into the living room to resume playing with her dolls.

“I’ll get you a razor,” Roy explained, heading down the hallway towards the master bedroom.

“I’ve got fresh sheets on your bed,” Joanne explained, opening a loaf of bread. When Johnny didn’t respond, she looked over at him. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Johnny looked up suddenly, unsure of what she had said. “Oh, um, did you say somethin’?”
Joanne smiled at him, not wanting him to see how worried she felt. She knew now what Roy meant when he said that Johnny was lost. She could see it too. “I said that I’m glad you’re back home.”

“Oh... yea, thanks,” he replied softly, looking down the hallway when he heard Roy approaching.

“Here you go,” Roy said, handing the disposable razor to his friend. “Everything else is where it was the last time you were here,” he said, hoping his partner was feeling welcome.

“I appreciate it,” Johnny commented, turning to walk down the hallway, “I appreciate everything, Roy... Jo, I can’t wait to eat some o’ that soup,” he added, turning quickly and disappearing down the hallway.

Roy turned his attention to Joanne, noting the sad smile that crossed her face. As soon as the guest bathroom door closed, she spoke up.

“I see what you mean... He isn’t the same person, is he?”

“Not right now,” Roy answered, stepping around the kitchen bar to embrace his wife. “But we’re going to get him back...” he whispered, inhaling the scent of her shampoo. He thought about how close he had come to losing her and he pulled her even tighter, never wanting to let her go. “We’ve got to.”

Joanne ran her hands across his muscular back, feeling the tension in his muscles. She hoped that tonight, he would let her massage away the tightness, but for now, she knew that he needed her support and encouragement as much as her touch. “We will, Roy,” she said, pulling back to look into his blue eyes. “With so many of us pulling for him... We’ll get him back.”

E!
Marco nudged Beverly who lay sleeping against his shoulder. “Hey, baby? We’re at my place.”

“Hmm,” she moaned, rubbing her eyes. As his apartment came into focus, she responded. “Oh.”

“Why don’t you stay here with me? I’ll fix something light for lunch and we can nap all afternoon. I’ll take you home this evening,” he suggested, wanting to spend more time with her.

Beverly raised her arms above her head, the feeling of stretching her aching shoulders and back creating a sense of relief. “Ohhh,” she yawned. “Sounds good... to me.”

“Chet, you okay to drive home, amigo?” Marco asked, opening up the back door of the van.

“Oh, yea, yea... I’m fine. I caught a couple of naps in the waiting room,” he said, twisting his wrist to look at his watch. “I’ve got time to take a nap before Caroline and Corrie get home.”

“Alright, be careful,” Marco said, crawling out of the van and offering his arm to Beverly. “See you next shift.”

“Bye,” Chet said, offering a wave to his friends. He smiled when he saw Marco wrapping his arm around Beverly’s waist as the two made their way up the sidewalk. He shifted his van into reverse. He couldn’t wait to spend some quality time with his own special lady.

E!

The ride home had been a quiet one for Iris and Crockett. Neither one wanted to disturb Lily’s peaceful slumber. When Ron turned onto Iris’ street, she decided it was time to wake her daughter.
“Lily?” she said, gently nudging the sleeping young woman. “We’re home.”

Lily awoke with a start, looking around the interior of the car to regain her bearings. Her wild eyes found Iris’ face and immediately she relaxed. She hadn’t been dreaming; she really was back with her mother.

“We’re home, sweetheart,” Iris repeated.

“That’s right. Curbside service,” Crockett announced, turning into Iris’ driveway.

Lily sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She swallowed hard, fighting her emotions at the sight of her home she hadn’t seen for so long.

“I’m... home,” she whispered to herself as the car came to a stop.

The trio exited the vehicle, walking up the sidewalk to the front door. Crockett felt like an intruder on this private moment between the Campbell ladies, but he had nowhere else to go at the moment. He had to wait for Mike and Hank to bring him his car. He took a seat on the sofa while Lily meandered around the home, reconnecting with her former life.

“Your room is just the way you left it. I haven’t changed a thing,” Iris said, following as Lily walked slowly down the dimly lit hallway to the bedrooms.

As soon as Lily opened the door, she felt her heart skip a beat. Her mother was right; it was exactly the way she left it. Her mint green and pink bedspread was still spread across the double bed. The ragdoll she had slept with as a little girl lay nestled between the two fluffy pillows. Suddenly, she was overwhelmed with emotions. She sat down on her bed, her shoulders heaving as she sobbed.

She felt the bed sink beside her and knew that her mother was sitting down too. She felt warm familiar arms enveloping her and she sank into their safety and comfort.

“I’m so sorry, Momma.”

“Sshhh, it’s over now, sweetheart. You’re home... John’s home... All is well.”

“How can you e-every for-give me?” she gasped in a ragged breath.

“Easily... You’re my baby girl, and like I said... there’s nothing you could ever do to make me stop loving you.” Iris pulled her daughter away from her slightly, cupping her face with both hands. “I’ll say this because YOU need to hear it, not because it’s necessary for me. Lily... I forgive you. I love you. Now you can let that remorse go and... and live again.”

Unable to speak, Lily merely nodded her agreement, then returned her head to her mother’s bosom. She was truly home and she never wanted to leave again.

“Ahem,” Crockett said, clearing his throat to announce his presence. “My ride is here.”

“Oh,” Iris said, looking up at the man she had grown so fond of.

“Oh, Joanne sent you some soup so you wouldn’t have to cook lunch. It’s on the kitchen counter, still warm.”

“Um, aren’t you hungry? Won’t you stay and eat it with us?” Iris asked.

Appreciating the gesture, Crockett knew he needed to decline. As much as he wanted to spend time with Iris, she and Lily needed time alone and he knew it. “Thank you, but I need to get Hank and
Mike back home now,” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the living room.

“Oh... yea... I forgot they had your car.”

“If you two need anything... day or night... call me, okay?” he said, reminding them that he was there for them.

“We will,” Iris said, stroking her daughter’s hair. “Thank you, Ron.”

“You’re welcome,” he said with a smile. He took a step backwards, not wanting to break eye contact with her, when suddenly Lily bolted to him, wrapping her thin arms around his torso.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Crockett. Thank you for everything,” she wept.

Crockett covered her with his arms, lightly kissing the top of her head. “You’re welcome, sweetie, and it’s Ron, okay?” he suggested, looking at Iris and noting that she, too, was weeping. “What is it about women and tears,” he groaned, jokingly, grinning as he rolled his eyes.

The three of them snickered at his comedic injection. “It’s just... what we do,” Lily explained, chuckling as she ran her fingers beneath her swollen eyes. She appreciated the change in the emotional atmosphere.

“And I love you, anyway,” he replied, laughing as he pulled her close once more.

Iris joined them in the hallway, appreciating the quick hug she received from Crockett, as well. She walked him to the door as Lily stepped into the kitchen.

“Do you mind if I... call you later? I just want to know that you two are okay,” the nervous lieutenant explained.

Iris felt a warmth wash over her being. “I’d appreciate that. Call me anytime. Maybe... maybe you could join us for dinner one night,” she suggested.

“Sounds good.”

They both lingered a moment longer, looking into each other’s eyes. Mike and Hank stood patiently, both men leaning their hips against the hood of Crockett’s car. They exchanged knowing looks then peeled away, getting into the car to wait for the lieutenant.

E!

As the shadows of the day began to grow longer on the dark wood-grained paneling, Johnny lay sleeping in the guest room at the DeSotos’ home. It was a familiar place to him; the drawers held a few of his personal items and several changes of clothing for those times when he had to stay over. Occasionally, after a hectic shift, he and Roy would spend time together to decompress. If there had been a particularly bad run, the two might imbibe in a little too much beer, and Johnny would stay over to sleep it off. Then there were the times when he would get injured and need a little assistance for a couple of days. More than once, Joanne had been called to Rampart to pick him up, after a mishap earned him paid leave to recuperate.

This afternoon, the DeSotos’ were once again caring for him, but this time it was different. He wasn’t injured, or inebriated. However, he was sick. A light sheen of sweat had popped out along his clean-shaven face and neck. His eyes darted back and forth beneath his closed eyelids as he was caught in the middle of a nightmare. His breathing quickened as his sleep-paralyzed body tried to
escape the torment. Inside his dream world, Johnny was running, trying desperately to reach the riverbank before William Waite’s pick-up truck pulled away from the two people tied up with nooses around their necks. He knew that as soon as the pick-up crept up the river bank, the two would be left hanging from their necks, dying in agony. No matter how fast he ran, he seemed to be getting farther and farther away from the impending murders. Only this time, Father Mitchell and Phillip Campbell weren’t the people facing certain death. The two people he saw hanging, their faces grotesquely contorted, were the two people he loved more than life itself – his parents.

E!

Iris checked on Lily for the third time since they had returned home. She had to assure herself that her daughter was still in the house. She needed to know that it hadn’t been a dream. Slowly and quietly, she closed Lily’s bedroom door, not wanting to wake her from her peaceful slumber, then tiptoed down the hallway.

After ensuring that all was well, she sat down at her desk. She pulled open her stationary drawer removing several sheets of lavender paper. Her heart thudded inside her chest as she opened up the worn address book. Did they still live at the same location all these years later? She had no options but to try to contact them. It had been far too long since they had heard from her and now it was time to contact them again. They needed to know the truth and they needed to be prepared for what was about to happen in Selma.
Chapter 26

Marco pried one eye open, grimacing at the nosy tendrils of the dawning sun as they snaked through the blinds in his bedroom. Turning onto his side away from the window, he once again snuggled closer to Beverly, spooning her sleeping form. He nuzzled her neck, inhaling the scent of his shampoo that lingered on her hair from the afternoon before. He lightly kissed her neck just behind her earlobe, laying his arm across her abdomen and deftly slipping his fingers beneath the hem of his tee shirt that she was wearing. He smiled as he remembered how she looked wearing his clothing, claiming that his boxers were more comfortable than her own delicate underwear.

A soft purring sound emanated from deep within her throat as his fingers stroked the bare skin below her naked breasts. Encouraged by her obvious enjoyment of his touch, Marco wet his lips then pressed them gently around her earlobe as his body began to respond to her nearness. He worked his other arm beneath her, enveloping her in a hug that drew her even closer to his chest.

Beverly, her mind suspended between sleep and wakefulness, felt the masculine body behind her, pinning her against the muscular form. What had begun as a light touch suddenly felt very threatening. His strong arms were wrapped around her midsection and his breathing was hot along her neck. Her eyes shot open wide, but her brain was still too muddled to comprehend where she was at the moment, and fear from her past was suddenly resurrected, stealing her breath straight out of her lungs.

“N-nuh,” she grunted groggily, struggling to free herself from her unknown assailant.

“Baby?” Marco’s husky voice questioned.

“S-’top,” she said, struggling to wriggle free from his grasp, her voice getting louder as she protested further. “STOP!”

“Beverly!” he said more forcefully, throwing one leg over her hips in an effort to restrain her kicking legs. He didn’t want her to injure herself as she tried to flee. “It’s me… Marco… Wake up!”

All he could think about was waking her up, forgetting what he had been told during Lexi’s recovery – holding her close to his body would increase the terror, not soothe it. He twisted the two of them so that his body weight was pressing her into the mattress. His face was mere inches from hers, her unseeing eyes wide with trepidation.

She had to get away from the strong grip. She opened her mouth to scream for help, but a large hand clamped down, covering the lower half of her face and sealing her lips.

Marco continued his efforts to wake her up; he had to stop her from hurting herself, hurting him, or waking up the neighbors. He did not want to have to explain this to the police, should they receive an emergency call to his apartment.

“C’mon, baby… Beverly…,” he grunted as he struggled against her resistance.

Beverly bit down on the fleshy skin just below Marco’s little finger.

“Argh!” he groaned. “Owe!”

His painful cry brought her completely out of her fogginess. She saw the contorting face hovering
above her, finally realizing who it belonged to.

She released the bite, offering an end to the agony she was creating. “Mumph!” Her cry was muffled by his hand that remained firmly in place until he had determined that she was fully awake and aware of what was happening.

“Sshhh, it’s me, baby. It’s me, Marco. Don’t be afraid. You’re safe.”

Marco continued to offer her reassurances of her safety, even though he was restraining her. He saw the recognition on her face when she released her grip on his aching skin. He eased his throbbing hand away from her mouth, using it to wipe the tears that were streaming from the corners of her eyes.

“Shhh, it’s okay sweetie,” he crooned, caressing her face. “My bad… My fault. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to, Bev. I… I didn’t know… what else to do,” he struggled to explain his actions, knowing that for her, being restrained was just as frightening as what she feared might happen to her at the hands of a stranger.

Beverly’s face melted into his hand, embarrassment and shame coloring her face. She thought this part of her recovery was behind her, thought her demons had been contained and sent back to the hell from which they had been born. But now she feared she was wrong. “I’m… s…sorry.”

“No, no… Shhh,” he continued his soothing ministrations. “Deep… slow… breaths, Bev.”

Several moments later, Marco rolled over onto his side, pulling her slowly with him until she was resting her head on his bare chest. She shivered, trembling from the adrenaline rush that was beginning to wear off as she continued to sniffle, her respiration and heart rates slowly returning to normal while he lovingly stroked her hair. When she seemed to have regained her composure, he kissed the top of her head.

“You okay, now?”

She nodded, pushing away from him, unable to look into his handsome dark eyes, fearing what she would see there. Pity? Anger? Frustration? Rejection? It didn’t matter. She couldn’t handle it; no matter which negative emotions might be lingering on the face of the man she loved.

She sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, searching the room for her discarded clothing. She spotted her garments laying across the back of a chair and felt a sense of urgency to flee. But when she tried to stand up, she felt the tee shirt being tugged by Marco.

“Just relax, Babe.”

She sniffled, running her fingers beneath her eyes. “I, uh, I need to get dressed.”

“Why? You’re off today and so am I,” he said, scooting over to the edge of the bed to sit beside her, wrapping his arm around her waist.

“I need to, ah, to go… I’ll, um… I’ll call a cab,” she said, reaching for the bedside phone.

Marco placed his hand over hers, stopping her from making the call. “Don’t go, baby.”

There was no way he was going to allow her to leave in her current state of mind. He grasped her hand, encouraged when she didn’t pull it away from him. He held it tightly, feeling the trembling beneath his stroking thumb. “Talk to me, Bev.”
“I’m still so… messed up,” she rasped, remembering Johnny using very similar words to describe himself. She had challenged his self-reflection, and she knew Marco was about to do the same thing to her.

“No you aren’t. You and I both know what happened just now.” He waited for her to speak, but when she didn’t, he continued, guiding her hand back to her lap and away from the telephone. “We were both exhausted; we slept deeply and you had a difficult time waking up. You felt me behind you, and you… you’ve never slept over here before, so… you didn’t recognize where you were, and… I mean, that makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Beverly nodded her agreement, her face hanging downward.

“See,” Marco said, pulling her into a sideways hug. “I have been listening to you, especially when you were talking to Lexi… And Johnny, even though I kind of blew it just now by holding you down. I’m really sorry, baby.”

Beverly turned into him slightly, wrapping both arms around his waist. He had become her rock, her anchor, but would he still want her?

He ran his hand down her mussed up hair, once more kissing her on top of her head. “I love you so much, Beverly. I’ll keep you safe… I promise. I’ll never try to restrain you again.”

“I… love you… too.”

Silence filled the room as the two sat beside each other, neither one knowing exactly what to say. “I love ALL of you, Bev. Your past… your present… Everything.”

She inhaled a deep ragged breath. She thought about the short private conversation they had shared in the hospital hallway. She had told him that she wanted to show Johnny her branding scar; she had needed to make a point to the distraught young man. Now, perhaps it was time to show Marco the rest of her marks, too. He had told her many times that he could handle her past, but he had never actually seen the permanent reminders of what she had endured.

She gulped as her shaky fingers clutched the tee shirt she had slept in and began slowly pulling it upwards.

“Baby,” he said, unaware of what she was doing. “You’re still upset… We don’t have to-“

“I need to show you… all of my past,” she said slowly turning her back to him.

Marco felt the lump lodge in his throat. While they had only made love twice, both times had been in complete darkness. She hadn’t wanted him to see her naked. Now he knew why. “Are you… sure?”

“Yes… and if you never want to… see me again, then I-“

Marco reached up to her shoulders, slowly helping her pull the cotton garment over her head. “That will never happen. Never… No matter what,” he offered, seeing the various scars, stripes, and burn marks that covered her bare back as the shirt was removed.

Beverly hung her head, slowly turning her torso to allow him a better view of her disfigurements that were just as prevalent on her abdomen and breasts as they were on her back. “I’m… sor…”

“Sshhh,” he said, using his thumb to silence her apology. “I’m sorry for the pain you’ve endured. I wish it had never happened to you, but… It’s what brought you into my life, and for that… I’ll always be grateful.”
Beverly felt her eyes burning as her hot tears spilled onto her cheeks. She felt the crook of his index finger lifting her chin. She closed her eyes as he lowered his face to hers, kissing away the salty streams as they streaked down her face. Slowly, his lips made their way to hers and they lightly touched. He waited, unsure if she wanted more. When she puckered her plump lips for a second quick kiss, then returned it with a deeper, more passionate one, he responded likewise. Their lips parted further and tongues danced as their hands touched, caressed, and soothed away the fears and worries.

Marco took his time with her, using his tongue, lips, and hands to ignite her skin and arouse her desire. Carefully, he lowered her onto the bed. Using his left elbow to prop himself up, he kissed and nipped his way down her neck, across the scar that had nearly ended her life, and continued southward. His right hand cupped her breast, raking his thumb across her pebbled skin and taut nipple. He made note of her responses as he explored her erogenous zones, enjoying her throaty groans of appreciation when he found a particularly sensitive spot. His tongue spent time along her breasts, giving each one equal attention. He made no effort to avoid the large branding scar, kissing it in order to prove to her that he was completely accepting of every inch of her.

He took a moment to remove his own boxers and to completely disrobe her with a slow gentleness. He had never wanted her as badly as he did at this moment, but her needs were far more important to him than his own. This was for her. She needed to not only hear how much she meant to him, but to feel it as well. When they were both completely naked, he positioned himself next to her, his cock brushing the soft skin of her right hip. He couldn’t help but notice how much her body was quaking, and he wondered if it was anxiety over him seeing her naked, or was she trembling from her own desires. He saw her eyes, deeply hooded, staring away from him.

“Bev,” he whispered, hovering his body over hers. “Bev, please look at me.”

Slowly she complied, whimpering as he once again caressed her face, running his fingers softly through her hair. She saw love and desire on his face and, for the first time, she had no doubt that what she was feeling was real. She loved this man more than life itself.

She lifted her hands onto his muscular shoulders, allowing them to drift down across his biceps and forearms, feeling the goosebumps that her tender touch created along his sensitive skin. She dared a quick glance between them, seeing that his manhood was completely engorged and weeping.

“Beverly, I want you to know that it’s me touching you,” he said, leaning in and kissing her pouty lips. “I want you to know that I love you and I’ll never hurt you,” he whispered into her ear.

When he pulled back, her eyes were open and dilated. He used his fingers to smear her juices, the scent of her sex rising between them. He felt his throbbing cock twitch with excitement.

He saw that her eyes were drifting closed as he readied himself, using his knees to gently nudge her thighs farther apart. Holding the base of his erect member, inching his hips forward with more personal restraint than he ever thought possible, he joined his body with hers.

“I love you, Beverly,” he crooned; watching as her eyes shifted to look at him, he slowly pushed himself deeper inside of her hot slick tunnel.

“I... ungh,” she groaned as she felt her inner walls being stretched by his massive member. She
gripped his biceps, lifting her hips to take him in fully. “Love you... too,” she panted.

Slowly, they found their rhythm, and together they climbed higher and higher, nearing their destination. Sweat dripped from the end of Marco’s nose as he pumped into her, the sensations sending jolts of electricity throughout his being. He felt her squeezing him, making the sensation even tighter, hugging his upper torso with her arms, and his lower appendage with her womanhood. Her breathing became ragged as she neared her climax.

Marco fought an inner struggle, needing to continue to stroke her until she reached her orgasm, but finding it difficult to keep his own climax at bay. His toes began to curl and his nuts began to tighten.

“Come... for me... baby,” he grunted, emphasizing each word with another thrust.

“So... close,” Beverly panted, using her heels for leverage to create an upward thrust of her hips to take him in deeper. Their groins continued to grind, giving her just the right pressure for her to reach her peak. With the tingling fullness beginning in her lower belly, she threw her head back, her eyes rolling back into her head as she cried out with her release. “Ye-yes... Yes... YESSSS!!”

Marco felt her body stiffen, feeling the heat and the quaking of her inner walls. As she found her zenith, she reached around, gipping his buttocks with both hands and pulling him into her as deeply as possible. When the first faint tremors began, he felt his nuts constrict. He thrust into her twice more, then exploded.

“Bev... Babe... AARRGHHHH!!”

His cock throbbed, releasing his seed deeply inside of her. Each quiver of her dripping hot walls, caused his cock to pulsate. They were both out of breath and completely spent, but neither had ever known such a deep sense of satisfaction. Marco’s wilting cock slipped from her slickness and he rolled over onto his back with a heaving grunt. He had no strength or energy left, but he felt more satiated than ever.

He listened to her heaving breathing and slowly reached out his hand, grateful when their fingers intertwined. “You... okay?”

“Yes...,” she said between deep inhalations. “Never... better.”

Passion and love had enveloped them, united them, leaving them collapsed in exhausted bliss.

E!

Roy sat at the kitchen table sipping his coffee while Joanne prepared breakfast. They had developed a routine on his days off. After the kids left for school, Joanne cooked breakfast for the two of them, and he cleaned the kitchen afterwards. It was his way of showing her how much he appreciated her, and it allowed them to spend quality time together. It had proven to be a great way for them to keep open communications between them. After the events of the last couple of days, Roy was grateful for the four-day weekend his shift was experiencing.

“Do you think he’s okay?” Joanne asked, setting a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast in front of him.

“Yes... I peeked in on him when I first got up,” Roy said, looking at her sheepishly. “He was snoring.”

“Good, he needs his rest.”

Just as Joanne sat down, the telephone rang.
“I’ll get it,” Roy said, pushing away from the kitchen table. He picked up the receiver. “DeSoto residence.”

“Roy, it’s Hank.”

“Hi, Cap. He’s still asleep,” Roy stated immediately, knowing that their captain was calling for an update on Johnny.

“Good… What kind of night did you have?”

Roy snickered. He knew what Hank meant, but he still thought it sounded funny. “He slept through the night and didn’t wet the bed. He should be getting up soon for his next feeding,” he said, still grinning.

“Oh, you’re a riot, DeSoto. Um… Do you think it would be okay if, ah… Well, I talked to the chief yesterday, and… We both want to visit with John and… lay out the plan for the next couple of weeks.”

Roy grimaced; he didn’t like the sound of Hank’s voice. “Is it bad?”

“No, no… We really just want to make sure that… that John is alright and…”

“That he’s fit for duty?”

Hank hesitated on the other end of the line. “Well… that he will be fit for duty before he returns.”

Roy felt defensive for a moment, then realized that Hank was in an awkward situation with the chief. They hadn’t really gotten along well in years. “Yea… I get it. Why don’t you come over around lunch? We’ll have some sandwiches, or something,” he suggested, casting a hopeful glance at his wife.

Joanne nodded her agreement.

“Thanks, Pal. We’ll see you in a few hours.”

Johnny stepped into the kitchen, looking disheveled in the faded jeans and tee shirt he had thrown on. His face was clouded by a scowl, having overheard Roy’s side of the conversation. “Cap?”

Roy turned around, looking into Johnny’s worried face. “Yea… He’s…” Roy didn’t want to say it, but he wanted to be honest with his friend. “He and, ah… McConnike are coming over for lunch.”

Johnny sighed, fixing himself a cup of black coffee; he knew his way around the DeSotos’ kitchen. Joanne and Roy exchanged another quick glance.

“There’s plenty of eggs and bacon. I’ll fix you some fresh toast,” Joanne said, getting up from the table.

“Naw… Eat your breakfast while it’s hot, Jo… I’ll fix my own toast,” Johnny replied, dropping a slice of bread into the toaster. He added a spoonful of scrambled eggs and a slice of bacon to his plate while he waited for the bread to toast.

In short order, Johnny sat down with a plate of hot food. He sipped his coffee then looked over at the DeSotos. “So… How much trouble am I in?”

“I don’t think you are,” Roy answered, watching Johnny spread grape jelly on his toast.
“C’mon, Roy,” he said, taking a big bite of the toast and jelly, an act that never stopped him from continuing with a conversation. “We both know how this’ll go down. I’ll get suspended, or…” he gulped, pushing the bread down his tightening throat. “Or… terminated.”

“Oh, Johnny, don’t say that,” Joanne said, patting his shoulder as she stood up with her nearly empty plate in her hand, heading for the sink.

“It didn’t sound like it,” Roy added. “Cap… He sounded like he was just… you know, worried about you.”

“Whatever,” Johnny said, waving Roy off.

They both continued eating in silence. Roy finished his coffee, casting an occasional glance at Johnny’s plate. He was mentally taking note of how much the younger man consumed.

Johnny quickly ate his breakfast then headed for the sink to wash his dishes.

“I’ve got it,” Joanne said, taking the plate from him. She had decided to wash the dishes herself, allowing her husband and his partner time to talk.

Johnny smiled at Joanne, passing his plate to her. “Thanks, Jo. I appreciate everything.” He stretched his back then walked towards the hallway. “I’ll get out of your way.”

“Why don’t the two of you get fresh coffee and sit out on the deck. It’s a beautiful morning,” Joanne said, picking up the coffee pot to warm their cups.

The two men looked at each other. There was still a lot that remained unsaid between them.

Roy lifted his eyebrows to question his partner.

“Sure,” Johnny acquiesced, his response lacking his usual enthusiasm.

The two friends refilled their cups, then headed out the sliding glass doors to the DeSotos’ deck, the same deck that Johnny and Roy had built together. Johnny walked over to the railing, leaning against it with his forearms. He set his cup down on the horizontal piece of wood, running his fingers across the nails, wincing when a sharp splinter slid beneath his fingernail. He hissed when he pulled it out, grumbling to himself. He waited for Roy to begin the conversation while he listened for a moment to the neighbor who was mowing his lawn, inhaling deeply the scent of freshly cut grass as he continued to pretend to inspect their handiwork along the railing. His nose twitched from the cut grass and he ran his sore finger beneath it before returning it to the nail nearest his coffee cup.

“Looks like everything’s holdin’ up well,” Johnny commented, feeling the need to fill the obvious void between them. “No warpin’ or nails raisin’ up. They’re still flush with the planks.”

“Yea,” Roy agreed, watching as the light morning breeze lifted a couple of tufts of Johnny’s hair. He wondered if Johnny should cut it before the chief arrived. “The men who built it knew what they were doing.”

Johnny snorted. “Or got lucky,” he said, lifting his cup to his mouth.

“They’re a good team.”

“They were,” Johnny clarified. “Things have changed.”

Roy gulped. “Changed how?”
Johnny cut his eyes over at Roy, then returned his gaze to the DeSotos’ pristine backyard. “Humph… Don’t act stupid, Roy.”

Roy felt his hackles rise. Johnny was doing it again, picking a fight. Roy, who normally thought before he spoke, was tired and frustrated. He tried to put himself in Johnny’s place, but he couldn’t understand why the younger man seemed to insist on pushing others away. He turned to his side, facing Johnny.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Johnny never budged, continuing to sip his coffee and stare at the slight bruise that was forming beneath his fingernail. He shifted his gaze to the neatly manicured backyard where his eyes rested on the tire swing that he and Roy had put up a few years earlier. The scratched earth beneath it was proof that Chris and Jenny were still enjoying it. “You better watch your language with the kids around.”

“The children are in school, John… Except for the one I’m looking at right now,” Roy stated, growing angrier each time his partner spoke.

The use of his formal first name let Johnny know that he was getting under Roy’s skin. “What did you say?”

“You heard me… I’m looking at a grown man who’s acting like a child. Why are you so pissed off at me?”

Johnny thought about the question for a long uncomfortable moment. Why was he being so nasty to the man who had been his best friend for years? Roy and the others had gone out of their way to retrieve him from the Unity Family, even after they knew the truth about his past.

Johnny hung his head, his shame pressing his shoulders downward. He watched his shadow disappear as gray clouds blocked out the sun. He gave Mother Nature a sarcastic snort as he considered how his mood seemed to match the weather. He shook his shaggy head slightly. “Shit, Roy… I dunno,” he said, raking his hands through his hair.

“Be my guest,” Roy said, waving his hand towards the chairs near them. “My home has always been your home,” he said in a voice laced with contempt. “Guess that doesn’t mean anything to you though, huh?”

Johnny plopped into a chair, looking up at Roy before he answered. “Yea… It means a lot to me… everything. But now you know who I really am,” he began, hearing his own voice getting louder. “You know I’m just a royal fuck up.”

“I know you’re my partner, and I don’t want anyone else beside me in the squad. When I’m on a rescue, I don’t want anyone else working with me. I know that I felt a brotherly connection with you from the start. I know that my family adores you and my kids consider you to be their uncle. And… Johnny, you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Johnny’s jaw muscles began clenching and releasing. He hadn’t expected this reaction from Roy.

“So why are you so angry with me? Johnny… What did I do? I can’t apologize for something that I don’t know I did.”

Johnny shook his head, staring through the slats of the railing, never answering Roy’s questions. “Look, I’m sorry that I jumped to conclusions about your relationship with Iris, but you have to
admit, you made a comment about Joanne, too. So that should make us even.” Roy waited for a response, but got nothing.

It took several moments before Johnny made any remarks. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Roy. I did,” Johnny said, pointing his middle finger at his own chest. “ME!”

Roy knew that Johnny wasn’t referring to their fight. “Damn it, Johnny, what do I have to do to convince you that you didn’t do anything wrong?”

“You can’t… You CAN’T! I’m the one who has to look at myself in the mirror and… and I… hate what… I see.” Johnny’s voice cracked and he cleared his throat, his face turning crimson.

“Nothing has changed, except more of us know what happened to you when you were younger. Why is it that our knowledge changes how you feel about yourself?”

“It… doesn’t,” the younger man said, his voice husky. “I’ve always felt… like this. I guess, I was able to hide it better when you fellas didn’t know. I wish you still didn’t… didn’t know how I messed up. You don’t know what it’s like to… to hate, no, no… to LOATHE yourself… and know that others hate you, too.”

Roy took a seat beside Johnny. “No one else does, Johnny. No one.” He searched his friend’s face for some sense of understanding. He saw nothing. “Okay, so you didn’t want any of us to know about Selma, but Johnny, it isn’t something that you could’ve prevented. Hell, the goddamn president of the United States had a hard time stopping it,” Roy swore, his own voice growing louder. He would probably get an earful from Joanne later on, if she had heard him.

“You weren’t there… I… was,” Johnny said, again pointing a finger at his own chest.

“And I thank God you survived it. My life would’ve been so different if you had tried to intervene and… and been killed. The field of paramedicine would be completely different. My family would be different.” Roy gave Johnny a minute to consider what he was saying. “I’m sorry I made that lewd comment about you and Iris. I was mistaken about your relationship, and I’ll always regret what I said. But something tells me that’s not what’s really bothering you. Johnny… Please tell me… What else did I do?”

Johnny shook his head once more. His defenses were waning. “Nothin’, Roy. I a’ready told ya… You didn’t do anything. I jus’… I’ve lost people who were close to me and it hurt like hell, a’right? I jus’ don’t… I don’t wanna go through it again. I… can’t.”

“So you pushed me away, instead? That doesn’t make sense.”

Johnny inhaled deeply, trying his best to calm his growing temper. ‘Why can’t Roy just accept the truth?’ he wondered. He rubbed his finger beneath his nose, pressing his lips into a thin line. When he was ready to speak, he chose his words carefully. “To me it does… I’d rather you cut ties with me because you’re angry than… than because you… you despise me.”

“Johnny… look at me.” It took a moment for Johnny to comply. “I am NOT angry or disappointed in you. I don’t despise you. If anything, I have even more admiration for you, now. I couldn’t have gone through what you did when you were just a kid, and come out of it like you have. Your fortitude… Your resilience… is amazing. Nothing has to change between us, but you DO need to work on yourself. It’s no different than what Cap went through with Carrigan. He got help and he’s much better now. Will you do the same?”

Johnny leaned over, propping his elbows on his knees, running his fingers through his hair. “I
dunno… There’s no way it’ll make things better. I mean, it won’t bring Phillip… or Father Mitchell back, will it? It won’t change the past. It won’t help me face Kizzy… at the trial… knowing that… I’m the last person… who saw her son… alive and… and I did nothin’. Besides, I’ll never be able to work as a paramedic anywhere again if Dr. Robertson documents that…,” Johnny stopped himself, his heart suddenly pumping an icy sludge.

“If Dr. Robertson documents what?” Roy asked worriedly.

Johnny’s face turned ashen, a sharp contrast to the bright red coloring that was quickly rising from his chest up to his neck. He felt nauseous, leaning his elbows on his knees. He stared down at the narrow spaces between the planks of wood that created the flooring, wishing he could somehow slither between them and disappear beneath the DeSotos’ deck. “Fuck,” he whispered to himself. He had almost let his true feelings slip out.

“Nothinc.’”

“No… say what you’re thinking. If Dr. Robertson documents what?” When Johnny didn’t answer, Roy felt his mouth go dry and his heart slam inside of his chest. He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that caused bile to rise into the back of his throat. There was only a couple of things that the psychologist could document that might impact Johnny’s career as a firefighter and paramedic.

Roy had to ask the question, even though he really didn’t want to know the answer. He saw Johnny blinking his eyes rapidly, staring at the flooring of the deck and he knew he had to push forward. In a voice shaky and airy, he asked the question that had been on his mind for over twenty-four hours.

“Johnny… are you thinking about… killing yourself?”

Johnny squeezed his eyes shut. As much as he wanted to deny it, he couldn’t lie to Roy.

“Roy… remember that run we went on, where the… the war vet thought he was… back in ‘Nam? He was about to hurt his… his wife, and…”

“Yes,” Roy agreed. “He thought our utility holsters on our belts were weapons.”

Johnny slowly nodded his head, thinking about the wild-eyed look in the man’s eyes during his flashback episode. “Well, I… I know how… how he musta felt. The last coupla’ days… I’ve had these… these thoughts and images… coming into my head… I don’t want ‘em to… They just won’t stop invadin’… and I can’t… make ‘em go away. Anyway, it’s not about… killin’ myself, but…”

Johnny shook his head, halting his rambling words. There was no use trying to explain it to Roy, nor could he continue to justify his feelings. He scrubbed his face with his palms, releasing a sigh. He picked up his cup, slowly pouring the remnants of the coffee between the wooden cracks in the flooring, absently staring at the stream as he emptied the cup. “Yea… yea, it’s crossed my mind.”

“Ohmygod, Johnny… I’m sorry…” Roy reached out, gripping his friend’s shoulder. “I… I didn’t know you were… you were this… depressed.”

Johnny bit his bottom lip, feeling uncomfortable as he continued to stare at the floor.

“How long?” Roy asked.

Johnny merely shrugged his shoulders.
“Is it the… flashbacks that make you… feel like doing something?” Roy felt inadequate in his current role. It was a strange feeling for him. He had never had difficulty talking to a suicidal patient, but when he was facing it with his best friend, he couldn’t seem to get his words out.

“I dunno,” Johnny groaned, resting his elbows on his knees again. He pressed his forehead against his hands. “I shouldn’t’ve said anything… Jus’ forget it… ‘kay?”

Roy’s eyes surveyed his distraught partner, wondering exactly what he might be contemplating. His training came back to him, and he was able to move forward with his line of questioning. “Nu-uh… No can do,” he said, his voice firm.

“Aahh, damn it!” Johnny swore, angry with himself for saying too much. “Can’t you let anything go?”

“I can let things go that need to be let go of… This isn’t one of those things.” He waited a moment to gauge Johnny’s reaction. He saw the younger man’s chest moving rapidly as his respiration rate increased. “What have you thought about doing?”

“Don’t wanna talk… ‘bout it anymore,” Johnny exclaimed, standing up and returning to his stance beside the railing.

Roy slowly followed him, trying to decide how to help his friend open up. “You don’t… trust me much, do you?”

“It’s not about you, Roy,” Johnny said, looking at nothing in particular. “Sure it is. If I lose my… best friend because I… I wasn’t good enough to confide in, then…”

“I know the game you’re playin’,” Johnny spoke up. “I’ve had the same trainin’ as you.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I’m not your patient…,” he glanced back at Roy for a brief moment. “It’s not your responsibility to rescue me from myself, a’right?”

“No,” Roy said softly. “No, it isn’t alright. You’re right when you say that you aren’t my patient. You ARE my best friend, though, my partner.” He felt a scratchiness beginning in the back of his throat. “If you won’t let me help you… then will you at least help me?”

Johnny released a nervous laugh. “Sure… Whatcha need, pally?”

“I need to know what went wrong… between us. I… I want to know why… you didn’t tell me… how you were feeling.”

Johnny gave a sarcastic snort. “What was I s’pose to say? Hey, Roy, I’m thinkin’ ‘bout hangin’ myself, or cuttin’ my wrists, or takin’ a handful of pills, so how ‘bout talkin’ me out of it, huh? Nope, too damn… uncomfortable.”

“So’s dying by your own hand,” Roy shot back.

Johnny leaned his head back, laughing inappropriately. “You’re right, Roy… You’re right… ‘Cause I’d prob’ly fuck that up, too.” Johnny’s left cheek tugged upwards slightly.

Roy’s face remained serious. He knew that Johnny’s uncharacteristic behavior was his way of masking his true feelings.

“Do you still have that old antique pistol?” Roy asked, concerned about Johnny returning to his apartment in his current state of mind. He had only agreed to stay with the DeSotos for a day. He
was already remaining beyond the time frame Dr. Buchanan had requested. Roy knew he had no way of stopping Johnny if he really wanted to return home.

Johnny rolled his eyes at Roy. “Don’t worry, pally… I’m not gonna do it.” He looked over at Roy, seeing the shock on his round ruddy face. How could he tell Roy that the pistol wasn’t just an antique that he had collected; it was a means of self-protection from a gang of hooded bigots hiding in the shadows for the last ten years. Not wanting to tell Roy the truth, he expertly dodged the issue by shifting the focus of the conversation. “But if you think you hafta tell Cap… then… go ahead,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Then it’ll all be over. I’ll lose my job and…”

“No…,” Roy said, turning to face Johnny. “No, I’m not gonna tell Cap. But Johnny, you do need to talk to Dr. Robertson about this. I…,” his own voice broke amid his emotions. “I can’t… lose you… like this… pl-please?”

Johnny swallowed hard, looking over at Roy’s bloodshot blue eyes. He didn’t see judgment or hatred there. He saw worry, concern… and brotherly love shimmering in the pools welling up along Roy’s lower lids. He felt his bottom lip begin to quiver and his chin wrinkled. “Roy, I… I don’t wanna die… I jus’… I don’t wanna live right now. Does that make sense?”

“Yea… You’re facing a difficult journey. The trial will be rough and… and seeing that place all over again... It’s going to bring back some pretty horrific memories, Johnny. I may not have been in Selma, but I know what it’s like to be in a place where there seems to be no way out. I was there once myself, remember?”

Johnny turned back to the railing. “Yea… O’ course, I remember.”

“I had friends who helped me, but… it was my best friend who… who basically forced me to face the truth… because he… he cared about me and my family.”

Johnny nodded his head slightly, thinking about how worried he had been about Roy when the DeSotos’ marriage seemed to be beyond repair.

“But… we’re gonna help you get through this. I promise… Johnny, hurting yourself… killing yourself… It’s a permanent solution to a… ugh!” Roy felt completely helpless. He knew that there was nothing he could say to make Johnny change his mind, certainly not the old worn out adage. He blew out his breath and decided to take a different strategy.

“Okay, I won’t patronize you, alright? Yes, we’re both adults and we both know that… Ahem,” he hesitated, clearing his throat before he could force the words out. “Suicide IS an option, but Johnny, it’s literally the LAST option.”

Johnny pressed his lips together firmly. The word ‘suicide’ seemed to be just as difficult for Roy to say as it was for Johnny to hear. He felt the backs of his eyes beginning to sting and his throat started to itch.

“Johnny, please promise me that… that you’ll try everything… every other possible option first… and that… you’ll call me before you… do… it. Please?” Roy was trying hard to validate Johnny’s feelings, removing any judgment from the conversation.

Johnny thought about Roy’s words, looked again at the sincerity on his face. He had expected Roy to treat him like a kid. Instead, Roy was reasoning with him. He wasn’t avoiding the subject, uncomfortable though it was. Johnny considered Roy’s request carefully. He knew that if he could survive a few more months, just until he could get through the trial, then perhaps it really would be over. Was there any possibility that he could get his life back then?
“Please, Johnny… Please trust us to help you get through this… Trust me… please?” Roy felt his lower lip beginning to tremble. He had faced many challenges in his career as a paramedic, but he had never felt a tidal wave of fear washing over him like he did at this moment. Johnny’s life was at risk, and Roy was terrified of making a mistake with his partner.

Johnny felt his emotional wall crumbling. His body began to tremble and he started gasping and coughing. It was all so overwhelming. Thoughts that he had sworn he would never verbalize to another living soul had just escaped from the fortress where he had held them captive for so long. And now that those words had been spoken, they could never be retracted. He knew that his relationship with Roy would never be the same, even if he returned to work at 51’s and made it through the trial. Nothing would ever be the same between them.

“Johnny, tell me… What could happen that would make this worth… dying for?”

Johnny looked over at Roy. If he was ever going to say the words; if he ever wanted Roy to truly understand what had brought him to this point in his life, the time was now. He swallowed hard, then used his tongue to wet his lips. He lowered his head, squeezed his eyes closed, and took a deep breath.

“I’d die… a thousand times… to keep those filthy bastards… from gettin’ to you and your… family, Roy,” he said, his words fading into a husky whisper.

Roy felt his world tilt. “What?”

Johnny sighed heavily; he had to make Roy understand. “They threatened my family… That’s why… I had to stay away… from my parents… I never…,” he hiccupped, his breath catching in his throat. Telling Roy was more difficult than he had imagined. “I never thought… ‘bout y’all ‘til… Roy,” he croaked out, his brown eyes finally connecting with Roy’s misty blue ones. “I can’t let ‘em… h-hurt my f-family… My 51 family… and… you, Jo… and the… k-kids.”

Johnny thought he would fall when his knees began to buckle. Roy saw what was happening and reached out to support his best friend. Johnny’s body was suddenly wracked with gut-wrenching sobs that had been building up inside of him for a decade. He lost all control of his emotions. He had tried so hard for so many years to remain stoic in the face of danger. He had managed to convince himself that his parents were safe because of the distance between him and them. But when William Waite had resurfaced, and the detectives from Selma had managed to track him down in Los Angeles, he knew that the Ku Klux Klan could just as easily find him, too. Now he had a much larger family to be concerned about, and he knew he couldn’t live with the guilt if any one of his friends were to be injured by the KKK. He had always placed the life of a victim ahead of his own, and he had the physical scars to prove it. He knew, without a doubt, that he would gladly sacrifice his life in order to save the lives of his friends. He knew that he was capable of taking his own life if it meant that his friends would be safe from the hideous secret society that he had feared for the last ten years.

“W-who, Johnny?”

Johnny felt his face contort in emotional agony as he considered the possibilities. The KKK was ruthless. He truly didn’t want to die, but he wouldn’t even hesitate in order to keep them away… especially from the DeSotos. His cheeks burned, his breath quickened. He felt his body caving beneath the mental strain of the load he had been carrying around for far too long. When he felt Roy’s warm hand cup the back of his neck, he collapsed against the older man’s chest. He had reached the end of his rope and Roy was his knot.

“The… K-Klan,” he wept as unwanted images from the nightmare of the previous night, images of
his parents hanging along the edge of the Alabama River, once again flooded his mind. He held on tight to Roy’s shirt, feeling the older man pulling him into an embrace. Johnny screwed his eyes shut, willing the terrifying images to disappear. But instead, the bodies morphed into two smaller bodies hanging lifeless with their necks bent at odd angles. And instead of Kizzy’s wailing cries of anguish, it was the high-pitched piercing screams of Joanne DeSoto that filled his ears, tormenting his soul.

“No, no, no, no,” Johnny chanted, curling his body into a tight ball as Roy tried to calm him.

“Easy, Pally… No one’s here but you and me… They aren’t here. They can’t hurt you… or us… Deep breaths… slow breaths… stay with me, Johnny,” Roy coaxed, rubbing soothing circles along Johnny’s shivering damp back. His own cheeks grew hot and moist as he held his friend. Johnny had been his best friend for several years, but he was only just beginning to understand how much he and his family meant to his partner.

Realizing that the situation was much direr than he had ever imagined, he silently vowed to do whatever it took to help Johnny get through the trial. Behind the macho bravado-filled façade that Johnny normally displayed, a part of him had never left the river’s edge on that long ago March morning; a part of John Gage had died along with Phillip Campbell and Father Mitchell. Perhaps when Johnny returned to Selma, he would be able to close that dark chapter in his life. As he held Johnny’s trembling body in his arms, allowing him to weep on his shoulder, Roy silently prayed that when Johnny returned to Los Angeles after the trial, that he would bring back the part of him that had been missing for so long.

Johnny felt his body being lowered to the deck, knowing that Roy was holding him, protecting him from the images that Johnny knew weren’t real. Yet, his eyes were seeing them, his nostrils were smelling the musty stale earthy scent of the river, and his ears were hearing the screams of inconsolable mothers. He felt Roy’s touch grounding him, Roy’s voice pulling him back from the scene, and slowly the sounds, smells, and images faded into nothingness.

Roy felt the heat of the California sun shining down on them, realizing that the cool shadows of the low-hanging ominous clouds had been pushed back by the bright morning sun. He felt Johnny’s shaking beginning to dissipate and his breathing began slowing down.

“Atta boy, Junior,” he whispered, continuing his efforts to settle his terror-stricken partner. Roy had never considered that Johnny had been thinking of killing himself as a way of protecting his station family. The thought of him losing his best friend, of Johnny sacrificing himself to keep Roy and his family safe was more than he could bear. He leaned his head back against the railing, frustrated with himself for becoming so angry with Johnny over recent weeks.

Johnny finally released his white-knuckled grip on Roy’s shirt, using his own tee-shirt to dry his face. “S-sor-ry, ’oy,” he said in a staccato voice.

“Don’t be,” Roy responded, scrubbing his own face with the palms of his hands. “We’re gonna get through this… I promise.” Roy locked eyes with Johnny before continuing. He had to make sure that the upset man was truly listening to what he was about to say. “You aren’t facing any of this alone. And when you feel like you can’t go any further… The fellas and I will carry you.”

Joanne, standing close enough to the barely opened kitchen window, watched and listened to what was happening on the deck. Although she couldn’t hear everything that they were saying, their body language spoke loudly and clearly. Both men were crying and hugging, not the normal behavior of most ordinary firemen. Then again, Roy and Johnny weren’t ordinary firemen. When she saw both men crying as they dropped to their knees, she pulled a paper towel off the roll beside the sink to dry her own eyes. Whatever was happening between them, it had to be cathartic. She watched from the kitchen window until she saw them pull apart. She quickly tried to regain her composure, when a
sudden knock on the door jolted her.

She tried to make herself presentable before answering.

“Chet?”

“Hey, Joanne… Is…,” he stopped, seeing her red swollen eyes. “Jo, what’s wrong?” he asked, entering the living room. “Is it Johnny?”

Joanne used the backs of her hands to dry a fresh round of tears. “They’re… Roy and Johnny are… talking on the… deck… and…”

“Ohmygod,” Chet mumbled, looking past her, trying to see what was happening between his two friends. He stared through the sliding glass door, seeing the two men sitting beside the railing, embracing. Johnny’s forehead was resting on Roy’s shoulder, and Roy had one hand clamping the back of Johnny’s neck and the other was rubbing soothing circles on his back. The sight made Chet’s heart leap into his throat.

Joanne sniffled, trying to find her voice. “Um… give ‘em… a minute… okay?”

“Sure…” Chet pulled out a bar stool and took a seat, his face somber. “I’m worried, Jo.”

Joanne reached for a cup from the cabinet. “Me, too,” she said, pouring him a cup of black coffee.

Chet accepted the proffered cup, offering her a gentle smile. “Thanks… I came by to… I wanted to ask Johnny to… to be one of my groomsmen at the wedding.”

Joanne gave him a kind smile. “That’s great…” She turned her head to look out the window. Seeing the two men getting up, she felt a sense of relief. “I think he needs to know that… that he’s still important to you.”

“He is,” he said, lifting the cup to his mouth. “All my station brothers are. They really stuck by me when… When they prob’ly shouldn’t’ve.”

The two of them continued their casual conversation, talking about Corrie’s latest mispronunciations and antics. Both of them turned their heads when they heard the sliding glass door opening. Joanne was the first to speak.

“Johnny? You have a visitor.”

Johnny looked up, seeing Chet sitting at the kitchen bar. Quickly, he tried to remove any remnants of his emotional episode, forcing a grin across his splotchy face. “Ah, hey, Chet. You must be droppin’ Corrie off for Caroline.”

“No, Caroline is off today so… Gage!” Chet said, his blue eyes widening in shock as he got his first good look at the paramedic. “You look… um, slick-faced,” the lineman said, unable to think of anything else to say. Johnny looked very different after having shaved off his scraggly beard. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, something Chet would have normally mentioned, but not today.

Both men snickered.

“Yea… It started to, ah, itch.”

Joanne looped her arm through Roy’s, jerking her head towards the living room. “We’ll leave you two alone.”
Johnny’s eyes widened, curious about why he needed to be left alone with his nemesis. He gulped, feeling waves of heat wash over him. “Is… Is somethin’ wrong, Kelly?”

“Nope,” Chet responded with his usual goofy grin. “I just need to ask you somethin’, Gage. You, ah… You weren’t here when I asked the other fellas, and,” he slid off the stool, shrugging his shoulders. He had no idea if Johnny would accept his invitation. “My weddin’ is comin’ up in the Spring and… Well, the other fellas all agreed to stand up with me, but you weren’t here and…” He blew out his breath, looking over at Johnny. “It would really mean the world to me if you’d stand up with me, too. Will you be one of my groomsmen?”

Johnny was stunned. Had he heard Chet correctly? He narrowed his eyes at the Irishman. “Joanne made you ask me, didn’t she?”

Chet’s blue eyes opened wide. “Wha-no, no, Gage. I’m serious here. I was gonna ask you, but you were… you know… up in the mountains… But now you’re back and… And I really want you to be there. I want… all my shiftmates standing with me…,” he paused, his face dropping. “Oh… You don’t approve of the weddin’, do you? I really thought you were supportive… I’m-“

Johnny held up his hand, palm out. “Whoa… Chet… Of course I’m supportive of the marriage. Caroline is the best thing that ever happened to you, and… Actually, I think you’re the best thing that’s happened to her since Corrie was born. I’m truly happy for you and… If you’re sure you want me there…”

“Yea… Yea, I do. It won’t be the same if you aren’t there.”

Johnny scrubbed his face with his hand as Chet’s last few words echoed in his mind. What would be different if he were gone? What impact would his death have on his shiftmates? He really hadn’t given that much thought. He felt his left cheek twitching slightly. He couldn’t believe Chet felt this way, not after everything that had happened recently. “Ah… Yea, Chet… Yea, I’d be… honored,” Johnny said, his voice a whisper.

Chet’s smile broadened beneath his bushy mustache. “Far out!” he nearly shouted, seeing Johnny extending his hand towards him. He considered the proffered hand, but thoughts of Johnny and Roy embracing on the back deck returned to his mind and the lineman lunged toward Johnny.

Johnny was nearly knocked off his feet, stunned by Chet’s sudden hug.

“Thanks, man. Thanks, Johnny,” Chet said, slapping Johnny on the back, relieved that his friend had agreed. Now his list of groomsmen was complete. Caroline still needed to choose her bridesmaids and the wedding party would be set.

Johnny returned the embrace then quickly separated from Chet. Neither man was completely comfortable with such an emotional display between them. “Thanks for… askin’.”

Chet pumped both fists in the air. “Woohoo!”

“So when’s the big day?”

“March 27th,” the Irishman replied, proudly.

“Did he say yes?” Joanne called out as she and Roy re-entered the kitchen.

“Yes!”

Roy wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist, smiling at his two friends. Perhaps the invitation was
exactly what Johnny needed to give him something to look forward to.

“Okay, Gage,” Chet began, his energy renewed with the acceptance of his invitation. “We’re gonna wear our dress uniforms, ‘cause I can’t stand those monkey suits with the frilly sissy shirts. And Marco is gonna be my best man, so he’s gonna throw me a bachelor party and I want all you fellas to come, and there’ll be lots o’ beer and strip-, er-“

Joanne crossed her arms over her chest, quirking one eyebrow in Chet’s direction.

“Striped cake,” the lineman stuttered, grinning at Joanne. “Yea, it’ll be striped, you know, like a football field…”

“Give up, Chet,” Roy chided. “You can’t dig your way out of this one with a shovel.”

Johnny chuckled for the first time in a long time. “Aww, let ‘im try, Roy,” Johnny interjected, enjoying seeing Chet squirm and glad the focus had shifted off of him.

Joanne fought the urge to laugh out loud, preferring to keep Chet on the hook a little longer. “Chet, you might as well tell me you’re going to host a Bible study. That would be about as believable as a bachelor party with a STRIPED cake,” she argued.

Chet rocked back and forth on his feet, shoving his hands deeply into his pockets, lifting his shoulders upwards until they reached his ears. “Yes, ma’am.” He looked back and forth between Roy and Johnny. “I, ah,” he stammered, backing up towards the front door. “I’ve got a lot to do today, so… I’ll just be goin’ now,” he said with a grin, his face a dark shade of red. “Thanks, Gage. I really appreciate it, and… I’m… really glad you’re back.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Joanne offered, continuing to make the lineman uncomfortable, and loving every minute of it.

The two paramedics watched as Chet bounded for the front door, seeing the back of his neck flaming red with embarrassment.

Johnny’s trademark grin made another appearance on his handsome face, this time reaching his expressive eyes. He turned to his friend. “Roy, ah… Where’s my Rover?”

“It’s at your apartment, as far as I know,” Roy responded, concerned that Johnny was about to bolt before their superiors arrived.

“Oh… What time are the chief and Cap comin’ over?”

Roy sighed, exasperated by his partner’s behavior. “Johnny, you’ve got to be here to talk to them. I really don’t think you’re in trouble, so-“

“Roy!” Johnny said, raising his voice to stop Roy’s imagination from running away from him. Of course, Johnny understood why Roy thought he was skipping out on the meeting. It had been his modus operandi for the last ten years. “Hey, hey… hold up. I need to know how much time I’ve got before I have to be back here. I’m gonna talk to ‘em, a’right?”

Roy wasn’t sure he believed his friend, but they seemed to have made quite a bit of progress in the last couple of days. He decided to give Johnny the benefit of the doubt.

“I don’t know, exactly… Around noon, I suppose.”

Johnny glanced at the wall clock above the kitchen table. “Umph, I don’t think I have time to get my
hair cut,” he lamented, running his hand through his untamed locks.

“I can give you a quick trim, Johnny,” Joanne said, walking back into the room. “It won’t be regulation length, but it’ll neaten it up some.”

Johnny offered her his smile, knowing how it melted her heart. He loved Joanne. She was like the sister he had never had. “You… don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” she chuckled. “Roy can cut up the ham and the vegetables while I cut your hair; right, Roy?”

“For…”

“For the sandwiches,” Joanne said, rolling her eyes playfully. “How quickly you men forget,” she muttered, walking down the hallway to the bathroom to retrieve the needed supplies for the impromptu haircut.

“Oh, yea…,” Roy said, ducking his head with a grin. Life seemed to be on the verge of returning to normal. At least, he hoped it was.

“There’s lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and cheese in the crisper drawer of the fridge. The ham is on the bottom shelf,” she called over her shoulder as she headed down the hallway. Moments later, she returned with a towel draped over her forearm, comb in hand, and snipping the scissors, aiming them at Johnny. “Ready?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, following her onto the back deck.

Roy watched the two of them as they set about trimming Johnny’s shaggy mane. His blue orbs were filled with worry about the dark thoughts Johnny had shared with him.
Warning: violent images in the final paragraph.

Chapter 27

Hank Stanley stood pacing in front of his living room window, anxiously awaiting the arrival of Chief McConnike. He dreaded being alone with the man during the ride to Roy’s house. The nervous fire captain felt butterflies flitter in his stomach whenever he was around the older man; had ever since he was McConnike’s engineer.

“Honey, just have a seat,” Rebecca encouraged. “You’re wearing a path in our carpet.”

“I’m sorry, Becca. I just… I hate being alone with him.”

“Well, imagine how John must be feeling right now,” she suggested, knowing how easily John could get worked up.

Hank turned around, offering her a smile. “I have thought about it. I just wish I could settle him down before we get there. He has a way of…,” Hank chuckled, staring down at his feet. “Of sticking his foot in his mouth.” Hank looked back up at his wife, seeing the tender concern in her eyes. “And John doesn’t know the Chief like I do.”

Two sharp horn beeps sounded, and Hank groaned. “Ugh,” he sighed, peeking out the curtains, unnecessarily; he knew who was in his driveway.

“Wish me luck,” he said, inhaling deeply as he opened the front door.

“You’ll be fine, sweetheart.”

The ride to the DeSotos’ home was made with the chief droning on and on about the civil rights marches during the sixties and the advancements made by the department in hiring minorities. Hank offered a few obligatory grunts, forcing himself not to roll his eyes. In his opinion, Chief McConnike was one of the most judgmental men in the department, but Hank had no choice but to keep his views to himself. The chief always looked polished to the upper echelon of the department, but a few of the men who had worked directly under his command held an entirely different view of their superior. Hank was one of those men, but he had never been forgiven for the hat burning incident, and McConnike enjoyed bringing it up every so often. He wondered if perhaps he should share the details with his men, after they were all back together on shift. He tucked that thought away for the moment, deciding that if the opportunity presented itself, he would let them know exactly why he had burned the chief’s hat.

When they arrived at their destination, they both exited the chief’s car, heading up the steps to the front door where they were met by Roy.

“Chief, Cap,” he greeted them. “Come in.”

In the kitchen, Johnny stood in front of the refrigerator, removing the condiments needed for the sandwiches. When he heard the familiar voices, he set the jars down on the kitchen table then used his fingers to comb his damp hair into place.

“John Gage, how are you doing?” Chief McConnike asked, extending his hand to his young paramedic.
“I’m, uh, doin’ well, sir. And you?”

“Oh, fine, fine,” the chief responded, shifting his bespectacled eyes to the lady of the house. “Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. DeSoto.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome. I’m happy to do it. Everything is ready for you men, so I’ll just make myself scarce.”

“No, Joanne, that won’t be necessary. Please,” Hank began, pulling out a chair at the table for her, “have a seat. We’ll talk after lunch.”

Johnny’s heart seemed to jump into his throat and remain there. How could he eat when he didn’t know if he would still be employed by the end of the chief’s visit?

He slathered his bread with mayonnaise, slowly creating his sandwich, while the others assembled and ate theirs in the midst of casual chatter. He sipped his glass of water, using the cool liquid to wash the small bites of his sandwich down his throat. He had only consumed about half of it when the others seemed to be finishing up their meal. Thankfully, he was able to hide the remnants of his sandwich beneath his napkin.

Joanne began clearing the dishes, exchanging glances with her husband. Roy looked as worried as Johnny, and Hank didn’t look much better. “How about some coffee and chocolate chip cookies? Corrie and I made them yesterday.”

“Oh, Jo, I’ll help you get everything ready,” Roy commented. “You fellas go on out onto the deck, and I’ll be out with the coffee and cookies in a minute.” He didn’t want Joanne to overhear the conversation should it get heated, so he used the excuse of helping his wife in order to ensure that the kitchen window was completely closed. Firemen had a propensity for foul language, and she had already chastised him about his earlier swearing.

Johnny tensed his jaw muscles, feeling as if his partner had just thrown him under the proverbial bus by leaving him alone with their superiors.

“Well, it is a beautiful day,” the chief said, pulling open the sliding glass door.

Hank followed next, while Johnny lingered long enough to give Roy a pleading glance.

“I’ll hurry,” Roy whispered, pulling the mugs from the cabinet. He and Johnny had been communicating without words for a long time, and right now, he certainly knew what Johnny was thinking.

The three men sat around the patio table as an uncomfortable silence fell around them. Johnny, who was normally very attuned to the sounds around him, heard nothing. There was no traffic noise, no songbirds, not even the rustling of the leaves in the trees. The only noise he heard was the rushing sound in his ears. He sat up as straight as possible, wondering which of his supervisors would speak first.

“John, I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Hank said, patting his shoulder.

“Thank you, Cap…” Suddenly, Johnny blanched. Was Hank Stanley still his captain?

“Yes, me too, Gage,” McConnike added. “The fresh air,” he said, inhaling in an exaggerated manner, “and the smell of freshly cut grass just makes me feel energized.”
“Makes my eyes water,” Johnny muttered, rubbing at the inside corners of his eye sockets.

“Ahhh, yes... that, too. Are you okay out here?” the chief asked.

“Ah, yessir, fine.”

“Very well,” McConnike began, using his index finger to push his new glasses further onto his nose.

The gesture reminded Johnny of Craig Brice’s annoying habit. He thought about how ironic that thought was; he and Brice had never been close, but right now, Johnny missed him. When the chief cleared his throat, Johnny was jerked out of his musings, returning his attention to his superior.

“Ahem... John, I understand that you had quite an experience when you were younger.”

Johnny’s eyes widened. He had no idea that McConnike knew what had happened in Selma. He had just assumed that he was going to be disciplined for his excessive absenteeism. His paid leave had run out several days ago. By not returning to work, or notifying his captain, he had basically abandoned his job, even though his intension had been to resign. Johnny had never been a good poker player; his expressive face always gave him away, just as it was doing now.

“Relax, son,” McConnike stated, realizing that he had surprised the young man. “We’re-“

“Here’s the coffee and cookies,” Roy announced, rushing out the open door and setting the tray down in the middle of the table. He saw the look on Johnny’s face and wondered what he had missed.

“Thanks, DeSoto,” the chief said, reaching for a steaming mug. “John, Hank has shared with me all the details of your past experiences.”

Johnny gulped, unable to look at his captain. Why had he told the chief everything? He felt the prickly heat of embarrassment and anger clawing and scratching along his reddening neck. It was bad enough to have his friends know what had happened, but now his chief knew, too. How long would it be before the entire department knew? He didn’t mind being the butt of a few friendly pranks around 51’s, but if the entire department found out about his past… He shuttered at the thought of what might happen to him then.

“John, I want you to know that the department will grant you the time off to go back to Selma for the trial. It will be administrative leave, paid time off but not vacation time, okay?”

“Um… ‘kay, th-thank you, sir.” Johnny’s eyebrows knitted together in confusion. Had he understood the chief correctly? If he was going to be granted paid time off, then perhaps he wasn’t going to be fired, after all.

“Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, I want to discuss more recent events,” McConnike stated.

Johnny’s heart sank. This was it. This was the reprimand he had been dreading.

“I understand you joined a cult, Gage.”

Johnny coughed, struggling to breathe for a moment. “Ahua… ahem… Well, not exactly, sir.”

The chief shot his captain a disapproving glance and then looked back at the man in question. It was obvious to both paramedics that Captain Stanley had told the chief what had happened in Tehachapi.
“Not exactly? How do you, not exactly, join a cult? We’ve had quite a few out here on the West Coast and you are either IN or OUT… Never sort of in. That’s like a woman being sort of pregnant,” the older man joked. No one laughed.

“Chief,” Hank began, his hazel eyes growing more concerned. “I explained that to you, already. It was a rescue.”

“Yes… I’m well aware of the rescue, Stanley. The FBI has already informed the department that SEVERAL of my men were involved in a rescue of ONE of their own.” His icy blue-eyed glare sent a chill down Johnny’s spine.

“But… Johnny was there to rescue a young lady named Lily Campbell,” Roy began, feeling defensive.

McConnike held up a hand in Roy’s direction, silently shushing him. Roy gritted his teeth, but he knew better than to talk back to his superior.

“I understand that a report will be forthcoming from the feds that will explain it all, in detail, but right now, I want an explanation from the two of you,” he said, pointing his wrinkled finger at Hank and Johnny, respectively.

Johnny, having spent the last several weeks trying to protect his station 51 family, immediately jumped at the chance to defend his captain. “Cap’n Stanley had nothing to do with this, sir. I’m totally to blame here… Jus’ me,” he said, once again pointing his middle finger at his own chest.

Roy’s face paled; he felt a sense of déjà vu when Johnny spoke.

“Hank, what your men do is a direct reflection on YOU, ME and on the department.”

Hank felt his mouth go dry. He forced his voice to remain calm when he responded. “John Gage was on paid leave to handle some personal business… He can do whatever he damn well pleases on his own time.”

“Not when it reflects poorly on the department!” the other man argued. “Joining up with those flower loving, tree hugging, dope smoking hippies makes all of us look like a bunch of religious fools!”

Johnny’s fists began to clench and release in his lap. He would not allow his captain, or anyone else on his shift to take the blame for what he had done.

“Johnny was tricked into joining that group, Chief,” Roy spoke up. “He only did it to get Lily out. He had no idea that she was working with the FBI to take down the leader.”

“Then maybe he isn’t the rescue man he’s been made out to be,” the angry man shot back.

Johnny leaned forward, unable to take any more. “HE,” he said, patting his chest with his open palm, “is sitting right here. Don’t talk about me like I’m not!”

“Alright, John… Then why don’t you answer my question?”

“I didn’t hear a question asked,” Johnny stated flatly.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” the chief said with a soft snort. “What the hell happened to you up on that mountain? I need some reassurance that you’ll be fit for duty when you come back on shift and not go… AWOL.”
“Headquarters will be sent a copy of his medical release, Chief. Just like we do for any man who gets n

“I’ve reviewed his most recent medical report that stated he was underweight, and I also know that I never received a follow-up report telling me he was back up to the minimum weight. HOWEVER,” the chief said, leaning forward, slightly. “I’m not as concerned about his gaining or losing a few pounds as I am about the… overdose.”

Roy and Hank both tried to speak at once, but it was Johnny’s voice that overpowered them both.

“To respond to your first concern,” Johnny said, sounding more professional than Roy or Hank had ever heard. “I didn’t return for my weight check. Like Cap said, I was on leave for personal reasons. As to your second concern, I was drugged with an herbal opioid… um, concoction,” he replied, unsure of exactly what he had consumed. “I was given a spiked drink. I did NOT do it deliberately.”

The fire chief sat deathly still, scrutinizing the younger paramedic as if trying to determine if he was being truthful. The older man stared at Johnny, obviously wanting to ask a question but unsure of how to phrase it. Hank knew exactly what the chief was thinking. ‘Don’t you dare say it, you sonofabitch!’ Captain Stanley thought to himself.

“We nearly lost him, chief,” Hank finally said.

“So I heard,” McConnike replied. “I’m truly glad that you’re alright, John. I apologize if I sounded… cold, or unconcerned. I care about ALL the men under my command,” he shot back, his words obviously aimed at Hank.

McConnike pushed back from the table. He positioned himself to stand up, placing his flattened palms on the table, then asked Johnny a question, trying to make it appear as an afterthought. “Has anything like this ever happened before, son?”

Johnny’s nostrils flared and his breathing became labored. He knew exactly where his chief was headed with his line of questioning and it made him sick to his stomach. He clenched his teeth together, squeezing his jaw muscles until they ached. “Never!” he spat out.

Hank wanted to speak up, to defend his paramedic against their superior officer, but he struggled to find his voice. ‘You bigoted bastard,’ he thought.

“So this… overdose… was some kind of an accident?”

“Chief,” Hank said, finally. “You’ll see when the report comes out. What Johnny is telling you is absolutely true. He did nothing wrong… nothing!”

“I never meant to imply that he did, Hank.” Chief McConnike had taken this subject as far as he could without compromising his own position within the department. “Any lasting effects from the, um… poison?”

“No, sir. Dr. Buck said I was very lucky. I’m going to see Dr. Brackett in a few days for a follow-up appointment and I believe he’ll clear me for duty. I think I’ll be back at the right weight by then.”

The chief’s entire demeanor seemed to change immediately, confusing the two paramedics. “I’m glad that you’re recovering well, and I’ll be glad to have you back on shift in a few days.” He stood up, patting the stunned paramedic on his shoulder. “You take care of yourself, young man. Our department needs more men like you on the front lines.”
Hank stood up, biting his tongue to keep from getting himself in trouble. He knew what McConnike meant by that last comment, and it had nothing to do with Johnny’s skills or bravery. The chief was the kind of man who wanted certain individuals to STAY on the front lines, rather than advancing into positions of leadership.

“You take it easy, John. We’ll see you next Sunday,” Hank said, shaking hands with his two men.

McConnike extended his hand to Roy first, thanking him for lunch, then he shook Johnny’s hand. “Please know that the department is fully supportive of your testifying in Selma. You’re a very honorable, brave young man.” With that final comment, Chief McConnike walked back into the house, followed closely by the other three men.

“Goodbye, Mrs. DeSoto. Thanks again for the lunch.”

“You’re welcome, Chief McConnike,” she said, her hands plunging into the soapy dish water. “You, too, Cap. Give my best to Rebecca,” Joanne called out to the departing men, wondering how their meeting had gone.

Roy and Johnny stood on the steps of the DeSoto home, watching as their supervisors walked down the sidewalk.

“Well... that was strange,” Roy mumbled to his partner, unsure of what had caused the chief’s sudden change in demeanor. When he looked at Johnny, he saw the younger man’s thousand-mile stare, and he wondered if Johnny had some insight into Chief McConnike’s strange behavior.

Johnny continued staring at the departing supervisors, crossing his arms over his chest, defensively. “No, Roy... It wasn’t strange at all.” He turned his head to the right, just enough to glance at his friend. “I’ve heard the same unspoken speech many times.”

Roy drew his eyebrows together, waiting for Johnny to elaborate, but an explanation for his last comment never came.

As McConnike and Stanley made their way out to the red chief’s car, Hank turned around and surveyed Roy and Johnny standing side by side on the steps of the DeSoto home. He didn’t think Roy had caught on to what McConnike had done, but Hank knew and he was sure Johnny knew as well, and it nauseated him.

As soon as they got into the chief’s car and began the drive back to the Stanley home, McConnike turned to his former engineer. “You’ll need to watch him close, Hank,” he said, emphasizing his point with his index finger. “You know how easily some people can become addicted – even after just one time. That young man can make the department look good. I mean, imagine the press coverage we’ll get with one of our men being a witness to the civil rights murders in Selma, but he’s got to stay clean and sober while he’s in the limelight... Well, and on shift, of course.”

“He’s not interested in the press coverage for the department,” Hank shot back. “And I know he sure as hell doesn’t have a drug problem... In spite of what you may think about his heritage.”

“Maybe not, but there are certain people we need to monitor a little closer than others.”

Hank fought an internal battle to keep from punching his superior. He truly hated Chief McConnike.

“One of the FBI agents was undercover and was there when it happened. Why don’t you talk to him?” Hank suggested.
“I’ll read the report when it comes,” McConnike stated, seemingly unfazed by the fact that the FBI was involved in the situation involving the men from Station 51.

Hank’s rage nearly erupted, but for the sake of his men, and his own job, he remained silent. Chief McConnike was still the same bigot he had been back when Hank had burned his hat.

E!

As darkness fell over Los Angeles, Marco drove Beverly home. They had shared a wonderful day, working through some issues from Beverly’s past, and strengthening the bond that was drawing them together. Marco had amazing insight into human behavior, and she felt much closer to him after spending the day talking and making love. She kissed him goodnight then jostled her key into the keyhole. He waited for her to turn on the lights in her apartment before he left. He felt a lightness in his step, whistling as he walked back to his burgundy sedan. They had made a lot of progress over the last forty-eight hours, and he hoped it was just the beginning of their future together.

Inside her apartment, Beverly locked her door then headed for her bathroom. She felt emotionally drained, and yet, freer than she had felt in a very long time. He had seen her body, really seen it, and he hadn’t rejected her. In fact, it was just the opposite. He wanted to continue seeing her. She wished she wasn’t on shift at The Wellhouse tomorrow because she would have really enjoyed spending another night in his strong safe arms.

She flipped on the light in her bathroom, beginning her nightly routine before going to bed. When she pulled open the door of her medicine cabinet, her heart skipped a beat. There, lying next to her toothbrush, was the white round dispensing container for her birth control pills. She had forgotten all about them, having missed two pills while she was trying to help rescue Johnny and Lily. She thought back over the love making she had enjoyed with Marco, and her heart began to pound inside her chest and fear slithered up her back, constricting her breathing. The two of them hadn’t used any protection.

“Ohmygod, no… “

E!

Johnny surprised both Joanne and Roy by agreeing to remain with them for one more night. As he snuggled beneath the covers in the DeSotos’ guest room, he was grateful that his disclosure of suicidal thoughts had not been brought back up. The family, including the DeSoto children, had spent the afternoon and evening grilling burgers and enjoying the waning warmth of the late summer night. Johnny had been coaxed by Jennifer to push her on the tire swing. He watched her long blonde ponytail waving behind her in the wind as he pushed her higher and higher. He felt a twinge of jealousy for his partner. Roy DeSoto truly had it all, and he had nearly thrown it all away because he had jumped to conclusions instead of communicating openly with his wife.

He reached out, pressing harder along Jenny’s lower back, smiling at the sound of her high-pitched squeals as she soared skyward, his heart filled with regret. Johnny wondered if he would ever know the joys of fatherhood. Would he ever have his own house and family? Had he and Lily not lost six years of their lives together, he might be pushing his own dark-haired daughter on a tire swing in his own backyard by now. As he continued to keep the swing going for his surrogate niece, his thoughts drifted across town. He wondered how Lily and Iris were handling their reunion. Thoughts of the two Campbell ladies were never far from his mind throughout the rest of the evening.
When he finally turned off the bedside lamp, he rolled over onto his back, slinging his arm over his eyes. The bed springs squeaked, a sound that was strangely comforting and familiar to him. The last thoughts that flitted through his mind before he succumbed to sleep were about Lily. She had agreed to return to Selma with him for the trial. Perhaps the small Alabama town, the place that had taken so much away from them, would be the perfect place to give them a fresh start.

E!

Lily kissed her mother’s cheek, then padded down the hallway to her bedroom. This would be the second night she would spend in her childhood bedroom. As she pulled back the covers, her eyes fell on the 5 x 7 photograph taken over ten years earlier. It was a picture of her standing between her mother and Johnny taken along Dallas Avenue, in Selma. At the time, she had wondered why her mother had asked Kizzy to take the photograph in that particular spot. Years later, she had learned that the white Victorian-style house in the distant background belonged to her maternal grandparents.

Lily picked up the frame, running her fingers along the edge, near Johnny’s boyish face. She closed her eyes, allowing the memory of the scent of early blooming azaleas and daylilies tickle her nose. She remembered standing beside a small camellia bush, the pink blooms already fading on the winter-blooming shrub, but her mother had insisted that the three of them stand near it for the photograph.

Lily kept her eyes closed, wanting to relive that moment. It was a happier time for all of them, before Phillip’s death. Kizzy smiled boldly as she snapped the photograph, ignoring the derogatory shout of a young man passing by in a navy blue car. She felt Johnny squeezing her hand, a symbolic gesture of protecting her. That was the day she learned what the word ‘mulatto’ meant. She recalled her paternal grandmother, offering her a big white-toothed smile as she explained that it meant being of mixed race. Lily had looked over at her new friend, Johnny, and saw him give her a flirtatious wink.

“IT means you get the best that both races have to offer,” Johnny had said to her, having heard something similar from his own parents, years earlier.

Lily opened her eyes, looking back down at the picture. “Oh, Johnny,” she whispered in the dimly lit room. “I still love you, more than anything.”

She touched her fingers to her mouth, then gently pressed them against the glass of the frame, completely covering his face. Maybe one day soon, he would want to rekindle their romance. But he had asked to take it slowly, and so, she would give him the space he needed. She thought about how lucky she was that he had remained single all these years. As difficult as it would be, she would refrain from contacting him. He knew where she was and how to reach her. She would wait until he was ready.

She reached to her left, clicking off her lamp, then snuggling between the covers. “Good night, Johnny,” she whispered into the darkness, then closed her eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

E!

The following morning, Johnny kissed Joanne on the cheek, thanking her for allowing him to stay with them for the last two days.

Joanne noticed how the light seemed to have returned to his eyes. He also had more color in his cheeks, giving his face a healthier glow. “Oh, Johnny, you know that room is yours any time you need it,” she replied.

“I know... And I really appreciate it, Jo.” He shifted his eyes to his partner. “Ready to go?”
“Ah, yea, sure.” Roy looked over at his beautiful wife. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

Joanne waited for the men to drive away from the house, then quickly ran to the telephone. She dialed the familiar number, glad when her call was answered.

“Iris? They’re on their way… um, I need to tell you something, but please don’t let Johnny know I told you.”

Iris felt her heart flutter. “O-okay.”

Joanne spoke quickly, knowing that they didn’t have much time. Johnny’s apartment wasn’t very far from the DeSotos’ neighborhood, but there was so much that Iris needed to know, and she was in the best position to help the troubled young man they all loved.

“I was… so afraid of something… like this.” Iris was struggling to push her words past the lump in her throat.

“I know you’re there getting things ready for him, but… Will you just look around; see if you see any old prescriptions or… or anything that he might use… you know, if things get really bad?”

“Lily’s cleaning his bathroom right now, but I’ll check in his bedroom. If he has any pills, they’ll likely be near his bed… Um, what should I do with them?” Iris asked, feeling a sense of urgency.

“Take them, Iris. He isn’t injured now, so he shouldn’t need anything for pain. I just,” Joanne bit her bottom lip, her green eyes becoming misty. “I’ve heard Roy talking about all these kids who… who get hooked on drugs after just one try and… and even though Johnny didn’t mean to take it… Iris, if he’s as depressed as Roy says he is… then…”

“Don’t say it, Joanne… I can’t… I can’t even think about it right now… It’s too… awful.”

“Then you’ll do it? You’ll take his pills with you when you leave? Just for a few days, okay?”

“Yes, of course I will… I… I’ll do whatever I can to protect him,” Iris replied.

E!

The drive to Johnny’s apartment was made in silence. Neither man knew what to say to the other. Roy pulled the small gold-colored car into an empty guest parking space. He saw Johnny’s eyes light up when he saw the dingy white Rover a few spaces over.

“See... She’s still here,” Roy offered, engaging the parking break.

“Yea,” Johnny said, feeling his chest tighten. He had truly thought he would never see it again, yet, here it was… and it still belonged to him.

The dark-haired man walked over to the vehicle, his most prized possession, and ran his hands across the hood on his way to his apartment. He patted it lovingly, as if the vehicle were a treasured pet.

Roy smiled wistfully. He had always known how much Johnny loved his vehicle, but knowing that he was to have been the recipient of the Rover actually made his breath hitch. Johnny would only entrust his Rover to his best friend. He pinched the bridge of his nose, following his lanky partner up the sidewalk and the stairway, heading for Johnny’s second floor apartment.

Johnny dug into his pants pocket, remembering that he no longer had his keys. He had given his
keyring to Iris to be returned to his landlady. “Ahhh, no!” Johnny groused, lightly slapping the door. “I don’t have a key, anymore.”

Roy grinned, raising his hand to knock on the door. He knew something that Johnny didn’t.

Suddenly, the door flew open, leaving Roy’s hand suspended in mid-air.

“Johnny... You’re home!”

“I-Iris?” Johnny stammered, looking back at his partner. “How’d...”

“I called her yesterday, when you were swinging Jenny. I knew you didn’t have a key and...” Roy snickered. “And I didn’t want to hand over mine to you. I never know when I might need it,” he said with a grin.

Iris held up the key ring, jingling it in front of Johnny’s excited brown eyes. “And here you go,” she said, stepping out of the way so the men could enter.

Johnny walked in, sniffing the curious combination of lemons and ammonia mixed with tomatoes and garlic. “Mmm,” he moaned.

“Lily cleaned up your apartment while I made lasagna, salad, and garlic bread. It’ll all be ready in about ten minutes, but,” she looked up at the wall clock. “It’s kind of early, but it reheats well,” she said walking back into the kitchen.

“This partner of mine can eat anytime,” Roy joked, nodding his head in Johnny’s direction, hoping the younger man’s appetite had truly returned to normal.

Johnny didn’t hear much after his ears heard the melodious sound of Lily’s name. He looked down the hallway, hearing bumping sounds and water running in his bathroom. “Is... she still here?”

“Yes,” Iris replied, spreading the garlic butter across the French bread she had spread out on a baking sheet on his small kitchen table. “Don’t worry; we’re heading out in just a minute. We know you need to rest and... You need your space, too.” She recalled Lily’s worry about Johnny wanting to take things slowly, but Iris understood his reasons, and she was actually grateful for the extra time she was getting to spend with her daughter.

The bathroom door opened and Lily exited, carrying a bucket with cleaning supplies in it. “Oh,” she said, blowing an errant strand of hair out of her eyes. “I didn’t know you were here already.”

“No... It’s, ah... It’s fine, Lily. It’s, um... It’s good to see you again.”

Lily grinned sheepishly, walking past him to return the cleaning bucket beneath the sink.

“Oh,” Johnny began, silently kicking himself for his rudeness. “I really appreciate... all this,” he said, spreading his arms out around the room. “Everything.”

Iris smiled, turning off the oven and returning the oven mitts to the tiny hook on the wall. “You’re so welcome, Johnny. It’s the least we could do. Now,” she said, walking towards him. “The lasagna will continue to cook for a few more minutes and it’ll stay warm for a couple of hours as long as you leave the oven door closed. The salad is in the fridge, and just stick the bread in the oven for a few minutes before you’re ready to eat.”

“Wow,” the thin paramedic said, his trademark grin lighting up his face. “Thank you... thank you both.”
Iris kissed him lightly on the cheek, then turned back to Lily. “Ready to go home?”

Lily locked eyes with Johnny for a brief moment, wanting to show him the same kind of affection her mother had, but she didn’t dare. Instead, she offered him a quick smile, then followed Iris towards the door.

Johnny’s chin hung open slightly, his face following the ladies as they headed for the door. “Call me if you need anything, Johnny, okay?” Iris called over her shoulder, securing her purse, and its stolen contents, on her shoulder. She would only keep them for a few days, just until this crisis was over.

“Um, yea... yea, thanks. I will.”

Roy waited for the door to close behind the Campbell ladies, then reached over and used his fingers to lift Johnny’s chin until his mouth closed. “You’re hopeless, you know that, Junior?”

Johnny’s eyebrow quirked in Roy’s direction. “Huh? Whatcha mean, I’m hopeless?”

“She’s crazy about you, and you can’t even speak directly to her.”

“Who? L-Lily?”

Roy rolled his eyes. “Yes... L-Lily,” he chuckled, mimicking Johnny’s stutter. It was obvious that he was smitten, more so than Roy had even imagined.

“Oh, yea... Well, we’re jus’, ya know... takin’ things slowly.”

“If you take them any slower, I’m gonna have to ask Crockett to draw a chalk outline around you just to see if you’re moving!”

“ROY!” Johnny said in a raised voice, dropping his keys in the wooden bowl on the table in the foyer.

Both men laughed, enjoying the mental release after the intensity of the last few days.

“Man, my apartment has never smelled so good,” Johnny said, inhaling deeply.

“It’s amazing what the touch of a woman can do,” Roy agreed.

Johnny waggled his eyebrows knowingly at his friend. “Do I need to babysit for you and Jo? I doubt you’ve enjoyed the touch of a woman in a few days, am I right?”

Roy picked up one of Johnny’s sofa pillows, throwing it at his partner. Both men laughed once more, then settled down in Johnny’s living room. Silence blanketed the entire residence, making the air thick.

“Roy... I really do appreciate all you’ve done for me.” Johnny seemed to be examining his hands as he struggled to say what was on his heart. “I, ah... I don’t know what would’ve happened... if you hadn’t... you know, been there for me. I’d... I’d prob’ly be dead.”

“You’d have done the same for me. You DID do the same for me,” Roy spoke softly, his blue eyes piercing his partner.

“Nah... You, ah... you saved my life, man. I jus’ helped you save your marriage.”
“Same thing,” Roy shot back.

Johnny leaned back in his chair, offering Roy a slight nod. “Yea... guess it kinda is, huh?”

“Family... all kinds of family... It’s what makes life worth living,” Roy commented, hoping to use his comment as a segue to a more serious subject.

“Ahem,” Johnny coughed into his closed fist. “Yea... I, ah... I’d like for you to, um... to take my pistol back to your house... please?” Johnny looked up, his brown eyes holding hope that his partner would understand his request.

Roy nodded in agreement, unable to push his words around the boulder that seemed to have lodged in his throat.

Johnny felt his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “It’s not... not for me, Roy. I jus’... Well, I don’t wanna worry you, you know? If you have it, then... You’ll know I’m not gonna... you know.”

Roy searched Johnny’s face, looking for any hint of deception. He could read his partner like a book, and right now, he wanted to know exactly what was going through the mind of the younger man. What he saw was genuine sincerity.

“Alright... Sure, I’ll take it. And I’ll leave the ammunition here, ‘cause I don’t want to have it at my house... You know, the kids and all.”

Johnny looked down at the floor for a moment, then back up at Roy. “It’s never even been out o’ the case, not since I bought it from that pawn shop. The owner had a shooting range behind the building. I fired off one round, jus’ to make sure it would shoot, then put it back in the case - empty. The bullets are still... still in a sealed box. So... no worries there, pally.”

“It still amazes me that you own a weapon, Johnny,” Roy said, his blue eyes curious. There was still so much about his partner that he didn’t know.

“Why? ‘Cause I should be shootin’ a bow and arrow, leavin’ the guns to the cowboys?” he questioned, his left cheek tugging slightly upwards.

Roy never cracked a smile, unsure of what his partner had meant by his comment.

“Lighten up, Roy... It was jus’ a joke.”

Roy offered him a slight smile; perhaps Johnny was returning to his old self after all. “Yea, yea... okay.”

Johnny grinned, slapping his jean-clad thighs with his hands. “Okay, well then it’s settled. I’ll go get it.” Johnny started down the hallway. “Hey, Roy? See if Iris made a pitcher of sweet tea, will ya? It’ll go great with the lasagna for our lunch.”

Roy walked over to the refrigerator, snagging a paper towel off the roll as he walked by. He dried the corners of his eyes, hoping that Johnny wouldn’t know how emotional the entire exchange had made him. He tossed the paper towel in the trash can, then pulled open the refrigerator door. A wide smile crossed his face.

“Hey, Johnny?” he called out, knowing that his partner could hear him in the tiny apartment. “She made more than sweet tea.”
“Huh?” Johnny questioned, lumbering down the short hallway with the pistol case in his hand.

“She made an old fashioned peach cobbler, too.”

Johnny’s grin lit up his expressive face once more. “Well, a’right! Let’s eat!”

E!

Roy felt a sense of relief as he drove his Porsche down the 405, the wind whipping through his thinning red hair. The antique pistol case was resting on the passenger’s side floor. Before he had left Johnny’s apartment, his partner had scheduled his first appointment with Dr. Robertson, and he had made arrangements for a physical with Dr. Brackett in a few days. With all the food Joanne and Iris had prepared for him, he was confident that Johnny would be ready to return to shift by next week.

He turned into his driveway, parking the little sports car behind Joanne’s vehicle. He reached down, removing the case from the floorboard, hearing an odd plunking sound coming from inside the case as he walked into the garage. He unlocked his toolbox, tucking the case safely inside. He hesitated for a moment, something just didn’t seem right to him. His fingers wrapped around the handle, preparing to open the wooden case, when Joanne’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Roy? How’d it go?” she asked, standing in the doorway between the garage and the kitchen.

He closed the toolbox, ensuring that it was locked for the sake of the children. His mind had been on his wife ever since Johnny had waggled his eyebrows, suggestively. It had been a long time since he had enjoyed the sensuous touch of his loving wife. He glanced at his watch, noting that it was only half past noon. They had plenty of time for a little romance before the kids got home from school.

E!

Later that evening, as the moonbeams peeked around the edge of the bedroom curtains fluttering in the breeze of the open window, trembling fingers ran down the barrel of the antique pistol. Guns made it too easy to end the suffering. The loud noise would never even make it to the victim’s ears before the penetrating lead took his life, ending the decade-long turmoil. There would be no pain, the loss of consciousness would be instantaneous. Images of Johnny lying across his bed, blood running down his face and neck from the single gunshot wound to his temple, became overwhelming. The mental picture of his dark hair matted with his own maroon-colored blood and his fingers growing ghostly white as the life seeped out of him, the dark pool of blood growing on the bedspread, seemed too real. His very existence would quickly fade away until his heart ceased to beat, effectively ending the blood flow; the light in his chocolate brown eyes faded away like the mist along the Alabama River on that early fateful morning. With eyes squeezing shut, the horrific images were forced back into their hiding place. The pistol was carefully tucked away inside the nightstand and the lamplight was extinguished with a click... ‘Not tonight, Johnny, not tonight.’
Johnny pulled his Rover into a vacant parking space in front of Dr. Robertson’s office. Peering through his mirrored aviator sunglasses, he glanced around at the other cars in the parking lot. He didn’t want to admit it, but he knew that he was looking for any familiar vehicles. He did not want to be seen walking into a psychologist’s office. Seeing nothing he recognized, he stepped out of his vehicle and headed up the sidewalk.

He stood in front of the door, running his sweaty palms down the sides of his faded jeans. He had never seen a therapist before, and he wasn’t looking forward to seeing one now. He pocketed his sunglasses, exhaled, then reached for the door handle.

He walked into the reception area, surprised by the décor. He had expected a cold sterile office, but what he saw was a quaint and welcoming waiting area. The medium blue walls were decorated with various paintings, all depicting various scenes of peaceful meadows. Shades of greens, yellows, and violets gave the paintings a sense of serenity. The furniture was covered in plaid cloth using a similar color scheme. Green plants stood tall, protruding from gold pots placed in the empty corners, adding texture to the pale blue sheers that served as curtains, blocking the view of the waiting room from those who were walking along the sidewalk.

Johnny felt an urgency to turn around and walk back out the big wooden door; yet, what he had seen of the office so far had felt non-threatening, a direct contrast to the sense of dread he had been feeling for the last few days.

“May I help you, sir?”

Johnny turned to face the counter, offering his trademark grin to the dark-haired receptionist sitting behind the desk.

“Ah, yea… I have an appointment with Dr. Robertson,” he explained, leaning his elbows along the counter.

The friendly woman smiled back at him, but said nothing. When she lifted her eyebrows, questioningly, Johnny spoke up.

“Oh, Gage… John Gage.”

She looked down at her appointment book, running her manicured frost-colored fingernail down to the 11:00 am slot. “Yes, right here. I see you’re a new patient,” she began, reaching for a clipboard with paperwork attached. “Please complete this while you wait, and then give it to Dr. Robertson when he calls you into his office.”

Johnny accepted the proffered papers, choosing a pen from the round pencil holder on the counter, and then took a seat in the empty waiting area. Leaning back against the soft cushions in the oversized chair, he crossed one ankle over the opposite knee and began completing the demographic information on the papers.
Filling out his name, address, and telephone number were easy, but he began to struggle when he got further down the questionnaire. With the pen poised over the first question, he leaned his head back against the head rest, scanning over the document before he began answering them.

‘List all medications you take on a regular basis.’

‘Are you having any physical symptoms today?’

‘How many hours of sleep do you get each night?’

‘Are you troubled by nightmares?’

‘How often do you experience unexplained pain? Describe the type of pain and what parts of your body are affected. What makes it better? What makes it worse?’

‘How much alcohol do you consume each week?’

‘How often do you take drugs that were not prescribed for you by a physician?’

Johnny’s face contorted in confusion. With the exception of the question about nightmares, none of the others were related to his emotional struggles. He glanced at his watch, realizing that he didn’t have very long to complete the form, and so, he began scribbling down his answers as quickly as possible. “Brackett or Early could treat me for this,” he mumbled to himself.

His eyes reached the last question just as the door to the psychologist’s office opened. He quickly propped his elbow on the arm of the chair, resting his forehead along the heel of his hand. He refused to look up, not wanting to see the person who was exiting Dr. Robertson’s office, hoping that they wouldn’t see him, either. Los Angeles was a very big city, but he still felt embarrassed to be seen in a counselor’s office, even by a stranger.

“Mr. Gage?”

Johnny jerked his head up, seeing a tall friendly looking man with reading glasses perched above his forehead, standing in the open doorway. Johnny felt his stomach summersault as he stood up and made his way to the office. It struck Johnny as odd that the doctor wasn’t wearing a white lab coat. He didn’t look like a doctor, in a casual button-down shirt and striped pants.

“I’m Dr. Robertson,” the other man said, extending his hand.

“John Gage,” Johnny answered, shaking the proffered hand.

“Well, Mr. Gage, please come inside and make yourself comfortable.”

Johnny walked in, nervously snickering when he didn’t see a Victorian-style fainting couch anywhere in the room. “Where am I s’posed to lay down, Doc?” he asked with a grin as he sat down in another oversized chair.

“Would you be more comfortable lying down?”

“Naw, jus’ kiddin’; forget it,” Johnny said, waving the man off with a flick of his wrist; obviously, Dr. Robertson was a serious kind of fellow.

Surprising the anxious paramedic, Dr. Robertson chuckled. “Hollywood likes to have patients lying down, not me.”
“Ah, for the dramatic effect?”

The older man stepped behind his desk to take a seat, nodding his agreement. “Makes the patient appear more vulnerable, weaker. In my opinion, anyone who has the courage to see a therapist has a lot going for them; they definitely are NOT weak, or vulnerable.”

Johnny looked down for a brief moment, then shifted his gaze back up at the psychologist. He could see why Captain Stanley liked him. Maybe this wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

“Mr. Gage, would you care for a cup of water, or perhaps coffee?”

“Um, please jus’ call me John or Johnny,” the dark haired paramedic said with a nervous grin. “And I’m good for now, thanks.”

“Very well, and you may call me Todd, or Robertson, or pretty much anything else you’d like,” the psychologist offered. “Trust me, I’ve heard it all,” he said with a toothy smile, removing his glasses from his forehead and positioning them on the end of his nose. He glanced at the paperwork, briefly, then looked over the rim of his glasses, giving his new patient a quick physical assessment, noting how the young man’s left knee was bouncing as he cracked his knuckles.

“John, I want to go over a couple of things that I share with all of my patients. The first is that everything we discuss will be completely confidential, and nothing will ever be disclosed without written permission from you, unless I believe that you are a danger to yourself, or someone else.”

Johnny raised his shoulders upwards, waving his hands in front of him. “No, no... Not gonna do that, Doc.” He had just met his therapist; there was no way he was going to divulge his deepest secrets to a stranger, especially not a man who could ruin his career by telling Headquarters about his recent dark thoughts.

Dr. Robertson smiled at his patient, undecided about whether he believed him or not at this point. “That’s good to hear. The second thing is that you are in control here, not me. I will help guide you through the process, but you will set the tempo. There may be times when I push you along, and I can’t promise that it will always be comfortable, but we’ll make the journey together. Does that make sense?”

“Um, yea, I... I guess so.” Johnny relaxed into the comfortable chair, settling into the cushions. He felt his heart pounding in his chest and he wasn’t sure why. After all, there were no needles anywhere around the room like there would be if he were at Rampart for a doctor’s visit. This was a completely new experience.

“Now, what brings you into my office today?”

“Well, my... um,” Johnny gulped, feeling a constriction in his throat. “My captain, uh, Captain Hank Stanley with the LA County Fire Department, recommended you. You helped him and his wife through some, uh, difficult times, and he said you could pro’bly help me, too.”

Dr. Robertson quickly scanned the intake form, noting that Johnny had indicated that he was single. “I see... Are you in a relationship that’s having difficulty?”

Johnny’s eyes shot wide open. How could Dr. Robertson possibly know that? Slowly, his eyebrows relaxed a little when he realized why the psychologist had asked the question. “Oh, no... See, Cap and his wife were... I mean, that’s really not for me to say ‘cause you a’ready know ‘em, and all, so... Um...”

“John?” Dr. Robertson interrupted, clasping his hands together on the desk.
“Yea?”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Johnny’s dark eyes darted around the room, unsure of how to answer the question. “What happened when?”

The psychologist peeled off his glasses, folding them and dropping them into his shirt pocket. “Anything that has caused you distress. It might be something that happened in the last day or two, or perhaps it was something that happened when you were very young. Like I said at the beginning, you’re in the driver’s seat, here.”

Johnny snorted nervously, then began to cackle. “That’s kinda funny, Doc. See, my paramedic partner hardly ever lets me drive the squad. It’s a runnin’ joke around the station that, um, you know... I’m never actually in the driver’s seat.”

“Well then,” Dr. Robertson said with a smile, having finally found a way to engage his new patient. “That sounds like a good place to start. Being a fireman and a paramedic puts you on the front lines when people are having some of the worst experiences of their lives. You see a lot of pain and suffering; and no matter how hard you try, you can’t turn off your emotions. I’ll bet you’ve seen and heard things that have haunted you for a long time afterwards, things you can never un-see.” He leaned back in his squeaky chair, rocking slightly. “Am I right?”

Johnny felt like this man had suddenly crawled inside his mind. “Damn, Doc, you’re good.”

Forty-five minutes later, Johnny stepped out of the psychologist’s office, stopping by the receptionist’s desk to schedule his next appointment. The session had gone much easier than he had anticipated, nothing too traumatic had been brought up. He tucked the appointment reminder in his shirt pocket and walked out the door into the noonday sun. He had a lightness in his step as he walked over to his Rover, no longer concerned about who might see him.

Johnny liked Dr. Robertson. The older man had a kind, nonjudgmental demeanor, and he seemed to have quite a bit of insight into the mind of a first responder. It had felt good for Johnny to talk about himself during the visit. He had been given an assignment to complete before his next appointment and so, he headed off to the store to pick up what he would need. Maybe counseling wouldn’t be so bad after all.

E!

Beverly took a seat behind her desk at the Wellhouse. She had never dreamed she would ever trust a man again, certainly not fall in love. But she had... and now she was afraid she had ruined the relationship by forgetting her birth control pills.

Beverly sat lost in her thoughts, watching through the window at the scene unfolding on the picnic table in the backyard. One of the newer residents, who had been rescued from a brothel where she had literally been in chains, was visiting with her family for the first time in two years. A red-haired toddler giggled as she ate her ice cream, the daughter of the rescued woman. She had not seen her baby since the day she had been born, but now she would have a chance to be a part of the little girl’s life, as long as she was able to beat her drug habit.

Beverly’s hand dropped to her lower abdomen. Even though she wanted to be a mother, she had long ago given up on that dream. What kind of a mother would she be? She had never known the
love of a parent. Would she be capable of giving love to a child? Then her thoughts turned to Marco. He was the kind of man who would insist on marriage if she were carrying his child. But would he resent her? Would he think she had trapped him, purposefully deceived him?

She felt the backs of her eyes beginning to sting. She couldn’t think about that now; she had work to do. Maybe she wouldn’t become pregnant after missing just two pills. Maybe she would never have to face Marco to tell him the news that would ruin their relationship. But worry seemed to take up residence on her shoulder, pounding her skull with a hammer. She rubbed her temples, then pulled open the drawer to retrieve some aspirin.

She held the clear bottle of bitter white pills in her hand, turning the half empty bottle around, watching the pills turn, over and over. Should she take them? Would it harm her child, if she were pregnant? She felt her hot tears overflow her red-rimmed lower lids. She slipped the bottle back into the drawer then headed for the kitchen for a glass of water and a paper towel. She couldn’t let the residents know she was upset. She couldn’t let anyone know what might be wrong... not even Marco.

E!

Johnny grabbed the paper bag from the seat, stepped out of his Rover, and headed up the stairs to his apartment. When he walked inside, he put up the lunchmeat, bread, and milk, then withdrew the black and white journal he had purchased. Dr. Robertson had suggested that he go to a place where he would be alone and undisturbed, and begin to write down his thoughts, telling his life story as though he were an observer. He had also been told to exercise, and so, he decided to take a walk to the neighborhood park. He filled up his canteen with cool water, not knowing how long he would be gone. Slipping his keys into his pocket, he walked back out into the afternoon sun, feeling the cool autumn breeze rustling through his hair. He slipped on his sunglasses, then headed down the sidewalk with his canteen and journal in hand.

It was a beautiful day for a walk and the park was a little over a mile from his apartment. He felt better about himself than he had felt in a long time. Maybe by journaling, his nightmares would dissipate. He knew it wouldn’t happen immediately; Dr. Robertson had told him that much, but over time, they should get better. So Johnny set out on his journey to the small park, and what he hoped was the beginning of his internal healing. He had to work on himself before he would be able to work on his relationship with Lily... and with his parents; he knew he couldn’t avoid them forever.

E!

Roy slammed the phone down for the sixth time. “Damn it!”

“Roy,” Joanne chided, nodding her head towards the stairs.

Roy knew he needed to watch his language, now that the children had gotten home from school. “I’m sorry,” he sighed. “I’m just getting worried about him.”

“He’s a grown man, Roy.”

Roy looked over at the love of his life. “You didn’t see him yesterday. You weren’t the one… holding him when he was sobbing, Jo. He was really... thinking about doing it.”

Joanne walked around the kitchen bar, stepping up behind her husband who was perched on one of the bar stools. She began kneading his shoulders, feeling the tension that the last few days had deposited there.
“Honey... When you two left yesterday, I called Iris. Maybe I shouldn’t have done it, but I wanted her to know just how depressed Johnny was, so... I told her that he... he had been having those... thoughts,” she whispered, unable to vocalize the word she was thinking. “Iris agreed to go through his medications and take anything that... Well, that might be dangerous to him.”

“You what?” Roy asked, turning around to face her.

“Don’t be angry, please? I’m just as worried about him as you are. I just thought that... Well, he isn’t injured so he shouldn’t be needing any pain meds and... And I didn’t want him to be... tempted, you know?”

Roy exhaled loudly, wrapping his arms around her waist and laying his head on her chest. He loved the feeling of her small fingers carding through his thinning hair.

“I’m not mad, baby. I’m actually glad you did it. I just wasn’t expecting you to share what I told you, that’s all.”

Joanne kissed the top of his head. “Iris has his pills and you have his gun. Maybe we’ve made it a little less convenient... Just in case.”

The mention of Johnny’s gun brought back the memory of the day before. When he had placed the gun case in his tool box, he had heard an odd clunking sound. “I better go check on the pistol. I think it shifted out of the foam holder when I set it down yesterday.”

Roy stood up, kissing Joanne on her ruby lips. “Keep the kids inside, alright? I don’t want them to know it’s out there, especially not Chris. He’s a curious boy and I don’t want to tempt him in any way.”

“I will.”

Roy walked out the kitchen door into the garage, closing the door behind him, just in case the children came down the stairs. At least that would give Joanne a couple of seconds to intercept them before they walked into the garage.

Joanne set about removing the chicken from the refrigerator to prepare for their dinner, when suddenly she heard the crashing sound of the kitchen door slamming into the wall. Spinning around, she saw Roy rushing through the doorway, his face pale and his blue eyes wide.

“I’ve got to go over there, Jo. He... he kept the pistol.”

“What?”

“The gun case... the gun’s not in it... and he isn’t answering the phone...” He stared at her in disbelief, not wanting to believe that his friend had lied to him. Then again, if Johnny was intent on killing himself, there was no reason to tell the truth.

Joanne grabbed onto the kitchen counter with one hand, covering her mouth with the other. Her face lost all its color and her green eyes welled up with tears. “Ohmygod, Roy... He wouldn’t... would he?”

“I don’t know,” he said in a raspy voice. “But I’m gonna find out.”

“Should I call a squad?” Joanne called after her quickly departing husband.

“No!”
Roy charged out of the garage, jumping into his Porsche without even opening the door and quickly darted down the street with his emergency flashers on.

E!

Johnny finished writing in his journal, detailing his boyhood trip from Montana to Alabama during the civil rights movement. The sun was beginning to set and the breeze brought a hint of a chill with it. He stretched out his fingers, gathered up his canteen, pocketed his pen, and began the long walk back to his apartment.

He was surprised that the task of journaling the most horrific details of his life had been easier than he had anticipated. While he could still smell the dank musty scent of the river, it was as if the events had occurred to someone else. Somehow, by transferring his thoughts from his memory to the blank pages of his journal, they lost a bit of their razor-sharp edge, no longer feeling as if they had the power to slice through his jugular at any minute.

Roy eased to a slow rolling stop at the intersection near Johnny’s apartment. Jerking his head quickly from side to side, ensuring that the lanes were clear, he down-shifted before accelerating rapidly, tires screeching, in the direction of his destination.

Johnny had made it about halfway to his destination when he heard the unmistakable sound of rubber sliding on the asphalt ahead. Cringing in anticipation of crashing metal and shattering glass, he looked up just in time to see a familiar gold sports car and his partner’s auburn hair wiping wildly in the breeze as the car was revved up.

“Roy?” he questioned to himself, his chin hanging open slightly. As the car made the turn, Johnny could see that the emergency flashers were on. “ROY!” he screamed, even though he knew that his partner was too far away to hear him.

Johnny sprinted down the sidewalk, weaving and bobbing his way around a couple of joggers and an elderly gentleman who was walking his dog. The only reason Roy would be driving down this street was if he was heading to Johnny’s apartment. And if his emergency flashers were on, then something was very, very wrong.

Johnny sucked in his air through his nose, blowing it out through his mouth, just like his track coach had taught him years ago. It had been a long time since he had competed in a distance run, but if Roy was urgently looking for him, then he had to clock his best time ever.

His arms pumped, his cheeks puffed out, and his sweat-soaked brow was exposed as the wind blew his dark hair back across the top of his head. He felt his lungs burning and his side began to ache, but images of Joanne or one of the DeSoto children being sick or injured spurred him on. The pounding of his feet on the sidewalk set a steady pace for his breathing, and Johnny kept one destination in mind – his apartment.

Roy felt his heart skip a beat when he turned into Johnny’s apartment complex, seeing the Rover in its usual parking spot. Johnny was home, so there was only one reason Roy could think of that would keep him from answering his phone for the last few hours. “Please don’t, Junior. Please don’t do this to me.”

He jumped out of his car, sprinting up the stairs with his keys in his hand; he was more grateful than ever that he hadn’t given Johnny his key back the day before. His hands were shaking as he struggled to get the key into the key hole. He heard the locking mechanism disengage and used his
right shoulder to push open the door just as he turned the knob.

The door crashed into the wall, jarring the windows before swinging back closed as Roy scrambled through Johnny’s apartment, terrified of finding his lifeless body. “Johnny? Johnny, answer me!” he called out, his voice cracking with the strain.

Roy searched Johnny’s bedroom and bathroom, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. He rushed back towards the kitchen, pulling open the hall closet door along the way. Still finding no signs of his partner, he ran out onto Johnny’s balcony, but found it empty as well. Forcing the bile back down into his stomach, he peered over the ledge, but found the ground below merely covered with grass. “Where are... you?” he whimpered, running his hands through his windblown hair.

Roy stepped back inside the apartment and picked up the telephone. He quickly dialed his home number and wasn’t surprised when Joanne answered after only a half ring.

“Hello?”

“He’s not here, Jo. His Rover’s here, bu-but he isn’t. Oh God, where.... Wh-where would he have gone?”

Joanne began to cry, unable to control her emotions. It seemed as though her biggest fear was coming true. “I don’t know... I don’t know,” she repeated, wrapping her free arm around her abdomen as her tears poured.

“I-I’ve got to check the... ammunition. I’ll... I’ll call you back... in a minute,” Roy stammered, his breathing coming in short gasps as he hung up the phone on the kitchen wall.

Johnny rounded the corner of his apartment complex, still maintaining top speed. Something was wrong, and he wouldn’t slow down until he found out what was going on. He saw the Porsche parked beside his Rover, and his already rapidly beating heart shifted into an even higher gear. He took the stairs two at a time, then burst through his own doorway.

Seeing no sign of his partner, Johnny tossed his canteen and journal in the general direction of his coffee table, continuing his sprint down the hallway. His apartment was small so there was only one other place Roy could be. His breathing was coming in gasps, preventing him from calling out Roy’s name.

In Johnny’s bedroom, Roy was digging through Johnny’s closet in search of the sealed box of ammunition. Johnny had told him it was there, but now he couldn’t find it. That could only mean one thing. Johnny had taken it with him.

“Shit! Oh, shit!” Roy cursed in a high pitched frantic voice. He slammed the closet door shut, taking a step backwards as he spun around just as Johnny came barreling through the bedroom door.

“Umph!” Roy bellowed as Johnny ran right into him, knocking him in a backwards summersault across the bed and onto the floor.

Johnny, thrown back against the wall by the momentum of his collision with his partner, saw the pained expression on Roy’s face as he fell onto the floor. Johnny pushed himself off the wall, jumping across the bed and onto the floor near his red-faced partner who had obviously had the breath knocked out of him. Shifting onto one knee as though he were tending to a patient, Johnny grabbed Roy’s shirt collar with both hands, staring into the frightened blue eyes he knew so well.
Neither man could speak. Johnny was breathless from his half mile long sprint and Roy, who had landed awkwardly on his upper back and neck, couldn’t inhale enough air to say a word.

“Ugh, R-Rah-Roy? Wh-wha’s... wrong? What... ha-hap’ned?” Johnny gasped.

Roy’s face was reddening from his lack of oxygen and he felt his eyes bulging. As the tiny bright lights dissipated from his field of vision and he was finally able to regain his breath, he grabbed Johnny’s biceps, shaking him as hard as he could. “Pl-please... don’t... do it?” he wept, looking directly into Johnny’s worried brown eyes.

“Huh?”

“We’ll get... through it, Jo-Johnny. Please don-don’t do it... please. PLEASE?” he screamed at the younger man, trying desperately to get through to him.

“Roy... ROY!” Johnny said, his breathing beginning to slow down, but his heart rate still far too rapid from the adrenaline rush. “What are ya talkin’ about?”

“Please, Junior... I-I love ya like a... brother... please, don’t...” Roy’s voice faded as he recognized the confused look on Johnny’s face. “You’re... alright?”

“Yea, but what the hell’s goin’ on? What’s wrong? Jo? The kids? One o’ the guys?”

Roy’s eyebrows drew goin’ on? What’s wrong? Jo? The kids? One o’ the guys?”

Roy’s eyebrows drew together in confusion as his blue eyes darted back and forth, searching Johnny’s eyes for an answer, but getting nothing. Johnny really didn’t know why Roy had come rushing over.

“Roy, talk to me,” he called out, still clutching Roy’s shirt as he kneeled over the supine man.

“You... didn’t answer... the phone, and... the gun, I... I thought,” he stuttered, feeling his eyes beginning to sting as he realized that his friend was uninjured.

“I’ve been down at the park, Roy. I was on my way back when I saw you turning onto my street with your flashers on. I knew somethin’ was wrong so... I ran as fast as I could to get here. What’s... Tell me what’s goin’ on... please?”

“Where’s your pistol?”

“What? I gave it to you yesterday, man,” Johnny responded, perplexed. He released Roy’s shirt, settling back onto his aching haunches, reaching down to assist Roy into a sitting position.

“No, you didn’t!”

“Have you lost your mind, Roy? I handed it over to you yesterday. It was in your hand when you left here.”

“Empty,” Roy panted, crawling upwards to take a seat on the edge of Johnny’s bed. The room was still spinning and his heart was pounding in his chest. His legs felt weak and sweat began to run down the sides of his temples, his red hair standing up along the crown of his head, reminiscent of Albert Einstein’s famous look.

“What’s empty?” Johnny asked, joining his partner on the side of the bed.
Roy looked up, using his forearm to wipe the sweat from his brow. “C-case... the case didn’t have a gun... in it, Johnny. It had... It had some rolls of... pennies wrapped up in... paper... towels.”

“What?”

“It was... jus’ ‘nough weight... to make it... feel right,” Roy explained, still struggling to regain control of his rapid respiration and heart rates.

Johnny stood up, running both hands through his sweaty hair. “How? I... I haven’t even opened up the case in... in a long time.”

“I tried to… find your ammunition, ’cause I thought... I was afraid you...” Roy leaned his elbows onto his knees, hanging his head as the full force of what he thought had happened slammed into him. His shoulders began to shake, and his audible sobs broke Johnny’s heart.

“Hey, pally, I’m here... I know what you thought, but... I’m here and I’m not... I’m not gonna do it, Roy. I swear, I’m not gonna do it.” He sat down beside Roy, placing a supportive arm across the weeping man’s shoulder.

“I was... Oh God, I was so scared, Johnny. I was afraid I’d find you... I can’t even... s-say it.”

“Dead?”

Roy nodded, sniffling as he used the heels of his hands to dry his eyes. “You... You scared the... the shit out of me!”

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry to have worried you, but... I don’t know what happened? I mean, somebody must o’ stole it, but when? Nobody’s broken in here... nothing else is missin’,” he said, pulling open his nightstand drawer where he often kept loose change and his prized turquoise belt buckles. Seeing that they were still present, he was about to close the drawer when he noticed his rolls of pennies were gone... and something else was missing. “Shit!”

“What?” Roy asked, sitting up straight again, still breathing hard.

“Some asshole addict must o’ broke in while I was at Tehachapi. My... My change an’... pain meds are missin’ and my pistol.” He stood up, pacing in his bedroom then rummaging through his closet in search of the box of bullets. He found them inside the old shoebox where he had hidden them, sighing with a sense of relief. He couldn’t handle it if his gun had been used to harm someone, even if it wasn’t his fault. “Goddamnit!”

“Gone?”

“Naw... bullets are still there, but...” He walked over to the phone on the other side of his bed and picked it up.

Roy suddenly remembered what Joanne had told him earlier. Was it possible that Iris had taken the pistol before Johnny had gotten home yesterday? Johnny was about to dial the police station when Roy reached over and slapped the cradle, ending the call.

“What are ya doin’? I’ve got to report this.”

“Wait... I think I might know... who took them.”

Johnny returned the handset to the cradle. “Who?” he asked, feeling his anger beginning to boil over even more. Roy knew something he wasn’t telling him.
“Iris.”

“Iris? She never even knew I had it! And what about the drugs, huh? Iris isn’t some junkie who’d steal my pain meds!”

“Gimme just a minute to... to call Joanne back. It’s a long story, but... I’ll bet you dollars to donuts that Iris has... everything.”

“Why?”

Roy hung his head in embarrassment. His partner was not going to like what he was about to tell him. “Johnny... Joanne knows, alright?”

Johnny quirked an eyebrow at his friend. “Knows what?”

“About what we were talking about yesterday. She overheard some of it and... I told her the rest.”

“What?!” Johnny leaned his head back with a maniacal laugh. “Great! That’s jus’ great, Roy.” He pointed an angry finger at Roy, feeling his disdain mushrooming inside him. “I trusted you, man. I... I told you that in confidence! How... How could you... betray me like this?”

“I’m sorry, alright?”

“No!” Johnny spat out, his dark eyes shooting burning daggers at Roy. “No, it is NOT a’right!”

“I didn’t know she would tell Iris, I swear I didn’t.”

Johnny pressed both palms flat on the top of his dresser, leaning over as he worked to calm himself. He felt the tickle of the sweat rolling down along the side of his face and he rubbed it against his shirt sleeve as he pondered his predicament.

“I really... really wish you hadn’t o’ done that, Roy. I’m... ashamed enough about all this shit goin’ on in my head and now you blab it across the entire fuckin’ county!”

Roy stood up, staying at least an arm’s length away from Johnny. He didn’t know if his partner might take a swing at him, or not. “I’m sorry... I don’t know what else I can say except that... I’m sorry. Johnny, Joanne loves you, and so does Iris... They’re just as worried about you... as I am.”

“Humph!” Johnny scoffed, looking away from the source of his ire. “You know I could lose my fuckin’ job over this!” he shouted, his voice laced with venom.

“Okay, fine... Hold it against me. I can’t change it now... But... if we didn’t care so damn much about you, then we... we wouldn’t have gone through so much trouble to keep you... alive,” he said, his voice fading as he turned to walk over to the nightstand to pick up the phone. Until he talked to Joanne, he couldn’t be sure that his suspicions were correct.

Johnny stood fuming at his bedroom window, watching as the rich hues of the autumn sunset relinquished their grip on the evening sky, his emotions toggling between anger and hurt.

Roy spent the next few minutes talking to Joanne in an effort to reassure her that Johnny was okay. Afterwards, while Joanne made the call to Iris, Roy and Johnny settled onto his bed, both men trying to regain their composure from the last few minutes.
Breaking the silence, Johnny looked over at Roy who was still trembling with his elbows leaning on his knees once more. “Roy?”

Roy turned his head slightly, just enough to see Johnny. The older man didn’t respond audibly, wasn’t sure he could. His pulse rate was still faster than normal, but it was finally beginning to slow down a little.

Johnny hated that Iris and Joanne knew about his depression, but he couldn’t stay mad at Roy about it. It wasn’t fair to his partner to dump that kind of emotional burden on him and expect him not to share the load with the woman he loved. And Joanne had only been acting on Johnny’s behalf when she had contacted Iris.

“I’m... uh, I’m really... touched... that you cared enough to, um, to come rushin’ over here when you thought... you know.”

“I’ve never felt so... so helpless, Johnny,” Roy said in a husky voice. “I couldn’t get here fast enough.”

Johnny looked away, staring back out of his window for a moment. His gaze remained locked on nothing in particular a little longer, unable to look at Roy to make his next statement. “Please don’t ever do that again, not even for me, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you, Pally,” he said, reaching over and clamping his hand on Roy’s neck, giving the other man a brotherly squeeze. “I couldn’t live with myself if you got hurt, or killed, trying to get to me. Joanne and the kids need ya,” he snorted, “hell the whole county needs ya way too much.”

Roy shook his head slowly from side to side. Johnny was asking him to make a promise he couldn’t keep, especially in Johnny’s current state of mind.

“Please, Roy... I promise you that I will never intentionally harm myself, okay? I swear I will not kill myself. Now will you promise me you won’t do this again?”

Roy squinted at his partner who was silhouetted in an eerie halo from the light of the setting sun glowing behind him. Roy licked his dry lips, finally nodding his agreement. “Yea... Yea, I promise.”

The ringing telephone broke up the emotional moment. Johnny reached down, picking it up.

“Hello?”

“Um, Johnny?”

“Yea, hey, Jo. Does Iris have it?” he asked, crossing his free arm over his chest.

Roy could hear Joanne’s voice on the other end of the phone and then saw his partner’s countenance relax. “Good... No, no, I’ll, uh, I’ll talk to Roy. Maybe he can go get it. I think everyone will sleep better if it isn’t here... at least for now.”

Roy looked up at Johnny, nodding his agreement to pick up the weapon from Iris, feeling a huge sense of relief that what he thought would be a disaster turned out to be just a minor inconvenience.
“Thanks, Joanne... Here’s Roy,” Johnny said handing the phone to his partner.

Johnny exited the bedroom, wanting to give the DeSotos a few minutes of privacy. He walked into the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of tap water and downing it quickly. He refilled the glass and was finishing it up when Roy walked back into the kitchen. Johnny lowered the glass, using his shirt collar to remove the water droplets from his upper lip.

“She okay now?”

“Yea,” Roy mumbled, still feeling weak in the knees.

“Are you?”

Roy looked up at his partner, grateful to see him standing in his own kitchen rather than lying in a pool of blood on the floor of his bedroom. “Yea... Yea, I am now. Mind if I get a glass of water, too?” Roy asked, a slight grin forming on his round face. “My mouth feels like I stuffed it with a roll of Kerlix.”

“Help yourself,” Johnny replied, stepping aside to allow his partner access to the kitchen sink.

Johnny knew that Roy wanted to ask questions about his session with Dr. Robertson, but he also knew his friend respected his privacy enough not to ask. Johnny leaned against the counter watching Roy guzzle the cooling liquid.

“I think I’m gonna like Dr. Robertson,” he said, using the comment as an opening for Roy to ask him questions, if he so desired.

“Good. Cap spoke highly of him when he and Rebecca were seeing him.”

“Yea, he’s... Well, it jus’ wasn’t what I was expectin’, ya know? He didn’t ask a lot of deep probing questions; said I was in control of each session so we’d discuss whatever I wanted to discuss.” Johnny opened the refrigerator, removing the pitcher of sweet tea that Iris had left there the day before. He held it up as an offering to Roy, seeing the other man grin and reach out with his glass. He poured them both a glass full and then headed for the living room, thankful when Roy followed.

Roy sat down on the sofa, stretching his legs out in front of him, leaning his head against the back with a sigh.

“He asked me to start journaling,” Johnny said, picking up the black and white journal he had tossed at his coffee table as he ran inside his apartment earlier. “I was at the park, enjoying a relaxing afternoon and doin’ my, uh, homework,” he said with a lopsided grin. “That’s why I wasn’t here to answer the phone.”

“I’m sorry I panicked, Johnny. You promised me you wouldn’t do it without talking to me first, and... I guess, I... Damn,” he said, scrubbing his face with his free hand. “When I opened up the case, and it was stuffed with rolls of pennies... Then I couldn’t get you on the phone...”

“It’s okay, Roy... I’d’ve done the same thing. No harm... no foul.”

“I’m glad your appointment went well. I was afraid you might... you know... cancel.”

Johnny snickered, sipping his tea before he answered. “Almost did, but I made promises to some very important people... and I keep my promises.”
“I’m sure glad you do, Junior, I’m sure glad you do.”

E!

Glowing embers, the remnants of the setting sun, colored only the distant horizon by the time Roy pulled up to Iris’ house. The plump florist met him at the door, holding the antique pistol wrapped in a blue towel in her shaky hands.

“When I looked in his closet, just to make sure that there weren’t any more bottles of leftover narcotics, I saw it and… all I could think about was… Johnny lying in a pool of blood, with his dark hair sticking to what was left of his skull,” she paused, running her fingers beneath her eyes to remove the moisture that had slipped from them. “I just couldn’t leave it there. I couldn’t take a chance.” She turned her green eyes up to Roy’s concerned face. “I’m sorry that I caused so much trouble.”

Roy smiled softly. He understood exactly how Iris felt. “I would’ve done the same thing if I had been in your shoes. You didn’t know he was going to give it to me for, er, safekeeping. We did it because we all care about him.”

“That we do,” she said, wistfully, leaning against the door frame.

“How’s Lily doing?”

Iris cut her eyes over her shoulder, seeing that her daughter’s bedroom door was still closed. “She’s doing okay. I think she’s going to need some… help, you know? And she’s missing Johnny… We both are.”

Roy slowly nodded his head in understanding. “Johnny saw a therapist today. He seemed to really like the guy. Maybe Lily should see him, too.”

“I’ll think about it, Roy. I don’t know if she’d even consider it, even if she needs it. She is one headstrong girl,” Iris chuckled. “I love her so much. I can never repay you men for doing what you did to get her out.”

“She’s a very impressive young lady, strong like her mother,” he said. He had grown fond of Iris, in spite of their rocky start. “And for what it’s worth, Johnny really misses her, too.”

“I think they would be good for each other, Roy, but how do I get him to see that?”

“Give him time, Iris,” Roy said, taking a step back. He needed to get home to Joanne; he knew she was probably frantic with worry about what had happened between him and Johnny. “He’ll come around.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Roy snickered as he slipped the weapon into his pocket, handing the towel back to her. He didn’t want the neighbors to see him standing at Iris’ door brandishing a gun. “Then we’ll give him a little shove in the right direction.”

Iris giggled, feeling a sense of emotional relief at Roy’s joking manner. “Thank you for being such a good friend to my, um, nephew. It means a lot to know he has you looking out for him.”

“He does the same for me. We’re a team, Iris. We’ll always be a team.”
Roy waved his hand as he turned to walk back to his car. The evening air was cool, whipping through his hair as he drove home with the top down on his Porsche. He needed the time alone to settle his nerves… and plan his next steps for how to help his partner find his way back home.

E!
Chapter 29

On Friday morning, Johnny strode through the automatic glass doors at Rampart’s Emergency Department, walking down the familiar corridor to the nurses’ station.

“Mornin’, mornin’, mornin’,” he said with a smile, hoping he appeared more chipper than he actually felt.

“Well, hey there, Tiger. Here to see Kel?” the head nurse asked in her sultry smoky voice, already knowing the answer. She had enjoyed a quick breakfast with the handsome head of the emergency department, a frequent casual date that always left them both hungry for a little something extra that was never on the menu. Although they had given up on their relationship, each having chosen a career over a life partner, they still enjoyed each other’s company on occasion. On this particular morning, Kel had filled her in on the plans for Johnny’s return.

Johnny had to work hard to give her his best heart-melting smile. “Yes ma’am. I’m ready to get back to work. I hear Roy’s been breakin’ in a new trainee, so I’m sure he’s ready to get his old partner back.”

“I’m sure he is,” came the deep baritone voice of Dr. Kelly Brackett walking up behind Johnny.

The younger man spun around, extending his hand to his physician. “Hey, Doc. Good to see ya.”

“Same here, Johnny.” The physician, after shaking Johnny’s proffered hand, turned to his side and gestured with his hand in the direction of treatment room 3. “Right this way.”

“I’ll get his chart, Kel,” Dixie said, sliding off the stool where she was perched behind the counter.

Johnny followed the dark-haired physician into the exam room and began removing his shirt. He had needed medical clearance before so he knew the routine. He had already weighed himself at home and felt confident that he would meet the weight requirements to return to duty, but he also knew that his slim physique wasn’t the only issue that needed addressing during this visit.

“Doc, did you get a copy of my hospital records from Tehachapi?” he asked, stepping up on the scales.

Dr. Brackett slid the poise over to the appropriate notch on the weigh beam, passing the minimum weight by three pounds. He offered a quick smile of approval to his patient.

“Yes, I did. You, uh, you had a really close call, Johnny,” the physician said, looking over at Dixie as she walked into the room passing him the manila folder. “Thanks, Dix,” Dr. Brackett mumbled, opening up the chart.

“I passed the weight test, Dix,” Johnny piped up.

“Good, I’m ready to see my favorite paramedic team reunited on shift again,” she said with a wink, turning and walking back out the door. Dr. Brackett had wanted a few minutes of privacy with Johnny, and she respected his wishes.

The physician took a set of vitals, then followed it up with a check of Johnny’s eyes, ears, nose, and throat. “Any side effects from the poisoning?”
“No, sir. Dr. Buchanan said I was lucky, ‘cause it was almost a fatal dose. Roy and Dr. Buck... they saved my life,” he said looking down at his legs dangling over the edge of the exam table.

“Do you feel ready to go back to work? It’s a stressful job.”

Johnny knew that Dr. Brackett wasn’t talking about the physical stress of being a fireman and paramedic. “Don’t I know it, Doc, but, yea... I’ve never been more ready in my life.” Johnny hesitated for a moment, wondering if his doctor would ask him the difficult questions. He looked up, seeing the older man standing with one arm over his chest. The other elbow was resting on it and he was rubbing his chin with his fingers. His lips were twitching, a sure sign that he had something very serious on his mind.

“If you wanna know somethin’, jus’ ask me, Doc. I know you want to,” the paramedic spoke softly, fully prepared to lie to his medical director if he asked questions which, if answered honestly, might jeopardize Johnny’s career.

“You know me well,” Kel replied, stepping up to the exam table and leaning against it with one hand.

“Well, you’ve seen me naked more times than I can count so, I think YOU know ME pretty well,” the nervous paramedic snickered.

Dr. Brackett relaxed a bit, grateful to see Johnny’s joking manner returning, although he couldn’t help but wonder how John’s time with the Unity Family might have affected him. He looked at his patient with concerned blue eyes.

“How are you, Johnny? Mentally, I mean. You had a rough time in the mountains... Are you sure you’re ready to go back on shift? I can let you stay off a little longer, if you think you need it.”

Johnny reached for his shirt, slipping one arm through the sleeve, then searching for the other while he looked directly into his physician’s eyes. “I’m good, Doc. I’m, uh, seein’ a therapist. I’m not exactly proud o’ that, but... Well, I’ve been through some tough stuff in my life. He’s gonna help me sort it all out.”

“You may not be proud of it, but I’m sure as hell proud of you. It isn’t easy for us as men to admit that we need counseling, but we do... We ALL do,” he said, patting his patient on his shoulder. “I had to have some myself, once. Who are you seeing?” the physician asked, casually turning his attention to Johnny’s chart.

“You?” Johnny asked, his chin hanging open slightly, wondering what could have happened to a man like Brackett to send him to a psychologist. “Oh, um, Dr. Todd Robertson. Cap recommended him.”

“I know him,” Brackett offered with a knowing wink. “He’s a great guy... And yes, me,” the dark-haired physician said with a light-hearted knowing grin. “Who do you think recommended him to Hank?”

“Huh,” Johnny said, shaking his head as he stared down into his lap with a lop-sided grin on his face. When he looked back up, his chocolate eyes held a new sense of trust, seeing his friend and personal physician in a new light.

“Johnny, I’ll dictate the medical release letter this afternoon and drop it off in the mail on my way home. That way it’ll be delivered to the station tomorrow so Hank will have it on Sunday, or, if you’d prefer, you can come back by here late this afternoon and pick it up yourself.
Johnny considered his options. “Well, if you don’t mind… Um, would you mail it yourself? That way it’s comin’ straight from you.”

Dr. Brackett tilted his head slightly. Something odd was going on with his young medic, but he had no idea what. He turned his attention to his charting.

“Say, Doc?”

“Yea, Johnny?” the physician asked, looking up from Johnny’s open chart.

“Would you mind giving me a... a drug test?”

Dr. Brackett clicked his pen, slipping it back into his shirt pocket. His forehead wrinkled questioningly as his azure eyes looked up at his patient. “No, I don’t mind, but I’d like to know why you think I need to,” he said, his expression growing more serious as he crossed his arms over his chest. Johnny’s request had confirmed his earlier suspicions that something was definitely wrong.

“Well, I had a visit from Cap and Chief McConnike the other day. Chief seemed a little concerned about, ahem... About my poisoning.”

Dr. Brackett studied his patient for a long moment. “Did he suggest that you have a drug problem?”

“Not in so many words, but... Doc, I’ve been suspected o’ bein’ a lot o’ things and,” he snickered, “most of ‘em are true, but... I ain’t never been a drug addict. Besides, I’ve brought too many dead kids in here, watched their grievin’ loved ones...,” he shook his head. “No, not me. I don’t even get drunk that often. No sir, I’m not an addict of any kind.”

“And I don’t appreciate the chief suggesting that you might be. If you had a problem with drugs, I’d know about it, Johnny,” Dr. Brackett said, pointing a finger at his own chest. “And I wouldn’t allow you to work out of this, or any other hospital.”

“I know that, Doc. I jus’... I feel like I need to prove it to ‘im... Please?”

Dr. Brackett straightened up to his full height, then walked over to a drawer to remove the necessary supplies. He had a feeling that Johnny had spent many years trying to prove himself in ways not required of others.

“Johnny, I know this must really be important to you. I’ll do it, but I’m noting in your chart that this is per YOUR request, not mine, understood?”

Johnny allowed his lopsided grin to spread across his face. “Yea, thanks, Doc. I really appreciate it,” he said, accepting the small specimen container.

“I’ll wait for you and take it to the lab myself,” Dr. Brackett offered. “I’ll be at the nurses’ station. Maybe you’d like to grab a cup of coffee?”

“Sounds good,” Johnny said, tapping his fingers on the lid of the container as he stepped backwards towards the tiny restroom. “I haven’t seen the staff breakroom in a while,” he snickered, his familiar grin adorning his face.

“We’ve missed you around here, Johnny,” Kel said, quickly exiting the room.

Kelly Brackett wasn’t the kind of man to show his true feelings very often. Johnny – and all the other men who worked out of Station 51 – were more than just his friends and, on occasion, his patients; they were as close as his own family. He had taken care of them when their lives were hanging in the
balance. He thought back to the time when he had counseled Roy after the senior medic had lost a patient in route to Rampart, unable to communicate with the base station because the ambulance had lost its external antenna. Kel had used the same analogy with Roy as had been used with him when he, too, had lost a patient and was questioning whether he should leave his chosen profession. Although his confidence in his own abilities was sometimes misconstrued as arrogance, he simply felt as though he were the most qualified physician to handle most cases that came into the emergency department for treatment, including injured firemen. Because of that, he had grown accustomed to taking the proverbial ball and running with it. But when Johnny needed him in Tehachapi, the young medic was out of Dr. Brackett’s purview. Another physician, no doubt just as skilled and knowledgeable, had saved the young paramedic’s life. The reality of Johnny’s near-death experience slammed into Dr. Brackett with enough force to cause him to lose his breath. He had to leave the room in a rush in order to regain control of himself.

Johnny stood staring at the treatment room door as it swung closed. He exhaled, his shoulders slumping over. Even though his physician had told him that he didn’t believe Johnny had a drug problem, the paramedic still felt like he needed to prove it, and not just to the department brass. He wanted the medical staff at Rampart to know, too. He knew how quickly rumors spread throughout the hospital; he didn’t want to be the subject of any of those rumors.

He stepped into the tiny restroom, cup in hand, to give the lab a sample to test. The bleachy clean scent brought back images of Lily cleaning his bathroom, a few strands of disheveled hair hanging down in her face. He grinned as he thought about how she had huffed out her breath, making the stray hair blow out of her eyes. Now that he was going to be returning to work Sunday, perhaps his life was about to return to some semblance of normal. Was it possible that Lily would soon be a part of his life again?

E!

Marco drove up to the grocery store for his weekly shopping trip. He considered himself to be a decent cook, although the guys seemed to appreciate his cooking more than he did. He had planned to prepare dinner for Beverly tonight, a romantic candlelight affair. The two of them had decided to have a relaxing meal at home and watch an old movie. He could almost feel her warm body snuggling up to him on his sofa.

As he sat in his car, his eyes wandered from the market to the store beside it. Mavis Jewelry was an old family-owned store, the same store where his parents had purchased their wedding rings. He looked down at his watch, realizing that he had plenty of time, so he stepped out of his car and headed towards the jewelry store. He wasn’t ready to ask the question just yet, but this was as close as he had ever come to finding someone with whom he thought he could spend the rest of his life. He was happy with Beverly, missed her terribly when they weren’t together. Was that what it meant to truly be in love?

He pushed through the door, hearing the jingling of the bell to alert the owner that he had a potential customer.

“Good afternoon, sir; may I help you?”

“Yes, I’d like to, um, to see your engagement rings, please?” Marco asked, feeling butterflies in his stomach, wondering how much a nice ring would cost.

“Ah, yes, congratulations,” the gray-haired man said, searching his large keyring for the right key to open the display cabinet.

“Well, I don’t know that congratulations are in order, just yet,” the lineman chuckled. “I’m only
“Well, if you see something you like, let me know. I’ll beat anybody’s prices around here,” Mr. Mavis said, confidently.

Marco scanned the rows of diamond rings, amazed at how they sparkled. He tried to imagine one of them on Beverly’s hand.

“Do you have a price range, or a particular shape or size in mind?”

Marco shook his head, still scanning the stock. “This is the first time I’ve really thought about it, sir.”

Mr. Mavis leaned his short chubby arms on the display cabinet, careful not to cast a shadow across the rings. He liked Marco’s polite demeanor. “There are no coincidences, young man,” he said sincerely.

“What are the prices,” Marco asked, hating that he had to even consider that, but he had always tried to be responsible with his money, and his career choice meant that he would never be a wealthy man. “I’m a fireman, so I don’t have a whole lot of money to spend.”

Mr. Mavis eyed him curiously. “Thank you for your service. I give all the local police officers and firemen a 15% discount. Plus,” he said, raising one stubby finger in the air for dramatic effect, “October is our fortieth anniversary for this business. We’re going to have a big sale starting in just a couple of weeks. If you add the firemen’s discount to the sale price, you can get a really nice ring at a very affordable price.”

Marco’s dark eyes looked up, appreciating what he was hearing. “Really?”

Mr. Mavis felt a kindred spirit with the young man, even though he had never met him until a couple of minutes ago. “I’ll even do something more, as long as you don’t tell anybody else,” he said, leaning closer and lowering his voice even though Marco was the only potential customer at the moment. “If you see something you really like, I’ll put it back for you until the sale.”

The lineman’s pearly white teeth shown from beneath his jet black bushy mustache. His eyes roamed the rows of rings, but kept returning back to one oval solitaire. “May I look at this one?”

“Absolutely,” Mr. Mavis said, removing the ring. “She’s a beauty.”

Marco glanced at the price tag and felt his stomach drop. “Yes, she is.”

“Should I put it in the safe for you until the sale?”

Marco shoved his hands into his pockets, more to dry off his sweaty palms than anything else. “Um… Not yet, but maybe soon,” he said with a sparkle in his eyes. “Thank you so much, and, um, how much of a discount will the sale be?”

“If you come back in just a couple of weeks, this one will be 40% off,” Mr. Mavis said, holding the ring between his thumb and index finger so that it caught the overhead lights and sparkled at Marco.

Marco did a quick mental calculation. With the discounts making a deep impact on the price, this ring should be within his price range. He accepted it from the jeweler, noting how much it glittered and glistened as he turned it in between his fingers. He held it at arm’s length, imagining how it would look on Beverly’s hand.

“So, what’s the lucky lady’s name?”
“Beverly,” Marco replied without looking up. He tried to imagine the look on Beverly’s face as he slipped it on her finger. He didn’t let the thought linger long; her acceptance of his proposal wasn’t a guarantee.

“Thank you, Mr. Mavis.” Marco handed it back to the older man, then turned to exit the store. “Well, I may see you in a couple of weeks,” he tossed over his shoulder. “Have a nice afternoon, sir.” Marco pushed through the door, hearing Mr. Mavis’ similar departing comment amid the jingle that echoed as the fireman left.

Mr. Mavis watched the dark-haired man walk out the door, turning to the left in the direction of the grocery store. He stood for a moment, looking down at the ring he held in his hand. Instead of returning it to the display case, he pulled open a drawer and removed a tiny brown envelope. He clicked a pen, writing two words on the top line of the envelope – Fireman’s Beverly – and then slipped the ring inside before placing it inside his locked safe. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the young fireman was in love and was ready to propose. “You’ll be back, Mr. Fireman… And this little jewel will be waiting for you.”

E!

Johnny sat in his recliner, staring at the telephone on the wall in his kitchen. Should he call her? He wanted to hear her voice, but he didn’t want to interrupt her time with her mother. As his internal debate continued, he reached over to his coffee table and picked up his journal. Dr. Robertson had encouraged him to write as often as possible; now seemed like a very good time to write down his feelings.

After half an hour of silently pouring out his heart, he closed it up and headed over to the telephone. His hand lay on the receiver for several long moments as he considered what he should do. He closed his eyes, lifting the receiver and cradled it in the crook of his neck, like he did so often with the biophone. He quickly dialed the prefix, then hesitated before completing a different, even more familiar number. When he heard the ringing on the other end of the line, he leaned his back against the wall.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Roy, I jus’ wanted to let you know that I’ll be back on shift with you on Sunday.”

“That’s great, Johnny. I’m glad to have you back.”

“Thanks, man. Thanks for everything… I mean it… I, uh, I need to call Cap and let him know I won’t need a replacement, but I jus’… I wanted to tell you first.”

“Thanks… It’ll be great to have you back in the squad with me. The guys will be glad to have you back, too.”

“I appreciate it. I’ll see ya Sunday,” Johnny said, hanging up the phone. His next call would be to his captain and then, perhaps, he would call Lily.

Roy heard the increased energy in his partner’s voice and he hoped that meant that they had weathered the current crisis. He knew things would likely worsen as the trial date approached, but he wouldn’t think about that now. Today, he would celebrate the victory of his partner returning to work, and to a somewhat normal life.

E!

“Beverly? You seem really quiet; is the food that bad?”
Beverly used her fork to stir the roasted vegetables around her plate. “Oh, no, the food is great. I guess I’m just not all that hungry.”

Marco watched her for a few moments, noticing the dark circles that were developing beneath her eyes. Something was wrong, but he had no idea what. “How about some dessert?”

“Maybe later.” Beverly’s green eyes looked across the table at the most wonderful man she had ever met. She was feeling nauseated – even though she knew that it was just in her head. There was no way that she would already be experiencing morning sickness, even if she was pregnant. With her queasy stomach, she knew that dessert was out of the question. She reached for her water glass, sipping the cooling liquid. She felt the heat of Marco’s dark eyes watching her, but she couldn’t face him. She couldn’t stand to look into his handsome face knowing that she was hiding something from him. She picked up a piece of broccoli, forcing herself to chew it up. Getting the proper nutrition could be more important now than ever.

“Are you sure you don’t want a glass of wine? It’s your favorite,” Marco said, his eyes sparkling in the candlelight.

She shook her head, taking another sip of the water to wash down the food she had been chewing for far too long. She saw the hurt on his face when she declined his offer. The wine was expensive, and now she wasn’t drinking any of it. Should she risk telling him why?

Marco clinked his fork on his plate, resting it on the edge. He steepled his hands in front of his face, staring at her picking at her food. “Have I done something wrong?”

Beverly gave him a brief smile before returning her eyes to the partially eaten food on her plate. “No, of course not. I’m just… I’m really tired, sweetheart. I’m sorry that I’m not very good company tonight.”

He reached across his small table, grasping her soft hand in his and lifting it to his mouth. His lips lightly brushed across the back of her hand. “You’re always good company, Bev. It’s okay to have a rough day. I’m going to have a few of them from time to time too, so let’s just accept that as a part of our relationship and… And let’s agree not to hold it against each other, okay?”

Beverly batted her eyelashes, forcing back her tears. Was it really possible that she had found a man who loved her unconditionally? Would he still feel the same way if she was carrying his child? She slipped her hands beneath her thighs, an old habit that was resurrected whenever she began experiencing feelings of self-doubt. She swallowed hard, struggling to find her words. “Um… ‘kay. I love you, Marco.”

“I love you, too,” he responded, continuing to stare at her for a few more moments. He had no idea what was going on with her; he just hoped that she wasn’t having second thoughts about their relationship. He didn’t think he could handle it if she broke up with him, now that he had fallen in love with her.

E!

That night, as Johnny lay in his bed staring at the ceiling, he wondered what was happening at the Campbell house. He had decided not to call Lily after all; he was afraid she would ask him about his thoughts of self-harm. If Iris knew, then surely Lily knew as well. How could he face them, now that they knew about his morbid ideas? Would they be hurt that he had considered taking such drastic action? Would they be angry?

Throwing his arm over his eyes, he exhaled loudly, praying that peaceful sleep would find him.
tonight. He needed to get some rest before he went back on shift, and he needed to get rid of the nightmares before he suffered an embarrassing moment at the station, on his first night back.

“Please, God… take ‘em away,” he muttered into the darkness.

E!

Across town, Beverly gave Marco a chaste goodnight kiss. He stood outside her door, waiting to hear the locking mechanism engaging before he turned to walk back to his car. The evening had not gone as he had planned, and he was beginning to wonder if he had done something to offend the woman he loved.

As he drove back home, he reviewed the events of the night. Beverly hadn’t eaten much of her food, refused her favorite wine, and complained of a headache. She had explained it away as being tired, and had seemed to be on the verge of tears a couple of times during dinner and the movie. While he had been hoping for a romantic interlude, he had only received a passionless kiss at her door without even a hint of an invitation for him to enter her apartment.

He continued to ponder her strange behavior as he drove home, cleaned up his kitchen, and prepared for bed. As he closed his eyes, he silently prayed for Beverly and whatever was bothering her.

In her apartment, Beverly showered and readied herself for bed. She stared at her naked body in the mirror, seeing the faint lines along her breasts. Her heart ached at the permanent reminder of what she had lost when she was only sixteen years old. Back then, she had shared her secret with the woman whom she thought was her best friend, but the older woman had betrayed her, and the resulting beating had been the worst she had ever experienced. She wrapped her arms around her abdomen, allowing her tears to fall.

“Get... a grip, Beverly,” she mumbled through gritted teeth, as she took a seat on the edge of her tub. “It won’t happen again. You’re a grown woman now, and... And Marco wo-wouldn’t,” she hiccupped, feeling the hot tears burning her cheeks, the swelling lump in her throat choking off her words. “I won’t... let it... happen again.”

E!

Early on Sunday morning, Hank walked into the captain’s office at Station 51, coffee cup in hand. This was the first time his crew would be reunited in several weeks and, as always, he was hoping for a safe shift.

He looked at the C-shift captain, seeing his disheveled appearance and sagging features. “Rough shift?” he asked, lifting the steaming cup to his mouth.

“Yea... Last call out was at 0214 and we just pulled back into quarters about ten minutes ago.”

“What happened?”

The exhausted captain closed up the log book having finished documenting the run. He stood up, stretching his aching back. “Senior citizens’ apartment complex. Seems one of the residents turned on a space heater for a little added warmth now that the nights are cooler and didn’t realize how close it was to her curtains. That’s what we suspect, anyway. We had two code F’s from smoke inhalation.”

Hank sighed; he knew exactly how his colleague felt. “Sorry... Why don’t you head on home and get some rest? I’ll take whatever comes in now.”
“You sure?”

“Absolutely,” Hank replied, patting his hand on the shoulder of the departing captain. “Go hug your wife, take a shower, and sleep the rest of the day.”

The C-shift captain gave a soft snort. “Better shower first, then hug the wife.”

Hank watched the tired man lumber slowly around the squad towards the back parking lot, then the A-shift captain turned to his desk. There was an envelope with his name on it sitting in his ‘in’ box. The letterhead indicated it was from Rampart General Hospital.

“This better be John’s medical release,” he mused, slipping the sharp instrument down the length of the white envelope. When he removed the familiar form and scanned over it, he frowned. “What the hell?”

Across the apparatus bay, Johnny, being unusually for his shift, greeted the C-shift mean as they cleaned up from their run. He tossed his duffel bag onto the bench seat in front of his locker.

“Hey, fellas, I brought donuts. I’m gonna leave ‘em in the kitchen. Grab some on your way out, if you want.”

A chorus of gratuitous expressions echoed as Johnny carried the two pink pastry boxes he had purchased to the kitchen and set them down in the center of the table. Although he had pasted on his usual cheery persona, he was anxious about returning to the station now that his shiftmates knew so much about him. The last time he had walked out of this building, he had assumed it would really be the last time. So, having Hank Stanley refuse to accept his resignation letter and having been released for duty by Dr. Brackett, he felt as though he had been given an amazing gift – a gift he vowed to make the most of.

He found a fresh pot of coffee made and was about to pour himself a cup, but a sudden jolt of queasiness caused him to change his mind. He needed to talk to his captain before the rest of his crew arrived. He had seen Hank’s car parked in the back lot and he wanted to make sure his medical release had arrived.

Standing just outside the doorway, he cleared his throat as he knocked. “Ahem, mornin’, Cap.”

Hank dropped the release form he had been fuming over and stood up to shake his junior medic’s hand. “Welcome back, John.”

“Thanks, Cap.” John shifted his weight from one foot to the other, running a nervous finger beneath his nose. He propped a hand on his hip. He could see that something was bothering his captain. “Did you, ah, get my medical release?”

Hank lifted his eyebrows, looking down at the paper on his desk. “Have a seat.”

Johnny felt his stomach flip flop as he lowered his body into the vacant chair beside the captain’s desk.

Hank sat down in his chair, using his index finger to tap on the paper. “John, why did you request a drug test?”

Johnny blanched, coughing into his closed fist. “Ahua... I, uh, I figured it was best. I have nothin’ to hide, Cap.”

“I know that. You did this because of what that jackass, McConnike, said... Am I right?”
Johnny rested his elbows on the arms of the chair, lacing his fingers together. He took a moment to steel his nerves before looking over at his superior. With serious dark eyes, the young medic spoke. “He made an insinuation about me that I really didn’t appreciate, Cap. Maybe you didn’t notice, but—”

“Oh, I noticed. Believe me, John. Not only did I notice, I gave him an earful when we left.” Hank wanted his man to know that he had the full faith and support of his captain.

Johnny shifted in his seat. “Ah, thank you, Cap. I apologize if I did somethin’ wrong, but I jus’ really wanted to make a point to him. I’m clean, always have been… always will be.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, but you also didn’t have to do this,” he said, holding up the paper. “I just wanted you to know that… I believe in you, and every man at this station believes in you. Don’t let a man like McConnike cause you to do anything any differently than you would normally do. You didn’t deserve his smartass comment, or insinuation, as you put it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Johnny said, feeling uncomfortable with the praise his captain was bestowing. “Should I ask Brackett to write a new release form, without the drug test information?”

Hank leaned back in his chair. “Nope, let’s leave this one just like it is. Maybe it’ll shut McConnike up.”

Johnny allowed his lopsided grin to spread across his face. “Thanks, Cap. I, uh, I brought some donuts,” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the kitchen.

“Well then… What are we waiting for?”

The two walked into the kitchen to find Mike and Roy enjoying fresh donuts and coffee.

“John,” Mike offered, extending his hand to his paramedic.

“Hey, Stoker.”

“Thanks for the donuts, Cap,” Roy said, lifting his half-eaten pastry in the direction of his captain.

“Oh, don’t thank me,” Hank grinned.

Roy was about to respond when Chet rushed through the door, his eyes widening when he saw the pink boxes. “Aww, far out! Pastries!” he said, lifting a powdered sugar donut to his lips. He quickly consumed an enormous bite, leaving his mustache appearing to be snowcapped while he licked his fingers. “Mmm.”

Johnny smiled at the antics of his station nemesis. “You’re welcome, Kelly.”

“Ahu-ahua-hua,” Chet coughed, pretending to choke on his donut. “Gage, you sprung for donuts?” he said, showering his uniform with powdered sugar.

“Yea, you got a problem with that?” Johnny asked, pretending to be aggravated. In reality, he was glad to be sparring with Chet. It was the one thing that made his return feel normal on his first day back on duty.

“No, I don’t have a problem with it… I’m just stunned, is all,” Chet snickered, shoving the rest of the white donut in his mouth. “I can’t believe you’d buy us donuts when you complain about spending a few bucks on a dinner date.”
Johnny grimaced, then opened his mouth for a retort, when their captain silenced his two youngest crew members.

“Kelly!”

“Yessir, Cap?”

“Go get cleaned up; we’ve got roll call in ten minutes,” Hank said, feigning irritation at his crew. Truthfully, a warmth was washing over him, a feeling of complete normalcy – something he hadn’t felt in a very long time. He picked up another glazed donut, topped off his coffee cup, and headed back to his office. He wanted to allow his crew a few minutes to welcome Johnny back.

In the back lot, Marco pulled into a vacant spot, glad to see Johnny’s Rover back in its usual parking spot, but realizing that he was the last person to arrive on shift. He would be assigned latrines, but he didn’t care. Anything that kept him busy would keep his mind off of Beverly and her recent odd behavior.

When he entered the locker room to change into his uniform, he found his best friend washing his face, his uniform shirt slightly damp in a few places.

“Tried to set Gage up, huh?” he asked, assuming that one of the Phantom’s famous water bombs had backfired.

Chet grinned, looking at his friend from the mirror. “Naw, Johnny bought us donuts and I got some white powder on me,” the lineman snickered.

“It’s called powdered sugar, not white powder. You sound like you’ve been snorting some white powder,” Marco goaded.

Chet gave his friend a double-take; he knew Marco better than anyone, and the man was in a very bad mood. Chet gave his face one last look to make sure he was presentable for roll call, patted it dry with a towel, then turned around and leaned against the sink. He watched as Marco began changing clothes, seeing how his shoulders were slumped and his movements were slower than usual.

“Somethin’ wrong?”

Marco never looked at Chet. Instead he simply hung up his shirt in his locker, removing his uniform shirt and threading his arms through the sleeves. As he began to button it up, he muttered something in Spanish.

“English, please?” Chet said.

Dark eyes looked up at the Irishman. “I said, not really.”

“Not really means yes,” Chet corrected. “Lemme guess... Beverly?”

“Something’s wrong, Chet, but I don’t know what it is; she won’t tell me.”

“Uh-oh,” Chet mumbled, rubbing his chin with his fingers. “What’d you do?”

Marco’s eyes widened. “Nothing!” he said in a raised voice, stepping out of his jeans and throwing them into his locker like he was throwing out the first pitch at a Dodgers game.

Chet saw the frustration in his friend’s actions and knew that the situation was serious. “Hey, buddy,
I’m sorry; that was meant to be a joke.”

“Yea, well it isn’t funny, amigo,” he huffed, pulling his navy blue uniform pants off their hanger and slipping them on.

“I know that Caroline asked her to be a bridesmaid and she agreed. She said that Beverly seemed happy to be asked.”

“Guess it was because I wasn’t the one who was doing the asking,” Marco groused.

Chet stepped over to the place where Marco was getting dressed, propping one foot onto the bench and leaning his arms onto his raised knee. He knew that when a man was in a mood like Marco’s, there was usually only one reason why. “So... not much action in the bedroom lately then, right?”

Marco looked over at his annoying friend, suddenly feeling an overwhelming desire to punch the slighter man. But he also knew that his mood wasn’t Chet’s fault. He blew out his cheeks, resisting the urge to slam his partner with a smart aleck comment. “Yea... nothing in over a week.”

Chet grinned, using his fingers to wax his mustache. “Then you just answered your own question, man. She’s been grouchy for a week and you haven’t gotten any, um, attention so... It’s just her time o’ the month. She’ll be fine in a day or two,” he said, patting Marco’s shoulder knowingly.

“Chet, you’re an idiot. We’ve been dating for months, and she’s never acted like this before.”

“So she’s havin’ a bad one... It happens,” he suggested as though he was an expert on female hormonal cycles.

Marco stared at his friend as he threaded his belt through the loops, buckling it in front. “Chet... Can I ask you a serious question? And will you give me a serious answer?”

Chet’s countenance shifted immediately. He took a seat on the bench in front of their lockers, patting the space beside him. Marco accepted the silent invitation and sat down beside his friend.

“Ask away,” Chet said, his blue eyes holding a seriousness that Marco had only seen a few times.

The senior lineman leaned his elbows onto his knees, sighing as he gathered up his nerve. Then, just when Chet thought the older man might change his mind, he spoke.

“How did you know... that Caroline was... the one?”

Chet fought the urge to smile at his friend. Perhaps it wasn’t just Beverly who was having some difficulty lately. Maybe Marco was caught up in his own quandary that was adding to the tension between them. He clapped his hand on Marco’s neck, offering the older man a gentle squeeze.

“When I realized that I wouldn’t be able to breathe if she ever left me. I can’t imagine my life without her, man. Saying good night, and parting ways is... It’s torture. All I want to do is hold her in my arms all night and... wake up to find her in my arms the next morning.” He shook his curly-haired head. “I’m not makin’ any sense, am I?”

“You’re making perfect sense,” Marco said, a slight smile lurking from beneath his sleek dark mustache.

“So,” Chet began, his eager eyes sparkling. “Do you think Beverly might be the future Mrs. Marco
Marco snickered, grabbing his young friend’s neck in the crook of his elbow. “You’ll be the second to know,” he said, releasing Chet’s neck and bending over to pull on his socks and boots.

“Hey! I’m your best friend, man. Who else would be first?” Chet asked, hurt when he realized that someone else was going to hear the announcement first.

Marco slipped his feet into his boots, then stood up, towering over the junior lineman. “Beverly, you goof.”

Chet laughed, standing up to follow Marco out to the line-up. “Oh... yea.”

Roll call was uneventful, Hank welcomed Johnny back along with the other men who offered their support of their coworker’s return. Chores were assigned and before the men dispersed, the klaxons sounded. Yes, life truly seemed to be returning to normal for the A-shift of station 51.

E!

After lunch and the fourth run to Rampart, Roy opened the door of the squad, slipping in behind the wheel. He waited for his partner to stow the supplies they had retrieved from Dixie and take his seat on the passenger’s side of the emergency vehicle. As soon as he slammed the heavy door closed, Roy turned to his right.

“Why don’t you just call her?”

Johnny, his arm resting on the window ledge, looked over at his partner, nonchalantly. “Call who?”

Roy shook his head in disbelief, cranking up the squad and pulling away from the emergency entrance. “You know who; Lily.”

Johnny looked out the side window, allowing the breeze to ruffle his dark hair as the squad eased away from the ambulance bay. “I a’ready told ya. I’m lettin’ the two of them get reacquainted.”

“Bullshit,” Roy muttered, uncharacteristically.

“What did you say?”

“I said bullshit. I’ve already told you what Iris said when I went over there to pick up your pistol. Iris wants to talk to you... and so does Lily. They miss you, Johnny, can’t you see that?”

“Roy, I...” Johnny ran his hand through his windblown hair. “I... I jus’ can’t.”

“Can’t?” Roy questioned softly, thinking he knew what his friend was thinking. “Or won’t?”

Johnny jerked his face over at his partner. The anger in his eyes evident upon first hearing the question, slowly softened. He released a sigh, looking down at his lap. “A’right... A’right, you got me.”

“Why, Johnny?”

Johnny heaved heavily, obviously contemplating telling Roy the truth. He squinted as the glare of the sun on the windshields of the passing cars hurt his eyes. “Roy... that woman... I jus’ feel so... I dunno... weak,” his voice raised a little, indicating that he was questioning what he was feeling. “When I’m around her, I feel... yea, weak. I don’t know how else to put it.” He refused to look at his friend, unsure of what Roy would think of his confession.
Roy felt a smile tugging at his lips. He watched his younger friend shifting uncomfortably in his seat, and finally couldn’t resist the temptation to chuckle.

Johnny, arching an eyebrow in Roy’s direction, felt a heaviness in his chest. He couldn’t believe his best friend was laughing at him. He shook his head in disbelief, looking out the passenger’s side window. “Shut up, Roy. You don’t understand.”

“Yes, I do, Junior... You’re in love.”

“Am not. I mean, I love Iris and Lily, both. They’re like family,” he said, knowing Roy wasn’t believing the lie.

“Like I said before,” Roy said, accelerating and pulling into traffic on his way back to the station. “What?”

The red-haired paramedic looked over at his partner with a huge grin. “Bullshit.”

“Roy!”

“Hey, don’t fight it, and I’m not making fun of you. I’ve been there, remember?”

Johnny knitted his eyebrows together as he looked at his partner. “You mean... Joanne made you feel, uh, weak?”

“Made?” Roy questioned, casting a quick look in Johnny’s direction. “Makes, Johnny... She still does it, every time I look into those emerald green eyes, I get weak.”

Slowly Johnny’s trademark grin spread across his face. He had always known that Roy and Joanne had a wonderful marriage, even though they had experienced a rocky period several months ago. They had weathered the storm and seemingly had come out of it stronger than ever. However, this was the first time his partner had ever made a revelation about how his wife made him feel.

Roy looked over at Johnny once more as they neared the station. Seeing Johnny staring at him, he smiled. “Face it, Johnny. You already know the truth. You love Lily, and you know she loves you.”

“Well, if that’s true... and I’m not saying it is, but if it is....” he said, hesitating as Roy eased the squad to a stop in front of the station, “What am I s’posed to do?”

Roy shifted into reverse, not responding to Johnny’s question until the squad had been backed into its proper location. He turned off the ignition, giving his partner a knowing look. “Call her... Then just do what comes naturally.”

Johnny stared at Roy in disbelief, his mouth hanging open slightly.

“No that,” Roy chided, knowing what his friend was thinking. “At least, not initially,” he continued, wagging his eyebrows.

Johnny leaned his head back and released a belly-heaving laugh. It felt refreshing and gave him a sense of relief to laugh out loud.

The two men exited the squad, the slamming doors echoing in the empty apparatus bay. Knowing that there wasn’t going to be a better time than the present, Johnny sauntered towards the dorm to make the private phone call.

Roy noticed where Johnny was heading and knew that his friend was finally going to talk to Lily.
“Remember... be a gentleman,” he tossed over his shoulder at the departing young man, then pushed through the kitchen door to make a fresh pot of coffee. He didn’t know how long the engine would be gone, but he hoped it would be long enough for he and Johnny to talk after the younger man talked to Lily. He just hoped that Johnny’s mood would be as light after the call as it seemed to be before it.

E!

Roy set about percolating a fresh pot of coffee. He had just poured himself a cup, blowing a cooling breath over the steaming liquid as Johnny bounced through the kitchen doorway. Roy grinned, setting his cup down without taking a sip.

“Well?”

Johnny, grabbing his own mug, poured himself a cup. He knew Roy wanted the details of his conversation with Lily, and he was determined to frustrate the other man as long as possible. He was glad his back was turned to Roy as he was unable to hide his lopsided grin.

“Deep subject, Roy,” he said, stifling a giggle at his own sense of humor.

Roy rolled his eyes. “Oh, har-har. You know what I’m talking about. How’d it go?”

Johnny turned around, leaning his hips against the counter as he lifted his cup to his mouth, completely forgetting how hot the coffee was. He grinned widely. “I’m goin’ over there for dinner tomorrow night,” he said, taking a big sip and scowling. “OWE!”

Roy chuckled to himself. “Well, at least now I know you’ll be a gentleman,” he laughed as Johnny opened the freezer to retrieve an ice cube for his burning lips.

E!

Much as Johnny had feared, the evening shift was a quiet one. As the men turned in for the night, Johnny positioned and repositioned his bunkers beside his bed. Roy noticed his partner’s obsessive behavior and knew something wasn’t right.

The senior medic looked around the room, seeing that the others were in various stages of making their nightly preparations. He took a seat on his bunk, staring at his fretting partner.

“Johnny?” he whispered, hoping the others wouldn’t hear him.

Dark eyes looked over at Roy, questioningly. Johnny could tell by the worried look on Roy’s face that he knew something was going on. He darted his eyes back down at his perfectly positioned bunkers, before crawling beneath the covers without acknowledging his partner’s call, extremely grateful when their captain turned off the lights.

Roy heaved a deep sigh, wanting to talk to Johnny, but knowing that now wasn’t the time. He slowly slipped his bare legs between the sheets, turning his head to the right to see if Johnny was assuming his usual sleeping position. Instead of finding his partner with his arm draped across his eyes, he saw Johnny lying on his back, shifting his head as if trying to find a comfortable spot on his pillow.

Johnny could feel Roy staring at him, but he refused to look at his worried partner. He had shared with Roy that he had been struggling with nightmares and he knew the other man was concerned
about him. He had consumed three cups of coffee after dinner, hoping the caffeine would keep him awake between calls. Now they were giving him another problem.

“Aaargh,” he groaned, kicking the covers off of his legs. He stood up, padding his bare feet through the dorm in his boxers and tee shirt, when Chet’s grumbling caught his attention.

“Told ya, Gage,” the junior lineman groused, rolling over in his bed, pulling the blanket beneath his chin.

“Go play on the freeway, Kelly,” Johnny mumbled, pushing through the doorway towards the latrine.

“Shut up, you twits!” Hank commented, thankful that the darkness in the room hid the smile that was shining on his face. Hearing the verbal sparring between his two youngest crew members felt as warm and comforting as his own familiar bunk and blankets on this cool autumn night.

It was just after 0400 when Roy rolled onto his side, his back to the brick wall divider. There was just enough light from the street lamps seeping through the dorm window to allow Roy to see his partner’s chest rising and falling in an unusual pattern. He could hear the heavy irregular breathing and knew that Johnny was in the throes of a nightmare. Slowly, he slipped out of his bunk, hoping to quietly wake Johnny with a gentle nudge.

Johnny was trapped in total darkness, the stench of musty stale water assaulting his nose. In the distance, he could hear the unmistakable sound of fists connecting with bone-covered flesh and the pitiful moans and grunts of the victim of the vicious assault. Somehow he knew that the victim this time wasn’t Phillip Campbell; it was Roderick Gage, Johnny’s father. Johnny gripped a metal object in his hands as his taste buds were suddenly overwhelmed by the gritty combination of dirt and rotting layers of pine needles and oak leaves. He opened his mouth, his body rejecting the putrid combination when suddenly he felt an unseen hand grab his shoulder as a loud piercing sound shot a volt of electricity through his heaving chest.

Johnny’s dark eyes jerked wide open as the lights came up in response to the klaxons. The first sight he saw was the face of his partner hovering over him. Roy quickly pulled his hand off of Johnny’s shoulder and stepped away from the younger man’s bed, slipping his bunkers over his boxer shorts and snapping the red suspenders over his firm trapezius muscles. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that his partner was also preparing for the run that Sam Lanier’s disembodied voice was alerting them to. He heard their captain acknowledging the call, as he and the rest of the groggy men lumbered to the emergency vehicles. As they drove into the darkness, the red lights and sirens disturbing the serenity of the early morning hour, Roy wondered what which horrific images had been lurking behind the twitching closed eyes of his partner. Whatever memories had held him captive, Roy was determined to help him escape from them, but first he had to convince Johnny to discuss the terror he had experienced in his past, and what tortures were continuing their cruel torment of his best friend’s life. Whatever it was, Roy strongly suspected that it was more than what had happened on that cool March morning back in Selma.
Chapter 30

Sharon Gage refolded the letter and gently slid it back into the lavender envelope, clutching it tightly between her trembling hands. It contained answers to questions she and her husband had been asking themselves for the last ten years. Her heart ached for the pain their son must have endured in his efforts to protect them. Sitting beside her husband, she listened to his voice, sensing the anger that he was skillfully hiding just beneath the surface of his words as he conversed with Iris Campbell. As soon as the conversation ended, she linked her arm through his, holding tightly to his elbow as he returned the receiver to the cradle of the black rotary dial phone on the edge of the end table in their living room. The telephone call had lasted longer than either of them had intended, but after a decade of rarely seeing their son, his actions finally made sense to his parents.

“Roddy?” she gasped, fear gripping tightly around her heart.

Roderick Gage was a man of few words, a man whose pride had poisoned his own son. Because of his personal values that put a man’s bravery and dedication to his heritage above all else, he had forced his son to make a devastating decision at the tender age of sixteen. Roderick had long suspected he knew why Johnny had chosen to live in California, but Iris’ letter and their subsequent phone call had provided the confirmation for his son’s flight to the West Coast, leaving the older Gage with no one to blame but himself.

Sharon ran her hand down the silky dark mane along her husband’s neck. It was beginning to show a few streaks of gray, just as her own lighter-colored locks were, but he was still just as handsome as the day she had married him. She remembered how proud he had been when their son had been born. John Roderick Gage had been such a beautiful baby. Sharon’s thoughts drifted back in time, remembering the smile on the midwife’s face when Johnny had displayed what appeared to be a lopsided grin as he lay nestled along his mother’s breast. Even with his swollen face and puffy eyes, the newborn knew how to melt a woman’s heart.

“Roddy… We’re going to go see him,” she offered, seeing her husband using the sleeve of his shirt to dry his dampening forehead. The stress of the situation was causing his blood pressure to rise. “You can talk to him then… man to man.”

Roddy looked up into the misty blue-green eyes of the woman he had fallen in love with when they were just teenagers. His heart ached for all the time they had missed, and after all these years, the truth was punching him in his gut; his anger over the time they had lost with John burning his heart like molten lava. The distance between the Gages and their son was more Roddy’s fault than the fault of the Ku Klux Klan, and they both knew it.

“Sha-Sharon…,” he began, his voice sounding frail and weak, unlike the strong man to whom it belonged. “I… It’s… my fault,” he said, collapsing into her embrace, wrapping his arms around her. “Isn’t it?”

“Shhhh,” she crooned, carding her fingers through his hair as she embraced him. “He’s fine… Iris
said he was… And you… you couldn’t have known what was going to happen… Besides,” she continued, “now we can visit with him and… and you can tell him how you… feel,” she said, sniffling as she felt his thin body shuddering within her arms.

“How… How can…?” Roddy didn’t finish his question; Sharon, having always been able to read his thoughts, answered his unfinished question.

“Because he has a big heart,” she responded without missing a beat. “He’s a forgiving soul, Roddy. We raised a good boy… And now he’s a successful young man. It’ll be okay, sweetheart, I just know it will. He will forgive you.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Sharon inhaled deeply, running her hand along his back as their embrace deepened. “Then we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

E!

Iris hung up the phone, swiping at her tears with her fingers. She had taken a chance by writing Johnny’s parents a letter explaining why he had had so little contact with them in the last ten years, and breaking a promise she had made to the frightened teenager years earlier. It wasn’t just that he wanted to start his career as a fire fighter in Southern California instead of Montana. His reasons went much deeper than that; he had been protecting them from the Ku Klux Klan – or so Iris had always thought. Iris had listened to Roderick Gage’s masculine voice as it cracked with emotions. Her heart was broken for them, but it also held a sense of hope. Reunification was possible, her daughter was proof of that, and she hoped that the Gage family would be reunited very soon as well.

She listened to the sounds of Lily working in their kitchen. The younger woman had insisted on cooking the dinner for their guest. Iris knew that her daughter was deeply in love with Johnny; she just hoped the troubled young man would be able to return those affections. Lily’s emotional state was still somewhat fragile and Iris didn’t want to upset her in any way.

She stepped into the kitchen, seeing the frustrated look on her daughter’s face. “Need some help?”

Lily looked at her with pleading eyes. “Yes… I’m not as good a cook as you are.”

Iris smiled, pulling her daughter into a sideways hug. “It just takes practice, Lily... Lots and lots of practice.”

Lily turned her attention to the sink, shoving her hands into the soapy water to clean up a few of the dirty dishes. “Was that Mrs. Gage?” she asked, her voice wavering.

“No… It was Roddy.”

“What’d he, um, say?” she questioned, rinsing the mixing bowl and placing it in the drain to dry.

“They want to come out here to see him, Lily.”

The younger woman spun around on her heels, staring at her mother, forgetting about the suds dripping from her fingers onto the tile floor. “Then you’ll have to tell Johnny that you contacted them, won’t you?”

Iris, grabbing a dish towel to clean up the wet floor, nodded her head, already dreading that conversation. She batted her eyelashes to rid them of the tears clinging along her lower lid. “Don’t
worry… If he gets upset, it’ll be with me, but I don’t think he will. His parents love him dearly,” she said, switching dish towels to dry the dishes that Lily had washed. “I just don’t understand why he seems so hesitant to call them, now that the threat is over.”

Lily turned her attention to the oven, checking on the meatloaf she was baking. She knew the truth, something she had never shared with her mother, or anyone else. Johnny had opened up his heart to her one time, shortly after he moved in with them in California. He had been feeling especially depressed and Lily had held him while he wept. She knew that he had told her more than he had ever wanted her to know, and she had promised him that she would never reveal his secret to anyone. She had kept that promise, but would Johnny assume otherwise? Would he blame her for the actions of her mother? That fear burned her soul just as hotly as the heat from the open oven door.

Assuring herself that the meatloaf was thoroughly cooked, she closed the door and turned off the oven. She just wished she could turn off her concern for Johnny so easily.

E!

Ronald Crockett twisted his wrist, realizing that he had spent far too long at the office. He pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyelids long enough to give his tired eyes a brief respite. He had been pouring over the FBI reports of the events at The Unity Family compound, adding his own notes from what he had witnessed. He gathered up the papers, tapping them on the desk to align them, then slipped them inside the large brown envelope. He stood up, pulling his coat from the back of his desk chair. He slipped it on, adjusted the collar, and was about to walk out of his office when his phone rang. He turned back, staring at the shrill sounding object. Briefly he considered allowing it to ring, but his curiosity won the internal battle. He picked up the receiver, his exhausted voice greeting the caller.

“Crockett here.”

“Hey there, Ron. How’s things on the other side o’ the country?”

The lieutenant allowed a grin to spread across his dark features. “Slim… We’re doing alright. And how are things in the Deep South?”

“Oh, still hot as hell, but that’s nothin’ new.”

Ron propped one hip on the corner of his desk. He was hoping that his friend had received the photographs he had sent. “How’d you know I would still be here?”

“Well, when I didn’t get an answer at your house, I just assumed that’s where you’d be. I mean, it ain’t like those of us in law enforcement have any kind o’ social life, right?”

Ron clucked his tongue in rebuke. “Now, now, Slim... You speak for yourself. I’m doing okay with the ladies.”

This time it was Slim who cackled into the telephone. “And you’re still a liar, too.”

Feeling the need to change the subject from his dismal love life, Ron shifted the conversation. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this conversation?”

“Well now, I ’spect you already know the answer to that. I got your package and I got to tell ya…” The Selma law enforcement officer released a long slow whistle. “This is jus’ what the prosecution
needed.”

Ron offered a soft snort as his only response.

“I showed ‘em to the DA and… Well, let’s jus’ say that he’s plannin’ on lettin’ that high dollar defense attorney know what kind o’ evidence we’ve got against his client jus’ as soon as he gets in his office in the mornin’.”

“Do you think the old man will want to cut a deal?” Ron asked hopefully, realizing that a plea bargain would allow Johnny to escape testifying and spare the Campbell family from having to relive the nightmare of Phillip’s murder.

“If he’s smart, but… No one ever accused William Waite o’ bein’ the sharpest tool in the shed,” he said in a voice that let Ron know that he was smiling. “The DA is hopin’ he’ll confirm the identity o’ the, um… o’ the other fella who was with ‘em that mornin’. The one that killed the priest.”

“You said you already knew who it was,” Ron said quickly, knitting his eyebrows together in confusion.

“Knowin’ and provin’ are two different things, Crockett. The judge won’t let my gut feelin’ take the witness stand. Besides, if it’s who we think it is, then I’m sure there’ll be a request for a change of venue. The national news is gonna descend on Selma again, I ‘spect.”

“Yea… No doubt about that.” Ron lowered his gaze to the floor. He needed to know who else had been informed of the pictures. “Say, Slim… Have you told Kizzy Campbell?” The silence that followed answered his question.

Slim exhaled loudly into the phone. “No… Not yet. I’m afraid she might want to see ‘em and… God knows that no momma needs to see her boy like that. The pictures are clear enough to tell how… how bloody he was. She knows what happened, but to see it right there in front o’ her… Nu-uh… I don’t want her to see ‘em.”

“Okay… so what’s the plan? I know you didn’t call me just to tell me you got the pictures.”

“You’re a good detective, aren’t ya?” the other man chuckled softly. “I need you to talk to your man out there. We may need Mr. Gage to come on back to Selma sooner than we thought.”

“Why? How does Johnny factor into the pretrial wheeling and dealing between the DA and the defense?” Ron asked, worried for his friend. Johnny had had a very close call in Tehachapi, and the detective wasn’t sure the paramedic was ready to face the demons he had left behind along the Alabama River in 1965.

“Our DA is one o’ the brightest crayons in the box, Crockett, and—”

“Oh? I knew he must be a man of color,” Ron interrupted, hoping to inject a little humor into the tense conversation.

“Well… now that you mention it, yea he is, but that has nothin’ to do with this case. In fact, he’s tryin’ real hard to keep his race out of it. Anyway… Since we’ve got the pictures AND a witness, then that ought to scare the shit out o’ Waite? Mr. Pettway, the District Attorney, is hopin’ that he’ll start singin’ like a bird.”

“A jail bird?”

“Ah-haha, yea, that’s right… With a little luck, we can solve the murder of Phillip Campbell AND
get the truth about Father Mitchell’s alleged suicide, too… I mean, Waite’s voice is kind o’ slurred now, and he’s confined to a wheelchair, but—

“But you think with enough pressure, he’ll confirm the identity of the Sheriff’s Deputy in those pictures?”

“Yea… Yea, we hope he will… So, will you talk to Mr. Gage? Or would you at least give ‘im my number and ask ‘im to give me a call? He can reverse the charges; I’ll accept ‘em.”

“And if Johnny refuses to testify?” Ron asked, unsure if it would be in Johnny’s best interest to go to Selma so soon after the events in Tehachapi. The lieutenant already knew that Johnny couldn’t remember what had happened on that March morning, but his friend from Selma didn’t.

“Well, now see… That’s the beauty o’ this whole plan. Gage may not have to testify… Not yet, anyway. All he’s got to do is jus’ be here an’ act like he’s gonna do it.”

The muscles on Ron’s face relaxed a bit. “So… won’t the DA want to depose him?”

“Yes, if he has to, but maybe if Waite just sees ‘im, then he’ll agree to a plea bargain, beg for leniency if he turns state’s evidence. But—

“Whoa, now hang on just a damn minute, Slim,” Crockett said angrily, standing up from his perch on the corner of his desk. “Are you saying that that sonofabitch is gonna get away with murdering Campbell, a black man, if he testifies against his accomplice who killed a white man? So the life of a white man is worth more than the life of a black man?” Crockett could feel his blood pressure rising.

“NO!” Slim retorted, raising his voice into the phone. “Now you know me better than that, Crockett, and that ain’t what the DA is sayin’ either.”

“Then please enlighten me, ‘cause that’s sure as hell what it looks like from where I’m standing,” Ron replied, placing a balled up fist on his hip.

“By turnin’ state’s evidence, Waite will have to admit that he was there, and that means he’s guilty of murder, too. He’s had a stroke that left him a crippled old man, Crockett. He ain’t gonna be on this side o’ eternity much longer. So why not get convictions for BOTH murders? Mr. Pettway’s prepared to offer Waite house arrest instead o’ prison if he admits to his part in the death of Campbell AND testifies against the deputy. If Waite. thinks that Gage is gonna testify as an eye witness, then he’ll realize he may go to prison. I really think that if we put enough pressure on ‘im, he’ll do what we want.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Crockett asked, feeling his anger beginning to subside. Slim Smitherman’s comments really were making sense.

“Well… If testimony is necessary, then all Gage has to say is that he’s the fella that took those pictures. He’s not some young teenager anymore. He’s a grown man, a respected member of his community, and that makes ‘im a very solid witness. The DA wants to use that to turn up the heat on Waite.”

Ron sat silently for a few moments, going over the plan in his mind. He knew it was a good one, but would Johnny agree to it? He knew the paramedic was stressed out about the idea of testifying at the trial in early spring, but would he be able to give a deposition in the next few days?

“Ahem, how soon do you need Johnny down there?” Crockett asked.

“Oh, in ‘bout a week to ten days, not sure ‘xactly.”
“Alright… I’ll talk to him, Slim, but I really don’t know if he’ll be willing to do it.”

“You know we could issue a subpoena, Crockett,” Slim added. It wasn’t a threat; he just needed to make sure that the detective explained everything to their star witness. “O’ course, we’d rather it look like he’s jus’ itchin’ to tell us what he knows.”

“I know… But I doubt that a subpoena will be necessary, unless he needs it to give to the fire department so he can get the time off. I assume that the DA’s office is picking up the bill for the travel expenses?”

“You bet,” Slim stated.

Seeing his opportunity, Ron added more to the request. “What about travel companions? I bet Johnny wouldn’t hesitate if the DA offered to pay for plane tickets for Iris and Lily Campbell, too.”

“You West Coast boys drive a hard bargain, don’t ya?”

Ron snickered on the other end of the line.

“You get Johnny to agree to come without us havin’ to subpoena him, and I’ll betcha the DA will pay for the two extra tickets,” Slim said, laughing into the phone. He had already decided to pay for Iris and Lily’s travel expenses out of his own pocket if Mr. Pettway’s budget wouldn’t allow for it. He knew that having additional support for the murder victim would increase the pressure on Waite, and offer comfort for Johnny and Kizzy.

“Deal,” Ron said, “I’ll give you a call back in a day or two. Just give me time to talk it over with Johnny and the Campbell ladies,” Ron added.

The two men finished their phone call. Ron returned the receiver to the cradle, swiped his hand along the wall to turn off the light, and headed out the office door. He had to think of a way to broach the subject with Johnny… and then he had to talk to Iris.

E!

Johnny leaned back from Iris’ dinner table, rubbing his protruding belly. “That was the best meal I’ve eaten in a very long time.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Lily said with a grin, grateful to her mother for helping her cook the dinner. She had wanted to impress Johnny with her culinary skills, but Iris had stepped in at the last minute to prevent a total disaster.

“You’re as good a cook as your mom,” Johnny beamed, his lopsided grin adorning his face. His life was definitely improving, at least this part was getting better.

“Um, Johnny…”

The dark-haired paramedic looked over at his surrogate mother. “Yea?”

Iris sucked in her bottom lip, cutting her daughter a glance. Lily bowed her head, fearful that Johnny would be very upset over what her mother was about to tell him.

Johnny shifted his head from side to side, watching the unspoken messages passing between the Campbell ladies. “What’s goin’ on?” he asked, a shadow crossing his handsome features.

“I’ve done something that… I hope you won’t be mad at me, but…”
“But...?” he asked, lifting his eyebrows as he leaned forward, his full stomach suddenly queasy.

“I contacted your parents,” Iris blurted out.

Johnny silently stared down at the remnants of the meal he had just consumed. His face reddened as his jaw muscles began to flex and relax, a sure sign that he was growing agitated. His silence roared at Iris, and she knew that he was upset with her. When he looked up, narrowing his dark eyes in her direction, she immediately regretted what she had done.

Johnny cleared his throat, obviously struggling to keep his temper in check. “Why?”

It was a simple question and a fair one. Iris knew she owed him an explanation. “The threat is over, Johnny. Roddy and Sharon are no longer at risk. And... I thought they deserved to know... the truth.”

Johnny’s breathing became irregular; he scrubbed his face with both hands, clearly choosing his words carefully. “The truth?”

“Yes,” Lily piped in.

Johnny jerked his head to look directly into Lily’s eyes. Had she divulged his secret? His dark eyes bore into her soul, pleading for her to silently tell him that his secret was still safe with her. Lily pressed her lips together tightly, trying to think of the right words to use to relay the information he needed to hear. Johnny bit the inside of his jaw until he tasted the metallic taste of his own blood.

“Mom told them everything she knows about what happened,” she explained. The message was a subtle one, but it was enough to reassure him that Lily hadn’t betrayed his trust. Iris had told them the truth… as she knew it.

“I’m sorry,” Iris mumbled, beginning to tremble as she cried. “I... I thought I was doing... the right thing.”

“Well, think again,” he huffed, pushing away from the table and walking over to the kitchen sink, staring out the window at his Rover parked in her driveway.

Iris and Lily exchanged worried glances.

Iris stood up, walking over to the place where Johnny was standing. “I’m sorry, Johnny, but I don’t see why you’re so upset. I mean, okay, so I should’ve let you tell them yourself, but... I was afraid that you wouldn’t.”

He spun around, glaring his angry dark eyes at her. “You’re right... I wouldn’t’ve… Not yet.”

“But you can’t stay away from them, Johnny,” she said in a raised voice, grabbing his upper arm to turn him so that he could see the tears streaking her face. “I know what it’s like to have a child that you can’t get to.” She hesitated, hearing her daughter softly sniffing at the table. “I know how they feel, but you had no choice, not really... not until now. They’re safe now… We all are.”

Johnny jerked his arm away from her, returning to look out the window once more, his mind taking him back to the last couple of times he had seen his parents. They had attended his graduation from the Fire Academy. It was both the happiest and the hardest day of his life. What should have been a
joyful occasion was one filled with fear and trepidation. He had only returned to Montana once since then, and the brief visit there was once again clouded by worry. Both times had been very difficult for him, but he had never told anyone the real reason why… except Lily, and obviously she hadn’t revealed it to her mother. For that, he was grateful. He flared his nostrils, not moving as he asked Iris his next question.

“How... are they doin’?”

Feeling a bit more hopeful, Iris stepped up to him again. “Well... they’re doing just fine, still in good health.”

He nodded his head slightly, his heart leaping into his throat. “What’d... what’d they say… ‘bout me?”

“How much they love you,” Iris responded, gulping when she saw him pinching the bridge of his nose. “How much they want to... see you. And...” She looked back at Lily, seeing the younger woman drying her eyes with her napkin. “And that... they’re very proud of you... for what you did... for them.”

Johnny reached out for the countertop, leaning against it for support. His rough exterior had been damaged, but still he refused to succumb to the emotions that were threatening to escape from his crumbling façade. As he struggled to regain his composure, Iris slowly reached out to him, running her hands along his back in a motherly manner.

“You... should o’... left it... ‘lone, Iris.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of, Johnny. They love you and... and now they understand.”

“I would o’ told ‘em,” he managed to say, even though it was in direct contrast to his earlier statement.

“When?”

He shrugged his shoulders, hearing Lily’s chair scraping across the wooden floor. Immediately, she was at his side running her hand up and down his back as well. She felt his trembling muscles beneath her hand and her heart broke for him.

“I... was gonna wait... ‘til after the... trial.”

“Well,” Iris began, still rubbing soothing circles on his back. “Now you don’t have to wait... They’ll be here on October 5th.”

“Ohmygod!” Johnny moaned, hanging his head. “That’s less than two weeks away,” he groaned, struggling to regain his composure. “That’s... I mean, I... I need more time to…,” he swallowed hard, feeling his throat constricting. Iris didn’t know the real reason for his reluctance. “I jus’… I can’t.”

“You can... and you will. You’re stronger than you think, John Gage,” the older woman said in a firm voice, not understanding his reaction.

“Ah... Ah-ha,” he laughed sarcastically at the irony of her comments. “Yea... Strong... that’s me... I’ve been afraid of damn ghosts for the last ten years,” he grunted through gritted teeth, slamming his hand down on the counter, making the two ladies jump. In his mind’s eye, he saw the flowing white robes and hoods that covered the cowards who hid beneath them, and felt his knees tremble just from the memory.
“Johnny,” Iris said softly. “They’re flying in and they’ll be staying here. I’d like for you to stay here, too.”

“Can’t,” he said, pushing away from the counter, running his hand down his face. “I’ve got to work.”

“No, you don’t... not the whole time.”

Johnny spun around to face the two women, feeling as if the walls were closing in on him. The air became thicker and the temperature in the room seemed to rise. “What do you want from me, Iris?”

“I want you to talk to your parents, John. I want you to reconnect with them.”

Johnny ran a finger beneath his nose, sniffling. “C-can’t.”

“John.”

“I CAN’T!” he yelled, running both hands through his hair. “If you told them everything... EVERYTHING... then... they aren’t comin’ here to... reconnect,” he said, waving his arms, animatedly. “They’re comin’ here to... disown me.”

“John Gage!”

“What? You don’t believe me?”

“NO!” Iris yelled back, matching her voice to his while Lily stood silent.

“Well, it’s true. I,” he began, pointing his middle finger at his own chest, “I... I did something my... my father... will hate me for. And... I really didn’t want him to know, but... maybe you didn’t realize it, but... But you told ‘im, Iris... You told ‘im.”

“What did I tell him besides the truth? That you were threatened by the KKK and that they were threatening your parents, too. I told them the truth, Johnny. The whole goddamn TRUTH!” she spat out, not caring that her daughter was hearing her swear.

“And that’s the problem,” Johnny said, his voice gravelly. “Now they know the truth about their son... their ONLY son...” he continued mumbling something unintelligible as he walked back through the house, picking up his jacket from the back of the sofa. He hesitated at the front door with his hand poised on the knob. “I really did enjoy dinner.” He turned to look over his shoulder at the two stunned women. “I’m sorry... to both of you... You didn’t know what you were doin’, Iris. I’m sorry I blew up at you. I... I really am sorry,” he said in a fading voice as he turned the knob and jerked open the door. He had to get out of the house, get some fresh air, and figure out how he was going to face the people he loved more than life itself, no matter how they felt about him. He couldn’t keep hiding from them. At twenty-six years old, it was time for him to face his father... And accept his fate.

E!

Ron Crockett swirled the amber liquid in the bottom of the glass as he held the receiver to his ear, listening to the endless ringing of Johnny’s phone. He returned the receiver to the cradle, uttering a mumbled curse as he tossed the rest of his whiskey into the back of his mouth. He squinted his eyes as his throat protested the harsh burn that ran from his tongue down to his stomach. He leaned his head back against the pad of his favorite chair, staring at the old movie that was playing on his television set. He didn’t recognize any of the actors, but it was only on for the noise. He hated silence and he hated being alone on a Monday night. He shifted his gaze back to the telephone, wondering if
he should contact Iris before he spoke to Johnny.

“Aww, what the hell,” he muttered, flipping open the address book he always kept beside his phone. He ran his finger down the list of names until he reached the one he was looking for.

Across town, Iris was washing the dinner dishes while Lily was taking her shower. Neither of them had said very much after Johnny left. Iris knew that Lily was upset with her, but she still felt that she had done the right thing. The Gages needed to know that their son loved them enough to stay away from them, to save them from the cruelty of the Ku Klux Klan, and it was obvious that Johnny needed to reconnect with his parents; his earlier outburst was proof of that. Somewhere behind the mussed up hair, crooked grin, and macho bravado was a little boy who never really got over the sudden departure from his parents’ home when he was just a kid.

Just as she placed the last dish into the dish drain, her phone began to ring. Assuming that it was Johnny, she quickly dried her hands and answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Iris? It’s Ron.”

Iris closed her eyes and leaned against the kitchen wall; his voice was just the balm her wounded heart needed right now.

“Hi.”

The two friends talked for several minutes. The lieutenant shared Slim Smitherman’s plan, including the free trip back to Selma for she and Lily, and Iris informed him of the dinner fiasco that had occurred earlier at her home.

“Well, Caroline is doing really well at the shop. I think she’s ready for the responsibility of running it by herself for a few days. So, when would this trip take place?”

Ron cleared his throat, wishing he had another drink. “Ahem… Not sure, but Slim thinks it’ll be in a week or two.”

Iris’ hand flew to her mouth. “Oh no!”

“Is that a problem?”

“Ah… Yes…,” she managed to say, struggling to force her words past the growing lump in her throat. “That’s around the time that his parents are to arrive here in L.A.”

“Aw man,” Ron grumbled, scrubbing his face with his hand. “That means he won’t want to go to Selma then. Can’t they come sooner?”

Iris shook her head, even though Ron couldn’t see the gesture. “No… His father owns a small ranch and he’s got to take care of a few things before they can leave.”

Ron sighed into the receiver, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. “Um… I guess I need to call Slim back and-“

“Whoa, wait,” Iris interrupted, her mind quickly formulating a plan. “This might work out perfectly…”
Johnny opened the door to his darkened apartment, dropping his keys into the wooden bowl in his foyer before he turned on the lights. His sparsely decorated apartment made it easy to find the bowl without even looking, even in total darkness.

He slipped off his jacket, tossing it haphazardly towards his recliner as he headed for his refrigerator. He needed a drink to settle his nerves; he had to figure out how he was going to face his parents in a couple of weeks. He retrieved a beer, peeling off the tab and dropping it into his trash bin as he turned up the can to guzzle the frothy liquid. The shrill ringing of his telephone surprised him, causing him to strangle a bit.

“Ahua,” he coughed, reaching for the phone on the kitchen wall. He held his hand on the receiver, convinced that Iris was on the other end of the line. “Shit!” he swore, not wanting to further discuss what she had done.

He belched loudly, grateful to be alone in his apartment, then picked up the telephone on the third ring.

“Yea,” he said curtly.

“John? Hey, it’s Crockett. You got a minute?”

“O’ course,” Johnny replied, taking another large swig of his beer.

The next few minutes were spent with Ron listing all the reasons why Johnny should fly to Selma in a couple of weeks. Just as Iris had suspected, Johnny readily agreed.

“That’s great, Gage. I’m glad you’re so willing to go back there. I know it won’t be easy for you.”

“Yea, well… sometimes life ain’t easy,” Johnny mumbled, finishing his beer.

“Oh, and Iris and Lily will be going with you,” Ron added, hoping it sounded more like an afterthought than a part of the original plan.

“Ha, yea, well… They’ve got some, um, guests coming out for a visit so I doubt they’ll be able to go.”

Ron grimaced, thankful that Johnny couldn’t see his face at the moment. He knew who Iris’ guests were and he was dumbfounded by Johnny’s reaction.

“Actually, I’ve already talked to her… just now, when I couldn’t get you on the phone, and she mentioned something about her guests having to change their plans. I guess they’ll visit her later,” the clever lieutenant stated.

“Yea… I guess so,” Johnny said, shifting the receiver to the crook of his neck. Then, standing several feet away from his garbage can, he lifted his hands above his head as if making the game winning shot from half-court, and rolled his eyes when the beer can sailed in an arc across the room, clanking on the tile floor beside his intended target. He returned the receiver of the phone to his hand as he opened the refrigerator door and reached in for a second can.

“Okay, well,” Ron stammered. He had planned on having to convince Johnny to make the trip so to have him agree so quickly left the lieutenant with nothing more to say. “I’ll get back with Slim and
he’ll set it all up. Will you have trouble getting off for a couple of shifts?

“Nah, Chief McAsshole a’ready said they’d give me the time off… with pay,” the paramedic said, immediately squeezing his eyes shut. He wasn’t sure how Lieutenant Crockett felt about Chief McConnike.

Ron laughed into the phone, his whiskey lightening his mood. “McAsshole? Kind of a brazen comment to make about your superior officer, isn’t it?”

“You probly wouldn’t like you any more than he likes me,” Johnny said softly.

“Okay… I get it, man,” the ebony detective mumbled. He knew exactly what Johnny was talking about. “Don’t let ‘im get to you, John.”

“I won’t,” the paramedic replied, pulling the tab off the cold can.

Ron heard the popping noise, and the burping sounds that Johnny was trying to muffle. “And take it easy on the beer.”

“Aha, yea… okay. So, juss’ lemme know when I’m headin’ back south, a’right?”

“Will do, Gage. You take care.”

Johnny hung up the phone, clenching his jaws together tightly. His shaggy bangs were sticking to his forehead, his body temperature rising in response to his anxiety. He wanted to kick, punch, or throw something, but he couldn’t afford to damage his apartment, or his body. It looked like he would be facing his tormentor much sooner than expected. The only silver lining to the storm cloud on his horizon was that it might help him delay facing his parents, especially his father.

He grabbed an entire six pack of beer from his refrigerator and headed for his living room. It was Monday night, so he knew there would be a football game on, something that would hopefully take his mind off of his circumstances.

He punched the button on his old television set, then dropped the beer on his coffee table as he plopped into his recliner, waiting for the T.V. to warm up. He noticed his journal lying haphazardly, teetering on the edge of the coffee table. Opening another can of beer, he leaned back, waiting for the kickoff of whichever game was about to start, but his eyes kept drifting to the journal. Dr. Robertson had encouraged him to write down his thoughts and feelings, especially during times of distress. Now seemed to be just such a time.

He leaned forward, retrieving the black and white journal along with the green pen that had fallen on the floor, and turned to the first page. He read over the notes he had written previously, his thoughts drifting back through the years. When he reached the end of what he had written, he clicked on the pen and began to write. He poured his heart out on the blank pages, sharing more of himself with an inanimate object than he had ever shared with a living person.

By the time the football game was entering its second quarter, Johnny had filled up several pages of his journal, and emptied two more cans of beer. His body was relaxing under the influence of the alcohol, and his need for hiding certain elements of his past was melting away, too. He noticed his handwriting was growing sloppier as his alcohol induced buzz was increasing.

Johnny heard his telephone ringing and struggled to shift his recliner into the upright position. He stood up quickly, stumbling over his coffee table as he made his way to the telephone.

“Hel-looo,” he drawled out.
“Johnny?” Roy questioned, concerned by the sound of his partner’s voice.

“Heyyy Pally, wha’s up?”

“Um, are you okay?”

“Yup… doin’ go-oood,” Johnny stuttered around the sudden belch.

“Uh, well… I was wondering if you wanted a little OT tomorrow? I just got a call from Hookraider. His two medics want to take off, and he wanted to see if we wanted to pull a double shift.”

“Uh… I can’t… I got to… see, uh… Dr. Ro-Rober’son tom’row,” he struggled to string his words together.

“No, you don’t need to miss that… Ah, are you drunk, Junior?” Roy knew the answer, but he wondered if Johnny would tell him the truth.

“Um, yea… Li’ bit,” Johnny said, snickering uncontrollably.

“How much have you had?” Roy asked, concerned about his partner’s state of mind, knowing that Johnny had been thinking about killing himself not so long ago, and alcohol was a depressant.

“Ohhh, no’ quite ‘nough,” Johnny replied, leaning against the wall and sliding to the floor. “I ain’t had much alcohol in a… long time.”

“Well, I think you’ve had enough. Are you drinking alone?” Roy was growing more and more worried.

“Yep… Jus’ me an’… uh…,” he leaned over enough to see the television screen. He wasn’t even sure which teams were playing. He immediately recognized the uniforms of the home team. “Me an’ the lambs, uh, I mean… ahaaha… Rams,” he said, laughing hysterically and inadvertently snorting into the phone.

Roy, thinking quickly, realized that the ballgame would give him a good reason to check on his partner.

“Well, the kids and Jo are watching ‘Little House on the Prairie,’ so do you mind if I join you?”

“Nope… c’mon o’er, Pal-ly… Or should I say… Pa?” Johnny said, snickering loudly at his own drunken attempt at humor.

“I’ll see you in a few minutes… And I’ll bring you some coffee,” Roy said, hanging up the telephone.

Roy grabbed his jacket and stepped into the living room. “Jo, I’m going over to Johnny’s for a few minutes.”

Joanne looked up from the magazine she had been perusing, worry filling her green eyes. She cut a quick glance at the children who were engrossed in the television program they were watching, then looked back at her husband. “Is everything okay?”

Roy smiled at his wife, not wanting her to worry. “Yea, but Johnny’s going to have quite a headache in the morning.” He gave her a flirtatious wink, knowing that Joanne would understand. “I’m going to pick up some strong coffee on my way over.”
Joanne smiled, slowly shaking her head then returning her attention back to the magazine in her lap.

“Johnny, Johnny, Johnny,” she mumbled softly.

E!

Back at the Campbell residence, Iris hung up her telephone after talking with Roddy and Sharon Gage for the second time today. She felt certain that she could reconcile herself to Johnny by telling him that his parents would no longer be visiting him in LA because of the interview he had scheduled in Selma. But she had no intention of telling him that the District Attorney and others associated with prosecuting William Waite wouldn’t be the only people he would be seeing when he arrived in the small Alabama town.
Chapter 31

Chapter 31

By the time Roy arrived at Johnny’s apartment, the young man had lost count of the number of cans of beer he had consumed. Standing outside the apartment door, Roy could hear the noise from the game on Johnny’s television set. He knocked, hearing the sounds of his partner walking inside the small apartment.

Johnny opened the door, invited Roy inside, then turned around and attempted another jump shot, sending yet another empty beer can flying across the room and crashing on the floor beside the trash can.

“Awww, damn it! How th’ hell’d Kelly… do it?” Johnny asked in a slurring voice, turning back around to face his guest and nearly losing his balance.

“Whoa, buddy,” Roy said, trying to steady his stumbling partner without spilling the large cup of coffee he was carrying in his hand. “I think Chet was stone cold sober when he made the game-winning shot.”

Johnny arched an eyebrow in Roy’s direction, feeling the effects of the alcohol as he struggled to steady his vision. “How’d you know? You had a… bum ankle.”

Roy took Johnny by the elbow and guided him towards the sofa. “Take a seat, Junior, before you end up with a bum ankle yourself. Besides, I was able to hobble back out of the locker room, remember?”

Johnny jerked his arm away from Roy’s grasp. “Lemme go,” he groused, deliberately avoiding the hot drink Roy was offering, preferring one of the luke-warm beers from his coffee table instead. He fell heavily into his favorite chair, pulling the tab from the can and allowing the aluminum ring to linger on his index finger.

Roy, feeling frustrated by Johnny’s lack of concern about his level of intoxication, tried to take the beer away from his slurping partner.

“C’mon, Roy! Get y’own d-drink,” he stammered.

“How many have you had? You smell like a damn brewery!”

Johnny snickered. “On’y a c’uple…,” he grinned his lopsided grin at his partner. “You know e’ery drunk’s on’y had a c’uple.”

Roy, annoyed, got up and walked into the kitchen. He counted the empty beer cans lying around the trash can. Only one flattened can had seemed to find its way into the waste container.

“If my math is right, you’re on your second six-pack.” Roy waited for a moment, seeing his friend beginning to squirm around as he struggled to stand up once again.

Johnny pushed his way out of the recliner, holding onto the furniture as he stumbled down the hallway. “10-4, Ram-Rampart,” he stuttered. “Start… IV o’… brew-brewsky an’…,” he hesitated, flipping on the light in his bathroom, “an’ tran’port t’ the… the latrine,” he snickered, closing the door behind him.
Roy picked up the discarded cans, making sure to properly dispose of them, then walked back into the living room. While he waited for Johnny to return to watch the rest of the game, and hopefully sober up, he saw the open journal and the sloppy handwriting he barely recognized.

Roy knew it was wrong, but while Johnny continued bumping around in his bathroom, Roy positioned the journal to better allow him to read a few sentences of the private thoughts of his partner – and he didn’t like what he read.

Johnny stumbled out of the doorway of his bathroom, humming and singing his way down the short hallway, unaware that Roy had read the last few lines he had written. When he saw the open journal, he quickly shut it, dropping it beside his chair, away from his partner.

“Johnny?”

“Hmm?” the other man hummed his response, his demeanor suddenly growing sullen as he sank back into his chair.

“What happened at Iris’ house tonight?”

“Nothin’,” Johnny spat out, slumping down lower into his chair, staring at the commercial on his television set. He did not want to rehash the scene at the dinner table.

“Something did. When we worked off shift this morning, you were excited to be going over there. Now you’re back home, drunk off your ass, and…” Roy managed to stop himself before he mentioned what he had read in the journal.

“So… something must’ve gone wrong.”

“Me… a’right? I wen’ w’ong,” Johnny said, his voice wavering.

Roy spent the next hour and a half trying to talk to Johnny as the younger man faded in and out of an alcohol-induced daze, and between stumbling trips to the bathroom. Between the garbled bits of information that Johnny mumbled as the alcohol overtook his lucidity, Roy managed to pick up enough to have an idea of what was haunting his partner.

When Johnny’s head began to loll toward his chest and soft snores wafted across the room, Roy knew it was time to help him get more comfortable so he could sleep it off.

“Time for bed, Junior.”

Roy hoisted Johnny into a partially standing position, lifting one of Johnny’s arms around his shoulder, allowing the lighter man to lean into him as they made their way down the hall to Johnny’s bedroom. Roy undressed him, leaving him in only his boxers and tee shirt, then rolled the thin man onto his stomach to prevent aspiration. He sat on the edge of Johnny’s bed for several long minutes, until he knew his friend was asleep. He knew he couldn’t leave his best friend alone in his current condition, so he made his way back to the kitchen and called Joanne. As soon as he had assured her that he would be home early enough to shower and change for his double shift the next morning, he turned off the television set, not caring which team had won the game, and settled onto the sofa for the night. He glanced over at the journal that was leaning against Johnny’s chair. Did it hold the secret to Johnny’s sudden change in behavior? Should he violate Johnny’s trust and read more of his most private thoughts?

Roy rolled onto his side, unwilling to continue his inner struggle regarding the journal. He needed to trust his friend. Johnny had assured him that he would call Roy if he were to ever have any other thoughts of suicide. Now it was time to take Johnny at his word. Closing his eyes and uttering a silent prayer for the man snoring in the back bedroom, Roy slowly drifted off to sleep.
Several hours later, just before the first streaks of dawn made their way above the horizon, Johnny awoke with a sense of urgency. With a pounding headache, he rolled out of bed, bumping into the doorframe of his bedroom until he was able to orient himself to his surroundings.

Roy was startled awake by the sound of Johnny hitting the wall on his way to the bathroom. He immediately bolted from the sofa and rushed to his partner’s aid. Johnny grunted in surprise, his eyes wide.

“John-Johnny!” Roy said in a raised voice, managing to bring Johnny out of his sleepy haze. He saw the groggy look on Johnny’s face morph into confusion and then finally turning into recognition.

“R-Roy?”

“Yeah, it’s me… Take it easy.”

“Whacha doin’ ‘ere?”

“Well, right now, I’m helping you get to the bathroom,” Roy said, flipping on the light in the short hallway. “Come on,” he said, ushering Johnny in the right direction, noticing how his red-rimmed eyes squinted at the harsh bright light.

Johnny allowed himself to be led to the bathroom, refusing Roy’s help beyond the threshold.

Roy waited outside the door, until he heard the sound of Johnny’s relief, then leaned closer to the closed door so that his voice could be heard. “Need some aspirin?”

“Ugh… yeah,” the other man groaned, flushing the toilet. He grimaced at the noise that seemed much louder than usual, then washed his hands and made his way back to his bedroom. His head was throbbing as he pulled open the middle drawer of his chest of drawers, digging through it in search of a pair of gym shorts.

When Johnny made it out to the living room, he saw the blanket with the Native American motif crumbled at one end of the sofa. His memory began to return and he sat down heavily in his recliner.

“Aww, man. What was I thinkin’?”

Roy returned with a glass of water and a couple of aspirin, leaving the light on in the kitchen so the two could see each other without the brightness of the living room light.

“Only you can answer that one,” Roy responded.

Johnny nearly gagged as the bitter pills began to dissolve on their way down his throat. He swallowed the rest of the water in an attempt to rid his throat of the awful taste. He set the empty glass down beside his recliner and noticed the journal. Immediately an overwhelming sense of dread seemed to suck the air out of his lungs. He pressed his lips into a thin line as he picked up the journal, tossing it onto the coffee table.

“Guess you read it, huh?”

Roy fought the urge to respond in a smart aleck way. “No… I respect you too much, Johnny. Those are your private thoughts. I won’t violate your trust – ever. I’m here, if you want to tell me, but I… I didn’t read it,” he said, nodding in the direction of the journal. His comment wasn’t entirely true, but he had only read a few sentences, not the whole journal.

Johnny stared at his knees, exhaling audibly. Should he tell Roy? Would the man still be his best friend if he knew the true depth of Johnny’s failure?
“I, uh… I’ve got to go back… to Selma in a… a couple o’ weeks.”

“Why so soon?” Roy asked, worried for his partner. Was it too soon for Johnny to face the stress of the trial? He had barely recovered physically from his near-death experience at Tehachapi.

“You, ah, you ‘member those pictures?”

Roy knew exactly which pictures Johnny was talking about. “Yes.”

“Well, the FBI managed to… to develop ‘em. Seems I’m the key witness now,” he said with a nervous chuckle. “I’ll prob’ly end up givin’ a … a deposition.”

“Why?”

Johnny ran a hand through his mussed up hair. “I think the DA is tryin’ to avoid a trial.”

“You mean he wants to offer Waite a deal?” Roy questioned, feeling confused. With the pictures, it should be an open and shut case.

Johnny rubbed his temples, yawning. “I guess… Aww, hell, I dunno what he’s doin’.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back there?”

Johnny sat silently for a long moment. It was the same question he had been asking himself since he had gotten the call from Crockett. “Doubt it…” Johnny paused, exhaling loudly as he scrubbed his face with both hands. “Roy, I… I still can’t remember.”

Roy realized that Johnny was opening up to him and wanted to keep him talking. “Can’t remember what you saw that morning, or what?”

“Yea… What I saw,” Johnny replied, his eyes growing glassy as they stared at nothing in particular. “I… ‘member the smell o’ the water, the sounds o’… of fists hittin’ Phillip… I even remember the…,” he snorted at the oddity, “the taste o’ the place.”

Roy knitted his eyebrows together in confusion. “Taste?”

“Yea… Stupid, huh? I remember the taste of rottin’ wood and gritty dirt, or somethin’ like that in my mouth, but… not what I saw.”

Roy didn’t know what to make of Johnny’s memory, but he knew he needed to encourage his struggling friend. “No… No it isn’t stupid, Johnny. It’s your brain just trying to put the pieces of a traumatic event back together when it would really rather keep the memory hidden.”

Johnny tilted his head like a dog trying to figure out the origins of a curious sound. “Think so?”

“Yea… I do. I mean, I’m not a psychologist, but I know that our brains are great at protecting us. How many people have we pulled out of car accidents who were conscious or semi, at least, but when we see them later on in the hospital, they don’t remember who we are?”

“Or that they were even in an accident,” Johnny added, realizing that his partner was right. Even though Roy wasn’t the first person to tell him that, it was the first time the statement really clicked with Johnny. Roy had put it into a context that Johnny fully understood, making the younger man feel better.
“Have you seen the photographs?”

Johnny shook his head. “No… Not sure I wanna.”

“It might help you remember more details,” Roy suggested.

The two men continued talking until daylight began to appear. Roy had hoped that Johnny would tell him more about what had happened at Iris’ house, but it didn’t happen. Johnny was keeping those details to himself. Roy knew not to push, but he decided that he needed to make a phone call as soon as he was sure that Ron Crockett was awake.

“Well, I’ve got to go, Johnny. I’m working a double, remember?”

“Yea, sorry I can’t share the over-time with you, but I really need to go by Robertson’s office for that appointment, especially since I’m gonna be testifying a lot sooner than I thought.”

“What time is your appointment?” Roy asked, hoping the innocent sounding question wouldn’t reveal his intentions.

“Eleven.”

Roy looked at his watch. “Maybe you should try to get a little more sleep, then,” he suggested, pushing himself into a standing position.

Johnny followed him to the door. “Roy, I… I want to… thank you for… for your continued babysitting service,” he said with a snorting grin. He hoped Roy understood how he really felt without him having to say the words out loud.

“You’d do it for me,” the older man stated, patting his friend on the shoulder. “I hope your session goes well, and… Call me any time, okay?”

“I will,” Johnny agreed, closing the door behind Roy as the other man left the apartment.

Johnny’s headache was easing and even though he wanted to go back to bed, he picked up his journal instead. Flipping to the last page he had written on, he read over the last few sentences. The writing was hard to read, even by Johnny himself, but he could feel the desperation in his words as he read them over and over again.

“I let them down… I let my people down,” he read out loud, slamming the journal shut. He knew he needed to take the book with him to his appointment and let his psychologist read it, but he was ashamed of himself, more ashamed than he had felt in over ten years. His deeds had been exposed by Iris. No matter that she hadn’t intended to hurt him, she had brought out his greatest failure - not the failure to save Phillip’s life, but the fact that he had allowed history to be repeated. He had allowed white men to push him off his land in Montana, separate him from his family, and live his life hiding in plain sight in the bustling city of Los Angeles, the opposite of the quiet, rural reservation on which he had been born.

He thought back to his early days at the station and the antics of Chet, when the Irishman had made comments about Johnny’s Native American heritage. The others had thought Johnny had reacted too strongly, seemingly siding with Chet. Had he been too sensitive to Chet’s comments? He didn’t think so. He inhaled deeply, cleansing his lungs, sending oxygen to his brain. It all made sense now. He had reacted so strongly to Chet’s peace pipe and hatchet comments because he was feeling guilty – guilty for failing to stand up to the bullying of the Ku Klux Klan, guilty for allowing himself to be treated much the way his ancestors had been treated over a century earlier. And now his father knew the truth. John Gage was a coward, not only for not intervening in the attack on Phillip Campbell,
but for running and hiding from the KKK instead of standing up and facing them like the warrior his father had taught him to be when he was a young boy.

E!

Before Roy left home for his OT shift, he called Ronald Crockett and shared with him the things that Johnny had told him earlier.

“Roy, I did keep copies of the pictures for Johnny, but I haven’t given them to him, yet,” the dark-skinned detective sighed. “I really didn’t know if it was a good idea, or not.”

“Well, I know he’s going to see Dr. Robertson today, and I know that Johnny’s really anxious about going back to Selma because he can’t remember what he saw. Maybe if Dr. Robertson had the pictures, he could help Johnny with his recall,” Roy suggested.

“Hmmmm, I hadn’t thought about that, but you make a good point.” Ron jotted down a few notes in his pocket memo pad, then ended the call with Roy. He had a very busy day ahead, and he needed to get in to see Dr. Robertson before Johnny’s eleven o’clock appointment.

E!

By 9:00 am, Beverly Marsh had arrived at The Wellhouse to prepare for her weekly group session with former residents who still needed some support during their transition back into free living. She sat at her desk, pouring over progress reports for the ladies who were scheduled to attend. One name in particular caught her attention – Lexi Lopez.

Lexi, the sister of Marco Lopez, had made a miraculous recovery from ‘the life’ and she had credited it to her faith, her family, and her deepening relationship with Mike Stoker. Beverly knew how important all three were in the recovery of the ladies, but rarely did a resident find herself secure in all three areas. Beverly had no family support, and very little religious faith, but she had been growing more resilient since Marco had entered her life. She had always thought that she was a strong woman, and many other people told her she was, but it was the love and acceptance of a man, a truly good person, who had recently helped her in her recovery, more than anything else. Perhaps it was the fact that she was accepted by a man as more than just an object, or maybe it was being treated like a normal woman and not a woman with a sordid past. But mostly, it was the fact that Marco Lopez loved her… And she loved him.

The hardest part of her recovery had been learning to trust again, especially to trust a man. Men had hurt her, both physically and emotionally. Now she was in a relationship that fostered trust and faith, but she wasn’t being honest with Marco.

She had avoided intimacy with him for over two weeks now, and yet he hadn’t pressured her at all. She knew that he was worried about their relationship, he had even said so, but again she had avoided the difficult conversation. How much longer would he be willing to continue in a one-sided relationship? She needed just a few more days to find out if she was pregnant with his child, but keeping that information from him wasn’t doing either of them any good.

Beverly stared at the telephone on her desk. The topic for today’s group session was trust. Maybe it was time for her to take her own advice. Maybe it was time to take a huge leap forward in her own recovery and actually trust a man – totally trust him not to hurt her, not to abandon her in her time of need.

She reached for the phone, took a cleansing breath, and dialed the number she knew by heart. If she didn’t do it right now, she might not do it at all.
Marco was gathering up the supplies he needed to complete his laundry tasks for the day. He would be going back on shift tomorrow and needed to clean his apartment while he had a chance. He had just separated his dirty clothes into two groups when he heard his telephone ringing.

He dropped his dark clothes into the laundry basket then answered the telephone. “Hello?”

“Marco?”

“Hey, Beverly, how are you feeling?” he asked, still concerned for her seemingly continuous headaches.

“Um, better, actually.” She felt her pulse rate quicken and knew she had to forge forward. “I was, uh, wondering if you wanted to grab a bite to eat for lunch at the Pourhouse?”

Marco felt his heart leap into his throat. It was the first time in a couple of weeks that she had initiated anything with him. “Yes, that sounds nice. I’m just doing a little housekeeping this morning, and…” he paused, remembering that she was at work. “I, um, I thought you had group today?”

“I do, but… We’ll be finished by 11:30 am so I can get there by noon,” she said, hoping she didn’t sound as nervous as she felt.

“I’d really like to see you, babe,” Marco added, hoping that their relationship was getting past its current rocky period. He still didn’t know what he had done, but he knew he wanted to be close to her again.

“I’d like that, too,” she said, feeling her eyes stinging. “I… I owe you an apology.”

Marco closed his eyes, saying a quick ‘thank you’ prayer. “No… You haven’t been feeling well. That happens to all of us.”

“Well… Regardless, I… I want to see you and, um, maybe get us back… on track,” she said in a husky whisper, her voice cracking in spite of her best efforts to keep her emotions in check.

“Me, too. I love you, Bev,” he said, sucking in a deep breath.

“I love you, too. I’ll, um, I’ll see you at lunch, okay?”

“I’ll be there.”

When Beverly hung up the phone, she allowed her hand to cover her lower abdomen. In just a few hours she would put herself through one of the toughest tests she had faced since escaping from the world of prostitution. She would be allowing herself to become vulnerable to a man by sharing something with him that might end their relationship, but she knew she needed to do it. She would do it, and regardless of the outcome, she would be stronger for it.

E!

“Mr. Gage?”

Johnny looked up at Dr. Robertson who was standing in the open doorway of his office. He closed up his journal, having taken the opportunity to continue his writing assignment while he waited for his session, and headed towards the office.

“Hey, Doc,” he said, feeling just as anxious during this visit as he had on his first one. He had
decided to tell his psychologist about his impending return to Selma, and ask for any advice the
doctor might be able to give him.

“Have a seat,” Dr. Robertson said, gesturing into the room. When Johnny seated himself in the chair
nearest the large desk, the doctor surprised him by sitting down beside him, not in his large leather
chair. “So, how’s the assignment going?”

“Good,” Johnny said, holding up the journal. “It’s really helping me… I think.”

“In what way?”

“Well, by writing down the details, it… It almost seems like it’s a story or somethin’, you know, like
it happened to somebody else.”

“So are you remembering more details?” the psychologist asked, stretching out his arm to pick up a
large envelope from off the corner of his desk.

“Yea… kinda…,” Johnny thumbed through the pages, looking for a particular passage he had
written. Running his middle finger down the page, he tapped it when he found what he was looking
for. “Yea, here it is… I remembered the sound of three doors slamming, car doors, I mean.”

“Is this when you were hiding along the bank of the river?”

“Yea,” Johnny replied, disliking his behavior being referred to as hiding, but that was in fact what he
had been doing.

“Excellent,” the psychologist responded. “Anything else?”

Johnny shook his head, quickly closing the journal before the other man could read what he had
written.

“Naw, but… Well, see I…,” he sighed, wishing he could string his words together in a complete
sentence without sounding like a fidgeting little boy. It was exactly what he was afraid might happen
when it was time to give his testimony.

“Take your time, John. I’m not rushing you.”

Johnny looked over at the older man. “You aren’t, but… The DA in Selma is.”

“Oh?”

“I’m going back there in a week or so to testify, er… Well, to give a deposition, or somethin’,”
Johnny said, rubbing his nose nervously.

Dr. Robertson watched the non-verbal cues his patient was giving him and he didn’t like what he
saw. “You’re concerned about testifying?”

“Yea… I…,” Johnny hesitated, cracking his knuckles. “I’m… I can’t remember all the details.”

Dr. Robertson shifted in his seat, clearing his throat as he turned the envelope over in his hands.
“You told me last week that your memories are auditory and olfactory, but… not visual, right?”

Johnny swallowed hard, sucking in his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment before answering.
“Yea… I can… I can even remember the taste of… of rotten wood and gritty stuff in my mouth,
but… but I can’t remember anything I actually saw.”

“John,” Dr. Robertson opened up the envelope, removing the photos he had been given earlier. “I had a visitor before you arrived,” he quickly held up his hand to silence his patient in order to allow him to completely explain what had happened when the detective had dropped by his office. “Don’t worry, I told you that what you share with me is confidential unless you’re a danger to yourself, or others. You’ve given me no reason to violate that confidentiality.”

Johnny held his breath, wondering who had visited his psychologist. Only a few people even knew he was seeing one.

“A Lieutenant Ronald Crockett brought these to me this morning.” He held up the pictures, turning them so that Johnny couldn’t see the images on the front. “I neither confirmed nor denied that you’re my patient, but he seemed pretty certain that you were and that you had an appointment today at 11:00 am.”


“Well, it doesn’t really matter who told him, as long as it didn’t come from one of my employees. Anyway,” he continued, holding up the pictures again. “He gave me these photos, and said that he thought you might want to see them before you go to Selma; thought maybe they would trigger some memories for you.”

Johnny felt his jaw grow slack.

“Now, whether or not you look at them is entirely up to you. I will not make that decision for you. I must tell you though… they’re graphic. I do think you need to view them before you go back to Alabama. I’d hate for your first time seeing them to be under oath. But when, or even if you do, it’s going to be on your time.”

Johnny stared at the white squares the psychologist held up in his hand. He felt his respiration rate increase and the sound of blood rushing in his ears. Could he handle seeing the images again? Would that cause a deluge of unwanted images to flood his system, overwhelming him?

“I… I dunno,” he whispered, his eyes locked onto the pictures. “I-I need to see ‘em, but… I… I…”

“It’s okay to say it, John. You’re afraid, and rightfully so. There’s no shame in not wanting to return to such a horrific time in your life.”

Johnny tried to lick his lips, but found his tongue was dry. “But… I’ve got to do it… soon.”

Dr. Robertson recognized Johnny’s symptoms and quickly spoke up. “John, listen to me… Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. You’re going to hyperventilate.”

Johnny did as he was instructed, having given the same instructions to his own patients countless times. As he forced his breathing to slow down, Dr. Robertson walked him through several progressive relaxation exercises, explaining how to use them when he was feeling anxious.

“You can do these exercises anytime you need to relax, John. They really do help.” Dr. Robertson leaned back in his chair, silently watching his patient for a few moments. “I’d like to spend a few moments discussing what triggered your reaction. Is that okay with you?”

Johnny nodded his agreement, squinting his eyes closed tightly as he pondered where to begin. Deciding to simply jump in, he went on to discuss his concerns about testifying with the
psychologist, being careful not to mention his parents. He wasn’t ready to disclose his fears of facing his father. He felt a sense of relief as the session was coming to a close. He was surprising himself with how much he had shared with this man in only two sessions.

“You’re doing very well, John. Painful emotions and memories are difficult to discuss, but you’ve managed to progress much faster than I had even hoped.” He waited for Johnny’s reaction, and caught a glimpse of crimson light up his cheekbones. “We have a few more minutes so I must ask you again. Do you want to see them?” he asked, holding up the photographs.

“Maybe a couple of them.”

“Okay, why don’t I pick out a couple of the more benign ones and we’ll start there?”

Johnny nodded his agreement. He held his breath as he was given the first picture. Immediately he was transported back in time to the banks of the Alabama River in the early spring of 1965. He stared at the black and white photograph, feeling the cool morning air rushing across his scalp, the smell of the stale water, and once again the rotten taste that rested upon his lips. Everything was familiar about the scenery, but that’s all he saw – just the scenery, no images of the atrocities that had occurred there.

Johnny set the picture aside and held out his hand for the next one. Again, the black and white images morphed into the colors he remembered seeing that morning, including the pale misty fog as it clung to the surface of the water. There in the upper left corner of the photograph he could see the image of a pick-up truck backing down the earthen boat ramp.

As Johnny stared at the picture, he heard the voices of two men talking. He heard the distinct sounds of the two doors of the vehicle slamming shut and then, in the distance, the sound of a third one.

“There were two vehicles there,” the paramedic said softly, the sounds drifting from the past into his present. “Two men were in the first vehicle, the pick-up truck, and then… a third person was in the other one. And…,” another sound startled him, cutting its way through his memory. “A trunk…”

“Trunk?” the psychologist questioned, encouraging his patient to continue.

“Yea… I heard the sound of… of a trunk slamming shut… so, the second vehicle had to have been a car, must o’ been the deputy’s car.” Johnny looked up, his eyes widening. “He got somethin’ out o’ his trunk.”

“Something?”

Johnny ran his fingers beneath his chin, still staring at the images on the black and white photograph. “It was Father Mitchell. I remember hearin’ him say somethin’ ‘bout a priest.” Johnny continued searching his memory for the one item that was hiding from him. “Collar… He called him a… collar-wearin’ piece o’ white trash.”

The words still echoed in Johnny’s ears. How was it that he had forgotten them all these years when now they rang loud and clear?

“He…,” Johnny paused, staring at the rug on the floor, but not seeing it. “He didn’t pronounce ‘white’ the way that you or I would say it, though.”

“Oh?” Dr. Robertson didn’t want to say too much. His patient was remembering far more details than he had hoped this early in his therapy.

“Yea… Like it didn’t have a ‘t’ in it. It sounded more like his word was interrupted; you know, like
he was pronouncing the ‘w-h-i-‘, but then didn’t add the ‘t’ and ‘e’. It was like he was pronouncing ‘white trash’ so the two words ran together.”

“Can you say it the way you heard it?”

“Um… It was… whi-trash.”

Johnny’s mind continued to relay details about that morning that his brain had hidden deep many years before. He reached for one picture after another, remembering sounds such as a lone car passing over the bridge above him, the sound of a dog barking in the distance. He even remembered the sound of a rooster crowing as the sky became brighter. Yet the one thing he tried hardest to understand never revealed itself to him – why did he recall the taste of rotten wood and dirt, and why couldn’t he remember seeing the images that now appeared in the photographs he had taken that morning?

By the time Johnny seemed to return to the present, another half hour had passed. He glanced at his watch, seeing the time and his eyes widened.

“I’m sorry, Doc.”

The psychologist held up his hand to silence his patient. “We were making quite a bit of progress. I don’t mind our sessions going over when there isn’t someone else waiting to see me.”

“But your lunch…”

“I can eat quickly,” the older man said with a smile. “And I’m not charging you for the over time.”

Johnny stood up, extending his hand to the kindly doctor. “Thanks… I really appreciate your help.”

“You’re welcome, John. Don’t forget to schedule another session on your way out,” the psychologist said, opening the door for his patient.

Johnny nodded his agreement then headed for the receptionist’s desk, hoping that he could get at least one more session in before he had to return to the scene of the crime that had changed his life forever.

E!

Marco and Beverly ate their meal, both of them feeling the tension between them. Marco had anticipated that the lunch would go much smoother; now he was more worried than ever. He patted his lips with his napkin, then gently laid it on the table beside his plate. He looked over at Beverly’s half-eaten lunch and sighed.

“Beverly,” he said, reaching across the table to hold her hand. He felt the slight flinch as his hand grasped hers and his heart sank. “I think we need to talk.”

Beverly’s green eyes looked up at his brown ones. Her heart was thudding inside of her chest; she cleared her throat to find her voice. “Ahem, yes… I… I need to tell you something.”

Marco knitted his eyebrows together in confusion. Had he misunderstood her during their phone call earlier? Hadn’t she said that she wanted to get their relationship back on track? Had she changed her
mind? Was she about to break his heart by ending their relationship?

“Marco… Will you come over to my apartment for a little while? I don’t want to, um, to discuss it here.”

Marco inhaled deeply, reaching for the check, then standing up. He reached out his hand to assist Beverly to a standing position, scooting her chair back beneath the table and following her to the cash register. While he paid for their meal, he couldn’t help but notice the sparkling ring on the cashier’s finger. He had hoped to give one to Beverly very soon, but now he wasn’t sure. After accepting his change from the cashier, he picked up a toothpick, lodging it in the corner of his mouth. He needed something to settle his nerves and chewing on a toothpick usually seemed to help.

Stepping into the noon day sun, Beverly removed her sunglasses from the top of her head, placing them over her eyes as she walked across the parking lot. She heard Marco’s footsteps behind her and she fought a brief battle with her stomach to keep her lunch down. When she reached her car, she turned around, facing the man she loved more than life itself. Fear of what lay ahead seemed to be following her as closely as her own shadow. She briefly looked up at him.

“See you in a minute?”

“I’m right behind you,” he replied, closing her car door as soon as she was securely inside. He watched her crank up the car and slowly drive away, then turned to his own burgundy sedan. Whatever she was about to tell him, he was sure that their relationship would never be the same.

E!

Mike Stoker pulled his pickup truck into the driveway of The Wellhouse, running much later than he had intended. He had told Lexi that he would be a little late picking her up from her group session because he was taking the Captain’s exam at headquarters, but the exam had taken much longer than he had anticipated.

When he saw the shrouded look on Lexi’s face as she approached his vehicle, he felt horrible. He knew that she was upset with him, but there was nothing he could do but apologize. As she opened the door and slid in beside him, he reached out his hand to grip hers, thankful when she returned his gentle squeeze.

“I’m sorry, Lexi. The test took a lot longer than I thought it would,” he said. “Let me make it up to you by buying you lunch, okay?”

Lexi stared into her lap, thinking back over the group session. Her silence made Mike even more remorseful.

“Lexi? I’m sorry, alright? There was nothing I could do, baby. The only way that I can move up in the department is by passing the captain’s exam. Please try to understand,” he pleaded, backing out into the highway.

Lexi looked over at Mike, her face a mixture of emotions. “I know; I understand,” she said softly.

Mike stared straight ahead, making sure to focus on his driving. “Okay… Um, where do you want to eat?” he asked, still trying to understand her solemn mood.

“Can we just grab some tacos and go over to your place? I…,” she hesitated, knowing that the two of them needed to talk about where their relationship was heading, if anywhere. She had to share with him what had been bothering her for a while. She needed to follow the advice of her group counselor; it was time she talked to Mike openly about her feelings and concerns. It was time she
trusted him completely by asking him the question she really didn’t want him to answer.
Chapter 32

Mike swallowed the last of his third taco, glancing to his right to see that Lexi was only nibbling at her first one. He washed down the remnants of his meal with a long drink of his soda before backing away from the taco stand. Pulling into traffic, his mind began to wander, wondering what she was thinking. They had eaten their meal in relative silence. If the news was good, then she would have shared it with him while they had been eating lunch. That could only mean one thing – whatever she had to tell him, he wasn’t going to like it.

He flipped on his blinker, turning his pick-up into the parking lot of his apartment complex. He looked over at her once more as he eased the vehicle to a stop in his usual parking place. She seemed to be chewing on the inside of her lower lip, a habit he had noticed shortly after they had first met. It was something she did when she was anxious, and he once again realized that the impending conversation was likely going to be difficult for both of them.

He reached for the white paper sack containing the discarded taco wrappers as Lexi exited on the passenger’s side. He followed her across the courtyard to his front door, quickly slipping his key into the keyhole to unlock it. Gently, he placed his hand on the small of her back, silently encouraging her to enter his apartment.

Lexi walked into the living room, watching Mike as he quickly disposed of the remnants of their meal into his garbage can. The butterflies in her stomach continued fluttering, causing her to place a flattened hand along her upper abdomen.

When he turned around, Mike recognized her look of distress. “Lexi… Are you okay?”

“Ahem… Maybe I need some water.”

Mike quickly retrieved a glass from his cabinet, filling it with ice and water. He carried it back into his living room, placing it on a coaster on the end table beside her. “Have you been drinking enough fluids?” he questioned, noting her paleness. His protective feelings for her were much stronger than his sense of dread.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled, sipping on the cooling liquid.

Mike took a seat beside her, reaching for her forehead. He saw her flinch as his open hand neared her face, and he hesitated for a moment. Deciding not to make a big deal out of her reaction, he simply asked her a question. “Do you have a fever?”

“I… I don’t think so.”

Mike slowly rested the back of his hand against her brow. “No… You don’t feel too warm… Have you been getting enough slee-sleep?” he asked around a deep yawn.

“Sounds like you’re the one not sleeping,” she commented, thankful for the opportunity to change the conversation as she took another drink of her water.

“I stayed up late studying for the exam,” he explained.
Lexi felt terrible for not asking him about the exam sooner. She had been so caught up in her own worries that she hadn’t even thought to ask him about his own. “So... how do you think you did?”

Mike, beginning to relax a little with the gentle flow of their conversation, began rubbing the back of his aching neck with one hand as he stretched it to one side. “Okay, I think. I mean, you never really know until the scores come out, but I feel like I got a good score.”

Lexi returned the glass to the coaster, turning slightly to her right. “Neck sore?”

“Yea,” he commented, stretching his muscles as he lowered his chin towards his chest. “I sat at my table reading for several hours yesterday and didn’t get up to stretch enough, I guess. I think I better take some aspirin,” he said pushing himself off the sofa.

Mike walked into his kitchen, removing a medicine bottle from his cabinet above the refrigerator. She hadn’t yet started the conversation which was making him even more nervous. The tension in his back and shoulders seemed to be worsening with his growing anxiety.

“Do you need a couple, Lexi?” he called out, remembering that she wasn’t feeling well.

Lexi rubbed her temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache. “Yes, maybe that would help me, too.”

Mike returned, passing her the bottle of aspirin. “Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

Lexi tossed a couple of pills into the back of her throat, washing them down with the remainder of her water. “Oh, it’s nothing really. Why don’t I give you a neck rub?”

Mike cut his crystal blue eyes at her, lifting his eyebrows. “I’d love that, but you can talk and me a massage at the same time, right?” He wasn’t going to dismiss her request for a conversation.

“I suppose,” she said, sounding a bit disappointed. “You’ve done so much for me... a massage is the least I can do to repay you,” she commented, shifting her position. “Why don’t you lay on your stomach and let me see if I can work some of that soreness out.”

The thought of a massage from his girlfriend was music to Mike’s ears. He quickly tugged his tee shirt over his head, folding it neatly before placing it on the coffee table. Lexi got down on her knees beside the sofa, allowing Mike to stretch out his long frame.

She felt him shiver beneath her touch when she laid her hands along his naked shoulders. Gently, she began to knead the tight flesh along his neck and upper back. His skin was warm, and as she ran her hands up and down his muscles, her mind began to wander. What would it feel like to be the recipient of this kind of attention? Never had a man touched her in such a tender manner, and she wondered if this was what intimacy was like? Would she ever know the kind of relationship she so desperately craved?

Mike felt like he was in heaven. Her touch was soft, and yet firm enough to relax his tense muscles. She seemed to know exactly where he needed the most attention and he couldn’t stop the soft moans of pleasure that escaped from his lips. He had been wanting to feel her touch, the softness of her caress, but he was still unsure of himself. Had Lexi been any other woman, he would have known how to proceed with the physical side of their relationship, but she wasn’t like the other women he had dated. He had never dated a woman who had been so broken, so hurt by men in her past. As much as he longed for her, he needed to wait, to be patient with her. He needed to allow her to take the lead, to set the tempo of the progression of their relationship, and he had vowed not to push her into anything she might not be ready for. He and Marco had talked about how Marco’s relationship...
with Beverly had progressed more slowly than the lineman had wanted, but it had been necessary. Beverly had a difficult time distinguishing between intimacy and sex, and Mike was wondering if Lexi might be dealing with those same issues.

“Ohmygod, baby,” he groaned, feeling the hardness of his shoulder muscles melt southward, settling in his lower anatomy. “You have amazing hands.”

Lexi smiled to herself as she continued to massage his chiseled muscles. She loved the feel of his strong back, and she thought of how these same muscles had carried her to safety when Ricardo had tried kill her.

“Ohmmmm,” he hummed deeply in his throat, feeling the tension being released as she continued. “Thank you... so much,” he drawled out, feeling his eyelids growing heavy.

“You like?” Lexi smiled to herself, continuing her ministrations.

“Mmmhmm... I love,” he groaned again, his breathing slowing. “Now what was it you wanted to talk about?”

It wasn’t just the massage he loved. Mike Stoker loved Lexi, but he wasn’t quite ready to say the words out loud. He didn’t know how she might react. She had been tricked into thinking a man loved her when she was a young teenager. That man had exploited her vulnerability. Was she ready to trust a man again?

Lexi watched Mike’s handsome face relaxing along with his shoulder muscles. “I just wanted to… to let you know how much I appreciate what you’ve done for me and... and how I enjoy spending time with you.”

She was making him feel good, and that made her feel a contentment she hadn’t felt in a very long time. She refused to spoil the moment with her question. As his breathing slowed, her touch became lighter until she heard Mike releasing a series of soft steady snores.

Lexi remained kneeling beside the sofa for a few moments, gazing at Mike’s sleeping form. Something inside of her wanted to curl up beside him, to join him in his slumber, within his protective arms. Being held in the arms of a man of Mike’s stature and musculature was both alluring and frightening to her.

Too many times when she had been working the streets, she had found herself within the grasp of a stranger, crushed against his body as he assaulted her. She had learned early on not to fight against these perpetrators. Her will to survive was stronger than her desire to protect her body from being violated, and so she had learned to allow the aggressors to do what they wanted with her. Sometimes she was paid for her ‘service,’ but most times she was not. She couldn’t report the assaults. Prostitution was illegal and most people, law enforcement included, didn’t believe that a prostitute could be raped. Those episodes had left her with no option but to continue on working, despite the pain and lack of medical care, until she had earned enough money to return home to Ricardo.

Lexi blinked her eyes to force the memories back into the recesses of her mind. Those days were behind her now. The man who lay slumbering peacefully in front of her would never do that to her. Of that she was certain, but where did he want their relationship to go? That was the question she wanted to ask, but hadn’t been able to summon up the courage to do so. What if he only wanted to be friends? Could she handle that kind of rejection? She wanted more. She reached out with tentative fingers, gently brushing the light brown hair away from his face. Touching him felt... She struggled to find the right word to describe her feelings. Comforting? Contentment? No, there was only one word that accurately describe how it felt to touch Mike... Perfect, it felt perfect.
Mike didn’t know how long he had been asleep, but a soft whisper-light touch on the side of his face brought him back to consciousness. His eyes fluttered, then opened just in time to see Lexi jerking her hand away from him. He recognized the look on her face as one of embarrassment, as if she had done something wrong by stroking his brow.

He adjusted his position on the sofa, moving the small pillow to allow his head to be more comfortable. His blue eyes looked deeply, longingly into the brown ones of the woman he loved. He saw the uncertainty there, and he longed to take away her insecurities. As he rolled onto his side, he spoke no words, allowing the silence between them to linger, as if it offered a buffer of protection for her soul. When she didn’t move, he slowly reached out to her face, carefully running his fingers along her soft cheek. He curled a lock of dark hair behind her ear.

“That was the most wonderful massage I’ve ever received,” he whispered, coarsely. “You have such a great touch.”

Lexi’s heart was pounding inside her chest. Her eyes were drawn to his naked chest, but the fear she usually felt in the presence of a partially clothed man was beginning to fade away. This was not a john she was kneeling beside. This was Mike... Her Michael. She stared into blue eyes, quickly darkening with a desire she recognized, but no longer feared.

“So do you,” she said softly, her voice somewhat husky. His mere presence was causing her own desires to surface, but would he want her in that way? She didn’t know.

Mike licked his lips, pushing himself into a reclining position with his upper back leaning into the corner of the sofa. He opened his arms to her. “Join me?”

Lexi hesitated, unsure of what he expected from her.

“I just want to hold you, baby, while you finish telling me what you wanted to talk about. Is that okay?” When Lexi sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, he added. “I’ll put my shirt on first.”

This was what Lexi had been wanting to feel for a long time. She had always wondered what it was like to be close to a man without it being completely sexual. While every cell in her body was screaming at her to run, her heart and mind were telling her that it was time to trust. In spite of the adrenaline rush, she acquiesced.

“It’s okay, Michael. You don’t have to put your shirt back on. I... I like you just like this,” she responded, climbing onto the sofa with her back against his.

Mike slowly wrapped his arms around her so as not to alarm her, then kissed her lightly on top of her head. He didn’t move, allowing her to decide how closely she snuggled up to him. Encouraged by her warmth as she drew nearer to him, he ran his hand across her forearm, feeling the goosebumps along her soft skin.

“Are you cold?”

“Not really,” she said, shivering slightly.

Mike reached to the back of the sofa, removing the afghan and spreading it over both of them. He knew that there was another possibility for her goosebumps, and even though he wasn’t the most talkative man in the world, he decided that this was the time to tell her what had been on his mind. Perhaps that would help lead her into the conversation she had asked to have with him.

“Lex... I know that you’ve been hurt badly and... and this is probably uncomfortable for you...”
“I’m okay,” she lied, still unable to put her own needs ahead of Mike’s.

“No... You’re not okay, baby, and I know it. But I want you to know how honored I feel that you trust me enough to lay here with me like this and...,” Mike hesitated, inhaling the scent of her shampoo and kissing her once again on top of her head. “And I’ll never betray that trust. Just... Just please let me hold you here for a little while... Let me show you that... that you can trust me not to hurt you.”

Lexi felt the backs of her eyes begin to burn. He understood her, truly understood her. How was it possible? The lump that was lodged in her throat refused to be budged and so, she merely nodded her head in affirmation.

Mike held her for several moments in total silence while the words she had spoken earlier were haunting him, and he knew he needed to discuss them with her.

“I need to ask you something, and I need for you to be honest with me, okay?”

Still unable to speak, she nodded her agreement.

“The things I do for you and Antonio are because I WANT to do them… Did you rub my shoulders as a, um, payback, or... or did you want to?” Mike pressed his lips together, grateful that she couldn’t see his face. He desperately needed to know the truth from her. Was she treating him this way because she felt that she owed him a debt, or did she really want to spend more time alone with him? He hoped it was the latter.

Lexi considered her options and knew that she needed to be truthful. He was giving her the opportunity to begin the conversation she had been avoiding. His response would also give her the answer she so desperately wanted. “Um... I...” She closed her eyes, determined to continue on. “I wanted to, Michael. I wanted to... to...”

“To what?”

“I wanted to know... how it felt to... to be close, you know?”

Mike considered her words. “To be intimate without sex?”

She nodded her head.

“How does it feel?” he asked, curious about what she was experiencing. “You can be honest with me; it won’t hurt my feelings.”

“It feels... Safe.” That was it. That was the word she had been searching for. “I feel safe lying here with you.”

Mike squeezed her a little tighter, closing his eyes. “You are safe, baby.”

Following his lead, Lexi continued the conversation. “What are you feeling?”

“Peace... Like there’s no other place I’d rather be than with you,” he said, softly stroking her forearm with his thumb.

Lexi twisted her body enough to allow her ear to lay on his chest, listening to his heart beat and his methodical breathing. She was relishing the contentment she was feeling, but she still needed to know the answer to the rest of the question that had been plaguing her.
“Michael… Are we… I mean, where are we… going?”

Mike inhaled deeply, unsure of what she meant. “You mean, us… as in… our relationship?”

“Yes,” she responded, leaning into him a little more.

“Well, I’d like for us to be in an exclusive relationship. You know, not seeing other people.” Mike used the crook of his index finger to lift her chin so that he could see her eyes. “That’s what I want, but it isn’t entirely up to me. What do you want, Lexi?”

Mike felt her trying to pull away from his touch, wanting to avoid eye contact. He placed his hand gently on her cheek, using his fingers to brush her hair away from her face. “Please don’t look away. Just tell me the truth. Is that what you want? Do you want to keep seeing me, just me, and… and let’s see where this goes? No pressure, I promise.”

Lexi leaned her face into his hand, staring through his crystal orbs into his soul. “Yes,” she whispered, turning more to face him just as he lowered his face to hers.

The kiss was brief but when she turned her body toward him, she felt his erection pressing against her through his jeans. With a knowing smile, she ran her fingers along his lower belly. “I can take care of that for you.”

Mike gulped, shifting his hips into a more comfortable position. He reached for her hand, afraid that she might go even lower, and a woman’s touch in such an intimate place was something he hadn’t felt in a very long time. Pulling her hand up to his mouth, he softly kissed her knuckles. “I would love that, but… I’m okay.”

Lexi pulled her hand away from him, feeling the sting of his rejection. “But… you just said that… that you only wanted to see me?”

Mike sat up straighter, allowing her to sit beside him instead of leaning against him. They faced each other, neither sure of how the smooth conversation had turned so suddenly.

“I do! I do only want to see you, but not just for… physical satisfaction,” he said, trying to explain himself while his clothing had his manhood in a bind.

“Oh,” she said, her eyes dropping to her lap. “It’s because I’m… a… I was a…”

“Don’t say it,” Mike said, placing his index finger on her lips. “What you are is a survivor… a strong woman… and… and someone I’m… falling in love with,” he mumbled.

“But you don’t want me to offer you a little, um,” she pointed at his crotch. “A little relief like a real girlfriend would do,” she spat out, disappointed that he didn’t want their relationship to progress in a physical way.

“Yea, you could give me a little relief, as you call it, but what would it do for you, huh? How would you feel when I took you home after a quick lay?”

Lexi sat back stunned by his question. How would she feel? The silence between them hung like a thick fog, but Lexi was beginning to see Mike’s point. Maybe she wasn’t ready for a sexual relationship with a man she loved. And she did love Mike Stoker.

Mike saw her swallowing hard and knew he had hit a nerve. “Was this what you wanted to talk
Lexi felt her lower lip begin to tremble. She shrugged her shoulders, her voice raspy. “I… I dunno.”

Mike thought he understood what her concerns were, so he decided to be the one to initiate the conversation. “Lexi… Do you want us to make love?”

Her hair began to fall into her face and she quickly brushed it away, nervously curling it repeatedly behind her ear. “I… I just…”

Mike waited patiently, but she seemed unable to voice her need. “If we make love now, I’m afraid that you’ll feel used. I couldn’t live with myself if that happened. I do want to make love to you, just… just not now… not yet. Lexi,” he said, grateful when she looked up at him. “Baby, you mean so much more to me than… than a little sexual relief,” he said with a knowing grin. “If you want more, um, intimacy, then I’m great with that. In fact, I’d really like that, too.”

“But… What about your… you know?”

“My boner?” he asked, injecting a little humor into the serious conversation. He felt himself relax at her giggle. “I’ll be fine, baby.” He reached out to her, pulling her into a warm embrace. “Besides… it’ll return when the time is right for both of us.”

Lexi turned her face upwards, meeting Mike’s lips with her own. She lifted her hands, placing one around the back of his neck and running the other one through his course chest hair. The kiss deepened, and Mike’s tongue sought entrance. She quickly parted her lips, granting him the access they both seemed to desire. As he leaned his back against the corner of the sofa, bringing Lexi along with him without breaking the kiss, Mike Stoker began to think that the right time might come sooner than he had anticipated.

By the time Marco arrived at Beverley’s garage apartment, she was already at the top of the stairs, unlocking her apartment door. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he quickly followed her into her small residence. When he closed the door behind him, he saw her setting her purse on her kitchen counter then quickly grabbing onto the back of a chair and grimacing.

“Bev?” he asked, reaching for her elbow, concerned that she might fall. “Are you alright?”

Beverly nodded, closing her eyes as she pulled the chair away from the table and sat down.

Marco followed her lead, taking a seat then reaching for her hand. “Is it another headache?” he asked, worriedly.

Again she nodded, pressing her fingers to her mouth as a wave of nausea began to build.

“Can I get you something?”

Once the nausea began to subside a little, she stared down at the table. “Um, maybe a little ginger ale. There’s some in the refrigerator.”

She continued staring at the same spot while Marco rushed about in her kitchen. Quickly a glass
appeared in front of her, filled with the sparkling liquid. She tentatively took a few sips, relaxing a bit as the refreshing drink began to settle her stomach. She thought about how kind Marco had always been to her, remembering a time in her life when no one cared how she felt. Would he continue to be this attentive when she told him the likely reason for her headaches and nausea?

“Please let me take you to Rampart. We both know the medical staff there; they’ll be able to figure out what’s causing you to feel this way.”

Beverly looked up into his caring face. The backs of her eyes began to sting, but she had to forge ahead. She couldn’t back out now.

“I… I think I know what’s causing it. I’ll… I’ll know for sure in a couple of days, but…”

Marco’s features grew more stern. Something was very wrong.

“Beverly… You’re worrying me. What’s going on?” He couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps she was suffering from migraines, or something even more debilitating.

She squeezed her eyes shut, wrapping both hands around the cold glass. She had to get this over with now.

“Marco… I… I think I’m pregnant.”

“What?” he asked, his heart racing. She had told him that she was taking birth control pills, so he had never used a condom when they had been intimate. In fact, they had only had sex a few times.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered, pushing the glass away from her so she could rest her elbows on the table, burying her face in her hands. “I’m so… sorry… I… I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Wait a minute…”

“It was when we went to Tehachapi to get Johnny and Lily. Everything seemed to happen so quickly and… and when we got back we were both tired so I stayed with you and-“

“I remember, but-“

“And… I forgot to take my pill, two of them.”

Marco leaned back in his chair, realizing that that was the last time they had been sexually active. Her headaches had seemed to begin almost as soon as they had returned from the mountain. He quickly did the math, realizing that her symptoms had started too soon afterwards to be the result of a pregnancy.

“But, Beverly, you’ve been sick since then, so… it can’t be from a pregnancy, can it? Isn’t it too soon?”

She didn’t look at him, sensing that he was trying to convince them both that she wasn’t pregnant, but her body was telling her otherwise. “Look, Marco, I know this wasn’t what you wanted, and I’m not asking you for anything, alright? But I’m NOT going to terminate this pregnancy!” she shouted, slamming her hand down on the table, jarring some of the ginger ale out of the glass. In the two weeks since suspecting she might be pregnant, she had grown to love the child she wasn’t even sure she was carrying. Was she finally going to have someone who might love her unconditionally? Someone who wouldn’t leave her like she was sure Marco was about to do.

“I didn’t ask you to!” He retorted, just as forcefully. The unexpected turn of events had caught him
off guard and he wasn’t handling it well; his mind was spinning in a multitude of directions.

“Like I said, I won’t ask you for anything. I’ll raise this baby by myself. I won’t sue you for child support, or—“

“Wait just a damn minute,” he shot back, his own anger at her growing. She was trying to leave him out of the experience. “If I’m going to be a father, then I want to be a good one! I,” he continued, pointing a finger at his own chest. “I want to provide for my child; I want to be a part of his life. I am NOT going to walk away from my responsibility.”

“YOUR responsibility?” she scoffed, feeling a mixture of emotions that she couldn’t quite explain. “It was MY responsibility to take the goddamn pill and I forgot, alright? That’s on ME, not YOU! I’LL deal with this myself!”

Beverly couldn’t believe the words that were spewing out of her own mouth. She didn’t mean what she was saying, so why was she saying it? More than anything else, she wanted Marco to take her in his arms and promise her that this wouldn’t change their relationship, but he hadn’t done that. Instead, they were yelling at each other. She wrapped her arms protectively around her midsection as if she were protecting their child from his wrath.

“Just go,” she whimpered, not looking at him. She couldn’t handle the disappointment she knew was written on his face.

“No.”

“I said leave, Marco. This is my apartment and I don’t… want you… here… any… more,” she cried.

Marco could hear the pain in her voice and he knew that no matter what she was saying, she really didn’t want him to leave her. If she hadn’t wanted him to be a part of the baby’s life, then why would she have told him about the potential pregnancy?

“C’mon,” he said reaching over and placing his hand along her upper back. “I’m not leaving you, Beverly, certainly not in this condition.”

“I’m not the first woman who’s ever been knocked up; I think I can handle it,” she said curtly.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. You’re upset right now, and I’m staying until I know that you’re okay,” he explained, rubbing soothing circles along her back.

“Yea, well that won’t be for two more days,” she sniffled.

“Why two more days?”

“Because I have an appointment with my gynecologist in a couple of days. He’ll do the test to confirm the pregnancy. I don’t expect you to stick around that long,” she commented, running her fingers beneath her eyes.

“What kind of a man do you think I am?” Marco questioned, not liking the sarcasm she was using to describe him.

“A normal one,” she said, reaching for her glass of ginger ale. Her queasiness was returning and her throat was dry.
“So I’m just an average Joe, huh?” he asked, moving his hand away from her and running it nervously across his chin. “You think I’m the love-‘em-and-leave-em type, right?”

Beverly’s tough exterior began to crumble. The Marco she knew wasn’t like the other men she had encountered in her life. He was completely different. He was kind, gentle, responsible… Responsible, unlike her. She had forgotten her birth control pills. That was irresponsible. Why would he want to stay in a relationship with someone as irresponsible as her, even if she was pregnant?

“No,” she whispered, her voice sounding as weak as she felt. “No, I know you’re not that type of man. I just… I don’t want you feeling like you have to take care of a baby just because I screwed up. I don’t want you to think that I tried to trap you, because I didn’t. I never would.”

“I don’t feel like I HAVE to take care of a baby, and I don’t think that you screwed up. And I don’t think that you trapped me.”

Beverly felt his warm hands squeezing her own smaller ones. “Beverly… do you love me?”

His question caught her by surprise. She turned to look at him and saw nothing but sincerity on his handsome face. “Yes.”

He held both of her hands in his own, tugging on her arms a little so she would turn to the side. “And I love you. And if you’re pregnant, which we don’t even know for sure yet that you are, but if you are,” his face broke into a tender smile. “Then there’s a brand new life that’s going to come into the world that is a product of our love. That’s a reason to celebrate, not to be angry.”

“But Marco, I know how much family and church mean to you. Everyone will be so disappointed that I let this happen out of wedlock,” she cried.

“Sshhh,” he said, drying her tears with his thumb. “You didn’t LET this happen. It happened because we love each other, and if there is a child on the way then that child is physical proof of our love. Beverly, I’ve been trying to decide how to do this and,” he looked down, chuckling a little. “And I have to admit that this wasn’t how I had imagined it.” He looked back up into her red-rimmed green eyes. “I’ve been looking at rings lately, and I’ve found the perfect one, but… things didn’t seem to be going so well between us so I was afraid you’d say no, so that’s why I haven’t asked but,” he murmured, slipping from his chair onto one knee. “Beverly Marsh, will you marry me?”

Beverly’s eyes welled up with tears as she looked into the dark eyes of the man she loved. She really wanted to believe that the words he was saying were true, that he had been wanting to propose to her before he even knew that she might be pregnant. But that was too good to be true, wasn’t it? He was a Prince Charming, but she definitely wasn’t Snow White.

“Bev?” Marco questioned, concerned by her lack of enthusiasm.

“Marco… I… I can’t,” she whispered, closing her eyes and burying her face in her hands.

Marco didn’t try to hide his disappointment. Slowly he got off of one knee and returned to his seat. “Why not?”

Beverly swallowed hard, fighting with her constricting throat. “Be-cause… You’ll… resent me… in years to come… for… ma-marrying me… out of obligation.”

“Obligation? Beverly, I just told you that I had been looking at rings BEFORE I even knew that you might be pregnant. This isn’t about a baby… It’s about US… OUR future to-together,” he said, his voice cracking at the end as he fought with his emotions. “Whether there’s a baby on the way… or
Marco saw the stern expression on her face, the firmly set jaw, and he knew that her answer was final. She had rejected his proposal. He stared at her for a few moments, in shock at what he was hearing. Feeling dejected, the lineman stood up, patted gently on her shoulder, then walked towards the door. With his hand resting on the door knob, he turned back around to look at her one last time. “I do love you, Beverly, but… I guess my love isn’t enough for you.”

Beverly’s hand flew to her mouth as she choked back a sob. Why had she rejected his proposal? To become Mrs. Marco Lopez was something she had been dreaming about for some time. But it wasn’t a title she would be able to accept out of pity or guilt. She laid her head down on the cool kitchen table, listening as he cranked up his car and drove away, leaving her broken-hearted and alone… or was she?

E!

Lily slammed the receiver down onto the cradle of the phone hanging on the wall of the work area at Bloomers. “Where is he?” she groused.

Iris looked up from her desk where she had been perusing through the mail. She removed her reading glasses from their perch on the end of her nose.

“He’s a grown man and today is his day off. I’m sure he has errands to run,” she answered, trying to convince herself as well as her daughter that Johnny was okay. The dinner the previous night had been a total disaster and Iris knew she was the one to blame. She also remembered that Johnny had been suicidal not so long ago and the thought that he may have harmed himself was weighing on her like a ton of bricks.

“I’m worried, Momma. I’ve been calling him since ten o’clock.” She glanced up at the wall clock. “That was almost four hours ago.”

“Do you want me to call Roy to go check on him?”

Lily considered her mother’s offer, but she had another idea. “May I borrow the car?”

Iris felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her system. She couldn’t let Lily go to Johnny’s apartment alone, but she also knew that Johnny wouldn’t want to see her after she had arranged for his parents to come to Los Angeles for a visit. “I’ll take you over there as soon as Caroline gets back from her delivery run.”

“Momma… I don’t think he’ll be very happy to see you.”

The sound of the bells jingling on the front door pulled the attention of both women to the front of the store. A huge smile spread across Lily’s face when she saw the object of her concern walking into the store.

“Johnny!”

A very sweaty John Gage walked between floral arrangements on his way to the back of the store. His face held a forlorn expression as he approached the work station. “Aft…afternoon,” he heaved between deep inhalations.

“Out for a run?” Lily asked, stepping around the counter to greet him.

“Yea… Dr. Robertson… said it… would help me… so… I figured I’d… see how far… I could go.”
“How about some water?” Iris asked, already heading to the sink with a large glass.

“That’d be… great.”

Lily, feeling encouraged by the civil conversation thus far, offered him a big grin. “Did you run all the way from your apartment?”

“Yea…”

“That’s at least three miles,” Iris responded, handing him the glass of cooling liquid.

Johnny nodded, using his forearm to wipe the sweat from his brow before reaching for the proffered glass. “Yep.” There was a tense moment of silence before Johnny broke it. “Um, I wanted to apologize for my behavior last night.”

“No need, John. I shouldn’t have contacted them without your knowledge. I was just hoping to surprise you, that’s all.” Iris felt a rush of warmth cover her like a thick blanket on a cold winter’s night.

“You did… but… Um…,” he hesitated, unsure about how much to tell Iris. He glanced over at Lily who was staring at the work table. He could tell by her expression that she hadn’t revealed his secret shame to her mother. Maybe it was time Iris knew.

“I’d like to treat you ladies to dinner tonight,” he blurted out. At least the delay would give him a few more hours to gather his thoughts. He would share with them the details of his memories, and he hoped they might be able to somehow help him fill in the gaps. He needed his memory to be completely intact before he made the long journey back to Selma, Alabama in just a few short days.

“That isn’t necessary,” Iris responded.

“Aww, c’mon. I don’t cook much, but I can make a salad and we can order pizza,” he suggested. “I… I’d really like to talk to you about last night.”

“We’d love to,” Lily answered for them both, worried that her mother was about to decline.

The two women exchanged glances, then both looked back at Johnny. His crooked grin warmed both their hearts, but Iris felt her heart melting.

“She’s right… We’d love to. What time?”

Johnny passed the empty glass back to Iris. “Six o’clock,” he answered. “And thanks for the water.”

“Would you like a ride back home?” Lily asked.

Johnny leaned down, kissing her on the cheek without touching her with his sweaty face. “Thank you, but I need to run back. I think Robertson’s right. I do feel better.”

He backed away from the table, waving his goodbye. “See ya in a few hours,” he stated, turning and heading out the door.

Iris saw the blush warming her daughter’s face. Lily still loved Johnny, and Iris hoped that those feelings might be reciprocated by the handsome paramedic.

Johnny jogged in place at the cross-walk waiting for the traffic light to change. He had three miles to
consider what he would discuss with the Campbell ladies during their pizza dinner tonight.

E!

As the late afternoon sun began to paint the Alabama sky in vibrant hues of magenta and orange, Moses Pettway, the District Attorney for Dallas County, perused through the murder report and pictures piled up on his desk. He grimaced as he picked up the photograph of the victim, Phillip Campbell. As he looked at the photographs of the deceased man, he grimaced. Not only had the investigation been shoddy, there had never been anyone charged with the murder. Now he was in the position to represent the man whose final moments had been so horrific, and he was staring at the images of the men who were responsible for the crime. William Waite’s face was somewhat recognizable in the black and white photos, and the police chief who had been the whistle-blower had identified him during his deathbed confession. But Waite and the chief had not committed the crimes alone.

Moses reached across his desk, opening up a manila folder with the words MITCHELL 1965 on the label. Until the Gage photos had surfaced, the two cases hadn’t been linked together. Now that the photographs were in the possession of the district attorney’s office, it was obvious that the two cases were linked by more than just their date of death. Moses was left to contend with the facts that there were three perpetrators, not two as he had originally believed, and the second victim was most likely a homicide, not a suicide as the original autopsy report had determined. Deciding that his best chance of getting a conviction was to try the two cases together, he was left wondering if William Waite would be willing to face a jury alone, or would he reveal the identity of the third man? If not, would returning to the scene of the crime help John Gage remember the details that seemed to have eluded his memory thus far?

Moses inhaled deeply, staring at the back of the nameplate on his desk. He had a responsibility to the people of Dallas County, especially the two men who had died a decade earlier. Pressing his lips into a thin line, he rubbed his forehead with his fingers. Did he have the courage to face the men of the secret society responsible for the crimes? He thought about the men and women who had braved the authorities and made the journey from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 to fight for their civil rights. Even though their first attempt had failed, they had been undeterred; eventually marching from Selma to the steps of the state capital in Montgomery. Moses knew that he had to push forward just like the marchers had done. Even though he might not win, he still had to try; he owed it to the two men who had died that day.

He glanced at his watch just as his secretary knocked on his door. Looking up, he saw the stern look on the blonde woman’s face.

“Mr. Wilson is here,” she announced.

Moses stood up, adjusting his tie. “Send him in, please.”

The booming voice of the infamous defense attorney arrived before the man entered the office. “Weelll, Moses,” he drawled out, refusing to shake the extended hand of the district attorney. “We meet again,” he exclaimed, taking a seat in front of the large wooden desk, dropping his briefcase beside his chair.

“That we do,” the DA responded, resuming his seated position.

“Don’tcha jus’ love the discov’ry process,” he commented with a sarcastic grin.

Moses could feel his heart beating in his throat as his anxiety level rose. The man seated before him was an arrogant man of wealth and privilege, well known throughout the state as the best defense attorney around. There was a running joke in the area that criminals would retain his services before they committed their crimes. Sometimes Moses wondered if that was actually true. Lane Wilson’s
disdain for, and determination to intimidate Moses was obvious, but the younger man was unphased. Even though his mouth was growing dry while his forehead was growing damp, he remained stoic.

“I do when I’ve got the goods on the defendant.”

“Now we’ll jus’ hafta see ‘bout that, won’t we?” Wilson laughed, reaching out his hand for the large envelope Moses was handing over to him.

“I think you’ll see what I mean when you look at those pictures of your client,” Moses commented, his dark eyes watching as the other man removed the gruesome pictures.

The DA sat back in his chair, watching the defense attorney as he scanned the pictures. The other man’s mouth began to twitch and the color drained from his round face, making his cheeks match the graying color of the hair along his temples. Tiny beads of sweat popped out across Lane’s forehead, causing Moses to lean forward across his desk.

“Almost as good as a confession, don’t you think?” he suggested, lifting his eyebrows.

“Um… Ahem.”

The defense attorney struggled to find his voice, something that made Moses take notice. This was not the first time the two attorneys had been opponents. Usually the older man was unshakeable, but that wasn’t the case this time.

“This proves nothin’,” he mumbled, shoving the pictures back into the envelope haphazardly.

“It proves your client assaulted the man who was found dead, hanging from a tree in that same location just a short time later.” Moses interlocked his fingers, staring at the other man. “And the young man who took those pictures is willing to testify against your client.”

“You s-sayin’ you’ve got an eyewitness?”

“Yes… And we both know that your client knows who the other man is,” he said, tapping his index finger on his own copy of the photographs. “I want to know the identity of the third man involved in killing both Campbell and Father Mitchell,” he said, waiting to see how his statement would be refuted.

“Nobody killed that priest… He killed himself. Ev’rybody knows that.”

“I don’t know that,” the DA said. “I only know what those pictures and my eyewitness tell me,” he said, knowing that he was stretching the truth about his evidence. Could Wilson tell he was bluffing?

Lane Wilson felt a heaviness in his chest that he had never felt before. His throat seemed to be closing and he was struggling to catch his breath. Had there really been a witness to the events of that morning? Why hadn’t the man come forward before now? “Eyewitness, huh?”

“That’s right, Mr. John Gage. He was a young man who came here from Montana during the marches… taking pictures. He just happened to be along the river that morning.”

“Wh-ah… Where’s his statement?” Wilson managed to ask, rifling through the papers.

“Why don’t we depose him? He’ll be here in a couple of days,” Moses said, feeling a little more confident. “He’s flying in from Los Angeles where he works as a fireman and paramedic. In other words, he’s a well-respected member of his community. I mean, who doesn’t trust a fireman?” he asked, staring at the older man until the defense attorney finally broke eye contact.
“Are you sure you wanna bring all this back up? Think about the pain you’ll cause Kizzy Campbell by makin’ her relive her son’s death, ‘specially when you won’t win this case.”

“She’s had to live with it every day for the last ten years. At least when it gets brought up this time, it’ll be because justice will be served.” He steepled his fingers beneath his chin, more to anchor his own trembling hands than to give his opponent a pose of confidence.

“Are you sure ‘bout that? I’m quite certain I can find an alibi for my client, one that a jury is more likely to believe than your out-o’-town-kid. I’m pretty damn good at defendin’, ya know?” the smug attorney spat out, having regained his composure.

“And I’m pretty damn good at prosecuting,” Moses replied, never cracking a smile. “Especially when it’s a double homicide – a capital offense that can send your client to ol’ yellow mama to fry.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ ‘bout, Pettway? My client may… or may not… have been present that mornin’, but I’ll damn sure prove that he didn’t kill anybody; he sure didn’t kill a… a man o’ the cloth. And he sure as hell ain’t goin’ to the electric chair!”

“That’s left up to the jury to decide… unless your client wants to plead down a little?”

“Never!”

When Lane stood up, he feared his legs wouldn’t carry his rotund body back to his car. The pictures had brought back memories that he had long ago buried. He already knew the identity of the man assaulting the priest in the pictures. Now he had to figure out how to keep that identity hidden from the prosecution, while exonerating William Waite because if he couldn’t get an acquittal, then his entire life was going to change, drastically.

“Ahem… What day and time is the deposition?”

“I’ll have my secretary schedule it. It’ll depend on Mr. Gage’s flight schedule,” Moses stated, pushing away from his desk.

“Very well. Good day, Moses,” the defense attorney commented, grasping the handle of his leather case with his sweaty palm and exiting the office.

“Good-bye,” the DA responded to the retreating man, standing until he was sure the defense attorney was heading to the exit of the building. He sat down once again, exhaling his breath. Something had alarmed the other man, but what was it?

E!

Half an hour later, Lane Wilson knocked on the door of William Waite’s 1920’s style home just outside of town. When Waite’s hired caregiver greeted him, he pasted a smile on his face. “I need to… to see Bill, please.”

“C’mon in, Lane. He’s in the den,” the older woman stated, having grown accustomed to the frequent visits between the two men.

Lane left his hat hanging on the hall tree in the foyer then headed for the privacy of the small front room where his client was sitting. The nervous attorney looked over his shoulder, ensuring that the caregiver had not followed him; he couldn’t risk her overhearing what he was about to say.

“We’ve got a big pro’lem, Bill… a mighty big pro’lem… and it’s ‘cause o’ that damn kid from Montana.”
Chapter 33

Johnny hung up his phone, leaning his head against the wall. The call he had received was the one he had been dreading - not a call from his father, but a call from the District Attorney’s office in Selma. He was going to give a deposition in just four days, but he still couldn’t remember all the details of that morning.

“Ohmygod,” he groaned to himself, scrubbing his face with his hands. He looked at the time on his kitchen clock and realized he needed to shower and make a trip to the grocery store before the Campbell ladies arrived. He was going to need their help more than ever - if they were still willing to help him.

He pushed himself off the wall, stripping off his sweaty tee shirt on his way to his bathroom, throwing it with more force than was necessary into his clothes hamper. This was going to be a difficult few days.

E!

Marco trudged into his apartment, heading straight to his bedroom. He laid across his bed, wishing he could simply disappear into the covers. He was in love with a woman who had refused his marriage proposal… and who might be pregnant with his child – or was she?

Marco pulled out his shift calendar from his night stand and began counting the days since he and Beverly had first been intimate. Being from a large family, he knew enough about pregnancies to know that the usual symptoms didn’t occur until a couple of weeks or so after conception. Even if she had missed one or two of her pills the first time they had made love, her symptoms still wouldn’t have occurred so soon after returning from Tehachapi.

Marco scrubbed his face with his palms, not wanting to believe the truth that was staring at him from the calendar. If Beverly was pregnant, then the chances of the baby being his were very slim.

E!

Johnny finished slicing the cucumbers and was tossing them into the salad when he heard a knock on his door. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket as he walked to the door, assuming that the pizza delivery guy had arrived. He was pleasantly surprised when he opened the door and saw Iris and Lily standing there, Lily holding a large pizza box.

“Hey, c’mon in,” he said, recognizing the aroma of his favorite pizza. His expressive face gave away his confusion.

“The pizza man was heading up the stairs, so we sort of intercepted him,” Iris explained, hoping the gesture would make amends for the previous night’s debacle.

“Oh, okay,” Johnny said, closing the door behind them. He quickly opened his wallet, but Iris stopped him.

“No you don’t,” she said, placing a hand on Johnny’s arm to stop him from repaying her for the pizza.

“But I invited you over for dinner. I do NOT go Dutch with ladies,” he snickered, hoping his
nervousness was being hidden by his charm.

“And this is NOT a date, Johnny,” Iris retorted, finally feeling comfortable enough to smile.

“That salad looks delicious,” Lily said, setting the pizza box on the kitchen counter. Johnny’s kitchen table was too small to accommodate the large pizza box, salad bowl, and the dinner plates for the three of them.

Johnny relaxed, allowing his crooked grin to spread across his face as he replaced his wallet into his back pocket. He knew when he was defeated. “Let’s dig in, ladies!”

The dinner felt comfortable in spite of Johnny’s anxiety. The three of them slipped into an easy conversation with no mention of Johnny’s parents’ impending visit. As the meal was winding down, Johnny suggested they move to the living room where they would be more comfortable. They quickly cleaned up the remnants of the meal, then Iris and Lily sat on his sofa, Johnny following behind them.

Johnny inhaled deeply, picking up the journal as he passed by the coffee table on his way to his favorite chair. “I know you’re wondering why I asked you over here.”

Neither of the Campbell ladies spoke, allowing him the time he needed to gather his words.

“I, uh… You know that I’m going back to Selma to meet with the DA and… Well, there’s still some blanks in my memory.” He waited for them to respond, but when they didn’t, he continued. “It’s happenin’ sooner than I was hopin’. When I got back from my run, I received a call from the DA in Selma. I’ve got to give a deposition on Friday.”

Iris and Lily exchanged knowing looks. Iris chose to ask the question they were both wondering.

“I know you’ve been worried about making the trip, but… are your memories returning?”

Johnny began thumbing through his journal, more to give his nervous hands something to do than to search for anything in particular.

“No, not really… Like I said. I… uh… I can’t exactly remember all the details.”

“But don’t your pictures give all the details? What more do you need to tell?” Lily asked.

Johnny stared at the space between them, considering her question. It was a valid one, and one that he had wondered about as well. “I guess I need to be able to testify, under oath, that I saw those things happen.”

“And… you can do that, right?” Iris asked.

Johnny blew out his breath. “No…,” he hesitated briefly, then looked at the two of them. “No, I can’t. I remember hearin’ it happen. I remember the smell of the place, even the feel of the mornin’ breeze, but… but not what I saw. Heck, I even remember the taste.”

“Taste?” Iris was growing even more concerned that the stress was affecting Johnny’s mental status.

“Yea… I know it sounds crazy but… hell, maybe I am,” he mumbled, running his hand through his hair.

“What taste?” Lily questioned.

“I remember tastin’ this musty, gritty wood taste in my mouth, but… That’s just nuts.”
“No, it isn’t, Johnny,” Lily said softly. “When you returned that morning, you stood on the front porch throwing up. I found you leaning over the railing and—"

“No… I remember that. This is somethin’ else,” he said, tossing his journal on the floor in frustration.

“But… If you swear that you are the one that took the pictures, then isn’t that as good as saying that you remember seeing it?” Iris was searching for something to ease the burden her surrogate nephew was suffering. “I would’ve shut my eyes, too.”

Johnny shook his head. “I dunno. It must not be good enough; why else would the DA be flyin’ me back there if the pictures give ‘im what he needs? I mean, I can’t testify to somethin’ I don’t remember, but… I… I also asked you over here so I could explain my bad behavior last night, Iris.”

Lily sucked in a silent breath. Was Johnny about to tell her mother about his secret shame?

“Johnny, you don’t—"

Johnny quickly held up his hand to stop her. “No, Iris… I know I don’t have to, but I want to.” He ran a nervous finger beneath his nose, choosing his words very carefully. “My… My dad raised me to be, um, proud of my native heritage. And I am proud of it, but… But back in Selma, I…”

Johnny gritted his teeth together, feeling the adrenaline rush through his body. He hated admitting his failure to the two women who had become a second family to him, but Lily already knew, and Iris would likely find out. It was better to hear it from him.

“I… I failed my father… I failed my people.”

“How?” There was no judgment in Iris’ voice. She could see the struggle Johnny was going through and wanted to offer him a safe place to reveal his story.

“Because I… I let white people… push me farther west… away from my home. I… I let history repeat itself,” he said, his voice fading to a whisper.

Iris saw the downcast dark eyes and felt the urge to pull him into a motherly embrace, but the last thing she wanted to do was to make him feel any weaker than he already felt.

“You were just a child, and you were only one person. You were outnumbered, John. You did exactly what you needed to do and it has nothing… nothing to do with being a… a coward.” Iris saw his chest heaving and knew that he was devastated, even if his face remained stoic. “John… You did exactly what… what warriors do. You protected those you loved. You’re a protector, don’t you see that?”

Johnny swallowed hard, forcing back the lump that was quickly forming in his throat. He had been kicking himself for a decade. Nervously, he bit the end of his fingernail, slowly shaking his head as he stared at the floor. “Nu-uh… I don’t see that, Iris. When I look in the mirror… I see… I see me tryin’ to be… somethin’ I’m… I’m not,” he said, his face contorting in shame.

Iris leaned forward, considering his words. “John… Is that why Captain Stanley described you as being the first one into a dangerous scene?”

Dark eyes looked up from the floor, staring at Iris in disbelief.

“Obviously, he doesn’t see a coward. He sees a hero; a man willing to lay down his own life for the
life of a stranger.”

“He… He said that… ‘bout me?”

“Yes, he did… and all of your co-workers agreed with him,” she explained.

“When?”

Iris looked over at her daughter and then back at Johnny. “When I got them all together at my house, back when you were both in Tehachapi. That’s when we devised the plan to…,” she looked down at her lap, realizing how bad the idea still sounded, even though it had worked. “To kidnap the two of you.”

Johnny and Lily had already been told the story of how the A-shift of Station 51 had developed a well-planned strategy to retrieve the two of them from the cult. Neither of them was shocked by what they were hearing, but Johnny wasn’t expecting to hear the accolades proffered by his shiftmates, especially not his captain.

“Johnny, I wish you could’ve been at my house the night we devised the plan to, uh, retrieve you two. Your coworkers truly are your brothers. They love you enough to risk their own lives for you, and they know you’d do the same for them. They certainly don’t think of you as a coward, or weak, and neither do we,” she said, waving her hand in Lily’s direction. “That was the night that they told me… that I was… part of the 51 family,” she said, her voice choking into a whisper.

“But my father…”

“Loves you with a love you can’t begin to imagine,” Iris said, filling in the gap in Johnny’s comment. “Your parents do NOT think of you as anything less than their son that they are extremely proud of.”

Johnny leaned back in his chair, blowing out a deep breath. “Look, I can’t even think about them right now. Can you stop them from coming since I won’t be here?”

“Consider it done,” Iris commented, unwilling to tell him of the alternate plan she had already put into motion. After all, she really had stopped the Gages from coming to Los Angeles. Now she just had to let them know when to arrive in Selma.

“Thanks, um, okay, so… Maybe I’ll go see them when this is all over. I... I miss ‘em.”

“They miss you, too,” Iris quickly stated.

Johnny inhaled a cleansing breath. “So...,” Johnny said, wringing his hands nervously. “Do you think you ladies can help me remember anything? Is there somethin’ I might’ve said, or… anything that I could’ve forgotten?”

“You were pale, but then when you started vomiting, I just thought you had eaten something that disagreed with you,” Iris explained. “Or maybe that you were coming down with a stomach flu.”

Johnny rubbed his chin, pondering the events of that morning, at least the ones he could remember. “Humph… I just can’t figure out where that taste came from,” he mused, his eyes glazing over as he was transported back in time.

“Johnny, could you be thinking of something else? Something that happened before, or after Phillip’s
murder, that your brain has somehow injected into this traumatic time?”

“That’s a good point, Lily. John?” Iris asked, looking from her daughter to Johnny.

“No… No, I remember snapping the pictures while I was tastin’ this…” Johnny shook his shaggy head. “I dunno.”

Realizing that they weren’t making any progress, Iris decided to change the subject. “You know, Lily and I will be going with you to Selma? We’ll be there for moral support, for you and Kizzy.”

Johnny felt his back stiffen. “Yea… Crockett told me.” He inhaled deeply, trying to tell them how he felt without hurting their feelings. “You really don’t have to do that; I’m a grown man. I can handle it,” Johnny stated.

“Well, you may not need us, but my grandmother does,” Lily commented.

“Where are you staying while you’re there?” Iris asked, wondering where the DA was planning on housing him.

“The St. James Hotel.”

“Oh… right beside the river,” Iris commented, seeing Johnny shoulders slumping.

“Yea… I already thought about that. I hope I get a room on the front. Otherwise… I’ll be able to see the place where Phillip died from my window.”

Iris gave him an understanding smile. “Well, I’m sure they’ll accommodate your request if you ask them.”

By the time Iris and Lily left, Johnny was feeling exhausted, but somewhat renewed. He hoped he would be able to get a good night’s sleep. He didn’t want to have a sleepless night before a busy 24-hour shift. Before retiring to his bedroom, Johnny made one more entry into his journal, then turned out the bedside lamp. As he lay awake in his bed, with his arm thrown over his face, he recalled his many talks with Kizzy about her faith. Not being a religious man, he hoped that she was right about God, and so he did something he normally reserved for times when was trapped inside burning buildings, or cave-ins; he began to pray.

“Please God, please help me…”

E!

The following morning, Johnny entered the kitchen of Station 51 in search of some caffeine. His night had been a fitful one. Just as he had feared, images, sounds, and tastes from Selma had haunted his dreams. He headed for the stove, mumbling a greeting to his exhausted partner.

“Mornin’.”

“You look as tired as I feel,” Roy commented, staring at Johnny from his seated position at the kitchen table. His chin was resting in his hand, his elbow propped on the table.

Johnny jerked his face around as he reached for the coffee pot. “Oh, yea…,” he commented, turning back around to pour his coffee. “You worked a double, didn’t ya?”

“Yea… It was awful… and it was all your fault.”
Hank, who had been reading the newspaper on the sofa, snickered as he scratched Henry’s ear.

Johnny leaned his hips against the counter, blowing a cooling breath on the hot liquid. “MY fault? What happened?”

“Not what, who!” Roy groused, pushing away from the table in search of his second cup of coffee.

“A’right… Who?”

“Who, what?” Chet asked, entering the kitchen door with Mike at his heels.

“What?” Johnny asked, jerking his head in the direction of the junior lineman.

Mike and Roy exchanged knowing looks, and the exasperated engineer rolled his eyes as he picked up the paper from the kitchen table. Chet and Johnny reminded him of a couple of middle school boys.

Hank stood up, folding and dropping the newspaper on the sofa, frustrated by the antics of his younger men. “Alright… Roy, Mike, roll call in five and, uh, bring Abbott and Costello with you,” he said, taking a few long strides towards the door.

He stopped in the open doorway, scanning the apparatus bay, then returning his attention to the men in the kitchen. “Anybody seen Lopez?”

“HA… Finally,” Chet shouted, raising a fisted hand into the air. “Marco gets to scrub the toilet!”

Hank propped a hand on his hip, glaring at his junior lineman. “Not necessarily,” he deadpanned, turning on his heels.

“Um, wait…” Johnny’s head swished back and forth between Chet and Roy. He hesitated between being angry at Chet for interrupting, intrigued by the identity of Roy’s patient from the previous shift, and nervous about the conversation he knew he needed to have with his captain. Deciding the other two men could wait, he set his coffee cup on the counter and followed after Hank’s retreating form.

“Cap?”

“Yea, John?”

Johnny waited until the two of them were in the apparatus bay before continuing his conversation. “Can I talk to ya for a sec?”

Hank looked over at his paramedic with a questioning look. “My office?”

“Uh, yea… please,” he responded, following Hank into the privacy of the tiny room.

Hank gestured towards the empty chair beside his desk, closing the door behind him. “So, John… What can I do for you?”

“I got the call, Cap. I’ve got to go back to Selma for a deposition. My flight leaves on Thursday.”

Hank leaned back in his desk chair, his left arm propped on the armrest. “So I need to let headquarters know you need a replacement,” he said. It was a statement, not a question. “Have you let McConnike know?”

“Uh, no sir,” Johnny stated, blowing out his breath. “I guess I need to make that call, huh?” Johnny hated the thought of talking to the biased fire chief.

“No,” Hank replied, reaching for the phone. “I’ll make that call, too.” Hank remembered how
McConnike had reacted to the news of Johnny’s trip back to the epicenter of the civil rights movement. He didn’t want to put Johnny through that again. He looked over at his man whose knee was bouncing rapidly. “Are you ready for this?”

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. “Doesn’t much matter. It’s gonna happen whether I’m ready, or not.”

Hank nodded in understanding. “You know I’m here for you, John. We all are,” he said, waving his hand in the direction of the day room.

“I really ‘preciate that, Cap. You fellas have…,” he gulped, feeling the lump lodging in his throat. How could he explain how he felt about his brothers? They had risked everything to save him when they thought he was in the grips of a cult, and had actually saved his life that night after Lily had unknowingly given him an overdose of opiates. Now they were willing to support him as he traveled back to a place that had changed his life forever, a place that had defined how he viewed himself. He looked down at his hands, considering the irony of it all. Without the events in Selma, he never would’ve met the men who had become brothers to him. He shook his head, unable to complete his sentence. “Uh, thanks, Cap. I’m gonna get ready for roll call.”

“I’ll be there in just a minute. Let me get my notes together. Gather the men, will ya?”

“Sure thing,” Johnny said, standing to his full height and walking out the door.

Just as Johnny rounded the back of the squad, he caught a glimpse of Marco, appearing disheveled, rushing into the locker room. He snickered to himself, assuming that Marco and Beverly had spent an amorous night together. He opened the door to the kitchen. “Roll call.”

The sound of chairs scraping against the tile floor was heard by Marco as he rushed about trying to get his uniform on. He already knew that latrine duty was going to be his assignment, but he didn’t want to face the wrath of his superior for being late to roll call.

Marco felt his head pounding as he jogged around the back of the engine, skidding into place in the line-up while Captain Stanley stood tapping his pen against his clipboard.

“Glad you could join us, Lopez.”

“Sorry, Cap… Latrines, I know,” Marco stated, his voice sounding solemn.

Chet held his breath, concerned that his earlier smart-aleck remark might earn him that particular chore. When Captain Stanley nodded his agreement, Chet exhaled. “Whew.”

“Did you say something, Kelly?”

“Ah, no… no sir.”

“Lopez, make sure you leave home a little earlier next shift,” Hank commented, knowing that a reprimand would not be necessary. Marco was one of the most punctual men on the shift.

“Yes, sir,” came the muffled reply.

Mike cut a quick glance at his senior lineman, worried about the man he had grown even closer to since he began dating Marco’s sister. Even from just his profile, Mike could tell that something was wrong; his friend was carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders.

Just as Hank dismissed the men to begin their chores, Johnny turned to Roy. “Who?” he asked, his
curiosity about the mystery patient continuing to plague him.

Roy opened his mouth to explain his statement just as the tones dropped.

“Squad 51, woman down...”

The two paramedics rushed to their respective doors of the squad while Hank acknowledged the call.

“Squad 51, KMG365.” He wrote down the address while Mike opened the front bay door.

As the squad rolled onto the apron, Johnny stared down at the slip of paper he was holding. His mouth moved in silence as he read the address, his eyebrows knitting together. When recognition finally arrived, he closed his eyes, leaning his helmeted head against the back of the cab.

“Aww, no... not again!”

“Yep,” Roy replied. “Edwina Self and that damn dog you gave her!”

Johnny crumbled up the slip of paper, tossing it into the floorboard. “How many calls?”

“This is the third,” Roy stated flatly.

“Three runs in the last 24 hours?”

“No,” the red-haired paramedic groused, making his way to the correct address without Johnny’s assistance. “Third run in the last 12 hours.”

Johnny arched his eyebrow at his partner. “You mean to tell me that pup has bitten her three times in one night? What’s she doin’ to the poor dog?”

Roy made the left turn onto the correct street. “That poor dog got spayed yesterday so she’s got stitches.”

“And Ms. Self is aggravatin’ her to the point that the dog bites her?”

“No...,” Roy pulled up to the curb, shifting into park. “Ms. Self is once again faking an illness to get us out here so we’ll check on the dog,” Roy growled. “Get the oxygen and defibrillator, but I bet we won’t need them.”

E!

By the time the paramedics returned to the station, without making a trip to Rampart, the rest of the crew were engrossed in their chores.

“We need to do morning calibrations, Johnny,” Roy said, backing into the apparatus bay, seeing Mike moving out of his way, pushing the mop and bucket with him.

“Yea, and I need to, ah, to tell you somethin’, Roy. I’m not gonna be here for our next shift,” he stated, opening the passenger’s side door.

Roy stared at his normally expressive partner, seeing the blank look on his face. He walked around the front of the squad, opening up the doors to remove the necessary equipment.

Johnny pulled the biophone out of its compartment with practiced ease, setting it on the cement floor.
He kneeled down, screwing in the antenna.

“What’s wrong?” Roy asked, worriedly.

Dark eyes looked up, forlornly. “I’m headin’ back to Alabama on Thursday.”

“To be interviewed by the DA?”

Johnny gave his partner only a half-smile. “Gonna give a deposition.”

Roy sat back on his heels, preparing the datascope for a test. “Anything I can do for you?”

Johnny merely shook his head. “Thanks, man. I really do appreciate it, though.”

“How long will you be there?” Roy asked, watching the equipment run through the calibrations.

“Deposition’s on Friday, so I guess I’ll be back here on Saturday.” He looked up giving Roy a smirk. “Can’t get a direct flight anywhere near Selma, so it’ll take a full day in the air to make the trip.”

“Where will you fly into?”

Johnny snapped the biophone closed, then stood up and shoved it back into its compartment. “That’s probably the biggest irony of all. I’ll land in Montgomery, then rent a car and drive to Selma. It’s the reverse route the marchers made ten years ago.”

“You always do things backwards, don’t you, Johnny?” Roy chided, grateful when his remark was met by a familiar lopsided grin.

“Let’s go get the linens changed, pally. With any luck, we’ll get another run before lunch, so we can eat a burger somewhere... Kelly has kitchen duty.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Roy groaned, rapping his knuckles on the hood of the squad as he headed for the dorm to begin their chores, nearly bumping into Mike as he was returning the mop and bucket to the janitor’s closet.

In the latrine, Marco was just finishing up with the mirrors when Mike walked in to wash his hands. The engineer looked at the senior lineman’s reflection and decided to speak up.

“Marco... Are you okay?”

Marco looked into the mirror, locking eyes with Mike. He saw the sincerity in the other man’s face, and decided that maybe Mike could help him make sense of the situation. He craned his neck, looking to see if anyone had walked into the locker room. Seeing that it was empty, he leaned his back against the wall, crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the floor.

“Not really.”

Mike walked over to the nearest sink and began washing his hands. As he finished drying them, he spoke to his friend in a hushed tone so that no one would overhear. “Wanna go out back and inspect the hose tower?”

Marco knew that Mike was offering him a sympathetic ear while maintaining his privacy from the other men. “If you don’t mind, I... I could really use some advice.”
The two men headed for the back of the station, both finding a comfortable spot near the hose tower. The warm autumn sun of the last day of September felt soothing against Marco’s skin and he leaned into the metal post nearest him, closing his eyes. Where should he begin? And what would Mike think of him when he found out?

Mike saw the internal battle raging within Marco’s mind and he had no doubt that whatever was bothering the lineman, it likely involved his love life. “Is it Beverly?”

Marco pressed his lips together tightly, nodding in affirmation as he lowered his face to the ground. “She... She’s been sick since we made that trip to Tehachapi... headaches, nausea, dizziness...”

Mike placed a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. The symptoms were familiar ones, at least for a young woman. “How far along is she?”

Marco rubbed his forehead with his fingers, hoping to ease the tension headache he was feeling. “Not sure... She’s going to her gynecologist tomorrow. We’ll know for sure then.”

“Well,” Mike said, offering him a slight squeeze across the back of his neck. “Just in case it’s positive, let me be the first to congratulate you, papa.”

“Humph... yea... I wish it were that simple,” Marco said, inhaling deeply. “I, uh... I’ve been looking at rings, Mike. I mean, I really thought she was the one. When she told me that she might be pregnant, I proposed.”

Marco’s countenance told Mike the answer he had received. “Don’t tell me she turned you down.”

“She did... and she even kicked me out of her apartment,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I really wanted to marry her, even before this, but... She just flat turned me down... I don’t get it, Mike. Why would she do that? Why would she string me along, even... even sleep with me and then... when she thinks she’s pregnant, she turns down my marriage proposal?”

“I don’t know, Marco. You two seemed happy, really happy together. Has anything happened between you, a misunderstanding, or something?”

Marco began to pace in the small area between the hose tower and the retaining wall. It was the same question he had been asking himself since he left Beverly’s apartment. “I can’t think of anything, Mike. Everything was fine when we got back from the mountain. We were both tired and... and she stayed over at my apartment and... Well, one thing led to another and... It was only the second time we’d slept together. When she got home, she discovered that she’d forgotten to take her pill that morning and the morning before. I didn’t use a condom and... Then a day or two later, she started getting these bad headaches.”

Silence settled between them as Mike’s brain made the same calculations that Marco’s had made the day before. The timing wasn’t adding up. “Ahem,” he began, clearing his throat to summon up the courage to say what he was thinking. “You said that it was only a couple of days later that she started getting sick?”

“Yes... and it was only the second time we’d had sex,” Marco responded, knowing where Mike was heading with his comments. “I’ve already done the math, Mike. I know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m not making any judgments, but...”

Marco looked over at him with red-rimmed eyes. “If she IS pregnant... the baby isn’t mine.”

“I’m sorry, man. I just can’t explain it any other way,” Mike said, resting his shoulder against the
pole.

“It’s the only reason I can think of that she’d turn down my proposal. She won’t marry me because she knows that... that I’m not the father. So what do I do now?”

E!

Lexi Lopez finished cleaning up the breakfast dishes, putting them away in the cabinets while her mother began making a shopping list of grocery items they would be needing for the next few days. Maria made a couple of notes on the piece of paper then set the pen down, preferring to watch her daughter for a few moments. She had come so far in the last few weeks and Maria was sure that Mike Stoker was the main reason why. Lexi had spent a lot of time with him yesterday and today she was practically glowing.

“Are things going well between you and Michael?”

Lexi turned around, a blush evident on her pretty face. “Yes, Mama... very well. We had a long talk yesterday... about trust issues, stuff like that, and... and he asked me to be in an exclusive relationship with him.”

Maria saw the twinkle in her daughter’s eyes and she felt genuine happiness for her. “Does that mean that you two are going steady?”

Lexi laughed at the terminology her mother was using. “Yes, Mama, that’s exactly what it means.”

“Michael is a good man, Lexi. He’ll treat you well,” she said with a knowing grin.

“He already does, every time we’re together.” Lexi looked down at the dish cloth she was holding. “Yesterday, when I was alone with him, I... I wasn’t... afraid. It was really the first time I’d been completely alone with a man since...,” she lowered her face towards the floor. This wasn’t an easy topic to discuss, especially with her mother.

“I know what you’re talking about, sweetheart. Since the years you were away from us.”

Lexi nodded, grateful that her mother understood without her having to actually say the words out loud. Her days as a prostitute were behind her, but the effects would remain for a long time – maybe forever.

“Anyway, we had a long talk, and... and I really think the therapy session with Beverly yesterday morning and then talking to Mike yesterday afternoon helped me make a breakthrough... I feel like I’m really starting to get my life back.”

Maria pushed her plump body away from the kitchen table, walking over to the place where her daughter stood. She enveloped the younger woman in an embrace, stroking her soft dark hair. “Keep your eyes on the future, my daughter, then the past will never catch up to you.”

“I will, Mama.” When her mother released her, she wiped a finger beneath her lower lashes. “I think I’ll go call Beverly. I want to tell her how much progress I made yesterday.”

Lexi walked into the living room, curling up on the sofa beside the telephone, watching Antonio play with his farm set on the floor. She dialed the familiar number to the Wellhouse, knowing that Beverly was on duty, but she was quickly told by the house mother that Beverly was out sick.
worried for her friend, Lexi pulled open the drawer on the telephone stand, thumbing through the various notes until she found the one she was looking for.

Inside Beverly’s apartment, the counselor lay on her sofa. Her nausea was particularly bad this morning and she wondered if it was due to a pregnancy, or because of what had happened with Marco the previous day. She hadn’t slept at all, unable to stop crying over the loss of the man she loved so much. Why had she turned down his proposal? Why had she asked him to leave her apartment? Her emotions were warring within her. Her greatest fear was being abandoned by Marco Lopez and yet, she had actually caused her fear to become a reality, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Suddenly the shrill ringing of her telephone pierced through the throbbing pain in her head. In her rush to stop the offending noise, she quickly rose to her feet and reached for the phone on the end table a few feet away. She had barely picked up the receiver, when another wave of dizziness rocked her vision. She swayed from side to side as darkness came rushing in from her peripheral field of vision.

“Ugh,” she groaned, reaching for something with which to steady herself, but her flailing arms found nothing.

On the other end of the line, Lexi heard a groan followed by a crashing sound. Her heart slammed around inside her chest, wondering what was happening to her friend.

“Beverly? Beverly!”

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening. She could only hear a few raspy huffs of air being exhaled. No one spoke from inside Beverly’s apartment.

“BEVERLY!”

Antonio heard the alarm in his mother’s voice and turned around to see the fear on her face. “Grandma!” he called out, rushing toward the kitchen.

Maria Lopez met him in the doorway, having heard Lexi shout out Beverly’s name. “What’s wrong?” she asked, sitting down near Lexi, her hands balled into fists at her chest.

“I don’t know. She... She tried to answer and then... I think she must’ve fallen.” Lexi returned her attention to the telephone. “Beverly, can you hear me? Are you alright?” The only thing she heard was a clunking sound and then a dial tone.

“Mama, something’s wrong. I have to help her. I have to go over there,” she cried out, her words coming in a series of rapid fires.

“No,” Maria said, grabbing her daughter’s forearm. Her own fears of retribution from some of Ricardo’s cronies were crouching around her. “Call the station. Let the men go check on her. If she’s sick or injured, then they can do more for her than you can.”

Lexi struggled to see the rotary dial of the telephone through her own tears, fear clouding her brain. “I... I can’t remember the number. What’s the number, Mama?” she cried in a near state of panic.

Maria reached for the telephone, dialing the number she knew so well. She silently prayed that the call would be answered, hoping the men weren’t out on a run.

“Station 51, Fireman Kelly speaking.”
“Chet, it’s Mama Lopez.”

Chet leaned the broom against the wall, recognizing the sound of urgency in Mrs. Lopez’s voice.

“Is something wrong?”

“Yes, I think it might be. Please go check on Beverly. Lexi was just calling her on the phone and we think she might have fallen. She didn’t say anything.”

Lexi quickly grabbed the phone away from her mother, having regained some of her composure.

“Chet, Beverly didn’t go in to work today because she was sick. When I called her, I just heard a crashing sound and then I could hear someone breathing, really quick breaths, but she wouldn’t say anything. Oh Chet, please hurry over there, please?”

“We’re on our way,” the junior lineman said, hanging up the phone and shouting for the rest of the crew. “Hey, CAP! We’ve got a still alarm over at Beverly’s apartment,” he called out, rushing through the day room door and nearly bumping into Hank.

“I’ll call it in; get the rest of the guys together,” Hank stated, his deep voice covering up the worry that was crawling up his spine.

When a run involved one of 51’s family, it was always a little more intense.

“Marco! Johnny, Roy... Hey, let’s go, fellas!”

Marco and Mike heard the alarm in Chet’s voice, but neither had heard him say Beverly’s name. Both men leaped into action, each one heading for his respective seat on the engine.

“What’s going on, Chet?”

“Marco,” Chet replied, his blue eyes wide. “That was your Mom on the phone. She thinks Beverly fell at her apartment and wants us to go check it out.”

“Did Beverly say she was hurt?” he asked, pulling on his turnout coat as the bay doors rose. He saw Hank jogging across the bay in front of the vehicles and noted he seemed to be in more of a rush too. “That’s just it, Marco. All they could hear was rapid breathing; Beverly wasn’t able to talk to them.”

Marco felt like he had been kicked in the gut. Beverly had collapsed?

“Lopez, in the squad,” Hank ordered, watching Johnny swiftly slide over to the middle of the bench seat to allow Marco room to ride. He was the only one who knew where Beverly lived, and with that realization, his brain kicked into gear.

“Take a left, Roy,” he directed. Now he knew what it must feel like for the victims and their families to be waiting for the fire department to arrive. He leaned forward in the seat as if trying to pull the squad faster through the winding streets, between lanes of traffic, and on toward the rescue of the woman he loved, no matter what the circumstances might be between them. He just hoped they would arrive in time to help her.

E!

Inside her apartment, Beverly began to regain consciousness. She found herself lying on her side on the floor, disoriented, her head and left hand throbbing. Her vision was blurry and something warm was running down along her cheekbone.
“Ugh,” she groaned, trying unsuccessfully to get onto her knees. Sweeping her injured hand around trying to figure out where she was, she quickly grimaced and hissed in pain as something sharp stabbed her, slicing through her wrist.

The distant wail of sirens penetrated through the brain fog, reminding her of the man she had lost, the man she had driven out of her life at a time when she probably needed him the most. “Oh... Marco,” she wept, laying her head back down on the cold hard floor, her strength waning.

The sirens grew louder, keeping the darkness from closing in on her completely. Just when she thought they would pass by her apartment, they abruptly stopped. She closed her eyes against the rushing sound in her ears and the constant surge of pain along her temple. The sound of footsteps scrambling up the staircase alerted her to the presence of visitors, and then a round of pounding on the door and shouts sent a surge of hope into her heart.

“Beverly? Beverly, it’s Marco,” he shouted, reaching for the hidden key beneath an old flower pot while Johnny continued knocking and calling for her.

“Beverly, it’s Johnny. Can you open the door?”

Hank looked around at the frantic looks on the faces of his men. They were all professionals, able to keep calm under duress, but this call was personal – Beverly was family. He noted her car parked in the driveway, and yet, there were no sounds coming from inside the apartment. That didn’t bode well, and he knew it.

Marco managed to unlock the door and immediately bolted into the living room, gasping at what he saw. Beverly was lying in a heap near the end table, a lamp lay in shards along the edge of the sofa and the telephone was lying haphazardly on the floor, but it was the blood smeared on the handset and running down Beverly’s pale face that shocked him the most.

“Beverly!” he shouted, rushing to kneel by her head. He wanted to cradle her in his arms, but he knew not to move her. It seemed obvious by the condition of the apartment, that she had lost her balance and fallen into the corner of the furniture, knocking the lamp and telephone off the end table as she fell.

Johnny and Roy kneeled down on either side of their friend who was now their patient, setting up their equipment. Chet and Mike followed Hank inside the apartment, each carrying a piece of paramedic gear.

Beverly was vaguely aware of the presence of men in her apartment. They seemed familiar but in her haze, she couldn’t quite identify them. Suddenly hands were all over her, on her abdomen, her wrist, and a tight vise-like grip was on her upper arm. Her fight or flight instincts kicked in, but she didn’t have the energy to do either. In an act of self-protection, she tried to curl into a fetal position, but again, strong hands held her down.

Johnny held the handset of the biophone pinned between his ear and his shoulder as he wrote down the vitals Roy was calling out.

“Rampart, this is squad 51; how do you read?”

“Go ahead 51,” came the deep baritone voice of Dr. Brackett.

“Rampart, we have a female victim, approximately...” Johnny looked over at Marco who filled in the blank.
“Thirty-one.”

“Thirty-one years of age. She is unconscious, but responding to vocal and pain stimuli. Vitals are BP 92/50, pulse 100, respiration 18 and shallow. She appears to have been injured in a fall in her home. There’s a laceration along her left temple, bruising and swelling beginning along her left cheek and eye, and several lacerations along her left wrist and hand. We’re applying pressure bandages to the lacerations and she’s on 6 liters of oxygen,” he said, seeing Marco adjusting the nasal cannula per Roy’s instructions as the senior medic began dressing her wounds.

Roy reached for the IV box, anticipating the orders they would receive.

“Fifty-one, start an IV, lactated ringers, monitor her vitals and transport as soon as possible.”

“10-4,” the dark-haired paramedic replied, replacing the handset.

Dark eyes looked over at Marco who was gently caressing Beverly’s right cheek. “Hey, Marco?”

There was no response.

Johnny reached for the lineman’s arm. “Marco, is she on any medications, or had any recent illnesses we need to know about?”

Marco tried to lick his lips, but his mouth was too dry. “She... she’s been nauseated lately. She’s had headaches and… and dizziness, and…,” he gulped, worry for her health making concentrating difficult.

Roy and Johnny exchanged knowing glances.

“Marco?” Johnny said, his dark eyes staring at his friend, not wanting to be presumptuous. “Is there any chance she might be pregnant?”

The senior lineman nodded.

“We’re gonna take good care of her, Marco,” Johnny replied, sympathetically. Johnny returned his attention to the biophone. “Rampart, be advised the patient might be pregnant.”

Mike caught the look his captain was giving him and he slowly shook his head. Hank, being a perceptive man, understood the silent remark. There was more to the story than just a possible pregnancy.

Vince arrived just ahead of the ambulance and he and the two attendants entered the tiny apartment.

“Hey, Hank,” he said, giving the living room a visual sweep. “Any sign of forced entry?”

“No, we had to use her spare key to gain entry. I think she fell,” Hank replied, assuring the law enforcement officer that no foul play was involved, at least not with the damage in the apartment. Based on the look he had been given by his second in command, he was beginning to suspect that foul play might be involved in another way.

As soon as Beverly had been covered with a blanket and secured to the gurney, the attendants slowly made their way down the narrow stairway to the open doors of the ambulance.

Hank caught Marco’s elbow as he passed by. “Go in with her, pal. I’ll call in a replacement for you.”
“Thanks, Cap, but... instead of going in with her, I’ll ride back on the engine and then drive my car over to Rampart. I,” he stammered, looking down at his feet. “I don’t think she wants me with her right now.”

“Roy’s riding in with her,” Johnny stated, picking up the biophone and trauma kit. “I can drop you off at the station on my way in with the squad. We’ll be going right past there on the way to Rampart.”

Marco nodded, mumbling his appreciation to his co-worker. He knew he had a lot of explaining to do and he was not looking forward to that conversation.

Hank looked past his lineman, again searching Mike’s face for answers. Mike stepped up to his captain, whispering to him.

“I’ll explain later,” the engineer commented.

“Let’s clean up a little, men. She doesn’t need to come back home to this,” Hank commented, as Chet and Mike began to wipe up the blood and pick up the pieces of the broken lamp.

Just as Mike finished wiping the blood off the telephone, it began to ring, startling the engineer.

“Aww man, that’s probably Mama Lopez,” Chet replied, dropping the remains of the broken lamp into the trash can.

“Marsh residence,” Mike answered, picking up the receiver.

“Michael? Ohmygod, what’s wrong with her?” Lexi asked, feeling a mixture of panic for her friend and relief that Station 51 was there.

“She’s on her way to Rampart. It looks like she fell, but she’s going to need some stitches. She was semi-conscious when they left with her.”

“Okay, I’ll... I’ll head that way. Thank you for checking on her,” Lexi said, wanting to say more, but now wasn’t the time.

Clean up was completely quickly and within minutes, the engine was headed back to the station, minus a linemen. Hank reached for the microphone.

“LA, take engine 51 out of service, lack of man power,” he explained. He looked over at his stoic engineer whose eyes remained on the road ahead. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Marco was just telling me about it when we got the call, Cap. She was going to have a pregnancy test tomorrow. I guess you’ve figured out that... that this wasn’t planned.”

“Yea,” Hank stated flatly, peering out the window. Would the crises his men had been facing for the last year ever end?

E!

Inside the ambulance, Roy kept a vigil on his patient, watching her head loll from side to side as she began to regain consciousness.

“M-M’co?” she faintly mumbled.
Roy released his hold on her wrist where he had been checking her pulse. “Hey, don’t try to talk, okay? Just relax. Marco will meet us at Rampart,” he soothed. He held her cold smaller hand in his own, worried not only for her health, but possibly the health of an unborn child.

Roy soon felt the ambulance making the familiar turn into the entrance of Rampart’s emergency department. “Okay, Beverly, we’re here. Just relax and keep breathing through your nose, okay?” He wanted to ask her more health questions, especially about the possible pregnancy, but decided she wasn’t lucid enough to give a reliable answer.

“’m ’kay,” was the weak response.

The doors opened and the orderlies removed the gurney, heading down the hallway with Roy flanking Beverly’s side in search of a directive from an awaiting nurse. The friendly face of Dixie McCall met them outside treatment room two.

“In here,” she said, holding open the door.

Dr. Brackett followed the gurney into the treatment room where the orderlies were already transferring her onto the exam table.

“Doc, BP is up to 100/62, pulse is 90, and respiration rate is 16. Her alertness is improving slightly, and...” Roy hesitated, locking eyes with Dr. Brackett who looked up at the break in the report from the paramedic. “I haven’t been able to confirm the pregnancy.”

Dixie’s head jerked upwards, looking back and forth between the two men. Immediately she withdrew the necessary tubes to draw the blood work she knew would be ordered, and that blood work included a pregnancy test.

Dr. Brackett leaned over his patient, speaking to her in a calming voice. “Beverly... Beverly, if you can hear me, open your eyes.”

There was a flutter and then the appearance of the green eyes he recognized. Beverly Marsh had been a regular in the emergency department for a few years. She was the person called in whenever a patient came in who had been sexually assaulted, or who was suspected of being forced into prostitution. She had always been a commanding presence when she entered the facility, feeling comfortable dealing with these patients who were in an emotional crisis, something the rest of the staff felt very inadequate at handling. Dr. Brackett couldn’t help but feel a tug at his heart, seeing her lying on the exam table, looking pale and vulnerable.

“Att’a girl,” he said, offering her a smile. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“M-Marco?”

Dr. Brackett looked up at Roy for the answer to her question.

“He’ll be here any minute now. Johnny dropped him off at the station to get his car.”

“Marco’s on his way, Beverly. Now let’s take care of you. Did you fall?”

“Dizzy... f-fainted... I think,” she whimpered.

“Is there a chance you might be pregnant?” he asked, already knowing the answer. She nodded her head. “Well, Dixie’s going to draw some blood and we’ll find out for sure.” He patted her shoulder.
“Don’t worry; we’re going to make you feel better, alright?”

“O-kay,” she said, closing her eyes as the physician began the process of assessing her injuries while he waited for the results from the lab.

E!

The ride back to the station was a quiet one for Johnny and Marco. Johnny didn’t know what to say and Marco really didn’t want to have to explain himself. Johnny pulled into the parking lot of the station, near the backdoor, to allow Marco to exit the vehicle. When the older man opened his door to get out, Johnny reached over, grabbing his elbow.

“Hey, Marco?”

Marco turned back, looking at his friend.

“She’s in good hands.”

Marco nodded, his eyes telling Johnny how much he appreciated the comment. “Thanks, man. Thanks for taking care of her back there.”

“I’ll see ya at Rampart,” Johnny replied with a knowing smile. As soon as the passenger’s side door slammed shut, he turned the squad around and headed for Rampart, his mind reeling from the news, realizing that he wasn’t the only one carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.
Johnny walked down the familiar corridor in search of his partner. He found Roy leaning against the wall just outside of treatment room two.

“How’s Beverly?” Johnny asked, siding up to his partner, handy talkie dangling from his wrist.

“Vitals are improving and she’s more alert now.” Roy responded. He looked past his partner towards the entrance of the emergency department. “Marco on his way?”

“Yea... He didn’t say much on the way back to the station,” Johnny stated, knowing that Roy was as curious as he was about the matter at hand. “Man, I’d hate to be in his shoes right now.”

“This isn’t like Marco,” Roy said, his worried blue eyes still searching the hallway behind Johnny. “I understand pregnancies kind of slipping up on you. Chris caught us by surprise, but... but I was happy... scared, but happy. Marco looks like he’s about to walk the plank.”

“Yea, well, you were married. Maybe he’s concerned about bein’ a part-time father,” Johnny commented.

“They’ve been seein’ each other for a while now, and they seem happy, so... He doesn’t have to be a weekend dad.”

Johnny’s expressive face clouded over. “Roy... you don’t think that... maybe Marco isn’t the-“

“Hey, Marco,” Roy called out, stopping Johnny from embarrassing himself. “She’s improving and she’s more alert now. She’s been asking for you.”

Marco’s ears perked up at that comment. “She, uh... She refused my proposal yesterday,” he mumbled, his voice a mixture of disappointment and concern.

“Yeah, man... Marco, I’m sorry,” Johnny said, grimacing in sympathy. “That’s got to be tough.”

“Yea... She just told me yesterday that she thought she might be...” he paused, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. “That she might be pregnant. I was gonna propose even before I knew about that, but... she doesn’t want to marry me.”

Before either of the paramedics could respond, the door opened and Dr. Brackett walked out, his concerned face relaxing a bit when he locked eyes with Marco. He hoped that the lineman would be able to shed some light on Beverly’s emotional state.

“Marco, I’m glad you’re here. Why don’t you come to my office while Dixie gets her cleaned up?
Then you can see her,” the dark-haired physician suggested.

“We’ll check on her on our next run,” Johnny told his friend, taking a step backwards.

“Call us if you need anything,” Roy said, turning to head for the supply room to restock the squad.

“Thanks, fellas,” Marco replied, following the physician to room 127.

Dr. Brackett entered the office, walking behind his desk to his large leather chair. “Have a seat, Marco,” he said, gesturing to the green chairs in front of his desk.

“Is she going to be okay?” Marco asked worriedly, sitting down and leaning his elbows on his knees. His stomach felt like he had swallowed a stone and he could hear the blood rushing in his ears. What would he do if something else was wrong with her besides a pregnancy?

“I think so,” Dr. Brackett offered, seeing the obvious relief on the lineman’s face. “I’ve ordered a lot of lab work, which will take a little while to get the results back, but,” he glanced down at his hands then back up at the man sitting in front of him. “I have to ask you some questions and they might not be easy to answer.”

Dark blood-shot eyes looked up at the physician. “Is she... pregnant?”

“Well, that’s part of the lab work we’re waiting on.” He shifted in his seat, dreading the question he had to ask. “I need to know more about her mood lately. Is there anything you can tell me?”

“She’s been nauseated for a couple of weeks. She hasn’t been eating much, and she’s had really bad headaches and dizzy spells. Is that what you mean?”

Dr. Brackett made a mental note of the symptoms Marco had just described, but he really hadn’t answered the question Dr. Brackett had asked him. “That’s helpful information and I’ll make a note in her chart, but Marco, Beverly has a suspicious injury along her left wrist. Is it possible that... that the wound was self-inflicted?”

For the second time since coming on shift, Marco felt like he had been punched in the gut. Was it possible that Beverly was capable of self-harm? Would she ever consider killing herself? His mind quickly replayed the details of their last conversation. She had been so adamant about not terminating the pregnancy, if she found out that she was expecting a child. Why would she try to kill herself just a few hours later?

Slowly he shook his head. “No... No, Doc, she can’t be suicidal.”

“She’s been through a lot in her life, Marco. Sometimes a reaction to trauma can be quite delayed. Perhaps something inside of her snapped when she realized she might be pregnant?”

“No... I know how it looks, but it’s not true. She just told me about her suspicions yesterday and she was, well... She told me she wouldn’t consider ending the pregnancy, not that I asked her to, because I didn’t. In fact, I asked her to marry me...,” he looked down at his hands resting between his knees. “She turned me down, but... She wasn’t... she wasn’t suicidal, Doc, honest.”

“I’m glad to hear that. With the location of the injury, being on her left wrist and her being right-handed... I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t cover all the possibilities,” Dr. Brackett explained.
He looked at the forlorn look on Marco’s face and chose to address it. “I’m sorry that she refused your proposal. I’m sure this is a very stressful time for you both.”

“Yea,” Marco said, not making eye contact.

“She’s asked for you a couple of times since she came in. Why don’t we go see if Dixie is through getting her ready to go upstairs?”

“How long will she be here?” Marco asked, worriedly.

Dr. Brackett looked at the lineman with a bit of surprise in his eyes. “I want to keep her overnight for observation and to get more fluids in her. She was very dehydrated when she came in. I’ll allow you to spend the night with her, if you’d like?”

“I’m not sure she’ll even want to see me, Doc, but I really appreciate your offer. I’ll wait and... I’ll see what she says.”

Marco followed the physician towards the office door, his face downtrodden as he lumbered down the hallway.

Inside treatment room two, Dixie had helped Beverly get into a hospital gown. She had used a warm cloth to remove as much dried blood as she could from the younger woman’s face and arms.

“You’ve had a rough morning, huh?” Dixie asked, hoping to engage Beverly in a conversation.

“I’ve had a rough three weeks,” she commented.

“You’ve got a handsome fireman waiting to see you,” Dixie responded, having heard Marco’s voice when Dr. Brackett had exited the room.

“Had,” Beverly replied. “I don’t think he’ll want to... see me now,” she said, closing her eyes as Dixie placed a cold ice pack on the side of her head near her swollen left eye.

“Oh, you’re beautiful, even if you do have a shiner,” Dixie kidded.

Beverly offered a slight smile. “It’s not my looks... It’s me.”

“You’re selling Marco short, aren’t you?”

Beverly didn’t say anything for several moments. “Dixie, have you ever done something you regretted, really regretted, and... and you don’t even know why you did it?”

“Oh, I think we’ve all done things we regret,” the head nurse said, reassuringly. “It’s not what we’ve done that matters as much as how we handle it afterwards.” She looked down at the pale woman lying on the exam table. “Did you do something to Marco that you regret?”

Beverly swallowed hard, closing her eyes as she relayed to Dixie the events of the previous day. “I wish I could take it all back, Dixie, but... but it’s too late now.”

“Ahem,” Marco cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Dixie offered the lineman a warm smile then looked back down at her patient. “And here’s that handsome fireman now.” She leaned down closer to Beverly’s ear. “You have a second chance, Beverly. Take it.”
Dixie straightened back up, double checking the flow of the IV. “I’m going to give you two some privacy. If you need anything, I’ll be at the nurses’ station. Just stick your head out the door,” she instructed Marco as she walked past, patting him on the shoulder. She jerked her head in the direction of the bed, silently urging him to go over to the place where Beverly lay. “We’ll be ready to move her upstairs in a few minutes.”

Marco was still stunned by how pale Beverly looked. He reached out to run his fingers through her hair. “How do you feel?”

Beverly sniffled, feeling the warmth of his touch in stark contrast to the numbing feeling of the ice pack on the opposite side. “S-stupid.”

“Aww, Bev. You haven’t been feeling well. Anybody who’s been dizzy is subject to falling.”

“That’s not... what I... mean,” she said, her voice choking. “I’m talking about... what I... said to you... yesterday. I’m... I’m so sorry, Marco.”

“Ssshhh,” he whispered. “Don’t worry about that. You have a right to... to decide what you want, and... and if I’m not it, then...” He gulped, unable to continue. He desperately wanted to ask her about the paternity of the potential pregnancy, but he didn’t dare. Even though they might not be getting married, that didn’t stop him from caring about her and her health.

Beverly struggled to find the right words to convince him that he was what she wanted, that she did want to marry him, but she couldn’t explain her behavior from the day before. She began to think about how hurt Marco had looked when she had declined his proposal, and she wished she could take it all back. Would he even consider forgiving her for rejecting him so badly? If he couldn’t, then the only thing that might offer her a little bit of comfort for the loss was the possibility that she was carrying his child. Then she thought about the group session she had facilitated the day before. Risk and trust had been the topic of the session. To gain something required risking something. In all honesty, she had nothing to lose. She reached her hand out, grateful when he accepted it, stroking the back of her hand with his thumb. She was about to speak, to ask for his forgiveness, when there was a knock on the exam room door.

“May I come in?” Dr. Brackett asked, carrying a few pieces of paper in his hands. He didn’t wait for a response before walking over to his patient and placing a hand on her shoulder. “Well, I have some answers for you. I know why you’ve been feeling so awful. You’re anemic, Beverly. You’re also dehydrated, and I suspect you have an ulcer forming. But it’s nothing that some fluids, medication, a healthy diet, and a lot of rest won’t fix.”

“Am... I...”

Dr. Brackett looked into her eyes, unsure if he was seeing hope or dread in the emerald orbs. “No, Beverly. You’re not pregnant.”

Marco felt a sense of relief wash over him. At least there wouldn’t be a child trapped in a dead relationship. But her reaction shocked him to his core.

“Nooo,” she whimpered, silent sobs wracking her body as she tightly gripped the sheet covering her. She had been so certain, and somewhere deep inside of her, she had even been hopeful. Now she had truly lost everything – her relationship with Marco, and the child that had never actually existed.

Judging by her reaction, Dr. Brackett realized that she had been hoping the results would be positive. He tried to console her, but she didn’t respond to him. He looked over at Marco, seeing the mixture of emotions on his face.
“Beverly, I’m going to give you something to help you relax. Your body needs a lot of rest in order to heal and you can’t rest when you’re this upset.” He walked over to the cabinet, withdrawing a vial and a syringe. He carefully injected the medication into her IV port, then made a note in her chart. He checked her vitals again as he waited for the medication to have the desired effect.

Slowly the warmth of the anxiolytic took effect and she felt her body relaxing, her eyes drifting closed, and somewhere, she thought she even felt Marco’s warm caress along her face once more.

Dr. Brackett looked over at Marco, clearing his throat to gain the attention of the fireman. “Marco, I know she doesn’t have any family. I don’t mean to put any pressure on you, but I need to know if you’re going to stay with her. If not, then I want to call in one of our off duty nurses. I don’t want her to be alone right now.”

Marco looked into the concerned blue eyes of the emergency physician and he saw nothing but concern on the older man’s face. “I’m not leaving her, Doc,” he said, continuing to stroke her hair as she drifted off to sleep. “I’m going to stay with her and... try to convince her to stay at Mama’s house while she recuperates.”

Dr. Brackett offered him a smile and a nod. “That’s the best idea I can think of, Marco. Your mother’s tender loving care is better medicine than anything I can prescribe.” He looked back down at his patient, checking her pulse one final time. It was slowing down as was her respiration rate. “She’s ready to be moved to the floor. I’ll go make the call now.”

Dixie walked in the door just as Dr. Brackett reached for the wall phone. She stepped over to Marco, noting that Beverly seemed to be resting. “She’s going to be fine, Marco.”

He merely offered her a weak smile. He wished he had her confidence.

Dixie listened to Dr. Brackett requesting that Beverly be moved to the floor. “Marco, it’s lunchtime. Why don’t you go by the cafeteria? I think she’ll sleep for a while and you need to take care of yourself.”

Marco’s eyes never left Beverly’s injured face. “I can’t, Dix. I can’t leave her alone, not even for a few minutes.”

“Okay,” she said, offering the lineman a sympathetic smile. “I’ll check on you on my next break.”

“Dixie, let’s get one more set of vitals before she’s moved,” Dr. Brackett ordered, using that as an opportunity to pat Marco on the shoulder. “If you need anything, Marco, you ask the nurses to call me. I mean it.”

“Thank you,” the lineman responded, turning to look at the bumping sound of a gurney being brought into the room. He watched as her limp form was quickly transferred to the gurney and then walked behind the orderlies as they exited the treatment room. He was about to follow them toward the elevators when a familiar voice called out to him.

“Marco? How is she?”

Lexi’s dark eyes penetrated Marco’s crumbling exterior. Seeing the sight of his little sister there to support Beverly made him melt into her embrace.

“Oh Lexi... Thank you for... for calling us.” He pulled back, glancing down the hallway at the gurney waiting by the elevators. “She’s being admitted overnight. She’s dehydrated and anemic.”
Lexi matched Marco’s strides as they hurriedly caught up with the orderlies. “And exhausted, I’m sure.”

Marco looked over at his sister. “What do you mean?”

“She’s had three rescues in the last two weeks and... and one of them....” Lexi looked down at her feet, hesitating when the elevator doors opened. “Um, I need to let Mama know what’s going on. What room is she being taken to?”

Marco looked at the orderlies.

“402,” one of them said.

“I’ll be up in just a minute. Mama’s in the parking lot waiting on me. She sends her love, but she has Antonio with her and he’s too young to visit.”

“I understand and... I really appreciate you coming by, Lex.”

“I’d... I’d like to stay a little while, okay?”

“Thank you,” Marco announced, feeling relieved. If anybody could give him some insight into what Beverly might be thinking, it was Lexi. “I’d like that. You can take my car home later.”

Lexi watched as the doors of the elevator closed, then turned to walk back out to the parking lot. Beverly and Marco had been there for her when she needed them most. Now it was time for Lexi to return the favor.

E!

At Station 51, Mike and Chet walked into the kitchen, following their captain. No one said a word as they each poured themselves coffee and sat down at the table. The sound of the squad backing into the bay caused Hank to lift his hazel eyes from the table where he had been staring.

“Alright, you fellas sit tight. I’m gonna get Roy and John and we’ll have a quick meeting while we wait on Marco’s replacement.”

The two paramedics wandered into the kitchen before Hank had a chance to leave the table.

“Hey fellas, have a seat,” Hank requested, gesturing towards the empty chairs. “How’s Beverly?”

“She was improving when we left. I think they’ll probably keep her, thought,” Roy explained, dragging a chair out from the table.

“How’s Marco?” Chet asked, somberly. He had been as stunned as the others upon learning of Beverly’s possible pregnancy.

“Not good,” Johnny spoke up, opening up the refrigerator and pouring himself a glass of milk before assuming his seat at the kitchen table.

“He asked her to marry him yesterday, but she said no,” Roy mumbled, feeling sorry for his coworker.

“Aww man,” Chet groaned. “Why would she do that?”

Johnny and Mike cut the lineman knowing glares.
“What?” Chet asked, raising his shoulders, unable to make sense of what he was hearing.

“Let it go, Chet,” Mike suggested, unwilling to say what he was thinking about the paternity of the possible pregnancy. “We just need to be supportive of Marco, right?” the engineer asked, his blue eyes searching the faces of the group.

“She was asking for him on the way to Rampart,” Roy commented. “Maybe things will work out with them once she’s feeling better.”

Johnny downed half the glass of milk, using the back of his hand to wipe his upper lip. “It’s been one helluva year, hasn’t it?”

“Yea,” Hank groused, thinking the same thing. “But we’re all still here. We’ll make it through this trial, too. And so will Marco and Beverly, with our help.”

There was silence around the room as each man was caught up in his own thoughts. Finally, Johnny broke the silence.

“I, uh... I need to let you fellas know that... I won’t be here next shift,” the dark-haired paramedic said softly. “My deposition is Friday in Selma.”

“I’m sorry, Johnny. I was hoping that wouldn’t be necessary,” Mike said, offering whatever comfort his words might bring to his downtrodden friend.

“Yea... me, too,” Johnny said, tapping his index finger on the top of the table.

“Is this the twilight zone, or somethin’?” Chet groused, running his fingers through his curly hair. “I mean, what deity have we all pissed off lately, huh?”

“Chet, we haven’t done anything wrong. We’ve just had a run o’ bad luck, that’s all,” Johnny piped up, hoping to convince himself as well as his shiftmate.

Chet propped his elbow on the table, resting his chin in his hand. He picked at the gold flakes on the top of the kitchen table, his mind wandering. His own previous difficulties had seemed to set off the chain of events, but now his life couldn’t be better. He had a beautiful fiancée he loved, and a sweet little future stepdaughter that he was thinking of as his own child. He had reconciled with his father, and was getting married in just a few months. His blue eyes looked around at the assembled group. Captain Stanley had been the next one to succumb to the run of bad luck, as Johnny called it, but now he and Mrs. Stanley were doing great. Roy and Joanne had had their difficulties, but all seemed to be well there. Mike had experienced one of the worst accusations any fireman could endure, and yet, he had overcome it. Not only had he been exonerated of any wrong-doing, but the damsel in distress he had rescued had become his new girlfriend. Then there was Marco. He had gone through the elation of finding his sister, having her return from the sordid life of prostitution, and in the process seemed to have found the love of his life. However, his life seemed to be falling apart. And what about Johnny? He had been through hell in the last month, nearly dying, and if that wasn’t enough, now he was being asked to return to the place that had devastated him as a teenager, to testify against a secret society with more power and influence than anyone could imagine.

As the curly haired lineman continued allowing his mind to wander, his eyes grew larger and larger. “Hey, fellas, remember that traffic accident we worked? The one where we couldn’t find the victim?”

“Yea, so?” Johnny asked, unsure of where his coworker was going. That run had absolutely nothing
to do with the issues facing them now.

Chet sat back in his chair. “It’s the aliens.”

Johnny narrowed his eyes in disbelief. “What are you talkin’ ‘bout, Kelly?” the paramedic questioned, not seeing the exasperated looks on the faces of the other men.

Roy lowered his head to the table while Mike rolled his eyes. Neither man could believe what they were hearing.

“Don’tcha see, Gage? All this stuff that’s been goin’ on... It started when we couldn’t find the victim at that TA. And...” the lineman’s voice began to grow louder. “Think about it. That place where the aliens crashed... um...” he snapped his fingers in the air. “Roswell... Don’t they call it, um, yea... Area 51? That’s it! The aliens have confused us, Station 51, with the place where their relatives crashed, Area 51, and now they’re-"

“Aww, go play on the freeway, Chet!” Johnny argued, not in the mood to deal with the antics of Chester B. Kelly.

Roy pushed away from the table to pour himself a cup of coffee, wishing he had something stronger to mix with it. Mike stood up and wandered out of the room, needing to find a place to regain his sanity. Hank walked over to the place where his two younger men were involved in the asinine alien conversation. He gripped them both by the backs of their necks. “Knock it off, you twits!”

E!

Marco sat down in the plastic chair in Beverly’s room, slumping down in the chair and leaning his head back against the wall. He had some decisions to make about their relationship, but at least those decisions didn’t involve planning for the future of a child. He loved Beverly with all his heart, but how did she feel about him? Roy said she had been asking for him in the ambulance and then she apologized in the treatment room. What did all of that mean? He sat there, watching her sleeping, startled when there was a soft knock on the door.

Lexi stuck her head in the doorway and whispered. “May I come in?”

Marco nodded, waving her in, not wanting to risk waking Beverly. He pulled a second chair over beside the place where he sat and patted the seat. “Thought you changed your mind,” he whispered, glancing at the clock on the wall.

Lexi accepted the chair, looking back and forth between her brother and her friend. “Sorry, I drove Mama and Antonio home, ate a sandwich for lunch and then came back. I thought you might need a break.

“That’s thoughtful of you, but... I’m fine.”

She’s pale,” Lexi commented, noting how weak her friend looked.

“Yea... that’s the anemia.” Marco waited for a few moments before turning to look at Lexi. “What were you about to tell me downstairs? About her rescues?”

Lexi licked her lips, looking down at her fingernails. “She’s had some tough rescues lately, and one of them... Marco, she got called out to rescue a girl from a house where... where she,” Lexi nodded her head at Beverly’s still form. “It was the place where Beverly had been rescued years ago... the same place... the same john...”
“Ohmygod,” Marco groaned, scrubbing his face with his hands.

“But Marco... the girl... she didn’t survive.”

“What?” Marco’s eyes grew wide.

“Her pimp found out she had called for help, and... and he beat her up. By the time the cops and Beverly arrived to help her, they found her lying on the front porch. She literally died in Beverly’s arms.”

Marco pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering how Beverly had kept going after that had happened. “Why... Why didn’t she tell me?”

Lexi walked over to Marco’s chair and sat on the armrest, placing her arm around his shoulders. “For the same reason you don’t talk to her about your bad runs, where people die in the most gruesome ways.”

Marco exhaled a cleansing breath. “I talk about it with my shiftmates... I don’t want to... to burden her with those... images.”

“Exactly... Only someone who’s been there can fully appreciate what you’ve seen and been through. And, you want to protect your loved ones from those experiences, right?”

Marco nodded his head in understanding. He leaned his elbows on his knees, running his fingers through his hair as he stared at the floor. After several long moments of processing what he had heard, he leaned back up, looking at his sister.

“She... she told me yesterday that she thought she was pregnant. Don’t be mad at me, Lexi, please...”

“Why would I be mad at you? Who am I to judge?” she asked, lifting her eyebrows slightly.

“I asked her to marry me... but she said no,” Marco commented, his voice sounding distraught.

Lexi gazed over at Beverly and then back at Marco. “Is she?”

Marco shook his head. “I... I wanted to marry her anyway, Lexi. I was even planning on asking her as soon as I had the money to get a ring, but... She told me no.”

“Maybe she isn’t ready, yet.”

“I think there’s more to it than that.” Marco shifted his eyes from his sister back to the place where Beverly lay sleeping.

“What do you mean?” Lexi asked.

“We found out, down in the emergency room, that... she isn’t pregnant. Lexi, she was so upset. I mean, it was like she wanted to be pregnant, but... But if she had been pregnant... I don’t think it could’ve been mine.”

Lexi was confused by the things she was hearing from her brother, and she knew he was upset. “Wait, are you saying that you and she haven’t...”

“No, no...” Marco rubbed his forehead with his fingers. This was harder to discuss with his sister than he had anticipated. “We have... I... I love her and... it just seemed right, but... there hasn’t been enough time for her to be pregnant... at least not by me.”

“Marco!” Lexi argued in a stage whisper. “How could you accuse her of cheating on you?”
The hushed whispers had roused Beverly from her sleep, but she recognized the voices and decided to lie there, eavesdropping on the conversation. She was grateful that her face was turned away from Lexi and Marco, so they wouldn’t see the tears that had slipped from beneath her closed eyes.

“I’m not, Lex... I’m not accusing her of anything. I just... If she loved me and if she thought the baby was mine... why wouldn’t she marry me?”

Lexi couldn’t give him a good answer. She could see the stress on his face. When she heard his stomach growl, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “Have you eaten lunch?”

Marco shook his head.

“Go eat. I’ll stay here with her. You need to keep your strength up.”

Marco knew she was right. He needed to eat, but he also needed to clear his head. “Maybe you’re right. You don’t mind staying with her? I don’t want her to wake up alone.”

“Oh course not. She stayed with me when she didn’t even know me. Now she’s my friend. I’m here for her, and for you,” Lexi explained.

“Thanks, sis,” Marco said, standing up. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. If she...,” he hung his head. “If she wakes up while I’m gone, tell her I... I love her and I’ll be back soon.”

Beverly waited until she was sure Marco was gone before she began to stir.

Lexi reached for the magazine Marco had left in his chair, but she heard a shuffling sound coming from the bed and looked up. “Beverly? Beverly, it’s Lexi. How do you feel? Do I need to get you something?”

Beverly shifted so she could see Lexi with her non-swollen eye. “Thank you... for being here.”

“Hey,” the younger woman said, sitting on the edge of the bed and brushing Beverly’s light brown hair away from her face. “That’s what friends do. We’re here for each other. Marco’s been with you. He just went to the cafeteria to get something to eat. He’ll be back in just a few minutes. He... He said to give you his love.”

Beverly felt her lips begin to tremble. “I... I really messed up, Lexi. He... He hates me, doesn’t he?”

“Of course not! Beverly, he loves you very much. He’s just confused about why you turned down his proposal,” Lexi said, hoping her friend would take the bait.

“I wish I knew,” the broken woman cried. “I... I don’t know why I pushed him away.”

Lexi waited for Beverly’s sobs to settle down before she continued. “I know exactly why you turned him down and so do you.”

Beverly sniffled. “I’m not pregnant, Lexi. I... I was so sure I was, but Dr. Brackett said I’m not.”

“Why were you so sure?”

Beverly thought about the parts of the conversation she had just overheard, and she knew what Lexi was hinting at. “I... I had the symptoms. I knew it was a little too soon, but... I was dizzy, vomiting, and I had headaches. I... I missed two of my pills and... and we didn’t use a back-up method, so...,”
she looked away, picking at the blanket covering her body.

“Sounds like maybe you were kind of hoping you were,” Lexi commented, leading Beverly to say more.

The older woman shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno… maybe…,” she sniffled, inspecting the bandages on her left wrist and hand. “I… I heard part of what Marco said earlier and…”

“Which part?”

“About the timing of everything… He’s thinking I… I cheated on him, isn’t he?”

“It’s a valid question, Beverly,” Lexi stated with no hint of judgment or accusation in her voice. “Beverly, I grew up with four older brothers, and I think of you as… as the big sister I never had, but… Marco’s point is understandable, don’t you think?”

Beverly lowered her face once more. She nodded her head in agreement. “Yea… I didn’t cheat on him, Lexi. I swear, I didn’t. I… I haven’t had sex with anyone else since I left the business.”

Relief washed over Lexi. She was hearing exactly what she had hoped to hear. “Then why did you refuse to marry him?”

Beverly lay in bed, staring around the room, but not looking at the young woman sitting on the edge of her bed. She felt the lump in her throat growing. She coughed trying to dislodge it.

Lexi looked at the pale woman lying in the hospital bed, looking very frail, weak, and vulnerable. “Beverly, we both know why you refused his request. Why don’t you just admit it to him?”

Beverly shook her head. “No… He wouldn’t understand.”

“Give him a chance. He deserves it, don’t you think?”

“I can’t… explain it, Lexi. I don’t know how to tell him so he’d understand.”

Lexi stood up and began pacing around the room. She had to think of a way to get her friend to open up to Marco. “Humph… and to think I believed you, Beverly.”

“What?”

“I believed you when you told us at the group session that we needed to take a chance on someone close to us, that we should trust them… I believed you. But you were lying, weren’t you? You don’t even believe it yourself? You’re a fraud!”

“I am NOT a… fraud! You DO have to risk something sometimes, because it’s the only way to learn to trust again. You KNOW that, Lexi!”

Lexi spun around on her heels and her dark eyes bore holes into Beverly’s weakened body. “Exactly! And you aren’t willing to trust Marco completely, because you’re afraid he’s going to leave you. So instead of taking the risk, you just go ahead and push him away. You did it to protect yourself!”

“Yes! Alright, are you happy now? Yes, I… I told him… no, so… so…” Her sobs broke into her
So you would be the one in control,” Lexi stated softly, returning to her place on the bed. “I get it. It makes perfect sense to me.”

Beverly sniffled, wiping her face with the tissue Lexi handed her. “But I hurt him… I was wrong. I… You’re right; I’m a fraud.”

Lexi offered a sympathetic smile. “The great Beverly Marsh is human after all. You aren’t a fraud… You’re afraid, and that’s okay.”

“It’s not okay to hurt… hurt the man I love. He’ll never be able to… to forgive me, will he?”

Lexi knew the answer, but she wasn’t about to say it out loud. “That’s a risk you’re going to have to take. He’ll be back here in just a few minutes. Maybe you need to tell him the truth. He’ll understand why you did it, but I can’t speak for him as to whether or not he’ll forgive you.”

“I know,” Beverly said, cowering down lower in the bed. Her exhaustion was threatening to pull her under once more.

“But you’ll give him a chance, right? When he walks back through that door, I’m going to leave and… and you’ll tell him the truth and give him the opportunity to forgive you, right?”

Beverly closed her eyes. Lexi was right. It was time she gave more than lip service to the things she was counseling her ladies on – it was time she walked the walk, too. She nodded her head, holding the tissue to her runny nose.

“I will… I promise.” She tossed the tissue in the tiny wastebasket beside her bed. “Thank you… Thank you for… for holding me… accountable.”

Lexi offered a smile to the woman she really hoped would become her sister-in-law. “You did it for me. It isn’t pleasant, but it works.”

Beverly offered a slight nervous chuckle. “Yea… it does.”

The door of her room slowly opened, and Marco entered carrying a white sack of food and a soft drink. “I thought I’d eat…,” he began with a whisper, but stopped when he realized that Beverly was awake. “Bev?”

“Hey,” she replied softly, cutting her eyes at Lexi who was smiling broadly.

“Marco, I think I’ll leave you two alone now. I’ll see you at Mama’s house.”

Marco set his food down, fishing his keys out of his pocket and passing them over to her. “I’ll walk you out. Beverly, are you hungry?”

Lexi winked at Beverly while Marco’s back was turned to her. “I’ll walk myself out. You stay here. I think Beverly has something to tell you, don’t you, Beverly?”

Marco saw the looks passing between his sister and Beverly, and for the first time, his heart held a sense of hope.

“Yes… Do you have a few minutes to talk?” Beverly asked.
A huge smile spread from beneath the bushy mustache. “I have all night… and the rest of my life,” he said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed where Lexi had been sitting. “I’ll share my tuna fish sandwich and Pepsi with you.”

Beverly’s vision became misty, as she looked into the dark eyes she so loved. “I love you, Marco.”

“I love you, too.”

“I hope you feel better soon, Beverly. Marco, call me when she gets discharged. Mama’s getting the guest room ready,” Lexi announced as she backed out of the door and headed down the hallway.

The next hour was spent with Marco coaxing Beverly to eat part of his sandwich while Beverly tried her best to explain her behavior from the previous day. While Marco didn’t fully understand it, he understood that she regretted how she had treated him, and she had told him she loved him. In the grand scheme of things, nothing else mattered.

“I’m not making any sense, am I?”

“Well... I have to admit that I don’t understand it all, but I’ve never walked in your shoes. I don’t pretend to understand how you’re feeling, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t believe you. It’s just all confusing to me.”

An uncomfortable silence settled around them.

“Marco, is there any possible way that you can forgive me?”

Marco toed off his shoes and laid down beside her. He curled onto his side, pulling her into an embrace, careful not to dislodge her IV or cause her left arm further injury. Beverly allowed her body to melt into his, lying partially on top of him as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Sweetheart, I forgive you. It’s not even a question. But there is one question that I want you to think about, but don’t give me an answer, yet. I want you to think about my proposal yesterday. I’m taking it off the table, but only temporarily.”

Beverly flinched, wondering what he meant.

“I’m going to ask you the same question again very soon, but this time, I’m going to do it right,” he said, pulling the blanket up around her shoulders.

“Does that mean that everything’s going to be okay… between us?” she asked, her voice raspy.

“It already is. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere - ever. We finally know why you’ve been feeling so badly lately, and we’re going to have you feeling better real soon. I’d say things couldn’t be better, cariño. Now, just close your eyes and get some rest. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

E!

By the time Dixie’s shift ended, she was exhausted, but she had promised to check on Beverly and Marco before she left. So she shouldered her purse and headed for the elevators.
“Hey, Dix?” a voice called out behind her.

The pretty head nurse spun around in time to see her favorite paramedic duo heading towards her.

“You wouldn’t happen to know how Beverly’s doin’, would ya?” Johnny asked.

“I promised to check on her before I headed home.” She jerked her head in the direction of the elevators. “Care to join me?”

Roy held up the handy talkie. “As long as the tones will let us.”

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Johnny asked the question everyone had been wondering all afternoon. “Um… I know you can’t actually tell us, Dix, but… can you give us a hint. I mean… Is she…?”

Roy raised his eyebrows at the brazenness of his partner, but he was glad the question had been raised. They had all hoped that Marco would call them at the station, but he hadn’t, and this was the first chance they had had to actually stop by and check on the two of them.

“Well, Johnny… You’re right, I can’t….” she turned around to face the doors, leaving the two paramedics staring at each other behind her. “But I wouldn’t plan on smoking any cigars any time soon.” The clever nurse smiled to herself, knowing she had relayed the message without officially violating any rules of confidentiality.

Johnny leaned his back against the cold panel of the elevator, blowing out his cheeks in relief. At least Marco wasn’t going to be faced with an unplanned pregnancy. He just hoped the two of them could work through their problems. He didn’t like seeing his shiftmates upset over anything, especially not personal matters. It could easily take their attention off the job at hand, and that could endanger the citizens of LA County, and the rest of the men on shift.

When the elevator doors opened, the three of them exited, heading in the direction of room 402. The paramedics slowed down as Dixie eased up to the door, turning her head to the side to listen. She didn’t hear any talking inside, so she turned to her two friends. “Let’s keep it down, fellas. I think she’s sleeping.”

Dixie gave a gentle knock on the door. When there was no response, she pushed the door open just enough to peer inside. What she saw warmed her heart. She leaned back, allowing the two men to get a glimpse of the hospital bed.

There, asleep in the bed, were both Beverly and Marco. They looked peaceful and comfortable in each other’s arms. Both men stepped back, allowing the door to slowly shut, wistful smiles on their faces.

“That’s a sight for sore eyes,” Roy commented, remembering how he had done the same thing with Joanne after Jennifer had been born. The labor and delivery had been difficult, and more than anything, he wanted to bear some of the pain for her, but she had told him later on that the most wonderful thing he could have done for her afterwards was to hold her while she slept. And he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Marco and Beverly were going to be okay.

He looked over at his partner, seeing the dark eyes he knew so well, locked in a thousand-mile stare. “Earth to Johnny,” he said, tapping Johnny’s elbow with the back of his hand.

“Hmm?”
Dixie shook her head, grinning. Maybe things were about to return to normal for the men of Station 51. There seemed to be just one major hurdle left – Johnny’s deposition. And she wondered if Johnny’s faraway look was because of his upcoming trip to Selma, or if the scene between Marco and Beverly was reminding him of a certain young lady who had returned from Tehachapi with him.

“I’ll catch you guys next shift,” she commented, then grimaced. “I’m sorry, John. You said you wouldn’t be here. I hope everything goes well for you down south.”

“Thanks, Dix. So do I.”

As the trio walked back to the elevators, the radio alerted them to an incoming call.

“Squad 51, stand by for a response,” came the voice of Sam Lanier.

“Well, looks like we’re headin’ back out there,” Johnny said, offering Dixie a brief smile.

“We better take the stairs,” Roy said, ushering his partner towards the stairwell.

“Yea, I know. Catch ya later, Dix.”

“Be safe,” she called out as she pushed the down button. Yes, maybe life would soon return to normal for the firemen she loved like brothers.

E!

As the first streaks of the new day began to appear in the skies above Los Angeles County, Marco was awakened by the soft stirrings of Beverly. He stretched his legs, forcing his eyes open. When he saw her eyes flutter open, he greeted her with a smile.

“Good morning,” he whispered.

“Hey,” she said, turning her head awkwardly, trying to see him around the swelling in her left eye and cheek. “Um… bathroom.”

“Figured you might need to go. That’s your third bag,” he said, nodding his head towards the IV pole. “Let me help you get up.”

“I can’t believe you stayed with me… after I…”

“Sshhh,” Marco said, hushing her ruminations. “People who love each other stick together… in sickness and in health.”

After she had taken care of her most pressing need, she washed her hands, grimacing when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. It was the first time in years that battered face was reflected back at her. She finger-combed her hair, tucking the stray strands away to improve her appearance as much as she could.

Marco helped her get back into bed, tucking her in. “I’m glad you agreed to stay at Mama’s house for the next few days,”

“I appreciate the offer.”

“She loves you, Bev. We all do.”
Beverly blushed, pulling the blanket up around her chin. “I love you and your family, Marco. More than you, or they, could ever know.”

Marco winked at her. “We know.”

E!

At station 51, the men pulled themselves out of bed in response to the wake up tones. Hank acknowledged LA, then snapped his suspenders into place and followed his men towards the kitchen in search of coffee, surprised when he saw his junior medic had already made morning coffee.

“John?”

“Yea, Cap?” Johnny replied, pouring several cups of coffee.

“What are you doing up so early?”

Johnny shrugged his shoulders, passing the coffee cups to the men who lumbered past him. “Got a lot on my mind. Figured I’d make us some coffee since I couldn’t sleep.”

Mike patted Johnny on his shoulder, accepting a proffered cup. “Our thoughts will go with you, Johnny.”

“Thanks, Mike.”

“Do you need a ride to the airport?” Roy asked.

“Naw, I’ll just be gone a couple o’ days. It won’t cost me that much to park the Rover at LAX,” he replied, pulling out his chair and taking a seat. “I, uh, I want to thank all you fellas for what you did for me at Tehachapi. I,” he looked down into the dark cup of coffee. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you fellas.”

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you,” Chet said.

“You were there for Becca and me, too.” Hank tipped his head in Johnny’s direction.

“And you probably saved my marriage,” Roy added.

“And helped save my reputation,” Mike spoke up.

“Aww, c’mom, fellas. We’re always there for each other, right?” Johnny commented, uncomfortable with the praises he was receiving.

“That’s right,” Hank said. “And if you need anything… ANYTHING, you’ll call one of us, won’t you?”

Johnny nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yea… Yea, I promise.”

Chet couldn’t stand the current display of emotions. “Gage, you’re gonna by flyin’ over New Mexico, right?”

A couple of stifled snickers were heard around the kitchen table.

“Yea,” Johnny replied, allowing his crooked grin to make an appearance as soon as he realized where his nemesis was heading with his comment. “But don’t worry, Kelly. I won’t let the aliens get me,” he said, leaning back and propping his elbow on the back of the chair he was sitting in. “But as
I’m soaring over Area 51,” he said, using his hand to mimic an airplane in flight. “I might just send ‘em back here to snatch the Phantom.”

Chet turned to his side, his back to Johnny as he addressed the rest of the smiling men. He knew they had all needed a little comedic relief, and he was glad to be the one to provide it.

“John Gage - the only man on earth who admits he communicates with little green men.”

Johnny chuckled, standing up so that he could tower over the Irishman. “And you, Chester B. Kelly, are the only man on earth who admits he believes in ‘em.”

“It’s because they’re the same height,” Mike deadpanned, causing the entire room to erupt in howling laughter.

E!
Chapter 35

Johnny eased to a stop at the entrance to LAX, helping Iris and Lily out of the Rover and setting their luggage beside them.

“Do you want to leave your bag with us?” Lily asked.

“Nah, I’ll just carry it,” he replied, stepping back around to the driver’s side. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He pulled back into the line of traffic and quickly found an empty parking spot. He exited the vehicle and with his aviator sunglasses covering his bloodshot eyes, he withdrew his bags from the rear seat. The early morning breeze sent tufts of dark hair in a variety of directions as he walked towards the entrance. He hadn’t slept well the night before. His face contorted in a yawn as he removed his sunglasses, pocketing them in his flannel shirt while making his way towards the check-in line. In just 48 hours he would be returning to Los Angeles with this whole ordeal behind him – at least, that was what he was hoping.

As the line moved forward, a tall slender man with streaks of gray interspersed in his dark hair made Johnny’s breath hitch. The tanned leather jacket the older man wore reminded him of the one his father had always worn when Johnny was growing up on the reservation. The stranger turned sideways, locking eyes with Johnny and dipping his head in a silent greeting before walking away. Johnny couldn’t help but allow his gaze to follow the departing man. Had the deposition not been scheduled for tomorrow, Johnny might well be at the airport today picking up his parents. That thought sent a mixture of sorrow and dread into his heart. He missed his family terribly, but being apart meant that he didn’t have to see the disappointment on his father’s face. How could he ever face Roddy Gage again, now that he knew the truth about why Johnny had fled Montana?

“May I help you, sir?”

Johnny looked up, seeing the pleasant face of a young woman with a bright smile, and for just a few minutes, while he waited for his boarding pass, he was able to focus on something other than what was waiting for him in Selma.

E!

In the Lopez home, Beverly snuggled deeper within the comfort of the soft mattress and fluffy handmade quilt. She drifted somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, smiling gently as she thought of Marco. His presence seemed so real to her that she could even smell his aftershave. Suddenly, a feather-soft kiss on her forehead caused her eyes to flutter open.

“Sorry, baby… I thought I could kiss you good-bye without waking you.”

“Marco?” Beverly questioned in a husky voice, unsure if she was really awake.

“Yes, it’s me… I just wanted to check on you before I left for the station. How do you feel?”

Beverly pushed herself into a sitting position, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, wincing. “Sore.”

“Yea, you’re going to be sore for a few days. That was quite a fall you took,” he said, brushing her mussed up hair away from her face. “Mama has breakfast ready for you whenever you get up, but
there’s no rush at all. You need all the sleep you can get.”

“Mrs. Lopez has been so sweet to me… You all have.”

Maria was walking in the door with a fresh glass of cool water for Beverly’s bedside. “That’s Mama Lopez, Beverly; you’re family,” she said, setting the glass on the nightstand. She leaned over, offering her son a kiss on his cheek. “I have fruit, banana muffins, and scrambled eggs for breakfast, when you get up.” She wagged her finger playfully at the younger woman. “But like Marco said, there’s no rush.”

“Aunt Bev?”

The adults looked at the door to see Antonio’s curious face leaning through the opening.

“Yes?” Beverly responded, not questioning the youngster’s term of endearment.

“How ya feeling?”

“I’m much better, thank you,” she said, grinning back at him.

“Love you, bye,” he said, scurrying down the hallway in search of his favorite morning television program.

The adults laughed at Antonio’s antics.

“Aunt?” Beverly questioned.

“Hey, the kid has good taste,” Marco responded.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Mrs. Lopez said, backing out of the room and closing the door behind her.

“Thank you, Marco,” Beverly said, reaching for his hand. “For… everything… But especially for a second chance.”

Marco gave her a flirtatious wink. “I haven’t given you a second chance, yet,” he said, thinking of how he wanted to propose next time. “But I will.” He kissed her forehead before walking towards the door.

“Have a safe shift,” she said, offering him a warm smile. As soon as he had left the room, she exhaled loudly. ‘When you do decide to give me a second chance… the answer will be yes,’ she thought to herself.

E!

Johnny leaned his head against the window of the airplane, gazing at the fluffy clouds below. He wondered if this was like the view an eagle might see as it soared above the earth, carefree and strong. His mind took him back to his childhood, to a time when he was about five years old. His father had taken him for an overnight camping trip along the edge of the river that formed the western-most border of the reservation. The trip was a teaching moment, a time designed to introduce the youngster to the history of his people and the world of spirit guides.

Johnny recalled how his father had painstakingly spent time teaching him how to gather wood and build a fire pit that was safe. He taught him how to depend on the land for sustenance, and how to look and listen for signs of his spirit guide. It was the first of many such educational trips for Johnny.
He assumed it was one of the reasons why his love of camping had endured into his adulthood. It was his way of connecting with his past, of reminding himself of where he had come from, and continuing to connect with his spirit guide for wisdom and perhaps forgiveness for his failures.

On many of the camping trips, Johnny and his father found bear tracks, and often would see a bear in the distance. While this should have evoked fear in the child, instead it gave him a sense of peace, knowing instinctively that the bear was making its presence known as a way of communicating with him, offering protection from the dangers of the forest night. That’s when Johnny had decided that the bear must be his spirit guide, although his father hadn’t seemed so sure. The bear represented strength and instinct. It stood for courage, power, healing, and guardianship of the world. It was a watcher and Johnny knew that the bear had led him into his chosen profession. In fact, Johnny was so certain of it, that he had chosen to place a bear poster in his locker at the station. It gave him that same sense of protection, even though the image was that of a cartoon. Smokey the Bear had been a part of Johnny’s life since he had joined the department, but the bear had been more than just a symbol of the fire service.

As Johnny continued peering out of the window, he thought of all the items he had collected on those outings. Over the years, he had amassed quite a collection of unique rocks, bones, and even eagle feathers. He smiled wistfully as he recalled his father retrieving the first feather from the river as it floated past them. That was when Johnny had decided that the eagle must be his father’s spirit guide. The eagle represented a connection to the creator. It was an intelligent healer, full of courage, and representing freedom and risk-taking. He looked down once more at the clouds overlapping each other as they floated between mountain peaks, and he could almost imagine them whispering to the eagle as it flew between the treetops. Yes, the eagle was definitely his father’s spirit guide, looking down at the world below… looking down at the bear… looking down at him.

Johnny inhaled deeply, regretting the direction his thoughts were taking him. His father must surely be looking down on him now – now that he knew the truth about his son. Johnny knew that he would one day have to face the man he respected and loved more than anyone else in the world, but it had always been easier to put off the confrontation he knew was inevitable. His heart ached at the thought of disappointing his father. All he wanted to do was to make his father proud of him. And no matter what Iris believed, Johnny knew the truth. His father was not only disappointed in him, but was ashamed to even call Johnny his son. After all the years of teachings, and all the time and effort Roddy had put into raising his son to be strong and proud of his heritage, Johnny had let him down – he had let all of his people down.

Johnny pinched the bridge of his nose, squinting as the sun shone brightly on the eastern horizon. Slowly he lowered the shade, rubbing his fingers across his forehead as he leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes.

“Headache?” Lily asked, closing the book she had been reading.

“Yea… a little one,” he said, knowing it was easier to agree with her assumption than to explain the real reason for his pain.

“I’ve got a couple of aspirin in my purse,” Iris responded, leaning down in search of the bag beneath the seat in front of her.

Johnny raised his palm in her direction. “I’m okay; I’ll just get some water when the stewardess comes by.”

Lily gently reached over, tucking her smaller hand beneath his, offering him her presence as a
comfort. “This will all be over soon, Johnny, and we’ll be heading back to LA wondering why we were so worried about it in the first place.”

Johnny squeezed her hand, appreciating the gesture and her remarks, but he wasn’t as certain as she seemed to be.

E!

At 51’s, the squad had been called out immediately after roll call, but the engine crew had not been needed on the run. Mike and Marco were hanging hose behind the station, giving both men a chance to talk about the events of the previous shift.

“How’s she doing, Marco?” Mike asked, knowing he didn’t need to call Beverly by name.

Marco hesitated on the bottom rung as he descended the hose tower. “I stayed at Mama’s house last night so I could help with her if she needed me. This morning she seemed to be feeling better. She had a good night, and she’s drinking plenty of water.”

Mike’s compassionate blue eyes looked over at the senior lineman. “That’s good to hear, but I’m concerned about more than just her physical health.”

Marco sighed, taking the final step onto the ground. “I know… I just really don’t know how to answer you. She was…” Marco sighed. “She just seemed so… I don’t know… disappointed when she found out that she wasn’t pregnant.” He ran the back of his hand across his forehead, removing the tiny beads of sweat that were forming from the exertion in spite of the cooler temperatures.

“Maybe she’s ready to start a family, even if she doesn’t want to admit it,” the engineer offered.

“I don’t think so.” Marco leaned his forearms across the rungs in front of him. “Lexi and I talked about it for a while last night, after Beverly went to bed. Lexi has really good insight, Mike. I mean, it’s more than just the fact that she’s been… out there,” he said, sweeping his hand in the direction of the street. “She really understands human behavior.”

Mike wanted to agree with him, but he didn’t want to open himself up to questions about his and Lexi’s relationship that he wasn’t ready to answer, especially not with her older and very protective brother. “So, what did Lexi say about it?”

Marco didn’t recognize Mike’s deflection, for which the engineer was especially grateful.

“She talked to me about how the girls out there really have nothing to call their own, not even their own bodies, you know? They can’t depend on anyone sticking with them, being by their side through thick and thin. I mean, sure the other girls are with them, but not forever. Girls get traded and sold between pimps like worn out furniture at a flea market,” Marco said, cringing at his own words. “They can’t depend on their pimps for anything other than protection from other pimps, and not much of that. They can’t depend on the men who buy their services, and… They can’t always depend on the police to help them when they need it. It’s why they struggle with trusting other people, especially… us,” he said, waving his hand between himself and Mike. “Lexi thinks that deep down, Beverly wanted to be pregnant because the baby would be someone who wouldn’t… wouldn’t leave her, or… betray her.”

“Someone who would love her?” Mike interjected.

Marco’s dark eyes looked up at the taller man. “Yes… Yes, I guess so.” Marco allowed a slight grin
to spread across his face for just a moment. “Sounds like you and Lexi have been having some serious talks, too.”

Mike felt the heat of his blush creeping up from his collar, coloring the tips of his ears. “We’ve, ah… yea, we have. She’s opened up to me a little, Marco, and… I just want you to know that… I won’t betray her trust.”

Marco glanced back down at his feet. He wondered how intimate his friend had become with Lexi, but he knew it was none of his business. Even though Lexi was his baby sister, she was a grown woman, and what the two of them did when they were alone was… He shook his head, this was Mike Stoker he was talking to – his friend and Lexi’s rescuer. “Um, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

Mike felt his ears growing hotter. “Sure… go ahead.”

“How does Lexi act with you, um, when you, uh, you know… get close to her?”

“Ahem.” Mike cleared his throat, stalling for time as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The last thing he wanted to do was lie to his friend, but the next to last thing he wanted to do was get punched in the face by him.

“Aw, Stoker, I’m not asking for the details of your love life, just..., you know, is she scared… of you… as a man?” Marco both wanted to know and yet, didn’t want to know about his sister, but Mike was the only other person who might have some idea of what he was going through.

Mike’s blue eyes looked directly at his friend, realizing that the question was just as difficult for Marco to ask as it was for Mike to answer. He respected Marco, loved him like a brother, and he needed to be honest with the older man. “Let me put your mind at ease. We haven’t… okay?”

Marco looked back down at the ground, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief, but unable to look at his engineer.

“But we have gotten rather… romantic, I’ll say, and she’s shared a lot of heavy stuff with me. And to answer your question, there’s been times when… Yea, I think she was afraid of me. I remember reaching for her face, you know, to brush her hair away from her mouth so I could kiss her goodnight, and… she pulled away from me really fast. She flinched like she thought I was gonna hit her, or something.”

“Beverly’s done that with me, too.”

“They need our love and patience, Marco,” he added.

Marco’s dark eyes lifted quickly. “Do you? Love her, I mean?”

Mike didn’t hesitate, even though the question caught him by surprise. “Yea… I do.”

“I’m glad, really glad. I just want her to be happy. She’s been through so much,” the lineman said, shaking his head.

“I know… and I won’t let her down; you have my word. I won’t hurt her, at least, not intentionally,” Mike added, realizing how upset Beverly had been even though Marco hadn’t intended to hurt her, either.

Silence fell between them, neither man really knowing what to say. Marco ran his hand through his hair, deciding to plunge ahead with the uncomfortable conversation. “Um, when you do… you
know… Not that I’m rushing you, but… if it happens… She might not… really understand that…
that it’s not like what she’s used to,” Marco stammered, hoping Mike would understand what he was
trying to convey.

“Yea… we’ve kinda talked about it a little. Um, was Beverly… was she…,” Mike exhaled loudly.
“Aww hell, I’ll just ask you. Was she uncomfortable with her own, you know, desires?”

Now it was Marco’s turn to blush. He snickered for a moment, but felt a sense of relief knowing that
Mike was open to the conversation. “Okay, first of all, I’m going to pretend that you aren’t dating my
sister. But… yes, she was. It was just all about me. I mean, that’s great for a few minutes, but when
you love someone, it… it isn’t all about you… it’s mainly about the other person. It was like she
didn’t know how to be the other half of a real couple. Does that make sense?”

“Perfect sense,” the red-faced engineer commented, relieved that what he and Lexi had been
discussing seemed to be a common theme with women who had endured what she and Beverly had
been through. “She didn’t know how to receive love, right? Not just physically, but emotionally,
too.”

“Right,” Marco agreed. “I think they believe they don’t deserve it.”

Mike patted his friend on the shoulder. “Then it’s up to us to convince them that not only do they
deserve it, but that it’s something that we want to share with them.”

“But we’re not talking about my baby sister,” Marco added, grinning beneath his bushy mustache.

“Oh, of course not,” Mike agreed, laughing.

E!

By the time the plane had landed in Atlanta, Johnny was feeling nauseated. Iris noticed how pale he
looked when they stood up to exit the plane.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Johnny reached into the overhead compartment, removing their bags. “Yea… I just need to eat a little
something. How long is our layover?”

“Two and a half hours,” Lily responded, walking ahead of them down the aisle. She looked back
over her shoulder. “We’ll have plenty of time to grab a burger, or something before we board for
Montgomery.”

“Mmmhmm,” was all Johnny was able to mutter. The closer they got to Selma, the tighter the knots
were becoming in his stomach. At the rate he was going, he might not even be able to give his
deposition without asking for multiple bathroom breaks and a barf bag.

In spite of the crowds, the three friends were able to find a restaurant with plenty of available seating.
As the waitress poured them glasses of water, they perused the menu, each of them choosing a club
sandwich instead of a burger.

“I’m not sure my stomach can handle a greasy burger. I better go with something tamer,” Johnny
said after placing his order.

“It’s just a short flight,” Iris said, hoping to ease his mind.
“Yea, well, it doesn’t take long to throw up,” Johnny groused.

Lily sipped her water, turning to Johnny. “All you have to do is tell the truth. That’s nothing to get worked up about, Johnny.”

“Easy for you to say. You can remember that day,” he said, pointing his finger at his own chest. “I can’t. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

Lily and Iris exchanged knowing glances. If Johnny was getting this upset about the deposition, how was he going to act when he saw his parents afterwards? Iris hoped she hadn’t made another mistake by arranging for the Gages to arrive in Selma tomorrow afternoon.

Johnny ran both hands through his unruly hair. “I’m sorry, Lily. I know you were just tryin’ to help me. I didn’t mean to jump ya like that.”

“It’s okay. Stress is bad on everyone. Just remember this - all you’re responsible for telling is what you remember. If you can’t remember something, then just say so. There’s no shame in that.”

“But if that sonofa… um… if Waite gets away with murdering Phillip and the priest because I can’t remember what I saw, then… I’ll never be able to look either of you in the eyes again,” he grumbled, reaching for his water.

E!

In Selma, Kizzy trudged along the sidewalk along Broad Street. Her head was pounding, and she knew her blood pressure was elevated. Tomorrow was the next major step in the journey that had begun ten years earlier when her youngest son had died at the hands of murderers. She needed to refill her prescription, and she was determined to talk to the pharmacist, the one she had an unpleasant connection to that only a few people in Selma remembered.

She walked into the drug store, pressing her fingers into her temples when the bells jingled over her head. She pressed her lips into a thin line, making her way slowly down the aisle to the pharmacy counter.

“Hello, Mrs. Campbell. What can I do for you today?” the gray-haired pharmacist asked.

“I need a refill on my blood pressure pills,” she replied. “I’ve got a very ‘portant day tomorrow.”

Isaac Jones opened his card file, perching his reading glasses on the end of his nose as he thumbed through the third section of the index cards. “It must be a stressful one,” the pharmacist stated, pulling the card from the box.

Kizzy looked around, grateful that no one else was in the store at the moment. “Oh it is… My daughter-in-law and my granddaughter are comin’ to visit me – goin’ with me down to the DA’s office.”

Isaac’s green eyes looked over his reading glasses, his chin dropping slightly as he stared in shock at the older woman. “Is that so…”

“That’s right… and we’ve got us some good evidence, too. The truth’s finally gonna come out ‘bout what really happened to my Phillip,” she said, cryptically.

Isaac focused his attention on filling the prescription, struggling to keep his hands from shaking so
much that he dropped the pills. He thought his past had been long ago buried, but now he was hearing that it was about to be resurrected. His heart ached, pounding in his chest. He knew what he needed to do, but did he have the courage to do it? Could he make amends for a mistake he made all those years ago? Or would the biggest mistake of his life haunt him for the remainder of his days? He dropped the pill bottle into the small white bag, stapling it closed then handing it to Kizzy.

“Ch- um, charge it on your account?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, sir… I’ll pay up on the first day o’ the month, like always,” she said, accepting the bag, noting how pale the pharmacist had become. “Should I tell my daughter-in-law you said hello?”

Isaac stood staring at her, unable to find his voice. His mind kept vacillating between the present and the past… and everything that had been lost in between. “Um, yea… give both of ‘em my, um, my best,” he said, struggling to get his words past the lump in his throat.

“Stop by an’ visit me if you’re ever in my neighborhood,” Kizzy offered, knowing that the white pharmacist would never make such a visit. Truthfully, Kizzy felt contempt for the man, but she had no other option for filling her prescriptions. Maybe one day, she would be able to let go of her bitterness for what he had done, but right now, in spite of all her prayers, she still couldn’t find it in her heart to forgive the aging pharmacist.

Isaac Jones ran the only pharmacy in town; he delivered medications to the homes of white people, but he refused to enter the black neighborhoods. In his younger days, he often drove through those areas, especially at night with his friends shouting obscenities, but not anymore. Those days were over, but the older people in those neighborhoods had long memories, and he knew he wasn’t welcome along their streets. He had done things he wasn’t proud of in his younger days, but joining the Ku Klux Klan as a teenager wasn’t the worst thing he had done in his life. His most horrific transgression, the worst decision he had ever made, was one that still kept him awake at night, and every time Kizzy Campbell came into his pharmacy, he was reminded that forgiveness was something he didn’t deserve, and probably would never receive.

Across the street from Jones’ Pharmacy, Lane Wilson pulled his white Cadillac into a parking space beneath a large live oak tree along Broad Street. He waited a moment, watching the long tendrils of the Spanish moss blowing in the late afternoon breeze, feeling as if he were in a horror movie, just waiting for something, or someone to scare him. He took one last look at his watch. He had to time his visit at exactly six o’clock; he couldn’t risk anyone overhearing what he had to say. As soon as he saw Isaac flipping his store sign to closed, he stepped out of his car, rushing towards the door of the pharmacy as quickly as his rotund body would carry him.

“Wait… Wait jus’ a minute, Isaac,” he called out, waving his hand to get the attention of the pharmacist.

Isaac saw the man waving frantically and felt as if he had swallowed a piece of granite. Rising bile burned the back of his throat and for a moment, he thought he might vomit. He had a sinking feeling he knew what the impromptu visit was about.

“May I help you with somthin’, Wilson?”

The attorney chuckled to himself as he stepped through the open doorway. He could tell by the way Isaac used only his surname that the pharmacist knew the nature of the visit. He smiled broadly, flicking his hand towards the lock on the door.

“Why don’t you go ahead and lock up, and you and I can have us a quick chat. I need a… a favor.”
Isaac hesitated at the door, glancing up and down the sidewalk of his store front to see if anyone was watching. Seeing no one suspicious, he turned around and led the attorney down the aisle towards the back of the store. He motioned for Wilson to take a seat at the soda fountain.

“Would ya care for a Coca-Cola?”

“Naw… thanks anyway,” the attorney said, removing his hat and combing his thinning hair into place.

“I suppose you’ll tell me eventually, but this wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with that Campbell case, would it?” Isaac asked, running a damp cloth across the bar. It wasn’t dusty, but he needed something for his nervous hands to do.

“Well… as a matter o’ fact, it does. Seems that cocky-assed DA wants to stir up some old memories that’d be better left alone. He’s got some young fella comin’ in tomorrow to give a deposition… says he’s the one that took a bunch o’ pictures o’ the scene that mornin’. Now Bill’s face is jus’ a little too clear on the pictures so… So I need you… a fine upstandin’ member o’ the community… to swear under oath that… that Bill was with ya that mornin’.”

Isaac felt sick to his stomach. He was being asked to commit perjury. He gulped, pressing his closed fist to his mouth to stifle a cough. “Ahem… And why would I want to do that?”

The smug attorney snickered, scoffing at the pharmacist’s question. “Weeelll, I doubt that you’d want the fine folks o’ Selma to be reminded about your little secret, now would ya?”

Isaac blanched, grabbing on to the bar between them to maintain himself in a vertical position. He felt the color drain from his face. His former friend was actually willing to resort to blackmail to protect a guilty man.

“I started out here as a delivery boy. I worked my way through college. I’ve paid my dues, and I’ve worked hard… damn hard to build up this business,” Isaac said, his breath coming in short gasps. His once full head of hair was now thinning and held more gray hair than auburn, but as he stood staring at the image of his former friend, he could almost feel his hair turning completely white. Time and stress had aged him more rapidly than most. He and his wife had lost a lot over the years, and neither of them was getting any younger. If he did what Wilson was demanding of him, it might send his sweet Colleen to an early grave, but if he didn’t… He didn’t have long to let the ‘what ifs’ linger in his mind.

“So you have, Jones, so you have… and you wouldn’t want to lose your customers, not over a little thing like this, now would ya?”

Isaac wiped his sweaty brow with the damp cloth then threw it angrily into the sink behind him. “This isn’t some little thing,” he grunted, his back still turned to his uninvited guest. “We’re talkin’ about murder, damn it!”

“Calm down,” the attorney drawled out, knowing he had the other man on the proverbial ropes. “It ain’t really murder. The boy jus’ got what was comin’ to ‘im, that’s all.”

Isaac spun around, his green eyes hard with an anger he hadn’t felt in a long time. “That’s not true, and you know it. He jus’ happened to be the wrong color and crossed your path at the wrong time,” he said, pointing a finger at Wilson.

“MY path,” Wilson scoffed. “Don’t you mean, someone else’s path? I mean, after all… I believe Bill
and I had gone to do a little early mornin’ fishin’ with ya, ‘member?"

The pharmacist glared his eyes at the attorney. “I will not lie for you… or Waite… Not after what you two did to Father Mitchell and the Campbell boy.” Isaac lowered his head, mumbling his response to the previous question. “I do NOT remember the three of us goin’ fishin’.”

Lane Wilson stood up from the bar stool where he had been sitting. His round face became enflamed with an anger like Isaac hadn’t seen in years. “Oh, I ‘spect ya do. ‘Cause if you don’t, then I might be able to find someone else who ‘members that it was YOUR wooden skiff that was used to dump a certain someone’s body into the river that night.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Isaac said, feeling a sharp pain cross his upper chest.

“And that’s not the worst of it, my friend,” Wilson said, turning to walk back down the aisle towards the front door. “I ‘pect the DA might jus’ love to find out that you had a motive for killin’ that Campbell boy... and how that stupid priest tried to intervene and... well, I reckon you had no choice but to take him out, too.”

“Damn you to hell, Wilson!” Isaac called out, leaning against the counter as the pain tightened in his chest. He reached for a bottle of aspirin, forcing the top open and tossing a couple of the bitter pills into the back of his throat.

“I’ll be seein’ ya ‘bout ten o’clock in the mornin’ at the DA’s office,” Wilson called out, unlocking the door and waltzing through it, his chest puffed out in arrogance. He knew he would get the charges thrown out tomorrow, betting the entire case on the testimony of one man whom he assumed would want to keep his family secret buried from his customers forever.

Isaac slowly walked around the soda fountain and down the aisle to lock-up for the second time. His breathing was returning to normal, but his heart was pounding out a rhythm like none he had ever experienced. He walked back to the pharmacy area, searching the shelves for something to take, something to relieve the pain in his chest, but knowing that only one thing might relieve the aching of his heart – forgiveness for the biggest mistake of his life.

E!

By the time the plane landed in Montgomery, Johnny was feeling a little better. The meal he had eaten in Atlanta had seemed to settle his stomach more than he had anticipated. He walked behind the Campbell ladies, following the signs to the baggage claim area. As soon as they had retrieved their luggage and obtained the keys to their rental car, he stepped outside into the warm autumn air. It was nearly nightfall and the stars were already starting to appear in the evening sky.

“The sky reminds me of nightfall in the mountains,” Lily exclaimed, taking a seat in the back of the sedan.

“Yes, the airport is just far enough away from the city that the lights don’t interfere with the stars,” her mother responded. “Remember how bright they are at your Grandma Kizzy’s house?”

“Mmhm,” Lily answered, leaning her head against the back of the seat. “It gets so dark out there at night. There isn’t even a streetlight near her house.”

“Nope,” Johnny finally spoke up, making a left turn as the trio left the Montgomery Regional Airport. “Probably not gonna see a streetlight between here and Selma, either.”

“You know what we should do before we head back to LA?”
Johnny turned his head to the side, glancing at Iris sitting in the passenger’s seat. “What?”

“We should go take a look around Montgomery. You know, visit the St. Jude campus where the marchers stayed that last night… Go visit Dexter Avenue Baptist Church near the state capital… See the sites while we’re here.”

Johnny thought about the picture he had taken of Lily and Iris standing on the angled white staircase outside of the terra cotta brick church where the marchers had gathered before their final walk up to the steps of the Alabama Capitol building. Phillips had only been dead for three weeks by the time the successful civil rights march had taken place, but it had been important to Iris to have her daughter present. Lily had been a symbolic proxy for Phillip – seeing the results of his labor, finishing what he had been unable to finish. The two Campbell ladies hadn’t been posing for the picture, but he had seen them both looking to their right, watching as the mass of humanity made its way up Dexter Avenue on that historic day. He thought of how poignant it would be to recreate that picture, this time in color. He wished now that he had packed his camera. It was only a cheap camera; one he had purchased at the corner drug store near his apartment. He hadn’t taken any pictures with the 35mm camera his parents had bought him since he had gotten to the West Coast. He wondered if Iris still had it, or if the FBI had sent it to Quantico along with the film that had instigated his return to Selma. So much had happened since he had gotten back from Tehachapi that he hadn’t even thought about the camera. He would ask her about it when they got back from this trip. Perhaps if the stress of the deposition was behind him, he would feel like taking up his former hobby again. Maybe he would even try his hand at taking a few pictures around the station.

Most of the trip was made in silence; each one thinking about the last time they had traveled through the Black Belt of Alabama, as it was known. As they neared their destination, Iris broke the silence.

“Even though I have a lot of bad memories from this region, I still miss it.”

Johnny arched an eyebrow in her direction, even though she couldn’t see it in the darkened car.

“Why?”

“It’s where I grew up, John. I remember my grandparents always had the tastiest vegetable garden. The rich dark soil of the Black Belt makes everything taste so much better… and the flowers along their fence were beautiful…. The butterflies flitting around among the roses in their garden. I think that’s where I got my love of flowers. And my Momma always enjoyed watching the hummingbirds zooming through the trumpet vines and-”

Johnny slapped his hand on the steering wheel. “So THAT’S why,” he muttered, still staring at the road ahead.

“Why what?” Lily questioned, leaning forward, propping her chin on the back of the bench seat.

“That’s why they call it the Black Belt… the soil… it’s rich and dark, right?” he asked.

Iris chuckled, thinking she understood what he had been thinking. “Oh, Johnny… Please tell me you didn’t think it was because so many colored people live here.”

The embarrassed paramedic was grateful that the night hid his crimson face. “Yea… well…”

“Oh-haha!” Iris covered her mouth with her hands, feeling the laughter relieving the tension from her shoulders. “Oh… That is just too funny.”

“Well… nobody told me it was because the DIRT was black. What else was I supposed to think?”
Lily chuckled at the innocence of her friend. “You do make a good point, but… You have to understand that the rich soil made the land perfect for growing cotton. Which meant that…,” Lily hesitated, not wanting to think about the opposing histories of her parentage.

“That after the Civil War, the freed slaves really had nowhere to go, so they stayed in the area and became sharecroppers,” Iris finished for her. History was exactly that – it was in the past.

“Mom… do you think that I have relatives in the area who… who were slaves on Dad’s side and…,” Lily paused, grateful when her mother finished her sentence for her.

“And slave-owners on mine?” Iris turned slightly to her side, seeing the silhouetted outline of her daughter’s profile. “I’d say it’s not only possible, it’s highly likely, Lily. Both families have a long history of living in this part of Alabama.”

Johnny added his thoughts to the touching conversation. “Which is what makes you so perfect. You’re the end result of generations of separation and segregation… Which means you’re the beginning of the future.”

Lily felt the heat rise from her chest, coloring her neck. No one had ever called her perfect before. She wanted to kiss Johnny, to feel his arms holding her close, ensuring her that everything was going to be okay – for both of them. She also knew that he needed her encouragement, as well.

“Look,” she said, looking up at the looming structure that rose around the curve, the lights of Selma glowing behind it.

Johnny inhaled deeply. “Looks like we’re here,” he said, slowing down as he drove the sedan over the Edmund Pettus bridge, grateful for the darkness that obscured his view of the place where he had watched Phillip die.

“We’re still a few miles away. The Holiday Inn is on Highland Ave. Continue on Broad Street and then we’ll turn right,” Iris instructed.

“I thought we were staying at the St. James,” Johnny commented, confused.

“Well, when you told me that a few days ago, I thought maybe it had been reopened so I didn’t say anything. But when I called the DA’s office on Tuesday, I was told we were staying at the Holiday Inn. The St. James is closed for renovations.

“Humph,” Johnny mused, continuing to drive past Water Street, noticing the rundown building that was once a beautiful hotel – a home away from home for plantation owners trading cotton and other commodities along the Alabama River. “I could’ve sworn Mr. Pettway told me I was gonna be stayin’ there.”

Iris snickered to herself. “You must’ve been talking to the ghost of Jesse James… He still lives there.”

“What?” Lily questioned, bolting upright.

“That’s what the old folks say. They even say that you can hear his spurs clicking as he walks down the sidewalk in front of the building, and you can hear his dog barking late at night,” Iris said, nonchalantly. “And we are nearing Halloween…”

“I’m not gonna sleep tonight,” Lily muttered to herself.
“Take a right at the next light, Johnny,” Iris said.

Johnny followed her directives, pulling up to the Holiday Inn, admiring the display of pumpkins, and yellow and burgundy mums adorning the walkway.

“It seems nice enough,” Lily commented, stretching her back as she stepped out of the sedan.

“I jus’ wanna get this over with and get the hell out o’ here,” Johnny grumbled, opening the trunk, removing their bags. He heard Lily walking up behind him, felt slender arms wrapping around his waist and her head pressing between his shoulder blades.

“Johnny… it’s going to be okay… I… I just know it,” the young woman said, hoping that he would feel differently after giving his deposition… and seeing his parents.

E!

A few miles away, Isaac Jones sat beside his wife on the front porch of their old Antebellum home, rubbing his fingers across his forehead, stretching out the wrinkles that had formed there over the years.

“You have to do this, Isaac. You know that, right?”

“I don’t have to, Colleen,” he argued, worried about the consequences of his impending actions. He felt the warmth of her smaller hand as she reached out, clasping his larger one.

“We’ve lost so much over the years… It’s time,” she said, looking at him through misty blue eyes. “It’s got to be done, and there’s no better time than tomorrow morning.”

Isaac lowered his head, squeezing her wrinkled hand with his own. “I love you, Colleen. I’m… I’m sorry how our lives turned out.”

“Sshhh…,” she crooned, bending her neck downward until she could see his face. “We ain’t dead, yet… That means there’s still time… and there’s still hope.”

The aging pharmacist nodded his head slowly, using his free hand to swipe at the lone tear that streaked his ruddy face. She was right, and he knew it. And tomorrow morning, the whole town of Selma would know it, too.

E!

As the first streaks of dawn began to awaken the small city of Selma, Johnny stood in front of his window, watching as a few cars passed by on the street in front of the hotel. He sipped his coffee he had retrieved from the front lobby. His stomach growled, but he didn’t know if he would be able to eat breakfast. His anxiety level had risen exponentially overnight, and he knew his blood pressure must be at record levels. He looked over his shoulder, noting that the clock on the bedside table showed that it was not yet 7:00 am.

“Damn,” he mumbled to himself, wishing he had something to occupy his time. There was still three more hours until he was due to give his deposition.

E!

In the skies over the Great Plains, Roddy and Sharon Gage sat beside each other, each one nervous about what the afternoon might hold. Sharon was wringing her hands, anxiously tapping her foot on the floor of the airplane.
Roderick Gage sat stoically in the seat beside his wife, his head leaning against the headrest, and his eyes closed. His mind was strolling leisurely down memory lane. He thought of all the conversations he had had with his young son, sharing about his family heritage and teaching Johnny to be the proud, stalwart young man he imagined him to be. Where had he gone wrong? What had he said all those years ago that had led his son to believe that he would be ashamed of him if he left the reservation? He felt the warmth of a gentle, familiar hand wrapping around his knuckles, pulling him from his musings. He looked over at Sharon, offering her a wistful smile.

“Everything is going to be okay, Roddy.”

He turned his hand over, intertwining their fingers. “What makes you so sure?”

“Because I know him… and I know you… and I know how much we all love each other,” she explained, hoping he believed her.

He returned his head to its previous position, closing his eyes once more. He pressed his lips into a thin line for a moment before responding. “I failed him, Sharon. I taught him everything I know about our people, but I… I failed to teach him the most important lesson of all.”

“Roddy, no matter what Iris said, Johnny knows deep down that we love him and that we’re proud of him. You’ll see,” she said softly.

Roddy squeezed her hand gently, noting that she had not reassured him of the one thing he needed to hear more than any other – that Johnny knew how much his father loved him.

E!

Isaac looked down at his watch as he walked up the steps of the Dallas County Courthouse. He had been warned not to arrive too early, but he was a very punctual man. He hated being late for anything. Truthfully, he preferred to just walk straight into the conference room, avoiding the Campbell family and the DA’s star witness.

Slowly he trudged up the marbled stairs to the second floor of the building, his heart thudding like a caged animal. His brow was perspiring and his mouth was dry. He heard the voice of Lane Wilson talking loudly to the DA at the far end of the hallway, near the entrance to the large conference room, and he felt as though his legs wouldn’t carry him much further.

“I’ve got a witness on his way whose testimony you’re gonna wanna pay close attention to, Moses. I’m awful sorry for the Campbell family’s loss, but you’ll see that all you’ve done is waste the tax payers’ money by flyin’ Mr. Gage down here for nothin’.”

When the aging pharmacist rounded the corner, he saw a small group of people sitting on the bench just outside the designated room, but one familiar face looked up at him, her eyes widening in surprise. Iris Campbell had been fighting the knot forming in the pit of her stomach because of the deposition, but she was not ready for the man who suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs. Her face displayed the shock she was feeling, and her hand flew to cover her mouth, muffling the cry that escaped.

“Ack!” she cried, as if she had seen a ghost. “D-Daddy?”
Chapter 36

“Daddy?” Johnny’s head turned back and forth between Iris and the elderly man. He was stunned by what he had just heard, repeating the word when he heard Iris’ pitiful cry. He turned back to the elderly man whose face appeared to be masked in emotional torment. He saw the looks that passed between Iris and her father, and his heart broke. While the stunned paramedic’s eyes remained locked on the other man, he could feel Lily reaching over to embrace her mother. When he glanced at the younger woman, he saw that she was refusing to look at her maternal grandfather, the man she had believed was dead until just a few years ago. When she had learned the truth, that her maternal grandparents had rejected her because of her mixed-race status, she decided to repay them in like manner.

“C’mon, Mr. Gage. I don’t think this’ll take too long,” the booming voice of Lane Wilson instructed, speaking for Moses Pettway as though he were in charge instead of the district attorney.

Johnny stood up from the long white bench along the wall opposite the conference room. He adjusted the collar of his brown sports coat, running a hand down along his green and gold tie as he headed for the open door.

Lane noticed the reaction the father-daughter reunion was having on Isaac, and he smiled inwardly. He needed the pharmacist to be uncomfortable to ensure that his testimony would be exactly what the defense needed. Having his granddaughter present was a definite bonus. She was a physical reminder of what his daughter had done when she had eloped. “Jus’ have a seat on that whi’ bench, Isaac,” the defense attorney ordered, pointing a pudgy finger at what appeared to be an old church pew that had been painted white, contrasting with the grey walls of the hallway, positioned along the wall just outside the conference room.

Johnny stepped over the threshold of the conference room but felt his entire world tilt when the defense attorney spoke his last sentence. He was jolted back in time to that fateful morning, and the phrase that the unknown assailant had spoken. ‘Whi’ trash, whi’ trash…’ “Ohmygod,” Johnny mumbled to himself gripping the door facing, leaning into it to steady himself.

Johnny’s legs carried him into the large room, but his brain remained in 1965. Images, sounds, feelings and tastes all returned in a rush, like a backdraft consuming an oxygen-deprived room. Choosing not to look at William Waite, or the attorney he now suspected was the unknown third assailant that morning, he locked his brown eyes on the ebony face of the district attorney, accepting his extended hand as if it was a lifeline being offered to a drowning man.

“Moses Pettway, District Attorney. It’s nice to meet you in person and I want to thank you for what you’ve done for this case.”

“John Gage... You’re, uh, welcome.”

“Mr. Gage,” Moses said, sweeping his arm to his side. “This is Ms. Julie Pinehurst, our court reporter. She’ll be typing the transcripts from your testimony and this is Slim Smitherman, my investigator.” He nodded his head in the direction of the defendant. “And this is William Waite, and his attorney, Lane Wilson,” the district attorney said, completing the introductions. “You’ll be sworn in, then we’ll proceed with the questions.
Johnny sat stoically, staring at the district attorney. He could see Waite and Wilson out of the corner of his eye and he began to sweat. He cleared his throat, feeling a rush of heat as the walls of the room seemed to close in on him. More than anything else, he wanted to get away from the defense attorney and his client, but he also wondered what was happening in the hallway with Kizzy, Lily, Iris, and Iris’ father.

E!

Kizzy slid over on the bench, wrapping one arm around Iris’ side, forming a protective wall between her and her estranged father. “Everything’s gonna be a’right, Iris,” she mumbled into her daughter-in-law’s ear. “You hold your head up high.” She turned her face to the pharmacist, realizing that he had taken a seat at the opposite end of the corridor, as far away from the Campbell ladies as possible. His forearms were resting on his knees and his face was hanging towards the floor. Kizzy returned her attention to her weeping daughter-in-law. “God knows what’s in your heart, and He’s the one that will judge,” she said loud enough to be heard down the short hallway, her barbed words aiming straight for the heart of Isaac Jones.

Isaac felt his heart thudding around inside his tightening chest. He began to sweat profusely. He straightened up, leaning his back against the wooden slats of the bench. His head was throbbing in rhythm with his broken heart. He had lost nearly 30 years of his daughter’s life, and he had never even met his only grandchild. So many images were whirling around inside his head, but he couldn’t form a complete thought, and he certainly couldn’t say what he truly wanted to say.

Isaac wanted to stare at his daughter, so much older than he had imagined her to be. To him, she was still the eighteen year-old red-haired teenager, hopelessly in love with a man whom her parents did not approve, but he couldn’t bear to see the hurt in her eyes. He wanted to look upon the beauty that was his granddaughter, his only grandchild, to see the perfect mixture of Iris and Jon, the combination of the two races that he had always considered to be an abomination, and yet, her she was sitting before him in all her beauty and grace, the perfect mixture of Iris and Jon, the combination of the two races that he had always considered to be an abomination, and yet, her she was sitting before him in all her beauty and grace, but she wouldn’t look at him. He knew why, and he felt the burden of what he had done weighing even heavier on his chest. Sensing no other option, he leaned his head back against the wall, closing his eyes and listening to the indistinct sounds of voices coming from inside the conference room. The sense of dread that had been following him from the day before seemed to settle around him like smoke choking off his air supply.

E!

“So, Mr. Gage,” the defense attorney began, having waited patiently through Johnny stating his name, address, profession, and his verification that the pictures resting on the table as exhibit A were his handywork. “You’re a fireman, huh?”

“Yes, sir… A fireman and paramedic,” Johnny commented, shifting in his seat.

“Mhmmm,” the overweight man grunted. “And how old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

“So… that’d make ya… oh, ’bout sixteen when Phillip Campbell and Father Mitchell were ALLEGEDLY murdered, right?” he questioned, trying to continue his client’s claims of innocence.

“Yes, sir.”

“Mhmmm… Jus’ a young man… out takin’ pictures that mornin’… While most young men your age
were sleepin’… Why?”

Questioning brown eyes looked over at Mr. Pettway and he saw the slight nod of the DA’s head. “I don’t understand the question.”

Mr. Wilson allowed a snicker to escape from his throat. “Let me try to explain it so that you can understand it a little better,” he commented, sarcastically. His voice was oozing with condemnation. “Why were you out so early on Sunday mornin’, takin’ pictures of a foggy riverbank, while other boys your age were sleepin’ in. Ya see, most sixteen year-old boys stay out kinda late on Saturday nights, chasin’ girls… You DO like girls, don’t ya, Mr. Gage?”

“Oh, ah-ha… My apologies,” Lane stated, laughing. “I’m sure a strong fireman like yourself isn’t interested in… oh, never mind,” he said, waving his hand in dismissal.

Johnny recognized Mr. Wilson’s attempt to anger him, and managed to keep his temper in check. After all, he had plenty of experience with harassment, but his fears of the KKK, now that he suspected he knew who Lane Wilson really was, had his heart racing with anxiety.

“So,” Wilson drawled out, “you seem to have a fondness of photography; is that right?”

“Mmhmm… Mr. Gage, I jus’ have to ask… why were you… a young man of only sixteen years, out takin’ pictures of a foggy river that mornin’? I mean, I understand that you were stayin’ with the victim while you were visitin’ our fine state, so did ya jus’ decide to follow him to the river that mornin’? Did ya suspect that somethin’ bad was gonna happen to him?” Lane inquired, hoping to confuse Johnny, or to at least offer up a question in the DA’s mind about his so-called star witness.

Johnny thought for a long moment. These weren’t questions he had anticipated, but he skillfully avoided the attorney’s attempt to shift the focus. He cleared his throat and answered the first question. “Ahem… Well… um… The camera was a gift from my parents. I had used it a little on my trip down here, but I really wanted to see what kind of effects I could create with it. I wanted to take pictures of the bridge with the fog underneath it. I thought it would look kinda spooky.”

Mr. Wilson looked at the pictures, exaggerating his movements as he appeared to strain his eyes at the images. “Yea… Yea, I do believe they’re kind o’ spooky. Look how the images in the distance are all blurry… kind o’ like you might’ve photographed a few ghosts,” the attorney commented, hoping to place a little doubt in Johnny’s mind about whom he had photographed that morning.

“I’ve never seen a ghost drivin’ a new pick-up truck, or one who drove a police car,” Johnny stated flatly.

“So are ya sayin’ you’ve seen a ghost?”

Johnny pressed his lips together tightly, his anger beginning to boil over at the patronizing tone of the attorney.

“No, sir.”

The attorney handed one of the photographs to Johnny. “Who’s that in this picture?”

“I believe it’s-“

“I didn’t ask ya who ya BELIEVED it to be, Mr. Gage. I’m askin’ ya who ya saw on the banks of
the river that mornin’. Now if you DID spend time with the victim... Phillip Campbell, then surely you would’ve recognized ‘im when ya looked through your camera lens.” He leaned forward on the table. “So why didn’t ya help him? Why did ya jus’ stand there photographin’ a horrible violent act like this instead o’ helpin’ him out? Aren’t firemen s’posed to help people?” He saw the stress on Johnny’s face as the paramedic bit the inside of his lip. “Answer carefully, Mr. Gage. Who’s in this picture, and why didn’t you, at the very least, tell someone about what you saw? ‘Cause I’ve got a witness who will corroborate my client’s story that he wasn’t anywhere near the river when this egregious act took place.”

Johnny felt his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed hard.

“Let me remind you that you’re under oath, Mr. Gage,” Lane Wilson quickly interjected.

Johnny wasn’t sure which person was which in the black and white photograph. He knew the black man was Phillip – something he hadn’t known at the time - and his heart told him that the tall men standing beside the pick-up truck were William Waite and the police chief. And after hearing Mr. Wilson’s voice and accent when he spoke to Iris’ father earlier, he was thinking that the man standing near the kneeling priest had to be Lane Wilson. But if he was wrong, then the entire case was in jeopardy. He simply couldn’t testify to what he wasn’t absolutely certain of.

“I… I don’t know…”

“Mmhmm,” Mr. Wilson grunted again, leaning back in his squeaky chair. “Well, can’t you testify to what you saw that mornin’? I mean, did ya see my client beating and hangin’ Campbell, or didn’t ya?”

Johnny felt his heart leap into his throat. This was the question he had been dreading. “No sir… I can remember hearing the sounds, feeling the cool breeze, and… and some bitter wooden taste in my mouth, but…”

“But?” Wilson repeated, a wicked grin crossing his round face.

Johnny looked at Mr. Pettway, his sad brown eyes apologizing. “But I don’t actually remember seein’ what happened.”

“Ah-haha, ho, ah-haha!” Lane guffawed at Johnny’s statement. It seemed that things were going exactly the way he had hoped they would.

As the deposition continued, Johnny began to wring his hands in his lap. He pressed his lips together tightly. He hated being laughed at, especially now that he strongly suspected that the defense attorney was involved in the case a little more intimately than just defending one of the murderers.  

“So lemme get this straight,” Wilson began, his ruddy face adorned with a wide grin. “You admit that you’re the man who took these, um, kinda blurry pictures, but… you can’t tell me who you SAW on the bank of the river that mornin’? Is that why you didn’t try to help Mr. Campbell? You didn’t know it was him, did ya?”

“Um… No, sir… I, uh, I don’t remember SEEIN’ anything. I, uh, I HEARD it an’ an’ I… I saw the police chief and, uh, Mr. Waite drivin’ away a few minutes later,” Johnny mumbled.

“I’m not worried ‘bout who was out drivin’ along the river, doin’ a little scoutin’ for a good fishin’ hole on a Sunday mornin’, Mr. Gage. I’m talkin’ ‘bout who you SAW attackin’ Mr. Campbell and… and POSSIBLY attacking Father Mitchell that mornin’.”

“Objection,” Moses stated. “I believe he’s already answered your question, Mr. Wilson.”
A knowing smirk, thinly veiled as an understanding smile, escaped the defense attorney’s lips. “So he has…” The attorney leaned over to his client, asking him a question in a stage whisper, “Bill… do ya have any questions o’ this so-called WITNESS… who didn’t witness anything?”

“Nu-uh,” came the gruff response. Waite knew that the testimony had gone better than they had anticipated, and now that Isaac Jones was waiting to refute the evidence, he knew the case was about to be closed for good.

Johnny looked over at the district attorney. He wanted to apologize for his poor performance in the deposition, but he had done all he could do. He had told the truth, as he remembered it from that morning.

“Mr. Gage, thank you for your time,” Moses said, standing and ushering Johnny to the door. “Please wait outside, in case we need any clarifications after the other witness.”

Johnny dipped his head at the DA and walked back into the hallway, his shoulders sagging lower now than they had been before he entered. He passed by Isaac as the older man stood up in response to his name being called.

Johnny saw Iris weeping, and was grateful when Kizzy slid over, allowing him to sit beside the sobbing woman. He held her tightly, allowing her to cry on his shoulder. He looked over at Lily, and the daggers shooting from her eyes at the closing conference room door let him know that she was incensed by her maternal grandfather’s presence.

Iris inhaled a ragged breath. “Jo-John… I can’t… be-believe he’s… after all these years… he’s gonna take up for… for that MONSTER!” Iris wailed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, rubbing soothing circles along her back. “I’m sorry… I failed…,” he looked over at Lily once more, saddened by the look on her face. He then turned to look at Kizzy, noting the firm set of her jaw and the cold expression on the elderly woman’s plump ebony features. “I’m… so… sorry,” he mumbled, fighting to keep his emotions in check, his throat beginning to feel scratchy and his eyes stinging.

“The good Lord is still in control, Johnny. Don’t ya worry none ‘bout what happened in there,” she said, jutting her chin at the closed conference room door. “You done jus’ what the good Lord tol’ ya to do. Ya tol’ the truth. Now all we can do is let God take it from here,” she said, sitting back with her spine stiff.

Kizzy’s confident words belied the way she was really feeling - the same flames of bitterness she had been living with for over a decade were burning her soul. No matter how hard she tried to do the right thing, it seemed that her thoughts turned dark when it came to getting justice for her murdered son. She felt her fists clenching and unclenching in anger. She felt the sweat beads popping out across her brow. She understood what it meant to allow rage to overtake one’s person, and she was very close to losing all control. The main question at this point was who would be the recipient of her wrath – William Waite, or Isaac Jones. Deciding that Waite had committed a heinous act against her family one time, but Jones had committed the same act over and over again for more than 25 years, she balled her fist, preparing to stand toe to toe with the tall lanky pharmacist and punch him square in the nose as soon as he emerged from the deposition. She couldn’t allow herself to unleash her rage on a crippled man, but she had no qualms about allowing it to overtake a healthy man.

Across the conference table, Moses sat watching as the pale elderly pharmacist sat nervously in front of him. Something wasn’t right. If Jones was here to tell the truth about what happened that morning, then why was he visibly shaking? As soon as he was sworn in, Moses began the questioning.
“Mr. Jones, please state your full name, address, and place of employment for the record.”

Isaac struggled to get the words out, but he managed to identify himself as the owner of Jones Pharmacy for the last thirty-five years, and listed his address as he had been instructed. He removed his handkerchief from his pocket, running it across his sweat-laden face. The tightness in his chest was returning, but he couldn’t stop now. He had to get this over with.

“Mr. Jones, what information do you have about the events of the morning of March 7, 1965,” Moses inquired with what should have been an easy question to answer, but it seemed to take Isaac an eternity to respond.

“Well… um… not much… I was,” he didn’t dare look at Waite or Wilson. “I was at home with my wife, gettin’ ready to attend church services, and…”

Lane Wilson cleared his throat, his piercing eyes glaring at the witness he had brought in, who was obviously going off-script.

Isaac turned his face away from the defense attorney, trying his best to ignore the silent intimidation tactics. “And three men showed up at my house.”

Moses’ ears perked up at the sudden turn of events. “Who were these three men?”

“Ahem… Ah… William Waite, Joseph Felder who was the police chief back then, and… Lane Wilson… who was… uh, drivin’ his son’s patrol car.

“And why were they at your house?” Moses asked, seeing his counterpart shifting in his seat, rapping his fingers on the wooden table, his face morphing from pink to crimson to purple.

“Um…” Isaac rubbed his forehead, his temples throbbing. “Um… could you repeat the… the question, please?”

“Do you need a glass of water?” Moses asked, concerned by the appearance of the witness.

“I’ll get him some water,” Slim said, darting out of the room before Isaac had a chance to answer. He rushed to the water fountain outside the room, ignoring the stares of the Campbell ladies and Johnny as he sped past them.

Kizzy tried to relax her fists, but found herself clenching them tighter instead. She leaned her head to one side, peeking into the room while the door remained open, and she didn’t like what she saw. Isaac was resting his head in his hands, his elbows propped on the table. Bill Waite was glaring at him, not realizing that Kizzy was watching them. Kizzy could have sworn she could see horns and a tail growing from the feeble man’s body as he sat in his wheelchair, a shell of the man he had been just ten years ago. Suddenly her view of the man was obstructed by the defense attorney, his face construed by anger, leaning forward to whisper to his client. When the investigator returned, he closed the door behind him, leaving Kizzy wondering what was going on.

“I hate ‘im,” Iris said, struggling against her emotions.

“Sshhh,” Johnny said, still holding her. “That only hurts you, not him.”

“How can he… do this? Hasn’t he… hurt us… enough?”

Lily remained silent, her stone-cold face hiding her true pain.
Inside the conference room, Wilson waved his hand in the general direction of Isaac as the pharmacist accepted the paper cup. “Now then… jus’ take a sip o’ that water an’ settle down. Then you can tell these fine folks all ‘bout our fishin’ trip that mornin’.”

“I believe the witness has testified that he and his wife were preparing for church services, Mr. Wilson,” Moses corrected, believing for the first time that he had just trapped the witness for the defense.

Isaac set the empty cup down on the table, staring at it as the details of that morning began to flow from his lips. “Yes… that’s right, Mr. Pettway. We were about to leave… for our church service when Bill and Joe… um, showed up in Bill’s pick-up truck. I could… see blood in the back of the truck bed… I knew then that something terrible had happened.”

“But didn’t ya jus’ say that all three of us came over to your house, Mr. Jones?” the defense attorney interjected, sarcastically, imposing his question into the district attorney’s time with the witness.

Moses, anticipating an imminent explosion, glanced to his right to see that the stenographer’s fingers were busy flying across the keys taking down every word, and he sat back, allowing the unorthodox line of questioning to continue.

“You… I did… ‘cause you… you showed up later in the… in your son’s deputy car. That’s when you told me that you’d killed the priest and used MY boat,” he said pointing at his own chest, his voice raising in volume. “MY boat that I’d left tied to a stump on Saturday… You used MY boat to dump the body down river!”

“What the hell?” Wilson questioned, his voice breaking, momentarily forgetting that there was a woman present. “That’s a lie!”

“No,” Isaac responded, his anxiety level from earlier increasing, but his chest pain was abating – something the pharmacist knew was unusual. “Father Mitchell must’ve been alive when you threw him into the boat ‘cause…,” he exhaled a cleansing breath. “Um, ‘cause later… I…,” he pinched the bridge of his nose as he contemplated what must have happened to Father Mitchell in his last moments. “I found some indentions on the side o’ the boat, along the rim, that… that looked like teeth marks.”

Moses opened his eyes wide, remembering the odd comment about a bitter wooden taste that John Gage had mentioned during his deposition. Had he been hiding in the boat during the assault? For the first time, the two witnesses’ statements began to line up and Mr. Pettway began to quickly piece together the testimony, finally having an idea of exactly what may have occurred on that morning.

“Mr. Jones, do you still own the boat, the one you said was used that morning?” Moses asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Would you allow us to examine it?” Moses continued.

“It’s jus’ an old boat. A few marks on it don’t prove nothin’!” Lane spoke up, his voice sounding frantic.

“It’ll prove that what I’m sayin’ is true,” Isaac spat out.

“How’s that? And ‘member that you’re under oath,” the belligerent attorney reminded him, spittle flying from his angry mouth. His glaring eyes were reminiscent of the previous day during his after-hours visit at the pharmacy.
“Oh, I remember… I remember everything!” Isaac began, pointing his finger at the defense attorney. “I remember how you threatened me yesterday if I didn’t tell the story the way YOU wanted it told! YOU killed Phillip Campbell,” he said pointing his wrinkled index finger in the direction of Waite before pointing it directly at the defense attorney. “And YOU killed Father Mitchell!”

“OBJECTION!” Wilson screamed, his face bright red, his hand slamming down on the table with a thundering clap.

“He’s YOUR witness,” Moses pointed out, aiming his hand at the struggling pharmacist. “Besides, you can’t object to your own question!” He couldn’t believe how quickly the case was unraveling for the defense.

Wilson, his face darkening, pointed a stubby finger in the face of his own witness. “What the hell kind o’ stunt are ya tryin’ to pull, Isaac? This ain’t funny!”

“No one’s laughin’, Lane,” the pharmacist replied calmly.

Wilson narrowed his eyes at the other man. “You’re a liar,” he grunted through gritted teeth.

“No… I’m tellin’ the truth,” Isaac stated softly, struggling to find his voice. “I’ve kept your secret long enough… And I no longer have a secret that you can use to blackmail me.”

The frustrated defense attorney hesitated, then smiled at his witness. “I see what’s goin’ on, Isaac,” he commented. “You’re tryin’ to cover your own ass,” he said, spinning around to face the stenographer. “Pardon me, ma’am.”

“I know what you’re goin’ to say, Lane.” Isaac looked around the room. “I have somethin’ to declare, but it isn’t a confession of assault, or murder. That young woman out there, the one who’s biracial… She’s my granddaughter. Jonathan Campbell, the older brother of Phillip Campbell, is her late father… and my daughter, Iris Jones Campbell, who is out there sittin’ with her and Kizzy Campbell, is her mother. Iris ran off with Jon after she graduated from high school. They got married and lived in California until he died in an accident a few years after Lily was born.”

Lane Wilson gave a smug grin. “And that gives you motive to kill the younger brother, and lie about us bein’ involved,” he said, waving his hand back and forth between himself and his client.

“I’ve lived most of the last 30 years regretting that I turned my back on my daughter because of who she chose to love.” The pharmacist stood up on wobbly legs, leaned over the table, and pointed his own finger directly at Wilson’s chest. “But I’ll be damned if I’m gonna stand before God one day with the blood of two innocent men on my hands. YOU… and YOU,” he said, pointing at the two men sitting across the table from him. “YOU two did the killin’ and you used my boat… to dump Father Mitchell into the river… and left Phillip hangin’ by the neck!”

Lane used the back of his hand to wipe the saliva pooling at the corner of his mouth, his dark eyes leveling his witness. “Go to hell!”

“I’ve been livin’ in hell for almost three decades,” the pharmacist responded, staring at the defense attorney. “And maybe I deserve to live there for an eternity for what I’ve done, but at least I won’t arrive there guilty of murder. I’ve got to live with what I’ve done… and I’ve been payin’ for it for a long time… Now it’s your turn to pay for what you’ve done!”

Moses decided to interject, to end this verbal sparring match before additional blood was shed. “Before anyone around here goes to Hades they’ve got to go through the Dallas County Judicial System.” He looked over at his investigator, giving the tall thin man a knowing nod.
Slim Smitherman stood up, stepping over to the place where Lane Wilson remained standing, staring at his witness. “Lane Wilson, you’re under arrest for the murder of Father Mitchell…”

Isaac Jones felt weary, his chest aching, but his feet felt lighter than they had in years. “Mr. Pettway… may I… may I be excused for a moment?” he asked, feeling the need to splash his face with cool water.

“Just don’t go far. I need to talk to you and Mr. Gage for a moment,” Moses consented.

Outside the conference room, Kizzy had been pacing back and forth in front of the door. She felt as if her body were being pierced with needles. Her feet were swollen and aching, and she knew her blood pressure was elevated, but she only had one thing on her mind. She had heard the yelling going on inside the conference room, but hadn’t been able to determine what was being said. She felt her knuckles cracking as she stretched her fingers then tightened them up again into tight balls, spinning around quickly when she heard the door open.

Isaac felt like his knees might buckle as he rushed through the door on his way to the bathroom, but was stopped in his tracks when a fist connected with his left cheek, sending him stumbling, grabbing onto the door frame to keep from falling to the floor. Feeling the sting on his chin, he covered it with one hand, reaching out towards the conference table with the other as he somehow managed to stagger to the edge of the long piece of furniture, holding onto it with one hand.

Iris screamed, drowning out the sound of her daughter’s loud gasp as they both watched Kizzy’s attack. Kizzy’s anger at the pharmacist had spent far too many years coiling up inside her until what she perceived to be his ultimate betrayal caused her to release her venomous strike.

“Umph!” Isaac grunted, rubbing his face and grimacing at the metallic-tasting warm liquid that was quickly filling his mouth.

“Kizzy, NO!” Johnny yelled, grabbing the trembling woman’s arms and pulling her away from the open doorway.

Inside the conference room, Johnny saw Isaac leaning on the table on his forearm, patting his free hand against his mouth and looking down at the bloody mess the action left behind. Even more stunning was the sight of the defense attorney being handcuffed, his face a reddened mixture of surprise, frustration, and outright fury.

“Mr. Jones? Are you okay?” Moses asked, quickly rushing to the aid of his newest witness in the murder cases, rushing past the shocked court clerk who had pressed her back tightly into the farthest corner away from the melee.

“Yea… uh… I reckon I’ve had that one comin’ for a real long time,” he said, pushing himself back up off the table.

Moses helped ease him into a nearby chair, looking worriedly at the fuming black woman Johnny was struggling to calm her down. He knew her reaction was purely emotional, but she had no way of knowing that she had just assaulted the man whose testimony would likely give her the justice she had so long sought.

“Um… Mr. Jones… Please take a seat,” Moses suggested, passing him a box of tissue to slow the bleeding from his cut lip.

As soon as the pharmacist had placed pressure on his wound, the district attorney continued. “Um…
I have to ask you… Do you want to press charges against her?” the DA asked, hoping the answer was a negative one.

Isaac glanced at the heaving woman he had known for a very long time. She was refusing to look at him and he understood why. His eyes then looked through the open doorway at the bench across the hallway, finding his daughter and granddaughter hugging each other, both were crying and neither one was looking at him. He knew that their forgiveness was too much to hope for, but for him to forgive Kizzy was within his control and she deserved it. He looked up at the district attorney who was waiting for his answer.

“No… No, I don’t want to press charges,” he said softly.

Johnny and Kizzy were surprised by his answer, but they didn’t have time to react to it as the scuffling sound of Investigator Smitherman escorting the handcuffed defense attorney through the doorway and down the hall interfered with their thoughts. Kizzy was stunned, confused by what she was seeing happening around her, but Johnny was hopeful that the truth had finally been revealed.

In the hallway, Lily and Iris looked around at those involved in the ruckus. Their eyes shifted back and forth between Kizzy and Isaac, and Slim and Lane Wilson, unable to make sense of it all. “Wha-what’s going on?” Iris asked.

Moses, realizing that he still had a defendant present, turned to his stenographer. “Julie, do you feel comfortable rolling Mr. Waite to the Sheriff’s Office in the east wing, and telling the Sheriff that I’ll be down to explain everything to him shortly? I need to meet with the family,” he said, waving his arm at the stunned group remaining.

“No problem,” the stenographer stated, quickly stepping behind the seething disabled man and pushing his wheelchair out of the room. She was disgusted by what she had heard he had done, and had he been healthy, she would have been tempted to trip him, sending him falling down the stairs. But William Waite wasn’t healthy, and she felt as if she were helping the case in some small way.

Moses looked around at the faces of the five people who remained. “Would you all join me inside, please? We’ve had a major turn of events in this case that you all need to know about.”

Lily felt the bile rising in the back of her throat. “I won’t go in a room with him,” she said, nodding disdainfully at her grandfather.

“You’re going to want to hear this, Miss Campbell. I assure you of that,” the DA replied, knowing why the young woman felt the way she did, but he had to share the truth with her – her uncle’s tormentors and murderers had just been positively identified by the man she loathed.

In his Los Angeles apartment, Mike poured two cups of coffee, carrying both to his living room and taking a seat beside Lexi on his sofa. He set one cup of the steaming liquid on the coffee table in front of her. Lexi, whose attention was focused on the study guide opened in front of her, reached forward and picked up the mug. “I don’t know if I’ll ever pass the GED.”

“Hmm?” Mike asked, blowing a cooling breath across the java before taking a sip.

Lexi looked up, smiling at him as she lifted her cup to her mouth. “Are you tired, or are you worried about Johnny?” she asked, then tested the temperature of the coffee with a tiny sip.
“Both,” the quiet engineer responded.

She set the cup down beside her book on the coffee table and leaned back onto the sofa, reaching for his hand. “Well, a nap will help with your sleep deprivation, but…”

“But Johnny’s on his own,” he replied, filling in when she hesitated.

“He’s a grown man, Michael.”

“I know, but… We’re brothers, Lexi. We’re there for each other; we’ve always got each others’ back… Johnny is always there for the rest of us, especially this past year, but now… Now we aren’t there for him.”

“He knows you would be there if you could. Besides, some things just have to be done alone.”

“No… We’ve got to do something for him… He’s got to know that… that we’re here for him, you know?” He looked at his girlfriend, searching for understanding. He felt relieved when she reached out for him, both of them holding each other for a long moment.

Lexi broke the embrace when she heard him yawning. “You really ARE sleepy, aren’t you?”

“Maybe a little,” he said with a snicker. “I got about three solid hours before we got called out for that bus accident. By the time we got back to the station, it was almost five o’clock. I knew that if I tried to sleep any more then I’d be exhausted when wake-up tones sounded,” he explained. Besides, anytime one of the guys has a substitute, it just isn’t the same.”

“Who subbed for Johnny?”

Mike rolled his eyes. “Brice,” he sighed. “And it’s hard to rest when you figure the nutcase is going to say you laid out your bunkers wrong.”

“So it sounds like you might need a nap in a little while,” she responded; she was in no hurry to return her attention to the math equations on the page in front of her. She was finding it difficult to concentrate with the handsome engineer sitting beside her.

“Yea… Maybe after lunch we can do a little snuggling,” he suggested, hiding his grin behind his cup as he took another drink. “I promise to be a gentleman.”

Lexi looked up again; the desire she had been feeling since he had picked her up earlier seemed to be reflected in his own deep blue eyes. She closed the book, turning slightly to her side. “You don’t have to be.”

Mike swallowed hard, feeling his lower anatomy responding to her remark. Unsure of what to say, he decided to borrow one of his favorite movie quotes. “Why Miss Lopez, you’re trying to seduce me… aren’t you?”

Lexi sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, slowly nodding her head in affirmation.

Mike turned his body towards her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her into a slow soft kiss. As the kiss deepened, he used his tongue to lightly lick her lips, enjoying the feeling of her acquiescing to his nonverbal request for entrance. Their tongues danced as he pulled her closer, feeling her bosom pressing into his firm chest. He felt her reaching up, carding her fingers through his brown hair and he felt a shiver run down his spine. He wanted her so badly, but was she
ready to take their relationship to the next level? Would he be able to face Marco if he and Lexi began having a sexual relationship?

When the kiss ended, Lexi pulled back away from Mike, seeing that his eyes remained closed but his lips were swollen from the passionate kiss. She wondered what he was thinking and was about to ask him when he opened his eyes, dilated with need.

Mike reached out his hand, caressing the side of her face, enjoying the sensation as she leaned into his touch. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too, Michael… Please… make love to me,” she rasped in a throaty whisper.

Mike continued to stroke her cheek, running his thumb across her lower lip. “Are you sure, Lexi? I don’t want you to have any regrets, and I don’t want you to think that-”

“Sshhh,” Lexi protested, placing an index finger in front of his lips. “I know what you’re going to say and I don’t… I promise, I don’t think that you brought me here for sex, Michael. I don’t think that’s why you’re dating me. You’ve proven that over and over again.”

She allowed her fingers to drift from his lips, across his chin, and down to the top button of his pale blue shirt. Slowly she began to unbutton the garment, exposing his white undershirt beneath. She ran her fingers lightly across the cotton material, feeling his breathing rate increasing.

Mike felt as if he had fallen asleep and was dreaming. Her touch was amazing, heightening his desire for her. He felt the coolness of the air as she pulled open his button-down shirt, removing one layer of clothing that separated her touch from his naked chest. He tried to lick his lips but found that his mouth was going dry. He wanted to touch her, to cover her body with his own as he slowly brought them both to their climax, but he knew he had to go slowly with her; their first time had to be absolutely perfect.

“Ba-ahem, baby… if you’re sure about this… then I think we’d be a lot more comfortable in my bedroom,” he responded, his voice nearly choked off by his overcharged libido.

Encouraged, and more than a little nervous, Lexi began to stand. This was what she wanted; it was what she needed. She just hoped that he would still feel the same way about her afterwards.

Mike held her hand as he led her down the short hallway of his apartment. When they entered his bedroom, he turned around to face her while he discarded his open shirt.

Lexi reached down to the waistband of his jeans, untucking his tee shirt and helping him pull it over his head. She inhaled deeply at the sight of his muscular chest and couldn’t stop her hands, trembling with desire, from roaming across the expanse of his naked torso.

Mike leaned down, planting a passionate kiss on her lips that quickly melted down across her jawbone and neck. When she leaned her head back to allow him better access, he couldn’t stop the needy groan that bubbled up from deep within his throat. His hands reached beneath her tee shirt, skimming across her soft warm skin. Her touch was electrifying and he had to force himself to slow down, not wanting to alarm her. Although his body was screaming for release, this first time was going to be all about her, bringing her the pleasure he desperately wanted her to experience.

When his hands slipped around to her breasts, gently caressing the soft mounds, her breath hitched and he pulled back, allowing her time to stop what he was doing. Instead, she grabbed the bottom of her blouse and began to lift it above her head.
Mike reached around behind her, deftly unhooking her bra and pulling the straps down to reveal her heaving breasts.

“Michael?”

“Yea?”

“Can we get under the covers?” she asked meekly.

Mike’s eyebrows knitted together in confusion. “Maybe we shouldn’t be-“

“No,” Lexi said, quickly halting his words. “It isn’t that; it’s just… I don’t want you to… to see my… scars.”

Mike pulled her into a tight embrace. “Baby, I know about the scars and the tattoos.” He pulled away from her so that he could look into her eyes. He saw that she was looking away and used the crook of his index finger to turn her chin upwards, forcing her to look at him. “I love you, Alexia. The reminders of your past that mark your body are also a reminder of how I found you, and I’ve…,” he swallowed hard, forcing back the lump in his throat. “I’ve never felt like this about anyone before. I love you with all my heart, Lex… All of you.”

Lexi felt her lower lip quiver. How could such a wonderful man love someone like her? She didn’t know, but she knew she believed him. She reached for his belt, looking into his blue eyes as she helped him lower his jeans. When they fell to the floor, he stepped out of them, leaving them pooled beside his bed. He toed off his socks before easing her onto his bed.

When she lay on her back, he began showering her body with kisses, his right hand cupping her left breast as he lowered his mouth, hungrily suckling at the rosy bud. Lexi arched her back, caught up in the physical sensations she was feeling.

“Mmm, oh Mi-Michael.”

Encouraged by her obvious enjoyment of his ministrations, he allowed his hand to skim across her belly and dip into the elastic waistband of her pants. His fingers slowly roamed past the wiry curls, finding her womanhood hot and ready for him. He leaned back, sitting on his heels while he peeled her pants and panties from her hips and thighs. As soon as he had lowered the garments below her knees, she used her legs to kick them onto the floor.

Lexi closed her eyes feeling overwhelmed by the sensations his touches were providing. His large hand cupped her between her legs and she quickly parted her thighs, wanting more. His hot mouth returned to her lips, engulfing her in passion while their tongues danced, exploring the moist hot cavern of the other. She felt his fingers spreading her juices as he tentatively pushed a finger inside of her.

“Mmm, ungh,” she heaved, thrusting her hips upwards in search of more.

Mike knew she was ready, and he reached over her, pulling open the drawer of his nightstand, scrambling around in search of the prophylactic he needed.

Lexi watched as his body stretched across hers and she looked down at the bulge that was trying to escape from his boxers. Her fingers slipped inside, stroking his manhood, causing him to shudder uncontrollably.

“Ohgodyes,” he bellowed, relishing her touch. It had been a very long time since he had been touched intimately and his body responded to the stimulating caresses.
Lexi smiled inwardly, loving the fact that he was enjoying this as much as she was enjoying it. She waited patiently for him to discard his boxers, tossing them across the room in an uncharacteristic fashion, leaving his rock-hard manhood standing at attention.

Mike quickly rolled on the condom, pressing out the air in the tip, then rolled over on his side. His hand caressed the side of her face, offering her another chance to change her mind, but she didn’t. Instead, he felt her hands running across his chest and down to his cock. She shifted herself beneath him, spreading her legs for him in silent invitation.

Mike buried his face into her hair, nipping and sucking his way down her neck, across her chest, and latching onto an erect nub as he held the base of his cock. Then with all the self-restraint he could muster, he slowly entered her hot wet tunnel, groaning in pleasure as her body enveloped him.

With slow deliberate motions, they found their rhythm, each one in search of release. Sweat-soaked bodies slapped together, hips meeting in undulating motions, while primal grunts and groans filled the room. Mike struggled against his own body, wanting to allow his most primitive urges to take over his brain, but his emotions won out, and he managed to hold back his own climax until he felt her inner walls begin to quiver.

“Ungh, oh…Mi-“

“Come for me, baby. Please, just let go. I’ve got you…. Ohmygod,” he groaned, his own brain fogging over with his impending orgasm.

“Mi-Mich-ARGS!” she screamed, thrusting her hips upwards, digging her fingernails into his back as the explosive sensations of her orgasm shook her to her core.

Her release sent Mike over the edge and with one final thrust, he slammed into her, releasing his essence, filling up the condom as his cock pulsed, his body stiffened, and then finally wilted into a limp mass of flesh.

Neither one could speak, each one inhaling deep gulps of air, but their touches, their snuggling and caresses, spoke for them. This was how love was supposed to feel.

E!

Inside the conference room in Selma, Kizzy Campbell sat with her injured hand resting on the table while Johnny inspected the damage. “I think it might be broken. You really should have it x-rayed.”

“Would an ice pack help?” Slim asked, having transferred his prisoner into the capable hands of the Dallas County Sheriff.

Johnny looked up at the tall man who was standing in the doorway. He glanced at the swelling lip and the blood oozing through the tissue pressed tightly against Isaac’s injury.

“Um, yea… better make it two ice packs, Slim,” he replied.

“Will you two try not to hurt each other while I’m gone?” Slim asked, worried about leaving the opposing parties in a room together with only Johnny to separate them since the DA had walked out into the hallway to speak to the younger Campbell ladies.

“Yea…,” Kizzy said, wincing as Johnny continued to examine her rapidly swelling hand.
“Mmhmm,” Isaac mumbled around his puffy lip, struggling to look past the thin investigator to see what was happening in the hallway.

Slim exited the room, leaving the door open. Isaac craned his neck to see the place where his daughter, granddaughter, and the DA were having a very serious conversation.

“NO!” Lily wept, covering her face with her hands as she sat down on the bench again. “I can’t… I just can’t be… near him!”

“Lily, I know how you feel about him, but not only is he your biological grandfather, he’s also going to be the witness whose testimony will identify the murderers, AND he’s going to testify against them in court,” the DA explained. “He’ll get the Campbell family the justice y’all have been waiting for.”

“Humph… about twenty-six years too late,” she spat out.

Iris was more stunned than anyone by Moses’ words. She sat down beside her daughter, her arms trembling as she reached out for her. Had she heard correctly? She looked up into the dark eyes of the district attorney.

“You can’t be… serious.”

“Yes, ma’am… I am. He was supposed to come here to provide an alibi for Waite, but… he didn’t perjure himself… He told the truth, although it seems he might’ve been threatened for doing so,” Moses explained, glancing over his shoulder into the conference room, hoping that the situation had calmed down between Kizzy and Isaac.

Iris felt like she was being drawn and quartered. She found her heartstrings being pulled between her father and her mother-in-law. Would she be expected to choose sides? Her own parents had turned their back on her when she needed them most, and Kizzy had supported her for all these years, although reluctantly at first. Now her father might have risked his own life and the life of Iris’ mother by testifying against the killers. She stared at the two opponents sitting on either side of Johnny in the conference room.

“Does…,” Iris began, slowly rising to her feet, but unable to take a step forward. Her eyes were focused on her mother-in-law. “Does she know?”

Slim Smitherman rounded the corner, two ice packs in his hands, and locked eyes with Moses.

“Comin’ in?”

Moses looked back down at Lily who remained sitting, seemingly glued to her seat. “Yea…,” he said, reaching his hand down to Lily. “Won’t you join us?”

Lily looked up at her mother, seeing the flushed look on her face. “Ohmygod! You… You’re going in there, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Lily. Yes, I’m going in there because I want to know the truth.” She looked over at the DA then back down at her daughter. “We can’t change what has happened in the past, but the future hasn’t yet been written. I’ve always been told that the winners write the history books, giving the record a slant in the winner’s direction,” she said, running her hand down her daughter’s hair. “I want to write the history for Phillip,” she said, cryptically, hoping Lily understood what she meant –
that the truth needed to be told, whether she liked it, or not.

“I... I just... can’t,” the younger woman replied.

Disappointed, but understanding the response, Iris squeezed her daughter’s shoulder then stepped away from the bench, heading for the conference room. Before entering, she turned around to face Lily. “Please... Lily... We’ll be out in a few minutes.” She hesitated, hoping that Lily would change her mind, but Lily sat staring at the floor, brushing away the tears that had begun to stain her cheeks.

Lily heard the door close, continuing to stare at the floor. As the tears continued to burn her face, her body tensed, hardening against the memories that this town held for her. She stood up, walking to the end of the hallway, looking out the window. In the distance, she could see the steel girders of the Edmund Pettus bridge and the memory of the shouts, singing, screaming, and the barking of police dogs assaulted her. She shuttered, shaking her head to remove the images from her mind.

She stood up, walking to the end of the hallway, looking out the window. In the distance, she could see the steel girders of the Edmund Pettus bridge and the memory of the shouts, singing, screaming, and the barking of police dogs assaulted her. She shuttered, shaking her head to remove the images from her mind. She looked down at the street below, noting with confusion as a couple of children, one black and one white, walked together down the sidewalk, laughing. Were things really that different now?

The chiming of the church bells down the street surprised her. Instinctively she looked at her watch, surprised by how much time had passed by. It was already one o’clock in the afternoon. She looked back at the closed conference room door, wondering what information was being shared with those who had chosen to go inside. Slowly she walked back to the conference room and quietly twisted the door knob. The door squeaked when she opened it, causing those inside to turn and look at her. She felt the heat of their stares, but it was where they were sitting that broke her heart.

Kizzy sat beside Johnny who was still holding an ice pack on her injured hand. Her eyes were swollen and her free hand was busy drying her face with a tissue. Beside her was Iris, whose hand was slowly rubbing Isaac’s back. The elderly man had obviously been crying, his eyes swollen and red. A bloody ice pack rested on the table in front of him and his lip and cheek were bruised and puffy. Lily slipped into a chair beside the door.

“Isaac, we’re going to need your testimony at the trial,” Moses stated.

The elderly man nodded his head, grimacing when he tried to speak. “Yea… I... I wanna do it. I’ve done… so much wrong in my life… I wanna do this.”

“It’ll be risky for ya,” Kizzy stated.

“I know… and I don’t care. You’ve taken such good care of… of my baby girl and,” his eyes shifted from Iris to Lily. “And of our beautiful granddaughter… I failed them both… I failed you… and I failed your family, Kizzy. I failed Father Mitchell… I’ve… I’ve failed everyone… I know I’m years too late, but I wanna do this now.”

“What about mom?” Iris asked, reaching for his hand. The man who had raised her, who had ultimately turned his back on her, was obviously filled with remorse. He had apologized for every mistake he had made during her lifetime and she was filled with conflicting emotions.

Isaac cleared his throat, realizing that his wife really should be hearing this conversation. “She’s been encouraging me to tell the truth. She loves you and Lily, Iris. I’m... ahem,” he cleared his throat trying to push the words past the lump in his throat. “I’m to blame here… not Colleen.”

“Lily, I’m glad you decided to join us. Your grandfather will be the key witness against the two
surviving men who killed your uncle and the priest,” Moses commented, encouraged by Lily’s presence.

“So I hear,” she stated flatly. “That doesn’t change what he’s done. It doesn’t make him some kind of hero.”

“That’s your granddaddy you’re talkin’ about,” Kizzy cautioned her. “He’s doin’ what’s right now… That’s all that matters.”

“THAT’S ALL THAT MATTERS?” Lily shouted, stunned by how quickly everyone seemed to be forgiving the man she hated most. “I guess I don’t matter at all then, huh? I’m just some half-breed; I’m just a mistake, right?”

“LILY!” Iris yelled back. “Stop it! I know you’re angry, but things have changed.”

“Not enough!” she huffed, rushing back out the door.

“Lily?” Johnny called after her.

“Please, John. Please go talk to her,” Iris begged, fearing she couldn’t reach her own daughter.

“I’ll take care of her,” the paramedic exclaimed, but… both of you need to see a doctor,” he said, looking at both Isaac and Kizzy.

“I’ll take care of them… you take care of Lily.”

E!

Lexi snuggled closer to Mike, curling her body against his in his large bed. She listened to his soft gentle snores, the steady rhythm of his breathing, and she smiled to herself. Unsure of how long they had been sleeping, she slowly raised her head to peer at the bedside clock on his nightstand.

“Mmm,” Mike moaned, peeling one eye open to look down at the top of her head. “Where’re you going?” he sighed, pulling her tightly against him. He loved the feel of her warm soft body against his, his entire body feeling relaxed and rejuvenated.

“We’ve been asleep for over an hour. I need to get up and let you sleep a little longer,” she suggested, shifting her position, pulling the sheet up to cover her nakedness.

Mike rolled over onto his side, propping up on one elbow. He looked lovingly into her brown eyes, searching for any signs of regret. He used his free hand to brush her hair away from her face.

“Tell me the truth, baby… Are you okay?”

Lexi snickered, reaching out to push the rogue tuft of hair above his ear back into place.

“I’ve never felt better. That was… amazing, Michael. I never….” The lump in her throat began to grow, but she pushed her words around it. “I never imagined that love could be… like this. It’s… it’s beautiful… Thank you.”

Mike, unable to find his own voice, licked his lips as he lowered his face to hers. He kissed her lightly on her lips. “It was beautiful… It feels so good… to really… make love,” he said, repeatedly kissing her.

Nervously, Lexi asked him the question she had been so worried about. “How are YOU feeling?”

“Ahhh, satisfied!” he said, laying back down and pulling her into an embrace. “So… so… satiated.
Thank you, Lex.”

She began to run her fingers through the hair on his chest. He hadn’t understood her question. “I’m glad, but… I mean… How do you feel… about me, Michael?”

He kissed the top of her head, knowing that she was filled with self-doubt. “I feel like the luckiest man on earth right now. I’m holding the most beautiful woman who ever lived in my arms, after making passionate love to her and… and I love her and… and she loves me.”

Lexi rolled over on top of him, planting a passionate kiss on his lips. When she pulled back, she looked into his dreamy blue eyes. “I sure do.” She snuggled back into the crook of his arm. “Um… I’ve been thinking about Johnny.”

“Oh!” Mike said in a raised voice. “I just opened my heart to you, we have the most amazing sexual experience of my life and… and you’re thinking of JOHNNY?”

Lexi cringed, knowing that he was only joking, but she knew her timing was awful. “I’m sorry, baby. I promise I was NOT thinking of him in THAT way.”

“Whew!” Mike said, pretending to be relieved by the information.

“I was just thinking about….,” She sat up, pulling the sheet with her and sitting cross-legged beside him. “Remember the party at Mama’s house, the one for me? All of you guys from 51’s were there.”

“Of course I remember,” Mike said, moving his pillow against the headboard and leaning against it. “What’s that got to do with….,” he flashed her a bright smile. “I think I know what you’re thinking.”

“He kind of seems to like being the center of attention, so I was thinking that maybe… maybe we could throw him a party when he gets back. You know, just to let him know how proud we are of him and… and how much we’re supporting him… He’s having to do something difficult, a long way from home, and… and without his brothers… his support system.” She stretched one curvaceous leg out, running her foot seductively down Mike’s leg. “I know what it’s like to be alone in a touch situation… and now I know what it’s like to… to have others helping me. I just want him to know that… that we’re still here for him, you know? What do you think?”

E!

At Montgomery Regional Airport, Roddy Gage stood with his wife, Sharon, watching the conveyor belt carrying luggage around in a semi-circle. As soon as their suitcases appeared, he reached for them, carrying them away from the baggage claim area, heading for the car rental counter.

“Feels good to stretch my legs,” Sharon said, seeing the stern expression on his face. She knew he was stressed about the upcoming surprise meeting with their son, but she was hopeful that the chasm that had separated them for far too long was about to be bridged.

“Iris said the drive would take about an hour,” he replied, accepting the keys from the gray-haired gentleman at the rental counter. He pocketed the keys, passed the yellow receipt to his wife, then reached down for the two suitcases. “But I still don’t know what I’m going to say, Sharon.”

Sharon reached for his elbow as they headed for the automatic glass doors at the exit. “Whatever needs to be said to make things right. He’s our son, Roddy, and your heart will know what to say when we see him.”
AN: Thank you all for continuing to read this long story. The characters decided to take it over – LOL. Only one chapter to go.
Chapter 37

A/N: Okay, it’s going to take a little longer to finish this story than I thought. There will be one more chapter that will be a little shorter than my usual. Thank you all for the comments, PM, and especially for taking the time to read my work. I really appreciate it.

Chapter 37

“Lily?” Johnny called out, rushing to the window at the end of the hallway where Lily stood, once again staring out the window at the sidewalk below. He tentatively reached out, touching her shoulder, feeling her trembling beneath his fingertips. “Lily...”

“Leave me alone, Johnny.”

“No, I won’t leave you alone when you’re like this... Please, jus’... turn around, a’right?”

“Why?” she asked, turning her head to the side and leveling him with her red-rimmed eyes. “All you’re going to do is tell me I’m wrong for how I feel; just like them,” she stated, waving her hand in the direction of the conference room.

Johnny used his hands to gently encourage her to step away from the window, squaring up her shoulders so that she was standing directly in front of him.

“No one, especially not me, is going to say you’re wrong for how you feel. But,” he said, holding up his finger to stop her protest. “But you should at least find out what he’s doing for the case – talk to him for YOU, not for HIM.”

The sound of the conference room door opening made both of them turn to see what was happening. Moses was escorting Kizzy into the hallway, and behind them, Slim and Iris were flanking Isaac. Johnny noticed how pale the older man had become, looking as though he might faint.

“No,” Iris said, her voice sounding strained. “Mr. Smitherman is driving us to the hospital. Please stay with Lily.” Iris held onto her father’s elbow, pressing her lips into a thin line.

“Shouldn’t you call the fire department, or somethin’?” Johnny asked.

“The hospital is just a couple of miles away,” Moses replied. “Slim can get them to the emergency room just as quickly as the fire department can get here.”

“Oh,” Johnny replied. “I’ll help you get him to the car; I think I need to ride along.” He felt awkward just standing around when there were people needing medical attention.

“No, no,” Iris said, much too quickly. “I’m sure the two of you are hungry. Johnny, would you see that she eats something? It’s well past lunchtime and none of us ate breakfast,” Iris said, holding up her wrist so that Lily could see her watch. She hoped the gesture would remind Lily of the clandestine meeting scheduled to take place later this afternoon.
“Oh, um... sure, yea,” the younger woman stammered.

Johnny didn’t like the ashen look on Isaac’s face, but he was facing resistance from Iris and he certainly wasn’t certified to provide emergency medical care in Alabama. Did Selma have paramedics? He didn’t know.

“We’ll just hang out at that little café on the corner,” Johnny said, gently pulling on Lily’s elbow.

“Oh you could enjoy the nice weather... take a walk across the bridge, or something,” Iris suggested, hesitating long enough for her father to catch his breath, hoping Lily was getting the message.

Lily walked over to her grandmother, still refusing to make eye contact with Isaac. “I hope your hand is okay, Grandma,” she said, hugging Kizzy lightly, then turning to her mother. “We’ll be near the waterfront, Mom,” she replied, letting Iris know that she had not forgotten that the Gages were on their way to Selma. Lily hesitated for a moment, uncertain of what to say to her grandfather. Deciding that silence was her best option, she headed for the stairs.

“Shel’ll be okay, Iris. I’ll take care of her. I hope you both will feel better soon,” Johnny said, looking at both injured parties, his eyes lingering on the elderly man.

“I’ll be fine... ain’t my first fight,” Kizzy joked, hoping to lighten the mood, but she was worried about her granddaughter... and she suspected that Isaac was sicker than he wanted anyone to know.

“Thank you, John,” Iris replied. She continued ushering her father down the hallway.

Isaac had thought for a moment that his granddaughter might speak to him, but when she didn’t, the tightness in his chest worsened and his jaw began to ache. “Ugh... el...el...vator,” he huffed in an airy voice, unable to inhale deeply without pain.

“That’s where we’re going, Daddy,” Iris explained, knowing that he was in no condition to try to navigate stairs.

“Lemme help you,” Johnny said, replacing Iris at Isaac’s side. “I REALLY think I need to ride along.”

“No, John. We’re just a short drive from the hospital,” Iris repeated. Although she was worried about her father’s condition, she didn’t want anything to interrupt the reunion that was soon to take place.

“I’m calling ahead so the medical staff will be waiting on them,” Moses added, leaving Kizzy’s side to quickly make his way to his office.

“Tell ‘em we’ve got an ETA of four minutes,” Slim said, just as the elevator doors opened.

The group made their way inside, then headed for the ground floor. Johnny kept a watchful eye on Isaac, hoping that he was experiencing an attack of angina rather than something far worse. He followed Slim’s lead, heading for the large black sedan parked behind the building. He eased the elderly man into the back seat, watching as Iris helped Kizzy get into the front passenger’s seat before quickly settling in beside her father.

Johnny closed the door, avoiding the temptation to give the vehicle a couple of firm slaps. He watched them drive down the street, seeing the other cars pulling over to allow the sedan to pass. He ran his hand through his hair, blowing out his breath. He turned to go back inside the building to find Lily, but saw her standing just outside the door. She was crying.
“W-will they be... okay?” she hiccupped.

Johnny looked over at her, frustrated by her actions, but sympathetic. “Kizzy will be... I don’t know about your grandfather,” he said, waiting for her reaction to his comment.

“W-why?” she asked, not even noticing his choice of words.

“Your grandfather is having some... worrisome symptoms, could just be angina or... or somethin’ much more serious.”

“Angina?”

“Yea... It’s an intense pain in the chest that’s a symptom of heart disease, but... Well, he might also be having a heart attack, Lily.”

Lily felt her lower lip tremble, unsure of exactly how she felt about that news. She had been overcome with bitterness and hatred for him since she learned that he was actually alive, but now... she wasn’t sure how she felt.

Johnny watched as the news began to sink in for Lily. He felt just as stunned as she appeared. He had arrived at the courthouse this morning for a deposition... but had ended up being a witness to pandemonium. Now two people were in need of medical care and two more were possibly heading for prison for murder, and his testimony was only partly responsible for the justice that was soon to be doled out a decade after the crimes had been committed. He heard Lily trying to clear her throat and looked over at her, seeing her coughing lightly into her closed fist.

“Ahua... Ahem.”

“Let’s go try to eat somethin’; this could be a very long afternoon,” Johnny said, reaching for her hand, already feeling the pangs from skipping breakfast. With a little luck, he might convince her to go to the hospital after lunch.

They walked around the corner to the small café, deciding that the late autumn weather was pleasant enough to sit outside in the small courtyard. Johnny pulled a chair out for Lily, seating her before taking the chair on the opposite side of the table. They both pulled menus from between the condiments and began scanning the options.

“Good afternoon, folks... What can I get ya to drink?” a petite blonde waitress with bright red lipstick asked.

“Um, I’d like a glass of water with lemon, please,” Lily said, still perusing the food options.

“I’d like a large glass of sweet tea,” Johnny ordered, thinking about how much he had enjoyed the beverage when he had spent time here back in 1965. He quickly dropped the menu back into its place. “What do you recommend?”

The young waitress, obviously charmed by the handsome paramedic, gave him a toothy grin. “Fridays are fried catfish days. It’s really good with hushpuppies, French fries, and cole slaw,” she said, patting Johnny on his shoulder with her brightly polished nails.

“That’s what I’ll have,” he said, giving her a flash of his signature grin.

Lily watched the flirtatious display and felt a twinge of jealousy. She could tell that Johnny was just being polite to the waitress, but Lily felt hurt. She knew she was hyper-sensitive because of everything that had happened at the Courthouse earlier, but she couldn’t stop her eyes from
beginning to water. She swiped at the moisture, batting her eyes frantically. Was it possible that he preferred blondes? If so, how could she possibly compete?

“What about you, hon?” the waitress asked.

Lily looked back down at the menu, unable to see the blurry words. “Um, yes… that sounds good to me, too.”

“A’right, two fish plates comin’ right up,” she said cheerfully, swishing her ponytail behind her as she spun around, scurrying back inside the cafe.

Johnny waited until the waitress had left them alone before he spoke up. “Talk to me, Lily.”

She sniffled, running her fingers beneath her eyes. “I’ve… got no-nothing to… to say.”

Johnny leaned forward, lacing his fingers together as he rested his forearms on the table. “Aren’t you at least curious about what happened back there?” he asked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “Don’t you wanna know how the trial is gonna go?”

“I already know… they’ll get away with it… just like always… There’s no justice down here and HE doesn’t really give a damn. I’m glad Grandma punched him. He just wants to… wants to look like a… like some hero.”

“That’s not true and you know it,” Johnny stated, narrowing his eyes at her until she lowered her gaze to her lap.

The clicking of heels signaled to the duo that the waitress was returning. “A’righty… here’s ya drinks,” she said, leaning over a little farther than necessary to serve Johnny his iced tea. “Those fish plates will be up in just a jiffy.”

“Thank you, Miss,” he said, reaching for the glass and taking a sip. He waited for her to depart before continuing his gentle chastising of Lily. “He’s changed… People DO change, ya know. He’s comin’ forward and telling the truth about what happened that mornin’. And he was threatened for doin’ it, too.” Johnny watched her for a moment as she kept her gaze on her lap. “Are ya gonna ask me what happened with my testimony?”

Lily looked up, her dark eyes looking at him worriedly. So much had happened in the last couple of hours that she had forgotten to ask about Johnny’s statement.

“I blew it,” Johnny replied, cutting his eyes down Broad Street, his mind suddenly flooded with images from that day. The faint sounds of singing, followed by barking dogs and anxious shouts sent his respiration rate soaring and his heart racing. Shaking his head to dislodge the memories, Johnny continued staring at the bridge at the end of the street, not really seeing it. “Mr. Wilson asked me what I saw… and I had to tell ‘im that I didn’t SEE anything.” Johnny shifted in his seat. “He got a real kick out o’ that, but… Lily, I recognized his voice, the lawyer... I knew that he was the one who had attacked Father Mitchell...”

“Yea, Mr. Pettway explained that to us,” she replied, watching closely as he continued to stare into the distance.

Johnny wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but he realized that there was a lull in the conversation. He returned his gaze from the bridge ten years ago to Lily who was sitting in front of him now. He saw the pain on her face, sensing the confusion she must be feeling. “Mr. Jones told
‘em about his boat bein’ tied up along the river bank that mornin’ and... now I realize that the taste I’ve been rememberin’ all these years was from the rim of that small boat. I... I kneeled down beside it, propped my camera up on the edge and jus’... jus’ started takin’ pictures. Mr. Jones said there were teeth marks on the rim. He thought it was from Father Mitchell, but... it wasn’t... those teeth imprints were mine... Your grandfather is really the star witness for the prosecution, Lily; not me.”

“And I’m supposed to be grateful for that, huh?” Lily waved a hand in front of her. “Just act like he’s been grandfather of the year for the last 25 years?”

Johnny gritted his teeth, speaking to her sternly. “No, you don’t have to pretend like he’s been a part of your life since your mom was pregnant with you, but you could at least give him a chance… hear him out… Let him tell you how he feels and... and maybe you should be honest with him, too. Plus, we haven’t even talked about your maternal grandmother.”

“Don’t remind me,” she said, rolling her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but saw the waitress walking towards them carrying their plates. She waited until the young woman had served them before continuing the conversation while Johnny hungrily began to devour his meal. She raised her fork, using it to peel back the crust of the fried fish, picking out bites of the white flakey meat.

“I suppose they’ll just apologize for hating me, and then I’ll have to forgive them, and everything will be rainbows and roses, right?”

Johnny looked around, grateful that the two of them were the only people in the courtyard. “No, no one is saying you have to forgive them, but… I think you should at least give them a chance to talk to you… hopefully apologize.”

“Why? Besides, where the hell is Grandma Jones, anyway?” she asked, allowing a sarcastic look to color her face. “Oh, that’s right; I’m sure she’s at home baking me cookies!”

“Look, let’s take a timeout and eat lunch before it gets cold. I have the keys to the rental car; we’ll go to the hospital as soon as we finish eating,” Johnny suggested, pouring ketchup on his French fries.

“We told Mom we’d wait here.”

“Her father may be seriously ill, Lily… Your grandfather… Don’t you think Iris might need your love and support right now?” His dark eyes scanned her face. “You may not give a damn about him, but I know you love Iris and Kizzy.”

Lily looked down, shrugging her shoulders. He was speaking the truth and she knew it.

“Well, she and Kizzy are there without a car, Lily. How’s Kizzy gonna get back home since we’re the ones who picked her up this morning?” he asked around a mouthful of French fries. “You don’t have to go in, but we need to go see about ‘em.”

Lily felt like a child pouting, but she couldn’t stop the words from coming out of her mouth. “I’ll go with you to take Grandma home, but I will NOT go to the JONES residence,” she spat out, shoving a small bite of fish into her mouth.

Johnny pushed the partially chewed French fries into his jaw in order to speak. “He may not be going home today,” he said, hoping his words would bring her to her senses.

“Well,” she responded, sniffling like a small child. “I don’t care,” she mumbled, knowing that she was being untruthful. She cared more than she was willing to admit.
Johnny, his frustration showing on his expressive face, shoved his fork into his cole slaw. “Fine!”

Lily truly wanted to go to the hospital. She wanted to check on Kizzy, but there was a hint of concern tugging at her heart for the grandfather she had never met until today. Was it possible that her first meeting with him would also be her last? There were so many things she wanted to say to him, but none of them were pleasant. She couldn’t say those harsh words to a man who might be having a heart attack—a man her mother obviously still cared about, in spite of what he had done to her. And what about her maternal grandmother? What was she like? Did she still hate Lily as much as she must have when Lily was born?

“You really are half Irish, aren’t you?” Johnny pointed out, noticing that she was staring into her plate, clenching her jaw muscles. When she didn’t respond, he snapped his fingers in front of her face.

Lily looked up quickly. “What?”

“I said… You really are half Irish.”

The young woman knitted her eyebrows together in confusion. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re the most stubborn woman I’ve ever met!” He dropped his napkin onto his empty plate, then pushed it aside, reaching for his tea. “You can’t admit it, can you?”

“Johnny… please…”

“Nu-uh… I’m not gonna shut up about this because you’re makin’ a big mistake,” he said, looking around to ensure their conversation was still private. He leaned forward, lowering his voice. He was about to use a tactic he had learned from Roy. Roy seemed to be a pro at using it on Johnny, so he surmised it would work on Lily, too. He had been thinking about her reactions and statements, and he thought he had figured out the real reason that Lily had run away to join the cult several years ago…and it wasn’t just because her mother had lied about her maternal grandparents being alive. “You’re ashamed of them, aren’t you?” he began with a false accusation. He needed to make her angry to peel away the protective layers of her heart, even if he had to veer slightly off course to get the job done.

Lily wadded up her napkin, slamming it onto the remains of her meal. “I don’t know what the hell you’re trying to do, John Gage, but I have done nothing… NOTHING to be ashamed of!”

“I didn’t say you had DONE anything to be ashamed of, even though you have… You walked away from a sick old man… a man who is your grandfather… and you never even looked at him.” He waited for a moment, seeing a vein bulging along her temple. It was working. “What I said was that YOU are ashamed of THEM… The Jones family. What if he dies, Lily? What if you just lost your one chance to speak to him?”

“I don’t want to hear his lies! He’s a racist and a bigot! Just like everybody else in this town! He knew who killed Uncle Phillip all along and he wouldn’t come forward to tell the authorities because he didn’t care! He’s a coward! And I HATE him!”

Johnny saw the look on her face and knew that he was reaching his target. He sat back, satisfied with what he had done. “Like I said… You’re ashamed of them… of YOUR family.”
“MY family? No way… They are NOT my family. THEY denied ME, remember? THEY wanted nothing to do with ME… The only relatives I have down here have skin darker than mine… not lighter!”

“Now YOU’RE bein’ a racist,” he added.

Lily leaned against the edge of the table so that her face was closer to his, seething. “WHAT? That’s ridiculous!”

“Then why are you yellin’ at me?” Johnny asked without raising his voice. He was accomplishing his task.

“Because you’re the one who brought it up!”

“I only mentioned your maternal grandparents. You’re the one who added all the white people in Selma, callin’ them all bigots and racists… just ‘cause their skin is a lighter shade than yours.”

“If you’re trying to make a point, I don’t understand it; this makes no sense,” she argued, leaning back in her seat.

“Have you ever heard the statement that you can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family?” Johnny asked, hoping he was finally reaching her heart.

“Yes… and that’s sooo true,” she added, her voice a venomous mixture of sarcasm and anger. “Because I would NEVER have chosen the Jones family to be born into.”

“You’ve only met, two… no, three of them and one is your mother! You’re making some pretty big assumptions based on just a little information about a couple of members of the Jones family.”

“Well, where have they been all my life?” she spat out.

“Where have you been all their lives?”

“I don’t even know who they are, Johnny!” she argued, not realizing she was making his point.

“BINGO!”

Johnny leveled her with his dark eyes, searching her soul, the soul of the teenager who was devastated by the traumatic things she experienced during the Civil Rights Movement, and the added burden of finding out about her grandparents’ rejection just a few years later.

“Baby… You’re assuming that they hate you because of your father, but you haven’t even met them. People have to talk to each other, Lily,” he pleaded. “They have to be open with each other. You can’t assume you know what someone else is thinkin’ or feelin’… You have to ask. You’ve spent way too many years hating your grandparents and assumin’ that everyone on your mother’s side of the family hated you for bein’ half black when… Lily… Didn’t a distant maternal cousin search for you a few years ago? Isn’t that how you found out that your grandparents were alive?”

She merely nodded her head, using a napkin to dry her runny nose.

“Did you keep up with her? Did you contact your other relatives?”

Lily slowly shook her head. She had been so traumatized by the news that she had run to the cult, losing contact with the young woman who had sought her out.
“Why not?” Johnny asked. He hated it when he made her cry, but he knew that sometimes tears were the best way to cleanse the soul.

“I knew that… that they were… ash-ashamed of… me…,” she hiccupped. “I… I didn’t wanna… see it… on their… faces.”

“Lily… You made a lot of assumptions because you were afraid to seek out the truth,” Johnny said softly, his voice soothing.

“But… I was… jus’ a… ba-baby, and-“

Johnny reached for her hand, allowing her to use him as an anchor. He ran his thumb along the back of her hand as she continued to weep. “I know… You’ve been hurt so badly, sweetheart. It isn’t fair. What they did to your parents, and ultimately to you, was wrong, it was jus’ flat out wrong. But you’ve been lettin’ your hate… and your fear consume you for years. I think it’s time that you confront the issue… face to face.”

He watched her struggling to speak, but knew she was feeling an emotional lump in her throat.

“Do you think that maybe somewhere deep down inside, your mother regrets eloping with your father?” he asked, knowing he was piercing her already broken heart. He watched her respiration rate increase and knew that he was on the right track.

She shook her head from side to side. “No… she loved him… so much… but… If it… hadn’t been… for me… then when he… died, Mom… she could’ve… gone back… home,” Lily sobbed, finally expressing the deep-seated sorrow and guilt she had been living with for years.

Johnny felt a lump swelling in the back of his throat. He had reached her. He had managed to bring out the truth, the truth she had been running from for far too long. “That’s why you ran away to the group in the mountains, wasn’t it? It wasn’t the fact that your mother had lied to you; you wanted to give her an out, a way to return to her family without you taggin’ along because you felt like you were a barrier to her goin’ home… maybe even… an embarrassment to her.”

Lily could feel the splotches growing on her face and neck as she continued crying. Her eyes were burning and she felt hot. She wanted to leave, to run away again, to hide from this man who had just uncovered her darkest secret, but then again, she loved him with all her heart. She felt as though she were floundering around in quicksand; the harder she tried to get away, the deeper she sank. She wanted to say more, to ask him how he knew, but the sound of the waitress returning with their check made her turn her head away, reaching for another napkin to dry her eyes.

“Aww, suga’ are you a’right?” the young waitress asked, dropping the check on the table between them.

Johnny reached for the bill, offering an understanding smile to the kind young woman. “Ahem… It’s been a really difficult day, Miss.”

“Well, I know how to fix that, hon. I’ll be right back an’ it’s on the house. Don’t you worry none,” she called out over her shoulder. “We’ll have that frown turned upside down.” Her voice echoed in the courtyard as her clicking heels faded on her return trip inside the café.

Lily couldn’t say anything, her voice lodged in her throat. She watched as Johnny withdrew his wallet from his back pocket, dropping enough cash on the table to cover their meal and a very generous tip. She reached for her purse, but he stopped her.
“Nah, I’ve got this,” he grinned, flashing the same flirtatious look in her direction that he had tossed at the waitress earlier.

That grin melted Lily’s heart; it always had and probably always would.

“I can tell by the way y’all talk that y’all ain’t from ‘round here, so I’ve got a treat for ya,” the waitress announced when she returned, carrying a small tray. “I’ve got two slices of fresh pecan pie and two cups o’ coffee,” she said, serving Lily first and then Johnny. “Compliments of the chef,” she said, winking at them both. “Can’t have our guests leavin’ here feelin’ poorly,” she stated, collecting the meal ticket and the money. “Thanks a bunch, suga’,” she said, waving the bills in Johnny’s direction as she picked them up. “I hope y’all enjoy it, and that y’all will come back to see us. Jus’ wave at me if ya need anything else, a’right?”

“Thank you, Miss.”

Lily reached for her fork, her mouth beginning to water as she looked at the scrumptious dessert. “Yes, this was very kind of you.”

“Y’all have a nice afternoon,” the blonde-haired woman said, walking away from the table.

Johnny waited until they were almost finished with their pecan pie before he spoke up. “So… still think that everyone in Selma is a racist and a bigot?”

Lily shrugged her shoulders, finishing the last bite of her pie, allowing the faintest hint of a smile to appear on her face.

“You won’t… tell my mom, will you?” she asked meekly, referring to her secret that Johnny now knew.

Johnny reached for her hand again. “Lily, I love you. The things that you and I share… they’re between us. Besides, nothin’ good would come from Iris knowin’ about this. She’s under enough stress right now,” he reminded her, stroking the back of her hand. “I promise that I won’t tell her anything. However, speakin’ of regrets…”

“I know… You think I should talk to him and tell him how badly his rejection hurt me,” she said, speaking about her grandfather.

“I wouldn’t say anything to upset him right now, but… eventually… yea, I think you should. I think both of your maternal grandparents need to know how you feel. And you just might learn a thing or two about them and why they did what they did.” He saw her eyes widening in horror and continued. “I’m not sayin’ that it was right. I’m no shrink, but I do know that if people would just be more honest with each other… and actually TALK to each other instead o’ makin’ assumptions, then… the world would be a better… happier place.”

Lily thought for a moment, wondering if she should say what was on her mind. After all, she wasn’t the only person who had been making a lot of assumptions over the years. She looked up the street at the north side of the bridge, but didn’t see the Gages. She had to stall him a little longer. “Can we… go sit on that bench, down by the river?” she asked. “I just need a few more minutes to get myself together and… and then I’ll go with you to the hospital.”

Johnny flashed her his crooked grin. “That’s my girl,” he said, lifting her hand to his lips for a quick kiss before helping her to her feet. He pulled his sports coat off the back of the chair, draping it over one shoulder as he followed her out the gate of the courtyard.

They walked a couple of blocks, seeing the famous bridge rising ahead of them. Although the
afternoon was clear and sunny, Johnny’s eyes began seeing fog floating up from beneath the bridge and his face felt the chill in the air from that misty cool March morning. He swallowed hard, blinking his eyes to force the memories back into their hiding place. As they meandered along the sidewalk, an elderly man crossed in front of them, walking to his antique black Chevrolet pick-up truck. The door creaked when he opened it, sending a chill down Johnny’s spine, but when the older man cranked it up and it back-fired, Johnny’s knees nearly buckled. He covered Lily protectively, pushing her against the brick wall of the jewelry store they were walking past, shielding her with his own body.

“Johnny?”

Realizing what had happened, Johnny backed away from her, releasing her from where she had been pinned.

“So-sorry... I jus’ thought that... never mind,” he mumbled, looking around sheepishly. He had to get himself together, but there were so many memories assaulting him from every angle that settling his nerves was proving difficult.

They continued walking in silence, Johnny’s racing heart finally beginning to slow. He looked at the sidewalks on both sides of the street, seeing people of various skin coloring shopping in the local stores and walking together beneath the balconies of the two and three story buildings, enjoying what appeared to be pleasant conversations. The scene reminded him of the pictures he had seen of Creole Townhouses in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Along the way, Lily summoned up her courage to speak to him about his situation with his parents.

“You know… I’m not the only one who’s been making a lot of assumptions.”

Johnny continued looking ahead at the sidewalk, avoiding the sight of the looming bridge, not liking the direction she was taking the conversation.

“This isn’t about me,” he mumbled.

“Maybe not, but you’re right... People DO need to talk to each other. YOU need to talk to your parents... ASK them how they feel, not just assume you know.”

Johnny squinted his eyes, seeing the sun reflecting off the windshields of the passing cars. He pursed his lips, remaining silent.

“You’re assuming that they’re ashamed of you, but you haven’t actually talked to them about it… about ANYTHING!”

Johnny inhaled a deep breath. He knew she was right. She was using his own words against him and he hated it. Neither one said a word as they neared the empty park bench beside the river. The lamp post on the corner was decorated with square bales of hay, stalks of corn, and drying cotton plants. A few pumpkins and various colors of mums added a bit of color to the otherwise drab setting. Sitting on one of the hay bales was a scarecrow; its lifeless body reminding Johnny of the lifeless body of Phillip Campbell hanging by his neck along the edge of the river. He felt his heart pounding in his throat, his palms beginning to sweat. Turning his back to the fall decorations, he gestured toward the empty bench.

Lily took a seat, skillfully selecting her position so she would have the best view of the parking spaces opposite them. She knew that Johnny would be looking at her, having his head turned away
from the street and away from his parents when they arrived. Lily just hoped they would get here soon.

Johnny folded his sports coat, setting it beside him on the metal bench. He looked up, seeing the long strands of Spanish moss hanging from the oak tree limbs above them, the gray beard-like plant swaying gently in the afternoon breeze. He closed his eyes for a moment, listening to the natural sounds of the river contrasting with the urban sounds of cars passing by them. It seemed that most things in his life were contrasting. He was half Indian and half white. His girlfriend was half white and half black. His job was half medic and half fireman. For the last decade, he had been living in a world of part-time bravery and part-time terror. He turned to his side, seeing Lily holding her bottom lip between her teeth. He could tell she was anxious.

“Just take a few deep breaths, baby,” he encouraged, hoping she would feel well enough to go to the hospital in just a few minutes, erroneously presuming that her anxiety was due to the stress of the morning.

Lily allowed the gentle breeze to blow her dark hair away from her face. She closed her eyes, basking in the afternoon sun as the sounds of birds and insects that called the river bank their home grew louder and louder.

“Johnny… Can I ask you something else?”

He placed his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in for a light squeeze. “Sure.”

“I admit… I need to talk to my grandparents, but WHEN are you going to talk to your parents?” Lily looked straight ahead, not wanting to see the look on his face. “You’ve never talked to your parents about what happened here,” she reminded him, waving her arm toward the bridge.

Johnny pursed his lips, joining her position staring straight ahead. “And I honestly never would’ve if your mother hadn’t done it for me,” he said, stiffening his back. “Like I said earlier… there’re some things that would be too painful for our loved ones to know. Iris doesn’t need to know that you felt like you were baggage for her… and my folks don’t need to know that…,” he leaned over, resting his forearms on his thighs, hanging his head. “That they raised a… a coward who let… let my people down.”

Lily decided to push things a little further because she knew he needed to see how he was doing the same thing that she had been doing – making assumptions and running from those who loved him most.

“You think your Dad is ashamed of you, don’t you?”

 Johnny stared at his cuticles, stretching his long fingers out, examining the small scars that were the result of his job. “I know he is,” he mumbled. He felt the heat of his shame boiling up from his chest, rivulets of sweat beginning to trickle down the side of his face. A dog barking in the distance made his chest tighten, his breath hitch. His mind took him back to the sights and sounds of police dogs barking and attacking the marchers. The day had started with peace and hope, but had ended in tragedy and disappointment. He hated this place, even though it was a beautiful setting. His entire life had changed here a decade ago, and his relationship with his parents had been severed – possibly forever.

Lily ran her hand along his back, feeling the tension in his taut muscles. She noticed a gray sedan, much like the one they had rented, pull into a parking spot across the street. She took a deep breath, waiting to see who might emerge. She hadn’t seen the Gages since Johnny’s graduation from the Fire Academy, but she knew she would recognize them, and she knew they would recognize
Johnny.

A tall thin man stepped out of the vehicle, stretching his back and turning to look in her direction. She gave him a slight nod, seeing the recognition on his face. It was Roderick Gage. Sharon got out of the passenger’s side, and they met behind the car. She slipped her hand into the crook of her husband’s arm, both of them looking in Johnny’s direction. Lily saw Sharon dabbing a tissue to the corners of her eyes. She knew exactly how the older woman felt. She saw them heading for the crosswalk to wait for a break in the traffic so they could cross the street.

Lily’s attention returned to Johnny who was still slumped over staring at his hands. “How do you know that’s what they think if you haven’t talked to them about it?”

Johnny knew it was a fair question, but he didn’t like having his own psychology turned back around on him. “I jus’ know, a’right?” He responded, curtly.

She continued rubbing her hand gently along his shoulders, needing to make a physical connection with him. She saw the older couple crossing the street and knew that there was about to be a reunion that might be tender, or explosive. Either way, the relationship between Johnny and his parents would never be the same. Would her relationship with Johnny be damaged by her role in the surreptitious meeting?

“You’re afraid of the truth.”

“Am not,” he shot back. “I know my parents well enough to know how they feel, okay?” He hesitated for a moment, cutting his eyes at her. “Especially my father.”

Undeterred, Lily continued. “If they were standing here right now, would you ask them how they feel about what you did?”

Frustrated by the conversation, Johnny ran his sweaty palms along his pants legs. He narrowed his eyes at her, feeling his pulse pounding, hoping to change the conversation. “Are you ready to go?”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Lily said again, seeing the older couple walking towards them just a few feet away.

“Okay, yea… Yea, if they were here, I’d ask them how they felt about having me for a son,” he said, pointing his middle finger at his own chest. His face was growing red as he pondered how he was going to broach the subject when he finally did see his parents again, but having no idea just how soon that meeting would take place.

Roderick Gage heard Johnny’s statement, and he responded as truthfully as he knew how, struggling to push each word past the lump in his throat.

“So… Very…Proud.”

Johnny’s tense facial features softened momentarily, his dark eyes widening and his chin dropping, leaving his mouth agape. Had he just heard correctly? The look on Lily’s face told him that he had. He searched her eyes, seeing them pooling with more unshed tears, and a knowing smile spreading across her face as she looked upwards. Johnny gulped, feeling his Adam’s apple bobbing. Slowly he turned his head away from Lily and toward the sound of the familiar voice.

“I’m… ahem,” Roderick began, struggling with his own uncharacteristic emotions. “I mean, we…,” he said, pulling Sharon into a sideways embrace. “We are the proudest parents… that any… any
Johnny struggled to inhale a breath, slowly standing on his long legs that suddenly felt like wet noodles. This wasn’t possible, was it? “Mom? Dad? How…?” His words were choked off, his throat constricting, his chest tightening. He gasped for air, struggling to inhale a breath. Immediately, his training kicked in. ‘Get low… good air… low,’ he thought to himself, feeling his knees buckling as he fell backwards. He somehow managed to fall onto the bench, the only thing keeping him from landing on his backside on the cobblestone sidewalk. Leaning forward, trying to get his head lower than his heart, he consumed gulp after gulp of precious air.

“Johnny?”

Johnny heard Lily calling out to him, her voice sounding far away as his field of vision narrowed. He squeezed his eyes shut, concentrating on slowing his respiration rate.

“Slow down… You’re hyperventilating,” Lily instructed, kneeling in front of him and placing a hand on his shoulder.

After a moment of intense concentration, Johnny felt his breathing slowing, the tingling in his hands and tongue subsiding. He felt a large hand on his other shoulder, squeezing gently, and the feel of a man sitting beside him. From behind him, a second all too familiar hand began rubbing soothing circles along his upper back, just like when he was a child. The feminine hand grazed across his hair as his mother walked around the park bench, squeezing to sit in the narrow space between Johnny and the arm of the bench.

Johnny thought about the large tree limbs above the park bench and briefly wondered if perhaps one had fallen. He must have suffered a head injury; it was the only plausible explanation. They couldn’t possibly be here, could they? Forcing his eyes open to confirm his suspicions, he saw the jean-clad legs of his father sitting on his right and the plaid dress of his mother sitting on his left.

“Ugh... Oh... mygod,” he groaned, panting between words, not wanting to look into the disappointed faces of his parents, but it had been such a long time since he had seen them, and he missed them more than he had realized.

“Easy, son... Take it easy,” Roderick said, squeezing Johnny’s neck once more. He had known that their sudden appearance, especially in Selma, would come as a shock to Johnny, but he had no idea the affect would be this traumatic.

“I... um,” Johnny couldn’t find his words, his mouth as dry as the cotton ready for the harvest in the fields near Kizzy’s house.

“Sshhh,” Sharon Gage soothed, continuing to offer what comfort she could to her son. “We love you, sweetie,” she said, crooning to him as though he were still a little boy.

Lily stood up from her kneeling position in front of Johnny, backing away as he pulled himself back up, leaning his back against the cool metal bench. She watched, feeling as though her heart would burst when she saw Johnny reach out, embracing his parents, clinging to them as though they might disappear like a vapor in the hot sun if he released them. Lily saw Johnny’s shoulders begin to shake and knew that he was overcome with emotions. He had always been her rock, her fortress, but seeing him here, sitting between his parents, sobbing as he wrapped an arm around each of them, she saw him in a different way. He seemed so... vulnerable. She remembered how often he had cried in her arms when they had first returned to California. The nights were the worst times for him. She
remembered how he would wake up, calling out for his parents. Fortunately, Iris’ bedroom was on the opposite side of the house, but Lily could hear him crying. She would silently sneak into his room, crawling into his bed, and holding him while he sobbed. She never told anyone about these episodes, but they had seemed to cement their love for each other. That was when she had learned how he felt about himself – like he was a total failure as a son, and as a member of his tribe.

Sharon Gage ran her hand down her son’s dark hair, feeling the silkiness so familiar to her. His build, his entire being was so much like his father. She also knew that he had inherited Roddy’s stubborn streak. She pulled away from his shoulder, keeping her arm around his torso. She looked into his teary eyes and felt overwhelming love squeezing her heart, the same love she had felt when the midwife had laid him on her breast for the very first time. While the years had masculinized his features, he was still her little boy. He was still her Johnny.

“I’ve mis-missed… you,” she croaked out, cupping his reddened cheek with her pale hand. “I lo-love you, Jo-Johnny,” she said in a hoarse whisper. “And I… I always will…” There was so much more she wanted to say, but her vocal chords were no longer functioning. She saw him turn his face to the side, to look in the general direction of his father, and her breathing hitched. He had matured so much since she had last seen him, and he looked so much like his father.

“Da-dad… I’m… sor-“

“No. Don’t say you’re sorry.” Roderick cut off his son’s apology, enveloping him in a bear hug that nearly pressed all the air out of Johnny’s lungs. “Don’t… ever say… that, son,” Roderick managed to say, releasing Johnny but turning to face him. He looked at the man his son had become, and the sadness on Johnny’s face ripped his heart right out of his chest, leaving his soul injured. Johnny’s eyes were downcast, and Roderick knew that Johnny felt too ashamed to even look at him. Had he really felt like this for the last ten years?

Roderick ran his palm down his own face. He looked to his right, seeing the Edmund Pettus Bridge spanning the Alabama River. It had witnessed the best and worst that humanity had to offer. It seemed like a fitting place for him to have a heart-to-heart talk with his only son.

“Ahem…” Roderick cleared his throat, standing. “John… Let’s take… a walk, please?” the older man asked, seeing Sharon offering him a brief nod of affirmation. “Can you… stand?” He asked, reaching out his hand.

Johnny looked at Lily and remembered that they needed to get to the hospital. “Um, I-“

“He’ll be glad to take a walk with you, Mr. Gage,” Lily spoke up. She directed her next statement to Johnny. “I’m sorry we had to… surprise you like this, but, um…”

Johnny shook his head, letting her know that her apology wasn’t necessary. He exhaled a cleansing breath that puffed out his cheeks. Everything seemed to be falling into place, especially Iris’ insistence that he and Lily wait near the courthouse instead of going to the hospital. It all made sense now.

Accepting a hand from his father, he stood up, holding onto the back of the iron bench until he knew he was steady on his feet. “You um… ya really, uh, surprised me.”

“It seemed like the best way,” Sharon said, her smile a soft apology as she rose to her feet.

“Um… If you’ll give me the car keys… I think… While you visit with your family… I’ll go check on… mine,” Lily suggested, her voice fading to a whisper when she saw the look on his face. He seemed so… Fearful? Anxious? Was he really dreading the talk with his father that badly?
Johnny, relaxing his tense facial muscles, dug into his pants pocket, withdrawing the keyring. “When we leave here… We’ll… head that way,” he managed to say, his voice sounding a little more confident.

Lily curled her hair behind her ear, accepting the keys from him. “Please don’t rush.” She wanted their reunion to be perfect, not cut short by the misadventures of her own family situation. She knew that Johnny needed this time alone with his parents. The talk was going to go better than he suspected, and she knew it. She pointed down Broad Street. “Slim said the hospital was down that way, right?”

“Yea.”

“Son?” Roddy waved his hand in the direction of the bridge, grateful when Johnny gave a brief smile to his mother and to Lily, then turned in the direction of the looming structure.

Sharon reached over to Lily, pulling her into a hug as the two of them watched the Gage men turn, walking side by side along the worn sidewalk along the side of the bridge. “Thank you, Lily… Um, who’s in the hospital? Not your mother, I hope.”

Lily gave a wistful smile. “No… it’s kind of a long story, but… it’s my paternal grandmother and my maternal grandfather.”

“Oh my, I hope they’ll be okay,” Sharon replied, unable to take her eyes off her son and husband as they walked away. “Kind of odd that they’re both there together.”

Lily released a nervous chuckle. “Unusual… that describes my family, alright.” She took a hesitant step backwards, smiling awkwardly, her eyes watching Johnny and Roddy walking away from them. “I guess I’ll see you folks a little later.”

“Yes…,” Sharon replied absently, watching her two favorite men walking across the famous bridge.

“I’m glad you all made it here safely. I really…” She pointed over her shoulder, in the direction of the hospital.

Sharon turned briefly at the sound of Lily’s voice. “I understand. Go take care of your family.”

“Thank you… We’ll talk soon, okay?” she called out over her shoulder, heading in the direction of their rental car.

“Drive safely and let your family know we’re thinking about them,” Sharon replied, taking a step toward the empty park bench.

Sharon sat down, pulling Johnny’s sports coat into her lap, folding it neatly. She turned sideways, propping her right elbow on the back of the bench, continuing to caress the brown material as she watched for Johnny and Roddy to return to her. She ran her fingers across the material. She could smell the faint scent of Johnny’s cologne that was left clinging to it. “Oh, my sweet baby boy… You have no idea how much we love you, do you?”

In the distance, she heard the screeching sound of a familiar bird of prey and a silent tear seared her cheek as it left a hot wet path down her face. “Thank you,” she whispered, knowing that somehow the eagle flying over the river could hear her expression of gratitude. She knew that Roddy would
find the right words to reach their son, to heal his broken heart. “Thank you for being his spirit
guide.”
By the time Lily arrived at the hospital, Kizzy was sitting on the cement bench just outside of the emergency room doors, her right hand sporting a white cast. She saw Lily walking from the parking lot and quickly stood up to greet her.

“Lily? You’re here,” she said reaching her good arm around her granddaughter.

“Johnny’s talking with his parents… They just got here from Montana.” Lily wrapped her arms around her grandmother’s plump torso. “How’s the hand?”

Kizzy looked down quickly then snickered. “Well… It’s broken, but it’ll be a’right.”

Lily hesitated, wanting to ask about her grandfather, but unsure of how that might make Kizzy feel. Kizzy saw the look on her face and decided to help her out. “The doctor’s with Isaac now. Slim’s gone to get his wife, but… Your mom is in there with him.” She looked at her granddaughter, saw her shifting from one foot to the other and knew that she was contemplating what she should do. “I bet your mother could use a little support right now.”

Lily looked up into the dark eyes of Kizzy. “Then why are you out here?”

“Child… I don’t like no hospitals.” She lifted her elbow and cocked her head in the direction behind her, unwilling to even look at the emergency entrance. “That’s where too many o’ my friends and family drew their last breath,” she said with a slow shake of her head. She really did have an unnatural fear of hospitals, especially needles.

“Oh, Grandma,” Lily said, reaching for the cast on Kizzy’s hand. “Looks like you made it through this visit okay.”

“Only ‘cause I ran out o’ there as soon as they finished puttin’ the plaster on me. I didn’t give ‘em a chance to jab me wit’ no needle.”

The smile on Lily’s face faded. “I guess… um, my grandfather’s getting poked with needles, huh?”

Kizzy ran her hand down Lily’s back, silently urging her towards the door. She knew that it would be in Lily’s best interest to become familiar with her mother’s side of her family. Even though she disagreed with the long-term disapproval of Jon and Iris’ marriage, she and her family had not been overjoyed by it, either. Over time, most had come to accept Iris and even love her, but certainly not everyone in the Campbell family felt compelled to do so. A couple of the younger women had considered it a betrayal on Jon’s part. After all, weren’t there any colored women who were good enough for him, they had asked. And as for Isaac not coming forward until now, she completely agreed with him. Now that Dallas County had a colored district attorney, she felt that the Klan had less power, making it more likely that there would be a conviction. Besides, the Klan could be just as ruthless to white people whom they considered traitors as they did to their usual targets.

“Go on, Lily,” Kizzy spoke up. “Go on inside and see ‘bout ‘im for yourself.”

Lily’s legs felt as if they were made of lead. “But, I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say nothin’… Jus’ be there. If somethin’ needs sayin’, then you’ll know.” Kizzy encouraged. She watched as Lily slowly walked through the automatic glass doors, disappearing down the hallway in the direction of the reception desk.
Kizzy sat back down on the hard surface. She looked up at the puffy clouds floating so far above her head. “Well… I reckon you a’ready know what’s goin’ on down here,” she said out loud, her faith feeling more real to her than ever before. “I know the good book says that vengeance is yours, but…” She looked down at her broken hand with a wide smile. “But I did kinda enjoy throwin’ the punch for ya.” She looked up at the young white couple who walked past her, giving her a wider berth than was actually necessary. She simply smiled at them, offering them a friendly nod, and kept on with her audible conversation with her creator. “So, anyhow… They’re still a few folks down here that need ya help, so… If ya don’t mind… Could ya, you know, maybe spare another miracle, or two?” Once again, she cocked her head in the direction of the emergency department door. “Them folks in there sho could use a helpin’ hand ‘cause they got a lot ‘o makin’ up to do. I’d sho ‘nuff be grateful to ya.” She lowered her head, silently completing her verbal prayer. She inhaled deeply, always feeling a sense of contentment and peace after a conversation with her heavenly father.

E!

The huge steel girders rose from the concrete base, arching above Johnny and Roddy as they slowly walked in silence. Neither one could verbally express how he felt. When they reached the center, Roddy stepped to the side, leaning his forearms on the railing and looking out over the expanse of the river.

Johnny followed his father’s lead, mirroring the older man’s stance. He gazed down the river bank, his eyes landing on the place where he had been photographing the bridge when his life suddenly changed forever. Johnny squeezed his eyes shut, slowly shaking his head as if to rid his mind of the unbidden images that this place conjured up.

Roddy knew what was happening to his son and patted Johnny on his shoulder. “Is this where it happened?” Waving his arm in the direction Johnny had been looking before he closed his eyes.

Johnny nodded, encouraged by his father’s show of support. He opened his eyes, looking beyond the place where Phillip died. “Yea…”

As the two stared down the river, their attention was drawn to the flapping wings of an eagle leaving its perch in the distance. The large bird flew down from atop a tree, its keen eyes having spotted its next meal. The men watched as the skillful hunter gracefully dipped its talons into the water, plucking a wriggling fish that had ventured too near the surface.

Johnny’s anxiety level was rising exponentially with each minute that passed in silence. Roddy watched the graceful bird, immediately realizing how he could explain his feelings to his son.

“They’re really beautiful birds,” Roddy commented, grateful that the bird had provided the perfect topic with which to start the emotional conversation.

“Mnhmm,” Johnny grunted, watching as the eagle carried the fish back to the tree before devouring it.

“They’re a very strong spirit guide. It’s the messenger of the Creator. It’s swift, strong, and courageous. It’s creative, intuitive and… It brings healing, Johnny.

“Yea,” Johnny replied, glancing at his father and seeing all those traits in the older man.

“They are light in weight, but very strong. They are compelled to soar upwards, not fearing heights. The wind beneath their wings holds them aloft, navigating their way through where ever the wind may carry them, always finding the right course.”
Roddy continued watching the eagle in the distance as it finished up its meal. “It’s the protector of all the others around it, both animal and man, those who are more earthbound.”

Johnny thought about what his father was saying. His father had always been a protector, and he had taught Johnny from the time he was a small boy about the importance of protecting one’s family, one’s people. His shoulders slumped a little more.

Roddy raised one foot onto the railing, a stance Johnny had assumed often. It felt comfortable, natural. “Eagles are social birds, but they do need isolation at times.”

Johnny remembered the numerous camping trips his father had taken him on when he was a boy. Perhaps that was his father’s way of isolating himself from the rest of the world. Johnny understood that, often feeling completely connected with the universe when he was alone on a hiking excursion.

“The eagle’s eyes are much more powerful than ours, Johnny. They can see a small rabbit a mile or more away. That kind of vision also allows them to see the past, the present, and the future. They can see the bigger picture; they see the world from all angles. They do not fear the unknown, they quickly adjust to their surroundings, able to leave restricting beliefs in the past and ride the air currents to whatever new environment where the Creator desires them to go. They can soar so close to Grandfather Sun that they learn to love the shadows as well as the light.”

Johnny wanted to snicker. Was his father referring to Johnny’s mother? Johnny’s parents had taught him to love people of all races, and Johnny was a mixture of two - Indian and white. Shadow and light.

“The eagle is a creature of intense devotion. They are very territorial and they mate for life, weathering the storms together,” the older man continued.

Johnny thought about how long his parents had been together, weathering storms that many marriages would not have survived. Then he thought of his own dismal record with relationships and another wave of failure washed over him.

Johnny felt the backs of his eyes beginning to sting. He watched the eagle, stalwart on its perch overlooking the beauty below. It represented everything his father was… and everything he wished he could be.

“Ahem, yea… Dad I remember all those camping trips you and I went on when I was jus’ a kid.” He looked down at his legs, chuckling at the way their positions were mirroring each other. “When you told me all about the eagle, I could see so many of the traits in you.” Johnny turned to his side, looking at his father directly. “On our first camping trip, we found the eagle feather floating down the river – remember? That’s when I knew that the eagle was your spirit guide.”

Roddy knitted his eyebrows together. Johnny missed the look of confusion on his father’s face as he returned his gaze back out across the river. He felt so inferior in the presence of his father, but he continued on with his comments, letting Roderick know that he had been listening to the lessons his father had been teaching him when he was just a small child.

“Yea… Mine is the bear. It’s strong, but grounded. It encourages and provides stability. It protects others and I’m a fireman – that’s what I do, protect others. It’s confident…,” he snickered a bit, dipping his head. “Okay, I missed that one,” he admitted, realizing that all his bravado on the job was merely his way of overcompensating for his lack of self-confidence. “But… it seems like it’s always been with me in some way. I mean, I have a bear claw on my keyring and… I even have a bear
poster in my locker at work. I jus’ feel… I dunno… safe when I open my locker and see it there.”

“Son… the eagle isn’t my spirit guide.”

Johnny ran a nervous finger beneath his nose. “Huh?”

“MY spirit guide is the bear. It’s strong, but sometimes feared. It inspires us to take leadership roles and I have always held a respected position within our tribe. It’s courageous. It stands up for what it believes in and doesn’t back down.”

“Oh, yea… well, we both know that I didn’t do that,” Johnny mumbled, morosely. He tapped the toe of his boot along the edge of the sidewalk, pushing tiny bits of rock into the river below.

Roddy inhaled, watching as the rocks fell into the water. “I stood up to society’s expectations that the races not intermarry, and I followed my heart. Afterwards, others followed me, marrying for love, not for the tribe.”

Johnny continued swiping his boot across the cement, listening to his father, swallowing hard against the bile that was rising in the back of his throat. He cleared his throat, wishing he could somehow measure up to his father.

Roderick turned to face his son, placing an aging hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “Johnny... my precious son, you have felt the presence of the bear all this time because I have asked my spirit guide to protect you. I didn’t know all the details of what happened here, and I didn’t know how you felt about yourself until just a few weeks ago. Now I know... and I understand why I felt such a strong desire to have my spirit guide protect you all these years.”

Johnny looked away, feeling the pain of his father’s disappointment. “I don’t guess there’s a spirit guide for a failing coward, is there? Perhaps a field mouse?” He looked down at his feet, remembering Herbert, the mouse that had somehow found its way into the station. Just as Herbert had easily squeezed through the smallest openings, Johnny wished he could simply disappear into one of the many cracks along the sidewalk that flanked the bridge. He snorted in disgust.

“You see,” Roddy said, pointing in the direction of the eagle as it moved towards them. “It doesn’t allow its circumstances to weigh it down. It follows where the air takes it, adjusting itself to the elements. It leaves restricting beliefs behind, keeping its keen eye on the future – not the past. It is admired for its incredible beauty. It has a strong sense of nest fidelity, but when that nest may become threatened, it will actually abandon it, seek out a new nesting site because it’s what’s best for the future of its kind.”

With that comment, the eagle appeared to leap from its perch once more, flapping its enormous wings until it was high enough that it soared effortlessly on the breeze.

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Roddy looked over at his son, finally looking deeply into the familiar brown eyes he remembered. He hoped he was reaching his son through the use of the spirit guide metaphor.
Johnny... My son... You didn’t allow white men to run you off your land... You made a conscious decision to leave, to move on to a place that would not jeopardize your family... us,” Roddy said, placing a flattened hand on his own chest. “In nature, it is not uncommon for one of the strongest members of the species to pretend to be injured or weak, and then lead a predator away from the rest of the group, especially those who are younger... weaker. It’s self-sacrificing in order to save others.” Roddy looked at his son with an overwhelming sense of pride. “You have shown amazing courage, not just in your chosen profession, but by leaving the reservation to make sure that the Ku Klux Klan stayed away. Then your incredible valor came through again by coming back here and facing them... telling the truth to achieve justice for those who have been wronged.”

Johnny pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting his emotions. Was it possible that his father was telling him that his spirit guide was the eagle? He felt the familiar hand clamping him on the back of his neck and squeezing in a loving gesture.

“But... Dad, I...”

“I know what you thought, son, but I am your elder. I have known since you were a small boy that you have the heart and the skill of a stealthy warrior. I am not as strong as you, nor am I as fearless. You have risen far above your circumstances. You have risen above the bear. You have proven that you are worthy of the eagle.” Roddy held Johnny’s upper arms with his hands, looking proudly into the face of his little boy who had become a man at an early age. “John Roderick Gage... Your mother and I are so proud... of you...” he sniffled, tears pooling along his lower lids. “And we have... always been... so proud of... you. We... love... you, son.” Roddy felt the tickle in his throat, but he fought past it, needing to explain more to his son. “Johnny, when you left Montana, back when you were just sixteen, you told us you were on a mission, a quest. All these years, your mother and I have assumed that your quest was continuing... And in a sense, it has continued.” The older man inhaled a breath, his face reddening. “You’ve not been running though. You’ve been continuing to fulfill your destiny.”

The decade that had separated them disappeared as they embraced each other. Johnny released even more of the emotions he had been holding inside of him for years. His sobbing was gut-wrenching, unable to silence his wailing as he cried onto his father’s shoulder. This time, the tears were cleansing his soul. His father, his anchor, his protector, his bear had been with him all along. He felt his father’s hand running down the back of his head, clutching him just like he had done when Johnny was a child. He couldn’t believe that this nightmare, this separation had come to an end, and he had been reunited with his parents.

Roddy held onto his son with all his strength. He felt Johnny’s shoulders shaking, hearing him struggling to inhale as he let go of years of self-loathing and shame. “Let it go, John. Release the negative thoughts and pain that have filled your heart and darkened your soul.” He felt Johnny nodding and sniffing, then sensed him pulling back. “Let your spirit guide carry your pain away on its great wings, separating you from the sorrow forever.”

“I... I dunno,” he sniffled. “I dunno what to... say,” Johnny replied.

“Please say... that you... for-forgive me... for making you feel...”

Johnny looked into the bloodshot eyes of his father, swiftly shaking his head from side to side. “Dad, there’s nothing to forgive. I... I love you and Mom... so much. I... I made some assumptions that... I shouldn’t’ve made... That’s all.”

“And we love you, son. And,” the older man continued, turning to begin their walk back to the entrance of the bridge. “And I believe that... there is a certain young woman... who loves you... and you, like the eagle... are devoted to her. Am I right?”
Johnny snickered, slipping his fingers into his front pockets as they headed back to the park bench. “Yea… I do… And I am.” As they continued their return walk, he thought back over everything he had said to Lily during their lunch together. His own words had come back to haunt him. Lily wasn’t the only one who had been making erroneous assumptions – just like she had told him. He would have to tell her that she had been right all along.

“Perhaps we should head over to the hospital to check on Lily and her family?” Roddy suggested, breaking into Johnny’s private thoughts.

“Yea…”

The two walked side by side, their hearts feeling much freer on the return trip to the place where Sharon was waiting. “You should tell Lily how you feel… and show her. The eagle is not bound by society’s so called rules and norms.”

“Ahaha,” Johnny cackled, enjoying his newfound lightheartedness. “Well, nobody’s ever said I was normal… ‘specially not Chet.”

“And who is this Chet?” Roddy asked, following the cobblestone sidewalk towards the park bench where his wife was waiting.

“Maybe you can come see me soon and I’ll introduce you to all the guys,” Johnny suggested, seeing his mom standing up to greet them.

“We certainly hope to do that, Johnny,” Sharon replied, standing up to meet the two most important men in her life. “Is everything… okay?” she asked, her eyes moving from Johnny to Roddy and back again.

Roddy allowed a crooked grin to spread across his face. “Never better.”

E!

At the hospital, Lily and Iris had just taken a seat in the waiting area when an elderly woman walked in, rushing to the receptionist’s desk. Iris felt her heart skip a beat. She quickly rose to her feet, but felt as if they were planted in cement. When the older woman turned around, following the directive of the receptionist, she locked eyes with Iris.

Time seemed to stand still, and yet Iris felt as if she were being transported in time back to her childhood. Her throat was scratchy, but somehow she managed to get one word out.

“Momma?”

Colleen Jones raised a hand to her quivering lower lip. “I-Iris? You… You’re really h-here,” Colleen said in a husky whisper, unsure of how she might be received by her daughter… and her granddaughter.

Iris looked into the eyes of her mother for the first time since she was a teenager and she wept openly for all the time that had passed them by. “Momma, I’m…”
“Oh baby,” Colleen wailed, rushing to the place where Iris stood, nearly knocking her off her feet when she enveloped her in a hug. “I’ve missed… you so… much,” she said, crying into her daughter’s shoulder. When she pulled back, she saw Lily standing a couple of feet away, her eyes downcast. “Oh, Iris… She’s…” Colleen reached out tentatively, wanting to embrace her granddaughter, but keeping her distance. “She’s so beautiful… and she looks so much… like you.”

“Momma,” Iris said, running her fingers beneath her eyes. “I want you to… meet Lily… your…”

“My granddaughter,” Colleen whispered, feeling the icy rejection she had anticipated from Lily. She looked at the young woman. “Lily… I can’t… even begin to… apolo-“

“Don’t,” Lily interrupted, raising her hands with her palms face outward. “Just… don’t say it. I don’t want to hear it.”

Colleen, feeling the sting of Lily’s comment, took a step back. She would have to take this very slowly. She nodded her head in silent understanding. Looking over at Iris, she spoke up. “Have you… heard anything, yet?”

“No… The doctor’s with him now,” Iris explained. “But he was feeling better a little while ago.”

“And Kizzy?” Colleen questioned.

Lily’s face contorted in confusion, then morphed into defensiveness. “What about her?”

“Lily, please!” Iris said a little more harshly than she had intended.

Colleen held up her hand, halting her daughter’s chastisement. “She has a right to feel the way she does. She… doesn’t know us.”

“And whose fault is that?” Lily shot back. She had been feeling better about meeting her maternal grandparents, but now that Colleen Jones was actually in front of her, the old feelings of bitterness were bubbling up.

“All mine… and Isaac’s… Not your mother’s… and certainly not yours, Lily,” Colleen said softly. “We… have a lot to discuss. I hope you’ll allow us… the chance to… get to know each other.”

Lily was about to make a smart aleck remark when a treatment room door opened. Iris looked beyond her mother’s shoulder, seeing a nurse waving them over.

“I think… I’ll wait with Grandma Kizzy,” Lily commented, her emotions swirling around like a twister. This was all too much for her to take in.

“Lily…,” Iris said softly, not wanting to create a scene in the small emergency department.

Lily shook her head, rubbing her temple as she walked away. Her headache was returning, and she still couldn’t make sense of what she was feeling.

As Colleen and Iris walked into Isaac’s room, Lily hesitated in the waiting room. For several long moments, she tried to muster up the courage to face the Joneses in order to make an informed decision about whether or not she would accept them as her family. She was a grown woman, no longer a rejected innocent baby, and now the choice of a relationship with Isaac and Colleen was hers to make. If Johnny could face his parents, then surely she could face her maternal family, starting with her grandparents. When Iris looked back, holding the door open for her, she pressed her lips into a thin line, quickly turning away, darting towards the emergency department exit.
Johnny and his parents pulled into a parking spot near the emergency department. Immediately, he saw Kizzy, noting the cast on her hand. He quickly got out of the car and stepped over to the place where she sat.

“Broken, huh?” he asked, unnecessarily.

“It’s a’right,” Kizzy responded, standing up to greet the Gages.

“Um, Kizzy, I want you to meet my parents… This is Sharon and Roderick Gage.”

Roderick stuck his hand out, then realized that Kizzy’s right hand was unavailable. “It’s… Oh… It’s nice to meet you. Please call me Roddy.”

Kizzy smiled warmly, looking at the red-rimmed eyes of the three Gages. “Iris tol’ me y’all was comin’. Y’all have a fine son right here,” she said, patting Johnny on his back with her good hand. “Y’all should be mighty proud.”

“We are,” Sharon spoke up, her heart melting at the way Roddy and Johnny looked at each other.

The group made small talk for a couple of minutes until they saw Lily slowly walking towards them, her eyes swollen and her cheeks tear-stained.

“Oh, no,” Johnny murmured, rushing over to her. “Lily? What… What did the doctor say?”

“Mom and… um, Mrs. Jones are in there with him now. I… I just couldn’t do it, Johnny.”

“Do what?” he asked.

“I couldn’t go with them. I couldn’t even… talk to… um, her,” Lily said, feeling Kizzy’s arm wrapping around her waist.

“It’s all gonna be okay, baby girl,” Kizzy responded, hoping to reach her granddaughter with her words. “But you’ve got to let go o’ all this anger and bitterness. I’ll eat ya up inside.

“That’s just it, Grandma,” Lily explained. “I… I want to be angry at them… hate them, even… I really do, but… I just… can’t. She,” Lily continued, waving her hand back in the direction of the hospital. “Mrs. Jones… she just seemed so… understanding.”

Kizzy rubbed her hand along Lily’s back, exchanging a look with Johnny. They both knew what Lily needed to do, but neither knew exactly how to convince her to do it.

“Lily,” Kizzy spoke up. “Honey, whether you like it or not, Colleen Jones IS your other grandmother.”

“I know,” Lily replied, twirling her hair around her finger.

Johnny used the crook of his index finger to lift Lily’s chin until she was looking at him. “Lily… You were right about me. I had been makin’ a lot of assumptions… and I hadn’t talked to my parents about any of them.” Johnny just stood there, looking into the eyes of the woman he loved. He had a lot more he wanted to say, but he didn’t want to say them here. “And I was wrong… so wrong… about them.”
“I know… You’re right…” Lily hugged her grandmother and then wrapped her arms around Johnny’s neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too, baby.” He released her, pulling back so that he could look at her again. “We’ll be waiting right here.”

Lily nodded, offering a brief nod to the Gages before returning to the hospital. She had to join her mother and grandmother, and pray that it wasn’t too late for her to talk to her grandfather.

Kizzy sat back down on the hard bench, examining her swollen fingers protruding from the cast. “My, my, my, Johnny…” She hesitated, looking up at the tall lanky man who was standing beside her. “You sure do have your work cut out for you with that one,” she said, nodding her head and raising her elbow in the direction of the entrance.

“What’cha mean?” he asked, gesturing for his mother to take a seat beside Kizzy.

“I see how the two of you look at each other… I done seen them looks before… You love her, right?”

Roddy chuckled softly. “Ms. Campbell, he and I just had this same conversation a few minutes ago.”

“Nah, jus’ call me Kizzy… Jus’ plain ol’ Kizzy,” she laughed.

Johnny looked at them both. “Yea… I do love her,” Johnny replied, offering the small group a wistful smile. “I sure do.” He looked back in the direction of the emergency room entrance. “I jus’ hope she has the chance to… to get to know them… Even if she chooses not to pursue any kind of relationship with them.”

“Me too, Johnny,” Kizzy added. “I think there might be things that don’t none o’ us know ‘bout… things that might make her feel better ‘bout her momma’s family. Most folks got some good in ‘em, even if we have to look real hard to find it.”

“Obviously, Isaac has some good in him, as you say,” Johnny agreed. “Or he wouldn’t be comin’ forward now.”

The small group continued talking for several minutes, each one offering their own views to the conversation. The consensus among them was that Isaac and Colleen had redeeming qualities and deserved a chance to tell their side of the story.

As the conversation shifted back to Johnny and Lily, Kizzy suddenly yelped. “Oh LORD… Oh, sweet baby Jesus!”

“What? What’s wrong, Kizzy?” Johnny asked. He wondered if Kizzy was in pain from her broken hand, or if a sudden memory had been conjured up by the events of the deposition that morning.

“I jus’ realized somethin’,” the plump ebony woman exclaimed.

“What?”

“If you and Lily get married, it’ll be in California… I’ll hafta get on an airplane!”

E!

Iris withdrew a tissue from her purse, dabbing it to her eyes as she slowly exited the treatment room.
in the Selma hospital. This day had not turned out the way she had anticipated it would. Slowly she walked down the corridor and through the double glass doors into the parking lot.

Sharon was the first to see her exiting the hospital and quickly alerted the others.

“Ohmygod, no,” Johnny mumbled, seeing the look on Iris’ face. Her make-up was smeared, giving her eyes the look of a racoon. Her hair was somewhat disheveled and Johnny feared the news he was about to hear from her. She looked as if she didn’t have the strength to walk the short distance from the emergency entrance to the place where the Gages and Kizzy were waiting.

Johnny rushed over to meet her, wrapping his arms around to keep her from falling down. “Iris… What’s… what happened?”

Iris struggled to regain her composure. “He’s… gonna be… f-fine,” she hiccupped, pulling away from his chest so she could see him. She saw the others gathering around her and quickly greeted Roddy and Sharon. She saw the questions on their faces.

“Then… Why’re-” Johnny began, silenced by Kizzy.

“Is Lily still in there… with them?” Kizzy questioned.

Iris nodded. “His cardiac enzymes were… normal… They want to keep him… a few more hours and… repeat the test… You know… just to be sure, but it seems that… Daddy had… angina. He’ll need to follow-up with a cardiologist but-”

“Iris… Lily?” Kizzy reminded her, concerned about her granddaughter.

“They’re… ta-talking,” she smiled, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “It… It wasn’t safe for… me to come… home and… and my parents… couldn’t move to California because… they would’ve looked for them.”

“The Klan?” Johnny asked, trying to make sense of the broken message Iris was giving them.

“Yes… They didn’t agree with Jon and me getting married, but… They just didn’t… really know how to… accept it… accept us… and Lily… and have a… a relationship without,” she hesitated, refolding the tissue and dabbing it at her eyes again. “Without risking the Klan finding us.”

“Is that what they told you?” Johnny asked, skeptically. Even though he had done something very similar, he was still doubting the sincerity of the excuse.

“I know, Johnny. It sounds so… lame, but… After a while, it was just easier to stay apart than to admit being afraid of… of those… bastards,” Iris said in a whisper.

“I’m glad she’s givin’ them the chance to explain things to her,” Johnny replied, speaking of Lily. “I was afraid she wasn’t ever going to listen to them.”

“I think… I have you to thank for that,” Iris said, looking into the face of the young man she had cared for for such a long time.

Johnny enveloped her in a hug once more. He and his parents had been reunited after a decade apart. It seemed that Iris and her parents were also beginning the healing process – a process that obviously was going to be difficult, but certainly possible, and it looked as if Lily was going to be included in the reunification, too. As he stood there, holding Iris’ head against his chest as she wept tears of relief and joy, he thought about his other family – his station brothers. So much had happened to them over the last year. Was it possible that what was happening in Selma was just the beginning of a new
chapter in all their lives? Could it be that his work family was on the verge of experiencing a healing too? He closed his eyes, praying silently that the Station 51 A-shift would no longer be a house divided. It was time for them all to come full circle – moving from a house divided to a house united.

The End

A/N: I know this probably isn’t the ending you were expecting; I’ve left a lot of loose ends that obviously need to be tied. While this is the final story in the “A House Divided” series, there will still be one more story. I hope you will join me for “A House United” – a story, not a series, that will carry our favorite firemen and most of the original characters to a settled place in their lives. I want to thank everyone who has read this story and has followed this series through the years. It certainly took on a life of its own. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and opinions with me. I really appreciate it more than you could ever possibly know.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!